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Abstract

The complex Baltic Sea region lies at the top of the agenda for many politicians, and security stakeholders in Europe and beyond. The area, centered around one of the busiest seas in the world, is home to a roughly hundred million people, covers ten countries, and is divided among couple of geopolitical blocs. And though the Baltic Sea basin has not seen interstate war in three quarters of a century, the region nonetheless continues to experience periodic increase of tensions (Nikers & Tabuns 2021, p. 2). In recent years, the threats posed by Russia's aggressive stance have finally prompted an appropriate response from NATO. The report seeks to answer the question of whether the initiatives taken at recent NATO summits are appropriate to credibly deter and prevent attempts to undermine NATO's unity and increase its potential. In this context, it is worth recalling the basic principles of NATO's decision-making process. The report aims to delve into the some security dilemmas facing the North Atlantic Alliance in this region and assesses and analyzes the current scope of NATO's defense and security initiatives in the region. Taking the subject from this perspective, it showed how NATO tried to improve deterrence and defense along the Baltic Sea coast to meet challenges and threats. This study does not focus on economic and social security issues. This may be the subject of a separate in-depth analysis.

Key words: NATO, the Baltic Sea region, security, summit decisions, Russia.

1. Does it have to be Russia again?

The Baltic Sea region is a complex area from a security point of view. Looking only at Western countries (i.e. excluding Russia) in the region:

- Sweden and Finland are in the European Union but are not members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO),
- Norway (pragmatic outsider) is a member of NATO but not a member of the EU (Puka, 2012, pp. 33-34),
- Sweden, Denmark and Poland, though all EU members, are not part of the Eurozone (Elfving, 2021, p. 11),
- Germany, one of the richest countries in Europe, permanently and incomprehensibly 'seduced' by Russia or rather by its resources,
- Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the smallest of the countries on the Baltic Sea, former Soviet republics, arguably the most vulnerable of the rest.

Of the nine Baltic countries, only the borders of Germany, Denmark and Sweden do not touch the borders of the Russian Federation.

Due to the network of political, military and economic connections, the Baltic Sea region is part of the broad strategy of the Russian Federation, which aims to regain dominance over the countries of the former Eastern Bloc (Hays, 2020, p.1). The overarching goal of this policy is to undermine NATO's credibility and disintegrate the European Union. One can only predict what would happen if the countries of the Baltic Sea region were not members of either NATO or the EU.

The manifestation of Russian geopolitical ambitions takes place through the practical use of all possible means of combat. These include both non-military and military measures. The former include deliberately provoked actions by secret services, organized on their own territory and in the territories of states unfavorable to the Kremlin. These include espionage, corruption, blackmail, cyber-intelligence, cyber attacks, disinformation and propaganda. It is worth emphasizing that the combination of non-military measures may be synchronized with the use of the armed forces at a later stage (Gac, 2020, p. 85). In addition to information manipulation, Russia demonstrates its military strength, the quantitative advantage of which in the most important weapon systems additionally affects the level of threat to the Baltic Sea region. Military activity focuses primarily on strengthening the military potential and numerous maneuvers that indicate the possibility of extending an Anti-Access/Area Denial (which already exists over Kaliningrad or Murmansk). The above factors make the threat posed by Russia to the security of the Baltic Sea real, although a direct military attack is still unlikely. Nevertheless, Russian hybrid activity in the Baltic Sea poses a serious challenge to the political, economic and defense sectors in the region (*Ibidem*, pp. 94-95).

Paradoxically, it was the situation in the Black Sea, and more specifically in the Black Sea countries, Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), among other important threats and challenges, that awakened NATO and changed the way it operates in recent years, also in the Baltic Sea region.

A few years after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, I was a member of the NATO delegation to Moscow in 2010. The purpose of this visit was to provide a few lectures – together with other NATO colleagues - at the Russian Defense Academy on NATO mechanisms. The circumstances and atmospherics of that stay could, in themselves, be the subject of another story. More important is the fact that after some years of impasse in the relations between Russia and NATO, there was an attempt, at least on the NATO side, to relax the outstanding tensions.

Of course, the situation was far from normal but it is always better to talk and try to convince one another of each other's ideas than to turn your back or even worse, to start a shooting war.

Was it too early to restore the relationship with Russia again, resulting in the impression that the Georgian situation has become the 'new normal'? Were the Russian intentions to come back to the negotiation

table only another form of deception? Maybe the lack of the democratic world's more decisive reaction to those crises has just encouraged Russia to test the patience of the West one more time: only six years after the Georgian crisis, Ukraine became Russia's new target.

However, it was not until the Russo-Ukrainian war that broke out in 2014 that deeply shocked the popular perception of this stability, adding a mix of conventional and hybrid challenges to regional security that had not been seen for almost a century. Many are asking themselves whether e.g. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia will be next. Has Russia satisfied its appetites at this stage?

2. NATO evolution

NATO's goals have varied throughout history, and have always been adapted to circumstances in the course of the organization's existence. Initial goals, defined at its establishment, have evolved or disappeared, and today's aims are considerably different. The question is whether the overall security situation has changed the organization, or whether the organization has exercised significant influence over the security environment. In general, several important periods can be distinguished in NATO's development. While the first 40 years of the organization's existence were dominated by the Cold War *modus operandi* and a 'simple' bipolar world, the next 20 were marked by the expansion of tasks and operational engagement out of area (non-Article 5 operations), a gradual abandonment of static forces, a reduction in structures and defense spending among member states. At the time, a popular saying coursed NATO corridors and meetings: "*either out of area or out of business*". NATO was at the height of an identity crisis. Additionally, a preference for fostering deployable forces rather than building a new NATO defense infrastructure was all encompassing. Finally, the most recent period of NATO's growth, spreading over more than the last ten years, has marked a gradual return to the roots of NATO, and thus the mission of collective defense in the fast-changing geostrategic situation (Fałkowski, 2019, p. 176).

While the very existence of NATO, the seven-decade-long "*Strategic Odyssey*" (Palmer, 2019, p. 109), probably prevented the deterioration of the security situation in the treaty area, it should also be emphasized that NATO's sphere of influence was shaped by the constantly evolving defense capabilities of the alliance and its democratic values.

