

Pentagon Confronts Russia In The Baltic Sea

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Twelve months ago a new U.S. administration entered the White House as the world entered a new year.

Two and a half weeks later the nation's new vice president, Joseph Biden, spoke at the annual Munich Security Conference and said "it's time to press the reset button and to revisit the many areas where we can and should be working together with Russia."

Incongruously to any who expected a change in tact if not substance regarding strained U.S.-Russian relations, in the same speech Biden emphasized that, using the "New World Order" shibboleth of the past generation at the end, "Two months from now, the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization will gather to celebrate the 60th year of this Alliance. This Alliance has been the cornerstone of our common security since the end of World War II. It has anchored the United States in Europe and helped forge a Europe whole and free." [1]

Six months before, while Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he rushed to the nation of Georgia five days after the end of the country's five-day war with Russia as an emissary for the George W. Bush administration, and pledged \$1 billion in assistance to the beleaguered regime of former U.S. resident Mikheil Saakashvili.

To demonstrate how serious Biden and the government he represented were about rhetorical gimmicks like reset buttons, four months after his Munich address Biden visited Ukraine and Georgia to shore up their "color revolution"-bred heads of state (outgoing Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko is married to a Chicagoan and former Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush official) in their anti-Russian and pro-NATO stances.

While back in Georgia he insisted "We understand that Georgia aspires to join NATO. We fully support that aspiration."

In Ukraine he said "As we reset the relationship with Russia, we reaffirm our commitment to an independent Ukraine, and we recognize no sphere of influence or no ability of any other nation to veto the choices an independent nation makes," [2] also in reference to joining the U.S.-dominated military bloc. Biden's grammar may have been murky, but his message was unmistakably clear.

Upon his return home Biden gave an interview to the Wall Street Journal, the contents of which were indicated by the title the newspaper gave its account of them - "Biden Says Weakened Russia Will Bend to U.S." - and which were characterized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies as "the most critical statements from a senior administration official to date vis-a-vis Russia." [3]

It took the Barack Obama government eight months to make its first friendly gesture to Russia. In September of last year the American president and Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced that they were abandoning the Bush administration's plan to station ten ground-based midcourse interceptor missiles in Poland in favor of a "stronger, smarter, and swifter" alternative.

The new system would rely on the deployment of Aegis class warships equipped with SM-3 (Standard Missile-3) missiles – with a range of at least 500 kilometers (310 miles) – which "provide the flexibility to move interceptors from one region to another if needed," [4] in Gates' words.

The first location for their deployment will be the Baltic Sea according to all indications.

The proximity of Russia's two largest cities, St. Petersburg and Moscow, especially the first, to the Baltic coast makes the basing of American warships with interceptor missiles in that sea the equivalent of Russia stationing comparable vessels with the same capability in the Atlantic Ocean near Delaware Bay, within easy striking distance of New York City and Washington, D.C.

Although Washington canceled the earlier interceptor missile plans for Poland, on January 20 the defense ministry of that country announced that not only would the Pentagon go ahead with the deployment of a Patriot Advanced Capability-3 anti-ballistic missile battery in the country, but that it would be based on the Baltic Sea coast 35 miles from Russia's Kaliningrad district. [5]

The previous month Viktor Zavarzin, the head of the Defense Committee of the Russian State Duma (the lower house of parliament), said "Russia is concerned with how rapidly new NATO members are upgrading their military infrastructure" and "that Russia was especially concerned with the reconstruction of air bases in the Baltic countries for NATO's purposes which include signal and air intelligence radio of Russian territory." [6]

As it should be.

Since the Baltic Sea nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were ushered into NATO as full members in 2004, warplanes from Alliance member states have shared four-month rotations in patrolling the region, with two U.S. deployments to date.

Shortly before the patrols began almost six years ago the Russian media reported that "Relations between Russia and Estonia have been tense ever since NATO built a radar station on the Russian-Estonian border last year. On March 23, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko warned Russia would retaliate 'if NATO planes fly over Russian borders after the Baltic nations join the alliance.'" [7]

Last year the Obama-Biden administration went ahead with a series of major military exercises in the Baltic region:

The annual BALTOPS (Baltic Operations), the largest international military exercise conducted in the Baltic Sea, run by the U.S. Navy, NATO and the latter's Partnership for Peace program which included naval forces from twelve nations – Britain, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and the United States – led by U.S. Carrier Strike Group 12.

