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THE KEY SECURITY CHALLENGE IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION IS THE LACK OF TRUST

The end of the Cold War heralded an unprecedented wave of cooperative security -based regional cooperation schemes in Northern Europe. The promise of the 1990s in post-Wall Europe but perhaps in particular in the North was an era free of divisions based on increased cooperation and even integration over the former East–West division.

To a great extent this has also taken place. For example, the subsequent rounds of EU and NATO enlargements have expanded the euro-Atlantic security community further to the East than was originally ever anticipated. This has brought manifold gains both in economic, political and security political respects. In several respects the heart of these processes in Northern Europe has been the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). In the words of Pertti Joenniemi (2009) the BSR acted as a laboratory for innovative forms of regional cooperation and governance.

That said, the process has also had some unintended consequences. The biggest of them has perhaps been that Russia has increasingly felt sidelined and alienated from many of these processes. Although the hand of partnership has been repeatedly extended on both sides of the former East–West divide, both parties have in fact walked away from these encounters disappointed and with growing mutual disillusionment.

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On 27th and 28th of September 2012 the fourth German-Nordic-Baltic Forum took place. The conference was entitled “EU Responses to external challenges as seen from Germany, Poland, Nordic and Baltic countries and the EU neighbourhood”. Not only experts from the Baltic States, the Nordic States, Poland and Germany participated in the forum, but for the first time also scientists coming from those countries to which the EU policies are addressed. Thus, a fruitful exchange of ideas and opinions among the stakeholders involved on the contents of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its perception among the partner states could be achieved.

The expert seminar was organised by the Institut für Europäische Politik (IE) in cooperation with the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), Helsinki and took place at the premises of FIIA. The conference was generously supported by the Federal Foreign Office and the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

There is hardly any reason to lay the blame on this occasion. It seems obvious that both sides of the fence can make a convincing case that will support their arguments. Yet the fact of the matter is that the dividing lines in the North have not been erased. On the contrary, they seem to be resurfacing and deepening again. This is worrisome as they have the potential to undermine, and with time also undo, the emergence of a budding security community also in the North.

In the work of Karl Deutsch (1968) the main defining characteristic of a security community is the jointly shared belief in the possibility, indeed necessity of peaceful change within that community. Resort to violence is deemed as unacceptable and there is a mutual willingness to look for political means to resolve possible conflicts. For Deutsch, doing his work in the midst of the Cold War, clear examples of a security community were Scandinavia and the relations between the United States and Canada.

It can be argued that during the 1990s there were some signs of a security community that would have included also Russia being built in the North. For example, the metamorphosis of security related debates in the North is a case in point. The old Cold War agenda of hard military security was quickly replaced with a host of soft security issues. In stark contrast to the previous era, security was no longer seen as a divisive issue. On the contrary, instead of zero-sum mentality ultimately based on the insane notion of mutually assured destruction the new period witnessed the emergence of cooperative approaches to security. Security was seen as indivisible and common to all the actors. As a consequence, hard security issues were largely removed from the agenda, clearing space for the emergence of regionally based cooperation, even integration.

A return of fear to the Baltic Sea?

Against this backdrop one of the most intriguing and worrying developments have been the re-emergence of hard security related issues and even fears in the Baltic Sea. Often the Nord Stream gas pipeline is pointed out as an issue that has resulted in fresh divisions and concerns in the region. For example the Baltic states as well as Sweden voiced concerns over the detrimental hard security affects the project will have on their security. Some of the scenarios entertained, for example, in Stockholm concerning the increased likelihood of the use of Russian force in the BSR speak volumes about the lack of a fully shared expectation of peaceful change in the region.

The same can be said about some of the Russian military exercises in the region in recent years. Yet it could be that the crux of the issue is not the existence of the pipeline per se. Instead, a more accurate reading of the pipeline's significance is that it is a symptom and not the root cause of the lack of trust that seems to be the real underlying issue in the BSR.

On the Western (and Northern and Southern) shores of the Baltic Sea the main source for concern seems to be Russia. On the one hand Russia's domestic development is seen as worrisome. It is hard to find a country in the BSR that has not voiced concerns over Russia's development. Even the traditionally cautious Finland has made noises to that effect. On the other hand Russia's voiced ambitions to increase military spending and consequently also presence in the BSR is a concern. These worries have been accentuated by the August 2008 conflict with Georgia that showed that Russia does not shy away from using military force against its neighbours if it deems it necessary.