3. Back to the future

Anticipating a short answer to the subtitle assumption, it is useful to articulate some reflections by briefly describing the relevant strategic surroundings first.

What has the security situation looked like over the last decade in the Euro-Atlantic region? Can this period be qualified as normal? Probably, according to today's 'turbulent standards' one could consider them as such, although "*sanity is not statistical*" as George Orwell, wrote in the famous novel called as '1984'.

What is happening in the immediate vicinity of the Baltic Sea region is also happening more widely and it is not only the area of Central and Eastern Europe and North Atlantic. How is Russia behaving?

A quick flashback can be depicted in short as: Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, the nature of hybrid warfare – carried out not only in Ukraine, the information war – targeting Western societies, rising Russian defense spending, divide and conquer rule, Russia creating an imbalance of conventional forces in the region, Russian Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities (one of 'the bubbles' is located around the Kaliningrad region, so in the very heart of the Baltic Sea region), Putin's support to Assad and on the top of these terrorist attacks, scarcity of NATO forces deployed in the East and the South, populism, nationalisms, jingoisms, xenophobia, exile, emigration, some uncertainties coming from US global posture, the European Union in crisis, Brexit, weakened Schengen, et cetera.

Those are but a few elements amounting to the overall strategic situation we have lived in. We thus observe a further deterioration of the relations between NATO and Russia flexing its muscles in our proximity. Are we all NATO member states conscious enough of the differences between Russia's words and deeds? Are we maybe over sensitive too? What were NATO's military common responses to such troublesome Eastern neighborhood?

Focusing attention on selected aspects is a good starting point, including the decisions adopted at the outset of the still ongoing Ukrainian crisis. In recent years, threats resulting from Russia's aggressive stance have finally caused NATO to respond adequately to these behaviors. Key decisions taken by NATO at the last five alliance summits in Newport, Warsaw, Brussels, London and Brussels (2014-2021) have adequately strengthened the alliance's defense capabilities. NATO changed its way of dealing with Russia after an illusory period of so-called strategic security pause. However, are the steps taken sufficient? Has there really been a transformation of NATO from ensuring the security of countries at risk, through deterrence, to restoring credible defense capabilities? Those decisions were not routine by any stretch for NATO. Changing the course of 'NATO's big ship' can only happen when NATO Heads of State and Government (HOSG) meet. Those are what we refer to as gatherings of the North Atlantic Council (NAC), formally called as NATO summits.

4. Why are NATO summits so important?

NATO summits are meetings of the NAC – the NATO principal decision-making body – at the level of Heads of State and Government. Other NAC meetings are held in the format of foreign ministers and defense ministers (about twice a year) and permanent representatives - ambassadors (on average twice a week).

The summits are organized at various intervals. The 31st summit took place in London in 2021.

The longest summit-to-summit period was 17 years (Paris 1957 – Brussels 1974). After the end of the Cold War, this occurrence became more frequent and summits are held usually during 1-3 years on average (Kupiecki, 2016, p. 204).

During these summits, Heads of State and Government routinely approve key decisions, with significant ramifications for the future of NATO and global security. HOSG endorse decisions constituting a kind of a road map for future actions, and this becomes milestones or historical directions in the development of the organization. Therefore, decisions undertaken are, at least theoretically, of great importance, strategic weight, with consequences potentially for decades.

While in such context, the short intervals between summits might seem contradictory or even counterproductive; they may also provide a significant added value. They allow for factoring in of the dynamically changing world security situation (especially of certain imminent threats) and give the opportunity for adequate and quick adjustment and adaptation. Additionally, such hefty meetings of the most important leaders of the world and members of the most powerful alliance have a considerable built-in deterrence value.

5. Newport – Warsaw – Brussels – London – Brussels

Newport: At first 'reluctant' but essential changes in NATO *modus operandi* were made at NATO's Newport (Wales) Summit in 2014. The modifications were still very cautiously calibrated to avoid irritating the bear in the East. Nevertheless, the NATO Readiness Action Plan (RAP) was promulgated and began to be implemented. The RAP adjusted the approach to contingency planning, Graduated Response Plans (GRPs) were introduced, the Very High Readiness Task Force (VJTF) was created, NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs) were established in Poland and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania[1], the notion of hybrid war was better defined and the readiness of the Multinational Corps Northeast (where Finnish and Swedish

[1] Personally, I try not to call these countries Baltic States, because all the countries around the Baltic Sea are the Baltic States

officers serve together with NATO officers) in Szczecin (port on the Baltic Sea) was raised. A recommitment to the minimum 2% member states' GDP for own defense expenditures was agreed upon, this time with more determination (Wales Summit Declaration, 2014)[2].

Of course, the changes initiated in Wales could be claimed as superficial, and the mechanisms established (like NFIU with e.g. a tripwire function) were a mere pretense. But these upgrades at least provide momentum to introduce further changes, those later adopted in Warsaw. In addition, those initial changes have resulted in a breakthrough, a 'dent' in the post-Cold War illusionary reconciliation of NATO with Russia, following an 'at any price policy', Undoubtedly, a mental transformation occurred as well, in the way we lost think and talk about security, after a period during the so-called 'strategic pause'.

The summit in Wales was supposed to be a routine meeting, with the main task of summarizing the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, Russian aggressive actions in Ukraine changed NATO's course of action and, a few months before Newport, works was rapidly accelerated and reoriented towards new direction.

Warsaw: The subsequent expansion of these 'pre-signaled' undertakings in Wales emerged with force in Warsaw in 2016, where the necessity of strengthening of the NATO Eastern flank became an urgent necessity.

In Warsaw, a redefinition of threat from Russia finally occurred. Allies, without euphemisms this time, acknowledged risks to allies' security related to Russia's actions as clear provocative military activities on the periphery of NATO territory, willingness to attain political goals by the threat and use of force, and repeated violations of allied airspace (Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 2016).

In addition, it became obvious that Russia creates a global challenge not only in some areas but in certain actions as well e.g.: Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, large-scale snap exercises without transparency thus violating provisions in the Vienna Document (Vienna Document, 2011). Russia turned up the volume on aggressive nuclear rhetoric and military doctrine, carried out significant military presence and activities in the North Atlantic, Baltic Sea and Black Sea regions, as well as in the Mediterranean Sea (Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 2016).

