

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## U.S.–Baltic Military Cooperation in the Persian Gulf

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The three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—have contributed greatly to overseas military operations, especially Afghanistan, in recent years. Although they are small in size, the Baltic states demonstrate a willingness to contribute to NATO and the political will to deploy their militaries in a way notably absent across most of Europe.

A major concern of the Baltic states is that military cooperation with the United States will decrease when the mission in Afghanistan winds down. As the U.S. works with its Baltic partners to find new areas of military cooperation, one area that should be considered is maritime security in the Persian Gulf.

**Combined Task Force-52 (CTF-52) and Gulf Security.** The Baltic states have expressed an interest in participating in CTF-52.<sup>1</sup> The primary mission of CTF-52 is counter-mine warfare in the Persian Gulf, and it would play a vital role in keeping the Strait of Hormuz open in the event of a conflict with Iran.

Established in March 2004, CTF-52 is one of several task forces that form the Combined Maritime Force based in Bahrain. CTF-52 is a multinational task force that has included participation from Australia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Italy, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

This is an important mission. The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints. At its narrowest point, it is only 21 nautical miles in width, and roughly 35 percent of all seaborne traded oil—or almost 20 percent of oil traded worldwide—passes through its narrow confines.<sup>2</sup> In the past, Iran has tried to close the strait, albeit unsuccessfully. The Tanker Wars of 1984–1988, a byproduct of the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s, led to a major disruption of maritime shipping in the Persian Gulf.

**Iranian Capability and Intent.** Iran's maritime activity in the Persian Gulf is the responsibility of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Navy (IRGC-N) under the direct command of the Supreme Leader. The regular Iranian navy does not traditionally operate in the gulf. The IRGC-N falls outside the traditional military command structure, and power is delegated to a lower level than in the regular Iranian navy. Arguably, this command structure increases the likelihood of an incident that could lead to a broader conflict in the region.

Iran has threatened to “close” the Strait of Hormuz in the event of a crisis in the region, but it is unlikely that Iran has the military capability to completely close the strait to maritime traffic, and any provocation would bring about a series of catastrophic consequences to the Iranian maritime capabilities in the region. However, Iran does have the capability to disrupt maritime traffic in the region temporarily, which could lead to a spike in oil prices and escalate into a larger regional conflict. This is what the U.S. and its allies should be prepared for.

Today it is estimated that Iran has 3,000 to 6,000 sea mines, mostly of Soviet/Russian, Chinese, or

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North Korean origin.<sup>3</sup> Most of Iran's stockpile is on the primitive end of the scale, with only a small amount of the more advanced "smart mines." But even the most basic mines can pose a significant danger. In 1988, a U.S. frigate, the USS *Samuel B. Roberts*, was badly damaged by an M-08 Iranian mine—a mine based on a 1908 imperial Russian design.

**A Baltic Contribution.** The Baltic states have much experience dealing with mines and other unexploded ordnance. The Lithuanian navy estimates that up to 200,000 mines, torpedoes, missiles, and other ordnance were launched in the Baltic Sea for testing and other exercises between the Russian Revolution and World War II.<sup>4</sup> To deal with this problem, the Baltic states have created the Baltic Naval Squadron consisting of several Baltic ships with mine-countermeasures-vessel (MCMV) capabilities.

In addition, the Estonian navy currently has a fleet of three British-built *Sandown*-class MCMVs—arguably some of the best in the world. The Lithuanian navy operates two British-built *Hunt*-class MCMVs. Latvia operates a fleet of five Dutch-built *Tripartite*-class mine hunters. In 2012 and 2013, Estonian personnel participated in a major mine-clearing exercise in the Persian Gulf led by the U.S. Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain. The three Baltic navies already have experience working as part of maritime security coalitions and have served as part of NATO's Standing NATO Mine Countermeasure Group. It would be beneficial for the U.S. if the Baltic states deployed their countermine capabilities to the Persian Gulf.

**The U.S. Should Not Pass Up This Opportunity.** If the Baltic states are able and willing to contribute to Persian Gulf security, the U.S. should be opening and not closing the doors of opportunity. To this end, the U.S. should:

- **Assist the Baltic states with deploying to the Persian Gulf.** Participation in CTF-52 would be an important contribution to maritime security

in one of the world's most important shipping areas. The Baltic states have the capability and the political will to participate in CTF-52. The U.S. should provide the resources and training required to make their participation a reality.

- **Welcome the willingness of the Baltic states to contribute to global security.** With their willingness to contribute to global security missions well beyond their borders, the Baltic states have set an example for others in NATO to follow. The U.S. should publicly welcome and praise the Baltic states.
- **Leverage the U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship in the Baltics.** The U.S. and the United Kingdom are more effective actors in transatlantic security when they work together. For historical reasons, the U.K. has very close relations with the Baltic states. The U.K. also has world-leading MCMV capabilities operating in the gulf. The U.S. should work with the U.K. to identify ways to increase Baltic participation in the gulf.

**Willing and Eager.** The three Baltic states contribute at a disproportionately higher level than other European countries to NATO-led military operations because they want to be seen as "net contributors," not "net consumers," of security. Above having capabilities to offer to CTF-52, the Baltic states have shown a political willingness to contribute to global security outside the Baltic region. Joining the maritime security mission in the Persian Gulf would benefit the Baltic states, create a new area of focus for U.S.–Baltic security cooperation in a post-Afghanistan War world, and greatly contribute to regional security and the economic well-being of one of the world's key transit points.

The Baltics are eager to continue contributing to international security missions, and it would be a wasted opportunity if the U.S. failed to work with them.

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1. The Baltic Times, "Estonia to Send Mine Fighting Ship to Middle East," January 7, 2014, <http://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/34110/#.UvKNiLScx51> (accessed February 5, 2014).

2. U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, "The Strait of Hormuz Is the World's Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint," January 4, 2012, <http://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.cfm?id=4430> (accessed February 5, 2014).

3. Scott C. Truver, "Iranian Mines in the Strait of Hormuz Not 'Showstoppers,'" USNI News, February 28, 2013, <http://news.usni.org/2012/07/17/iranian-mines-strait-hormuz-not-showstoppers> (accessed February 5, 2014).

4. Adam Demeter, "Navy Partners with Baltic Naval Squadron," Navy News Service, June 14, 2011, [http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story\\_id=60981](http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=60981) (accessed February 3, 2013).

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