

Bureaucratic policy and defence cooperation in the Baltic States

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Abstract

The objectives of this paper are to (1) comparatively analyse defence strategies of the Baltic countries against the theory of institutionalism, focusing on factors that affect policy maintenance or change within defence cooperation and (2) assess the current state of defence cooperation in the Baltic countries. The study gives a theoretical overview, relating the theory of new institutionalism to the subject of debate over bureaucratic institutions, which also plays a role in the regional security politics of the Baltic countries. An empirical study compares the defence strategies of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. While few studies have investigated this subject before, that the conclusion reached by this investigation is that administrative bodies in the defence sector of the Baltic countries are affected by politically driven processes pertaining to the foreign affairs domain, which play a key role in matters related to cooperation and synchronisation of the defence and security of the Baltic States. The findings suggest that a more focused analysis of the role of institutions and bureaucratic policy in the policy making of the three Baltic countries needs to take place. The study concludes that (1) the current state of defence cooperation in the Baltic countries can be called “developing”; (2) the operation of defence establishments can be called “path dependent”, which is mainly influenced by “external” factors or pressures.

Keywords:

regional security, Baltic defence cooperation, bureaucratic policy, institutionalism

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Introduction

The modern theory and practice of international relations pays great attention to the role of international organisations in the formation of international relations and the joint implementation of policies that have become important for countries or a group of countries in the framework of bilateral or multilateral relations. In the context of regional security, in the case of the Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, international security arrangements form a framework for collective security based on membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In this context, the existence and importance of domestic players, such as political figures and national public administrations or legislators, is sometimes secondary for the perception of specific international relations, but in the practice and academic analysis of the political process, each of these domestic actors may play a central role.

Following [Waltz's \(1959\)](#) classical model of levels of international relations' analysis, three interrelated components are used in the interpretation of international relations, which have a direct and indirect impact on the formation and implementation of international relations—components of individual, national and international environment. In the case of the Baltic States, the context of the international environment in the choice of defence and security policy instruments is very clear, including the choices of international partnership within NATO, the European Union (EU) and other international organisations. At the same time, the changing security situation on the one hand and the limited resources for national security, social, political and technological vulnerabilities reveal the multidimensional nature of modern threats, which requires more than just the improvement of collective security mechanisms.

National security policy is formed in the interaction of the executive and the legislative branches and the whole of society, which results in laws, security concepts, policy programmes and governmental regulations. The policy thus crystallised nationally is reflected in both the collective capabilities and the national capabilities of the states. In the case of the Baltic States, taking into account geographical, historical and cultural factors, in addition to collective security frameworks, it is also necessary and possible to expand intra-regional security frameworks that complement collective security capabilities. From this point of view, national executive bodies have a very significant impact not only on the political process in a parliamentary democracy, but also on international relations and relations between the closest regional partners. The nature of institutional play, and how it influences intra-regional cooperation in particular are the leading questions of this inquiry.

In the context of the study of international relations and the domestic political process, the understanding of the role of national executive institutions is very relevant in the Baltic States, where the transition to a functional system of parliamentary democracy took place relatively recently after the restoration of independence. This issue is important both in the broader explanation of the role of the executive in understanding the role of institutions such as the Ministry of Defence in determining security policy in the Baltic States and their impact on Baltic defence cooperation. In further analysis of this issue, it is important which institutional factors act as the driving force of this policy, which determines the dynamics of political stagnation or development.

The academic importance of this work is underlined by the need to analyse and academically categorise the institutional aspects of the Baltic States in defining defence policy and their role in the development of joint Baltic defence cooperation. From the point of view of the theoretical analysis, the theoretical framework of institutionalism is used herein

the first section of this paper, to explain institutional drivers. The theoretical approach in analysing bureaucratic politics in this inquiry is based on the new institutionalism, historical institutionalism in particular. The empirical study compares and discusses defence strategies of the Baltic countries and focuses on the peculiarities of the current institutional defence cooperation in the Baltic States, outlining the characteristics of current institutional defence cooperation in the Baltic countries. The following research questions are analysed:

1. How are the defence strategies of the Baltic countries reflected in the policy of Baltic defence cooperation?
2. What is the current state of defence cooperation in the Baltic countries?
3. What are the institutional factors which drive change in Baltic cooperation policies?

In analysing defence strategies of the Baltic countries, comparative studies of the defence approaches of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were conducted. A more detailed study of the Defence strategy documents is made through content analysis of these documents.

