

Russia as key to the Baltic Sea region¹

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Executive Summary

The opportunities for the Baltic Sea region are essentially determined by factors of high politics, and these mainly have to do with Russia, directly or indirectly. Tightly connected to these are alleged geopolitical ‘lessons of the past’, which – likewise – pertain to Russia. Russian action at other arenas like the Caucasus inadvertently affects the Baltic Sea region. Even more, Russia is actually the key to developments in this region – not in detail, of course, but in rough outline. Combined with controversial Russian internal developments and security policy, this implies that prospects for the Baltic Sea region are less than bright. Simultaneously, however, classic Norden is forcefully reemerging.

¹ This brief is a revised version of a speech held in Hamina (Finland), 28 August 2009, at the conference on ‘The future of the Baltic Sea region’ (arranged by the Prime Minister’s Office and *Centrum Balticum* in celebration of the 1809 peace treaty of Hamina/Fredrikshamn).

Theses

It is sometimes said that 'Russia is too big for the Baltic Sea region'. There is much truth in this, since small powers as most of those in the region are hardly Russia's 'opposite numbers'. Also, Russia gives higher priority to other, less peaceful arenas. Nevertheless, Russian action in the Caucasus, for instance, *inadvertently* affects the Baltic Sea region. Even more, Russia is actually the key to developments in the Baltic Sea region – not in detail, of course, but in rough outline! The two theses advocated here are the following:

- (1) The opportunities for the Baltic Sea region are essentially determined by factors of high politics; these mainly have to do with Russia, directly or indirectly. Tightly connected to these are alleged geopolitical 'lessons of the past', which also pertain to Russia.
- (2) These determinants, combined with current Russian authoritarianism and controversial security policy (Caucasus, notably), imply that prospects for the Baltic Sea region are less than bright. Simultaneously, however, classic Nordic cooperation is regaining momentum.

The Origin of the Baltic Sea Region

Already the impetus for the modern version of the region lay in Moscow. The dramatic events of 19-21 August 1991, the failed reactionary communist coup, paved the way for the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, this meant that they could restore their interwar statehoods. It had also wide-ranging importance for Finnish foreign policy. That Finnish Prime Minister Esko Aho declared soon after these events that Finland would seek membership of the European Community (later the EU) was not based on a sudden realization of the wisdom of Jean Monnet's or Robert Schumann's visions. The reason was that the curtailments on Finland's foreign policy autonomy from its 'Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance' with the Soviet Union were now de

facto losing their importance (the treaty ceased to exist together with the Soviet Union by New Year 1992).

From 1991 and some years ahead, there was widespread euphoria regarding the opportunities for a Baltic Sea region, encompassing the Nordic states, the three Baltic countries, northern Germany and Poland, as well as the St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad oblasts. Among my Copenhagen constructivist colleagues, Norden was declared 'dead' and dull, whereas the Baltic Sea region would take over and live. Irrespective of linguistic or other barriers, elite persons could somehow talk it into existence, it was idealistically believed. It was imagined by some that the coastal regions of the great powers might be allowed to act autonomously in relation to their capitals – leading eventually to a revival of the medieval Hanseatic pattern. However, with the formation of the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) in 1992, encompassing the Nordic and the Baltic states together with (federal) Germany, Poland, Russia, and the EC Commission, the nation-states effectively put themselves in the driver's seat.

Divergent Postures vis à vis Russia

As a recent illustration of Russia postures in the region, I shall briefly describe reactions among its states to the 2008 war in Caucasus:

- Germany and Norway were the doves in relation to Russia. In spite of controversial Russian behaviour infringing on Georgian territorial integrity, communication channels should be kept open and business should be (almost) as usual.
- Denmark, having been rather tough with Russia in the post-Cold War era, kept a relatively low profile this time (no 'solidarity travel' to Tbilisi, for instance, during the immediate conflict).
- Finland: a pretty tough reaction. The NATO card, i.e. that Finland might consider joining NATO as a direct result of unwanted Russian behaviour, was played by the Foreign Ministry – though quickly put back in the wallet.

