ISSN 2335-870X
LITHUANIAN ANNUAL STRATEGIC REVIEW
2024 Volume 22

Policy commentary

Maximilian Terhalle[*, **]
London School of Economics (LSE IDEAS); the German Defence Academy

On the Prospects of Security in Europe: Reflections on the Baltic Defence Conference 2023, Vilnius

The arguments made in this article are divided in three sections. First, the analysis looks at some of the immediate security-related concerns that have come to shape the Baltic Sea region. The second section branches out from the Baltic confines and takes into account the impact that the so-called CRINK states (China, Russia, Iran, North Korea) have gained on the war against Ukraine through their support for Russia. This has turned the war into a broader conflagration than most observers have admitted for an extended period. Finally, the analysis cautiously addresses some of the imponderabilities provided by the upcoming presidential election in the United States.

Immediate regional security concerns

During the Baltic Sea Conference held in Vilnius in 2023 (full disclosure: the author was invited to the conference by one of the hosts), the atmosphere that could be felt in the historic town hall was both encouraging and concerned. In particular, with the critical American support bill of sixty billion dollars still out on a limb (at the House of Representatives), its negative impact on Ukraine's battlefield loomed

[*] *Maximilian Terhalle*, a visiting professor at the London School of Economics (LSE IDEAS) and instructor at the German Defence Academy, Hamburg, Germany; e-mail: terhalle4@gmail.com.
[**] This article solely reflects the author's private opinion.

https://doi.org/10.47459/lasr.2024.22.9

large in the room.

Ten months on, and the military aid package had been released, and some constraints against launching long-range missiles into Russian territory had been lifted in the meantime. The forthcoming NATO anniversary summit in Washington DC in July leaves many observes far less sanguine about the future of the alliance than many of them would have presumed, even two years ago.

There are several immediate concerns about security issues in the Baltic Sea region as well as salient strategic challenges that the alliance's members states will not be able to resolve at their summit, however dissatisfying this may be.

As for the immediate concerns, the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO has improved the overall balance of power in NATO's favour and has therefore benefited the Baltic states' security. However, it has not prevented Russia from undertaking, if not increasing, its hybrid warfare attacks on and in the region. Russia has intensified its efforts of disrupting, for instance, the region's air traffic by way of jamming and spoofing GPS, or continues to damage undersea cables, such as the Balticconnector and pipelines between Estonia and Finland. Its manifold activities remain, habitually, designed to intimidate the latest members of the alliance, if thereby only confirming the reasoning that led them to join in the first place (Balletta, Kaushal & Marks, 2023).

That said, Russia is grappling with the fact that the recent broadening of NATO's membership has created dilemmas for its Baltic fleet, based in the Kaliningrad Oblast and St Petersburg, which used to be considered unlikely less than three years prior. At the same time, Finland's accession in particular has betrayed the outright imperialist nature of Vladimir Putin's war of aggression. The argumentative structure of his revisionist stance has mainly been based on the premise that Russia currently is, and has been for decades, threatened by a West that is determined to encircle the country. Putin's concrete actions vis-à-vis Finland are, conspicuously, not commensurate with this construct. Because if Finland was in fact at the forefront of his greatest strategic concerns (as he has claimed since the latter's accession), the question seems appropriate, why exactly then did he recently decide to withdraw the bulk of Russian forces from this border region?

International strategic concerns

Nevertheless, the picture of the security concerns at stake, as drawn at the conference in Vilnius, naturally extended into a significantly larger one. To begin with, while suffering major losses in the defence of Kharkiv Oblast, Ukrainian forces have recently stood their ground. In the meantime, though, Russia has established close ties, however uneasy and unequal ones, with China, Russia, Iran and North Korea (CRINK) in the last two years. These have enabled it to largely absorb both its losses of military equipment, soft- and hardware, and the impact of international sanctions (The Economist, 2023).

These relations have created new dependencies and, most importantly, unintended consequences to the degree that the support by Iran is now lowering the threshold of Russia's resistance against the Islamic Republic becoming a nuclear weapon state. The support by North Korea is increasingly gearing Russia's return (for the former's steady supply with drones and missiles) towards advancing Pyongyang's technological state of sensitive military expertise.