This paper consists of three parts. The first section contains a literature review that provides a theoretical basis for further analysis. The second part assesses the current state of Baltic security cooperation. Defence strategies of the Baltic countries focusing on defence cooperation are analysed in the final part of this paper.

The theoretical framework of discussion

Arguably, it is common knowledge that the security of the Baltic countries was positively affected by their joining NATO and other international organisations, but more attention should be given to the impact of the domestic institutional actors and their role in the international affairs in the Baltics. In the political process, the study of institutions plays a key role in explaining certain political developments and decisions that are based on a constitutionally, normatively, structurally or socially conditioned set of actions that have influenced the political process or the interaction of these actors in a process of political participation, as well as societal factors.

Traditionally, political science is rooted in the study of institutions, which, in the early stages of the development of political theory, was more focused on the comparative analysis of political systems, mainly evaluating institutions from the point of view of formal structure, rules and mechanisms.

The aim of this section is to take a closer look at the theoretical aspects of institutions and institutional significance, and to look at the theoretical directions that could best be used to explain institutional factors in the field of Baltic defence cooperation—analysing which factors are important for defence cooperation in the Baltic States.

The theory of institutionalism offers a very broad selection of tools for explaining how institutions work, how decisions are made and what the legitimate drivers of institutional process are. For example, focusing only on rationally acting personalities within institutions and their motivation of “utility maximisation” we risk leaving the importance of ideas or discourse, behavioural patterns, values and norms inside the institutions, “outside” players, and the whole environment of the system and political process. In his famous book, *Essence of Decision*, Allison (1971, p. 67), in addition to the classical “rational actor”

model, offers two other models or “frames of reference” which are interconnected—the Organisational Process Model and Governmental (Bureaucratic) Politics Model, where the rationally acting individual is placed within the context of the organisational structure, an interacting group of other individuals and the political system.

Quite a fair assessment of the comprehensive nature of institutional analysis is given by [Peters \(2016, p. 62\)](#) in one of his latest works:

In an institutionalist perspective on policy-making, or other aspects of political behaviour, individuals are not atomistic but are rather embedded in a number of institutions. The individuals acquire the meanings for their political behaviour from those institutional connections, and they also acquire cues for their behaviour. Those cues may come in the form of incentives or disincentives, or they may be more normative; but the institutions provide guides for action and may also provide sanctions for individuals who do not conform to the expectations of the institutions.

Classics of individual perspectives within institutions offer a differing understanding of the problems “depending on where they sit.” Sometimes certain institutions reach beyond their direct responsibilities, as is the case with defence establishments in various countries when foreign affairs issues comes to the fore. For example, in the United States, the Secretary of Defense consults these issues internally with the military services, with his deputy, and with the undersecretary for policy and the assistant secretaries in that office ([Halperin and Clapp, 2006, p. 27](#))

The method for theoretical analysis of this study is based on a theoretical overview related to bureaucratic politics, relating the new institutionalism to the subject of debate over the bureaucratic institutions as “path-dependent” actors. From a theoretical perspective, we relate this study to the issue regarding what factors have served to change or stagnate policy. The historical approach is selected due to its focus on systemic and structural parts of the institutional process, as the study looks within certain political concepts and political decisions regarding the intra-regional cooperation, where institutions—namely ministries of defence play a critical role.

According to the new institutionalism, governments form their “business” environments for themselves, instead of adapting to it. Ideally, public administration would be driven by societal visions and political projects. Organisations that handle public affairs should not be considered merely as instruments ([Peters and Pierre, 2011, pp. 101–185](#); [Thoenig, 2003, pp. 685–708](#)).

In the historical process of the establishing and functioning of institutions, the “path dependence” is known in political and sociological theory, defining that future decisions within an organisation are made on the basis of recent or past decisions. If there is an understanding of these initial decisions, then one can also understand the logic of policy development. Politics is a “succession of the trail” and has been sustainable since its inception until the intervention of some major forces changes it ([Pierson and Skocpol, 2002, pp. 693-721](#)).