- The Baltic countries and Poland: a hawkish reaction as expected. The four Presidents and their Ukrainian colleague (representing the former 'captive nations' of the Soviet Union as they themselves put it) went to Tbilisi as part of a forceful and emotional common manifestation.
- Finally, the 'super hawk' of all – surprisingly Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt (acting independently from his own Foreign Ministry and the rest of the cabinet). As distinct from the Baltic countries and Poland, the reaction was cool and analytic. Russia's approach to Georgia could be compared to Nazi-Germany's towards Czechoslovakia 1938 (South Ossetia and Abkhazia corresponding to the Sudetenland) or to Serbia's towards Bosnia in the mid-1990s (at the time, Bildt had been an EU Special Envoy to Ex-Yugoslavia and Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General to the Balkans).

The underlying reasons behind this pattern of diverging reactions was a mixture of contemporary geopolitical concerns and alleged 'lessons of the past' – what could be called 'past geopolitics' (except for the case of Sweden, where Bildt's personal analysis was decisive). For Germany, Poland, and the Baltic countries, it seems that lessons of the past in relation to Russia were influential – as they have been for the whole post-Cold War era.

It may be believed, of course, that memberships of the majority of Baltic Sea countries in NATO or the EU have had a 'harmonizing' effect on their Russia policies. Experience shows, however, that this has not been the case. Whereas the EU can act coherently in relation to China, North Korea, South and West Asia and South America, it cannot do so in relation to Russia – for the same reasons as pointed out in regard to the Baltic Sea area. The same goes for NATO. So even if all CBSS-states were to become members of both the EU and NATO, this would hardly harmonize their Russia postures.

Spill-over from the Russia factor

The Russia factor influences directly, of course, the role of Russia itself in Baltic Sea cooperation. In times of controversial Russian behaviour, channels to Russia such as the EU Northern dimension, the NATO-Russia Council or NATO 'Partnership for Peace' tend to be more or less blocked. The St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad oblasts become more or less isolated from the region, and common infrastructure projects like the planned German-Russian 'Nordstream' gas pipeline come under extra fire. The pipeline is criticized by some for corresponding to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, aimed at geopolitically circumventing Poland and the Baltic states, and also making them more gas dependent on Russia.

In addition, the Russia factor has several *indirect* effects. Poland and the Baltic countries have tended to downplay the importance of the CBSS, the major IGO for the Baltic Sea region. Before the Balts were admitted into NATO and the EU, the reason was to defuse the risk that the CBSS might be seen as 'enough' Western integration for them and thus ruin their possibilities for the more essential memberships. Having gained these memberships, this tendency continued nonetheless. A reason may be that a forum that includes Russia, but excludes the United States, is seen as less attractive.

Moreover, the Balts were not amalgamated into the Nordic Council. There were probably several reasons for this, but one was allegedly the Latvian-Russian tensions concerning the rights of the Russian population in Latvia. In other words: the Russia factor once again!

Also for Norway, Russia is the crux of the matter. The High North (the Barents Sea) is more crucial than Baltic Sea cooperation. There are both cooperation incentives and a conflict potential (a long disputed border) in relation to Russia in the High North. Norway participates, albeit half-heartedly, in Baltic Sea cooperation in order to attract the interests of the region's countries to the high North as a *quid pro quo*. However, Norway carefully avoids irritating Moscow by siding with the Baltic states in controversial issues.

The US having abandoned the Keflavik base, Iceland seeks Nordic air surveillance in its neighbourhood in order to pre-empt that the Russian great power offers this service. Nordic air surveillance is actually proposed in Thorvald Stoltenberg's 2009 report on 'Nordic Cooperation on Foreign and Security Policy' (cf. below). This strengthens Iceland's Nordic profile at the expense of any Baltic Sea profile.