The outlook for NATO – Russia relations led to one general conclusion: "*We cannot return to business as usual*" (*Ibidem*).

New concepts and categories have permanently entered NATO defense terminology, such as eFP (enhanced Forward Presence) and tFP (tailored Forward Presence), and these become operational. Built upon the RAP package from Wales, the NATO's effort shifted from Assurance Measures to deterrence (not yet however full development), from the temporary posture, aimed at reassuring Eastern allies to reconfiguration of the alliance's defensive posture. Deployment of four battalion-sized battle groups, were deployed, one each in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland – in order to increase the presence of NATO forces on the eastern flank – to increase NATO forces' presence on the Eastern Flank – was introduced.

Moreover, two new NATO Force Structure HQs were created:
1. Headquarters Multinational Division North East (MND NE) in Elblag (Poland – about 40 km from the shoreline of the Baltic Sea and the Kaliningrad region) to enhance NATO C2 of increased forces presence in the East, and
2. Headquarters Multinational Brigade South East (MNB SE) in Romania – to improve integrated training in the Southeast area.

Additionally, the Warsaw Summit was the starting point for the deployment in the Central and Eastern

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[2] Before 2014 Summit, only 5 NATO countries met criterion of 2% (Estonia, Greece, Poland, the UK and the USA); now it is already 10 countries (additionally Croatia, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania) (Defense Expenditure ..., 2021).

Europe of the 9-month rotation of the US ABCT (Armored Brigade Combat Team).

Other military solutions adopted in Warsaw include: announcement of Initial Operation Capabilities for NATO's missile defense and recognition of cyberspace as a new operational domain, which means that a cyber attack on one of the NATO member countries can be treated as an attack on the entire alliance (see also NATO Encyclopedia, 2019, pp. 178-193). A major challenge is agreeing on 'threshold', identification of when Art. 5 could be invoked although NATO has affirmed that international law applies to cyberspace.

Of course, the long saga of defense spending and capabilities building, one more time played key role as a never-ending story at NATO summits. The Wales defense pledge of 2% GDP spending target for defense in each NATO country and 20% for defense investment (i.e. equipment) was restated and recommitted to by the alliance in Warsaw (Markowski, 2020, pp. 93-104).

Brussels: President Trump and his businesslike approach towards NATO dominated the Brussels Summit 2018. Spending commitments once again garnered much attention, as calls went out for a fairer burden sharing. Real commitments seemed to be in place and after years of decline, allies are reversing the negative trend on defense spending. This will make NATO stronger and its citizens safer. All allies agreed to redouble their efforts to share collective security and defense burden more fairly, with more money, capabilities, and contributions to missions and operations (Litan & Noll, 2018).

It was necessary to remind allies that greater spending on NATO does not mean additional money to NATO as an organization, but the obligation for member states to finance their own defense at the appropriate level, resulting from the proper application of Art. 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which most generally could be summarized as the clause obliging allies to ensure their own capabilities for self-defense. The time has come to an end when some countries were becoming 'free riders' because they either joined NATO (and feel safer now), or are remote from a potential threat.

In Brussels moreover, NATO leaders agreed on a major update to NATO Command Structure, with more than 1,200 additional personnel and new commands:

1. New Joint Force Command for the Atlantic based in Norfolk, Virginia (United States), ensuring that sea lines of communication between Europe and North America remain free and secure,
2. New Enabling Command based in Ulm (Germany), to provide Command and Control (C2) of NATO's Rear Area of Operations (RAO), and improve military mobility (MM) of troops and equipment within Europe, and
3. New Cyberspace Operations Centre, in Mons (Belgium), as part of the adapted Command Structure.

Allies furthermore agreed to establish Counter-Hybrid Support Teams. These teams can deploy, to support national efforts in a variety of areas, including cyber defense, countering disinformation or energy security.

Additionally, the NATO Readiness Initiative was promulgated; the so-called 'Four Thirties', constituting a very innovative step and long awaited quality leap. Allies committed to having 30 mechanized battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 combat vessels, ready to use within 30 days or less, by 2020. These existing forces can be made available to NATO for rapid reinforcement during a crisis.

Other decisions included:
- A new training mission in Iraq, at the request of the Iraqi Government and in coordination with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. This will be a non-combat mission, building on NATO's current efforts to train Iraqi instructors. NATO will also establish professional military schools and academies for the Iraqi forces. Ultimately, NATO started to recognize not only: how to win the wars, but how to win the peace.
- The 'Package for the South' was endorsed, which includes a range of political and practical cooperation initiatives to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defense against threats emanating from the South (Africa, Middle East) and to contribute to international crisis management efforts in the

region including in the fight against terrorism; the Hub for the South in Naples was declared fully operational. Based at Joint Force Command in Naples, the Hub helps NATO to better monitor regional threats and coordinate allied efforts.

• Allies also reconfirmed NATO's military, financial and political commitment to Afghanistan. They agreed to sustain NATO presence in Afghanistan until conditions indicate that a change is appropriate. They also agreed to extend (which can now be considered a true irony) funding for Afghan security forces until 2024 (Brussels Summit Key Decisions, 2018).

Allies made clear that NATO's door remains open by inviting the government in Skopje to begin accession talk and the Northern Macedonia is to become NATO's 30th member, which happened 2 years later (Macedonia joins NATO, 2020).

Another refrain from previous summits was raised: NATO-EU cooperation. The desire is to deepen existing cooperation signing a new declaration. Both organizations will step up cooperation on military mobility and work together to respond to hybrid threats and to counter terrorism. It is a pity that it ends with declarations for now, because closer cooperation would be extremely important in the Baltic Sea.

London: There were comments about the London Summit in December 2019 that it was a mini-summit or just a HOSG meeting. Personally, I disagree with such rhetoric and I hope we do not have mini-leaders for mini-summits. Such was the characterization of the summit per se.

