

SECURITY IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

196

ACTIVATION OF RISK POTENTIAL

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FIIA BRIEFING PAPER 196 • June 2016



ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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FIIA Briefing Paper 196
June 2016



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- A change in the Baltic Sea regional security situation has already taken place and is having direct and indirect impacts on the countries in the region.
- Potential risks to stability in the Baltic Sea Region have been activated, although they are not yet, and hopefully never will be actualized in the form of open military conflict.
- Russia's self-perception as a target of Western aggression is a way to legitimize assertive foreign policy towards the West in general and to continue military posturing in the Baltic Sea Region, where both the risks and possible gains for Russia are the greatest.
- Considering the full-spectrum approach to conflict and the web of relationships that exists throughout the Baltic Sea Region, it is possible to conclude that beyond a certain point, all Baltic Sea littoral states will not only be impacted but drawn into a conflict occurring in the region.

Russia sees the Baltic Sea Region fundamentally differently from the way the West sees it. In the Western view, the Baltic Sea Region is not formed primarily by geography, but by overlapping institutional, political and economic relationships. The mosaic of institution-based and historically evolved relations shapes the respective countries' self-understanding of the region and their role in it. Translated into security political jargon, this means that due to compatible yet separate military-political arrangements, the region may look like "one military strategic area",¹ but does not function as such, as a recent war game demonstrated.²

Russia, on the other hand, sees the Baltic Sea Region through an equation of physical control and political power. More precisely, in the traditional Russian view, control of physical territory is a source of power and something that gives legitimacy to Russia's place in the European, and in this case regional, security-political constellation.³ Although it can be convincingly argued that Russia's strategic alignment with the West, that is, adoption of core Western institutions (democracy, the rule of law, and an independent judiciary) would serve its vital

interests, Russia has chosen an isolationist and increasingly aggressive posture towards the West.⁴

This confrontational logic derives from Russia's internal developments and, most importantly, from the urgent sense of regime insecurity whereby the construction of enemy images has become a function of internal politics. The image of the aggressive West pursuing its geopolitical interests in Ukraine and beyond has become a tool that compensates for the increasingly evident deficiencies in the Russian political system, and is designed to mobilize the public to defend the regime. Finally, it is Russia's military operation in Crimea that clearly demonstrates Russia's ability and will to use military force in order to control the territory, instead of seeking to secure its vital interests through international institutions, such as international law.

The obvious question, reiterated in many previous analyses, is what will happen next should Russia perceive that its vital interests are threatened, for example in the Baltic Sea Region. Answering this question is complicated, not least because the strategic documents prepared for declaratory purposes do not offer a clear definition of what Russia's vital interests⁵ are. For instance, in the major strategic documents, only the maritime doctrine clearly stipulates Russia's interests in the Baltic Sea Region. For the purposes of this analysis, we highlight two permanent features in Russian thinking: the traditional view where political power is understood as an equation of control (of territory, but also of strategic

1 Wieslander Anna (2016): NATO, the U.S. and Baltic Sea Security, *UI Paper* No. 3, p.13. The argument made is that if the US failed to defend the credibility of NATO, the whole credibility of its foreign policy and strategy would collapse. It is assumed in the report that "all depends on the US in the beginning of the crisis". The US going first implies here that the States should and would respond to Russian aggression rapidly and with military force.

2 Shlapak, David A., Michael Johnson (2016): Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank. Wargaming the Defence of the Baltics, RAND: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND-RR1253.pdf and Kofman, Michael (2016): Fixing NATO deterrence in the East or: how I learned to stop worrying and love Nato's crushing defeat by Russia, *War on the Rocks*, May 12, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/fixing-nato-deterrence-in-the-east-or-how-i-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-natos-crushing-defeat-by-russia/>.

3 Trenin, Dmitry (1999): Reluctant Adaptation: Russia's Security Policy towards New Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, in Spillmann, Kurt and Andreas Wenger, *Russia's Place in Europe. A Security Debate*, Studies in Contemporary History and Security policy, Bern: Peter Lang, p. 90.