The question of how institutions change, or how certain policies are changed within the institution is one of the core questions within historical institutionalism. Historical institutionalism basically speaks of the fact that as a result of the historical development of institutions, they have accumulated basic principles of operation, internal culture, and relationship models with other institutions that hinder their development and ability to

be efficient (which reflects the concept of the “path dependency”), but at the same time, institutions are conservative and difficult to change. Significant changes are only possible at critical junctures, when it is clear that it can no longer be the “same way.” Changes that are made at breaking points make it impossible for the institutional model to function effectively. Changes in bureaucratic policy routines can often be driven by the influence of external forces, necessitating change and adaptation (Krasner, 1984, p. 225). Critical junctures are characterised by higher degrees of agency and contingency, but once political struggles and shifting coalitions result in new policy arrangements, these will be locked-in by policy feedback mechanisms, leading to a new period of incremental change (Roberts and Geels, 2019, pp. 221–240).

Dramatic changes in the actions of other nations or outside actors and changes in technology may open up new possibilities and force officials to make decisions; changes in the shared images of the society or bureaucracy, changes in personnel; self-generated efforts (Halperin and Clapp, 2006, p. 57).

Discussing the case of Baltic defence cooperation, then, as proved by the following empirical evidence, it is possible to reveal several “outside” factors that can lead organisations to the “breaking” points of the “path dependence”, which are rooted in the systemic context and “political environment” they belong in.

Baltic defence cooperation—Why it is important and where it stands

The geographical scope of this regionally focused study covers the three Baltic countries—Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, which will be called intra-region and “intra-regional” defence cooperation so it is not confused with the broader Baltic region. However, according to Hubel (2004, pp. 283–298), the whole area of the countries on the Baltic Sea is a “region in a making” or sub-region.

When analysing the security options for the conventionally weak small states, it is necessary to discuss the role of institutions in international society, which according to Archer (2014, pp. 3–25), is in favour of the small states when facing up to superpowers (Archer). Archer argues that small states (1) are not able to preserve their own autonomy; (2) have a narrow range of action; (3) have little to say about which games are being played and how; and (4) have only a small stake in the system and are unable to act for its sake. Understandably from this perspective, NATO and EU membership was the only possibility for the Baltic countries to design their security perspectives and predict preservation of sovereignty for a long time in the future. Though the question still remains as to whether all the instruments of coordination and resource sharing are properly utilised by the closest partners which share the same historical path and face the same security challenges.

Baltic countries are often mentioned as a good example of broader regional cooperation (Jančoškova, 2017, pp. 231–238). Unfortunately, within the domain of defence and security, since joining NATO in 2004, defence cooperation has suffered due to competition and a lack of trust between the three states. This period has seen little fresh defence cooperation, certainly by comparison with the preceding period during which the prospect of NATO membership and the support and practical assistance of other states encouraged Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to create flagship projects, alongside the Baltic Air Surveillance Network (BALTNET), the Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion, Baltic Naval Squadron and Baltic Defence College.

Even cooperation in BALTNET has been occasionally fragile—the project came close to failure in the late 1990s following a bitter dispute about the number and location of command and control nodes (Romanovs and Andžāns, 2017, pp. 14-22).

In truth, the initial impetus for a common regional identity, particularly in the realm of defence cooperation, came not from the B3 themselves but from the international community, which found it easier to try and deal with one larger entity rather than three smaller ones. Strong arguments included that the three countries faced a common enemy and were in the same operational space, that it would assist development of NATO interoperability and standards, and that it would help bring the countries into NATO (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Estonia, 2014). A leading role in engaging the Baltics in peacekeeping missions and “pushing” them towards common projects with the Nordic countries was played by the United States, especially under the Clinton leadership and by Bush afterwards (Sraders, 2021, p. 155).

One of the most sceptical studies on Baltic cooperation and challenges is the Baltic Interoperability Report and Baltic Security Strategy report. These studies were conducted by the leading Baltic security experts and some of the core questions that are still relevant are as follows: Is it possible to have military interoperability between states with totally different security concepts? Do decision makers understand what it means to fight seriously? Is there the political will to send troops to another country? Finally, who can and will give the orders? (Nikers and Tabuns, 2019a, p. 12).

According to the recent Centre of European Policy Analysis (CEPA) study, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are three countries but part of a single operating environment. This phenomenon still generates a problem as the three countries are “on convergent paths in security policy, although still far from complete harmonization.” It is “overreliance on the United States as the lynchpin of regional security” which is not beneficial to the synchronisation of the Baltic defences. In many cases, the answer to the hardest questions is an assumption, that the United States will fill the gap with the nuclear guarantee and multinational land-based, “tripwire” eFP forces (Lucas, Hodges and Schmiedl, 2021). Of course, the United States has its own national interests and commitments across the world. Growing security concerns over China-related developments are just one of the big problems for America. Due to China’s increasing capabilities, the United States deems it necessary to bolster its defence capabilities in the Indo-Pacific (Loftus, 2021, pp. 342–353).

