

Nato's Baltic Military Exercises Rouse Suspicion

By [Global Research](#)

Global Research, March 19, 2010

[Morning Star](#) 17 March 2010

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Nato war planes have participated in exercises over the former Soviet Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The one-day mission involved French and Polish fighter planes and was the fifth major Nato air manoeuvre in Baltic airspace since the three states joined the Western military alliance in 2004.

Nato officials said that the exercise was meant to boost the skills of its multinational crews that patrol Baltic air space.

Russia has expressed irritation over the wargames near its borders.

Earlier this month, Russian envoy to Nato Dmitry Rogozin said that Moscow would demand a report on the exercises, including "who will be declared the enemy."

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Dillschneider, a spokesman for Nato Air Headquarters in Ramstein, Germany, claimed that the exercise was not directed against anyone.

Speaking in Tallin, Lt Dillschneider said: "Air policing is a defensive act – it's the sovereign right of every state to take care and ensure that their air space is safe and secured."

Nato war planes patrol over Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on a four-month rotational basis.

Yesterday's exercise involved two French Mirage 2000 jets, two Polish F-16 fighters, two Lithuanian training planes and transport aircraft.

Nato has pledged to continue its air mission at least until 2014 but the Baltic countries are lobbying to extend that until 2018.

It remains unclear how Baltic air space will be monitored after 2018.

Estonia military chief Ants Laaneots said that the three countries may lease planes or form a joint air unit.

Mr Laaneots said it would be "way too expensive" for each country to buy new jets.

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