This will be one part of the key questions that the summit in Washington will have to address – though members may decide to ignore it at the expense of their own future security. In other words, will the alliance arrive at an understanding that it needs to perceive of the conflict in Ukraine as a war that is one, if significant, feature in the war that the CRINK states are coordinating, however loosely, against the 'decadent West'? (The Economist, 2024). In this regard, will the incoming General Secretary of NATO, Mark Rutte, see it as his mission to persuade the 32 member states what is strategically at stake here, concerning Ukraine but extending far beyond it? This would require NATO states to finally ask themselves, and largely agree on the answer to, what is indeed the core strategic purpose in supporting the Ukrainians in this war? Powerful Western states keep signalling to Moscow that they will support Ukraine to the degree that it can avert defeat but not to the extent that it can expel Russia from Ukrainian territory. Putin will thus conclude that the West is, ultimately, not serious about defending the order of the free world, in particular its sovereign borders. It is credibility in strategic terms that the West is currently lacking, which Russia perceives and will continue to exploit exhaustively. Xi Jinping, and proxies such as Iran and North Korea, on their part are close observers of the events in Europe. The course of action the West chooses may not be the only determinant for the course of action those states will take, but it will shape the degree to which these actors may feel emboldened. It may in fact see windows of opportunity, which would not be available if the West was unmistakably clear about its commitment to upholding sovereign borders. It is precisely such cool-headed firmness that needs to lead the way forward, because it does not fall prey to the Kremlin's (reliably employed) trap of reflexive control. On the contrary, adhering to Putin's logic has often informed Berlin and Washington's policy of (nuclear) de-escalation. So, should Western states decide that the strategic purpose of their support for Ukraine is indeed designed to prevent Russia from redrawing the map of Europe, that is, changing the balance of power, Putin's perception might change. And so might the perception of the other CRINK states, too. Maybe.

Realistically, though, the Biden administration and the German Chancellery under Olaf Scholz (add Victor Orban) will deny Ukraine any talks about accession to NATO in Washington for reasons that reflect, and confirm, the former two's understanding of escalation. While the summit will most likely agree to provide new means for air defence and other military gear integral to Ukraine's defence effort, it seems unlikely that NATO as such will alter its perception of the strategic dynamics of the global security context. However undeniable it may have become that the CRINK states, and China in particular, are both vitally important for Russia's war effort and indicative of their staunch willingness to fundamentally change the balance of power internationally (Sabanadze, Vasselier & Wiegand, 2024).

While neglecting these strategic dimensions may turn out to be a missed opportunity for the West, the elephant in the room – US presidential candidate Donald Trump – may soon exacerbate this state of affairs, operating from the core of the alliance against it. In the meantime, Russia's president Putin is solely interested in talking to the United States about the state of strategic affairs in Europe. Therefore, he will stick to his military strategy, regardless of the massive losses that the Russian armed forces will have experienced on a daily basis up to 5 November.

China and the dangers of a two-front war

None of this is just about Trump; rather, this is about the reciprocal impact that a potential war in East Asia, say over Taiwan, will have on the European strategic theatre, regardless of who becomes the next US president. While China did not play a major role at the conference, it is critical to remove oneself from the tactical developments of the Ukrainian battlefield, not least so when the US's withholding of the sixty-billion-dollar support package is still a fresh memory. In many ways, those months in 2023 might have been the rehearsal for what is to be expected during the first months of a second Trump administration. The latter's most recent remarks concerning Ukraine have underlined the belief that, as president, he might hold back a new package, regardless of how vital it may be militarily. Furthermore, Donald Trump may use such a moratorium as a warning signal to NATO-Europe 'to pay up'. This is despite the fact that, on average and for their own sake, Europeans spent two per cent on defence last year, and will do so again in 2024.

Should Donald Trump, decide to pursue a 'deal' with Putin in 2025, there can be no doubt that this would immediately lend itself to a worst case for Europe's security, and Ukraine in particular. Putin's strategy of waiting until the West loses interest (after 5 November, 2024) in its continuation of support for Ukraine would eventually have paid off. While this is not the room to outline the potential parameters of such a deal, suffice it to say that Moscow would read the US as having no further interest in the European geopolitical theatre. Thus, it would have no substantive and longstanding interest in underwriting the deal's results with credible force. From Putin's perspective, this would be the first big nail into the coffin of the 'decadent West'. In fact, by knowing full well that, in 2025, Europe would not be capable of defending itself alone, such a deal would basically hand Putin a card blanche 'to do whatever the hell' he wants, as Trump implied in early 2024.