On the other side, the invasion of Ukraine has encouraged much greater cooperation and training between Estonian and Latvian forces in joint manoeuvres (Postimees, 2018)

Concerning particular and vital defence capabilities, maritime security and air defence are still the most “suffering” parts and the weakest links in the Baltic defence chain. The Baltic States presently possess only very limited air-defence capabilities as a comprehensive air-defence system, is well beyond their financial reach (Harper, Lawrence and Sakkov, 2018, pp.15-25).

The greatest success in intra-regional defence cooperation was the establishment of the Baltic Battalion in 1994, which was operational until NATO accession. A new trilateral Baltic Battalion is now being formed within the NATO Response Force (NRF).

According to the CEPA study, the military spending of the three Baltic States is less than 1% of the combined defence budgets of European NATO members and the price for fragmented and ineffective acquisition is too high. For example, each country has purchased a different infantry fighting vehicle. Lithuania bought German Boxers; Estonia

chose second-hand CV90s; and Latvia the UK-produced CVR. It was a similar story with howitzer artillery systems: Lithuania bought the PzH 2000, while Estonia (together with Finland) chose Korean K9s ([Lucas, Hodges and Schmiedl, 2021](#)).

Common projects in the field of defence reflect the nature and dynamics of institutional engagement within formulation and implementation of regional security policy in the Baltic countries. Drivers and constraints of a particular domain of international policy are related to the function of particular national actors who, for defence and security, are the Ministries of Defence of the Baltic countries. The function of these institutions is determined by organisational structures, national legislation, personalities and international actors. The phenomenon of historical “path dependence” in the regional security policies of the Baltic countries clearly appears in the implementation of cooperative arrangements, which are reflected in the persistence of “agency-driven” political “habits” in the implementation of particular political projects in the field of defence and security.

As indicated in a study conducted by [Romanovs and Andžāns \(2017, pp.13-17\)](#), Western partners tended to support tripartite projects as a way to work with three similar countries at once, rather than with each country individually. Initially, each of the three countries was mentored by the Nordic countries—Estonia by Finland, Latvia by Sweden and Lithuania by Denmark, which was the only informal mentor in a NATO member state. This factor not only contributed to a coherent approach, as the Nordic countries supported trilateral projects, but also promoted a different military approach and military cultural diversity between the three, thus hampering military cooperation to this day ([Romanovs and Andžāns, 2017 p. 20](#)).

As noted by [Romanovs and Andžāns \(2017, p.18\)](#), the first intentions for trilateral cooperation between the Baltic States were already expressed in 1991. But the first major joint project that deserved the most attention was the Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT), which was established in 1995. Its main role was to contribute to the international community’s peacekeeping efforts and to allow the Baltic States to co-operate with NATO in the same field.

Initiatives reflecting the difficulties of institutional defence cooperation between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania include the establishment of a joint Baltic division, which has not been possible so far due to the limited number of military personnel in all three countries, and command and control over such a unit. Latvian has always been most in favour of deeper military integration and interdependence, but strategically the Latvian Ministry of Defence does not see more value in insisting and pushing for more concrete defence and security synchronisation between all the Baltic States ([Nikers and Tabuns, 2019b, pp.1-64](#)).

Personal disagreements are one of the most institutionally related factors influencing the Baltic cooperation in the field of defence. Personal relations between certain officials of the Ministries of Defence of the Baltic States is another topical issue that hinders dialogue and military cooperation, as they have a significant impact on other policy makers. Research conducted by [Vanaga \(2014, pp.28-40\)](#) reveals that personal disagreements and competition between individual officials in the Ministries of Defence may require direct government intervention at the highest level.

There are strategic disagreements in all defence sectors of the Baltic States based on national interests. In the defence sector, according to a study by [Vanaga \(2014, p.35\)](#), policy makers in the Baltic States act rationally, but they view short-term perspectives without seeing the positive aspects of cooperation in the long term as more important. In

terms of long-term perspective, a Latvian official, who has experienced the development of Baltic military cooperation since its inception, was positive that leaders (both political and defence ministry officials) were coming and going, but the goal of Baltic cooperation always has been priority, as it was declared by the politicians through the decades.