The 10-day Loyal Arrow 2009 NATO military exercises in Sweden with 50 jet fighters (the U.S. Air Force's F-15 Eagle among them) and NATO AWACS.

The Cold Response 09 NATO exercises in Norway (north and west of the Baltic) with over 7,000 troops from thirteen nations as well as air and naval forces.

"Cold Response 2010 is expected to be even larger" than last year's war games. [8] The U.S. Marine Corps "is planning Cold Response 2010, an exercise in Norway that could include a company of infantry Marines and a detachment of trainers with Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command." [9]

"The Corps has used caves carved into the sides of mountains here [Norway] for nearly 20 years, storing vehicles, equipment and ammunition later shipped everywhere from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to training exercises in Africa....[T]he Norwegians plan their security knowing that Marines will defend Norway in an attack using everything from Humvees to Howitzers that are already in place." [10]

The Defense Professionals website in Germany published a report on January 26 of a meeting of the Nordic-Baltic Chiefs of Defense (Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Norway, Finland, Lithuania and Sweden) to plan the "Baltic Host, Sabre Strike, and Amber Hope exercises to be held in the Baltics this and the following year."

"Exercise Baltic Host will be held this year in Latvia for participants from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and the US." [11] Last year's Baltic Host in Estonia included military personnel from that nation and from Latvia, Lithuania, United States European Command (EUCOM) and Strike Force NATO.

The earlier Amber Hope 07 was held in Lithuania and included the participation of over 1,700 troops from NATO and Partnership for Peace countries: Armenia, Britain, Canada, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, as well as representatives from NATO multinational headquarters.

Earlier this month a planning conference was held at the Gen. Adolfas Ramanauskas Warfare Training Center in Lithuania for the Sabre Strike 2010 military drills "where representatives of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and the US prepare[d] documentation and draft plans for the exercise which is scheduled to take place in Latvia in October 2010."

"Sabre Strike 2010 will be designed to tune together interoperability procedures of the three Baltic States and the US with prospects of participation in the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) operation in Afghanistan and other multinational operations in the future. This exercise for the first time will pull together troops of the Baltic States and the US for a training event of such character." [12]

2,000 troops from the four nations will take part and the war games will end with "a complex field exercise." [13]

On January 28 the Helsingin Sanomat announced that "Finland is to play host to what is by far the largest naval military exercise that has ever been seen in Finnish territorial waters" in September which "will be joined by 50 ships and 2,500 persons."

The Northern Coasts maneuvers will include warships and troops from Denmark, Estonia,

France, Germany, Latvia, Poland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United States and will consist of both sea and land drills, and the “maritime operations will be supported by air and special troops.” [14]

Not only hosting the largest naval war games in its history – ones simulating “a conflict between two countries that has an effect on the surrounding countries as well” – Finland will provide “nearly the entire Navy fleet” for the operation.

A local reported inquired whether the maneuvers were related to Russia’s plans for a natural gas pipeline in the Baltic Sea:

“At least according to the Finnish Navy, the exercise does not have anything to do with the Baltic Sea’s planned underwater gas pipeline, Nord Stream.

“But at least off hand, Annele Apajakari, Chief Public Information Officer at Navy Command Finland, was unable to say why also the United States, the Netherlands, and France will be involved.” [15]

The preceding day the same newspaper ran a story about prospective NATO-Russia military tensions in the Baltic region and quoted retired Lieutenant-General Matti Ahola as warning: “If the United States were to bring its planned anti-missile vessels into the Baltic Sea, it would bring about a reaction.” [16]

That was a week after the announcement that U.S. Patriot missiles and 100 troops were headed to Poland’s – eastern – Baltic coast.

In an article bearing the headline “Thanks to Poland, the alliance will defend the Baltics,” the British weekly the Economist on January 14 wrote that NATO would “stand by its weakest members — the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania” – and was elaborating “formal contingency plans to defend them.”