4 At the beginning of the 2000s, the Russian leadership signalled to the world that institutional reforms in the domestic sphere, further integration in global economic structures and adaptation of foreign and security politics along the lines of international institutions were considered to be in Russia's strategic interests. Medvedev, Sergei (2008): Rethinking the national interest: Putin's Turn in Russian Foreign Policy, *The Marshall Center Papers*, No. 6; see also Pynnöniemi and Mashiri (2015) *Venäjän sotilasdoktriinit vertailussa. Nykyinen versio viritetiin kriisiajan taajuudelle*, FIIA Report 42, Ulkopoliittinen instituutti: http://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/507/venajana_sotilasdoktriinit_vertailussa/.

5 Rogov, Sergey (1995): Security concerns of the new Russia. Volume I: The challenges of defending Russia. Virginia: Center for Naval Analysis. Russian Military Doctrine was approved by presidential decree No. 1833 on 2 November 1993. First published in *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 19 November 1993.

resources, information, and political activities); and the preference for using political, diplomatic, and other non-military means of preventing, localizing, and neutralizing military threats at regional and global levels, as indicated in the Russian military doctrine from 1993. For small nations located along the Russian border, even the non-military measures that Russia uses for preventing conflict from escalating can be detrimental. This dilemma is currently termed “hybrid war”, although we prefer to use the concept of “full-spectrum conflict”, for reasons explained in the next section.

Thus, to conclude the first part of the analysis, it can be argued that in the case of the Baltic Sea Region, Russia does not see a myriad of intra-regional interdependencies that tie the region’s countries together but, rather, an array of strategic deficiencies – not least in NATO’s deterrence capabilities – that facilitate its own risk-taking in a crisis situation. Russia’s demonstrative show of force and negligence of commonly agreed-upon rules of engagement signal a break with a previous Russian policy that sought to enhance confidence-building between militaries in the Baltic Sea Region.⁶ It also underlines that Russia views the region in the framework of a correlation of forces, that is, a venue for a strategic-level competition for power.

The term correlation of forces is familiar from the Cold War period and refers to thinking in accordance with which Russia must match, and preferably exceed, possible increases in the level of NATO military equipment in the regions adjacent to it. What counts in this ‘correlation’ are not only military, but economic, diplomatic, informational and economic forces. However, since this concept is embedded in the bipolar security constellation, it makes more sense to build this analysis on terms that can more appropriately explain the situation today.

The term *full-spectrum conflict* achieves this as it refers to the whole spectrum of political, diplomatic, military, information and economic tools that

target, first and foremost, the existing deficiencies – institutional, legislative, military and mental gaps that render the Baltic Sea Region vulnerable to disruptions. The full-spectrum approach to conflict explains Russia’s behaviour around the Baltic Sea Region, and suggests that risks on a strategic scale have been activated in Northern Europe.⁷ This analysis aims to identify some of the major elements in the full-spectrum conflict framework in the Baltic Sea Region and the risks inherent in this situation.

Full-spectrum conflict: a useful framework for analysis in the Baltic Sea Region

Full-spectrum conflict, a term first introduced by Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely,⁸ is a mixture of the Chinese concept of unrestricted warfare and George Kennan’s definition of overt and covert political warfare, as argued recently by Michael Kofman.⁹ Moreover, full-spectrum conflict is not comparable to total war concepts. Rather, it indicates that different *types* of means or tools of statecraft can be, and are, used to encourage or deter, deceive and influence the actions of others. The concept of full-spectrum conflict captures Russia’s key strength in this regard: its ability to subordinate the full spectrum of economic, informational, financial, legal, diplomatic and military means to serve the same political goal.