The main areas in which the countries work actively together are first and foremost the diplomatic level, which means that cooperation between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and other diplomatic channels works well, that is cooperation between experts between the defence authorities of the Baltic States.

[Glen Grant \(2019, pp. 18–48\)](#), emphasised that trust, which is probably the most important factor for successful defence cooperation, is lacking at all levels of defence and security cooperation. Strong perceptions of sovereignty, differences in strategic culture and a lack of coherence in defence planning also hinder Baltic cooperation in the field of defence. The increased joint capabilities and capabilities must be publicly demonstrated to Russia, which means that existing joint capabilities must be coordinated regionally. Instead of identifying and meeting the individual needs of Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, a politically clear focus at the regional level is needed. In this regard, the problems in one of the Baltic States in developing their military capabilities are and should, in fact, be a common concern of all three Baltic States. If this idea of a joint force is not recognised and adopted in the Baltic region quickly enough, NATO should provide assistance in the form of local policy guidelines on how to jointly plan, train and develop military capabilities ([Nikers and Tabuns, 2019b](#)).

Following the findings of the Baltic Security Strategy Project (BSSP), there are political challenges that are related to the capacity to lead joint endeavours, as well as build relations with allies and conduct joint reporting. From the other side, a positive practical example is the flexibility in information exchange between the three Baltic countries on cybercrime, cyberattacks on information systems and networks ([Nikers and Tabuns, 2019b pp. 1–64](#)).

The Baltic Defence College is arguably one of the most successful defence cooperation projects for the Baltic countries and it has the most political will and support, extending far beyond the responsibilities of certain administrative and bureaucratic bodies.

Other successes include the Baltic Air Surveillance Network and Control System (BALTNET) which was upgraded with separate national control centres in 2020. This is the prime example of Baltic defence cooperation but came as a result of sustained stimulus and impetus from outside allies. It is integrated with the Baltic Air Policing mission, in which warplanes from allied countries are in permanent readiness and can scramble at short notice to identify and deter any potential civil or military intrusion ([Lucas, Hodges and Schmiedl, 2021](#)).

Baltic strategies towards defence cooperation compared

The degree to which countries can rely on their defence independently depends on the actual means that are at their disposal and power they can solely project if there is military confrontation with a much stronger adversary. If these means are not sufficient to achieve necessary capabilities, the issue of allied consolidation of resources among like-minded partners or geographically proximate countries with similar threat perceptions comes into question. In a recent study on defence strategies of the small countries of Eastern and Central Europe, respondents from Baltic countries indicated moderate

reliance on NATO's collective defence according to their perceptions and principles (Dyčka, Rókk and Śliwa, 2020, pp. 23–45). In this regard, it is worth noting that the size of the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) battalion in Latvia and Estonia (introduced by NATO in 2016) actually doubles the strengths of combat ready units in their land forces (Szymański, 2017 pp. 9–18).

After the Crimean crisis in 2014, strengthening NATO's presence was among the top priorities of all the Baltic governments, until an agreement was reached in Wales Summit (2016) to deploy battalion size units to each Baltic country that would assure collective defence and provide at least something that could be perceived as a deterrence measure, or so called "tripwire" installation across NATO's Eastern "redlines".

Small states have no choice but to join powerful alliances. Multilateral organisations, which are governed reasonably pluralistically, can offer a kind of 'escape from smallness' by giving small states a theoretically equal say in framing collective security policies. Consequently, 'hard' security concerns have pushed them into a shared strategy of outright, maximum integration with both the EU and NATO, combined with efforts to earn protection from the United States. They have also profited from several tiers of neighbourhood cooperation, including many kinds of Nordic help, short of actual guarantees (Archer, 2014 pp. 3–25).

The Baltic States are concerned about every move by Russia since its aggression in Georgia in 2008, which was followed by the annexation of Crimea in 2014. After these events, the most worrisome for the Baltic observers have been the "Zapad" series exercises—large-scale military manoeuvres conducted by Russia jointly with Belarus. During these exercises, huge combat units are moved towards Western borders. The "Zapad 2017" exercise was quite notable in terms of exercising offensive operations. Before and during "Zapad 2017," journalists and commentators in the Estonian media often spoke about a potential attack by Russia, possibly targeted at the Baltic countries, Ukraine or Georgia (Ventsel, 2021, pp. 21–39). NATO's easternmost allies, particularly the Baltic States and Poland, are justifiably concerned about NATO's capability and readiness to come to their aid if there is military aggression from Russia (Kühn, 2020, p. 127–157).

