

So close and yet so far apart: German-Baltic geopolitical views

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Abstract. A certain paradox has pervaded German-Baltic relations for decades. Tightly linked through culture, art, education, and, above all, a genuine societal affinity for each other, in the realm of military power, the two sides could not be further apart. Where, over the years, German leadership has emphasized the notion of perpetual peace in Europe and positive transformation through trade, the Baltic states, on the contrary, stuck to the worldview of military power playing a central role in regional affairs. Put differently, despite geographic proximity between Germany and the Baltic states, these relations time and again have fractured along the line of how to best engage Russia. Existing scholarship has already extensively covered Germany's security ties with other major powers. This essay, in turn, seeks to depart from this conventional practice and instead assess Germany as a security actor through the eyes of small states in the Baltic Sea region, namely Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The following traces and evaluates key inflection points and controversies nestled within the German-Baltic security relationship.

So nah und doch so weit auseinander: Deutsch-Baltische Perspektiven auf die Geopolitik

Seit Jahrzehnten sind die deutsch-baltischen Beziehungen durch ein Paradoxon bestimmt: Obwohl in Kultur, Kunst, Bildung sowie gesellschaftlich eng miteinander verbunden, sind die Positionen beider Seiten bei der militärischen Macht vollkommen divergent. Während deutsche Regierungen im Laufe der Jahre den Gedanken des ewigen Friedens in Europa und der wirtschaftlichen Transformation („Wandel durch Handel“) betont haben, hielten die baltischen Staaten vor dem Hintergrund geschichtlicher Erfahrungen an der Auffassung fest, dass militärische Macht eine zentrale Rolle in regionalen Angelegenheiten spielt. Daher sind die Beziehungen zwischen Deutschland und den baltischen Staaten trotz ihrer kulturellen Nähe in der Frage des Umgangs mit Russland immer wieder auf die Probe gestellt worden. Die Forschung hat sich bereits ausführlich mit der Sicherheitspolitik Deutschlands hinsichtlich anderer (regionaler) Großmächte befasst. Dieser Aufsatz weicht von dieser gängigen Praxis ab und betrachtet stattdessen Deutschland als Sicherheitsakteur aus der Sicht kleiner Staaten im Ostseeraum, nämlich Estlands, Lettlands und Litauens. Im Folgenden werden wichtige Wendepunkte und Kontroversen in den deutsch-baltischen Sicherheitsbeziehungen nachgezeichnet und bewertet.

Keywords: Germany, Baltic states, Russia, NATO, Alliances | Deutschland, Baltische Staaten, Russland, NATO, Bündnisse

Introduction

Over the past years, the Baltic Sea region has made a comeback as a strategic forefront fraught with tensions and mistrust. Against the backdrop of Russia's illegal takeover of Crimea in 2014 and a subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the once hopeful vision of a tension-free geopolitical space has given way to highly confrontational dynamics. A number of treaties and mechanisms for consensus-building between NATO member states and Russia that once anchored regional order have been stripped away or manifestly eroded. With the shifting geopolitical tides, a considerable alignment of policies has emerged among the countries of the Baltic Sea region. Multinational troops have been placed to guard NATO's eastern flank. Allied military exercises in the region have spiked. However, underneath such common efforts, considerable fault lines and disagreements, rooted in varying national interests and threat perceptions, still abound, thus challenging the notion of all-encompassing transformation. This essay is an attempt to trace and parse out such security-related controversies.

More concretely, the following text examines German-Baltic geopolitical worldviews and their differing strains of thinking regarding Russia. Existing scholarship has already extensively covered Germany's security ties with other major powers, such as the United States, France and the United Kingdom, explicating their relational dynamics and historical legacies. This essay, in turn, seeks to depart from this conventional practice and instead assess Germany as a security actor through the eyes of small states in the Baltic Sea region, namely Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. With few exceptions, such an analytical angle has received relatively scant attention in the academic literature.¹ The presented analysis thus seeks to further our knowledge of the German-Baltic security link by bringing to light both the historical record and more recent developments. Such appraisal will be of interest to students of geopolitics, history, and international relations at large.