The idea of conflicts developing in the grey zone between war and peace being somehow novel reflects a binary war-peace division as well as a

6 Russia planned to take part in all international naval manoeuvres in the Baltic Sea in 2014. Russia Beyond the Headlines, 31 December 2013, “Russian Baltic Fleet to join several NATO-led maneuvers in 2014 – commander”: http://rbth.com/news/2013/12/31/russian_baltic_fleet_to_join_several_nato-led_maneuvers_in_2014_-_comman_33116.html

7 Other drivers identified in the study include changing global US priorities and defence cutbacks in the major European NATO countries. At least the latter risk has not materialized; on the contrary, many European countries are increasing their defence spending, albeit not at the same pace nor to the same extent. Ljung, Bo, Tomas Malmöf, Karlis Naretnieks, and Mike Winnerstig (eds.) (2012): *The Security and Defensibility of the Baltic States*. FOI, October 2012.

URL: <http://www.aff.a.se/balticum.pdf>.

8 Jonsson, Oscar and Roberg Seely (2015): “Russian full-spectrum conflict: an appraisal after Ukraine”, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol 28, No. 1, p. 9.

9 Kofman, Michael (2016): Russian hybrid warfare and other dark arts. Warontherocks.com, 11 Mar 2016: <http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>.

post-modern Western view of limited war. The binary division is arguably linked to the Cold War belief that due to nuclear weapons and mutually assured destruction, war was distinct from peace. To those accustomed to this Western post-modern conception, the concept of full-spectrum conflict represents a paradigm shift in warfare, where states see the use of military force (war) not as a continuation of politics by other means, but rather as one of the myriad tools that can be used to pursue strategic goals.

The reference to a paradigm shift can be misleading since there are several ways of assessing the change. The Russian military literature identifies six generations of warfare defined by the milestones of technological progress in armaments.¹⁰ In the Russian thinking on warfare, the emphasis is on the asymmetry of conflicting parties in technology and power relations.¹¹ However, to understand the implications of full-spectrum conflict, we need to analyse it in the *changing context of warfare* that the Russian (and Western) focus on technological development does not fully address.

The upshot of this analysis is that an asymmetrical conflict where non-state belligerents challenge the state has become a central form of warfare, coexisting in parallel with the former paradigm of the monopoly of the state.¹² A key difference between the two paradigms is that

military force is not seen as a final instrument of the statecraft, but rather as an instrument to create the conditions necessary to reach a strategic result. Thus, the old cycle of peace-crisis-war-resolution-peace is replaced by a different cycle: confrontation-conflict-confrontation-conflict.¹³

As indicated above, the Russian approach to conflict can be explained on this basis. Using a set of paramilitary, legal, semi-legal, and illegal group formations, the asymmetry of power relations can be magnified for the benefit of the attacker. This is clearly expressed in the new edition of the Russian Security Strategy: “An entire spectrum of political, financial-economic, and informational instruments have been set in motion in the struggle for influence in the international arena. Increasingly active use is being made of special services’ potential”.¹⁴ The actions can be either temporary or part of a longer-term process. Thus, the asymmetry is both spatial and a time-sensitive measure.¹⁵

Russian strategic documents underline the importance of asymmetrical threats stemming from the activities of non-state belligerents, although in the Russian thinking ‘colour revolutionaries’ are not regarded as independent actors but are viewed as proxies undertaking actions on behalf of Russia’s perceived great power foes. Thus, as suggested in the previous section, in the Russian view, a full-spectrum conflict is ultimately about the state’s geopolitical and geostrategic interests and their fulfilment. Therein lies a paradox: while Russia is ready to use these measures in what it views as *prevention* of the escalation and *neutralization* of threats to its vital interests, the use of these methods in the FSU region and beyond effectively escalates the conflict potential, and in the case of Georgia and Ukraine, has led to war. Against this background, it is worrying that recent Russian strategic documents have been tuned into crisis mode and, as Andrew

10 Accordingly, we are entering sixth generation warfare – the era of high-precision weapons that will outplay nuclear weapons. Kipp, Jakob W. 2012 ‘Russian Sixth Generation Warfare and Recent Developments’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Vol.9, Issue 17, January 25, 2012; Kiss, Peter A. (2014), *Winning wars amongst the people. Case studies in asymmetric conflict*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.