These concerns are compounded by the perceived decline in the internal cohesion and solidarity in the European Union and NATO. To a degree, the case can be made that, and although somewhat paradoxically their increased presence has acted as a backdrop to the increased discord between the 'West' and Russia, they have also been instrumental in creating the prerequisites for the emergence of the positive dynamics in the BSR during the post-Cold War era (Haukkala 2009). The EU has brought the positive forces of integration and regional integration to the fore while NATO and the US security guarantees have brought the reassurance to some of the countries in the region to engage also Russia in these processes. Yet in recent years both the role of the EU and NATO has been questioned in the region and this is a factor that is breeding insecurity in its own right in the BSR. For example, although the emergence of increased Nordic cooperation in the field of defence (NORDEFECO, see <http://www.nordefco.org/>) can be seen as a reaction to the ongoing financial austerity in Europe, it is not far-fetched to argue that it also has a more nervous edge to it as a response to the perceived or potential decline in euro-Atlantic solidarity when it comes to the North. For the same reason the Baltic states seem to be eager to increase ties and cooperation with the Nordics, although every in question is of course fully aware that the Nordics are ill-equipped to take the lead in guaranteeing regional security.

On the Russia side the lack of trust is clearly visible as well. The host of military exercises were already noted but obviously too much should not be read into them as militaries often plan and train for every contingencies. Interestingly Russia's drive to secure direct ways for shipping its natural gas and oil to world markets free of intermediaries is a telling sign: Russia does not seem to accept nor appreciate interdependence and the positive win-win dynamics that regional cooperation and division of labour could bring but seems to prefer direct control over key infrastructure. This drive for control is a factor that breeds suspicion in the region while increasing Russia's leverage over some of its neighbours. Russia has also become an increasingly vocal opponent to NATO – and at times it seems to even NORDEFCO as well – in the region and is overall very keen to accentuate the harder spectrum of security over the soft one – another political and rhetorical move that betrays the lack of trust on the Russian side while increasing the feeling of potential vulnerability on the other side. In the BSR context, if one removes the NATO and to a lesser extent the EU overlay, the disparities between Russia and the other countries are vast. The end result is the current vicious circle of diminishing trust and increase of mutual suspicion that, if left unchecked, seems set to bring the old security problematic and dilemma on the agenda also in the Baltic Sea.

The way forward

In light of this brief analysis, what could be done? As was already noted, the aim of this exercise is not to lay the blame for the current state of affairs. Many in the region would probably agree that Russia's domestic trajectory will be one of the key ingredients in the future. Yet as it seems far-fetched to expect Russia to radically change its course so we must start looking for ways to find a working *modus vivendi* in the Baltic Sea based on the current realities. As crazy and anachronistic as it may sound, perhaps the countries in the region should re-visit some of the older debates concerning European security from the Cold War. The CSCE was the key in developing mechanisms for confidence-building measures (see Holst 1983) – and increased confidence in the objectives of others seems to be the key for restoring trust also on the regional level. The issue of tactical nuclear warheads could be one topic for discussions in the future.

Another ingredient required might be that Germany takes a stronger role in the Baltic Sea Region. As was already mentioned, the disparities between Russia and the rest of the countries in

the BSR are vast. Although these asymmetries have been balanced by the EU and NATO overlays in the region they have not supplanted the need for regional leadership as well. Until recently it has seemed as if Germany has shied away from this role and preferred to delegate the BSR policy to some of its Northern *Länder*. Yet the recent active and very purposeful German Presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (2011–12) gives grounds to hope that it might be willing to assume a more active position in future. This would also be required as of all the countries in the region only Berlin can be seen as being politically on par with Russia to engage Moscow in a debate while taking the lead in the intra-EU and -NATO processes to come up with a common blueprint concerning the region.

To conclude, perhaps the best way to move forward in the future is to stop the pretence that the positive agenda of the 1990s is fully alive and well in the whole of the BSR and take the bull by the horns. A good deal of the original promise has been achieved but it all could be in danger of unravelling if Russia does not find a role with which everyone is comfortable in the region.

References

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