During the London Summit, member nations celebrated the 70th anniversary of the alliance. Is there anything to celebrate today? Certainly because the alliance has played, especially during the past and extremely dangerous confrontation with the Soviet Union, the most significant role in ensuring world peace and preventing global conflagration. NATO is a defensive alliance and poses no threat to any country. Thus, the London Summit, devoted appropriate time to commemorate seventy years of the strongest and most successful alliance in history, and mark the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain. It reaffirmed the vital enduring transatlantic bond between Europe and North America.

The HOSG again identified and underlined distinct threats and challenges facing the alliance, emanating from all strategic directions, including Russia's aggressive actions, terrorism in all its forms, cyber and hybrid hazards, instability beyond the NATO borders contributing to irregular migration.

In London, the Defense Investment Pledge was re-confirmed. NATO is slowly, but steadily increasing defense investment in line with its 2% and 20% guidelines, investing in new capabilities, and contributing more forces to missions and operations (London Declaration, 2019). It is necessary to remind allies again that greater spending on NATO does not mean additional money to NATO as an organization, but the obligation member states to finance their own defense at the appropriate level. This should be based on a proper application of Art. 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which most generally could be summarized as the clause obliging allies to ensure their own capabilities for self-defense. The time has come to end the thinking by some countries of enjoying a free ride, at other NATO member's expense.

Instead of becoming an opportunity to demonstrate unity, the two-day meeting of NATO leaders somehow reinforced many deep divisions among them. Summit participants recalled recent years' threats by Donald Trump that America would withdraw from NATO if other members did not invest enough in defense. Admittedly, there is some improvement, because at the recently concluded NATO summit in London, Trump did not reprimand allies as sharply as before. He did not change his views, but tried to interact by more diplomatically (Turecki & Kozerawski, 2020).

On the contrary, it was President Macron, who came across with the shot over the bow statement of NATO's "*brain death*". Meanwhile Turkish President Erdogan demanded NATO support for his actions against the Kurds. Erdogan threatened that if NATO did not recognize the Kurdish troops as terrorists, Turkey would oppose updating allied defense plans of the Baltic States and Poland. Turkey did not ultimately veto these contingency plans for Poland and the Baltic States, nor did it face harsh criticism from President Trump during summit.

In order to conclude on a positive note, Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg reassures that nothing threatens the alliance's basic principle according to which every attacked country can count on help of all the others (Remarks by President Trump …, 2019).

Brussels: And finally at the 2021 summit in Brussels NATO leaders discussed a wide range of issues, including the main themes of the NATO 2030 initiative: how to reinforce the alliance's unity, broaden its approach to security and contribute to safeguarding the rules-based international order.

They took decisions to prepare NATO for the challenges of today and tomorrow, including Russia's pattern of aggressive behavior, terrorism, cyber attacks and disruptive technologies, the rise of China, and the security implications of climate change.

NATO leaders agreed the NATO 2030 agenda to strengthen the alliance over the next decade and beyond (2021 NATO Summit, 2021).

In Brussels, decisions were taken in eight key areas. It was agreed to strengthen NATO as a transatlantic forum for consultations and joint action on all security matters, as well as to strengthen and broaden political consultation and coordination.

1. It was agreed to strengthen deterrence and defense by strengthening NATO as a defense framework for the Euro-Atlantic area. The commitment for defense expenditure we made in 2014 was renewed.

2. It was agreed to strengthen the resilience of NATO societies. With a new commitment to resilience from NATO leaders, NATO-wide resilience goals and specific national goals will be developed to protect critical infrastructure.

3. NATO will sharpen technological advantage. The allies agreed to launch a Defense Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic. Working with startups, industry and universities, the center will promote transatlantic cooperation and help avoid gaps between allies. The allies also agreed to establish a NATO Innovation Fund to invest in start-ups working on new and breakthrough technologies.

4. Work to uphold the rules-based international order will be intensified. To this end, NATO will strengthen its partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region with Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea. NATO is looking for new relations with the countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia. NATO is also committed to further deepening its cooperation with the European Union.

5. Training and capacity building for partners from Ukraine and Georgia to Iraq and Jordan will be significantly intensified.

6. Leaders have agreed for the first time, addressing the security implications of climate change will be an important task for NATO. This will include regular assessments of the impact of climate change on installations, missions and other activities, such as integrating climate change into our exercises, defense planning and procurement, and developing a methodology for assessing greenhouse gas emissions from military activities. All allies have made a clear commitment to significantly reduce military emissions. It was also agreed to set specific goals for NATO that will contribute to achieving the goal of net zero emissions by 2050.

7. It was agreed to develop another NATO Strategic Concept ahead of the 2022 summit, reaffirming the values and reflecting the significant changes in the security environment over the past decade. NATO's 2030 Agenda sets a higher level of ambition. And it sets a clear direction for the future adaptation of the alliance.

The allies agreed that these decisions must be backed by adequate resources – through state defense spending and joint NATO financing (Press conference by NATO …, 2021).

In the communiqué from Brussels in 2021 there was one paragraph (72) in connection to Baltic, namely: "*The Alliance's close and mutually beneficial security cooperation with our Enhanced Opportunities Partners Finland and Sweden, which share our values and contribute to NATO-led operations and missions, has grown across a wide range of areas. We will continue to strengthen our ability to respond rapidly and effectively to any common challenges and to work together on enhancing our resilience and civil preparedness. We will bolster our regular and open political dialogue and cooperation in support of our common security, including by crisis management preparation, exercises, and exchanging information and analysis, notably on the security situation in the Baltic Sea region*" (Brussels Summit Communiqué, 2021).

6. NATO security vacuum in the Baltic Sea

Were Newport, Warsaw, Brussels, London and again Brussels summits' decisions adequate steps in development of NATO's reaction to Russian aggressive action or just cosmetic, alignment to deter the potential aggressor? Has NATO recovered from the lethargy of protracted conflicts, or better some cold-war-style tensions in the Baltic Sea region? Who is the aggressor now? It is Russia but not only.

There are a number of other threats. A bipolar world is probably much easier to comprehend. We do not only have peer-to-peer type of confrontation nowadays. We have number of players with their own unpredictability. Also state actors are supporting terrorists, proxies and others, which make crises scenarios multidimensional. Who is the enemy then? Where are the redlines, or the threshold, so as not to overreact?