The magazine reported that “The main push came from Poland, a big American ally in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was the first to gain contingency plans — initially only against a putative (and implausible) attack from Belarus, a country barely a quarter of its size....Poland accelerated its push for a bilateral security relationship with America, including the stationing of Patriot anti-missile rockets on Polish soil in return for hosting a missile-defence base.” [17]

“Formal approval is still pending and the countries concerned have been urged to keep it under wraps. But sources close to the talks say the deal is done: the Baltic states will get their plans, probably approved by NATO’s military side rather than its political wing. They will be presented as an annex to existing plans regarding Poland, but with an added regional dimension. That leaves room for Sweden and Finland (not members of the alliance but increasingly close to it) to take a role in the planning too. A big bilateral American exercise already planned for the Baltic this summer is likely to widen to include other countries.” [18]

Poland is the prototype for and the foundation upon which the Pentagon and NATO are constructing a formidable military – naval, air, ground and interceptor missile – network in the Baltic Sea region on Russia’s northwest frontier.

Late last year Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vygaudas Usackas delivered a lecture called “The New NATO Strategic Concept: Lithuania’s Vision” to participants of the Higher

Command Studies Course of the Baltic Defense College (BALTDEFCOL) in which he stated "NATO is the embodiment of transatlantic relations. NATO should remain open to western countries, such as Finland or Sweden, to eastern countries like Ukraine or Georgia, as well as to the Balkan countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and other countries." [19] (The Baltic Defense College is based in Estonia and in addition to instructing officers from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania also trains personnel from other NATO and EU states and countries like Bosnia, Georgia, Moldova, Romania and Ukraine.)

As well as advocating the incorporation of states neighboring Russia to its west and its south into NATO, the Lithuanian foreign minister asserted "that Article 5 was the basis of the organisation and it should remain the cornerstone of NATO in the future." [20]

NATO's Article 5 is a mutual military assistance obligation, the main substance of which is in its first paragraph, which reads:

"The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

The outlines of a NATO "defense force" in the Baltic area and beyond were further delineated last November when it was revealed that Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine are to establish a "joint army." The combined military unit "may have a political objective. It is meant to set up an alternative center of military consolidation for West European projects, a center which could embrace former Soviet republics (above all Ukraine), now outside NATO. There is no doubt who will control this process, considering U.S. influence in Poland and the Baltics." [21]

Additionally, it will be linked to the Multinational Corps Northeast which was initially formed of Danish, German and Polish troops and later joined by forces from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. And the U.S. "[T]he Baltic military has cooperation experience with Polish troops. The Ukrainian military, too, has cooperation experience with NATO within the Partnership for Peace program....Establishment of a permanent brigade-class joint unit is expected to improve teamwork, allowing Ukrainians to grow into NATO's command, staff, tactical and logistic culture." [22]

The Multinational Corps Northeast has been used in Afghanistan where it has acquired direct combat zone experience.

The American client responsible for Ukraine's abrupt pro-NATO orientation, President Viktor Yushchenko, barely won 5 percent of the vote in this year's January 17 presidential election and is on his way out of office barring a reprise of the "orange revolution" of six years ago. Though at the NATO Military Committee meeting on January 27 Colonel-General Ivan Svyda, Chief of the General Staff and Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, announced that his nation was training troops for the NATO Response Force, a 25,000-troop global strike force. "The NATO Response Force (NRF) is a highly ready and technologically advanced force made up of land, air, sea and special forces components that the Alliance

can deploy quickly wherever needed.

“It is capable of performing missions worldwide across the whole spectrum of operations....” [23]

The Ukrainian military chief announced “We selected 12 detachments that are undergoing training in line with NATO standards and represent all types and branches of troops, including engineer units, the marines, field engineers, chemical and biological defense troops and others. Up to 500 Ukrainian servicemen will participate in the [alliance’s response] force.” [24]

The U.S. and NATO intend Ukraine to serve as a bridge between their new outposts on the Baltic Sea to the north and Georgia and Azerbaijan on Russia’s southern border.

Ukraine is being mentored and shepherded into the NATO pen with the U.S. employing the Baltic states of Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as both models and guides. The same mechanism with the same actors is being used for Georgia.

Last month the defense ministers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania signed a communique on joint military collaboration which “welcomed closer military cooperation in the security sector between the Baltic States and the USA which also included joint exercises in the Baltic region.” [25]

After releasing the statement, the three defense chiefs visited the Adazi Training Base in Latvia and “met with Gen. Roger A. Brady, Commander US Air Forces in Europe and NATO Allied Air Component.