11 Lalu, Petteri (2014): *Syvää vai pelkästään tiheää? Neuvostoliittolaisen ja venäläisen sotataidollisen ajattelun lähtökohdat, kehittyminen, soveltaminen käytäntöön ja nykytilanne. Näkökulmana 1920- ja 1930-luvun syvän taistelun ja operaation opit*. Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu, Taktiikan laitos, Julkaisusarja 1, No.3, p. 344; also Lalu, Petteri (2016): ‘On war and perception of war in Russian thinking’, *Research Bulletin* 3, Finnish Defence Research Agency, http://puolustusvoimat.fi/documents/1951253/2208221/PVTUTKL_160525_DOS_J_tutkimuskatsaus_on_war_and_perception_of_war_in-Russian_thinking.pdf/2d81a143-9e98-4194-92aa-86157e84b291.

12 Kiss 2014, 26, 37–39.

13 Kiss 2014, 31.

14 NSS 2015, paragraph 13.

15 Thomas, Tim (2015): Russia’s military strategy and Ukraine: indirect, asymmetric – and Putin-led. *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol 28, No. 3 p. 445; Pynnöniemi, Katri and András Rácz (2016): The Fog of Falsehood. Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine, FIIA Report 45, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs: http://www.fii.fi/en/publication/588/fog_of_falsehood/.

Monaghan has convincingly argued, “the Russian leadership is currently operating in the ‘mobilization preparation’ phase”.¹⁶

Key elements of conflict and risks in the Baltic Sea Region

Using the full-spectrum conflict framework, a number of key elements of conflict and the types of risks their interactions pose can be identified (Figure 1).

Strategic resources refer to various forms of economic leverage (ranging from punitive measures such as trade sanctions and ‘sanitary regulations’) to indirect means of economic pressure, such as political use of energy resources. The Russian National Security Strategy frames the use of strategic resources as an attempt by “individual states to utilize economic methods and instruments of financial, trade, investment, and technological policy to resolve their own geopolitical tasks”, which are consequently “weakening the stability of the system of international economic relations”.¹⁷

This category also includes military measures short of conventional war, most importantly, the use of military exercises and harassment in demonstrating Russia’s dominance in the region and force-projection capabilities in an escalating conflict situation. Linked to force projection, Russia has also developed a technological defence in depth, having lost its physical defence in depth with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. Much of the attention regarding this build-up of Anti-access Area denial (A2AD) capabilities has focused on Kaliningrad, but equivalent systems can be found across Russia’s western borders. Kaliningrad itself

is a double-edged sword for Russia. While it provides a forward bastion in which to base A2AD and force-projection capabilities, it is also vulnerable and ultimately difficult to defend.

The second major element is the nature of the Russian political system, paraphrased by Alena Ledeneva as *sistema*. The key idea is that instead of formal political institutions, Russian politics is based on unofficial and reciprocal networks of political and economic power that both sustain and support the system but also limit the possibility to reform.¹⁸ The fundamental incongruity between the Russian system and democratic governance produces long-term risks for Russian development and short-term opportunities that the system insiders may exploit to their advantage.

The third element is the informational means used in manipulating public opinion in Russia and abroad. The Russian national security strategy identifies “intensifying confrontation in the global information arena” that is “caused by some countries’ aspiration to utilize informational and communication technologies to achieve their geopolitical objectives, including by manipulating public awareness and falsifying history”.¹⁹ There is no shortage of studies available showing Russia’s use of these methods to achieve various objectives.

When any two of these elements converge, risks associated with conflict escalation can be expected.

Risk 1: Disruption of comprehensive security of the target country

Comprehensive security, or vital systems security, is the sum of technological, societal, political and economic resilience. The disruption of comprehensive security can be achieved by taking advantage of the discrepancy between *sistema* institutions and the tools of democratic governance in the target country.

16 Monaghan, Andrew (2016), ‘Russian State Mobilization. Moving the Country on to a War Footing’, Research Paper, Chatham House, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-05-20-russian-state-mobilization-monaghan-2.pdf>, p. 28; Pynnöniemi and Mashiri (2015); on Russian perception of threats, see also: Bartles, Charles K. 2016, ‘Getting Gerasimov Right’, Military Review, January-February 2016, 34; Lалу 2016.