We can straightforwardly surmise that in Wales results focused on delivering reassurance and from the Warsaw Summit deterrence to NATO's eastern flank. Should we be satisfied that credible defense is the ultimate outcome delivered by two Brussels and London summits? Logically, after all these summits effort, we should see qualitative leap bringing NATO to the next level. Were all described major initiatives undertaken at summits over the past seven years satisfactory? Have all of us in NATO and the Baltic Sea region really come to a common perception of the threat and thus our collective response to Russia?

When we look at the map of Baltic Sea region we can very easily spot from where insecurity emanates. One could draw an imaginary line along the Eastern borders of NATO and EU nations and call it an 'arc' of instability. By drawing a roughly parallel line several hundred kilometers to the west (along NATO's former eastern borders – before 1999) we can recognize between the eastern and western lines an area that can be defined as a 'security vacuum zone', which include the i.e. Baltic Sea region and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Key features one can notice in this zone is that it possesses some structures and troops, to deter and defend territories. Although there are some NATO force structure commands in this region, there are zero NATO Command Structure (NCS) organizations, but are those enough? Looking more closely at this region, one might refer to it as NATO's buffer zone.

The area does not contain enough NATO structures and troops to reliably deter and defend the territories that include the Baltic Sea region and directly adjacent to NATO's eastern flank, the area of instability. As a matter of fact, the NCS (NATO Command Structure) operational commands are not located in the region; only couple of training institutions e.g. JFTC (Joint Force Training Center in Bydgoszcz – Poland) or CoEs (Centers of Excellence). Instead, there are couples of the NFS (NATO Force Structure, which is not commonly-funded by NATO) elements like MNCNE (Multinational Corps North East), MNDNE (Multinational Division North East) and MNBSE (Multinational Brigade South East), et cetera, but there are no NCS structures (common-funded) on the Baltic Sea coast and in Central and Eastern Europe yet.

Also insufficient would be Standing NATO Maritime Group One (SNMG1) and Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group One (SNMCMG1), even though SNFs (Standing Naval Force) are multinational, integrated maritime forces comprised of warships from various allied countries and are highly interoperable with one another. Furthermore, each SNF provides unique and robust operational capabilities that complement each other in their common designated Area of Operations (AOO). Such is the case with SNMG1 and SNMCMG1 as both SNFs primarily operate in Western and Northern European waters, which include the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, the Norwegian Sea and their maritime approaches (SNMG1 and SNMCMG1…, 2021).

Although 22 years have passed since the first tranche of NATO enlargement, this has not been enough to establish a different deterrence and defense architecture in the Baltic Sea region.

In the information from the summit in Newport 2014 and London 2019, the Baltic Sea region is not mentioned even once (*Ibidem*).

At successive summits in Warsaw and Brussels, the Baltic Sea region was barely mentioned in the

communiqués. It is hard to expect that the seven NATO countries from this region will manage to focus the attention of the others on this part of Europe. NATO's 360-degree interest in security issues prevails.

However, a number of changes have been made to strengthen the region. They may seem quite slow, but they are better than the previous treatment of threats to the Baltic Sea region, in particular from Russia.

In short, these decisions can be boiled down to the gradual building of resilience through the aforementioned structural, planning and organizational decisions that very directly or indirectly lie in or concern the countries of the region i.e.:

1. W Newport (2014) – decisions taken are: Readiness Action Plan (RAP), Graduated Response Plans (GRPs), the Very High Readiness Task Force (VJTF), NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs) in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and readiness of the Multinational Corps Northeast (MNCNE).

2. In Warsaw (2016) – significant threats from Russia were identified, including large-scale snap exercises against the spirit of the Vienna Document and military provocative activities near NATO borders, including in the Baltic Sea region, irresponsible and aggressive nuclear rhetoric and repeated violations of NATO's airspace, which pose further threats and challenges to the security of allies and others (*Ibidem*). Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, Headquarters Multinational Division North East (MND NE) in Elblag (Poland), rotational presence of US ABCT (Armored Brigade Combat Team).

3. In Brussels (2018) – three more structures were added. In Germany, (and thus in the country on the Baltic Sea), i.e. new enabling command in Ulm (Germany), new Joint Forces Command in the Atlantic in Norfolk (USA), but dedicated to maritime communication lines (and therefore related to security also in the Baltic Sea); the new Cyberspace Operations Center, in Mons (Belgium) must also be mentioned as cyber threats are cross-border. 'Four Thirties', i.e. having 30 mechanized battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 combat vessels, ready to use within 30 days wherever NATO's interests are not insignificant (*Ibidem*).

4. In London (2019) – although no organizational decisions were made to strengthen the alliance, the very fact of organizing the summit had a deterrent value. Moreover, the threats and challenges emanating from all strategic directions were agreed, and the aggressive actions of Russia were recognized expresis verbis as a threat to Euro-Atlantic security (*Ibidem*).

5. In Brussels (2021) – important decisions to prepare NATO for the challenges of today and tomorrow, including Russia's pattern of aggressive behavior, terrorism, cyber attacks and disruptive technologies and the security implications of climate change were taken. Additionally Denmark, Estonia and Latvia are to further strengthen command and control in the Baltic Sea region by creating a complementary Multinational Division Headquarters (*Ibidem*).

Perhaps these are insufficient decisions, but paradoxically they significantly change the perception of the situation and the attention of the opposing party. Russia should not, without reflection and without any consequences, test the alliance's patience.

Besides, the decisions were taken in a relatively short period of time and they change the operational practices in the alliance so far. NATO is working to build larger formations to provide usable forces and capabilities to counter the directions from which threats come from.

Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are the direct beneficiaries of NATO's enhanced presence in the Baltic Sea region. Denmark and Germany also benefited from new installations, but that is not the most important thing. However, allied contributions to command and control in the Baltic Sea area through the NATO Force Structure remain essential.

In fact, all countries of the Baltic Sea basin indirectly benefited from the new solutions, plans and structures through the preparation of strategic assessments concerning, inter alia, the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean.

The improved exercise program will strengthen joint maritime combat skills in key areas, including

anti-submarine warfare, amphibious operations and the protection of maritime communications lines. The posture will also ensure support to reinforcement by and from the sea, including the transatlantic dimension with the North Atlantic being a line of communication for strategic reinforcement.