The probability that this development, or a similar one, is going to occur is high because America's strategic focus under Trump will be China. Such a concentration should not come as a surprise to Europeans, as it was President Obama in 2011 who spoke first about the US's pivot to Asia. The US–China rivalry has intensified to an unprecedented degree since then, with the possibility of a war constantly looming over the relationship. Not the least, Xi Jinping's ambition to unite Taiwan with China, made crystal clear since 2012, is a nationalistic promise that he has made to the Chinese public and, as it appears, is one key element integral to his thinking.

Strategically, this presents the US with the possibility of a two-front war, with one front being China, the other Russia. As this is not only an unwelcome prospect for American strategic thinkers and planners, it is also a possibility which, according to former US Defence Secretary James Mattis in 2017 (and reiterated by other US officials since then), the US would not be able to cope with. In fact, this scenario would make it increasingly likely that President Trump would give strategic priority to the East Asian theatre over the Western European one, with largely inconceivable consequences for Europe, including Ukraine.

Should Joe Biden win the US presidential elections, he would not withhold funds from Ukraine as a warning signal to the Europeans, and neither would he distance himself from NATO. Though, whether he would alter his personal assessment of Russia and attach, in turn, strategic purpose to his policy must remain unclear for now. This remains however much the EU’s newly appointed Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, Kaja Kallas, would try to convince him of the salience of such a change. Still, Biden would not be able to upend the structural dynamics set in place by China’s revisionist policy regarding East Asia. This is because Biden too would, depending on Xi’s proneness to risk, have to make hard choices – more so than since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Whether there is enough time left for Europe to – admittedly quickly – identify ways to credibly protect its own security, including Ukraine, also remains an open question. ‘Open’, not in the sense that Europe may eventually make the choice to gear up strategically but rather, ‘open’ in the sense that this is the most pressing matter that it has faced since the beginning of the cold war. Today’s state of affairs is, at its heart, about survival. The obvious fact, though curiously neglected, that Europe’s security has always been defined in conventional *and nuclear* terms does not make this matter any easier.

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With Kaja Kallas as the Baltic states’ new and powerful voice in matters related to security, Europe’s future has found a staunch and outspoken defendant of its territorial integrity. However, the nature of the strategic dynamics briefly outlined above may have a force to itself that is too big to be decisively shaped by individual representatives of the EU. And, with the French vote in July clearly indicating a move away from Macron's unmistakably anti-Russian strategy , the already stuttering French–German motor may not exactly energise the two countries' strategic alignment, either. In turn, the role of leaders such as Poland's Tusk, Italy's Meloni andthe UK's Starmer, will become dramatically more significant overnight.

Should the Democrats win, the Europeans would – probably for the last time – be given a small window of opportunity to revolutionise their strategic thinking and subsequent course of action, preferably with a vengeance.[1] Should Trump win, all they can do, ideally together with other G7 members, is to remind him of three things: first, that US private equities have invested some six hundred billion US dollars in Europe (and that the US military commitment produces confidence in their safety); second, that having access to a friendly shore on the adjacent side of the Atlantic is a hard-won privilege, with the distance from Frankfurt to Beijing being almost 4,000 km (approximately 2,500 m) less than the same distance from San Diego; and third, that dumping Ukraine (and, in extension, Europe) will put America, contrary to its instincts for power politics, into a self-inflicted position of weakness in which it will stand alone against two major powers (China and Russia). Ultimately, though, the United States would be able to absorb the initial reverberations of not wanting to listen to its allies' advice. The hard truth is, Europe (and Ukraine) would not. But then, the Democrats may win.

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[1] For an earlier call to reason, see Bastian Giegerich & Maximilian Terhalle, *The responsibility to defend. Re-thinking Germany's strategic culture*. IISS, Routledge: 2021. While the main addressee of this book was/is Germany, the message is, at least implicitly, applicable to Europe as well.

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Notes

1 Notwithstanding Russia's morphing into a war economy, the above states have delivered drones, short-range missiles and semiconductor chips at scale, among other things. For a balanced account of the strengths and weaknesses of Russia's military-industrial complex, see The Economist: Briefing. Military-industrial complexity Russia's economy can withstand a long war, but not a more intense one. Its defences against Western sanctions can only stretch so far. 23 April 2023.
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2 Also with former US Defence Secretary Robert Gates' valedictory, succinctly underlining the US's new positioning in 2011.