

Nordic-Baltic defence cooperation

By Jyri Häkämies

Since 1991, the Nordic-Baltic cooperation has become a daily routine between eight democratic countries in Northern Europe. This cooperation takes place on all sectors from economy and labour policy to foreign and defence policy.

Defence cooperation was for a long time a grey area among the Nordic countries, probably because these countries had very different defence solutions. This was particularly clear in the case of Finland. Finland had become a UN member already in 1955, but in spite of that it had to adopt a very cautious line in its relations with other Nordic countries. Still in the late 1960s Finland had to abstain from closer economic cooperation among the Nordic countries (NORDEK).

After the end of the Cold War, intergovernmental cooperation in Northern Europe has rapidly increased. In 1994, Finland and Sweden decided to join the European Union and the Partnership for Peace -arrangement with NATO. A few years later Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined both organizations. New forms for the Baltic Sea area and Nordic-Baltic cooperation were also developed.

Infrastructure support

Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the defence sector was launched immediately after the Baltic countries regained their independence in August 1991. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had to start the construction of their national defence systems virtually from the zero point. After the withdrawal of the Soviet (Russian) troops from the Baltic countries only partially demolished empty military bases and buildings were left behind.

The Baltic countries had not had national defence forces since the Second World War. Instead, Soviet garrisons were filled with conscripts and soldiers from distant parts of the country. The assistance provided by the Nordic countries was therefore welcome. During the first half of the 1990s, the possibility of the NATO membership was not taken too seriously by the Baltic countries. Neither NATO at first cherished such an idea. National defence system in the Scandinavian style was therefore at that time the most natural choice.

Extensive assistance programmes were launched quickly by the Nordic countries from 1992 onwards. The reasons for this were obvious. It was thought that a military vacuum in the Baltic countries would create instability for the whole Northern Europe. Finland, Sweden and Denmark were active and had each a target country of their own. Finland provided Estonia not only materiel assistance but also started to train future Estonia officers in the National Defence University (Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu) and other military institutions. A similar procedure was adopted for the training of Estonian border guards. Later Baltic military training institutions have been provided different types of support.

It was first during the latter half of the 1990s, when the possibility of the Baltic countries to join NATO became a topic of political discussion. After the admission of Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary to the alliance it was realized that there could be a continued extension process, where the three Baltic countries and other countries of the former

Eastern bloc would also have their place. Along with this development, assistance programs started to pave the way towards filling the membership criteria that NATO had put for its potential new members.

One element in the defence sector cooperation has been joint ministerial meetings between the eight Nordic-Baltic countries. These meetings were organized since the latter half of the 1990s both as internal events and as meetings with external parties. One of the high moments was the meeting of the Nordic and Baltic defence ministers in Turku in May 2001, with the US secretary of defence Donald Rumsfeld as a special guest. Later on another similar meeting was organized in Estonia.

Towards Operational Cooperation

During the last few years, Nordic and Baltic countries have launched new cooperation projects directed to militarily less developed new democracies. One example of this is the training program arranged for Ukraine to support it in building more effective national defence. Joint development programs deal with such issues as strategic planning, parliamentary control of the military, procurement processes, training, technology and research and public policy. There are some plans to widen this cooperation soon to new countries such as Moldova, Georgia and Armenia.

As said before, the content of Nordic-Baltic defence cooperation has developed remarkably. If the 1990s was the decade of support and assistance programs, after 2001 we have entered an era of more equal operational cooperation, both at the bilateral and multilateral level. As my predecessor Seppo Kääriäinen pointed out in the joint article with the Estonian defence minister Jaak Jõerüüt, different defence solutions are not an obstacle to mutually beneficial cooperation.

What does this era of operational cooperation mean? Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are sharing with the Nordic countries the idea of peacekeeping and crisis management cooperation. Quite soon after finishing the first stage of building national defence forces, all three countries volunteered to international operations. For them it was quite natural that they sought particularly cooperation with the Nordic countries. In addition to joint operations in places like Kosovo, the Baltic countries gave their contribution to both NATO and US-led ad hoc -coalitions for example in Iraq.

On the first of January 2008, the so-called Nordic EU Battle Group will become operational for the next six months. It will include troops from the lead nation Sweden, Finland, Norway, Estonia and Ireland. The Nordic battle group had in November its last exercises and now waits, if it will be called into action in one of the crisis areas of the world. Latvia and Lithuania are participating in the same spirit in other battle groups. It is also quite possible that the Nordic battle group will become operational in 2011 again. In addition to the EU battle groups, Baltic countries are participating in exercises and operations of NATO's reaction forces (NRF). Finland will analyze experiences gained from EU Battle Groups and, on the basis of this analysis, will consider the participation in the NRF.

The integration of the Baltic countries into European and North-Atlantic defence structures has now been more or less completed. In spite of their relatively small sizes they have found themselves a role in common operations and structures. Estonia can again be an example. Estonia's defence minister Jaak Aaviksoo has recently announced that his country will inside NATO specialize in the preparations against the cyber war. This is a wise decision, for several reasons. Estonia has been exceptionally advanced in creating an information society. Last spring Estonia was also a target of cyber attacks against its vital systems and infrastructures. The United States is NATO's leading country

in military capabilities, but smaller members can have strong niche areas as well. It is obvious that Estonia's specialization will benefit all countries in its vicinity, including Finland and other Nordic countries.

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