“In the communique the NATO operation in Afghanistan was underscored as a priority of all the Baltic States.” [26]

On January 1 the Trilateral Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT) – with troops from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – began duty in the 14th rotation of the NATO Response Force. “On the same date Lithuanians...also enter[ed] a half-year standby period in the EU Battle Group.” [27]

On the Western end of the Baltic, on January 17 Swedish Defense Minister Sten Tolgfors spoke on the Targeting Decisions on Strengthening Defense Capability (TDSDC) program launched on January 1, pledged that “Sweden will develop its national defense in cooperation with NATO and neighbors Finland, Denmark and Norway” and added:

“Our defense policy adds a new neighborhood perspective. The structure and direction of Sweden’s Armed Forces will continue to have a clear Baltic profile. We have northern Europe’s largest and most qualified Air Force that is twice as large as any of our neighbors, and it has a full operational range.”

“It is the biggest renewal of security and defense policy for decades in Sweden. We will use 2010 to make the requisite decisions to carry out the modernization of our military, and civilian crisis, management capabilities.” [28]

Under the new program all members of the Swedish armed forces, now transitioned from a conscript to an all-volunteer (according to NATO demands for military “professionalization” of member and partner states) status, “are to be available for deployment at home or abroad in five to seven days in situations of ‘heightened alert.’” [29]

"In the old system, a third of the forces – which in 2008 meant 11,400 military personnel – were supposed to be able to deploy within one year from mobilization. In the new defence system, all 50,000 members of the forces would have to be 'usable and available' within a week....The soldiers in the conscript army could never be used for missions outside Sweden's borders, but now that all soldiers will either be full-time employees or on contract, they will be available to deploy anywhere....New is also the focus on the Baltic Sea Region." [30]

Last autumn a German Luftwaffe Eurofighter intercepted a Russian plane over the Baltic Sea. "After the German jet challenged the radar plane, the Russians scrambled two fighters, which approached at supersonic speed. Finnish jets then escorted the Russians back to international airspace, averting a further escalation of the situation." [31]

This month NATO extended its Baltic warplane deployments until 2014. "The Baltic skies are presently secured by the so-called NATO air police, which in addition to fighter planes also provide air defense systems and manpower." [32]

Added to the permanent presence of Western military aircraft are now American Patriot missiles and troops to operate them in Poland, "a demonstrative anti-Russian move" according to a leading general of the latter nation. [33]

Persistent U.S. and NATO military moves are threatening to turn the Baltic Sea region into a powder keg that another hostile encounter between Western and Russian military aircraft could ignite at any time.

As to government officials and the news media in Russia, a year is a sufficiently long period of time to awaken from the illusion of an imaginative rest button that will reverse a decade of NATO penetration of the Baltic Sea and the consolidation of military infrastructure there aimed squarely – and exclusively – at their own nation.

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Notes

- 1) Berlin Wall: From Europe Whole And Free To New World Order
Stop NATO, November 9, 2009

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/11/09/berlin-wall-from-europe-whole-and-free-to-new-world-order>

2) Associated Press, July 23, 2009

3) Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 28, 2009

4) Russia Today, September 17, 2009

5) With Nuclear, Conventional Arms Pacts Stalled, U.S. Moves Missiles And Troops To Russian Border

Stop NATO, January 22, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/with-nuclear-conventional-arms-pacts-stalled-u-s-moves-missiles-and-troops-to-russian-border>

6) Voice of Russia, December 8, 2009

7) RosBusinessConsulting, March 26, 2004

8) Barents Observer, March 4, 2009

9) Marine Corps Times, July 21, 2009

10) Ibid

11) Defense Professionals, January 26, 2010

12) Lithuanian Armed Forces, January 11, 2010

13) Ibid

14) Helsingin Sanomat, January 28, 2010

15) Ibid

16) Helsingin Sanomat, January 27, 2010

17) Economist, January 14, 2010

18) Ibid

19) Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 28, 2009

20) Ibid

21) Russian Information Agency Novosti, November 18, 2009

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32) Russian Information Agency Novosti, January 4, 2010

33) Interfax-Ukraine, January 20, 2010

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