Baltic region: France strengthens its security policy in the face of Russia

Description

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, France has strengthened its presence on NATO's eastern flank, particularly in the Baltic States. However, the region is far from being a pre-squared area for France, which was not particularly noticed during the 20th century.



At the time of the return of Baltic independence and the end of the Cold War, Paris demonstrated its desire to have a presence in the Eastern Baltic region (comprising Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland). Still, for a long time, this activism was hampered by a lack of resources and coherence. Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, which caused a real shock throughout the European continent, led to a solid European mobilization in support of Ukraine but also, more broadly, to reinvestment in NATO's eastern flank, particularly militarily. France is making a significant contribution to this.

An increased military presence since 2014

The immediate consequence of the return of high-intensity warfare to the continent has been an increase in the attractiveness of NATO. After years of procrastination, Sweden and Finland expressed their desire to join the Alliance in a joint application on 18 May 2022. This was a historic decision, given that until then, these two countries had maintained the principle of military non-alignment, albeit lessened by their membership of the EU and NATO's Partnership for Peace.

It should be noted, however, that the Alliance had already strengthened its presence in the Eastern Baltic region well before 24 February 2022. Since 2004, NATO has been flying the Air Baltic Policing mission over the skies of the Baltic States, controlling the airspace of countries that are too small to have their air force. This mission was reinforced in 2014 (Enhanced Air Policing) and will be further expanded in 2022. France, for example, deployed ten times between 2004 and 2023 and brought forward its 2022 rotation by two weeks in response to the war launched by Russia, with four Mirage 2000-5Fs from the 1/2 'Cigognes' fighter group.

NATO's other mission on the Alliance's eastern flank, eFP (enhanced Forward Presence), is a direct response to the Russian aggression in 2014 and forms part of the Readiness Action Plan decided in 2014 and reinforced in 2016. The eFP involves deploying symbolic forces from member countries on the territory of Russia's direct neighbors (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland) to deter Moscow and demonstrate the Alliance's willingness to defend its members.

This Forward Tailored Presence has been reinforced in 2022, with the size of the battalions deployed in the four countries increasing from around 4,700 personnel (October 2020) to over 6,000, not counting the presence of US troops in Poland. Further south, the Forward Tailored Presence (FTP) has also been upgraded, creating four new battalions in Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Hungary for over 4,000 personnel by November 2022. However, these battalions have not yet finished deploying. All in all, the strength of this forward presence has more than doubled. For its part, France has taken command of the battalion deployed in Romania and reinforced its battalion present in Estonia on a rotational basis since 2017 under British control (Mission Lynx): since March 2023, the 300-strong French contingent has been equipped with 18 Griffon armored multi-role vehicles and a platoon of AMX-10 RC light armored vehicles; in May 2023, a 4-gun Caesar firing section was also projected to Estonia.



Joint training (Lynx) on the Estonian island of Saaremaa, May 2023 (source: defense.gouv.fr).

A strategic region for France in the 1920s?

The 1990s and 2000s were a slow period for French diplomacy and studies of the region, as France was much more involved in the crises in Africa and the Balkans. As Bruno Tertrais noted in 2001: *"The North is traditionally and implicitly considered as 'Anglo-Saxon territory,' [and] is not on the radar screen of the French strategist"*(1).

This was not always the case. Without exaggerating France's presence and interest, the 1920s did mark a substantial investment in the region. The Grand Duchy of Finland and the now Baltic territories "belonged" to Russia at the time, with limited autonomy for the former and as provinces of the Empire for the latter. After Russia's initial defeats, Lenin called an armistice at the end of November 1917 and promulgated the Peoples' Decree, which granted non-Russian peoples the right to independence. After a period in which the French and British intervened against the Germans and then the Soviets, independence was finally recognized by all, with a few territorial adjustments that were later contested. This was the first setback for French strategy because, unlike the British, France intended to preserve the coherence of the Russian Empire by supporting its reconstruction via the White Armies, counter-revolutionary formations opposed to the Soviets. At the time, independence was seen as a transitional process.

However, the early 1920s demonstrated the difficulty and ambiguity of French policy in the Baltic States. As Julien Gueslin notes, *"France did not have the means to attempt to extend to the North the construction of a united system designed to counter the Germanic and Russian powers"*(2) since it did not have the means, firstly military, then economic, since industrial circles were reluctant to venture into these countries.