From the perspective of great power politics and further endurance of the NATO collective defence system, the best use of European NATO resources would be to ensure an effective defence of NATO allies against Russia. Most concretely, this means improved conventional defence of the Baltic States and Poland (Elbridge and Brzezinski, 2021, pp. 8–16). EFP battalions are a good case for illustrating credibility-making from a ritual perspective: the performance of carefully calibrated symbolic deterrence on NATO's eastern flank after Russia's annexation of Crimea helps to maintain NATO's self-identity as a defensive alliance for its contemporary audiences (Mälksoo, 2021 pp. 53–78).

According to Milevski (2020, pp. 150–160), in order to defend Baltics, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive strategy, not only in operational terms such as logistics or command and control, which is often called a strategy: "A strategy of war, which can be honourably ended" is what the Baltics are missing the most. Here it is also important to stress how Russia perceive current NATO deterrence measures for the Baltics—whether they are "deterred," or they just do not want to attack or do not want to do so "yet." It must be admitted that there is no "rock-solid" answer to the question of what deters Russia and redirects its expansionist ambitions (Veebel, 2020, pp. 373–375).

In June 2017, NATO battalion-size battle groups deployed in the Baltic States in accordance with the provisions of the July 2016 Warsaw NATO Summit achieved combat readiness.

[Szymański \(2017, p. 15\)](#) stresses that compared to Russian military power, NATO battalion-size battle groups are of low combat value, but the Baltic States view them as a significant contribution to their own limited defence capabilities. ([Szymański, 2017 p.17](#))

From the perspective of defence strategy, Lithuania is turning into “a new defence policy leader among the Baltic States”, thanks to increased defence spending in 2013–2017 (by 170%, from 267 to 724 million euros/from 0.8% to 1.8% of GDP) which significantly accelerated the modernisation of the armed forces.

Estonia has followed a total defence approach with a strong focus on territorial defence, compulsory military service, and a large reserve army ([Veebel and Ploom, 2019, pp. 1–17.](#)). One of Estonia’s defence ministry’s priorities for 2018–2021 was to establish a separate cyber defence command.

In contrast with Estonia, Latvia has since the restoration of its independence, decided against the principle of territorial defence and focused instead on out-of-area international missions and operations ([Veebel and Ploom, 2019, pp. 12–14](#)).

Before the annexation of Crimea, Latvia had the smallest defence capabilities among the Baltic States. After the financial crisis of 2008, it was only in 2017 that Latvia spent more on defence than before the crisis. Three priorities can be distinguished in the updated modernisation programme for 2016–2028: early warning and command, combat readiness and host nation support ([Szymański, 2017 p. 9](#)).

When analysing the defence priorities and capabilities of the three Baltic countries, it is evident that the defence and deterrence policies of these countries are rooted within deterrence measures, which first and foremost is possible through resource sharing and collective defence. In such a situation, the Baltic countries surprisingly lack political options that could allow much more articulated defence synchronisation and integration among the Baltic countries themselves, which would serve for developing the most neglected and vital capabilities such as maritime and air defence. Also, solidary budgeting and procurement could allow for harmonisation of the land force defence capabilities and ensure compatibility among the military units and reduction of the maintenance costs of military equipment.

Defence policies are grounded within expertise and policy concepts that are developed by the ministries of defence and reflected in the policy planning and strategy papers. For Latvia and Estonia, the defence ministries propose their defence concepts for approval by the Cabinet of ministers, which later have to be approved by the parliaments. Lithuanian Military Strategy is approved by the Minister of Defence. In Latvia, the Ministry of Defence develops the State defence concept ([Ministry of Defence, Latvian, 2020](#)) which reflects all national defence priorities for the next 4 years. A similar planning cycle is established in Lithuania and Estonia. The national security concept is the “working” policy document for Estonia ([Ministry of Defence, Estonian, 2017](#)) and Lithuanian military strategy for Lithuania respectively ([Ministry of Defence, Lithuanian, 2016](#)). Examination of these strategical documents within the field of defence policy is important for understanding where the governments and ministries of defence stand in terms of certain political priorities.

In order to institutionally determine the leading political stance of defence ministries towards the Baltic countries, it is necessary to conduct content analysis of the above mentioned defence strategy documents. Firstly, the words “Cooperation” and “Baltic” were counted in each policy document and secondly, the context in which these terms are used

were determined. Thirdly, the word “synchronisation” in the context of the Baltic cooperation was examined.