The Russia factor may also spill over to societal ideology. The Baltic countries' anti-Russian profiles entail a strong preference for NATO, meaning the US, over the EU. In their state-building processes during the post-Cold War era, American society has been a stronger source of inspiration than the Nordic welfare state. A spill-over explanation seems close at hand.

Competing Strategies?

As requested by the EU Council, the EU Commission has prepared a Communication on the *EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region* (as analysed by Pertti Joenniemi: DIIS Brief August 2009). Although being vague and financially non-committing, it obviously means that the EU gives priority to the region as a 'model' for other parts of the union. The strategy opens an avenue for much functional cooperation of a low politics nature; it remains to be seen, however, if the Russia factor may spill over and impede some of this.

The *Stoltenberg Report*, approved in June 2009 by the Nordic foreign ministers, is a much more concrete document, encompassing several specific proposals. It elaborates existing defence cooperation between Norway, Sweden, and Finland (an outgrowth of the EU Nordic battle group), and connects Denmark and Iceland to it. First and foremost, however, the report suggest a *de facto* Nordic Defence and Foreign Policy Union – nothing more, nothing less. The sensational feature in this connection is that a binding military solidarity declaration is advocated – a parallel to NATO's article 5 (the 'musketeer' article). This part of the report, though, is probably too wide-ranging for cautious governments, also

in the longer run. For instance, should Denmark commit itself to Finland's defence, even though Finland is not a NATO member?

It should be underlined in any case that these wide ranging proposals pertain to the classic Nordic countries – nobody else! Even though Russia is hardly mentioned in the report, probably for diplomatic reasons, it seems to be crucial between the lines. The geopolitical interpretation that one can make is the following: the countries that are moderately challenged and preoccupied by developments in and actions taken by Russia, namely Norway, Sweden, and Finland, band together in a de facto union. Functional defence cooperation can conceal that we are actually dealing with a way to balance Russian power in the North. As mentioned, Denmark and Iceland are now being coupled to this cooperation. The Baltic countries, however, being seen as too anti-Russian and alarmist, are not invited. This would be seen as a provocation by Moscow.

Future Prospects

Currently, relations to Russia have been normalized after the Caucasus intermezzo. This should theoretically improve the opportunities for Baltic Sea cooperation. However, state postures in relation to Russia are only partially responding to objective developments. Those with a negative Russia conception will typically say: 'wait till next year, then the Russians will show their true face'. Or the pragmatists will say, even in a serious crisis, that business as usual should be retained, for all practical purposes.

The great power capitals, notably, have been playing a double play that is unfortunate for the region as a whole. On the one hand, they have given low priority to the region and its small powers. On the other hand, they are reluctant to concede a little bit of foreign policy control to their coastal actors - who for obvious reasons would revise priorities, if they were allowed to. One should not forget, though, the steadily increasing NGO-activities in the region (like *Baltic Development Forum*, *Centrum Balticum*, etc.). Although NGO-

representatives sometimes have internalized their respective state views, there is a glimmer of hope to be found in this sphere.

In spite of hopes for a flourishing Baltic Sea region that one may nurture, the above cynical geopolitical analysis – drawing also on past geopolitics – emphasizes the constraining influence of the Russia factor (hardly of Russia *intentionally*, to repeat). This very factor, however, has inadvertently encouraged the development of a *Nordic* Defence and Foreign Policy Union (if not by name). So what we are witnessing seems to be the reawakening of Nordic cooperation at the partial expense of broader Baltic Sea cooperation. But we should not, of course, write off functional low politics cooperation in the broader region, including NGO cooperation. Hopefully, awareness of the Russia factor among regional actors should pre-empt future grave disappointments. Moreover, low politics cooperation might benefit from an informal agreement in the CBSS and elsewhere that high politics were kept as taboo, just like in the Nordic Council during the Cold War. But of course, a ‘family’ with too many taboos is hardly a good family.