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Russia's Provocations in the Nordic-Baltic States: The U.S. Needs a Strategy to Support the Region

Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis

Russia's aggressive posture against its neighbors has a profound impact on U.S. allies in the Nordic and Baltic region. The Baltic states are on NATO's front line, and view Russia as an existential threat. Nordic states, especially non-NATO members Finland and Sweden, have felt Russian pressure this year. Lately, three issues have kept tensions running high in the region: Russian air incursions, Russian maritime incursions, and incursions across the Estonian–Russian border. The U.S. and NATO must set in place a robust, long-term strategy to bolster the collective defense of NATO member states and help secure the Nordic and Baltic region.

Russian Incursions in the Baltic Region

A violation of national airspace is a violation of sovereignty. In 2014, NATO has scrambled planes 400 times to intercept Russian planes flying close to NATO airspace and in a few instances actually violating it—a marked increase since 2013. Estonia has registered six airspace violations by Russian aircraft in 2014, including an incident in October when a Russian Ilyushin-20 aircraft flew in Estonian airspace for a minute before being intercepted by Danish, Portuguese, and Swedish fighter jets. In another incident in February coinciding with Estonian Independence Day, U.S. F-15s intercepted a Russian spy

plane that had violated Estonian airspace. In 2014, Latvia has so far recorded 180 incidents of Russian aircraft flying suspiciously close to Latvian airspace without identifying themselves.

Russia's actions have not been confined to the sky. In September, a Lithuanian-flagged fishing vessel operating in international waters was detained by Russia for allegedly illegally fishing within Russia's exclusive economic zone and towed to Murmansk, its crew temporarily detained. Russia has demanded bail for the ship of over \$2.7 million, more than its estimated value. The incident created a diplomatic row between Russia and Lithuania.

Russian Incursions in the Nordic Region

The Nordic states have experienced similar Russian aggression in recent months. Finland and Sweden, neither of which are NATO members, have been the object of multiple air and maritime incursions by Russian forces. Consequently, a national debate about increasing defense spending and whether to join NATO has developed in both countries.

Russian warships disrupted the work of Finnish marine research ships on two occasions. In both cases, Russian warships tried to prevent the Finnish ships from accessing international waters. In October, a suspected small submarine, widely thought to be Russian, illegally penetrated Swedish territorial waters, setting off a weeklong sweep of the nation's many archipelagos, the first such search since the end of the Cold War. Some reports indicate that, in fact, two submarines, one larger and one smaller, may have both been operating in Swedish waters, a tactic that would reportedly be consistent with actions by Russian Special Forces.¹

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4310>

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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Coinciding with Russian maritime incursions is the increasing number of Russian air incursions. In March 2013, a simulated strike by two Russian bombers and four fighter jets against Stockholm had to be met by Danish jets from Lithuania—because Sweden’s air force did not react due to being on low alert over Easter. This was a wake-up call for politicians in Sweden.

More recently, this past September, two Russian bombers entered Swedish airspace near the island of Öland in what the foreign minister of Sweden referred to as the “most serious aerial incursion” in years.² Finland has also recorded an uptick in violations of its airspace by Russian aircraft, including three in one week in August. In June, Russia had carried out a simulated strike against the island of Bornholm in NATO-member Denmark, hosting a music festival with 90,000 attendees at the time.

The Estonian–Russian Border

In September, Russian agents crossed the border into Estonia to abduct an Estonian Internal Security Service officer. Using communications-jamming equipment, smoke bombs, and stun grenades, Russian agents kidnapped Eston Kohvar at gunpoint on Estonian soil and then charged him in Russia with espionage. The abduction came fewer than 48 hours after President Barack Obama had visited Tallinn just before the 2014 NATO Summit.

In addition to the kidnapping at the border, the long-standing issue of the Estonian–Russian border parameters has come to the forefront. Estonia is the only Baltic country that does not have an officially agreed border with Russia. Both sides rely on a de facto border dating back to the time of the Soviet occupation. When Estonia enjoyed a brief period of independence between the two world wars, its border with the Soviet Union was based on the 1920 Treaty of Tartu. In 1945, after the Soviet Union annexed Estonia, Moscow re-drew the administrative border between the Soviet Union and the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic in such a way that 10

percent of Estonian territory, as agreed in the Treaty of Tartu, was transferred to Russia. After Estonia regained its independence in the 1990s, officials in Tallinn, for the sake of peace, agreed to drop any territorial claims and keep the de facto border based on the 1945 border—even though this meant handing 10 percent of the country’s territory to Russia.

Due to a dispute between Estonia and Russia over the exact wording, it was not until February 2014 that both sides agreed and signed a new border treaty. While the Estonian parliament is set to ratify the treaty, the Russian Duma’s Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Alexei Pushkov recently stated that he does not expect Russian ratification of the treaty due to current NATO–Russian tensions. While the failure of Russia to ratify the treaty does not impact daily use of the de facto border, it does add another unfortunate dimension to Western relations with Russia in light of the Ukraine crisis.

U.S. Commitment Needed

Russia is ramping up its aggressive behavior in the Nordic and Baltic regions and the U.S. needs to act accordingly. The U.S. should:

- **Improve the U.S. security relationship with Finland and Sweden.** Although not NATO members, Sweden and Finland have an important role to play for regional security. Access to Swedish and Finnish territory and airspace will be crucial if NATO is called on to defend the Baltic states.
- **Take America’s NATO obligations to the Baltics states seriously.** This should include: extending the European Reassurance Initiative indefinitely; pre-positioning U.S. equipment in the Baltics; continuing Baltic air policing; establishing a Baltic Sea Rotation Force; enhancing cybersecurity cooperation; and, after a decade of counterinsurgency training, refocusing military exercises in the region on maneuver warfare and collective defense.

1. Elias Groll, “Swedes Find Definitive Evidence of Submarine, Russians Call Them Unmanly,” *Foreign Policy* Passport blog, November 15, 2014, http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/11/15/sweden_finds_evidence_a_submarine_breached_its_territorial_waters (accessed November 24, 2014).

2. Gail Sullivan, “Suspicious Submarine Sighting off Sweden’s Coast Prompts ‘Hunt for Red October’ Comparisons,” *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/10/20/suspicious-submarine-sighting-off-swedens-coast-prompts-hunt-for-red-october-comparisons/> (accessed November 24, 2014).

- **Call for the speedy ratification of the Estonia–Russia border treaty.** Estonia’s border with Russia is also NATO’s border. It benefits all sides that the treaty is ratified by both countries as soon as possible.

Deterrence Is Easier than Liberation

Russia’s recent actions at sea and in air are a constant reminder that the U.S. and NATO must remain vigilant. Russia has been able to exploit the security situation to its own benefit, calculating that the U.S. will not respond in any significant way. It will be far easier to deter future threats and defend the region from Russia than it will be to liberate it. With this in mind, the U.S. must demonstrate its commitment to the transatlantic alliance.

—*Luke Coffey is Margaret Thatcher Fellow, and Daniel Kochis is a Research Assistant, in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*