When analysing defence strategy documents of the Baltic countries, the main emphasis is given to the development of national defence capabilities and participation in collective defence. This is the “political” path, which is being followed by defence executives of all the three Baltic countries since joining NATO in 2004. In line with this policy, other policy options, for example complete or partial synchronisation of Baltic countries’ defence, are not considered.

In the Lithuanian Military Strategy which was developed by the Ministry of Defence in 2016, the word “cooperation” is mentioned nine times in reference to NATO’s “open door” policy, bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation with the United States, Baltic, Nordic States and Poland, with an emphasis on cooperation with the United States in developing military capabilities and increasing the interoperability of the Lithuanian armed forces and the Allied forces. Defence cooperation with Eastern European, South Caucasian and Central Asian countries is mentioned. Information available at the website of Ministry of Defence states that the security of Lithuania is based on individual and collective defence. Lithuania must develop military capabilities for both individual and collective defence. At the same time, NATO membership guarantees that in if attacked, Lithuania will be defended by the armed forces of other NATO.

In the Latvian state defence concept, which was developed by the Ministry of Defence and adopted by the Latvian parliament in 2020, there is a separate paragraph emphasising Baltic defence cooperation which states that efficient defence cooperation between Baltic countries is an essential element of regional security, stability and threat prevention. Latvia strongly supports comprehensive Baltic-level military cooperation in all available formats and efforts to promote common security and defence policy in different international formats and forums. Mutual trust, coordination of military capability development projects, enhanced compatibility of armed forces and integration of command and control systems is key to successful Baltic cooperation. Latvia must also continue to host joint Baltic exercises. The “Baltic” is mentioned and mostly refers to the Baltic Sea Region. The word “cooperation” is mentioned 47 times, reflecting Latvia’s defence cooperation with the main regional security partners (the Nordic countries, Germany, Poland, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Ukraine and Georgia).

Estonia adopted 2017 references to the Baltic Sea Region defence cooperation when reflecting on the “Baltic” matter. The word “cooperation” is used 52 times in the national security document, basically covering policy guidelines for relationships within NATO, the EU and partnerships in the private and public sectors. Baltic cooperation is mentioned once as the next priority after Nordic, namely “closer cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic States is in Estonia’s interests.” In this way, the country can promote political dialogue and security cooperation, including in the fields of defence, energy, environmental protection and transport infrastructure.

None of the Baltic defence policies analysed in this study mentions any policy for synchronising defence with other Baltic countries. Attitudes towards Baltic defence cooperation reflected in the defence policies can be regarded as having “low profile” political priority. This is also reflected in the current state of defence cooperation.

Conclusions

It is possible to conclude after analysing Baltic defence policy that in terms of political priorities and institutional standing, Latvia is the most positive towards defence

cooperation with the other Baltic countries. Estonia moderately prioritises this issue and Lithuania appears to be the least interested in the more serious developments and demonstrates overall satisfaction with the current mode of defence cooperation with Latvia and Estonia. In general, all three Baltic countries share this very similar attitude. Any policy for synchronisation or more serious harmonisation is still a long way from becoming a reality and is not yet considered as a possible policy option.

When examining how Baltic cooperation has developed, maintained or changed since the 1990s, evidence can be found, that the “appetite” towards cooperation was encouraged by “outside” players. The most promising cooperation projects emerged during the first decade after the restoration of independence and lasted until the Baltic countries joined NATO. Subsequent policy within NATO after 2004 can be characterised as “path-dependent”, which meant that any serious “parallel” political options were not considered, even those that could seriously complement and benefit the existing “bubble” of collective security reality in the Baltics.

Defence co-operation in the Baltic countries can be labelled as “developing”, especially when thinking of the priorities of the allied partners, which would see much more harmonised or even synchronised Baltic defence that would complement NATO’s collective security arrangements. These priorities are more often expressed by American think tanks for more articulated defence cooperation and synchronisation among the Baltic countries cannot be excluded in the future.

The Baltic defence ministries play an important role in suggesting and implementing the most important intra-regional defence cooperation projects. These institutions determine the direction of such arrangements—leading to further development, stagnation or abolition. In the future, the Baltic ministries of defence will become more important players in these intra-regional security developments, and the subsequent research into these processes will be of more interest to researchers and practitioners.

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