17 Russian National Security Strategy (2015): ‘Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 31 dekabrya 2015 goda N 683’, 31 Dec 2015: <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/1/133.html>.

18 See Laine, Veera, Toivo Martikainen, Katri Pynnöniemi & Sinikukka Saari (2015): *Zugzwang in slow motion? The implications of Russia’s system-level crisis*. FIIA Analysis 6, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, p. 5: http://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/554/zugzwang_in_slow_motion/.

19 Russian National Security Strategy 2015, paragraph 21.

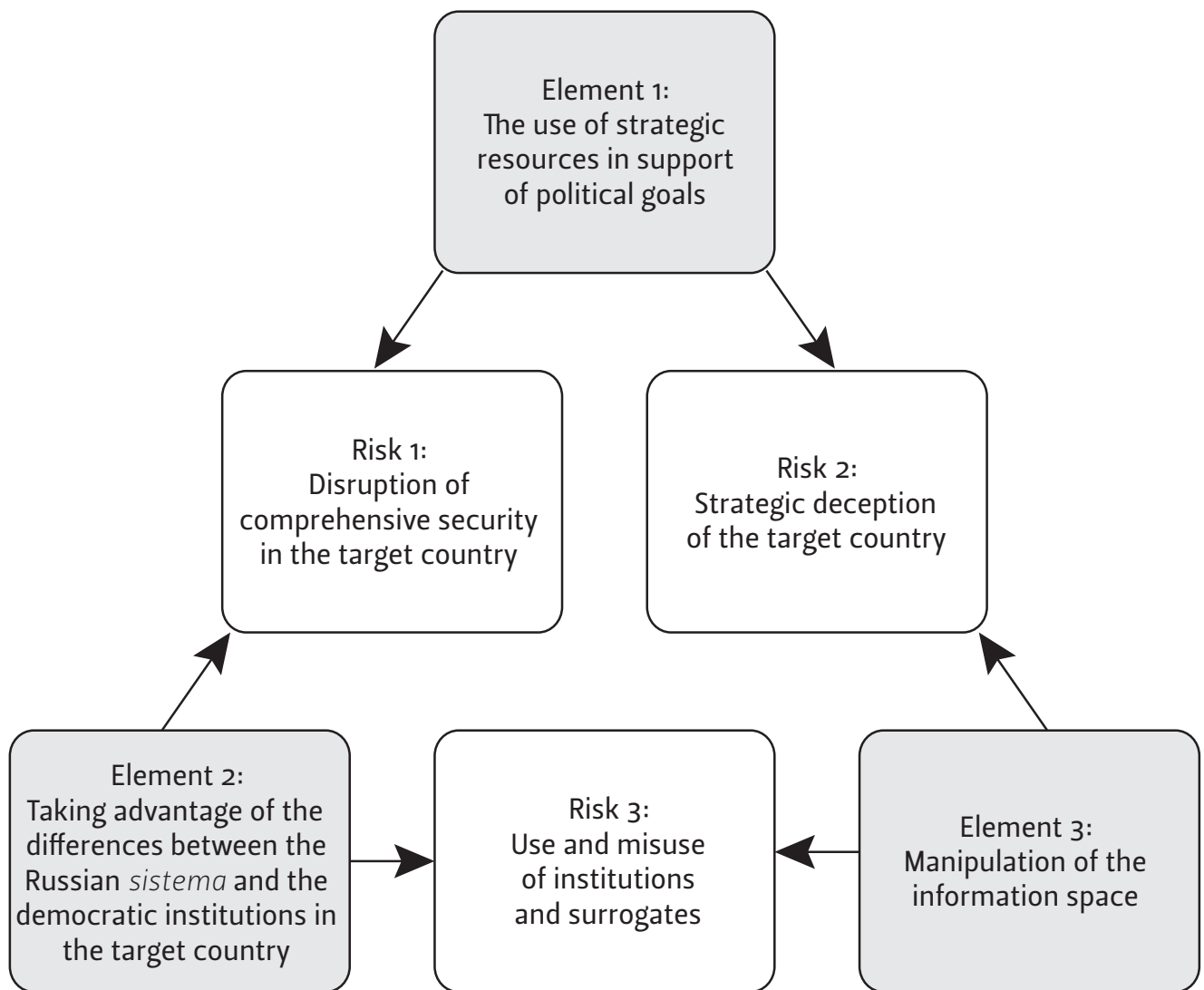


Figure 1. The risks and drivers of full-spectrum conflict in the Baltic Sea Region.