Further benefits for the security situation in the region are brought by the close cooperation between NATO and the EU. Added value is the participation of Swedish and Finnish officers in NATO exercises and structures.

7. Sweden and Finland

The status of Sweden and Finland as NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partners (EOP) partners since the 2014 Wales Summit allows them to participate in alliance working procedures on an equal footing with their members. Sweden and Finland also pledged to continue their partnership with NATO with much political will and energy. Finally, it helped that both were identified as countries that shared the norms, values and practices of the Western community, thus placing them in their 'circle of trust'.

The status of both countries as informal allies in the Baltic Sea region has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it can strengthen collective defense by preparing joint action if necessary. But if this status is not openly recognized, it can blur, and thus undermine, the allies' collective commitment to each other. For Sweden and Finland, this status most likely means that both of them will receive and will have to lend support from NATO in the event of a crisis in their neighborhood. But this is a fragile position that depends on the circumstances. Moreover, both countries do not have formal access to the alliance's decision-making process and joint operational planning. Developed consultation mechanisms and an increased exchange of information on operational planning could be used to address these disadvantages and speed up action in the event of a crisis.

It would be best for NATO and regional security for both countries to become members of the alliance. Moscow realizes that Finland and Sweden will side with their friends in the EU and NATO in a crisis, but rarely misses the opportunity to point out that formal Swedish and Finnish NATO membership would raise Russia's concerns about the balance of power in the Baltic Sea region (Wieslander, 2021).

8. How much is enough?

What still needs to be done post NATO summits? What are the other NATO political and military responses to Russian behavior suppose to be? Have the steps already taken been sufficient? Should other key response options be seriously contemplated? These questions are obviously rather rhetorical.

One of the answers to Russian aggressive behavior NATO should seriously consider could be further NCS adaptation. An agile NCS for the full spectrum of threats is necessary. The decisions of the 2018 Brussels Summit improved the setting, but the permanent presence of NATO forces, structures, bases or installations in the Baltic Sea region and Central and Eastern Europe is still needed. Lack of such locations is somehow irritating. Those would be crucial in achieving one of NATO main objectives – ensuring ability to conduct collective defense operations. Future structures and capabilities must be robust enough to withstand the demands of widespread conflict, while being flexible enough to better adapt to a rapidly changing security environment.

NATO should make greater efforts (not only regarding changes in the organizational structure and location of troops) to improve its own functioning, starting from the feasibility of its own contingency plans. It is not just about logistics e.g. freedom of movement of the troops and equipment (so called NATO Schengen), but also prepositioning, moving troops closer to the theatre for permanent presence (Hodges, Laurence & Wojcik, 2020). Operational planning should not be detached from but it should be reflected during Defense Planning Process in Defense Planning Capability Survey (NATO Encyclopedia, 2019, pp. 196-199).

This leads to the over-extended and complicated decision making process. We need NAC decision (at 30 countries), which starts operational planning process. Hence we need another NAC decision (at 30) to perform the plan. Putin does not have such limitations. We have to act or/and even react much quicker.

NATO nations need to give more authorization and power to its operational commander SACEUR (Supreme Allied Commander Europe) – not only for indication and warning phase of planning. In addition empowering SACEUR to organize e.g. snap exercises of eFP is essential. Of course, instead he can always put his hat of the US EUCOM (US European Command) and use American forces in the times of crises, but this is not a collective solution, rather, it creates dependence on a busy United States, with increasingly more challenges in the Indo-Pacific region.

A key fundamental is to place emphasis on responsiveness i.e. enabling SACEUR to the transition from peacetime BACO (Baseline Activities and Current Operations), through Crises, and to MLE (Maximum Level of Effort) = war (Mercier, 2018).

That sounds somehow enigmatic but it should be adequate for the purpose of this publication illustrating that there is still long way to get the sense of security and practical defense capabilities postured in the Baltic Sea and Central and Eastern Europe.

An essential measure should be active participation (across all NATO governments, including Finland and Sweden, from bottom to the top and vice versa) in exercises e.g. in CMX (Crises Management Exercise). The authorities of many NATO countries are usually delegating their risk and failure in training to the training (and learning by doing) to tactical level only. The whole of government (WOG) concept to training and exercising, and doing so to the point of failure should be a trademark of NATO. Shockingly, only rarely is any element at scale, of an Art. 5 crisis ever trained and exercised. Consequently, we do not exercise enough, including the following phase answering what comes after, during execution or transition phase. Therefore, collective defense scenarios, including participation of governmental decision-makers in all processes should be done on a regular basis. Better incorporation of realities of today's tactical and strategic environment with renewed emphasis on deterrence and collective defense is essential in conducting NATO exercises including EU countries.

Another concern to be tackled is improving cooperation between NATO and the EU. It is sometimes like stating the obvious or 'preaching to the choir' but such NATO-EU joint ventures must be viewed as opportunities in the Baltic Sea region and Central and Eastern European countries to both focus on security and defense (including defense industrial cooperation) while ensuring efforts are not duplicated among NATO and the EU.

And finally, it is essential to underline one of the most important problems, namely of personnel. Possessing the most modern weaponry, strategy, organizations without capable and ready personnel means nothing. At the end of the Cold War, the NCS had 22,000 staff across 33 commands. Following the 2010 Lisbon Summit, allies reformed their NATO Command Structure to create a robust, agile, and efficient command system. These changes focused on ensuring that NATO forces remained fit for purpose and improved NATO's ability to deploy forces on operations, reflecting the security environment of that time.

Today, NATO maintains personnel in 6,800 posts across seven commands. If we take into account that the recent increase of the NCS decided at the Brussels Summit is only 1,231 positions (out of more than 3.2 million of NATO troops), then concerns about this increase as being too large, seems unfounded. Due to the tendency to gradually eliminate and reduce the NCS personnel, we have a situation in which the NCS manning has become inadequate compared to current threats. Additionally, the 100% fill rate (a face, to a place) of the NCS is extremely important, but is often not the case.