A certain paradox has pervaded German-Baltic relations for decades. Tightly linked through culture, art, education, and above all, genuine societal affinity for each other, in the realm of military power, the two sides could not be further apart. Where, over the years, German leadership has emphasized the notion of perpetual peace in Europe and positive transformation through trade, the Baltic states, on the contrary, stuck to the worldview of military power playing a central role in

¹ Major/von Voss (2016): *Nordic-Baltic Security, Germany and NATO*; Sprüds/Vizgunova (2018): *Perceptions of Germany in the Security of the Baltic Sea Region*.

regional affairs. Put differently, despite geographic proximity between Germany and the three Baltic states, these relations time and again have fractured along the line of how to best engage Russia as the regional military superpower. When Berlin kept extending an olive branch to Russia and actively sought economic interdependence with it, the Baltics repeatedly asserted that one day this will be instrumentalized by the Kremlin for its own geopolitical ends.

Within this context, Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius have exhibited profound doubts regarding Germany's security policy trajectory. To be fair, during the era of Angela Merkel, the Federal Republic of Germany did gain some noteworthy political capital with its decision to assume the lead-framework nation status in Lithuania. As part of NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) initiative, Germany was the first European power to raise its hand in 2016 and willingly deploy *Bundeswehr* forces to the region. Yet while Berlin has expanded its presence in the region, it also continued to conduct a Russia policy that was sharply at odds with the views of the three Baltic republics. The prevailing view among the Baltic lawmakers regarding Germany has been one of a country that mistakenly bought into a certain end-of-history paradigm. From their vantage point, Berlin has constantly been too receptive to Russian influence and ideas about how European security should be organized. The following traces and evaluates key inflection points and controversies within the German-Baltic security relationship.

The misjudged Russia threat

Long before the Russian forces lit a match and set Ukraine ablaze, the three Baltic states had been sounding the alarm about Moscow's revisionist ambitions. Addressing the German political classes in the city of Hamburg in 1994, Estonian President Lennart Meri declared that his country, due to its nearness to Russia, had developed a sharper instinct when it came to recognizing the threats looming from the East. In a manner not typically associated with sweet-talking diplomacy, Meri posited that Europe stood before a fateful choice: "Either the neo-imperialist policy of a great eastern power will be tolerated, financed, and in the short term, possibly even profited from [...] or the notions of democracy, freedom, responsibility and peace will be helped".² A certain junior official from

² Meri (1994): *Address by H.E. Lennart Meri*.

St. Petersburg who attended this event was so enraged by Meri's speech that he stormed out of the room.³ His name was Vladimir Putin.

The Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, despite being anchored in the institutional West - the European Union and NATO, have had a markedly different conception of geopolitics than most of their Western European peers. Where, over the years, German leadership attempted to bind Moscow with international agreements, the Baltics repeatedly asserted that such efforts would eventually backfire. "We were saying loudly to our good friends in Germany not to have too deep relations with Russia, because one day they will regret this", Lithuania's prime minister recently recapped her interactions with German lawmakers.⁴ For all the talk of perpetual peace in Europe, the countries bordering the Russian Federation never truly bought into the notion that they have somehow escaped old-fashioned power struggles. From the Baltic vantage point, stability and prosperity in the region have stemmed primarily from the US security provisions and placement of hard power attributes, not from underwater connecting gas pipelines, economic interdependence, or diplomatic overtures to the Kremlin. As put by Estonia's Foreign Affairs Chair: "Those who have witnessed the advance of the Russian brutal war machine with their own eyes, are probably keenly aware that it cannot be stopped by gentle words alone".⁵

Accounts of Germany's aversion to pure power politics will often include the following explanatory note: 'because of our history'. The historical and catastrophic experience of Nazism cemented a certain culture of restraint within German society and eagerness to instead become a normative power.⁶ In a considerable way, today's Baltic geopolitical views are also born out of lessons taken from history. As succinctly put by Daunis Auers: "History lives, breathes, provokes and mobilises Baltic publics to an extent almost unimaginable in neighbouring Western European democracies."⁷ But whereas for Germany the historical 'baggage' has always been to be wary of military-based solutions and application of force, for the Baltics it has been the opposite – that neutrality and goodwill towards everyone is not a prudent and sustainable approach in international affairs.

3 Goble (2022): "When Putin couldn't take the truth spoken by Lennart Meri".

4 *The Economist* (2022): "Does today's Russia threaten the Baltic states?"