For example, discussions on resilience and cyber security have identified several system-level risks inherent in the integration of energy transmission infrastructures, digitalization of manufacturing industries and other interfaces that are created by computerization of vital societal functions. The basic equation is simple: the more digitalized the services and other technical systems, the more opportunities exist for disruption generated from outside.

Dependence on Russian energy resources has been identified as one factor that may undermine the societal and even the state security of the recipient country. From a comprehensive security point of view, however, the key is the percentage of the overall national energy mix that Russian-controlled actors have. For example, Finland imports all of its

natural gas from Russia, but natural gas makes up less than 7% of the national energy mix.²⁰

The fact that the Baltic Sea is a strategic artery for Russia should be taken into account in analyses. The building of the Nord Stream gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea is seen in Russia as a commercial project, offering a means of acquiring leverage over the former Soviet Union countries, Ukraine in particular, and also of re-establishing special cooperation with

20 Suomen virallinen tilasto (SVT): Energian hankinta ja kulutus [verkkójulkaisu]. Helsinki: Tilastokeskus [vii-tattu: 13.4.2016]. http://www.stat.fi/til/ehk/2015/04/ehk_2015_04_2016-03-23_tie_001_fi.html.

Germany.²¹ The Kaliningrad enclave has the status of a special economic zone, but in the current situation it functions merely as a major military installation for Russia. In view of this, it is noticeable that the Russian National Security Strategy from 2015 defines “resources, access to markets and control over transportation arteries” as objects of struggle in the context of increasing global and regional instability.²²

Risk 2: The strategic deception of political elites and public opinion

Russian military analysts have long analysed and developed informational-psychological means to manage perceptions of reality among the general public and decision-makers, and thus, to manipulate reactions to ongoing processes.

When approached from this perspective, the Russian emphasis on the “NATO threat” can be seen as part of strategic deception. The new formulations in the strategy documents emphasize Russia as being a target of containment and argue that the placement of NATO’s military infrastructure closer to Russian borders poses a threat to national security. This message is amplified by numerous accusations levelled at the West for being responsible for the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria.²³

Russia also uses its threat assessments to project and extend the reach of its brand of power politics to its neighbours. Speaking publicly of its threat perception – of feeling threatened at every turn – Russia attempts to get its neighbours to act in accordance with Russian interests.

Risk 3: Use of surrogates and misuse of legal and institutional instruments

The use of surrogate actors and purposeful misuse of legal and institutional instruments is the third risk which has been activated. At the most basic level, this involves using a front organization or company to push for policies or decisions desired by the Kremlin, while providing deniability and obscuring the original source of policy ideas or even cash.

Although we focus here on how Russia can take advantage of the three aforementioned elements, we should not overlook the fact that each of them has its limitations. The consolidation of state control over strategic resources provides Russia with considerable agility in a conflict situation, but does not insulate the country from the fluctuations of world commodity prices. Thus far, the manipulation of public opinion has provided a temporary replacement for real political and economic reforms, but it cannot compensate for economic growth and does not solve the underlying structural problems. Furthermore, the disruption of trade relations between the EU member states and Russia, as well as increasing awareness among Western politicians of Russia’s ‘game-plan’, are factors that in themselves limit the Russian space for action.

Full-spectrum conflict in the Baltic Sea Region

The very nature of full-spectrum conflict as described above means that it does not proceed according to a set plan or explicit strategy. To discern its use, a diverse range of actions – puzzle pieces – must be put together, thereby revealing at least a partial picture.