France gradually disappeared from the region, and neither the Winter War between Finland and the USSR nor the disappearance of the Baltic States annexed by the USSR changed France's position. The end of the Second World War saw the legitimacy of the Baltic States dissolved, while Finland was forced into neutrality. Although the illegal annexations by the USSR were not recognized de jure by France, de facto recognition meant that this state of affairs was quickly accepted. With the start of the Cold War, the region fell back into a state of virtual general indifference(3).

The end of the Cold War, between voluntarism and lack of resources

At the beginning of the 1990s, France appeared to have a significant deficit in its understanding of the issues in the region, even though it recognized important security issues at stake. This poor grasp of regional dynamics was to handicap France in the following decade. When the Baltic States declared independence from the USSR, French diplomacy kept a low profile. The prospect of compromising East-West relations and permanently weakening Mikhail Gorbachev's position within the Soviet apparatus, and therefore his ability to cooperate on international issues, weighed much more heavily at the time than the uncertain prospect of independence for states economically dependent on Moscow for survival. Unofficial support and lip-service condemnation of Russian actions barely disguised a desire not to change the status quo. France *"must not sacrifice the long term* [of its relationship with Russia] *for the short term* [of condemning Russia's actions in the Baltic States]"(4).

However, the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991 caught France unawares, and the country was faced with the urgent task of devising a security strategy for these states. Friction with Russia led to fears of the creation of a new Yugoslavia, with the apparent similarity of the situations: the issues of borders, ethnolinguistic minorities, and the

presence of troops from a former supranational entity could only fuel this fantasy. France, therefore, decided to support the accession of these States (Poland, the Baltic States, and Finland) to the European Community (and then the European Union), as well as the use of a multilateral framework to resolve the problems. But while NATO remains the ultimate horizon for the security strategy of these countries, France is suffering from the mismatch between resources and stated needs and the gap between official positions and practical implementation. The fact that Paris was also seeking to integrate Russia into this security framework – a coherent idea, but one that proved impossible to implement given the dispute between the states of the region, Russia, and the West – further undermined France's credibility during the 1990s. From 1995 onwards, French diplomacy began to accept the idea that the Baltic States would join NATO, which marked the failure of the French vision of transatlanticism. In 2001, during his official visit to the Baltic States, President J. Chirac pleaded in vain for EU membership to be sufficient regarding security.

The accession of Finland (1995) and then Poland and the Baltic States (2004) to the EU and, above all, to NATO (1999 for Poland, 2004 for the Baltic States, 2023 for Finland) marks the end of a strategic cycle in this region in which France, although present, has not succeeded in defending its vision due to a lack of coherence and resources. France's attempt to resume dialogue with Russia in 2019 will confirm the Baltic's mistrust of Paris's regional strategy. These doubts have been dispelled since the outbreak of a conventional war on European soil and, in particular, since the Bratislava.

Notes:

(1) Bruno Tertrais, "*A French Perspective on Security in Northern Europe*", Gullow Gjeseth (dir.), The Nordic Countries and European Security, Oslo, Clausewitz Seminar, Europa-programmet, 2001, p. 27, quoted by Matthieu Chillaud, *La démarche stratégique des États baltes dans l'architecture européenne de sécurité et de défense : une politique fondée sur une dialectique identitaire et militaire – De la restauration de leur indépendance aux commémorations russes du soixantième anniversaire de la victoire contre l'Allemagne nazie*, Doctoral thesis, Political Science, under the direction of Nathalie Blanc-Noël, Université Montesquieu – Bordeaux IV, 2007, Tel-00282264, p. 20.

(2) Julien Gueslin, *La France et les petits états baltes : réalités baltes, perceptions françaises et ordre européen (1920-1932)*, Doctoral thesis, History, under the direction of Robert Franck, Université Panthéon-Sorbonne – Paris I, 2004, Tel-00126331, p. 600.

(3) Philippe Merland, *La politique de sécurité de la France dans la Baltique orientale de 1989 à 2004*, Master's thesis, History, under the supervision of Isabelle Davion, Sorbonne University, 2022, p. 30.

(4) SHD, GR 14 R 140, USSR, Note No. 51 of 14 January 1991 on the note summary on bringing Lithuania back into line.

Vignette: Commemorative plaque affixed to the walls of Riga Castle in 2007 to celebrate the action of the French Naval Division under the command of Captain Jean-Joseph Brisson in support of Latvian independence in 1919 (source: French Embassy in Latvia).

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Link to the French version of the article

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