5 Mihkelson (2022): "Game-Changer: The Baltics Under Pressure".

6 Harnisch/Maull (2001): *Germany as a Civilian Power?*; Crawford (2010): "The Normative Power of a Normal State".

7 Auers (2015): *Comparative Politics and Government of the Baltic States*, p. 7.

Living with the memory of a long Russian occupation, the Baltics have their own version of ‘never again.’ It essentially stipulates sticking to powerful military organizations and allies at all costs in order not to be subsumed by their larger neighbor to the East. In their reading of history, the concept of power is a necessary ingredient to ensure national survival. Describing the Baltic Sea region, former Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves once likened it to living in the South Bronx. “You are living in a bad neighbourhood and you hope that you are going to get home or to the subway safely”.⁸ This description of the region stands in sharp contrast with how the rest of Western Europe has seen this part of the Continent.

Since regaining independence in the early 90s, Russia has been the primary security concern for the Baltic states, often depicted in existential terms. They have perceived Moscow as a revanchist actor that has demonstrated a willingness to engage in forced territorial revisions and military interventions. Geography only magnifies their sense of insecurity. The Baltics see themselves as the most exposed link in the transatlantic alliance as they are almost completely cut off from other NATO partners. This strategic reality of living next door to Russia necessitates the need for a counterbalancing force in the region. For this reason, they see allied military presence on the ground as the primary vehicle through which their sovereignty and security can be guaranteed.

Because of this worldview, the three Baltic nations have oftentimes been patronized by their Western European peers. Blinded by their own tragic history, the argument went, they could not separate the real threats from imaginary ones. According to the former President of Finland, this part of Europe was in the grip of a “post-traumatic state of stress”.⁹ Policies adopted by Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius regularly provoked scorn and eye-rolling across the EU capitals. For instance, a while ago, Latvia had banned the state-owned Russian television channel Russia Today, a move that many in Europe saw as an unnecessary curtailing of freedom of speech. Estonia, as the first-ever victim of a state-directed cyberattack, had moved its government data as a backup option abroad. Such policies were supposedly proof of Baltic Russophobia.

The notion of the Baltics being unreasonable in their threat assessments also carried some significant policy implications. Despite joining NATO in 2004, they were in effect relegated to being second-class alliance citizens, as no real

8 Ilves (2015): “Quo Vadis 21st Century Russia?”

9 Onali (2022): “Venäjää maansa viholliseksi kutsuva Viron”.

contingency plans existed regarding their territorial defense. In the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian conflict in 2008, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania pressured allied governments to develop specific military contingency plans. Behind the scenes, Berlin had moved to block the resolution on the grounds that this would be too provocative toward Russia. Only after repeated insistence by Washington, Germany had agreed to drop objections vis-à-vis developing Baltic contingency plans. Instances such as these, however, laid the groundwork for disappointment and disillusionment with Berlin. While the Baltics have always maintained excellent people-to-people ties with Germany, in the realm of security, it was always perceived rather skeptically – as an ally that cannot be fully counted on in times of crises.

Crimea: the turning point that wasn't

The annexation of Crimea was supposed to serve as a major turning point that shattered previously held orthodoxies about the Russian Federation, pushing Europe in a unified strategic direction. Testifying before the US Senate committee in 2014, Edward Lucas, a seasoned Russia analyst, submitted: “We have not listened to them [Eastern Europe]. Instead, we have systematically patronized, belittled and ignored those who know the problem better than we do. Now they have been proved right”.¹⁰ Admittedly, NATO did undertake some notable force posture adjustments in the post-Crimea era. Multinational forces were placed across Poland and the Baltics. To the surprise of many, Germany too crossed an important threshold by transferring its *Bundeswehr* forces to Lithuania.

On the surface, it seemed as though the security perceptions regarding Russia, as an immediate and grave threat, were converging in the region and that Berlin increasingly viewed the security environment in the same light as Riga, Tallinn, or Vilnius. As pointed out by Engelmann and Matlé, between 2014 and 2016, the German Foreign Minister visited the Baltics six times, an unusually high number by historic standards. During one such gathering, he did not hesitate to convey the notion that Berlin was “highly aware of the Baltic’s concerns of a Ukraine-like fate”.¹¹ In retrospect, however, it is obvious that the forceful takeover of Crimea by Russian forces did not serve as an eye-opener for most of Europe.