Considering the full-spectrum approach to conflict and the web of relationships that exists throughout the Baltic Sea Region, it is possible to conclude that beyond a certain point, all Baltic Sea littoral states will not only be impacted but drawn into a conflict occurring in the region.

This may seem counterintuitive, as one of the purposes of tailoring full-spectrum conflicts to individual countries is for Russia to safeguard its interests, yet avoid an uncontrolled regional escalation. Some international relations theory supports this, as the diverse economic, political, trade, societal

21 Martikainen, Toivo & Antto Vihma (2016): *Dividing the EU with energy? Unpacking Russia’s energy geoeconomics*.

FIIA Briefing Paper 191, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs: <http://www.fia.fi/en/publication/571/dividing-the-eu-with-energy/>.

22 Russian National Security Strategy, paragraph 13.

23 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Comment by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the new splash of anti-Russian rhetoric from the US Administration, 25 June, 2014, No. 1783-25-07-2014, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/ua/-/asset_publisher/ktnozLTvbbS3/content/id/676743.

Political and security cooperation in the Baltic region

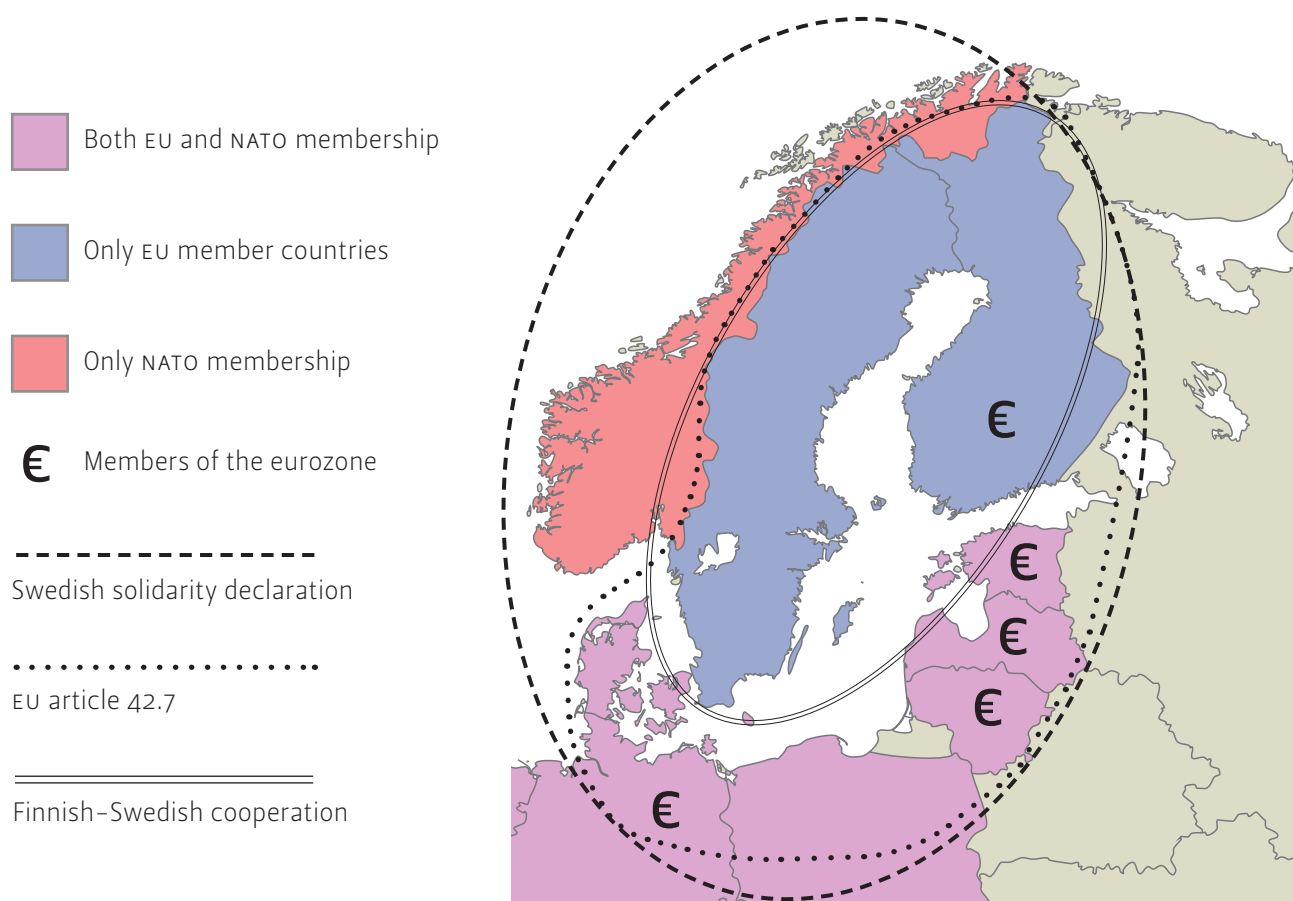


Figure 2: The web of institutional, political and economic relationships which suggests that even a bilateral conflict would quickly become regional – involving Finland.

and military relationships that constitute a kind of interdependence are frequently argued to restrain conflict.

This ‘interdependence view’, however, suffers from a key weakness: faced with full-spectrum conflicts individually tailored to each state, a serious conflict may escalate between only two states, but due to the interconnected web of institutional and political relationships, the actions or inactions of a third and fourth state in the region can result in a second-order effect that dramatically and quickly escalates beyond the intent of the initial aggressor.

In the case of Finland, this means it is difficult to imagine a scenario where Finland could realistically stay out of an escalating conflict, especially if it reached the level of open use of military force. Much below that threshold, Finland would be politically bound to support its fellow Nordic countries and European Union member states. In Finnish domestic debates, this means that when it comes to the frequently used division of conflicts into

‘global’, ‘regional’ and ‘directly impacting Finland’, the latter two have merged significantly during the past two decades. The current security environment coupled with Russia’s approach to conflict (full spectrum) has generated a new type of “security companionship” where the web of relationships and approaches to conflict suggests that states would be well advised to consider their own and the region’s security as largely intertwined.

