

Speech

**INF v. missile defence confrontation and
vulnerability of logistics
across the Baltic Sea**

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Abstract

Three types of problems are discussed in this speech: nuclear missile confrontation, logistics risks across the Baltic Sea as well as communication and electricity undersea networks.

Keywords

INF Treaty, nuclear confrontation, undersea networks

About the author

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1. Nuclear Confrontation

The nuclear related risks are presently most serious in the southern Baltic region, where Russia has deployed in Kaliningrad medium range Iskander missiles. There they are directly opposite to the still not operable ballistic missile defence system Aegis Ashore situated in Poland's Pomerania.

The missile confrontation started to worsen in the early 2000's, while the situation had been calm and stable for two decades after the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) in 1987.

The Americans say that the Aegis system was built against the scenario of just a few Iranian missiles attacking Europe. And since Aegis missiles are non-nuclear, and hence they cannot be used either in a first strike or even a counterstrike, they should therefore not have raised such a problematic situation.

But the Russians never believed an Iranian attack as the real rationale for Aegis deployment, and interpreted the system to be also against their own medium and even longer range missiles.

The situation became acute when the U.S. and Russia, after failed diplomacy, withdrew from the INF treaty in 2019, and Russia started to deploy in Kaliningrad two types of missiles, ballistic and cruise Iskanders, potentially also with nuclear warheads.

Presently the situation resembles superficially a classic Cold War nuclear confrontation of threat and counterthreat. It is not however an analogous repetition of the Euromissile Crisis of the 1980s, when there was an unstable configuration in respect to a surprise first strike, with SS-20s on one side and Pershing IIs and GLCM cruise missiles on the other. But, because as mentioned before, the Aegis missile defence system is not nuclear, and in fact those missiles do not even have a conventional explosive, but rather amazingly their destructive effect is due to a direct hit of a terminal homing projectile in a kinetic collision. Hence, they are not useful in offensive strikes against land targets.

An obvious way to try to repair the serious damage to the regional nuclear balance would be to return back to the original INF treaty, possibly modified by ways that might either lessen or remove the underlying reasons for the withdrawal from the treaty. Alterations could be (1) to limit the treaty validity only to European territory, or (2) to be valid only concerning nuclear warheads, rather than all medium range missiles. The latter proposal would however require a reliably arranged intrusive verification, which is politically quite difficult.

President Obama's INF answer to the problem in 2009 was to deploy the regional missile defences on Aegis cruisers on the sea, but that was not in practice a good enough permanent

solution. American missile cruisers in the southern Baltic Sea were considered intrusive by Russia, and they were often threateningly approached by Russian fighter aircraft. Any positive developments are presently only future hopes, and are at least waiting first for a Ukrainian peace treaty.

2. Logistics across the Baltic Sea

The main military logistics problems in the Baltic Sea area worry both the West and the East: NATO airborne and maritime logistics transport from the West across the sea to the three Baltic countries and Finland, and also Russian logistics to Kaliningrad.

The Baltic Sea creates a logistical problem to all eastern coast littoral countries. That has been well known about the three NATO Baltic countries which all need support and material supplies across the sea from the West.

But the same is true also for Finland, whose few land connections to Sweden and Norway through Lapland are not nearly strong enough for the volume. Unfortunately Finland also has a different railway gauge from Sweden.

To guarantee reliable seaborne and airborne logistics transport the sovereign control of the two Baltic islands, Gotland and Åland, is of crucial importance. Otherwise, the opponent's anti-air and anti-ship missile systems could jeopardize both essential cargo flights and ships bringing in necessary supplies.

Those two island groups should be defended effectively already from the first moments of any escalating crisis, first against paratroopers and helicopters possibly trying to take a bridgehead, and then later against amphibious landing crafts or heavy transport aircrafts, bringing in stronger occupation forces that could be very difficult to eliminate.

One can keep in mind as a forewarning example the failed attempt of Russians to take Kiev's Hostomel airport by an air assault of helicopters and paratrooper special forces, with stronger forces to follow. That attempt was unsuccessful because it was possible to very quickly deploy local defensive forces to supplement those few that were there at the airport originally.

The Russian garrison in the Kaliningrad semi-exclave has a somewhat similar supply problem, as its rail connection through Lithuania is not meant for military transport, and anyway would not be operable during war times. The air and sea routes from St. Petersburg are lengthy and unreliable. From a purely military view point one can thus well understand Russia's strong motivation to wish to connect Kaliningrad oblast by land route to Belarussian territory through the Suwalki area.

Similarly, any Russian plan to try to protect their naval and airborne transports from the St. Petersburg area would be militarily understandable, even by trying to take control of the Baltic islands. Trying to break the land encirclement by military attack could be an answer, but it is easier said than done.

The Kaliningrad logistics problem does not have a neat solution in war time.

3. Undersea networks

Another kind of logistics risk in the Baltic Sea concerns hybrid warfare against foreign connections of critical infrastructure of the eastern shore countries already during the gray period before any actual fighting has taken place. It is mainly a question about energy supplies and telecommunication connections. As we saw from the recent explosions of the Nordstream natural gas pipes, sabotage against such connections is neither easy to prevent nor is it easy to find out later who was the perpetrator. There are also numerous electric power connections between Sweden, Poland, Lithuania, Germany, Finland, and Estonia, and also from mainland Finland into the Åland islands.

The undersea telecommunication connections from Finland to Sweden and Germany are vitally important to Finland. One cannot avoid an assumption that some of the excessively large Russian owned “private” resort hotels in Finland with practically no visitors in them (like the well-known Airiston Helmi in the Turku archipelago) were built there to be ready to house special troops to do crucial damage to critical networks during the gray period of serious international crisis. Also, the present Russian operational mode of attacks against Ukrainian electric power stations and transformer infrastructure indicates that Russia has taken those civilian structures as part of their target list.

The relevant question is then, what one could do about those threats. There are no easy concrete answers. The long-term political answer of trying to create mutual political trust does not help soon enough when the trust has already disappeared. An obvious thing to do would be to prevent conditions where perpetrators can do their damages at leisure and without resistance. Hence, a short term answer is to try to prevent intentional damage by patrolling the routes. One can also alleviate the consequences of damage by technical means and by having alternative, redundant routes. The many risks existing in the Baltic Sea area have been ignored for decades. It will also take a long time to repair the situation, but the repair work should start as soon as possible.