¹⁰ Lucas (2014): „Testimony of Mr. Edward Lucas”.

¹¹ Engelmann/Matlé (2018): *Germany’s Role and Self-Perception*, p. 33.

With time, European powers fell back into their well-worn positions concerning Russia. Germany kept treading the middle line between some deterrent measures and some economic collaboration. The polling of the German public, for example, revealed a deeply ingrained belief (66% of the respondents) that working together with Russia was necessary even despite its recent land-grab by force.¹² Even after eight years of the Russian proxy war in eastern Ukraine, German lawmakers still crafted policy toward Moscow based on the assumption that closer economic ties with it would ensure a more constructive and stable relationship. Until the outbreak of full-scale war in 2022, part of the German establishment even saw Russia's claim to a sphere of influence in its neighborhood as understandable, so long as Moscow cooperated with Europeans.¹³ "The West continued to do too little, too late. We blacklisted officials but we kept building pipelines. We introduced sanctions but turned a blind eye to the companies circumventing them. Western politicians danced with Mr Putin (some of them literally) and retired to chair the boards of Russian companies", Lithuania's prime minister summarized Europe's misguided approach to Russia.¹⁴

The notion that Moscow can be kept in check primarily through economic interdependence and dialogue also resulted in significant European shortfalls in military spending and capabilities. For years, Germany has been derelict in its defence spending. Internal audits of the German armed forces have routinely revealed that the army suffers from a severe lack of modernization and too few personnel.¹⁵ This has not gone unnoticed by its neighbours. Whilst from time to time Germany has talked about the need for assuming a greater role in European security matters, there have been few practical indications suggesting that it is actually capable of doing that. The Baltic states, in particular, have not been won over by Berlin's musings vis-à-vis the so-called European autonomy due to its palpable inability to back this vision with the required material forces. As once put by the Latvian foreign minister, the European autonomy project at this point comes across as a "paper tiger".¹⁶

When it comes to German-Baltic security relations, another problematic layer has to do with the wider German societal attitudes. Polling conducted over

12 Fix (2020): „Russia in German public opinion”.

13 Schwarzer (2022): „Will Germany Stay the Course?”.

14 Šimonytė (2022): „Russia's invasion was predictable”.

15 *German Bundestag* (2020): “Information from the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces”.

16 *Baltic Times* (2018): “Most EU defense ministers object to creation of EU army”.

the years has indicated a deep-seated societal unwillingness in Germany to come to the military aid of NATO treaty allies in case of a conflict with Russia. In 2020, a mere 34% of the German respondents said that their country should fulfil its treaty obligations and use force to defend a NATO partner during a militarized crisis.¹⁷ Unwillingness to provide military aid to allied governments is especially pronounced in Germany's east. According to a 2022 survey, 67% of East Germans opposed participation in military operations to defend the Baltics in a hypothetical crisis with Russia.¹⁸ The Baltic states have been keenly aware of such polling. As put by the Latvian Defence Minister: "If you follow the polling statistics [in Germany], and we here follow up this very well, it is not extremely encouraging".¹⁹ For the outlined reasons, the three Baltic republics have remained rather mistrustful of Germany's security role in the region.²⁰

Ukraine 2022: aligning at last?

Most recently, during the initial amassing of Russian troops around Ukraine, Baltic lawmakers' criticism of Germany spilled into the open. After Berlin had decided to block the Estonian government's attempts to transfer Cold War-era howitzers to Ukraine, Baltic leadership reacted sharply. "They've [Germans] been living in peace for years. They think about gas, exports and co-operation. For us border countries, it's different. For us it's existential. Our past doesn't give much chance of just trusting [Russia]. It would be death for us," the Latvian Defense Minister was quoted by the international press.²¹ Latvian foreign minister echoed this sentiment by suggesting that the Baltic republics have been disappointed in how German lawmakers have handled the crisis situation.²² Another senior Baltic diplomat chipped in: "It is very concerning that a country that is a European superpower, Germany, is blocking NATO's decision to deliver military equipment and lethal arms to Ukraine, to make it capable to defend itself. And that is why I am not so sure if the Baltic states would be attacked, what would the German position be."²³

17 Pew (2020): NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States.

18 *Centrum für Strategie und Höhere Führung* (2022): „Sicherheitsreport“.