Conclusions

Russian internal and external policies are consolidated around the idea that the West is responsible for the conflict in Ukraine, the current international system is dysfunctional and, what is more, the current constellation of world politics should be changed to better serve Russia’s national interests. Fundamentally, this reveals a deep yearning by Russia to be recognized as a great power that has an important role to play in global affairs. Regionally, it means that others must acknowledge Russia’s

dominant role in the post-Soviet space. Furthermore, both the EU's influence and NATO's presence must be kept in check, and preferably rolled back. Here, the Baltic Sea Region is an important component, if only to ensure that the current strategic geography is maintained.

The analytical framework developed here takes into account two permanent features of Russian strategic thinking: preference for control, be it physical territory or economic and information flows; and the ability and will to use the full spectrum of tools to prevent and neutralize potential threats to Russia's vital interests. When these two features are combined, it appears that Russia can effectively cause harm to small states in its neighbourhood. However, it should be emphasized that Russia has, in the past, demonstrated its willingness to abide by the common rules and norms that are designed to build confidence. What this implies is that should Russia start to cooperate rather than prolong the conflict in Ukraine, the means available for confidence-building are already in place.

However, at the moment, a change in the regional security situation *has already taken place* and this is having direct and indirect impacts on Finland and other countries in the region. More broadly, potential risks to stability in the Baltic Sea Region have been *activated*, although they are not yet, and hopefully never will be, *actualized* in the form of open military conflict.

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ISBN 978-951-769-492-6

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

Cover photo: U.S. Navy Photo

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All manuscripts are reviewed by at least two other experts in the field to ensure the high quality of the publications. In addition, publications undergo professional language checking and editing. The responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.

This publication is part of a research project conducted by The Finnish Institute of International Affairs entitled 'Russia's changing role in Finland's neighbourhood'.

The project is part of the implementation of the Government Plan for Analysis, Assessment and Research for 2015.