

By Blake Williams

The 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago was dominated by talks of partnerships, smart defence and 21st century threats. The Baltic nations, however, are still concerned with the traditional territorial defence for which the alliance was founded. Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia — alliance members since 2004 — remain primarily interested in the organisation's commitment to collective defence due to the threat they feel is still posed by neighbouring Russia. The alliance's attempt to form an open dialogue with the Baltic's temperamental neighbour has not pacified these fears. At the Chicago Summit, NATO Secretary General Anders Rasmussen expressed the alliance's desire to strengthen cooperation with Russia on missile defence, reduction of short-range nuclear weapons in Europe, conventional arms control and counter-piracy initiatives. The tepid response from Russian officials and the belief of the Baltic nations that cooperation is unlikely in the near-term leaves their fears — fuelled by deep-seated resentment as well as recent history — very much intact.

At a panel discussion one year ago on US-Russia relations, Imants Liegis, Latvia's former Ambassador to NATO, labelled Russia "a somewhat unpredictable and aggressive neighbour out to reassert its influence" and highlighted the Georgian conflict of 2008 as justification for concern. Since then, little has changed. The five-day war in Georgia was instigated by Russia on the pretext of protecting Russian nationals in the country. Each of the three Baltic nations in NATO have a higher percent of Russian nationals than Georgia, with Latvia and Estonia's numbers climbing above 25 percent, according to the United States Department of State. The Georgian conflict coupled with the cyber-attacks against Estonia that originated from Russia in 2007 justifies the weariness of the Baltic nations. These recent acts of aggression left the Eastern European members of the alliance craving security reassurance at the 2012 Summit. Some comfort came with the formal announcement of an indefinite extension of NATO policing of the airspace above the Baltic region. The programme has been in effect since the countries gained alliance membership in 2004 and its continuation, although expected, was soothing. The policy extension perhaps received more fanfare than it otherwise would have as it was repackaged as part of the Smart Defence initiative.

"The big success for the Baltic states was the air policing" said Andres Kasekamp, the director of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute. "That's why people here can say we had a successful summit. Otherwise the summit was pretty lacking in success." Kasekamp went on to say that the four fighter jets stationed in Lithuania as part of the programme may not act as a significant deterrent to Russian aggression. The Baltic nations may therefore be prompted to increase their defence spending to allay their fears while other NATO member's expect to cut back. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia has more than doubled its military spending since 2006 and spent nearly four percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defence in 2010. By the Alliance's own admission, only six of the 26 European members of NATO spent at or above the organisation's benchmark of two percent of GDP on defence the same year.

These trends combined with times of austerity that make a reversal unlikely, have concerned Kasekamp about a shift of military power on the continent. While Ramūnas Vilpišauskas, the director of the Institute of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University in Lithuania, agreed with Kasekamp's sentiment for the long-term, his trepidation was directed at a change of focus rather than levels of defence spending. "I think a concern is the shifting of the United States attention into the Asian

region from Europe, as if the situation has been stabilised and fixed in Europe,” he said. President Barack Obama announced his country’s continental refocusing when reviewing defence strategy on January 5. Vilpišauskas has also expressed the opinion that this myth of stability has come from Russia’s differentiated approach to the Baltic States compared to other NATO and EU members and that difference often goes unnoticed by other alliance members.

The Baltic nations would like nothing more than a cooperative and productive relationship between NATO and Russia, they just do not expect one. Following the first sessions of the 2012 Summit, Rasmussen confirmed intentions to cooperate with Russia on missile defence and a commitment to an open dialogue. These words rang hollow for some, however. Scepticism, driven by a Soviet past, is rampant among the Baltic nations. The countries go along with initiatives to engage Russia (they are too small to block them even if they wanted too), but do so with little confidence of real results. Friendly relations with Russia would stand to benefit the NATO members neighbouring it the most. Russia’s strong lack of interest in legitimate cooperation, however, has left the Baltic countries preoccupied with NATO’s traditional territorial defence as the alliance enters a new era with new threats.

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