Permanent 'no-gaps' manning of these important positions is of the essence in light of all the aforementioned military challenges. Ensuring appropriate size and manning of the NCS should be taken into account in refining NATO operating procedures. This is why the permanent presence of forces on

exposed territories of the Baltic Sea and Central and Eastern Europe is an imperative (Doran & Wojcik, 2018).

There are a number of advantages to permanent presence: better deterrence and assurance to the allies; shorter time to respond and ability to react promptly; fewer problems with force-generation; obvious forward presence visible to the adversary; clear STRATCOM messaging about intent and commitment; exercise deployments are less provocative; ambiguity to the adversary regarding the scale of forces to be deployed; cheaper sustainment with in-place forces; ability to engage forces in multiple directions from permanent presence locations; unification of TTPs (tactics, technics, procedures) and development of regional expertise, and familiarity of areas of responsibility (Kuczyński et al., 2019).

There are some disadvantages as well to permanent presence e.g. it can be perceived as provocative; requires permanently deployed assets funding; and substantial force deployment is required to be credible. In this situation, it is paramount to calculate the number of troops, units, military formations needed in the region (Lostumbo et al., 2013, p. 100).

However, there is no definitive solution to exactly solve this math problem. From the summit in Wales – and above all through Warsaw – to Brussels and beyond, the awareness, and process of balancing the level of security and allied presence on NATO's entire territory seems to be increasing.

9. US presence

In this context, it is impossible not to mention the increased American presence in the region, which when Poland launched it was treated as a ridiculed idea, and even presented as cowardly behavior. A strange atmosphere surrounded the whole thing (Cowell, 2018).

Regardless of the label on the potential installation, the effort helped to focus attention on the strategic vacuum in the Baltic Sea and Central Eastern region and the lack of NATO operational installations and insufficient forces to counter the threat from the most important direction.

An increased US permanent presence in the region would give America the strategic flexibility it needs to confront and deter threats and the grounds for more flexible movement of the US forces. It would also help to secure American interests it shares with Baltic Sea region countries and frankly, all of Europe. It would help ensure preservation of western values of freedom, sovereignty and democracy.

A permanent American military presence in the region will significantly reduce security risks. More US forces are needed to enhance the security of the still exposed and militarily underappreciated part of NATO, and will strengthen the transatlantic relationship.

Although the US Marine Corps prepositioning program in Norway and the equipment that the Corps has been using since the Cold War will continue to support US MC forces in bilateral and multilateral exercises, it is also insufficient, the more so as the Corps plans to reduce its forces by seven percent by 2030 (Woody, 2020).

Some hope is given by the location of a part of the headquarters of the 5th Corps in Poznań (Poland), but still not a strong physical presence of armed formations. Be aware that the forces available for the V Corps on site and on site will be rather small (US Embassy Press Release …, 2020). On the other hand, the Americans are signaling a potential adversary that if necessary, they will spare their divisions to support Europe. They show allies that despite the partial withdrawal of troops, they remain reliable defenders and are ready to support NATO in the region with significant forces (Świerczyński, 2020).

Former US European Commander (USEUCOM) and SACEUR (2013-2016) General Philip Breedlove,

testifying before the US Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2015 said:*"Permanently stationed forces are a force multiplier that rotational deployments can never match"* (Breedlove, 2015, p. 3). Then he explained that: *"… we can mitigate the impact felt from a reduction in assigned forces through the augmentation of rotational forces from the United States. Rotational forces from the continental United States to Europe cannot completely fulfill strategic roles. The temporary presence of rotational forces may complement, but does not substitute for an enduring forward deployed presence that is tangible and real. Rotational forces also have an impact on our relationships with various host nations we will count on to enable operations; we might overreach to assume host nations will readily accept our new readiness construct. As I have said previously, virtual presence means actual absence"* (*Ibidem*, pp. 19-20).

A balance needs to be maintained between rotational deployments and the need for permanent facilities. US personnel presence on the Baltic Sea region and NATO's Eastern flank plays not only a crucial role in deterrence, but is a major force multiplier as well. Deterrence lies in the minds of potential adversaries, but it only works when supported by actual strength, and credible defense. Deterrence cannot be measured, but it can be increased.

On the other hand, there might be some counterarguments to permanent presence that could come from nations that are concerned that a large US base in the region, could cause the move of current US forces e.g. from Germany.

The United States and NATO should pursue the development of a more sophisticated and subtle strategic communication campaign, beginning with support for Russian-language television stations backed by the Baltic Sea country governments. NATO should do more to strengthen the Baltic Sea countries' security forces and thereby reduce the potential for Russian covert action. The United States and NATO should take action to mitigate the risks that a NATO deployment around Baltic Sea would decrease the potential for Russian aggression. To this end, the United States should consider measures to increase transparency or avoid the perception that deployed forces may be used to pursue regime change, and should develop a sound public relations campaign to convince local Russian speakers that NATO is not deploying forces against them (Radin, 2017).

This is why, maintaining unity of the alliance and developing cooperation between the US and democratic European countries within NATO, the EU and other international organizations should be one of their most important strategic goals in the field of security, both at the regional and global level.

10. Summary

Since Moscow launched its war on Ukraine in 2014, NATO has taken substantial steps to bolster security for its eastern members, particularly with a stronger presence in the Baltic Sea countries and Eastern Central Europe.

The NATO approach to security in the Baltic Sea has been comprehensive, as all NATO members in the region and other states recognize the dangers posed by a Kremlin.

NATO has sufficient resources, personnel, and equipment to enhance conventional deterrence focused on Russia; a more robust posture designed to considerably raise the cost of military adventurism against one or more NATO member states is worthy of consideration (Boston et al., 2017).

But it is not just about NATO's efforts. In the field of security, not only NATO should be involved, but also the EU, because not only NATO has countries on the Baltic Sea.

The Common Security and Defense Policy of the European Union has not taken a sufficiently serious position on the security of the Baltic Sea so far. On the other hand, at least NATO is trying to do something institutionally in this respect. However, it must be taken into account that most EU countries are also NATO members. It can therefore be concluded that attempts are being made to control the situation militarily,

but not all the instruments that could be used by the EU are used. The best example is the inconsistency with North Stream 2. Current economic sanctions may be successful in deterring Russia's adventurism in the Baltic Sea, but the measures have a questionable ability to prevent Russia from further expanding its production, including of nonconventional oil and gas (Åslund & Snegovaya, 2021, pp. 6-7).