19 Pabriks (2022): "Russia's Security Ultimatum."

20 Banka (2020): "Reclaiming a good ally status".

21 Milne (2022): "Latvia slams Germany's 'immoral' relationship with Russia and China".

22 Crisp (2022): "Nato must boost Eastern Europe troops if Russians stay in Belarus."

23 Kalniete (2022): "How do you solve a problem like Russia?".

However, once the Russian troops had actually moved in to brutally dismember Ukraine, Germany, in a span of just a few days, underwent a sweeping policy change. Raising to the occasion, the German government undertook a host of significant decisions: nullification of the Nord Stream 2 energy pipeline, a considerable increase of the defence budget in order to modernize its armed forces, adoption of a massive sanctions package against Russia, and arming of Ukraine. Even one of these listed policy items would previously have been viewed as a significant crossing of the threshold. Combined, they give the impression of a country undergoing a tectonic shift in its dealings with Russia.

Observing these policy decisions by Berlin, Baltic political elites have been supportively nodding along. Latvian Defense Minister, who previously had devoted harsh words to German lawmakers, acknowledged that “Germany has made a historic turn, which we respect very much”.²⁴ By the looks of it, Germany and Western Europe writ large have embarked on a major strategic course correction. Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, threat perceptions are finally converging across the Baltic Sea region.²⁵ Vladimir Putin’s Ukraine gamble has managed to backfire considerably, discrediting decades-old orthodoxies about the Russian Federation.

Of course, one ought to remain cautious regarding the speed with which genuine change can be ushered in. Addressing the Bundestag just days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Chancellor Olaf Scholz urged: “We need planes that fly, ships that sail, and soldiers who are optimally equipped for their missions”.²⁶ That, to be fair, will take time to fully materialize. One should bear in mind that it takes years to properly modernize and build up beleaguered armed forces. To provide one illustration, in 2021, France, Germany, and Spain announced plans to develop a European-based fighter jet. Realistically, Europeans will see them in the sky by 2040. In the foreseeable future, Europe in strategic matters will remain highly dependent on the US security umbrella. With that said, it is palpable that German-Baltic geopolitical views are finally on the path of convergence. As acknowledged by the Estonian Prime Minister, since the Ukraine invasion, “Western allies have come closer” to the Baltic point of view vis-à-vis Russia.²⁷

24 Petter (2022): “Latvian Defense Minister Demands Weapons from Germany”.

25 Bussmann/Banka/Stremming (2025): “How Small-State Allies Perceive Germany”.

26 Scholz (2022): “Policy statement by Olaf Scholz”.

27 Abend (2022): „Putin’s Appetite Will Only Grow”.

Conclusions

This essay, which in many ways is a product of a gathering of scholars at Vilnius University in the fall of 2021, has sought to disentangle and compare the geopolitical views of Germany and the three Baltic countries. While policy analysts have taken a renewed interest in regional security affairs, the German-Baltic angle has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. Within this context, this paper has aimed to capture key dimensions of this relationship. As such, the main thread of the text here has argued that for decades, the three Baltic republics and Germany have held fundamentally differing security assumptions as it pertains to Russia. At times, such differences have been diplomatically glossed over, while on certain occasions they have spilled into the public view, straining what is otherwise an excellent partnership.

It should not have taken this long, but it appears as though 2022 has finally brought German-Baltic security views on the same page. The European continent as a whole has been jolted by Vladimir Putin's naked aggression against Ukraine.²⁸ With the Russian troops pouring over Ukraine's sovereign borders *en masse*, a radical shift in German foreign policy has taken place. Russian aggression put a definite end to the security architecture as we knew it. The longstanding pillars of Germany's approach to Russia – the maintenance of economic relations and constant dialogue with the Kremlin- have now crumbled into pieces. As one senior Estonian government representative put it: "We will be in a totally new security environment. There will be a new Ukraine. There will be a new Russia. There will be a new Europe. There is no going back to February 23".²⁹ For the time being, the Baltic Sea region countries have come together in a serious way to push against Russian revisionism. In light of this, the topic of German-Baltic security relations has become more salient than ever and scholars should not overlook its relevance.

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