Counteracting both the existing and emerging threats in the Baltic Sea region requires increased cooperation in the field of defense and security not only between the most vulnerable Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, but also with all partner countries from the western Baltic Sea coast – Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark), as well as, above all, Germany.

The EU could try to bring all cooperation activities closer together. The Baltic Sea region needs restructuring to focus not only on deterrence (which is not only a purely military task) but also on adequate capabilities. Strengthening the security of Euro-Atlantic allies in the Baltic Sea region requires, first of all, filling their gaps in synchronization and partnership in many civil and military areas of air defense, maritime security, financial security, cyber security and information space, as well as building culture and identity coherence among these partner countries. They also cover threat perception, civil-military cooperation, and resilience to disinformation, energy security, and political and military deterrence.

Will and when the EU shake off its lethargy over the protracted conflicts or 'stealth war' in the Baltic Sea region? This question will remain unanswered for a while.

Baltic cooperation can be both an important complement to cooperation on the forum of NATO and the EU, and an integration platform. It should not be expected that the entire Baltic Sea region would become an area where a new defense alliance will be created. Nevertheless, there are areas where defense cooperation is promising. They include, among others joint control of air and sea space, exercises of the air forces and the navy, training of soldiers, pilots and sailors, and cooperation of special forces (Pacuła, 2013, pp. 63-66).

Since the defense cooperation of the Baltic Sea region takes place in many dimensions and in various configurations, it is difficult to draw general conclusions about the prospects for its further development.

It is struggling with a number of limitations and obstacles that prevent it from reaching its potential. The main one is the imbalance of the potentials of the countries in the region. On the one hand, rich, territorially vast but not too populated states of the North, on the other hand, small 'Baltic States' with limited human and financial potential. Additionally, Denmark is small and rich, and Poland is moderately wealthy, but with a relatively large human potential. As a result, cooperation, which is quite harmonious in subgroups (separately the Nordic countries, and the 'Baltic States' separately), encounters problems when trying to extend it to the entire region (The Territorial ..., 2020, pp. 59, 62).

Second, the states of the Baltic Sea region share their security interests, threat perceptions and priorities for international engagement. The security of Poland and Finland remains the territory's defense against land-based threats. Norway is primarily interested in the region of the Far North. Denmark and (to a lesser extent) Sweden are interested in participating in foreign missions, which they see as an opportunity to ensure their visibility in international relations and as a contribution to global security. In turn, they are fully aware of their own limitations in the possibility of independent or even joint assurance of sovereignty. Therefore, they seek security guarantees primarily in membership in international organizations (NATO and the EU) and on the side of stronger patrons. These differences have a direct impact not only on the position of these countries regarding cooperation in a given area, but also on the choice of priorities for the development and modernization of the armed forces. For Norway, it will be the Arctic fleet, for Denmark it will be an expeditionary force, and for Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia it will be armed forces capable of resisting the initial resistance and infrastructure capable of accepting allied support.

The third aspect is the lack of a regional leader (Germany is not interested enough in Baltic Sea cooperation to be one). It results from objective factors: none of the countries in the region has the appropriate political and military potential to perform such a role (Brauss & Racz, 2020).

Additionally, it is worth noting that countries, such as Sweden or Finland, due to their long-term policy of not entering into military alliances, very carefully and cautiously engage in defense cooperation. It even seems that the Nordic countries avoid taking actions that could lead them to take over such a role in the Baltic region. These concerns have increased after the United States announced a strategic shift towards Asia and the Pacific. One of the consequences of this decision may be the need for European states to take greater responsibility for the security of the continent. However, the Nordic countries have neither the potential nor the political will to play such a role.

Another factor influencing Baltic Sea cooperation is Russia. Theoretically, this is a factor that should be conducive to undertaking defense cooperation by the states of the region. The increasingly assertive actions of the Russian Federation in its neighborhood could be an impulse leading to this. Nevertheless, especially in the public opinion circles in the Nordic countries (and this translates directly into political actions), there is still an attitude that 'not antagonize and not provoking Russia'. Hence, despite the increasingly obvious premises in favor of, for example, the membership of Sweden and Finland in NATO, the prevailing option for the time being of cautious actions in the Baltic Sea region, so as not to create the impression of building an anti-Russian defense bloc.

It should be emphasized that such cooperation, even if it were more intensive, is not the ultimate panacea for the defense problems in the area. This is related to the general reluctance of states to make the defense of their sovereignty and territory dependent on the help of their neighbors. Meanwhile, for military cooperation to be really effective (especially in the case of countries with relatively low military potential), it must mean giving up some capabilities. This is the idea behind NATO's smart defense and EU pooling and sharing. However, it is easy to understand that states try to leave themselves as many capabilities as possible 'just in case' and not to make their security dependent on the help of their neighbors. As a result, cooperation that could result in real savings (e.g. joint financing of projects implemented by one partner) is often limited to the joint exercise of interoperability of the armed forces (*Ibidem*).

Although it is not the subject of the study, it is necessary to mention a particularly important problem that is energy security, which may turn out to be a sophisticated weapon. Russia supports actions aimed at weakening the EU, and the reaction to this is an incoherent element of the European Union's security policy, i.e. Nord Stream 2. This ejects the countries of the Baltic Sea region beyond the energy framework. For any small and medium-sized country, the collapse of the security system is a serious threat. Nord Stream 2 has become an essential element of the critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. Whether we like it or not, paradoxically, all countries, if only for environmental reasons, will have to protect it, even though it is not in their interest.

We must remember that any decisions, including all recent NATO summits provisions, increasing deterrence and defense will only make sense if they are backed by a viable reinforcement strategy! Nothing in this analysis should suggest that there might be a conventional Russian aggression against NATO and the EU in the Baltic Sea region. Prudence, however, suggests taking steps to soften potential sensitive areas in the interests of ensuring a stable security relationship between all NATO and EU members and Russia, which continues to refuse to return to dialogue (Panel Discussion…, 2021). Russia is not bluffing, and NATO and the EU's deterrence and defense still needs to be improved.

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