

Baltic Views of the Swedish Declaration of Solidarity*

by

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Background

I had my first contacts in 1991 with Balts who had or later got a decisive influence on the development of national security and defence policy. A few days after re-establishment of independence in the late summer I met the three men politically responsible for rebuilding the armed forces: Raivo Vare from Estonia, Tālav Jundzis from Latvia and Audrius Butkevičius from Lithuania. Interaction with an ever-larger and broader group of persons became possible through visits to the three states and during my period as Danish Defence Attaché accredited to Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius from summer 1994 to late summer 1997. I continued one more year as defence attaché in Riga, but that year was actually used to catalyse and focus the creation of a common staff officer academy and generate both Baltic and international support for this project. The Baltic Defence College was made possible by the friendly, dedicated and effective political leadership of the then Swedish Minister of Defence, Björn von Sydow. From summer 1998 until my retirement from the Danish Army at the end of 2004, I worked closely with von Sydow and the political and military leaders of the Baltic States to establish, consolidate and develop the College so that it could support the aspirations of the three States to achieve membership of NATO. That membership was considered essential for safeguarding the States' future independence.

My many years in the Baltics turned me into a combination of an external and internal observer and actor in the friction and conflict-ridden relations between the three States and between the key political and military personalities involved in defence matters. It was a period where politico-military roles and political-economic ethics were being defined and developed from the Soviet legacy – to put it nice and diplomatically.

When I left the Baltic States after ten-and-a-half years work for them it was with a well-developed insight into the attitudes and opinions, logic and weaknesses of the Baltic elites. That knowledge had been essential for an effective effort, initially in the use of the very considerable Danish state funds made available to support the development of the Baltic Armed Forces. Later, further developed insight was necessary to manoeuvre the BALTDEFCOL ship through the storms and tides of the archipelago of Baltic politics in the continued shadow of Russia. I am aware that the

* Chapter 7 of the coming translation into English: Bo Hugemark (ed.). *Till bröders hjälp. Med sikte på en svensk solidarisk strategi. (Friends in need. Development of a Swedish strategy of solidarity).* Stockholm 2011.

frank description in the rest of the article will be considered both rude and ungrateful by some both in and outside the Baltic States. However, this is necessary both for clarity in this short chapter and to have the outside reader appreciate the deep destruction of souls and human solidarity that was caused by Soviet society.

Thus I shall write far less diplomatically than any official Balts would probably do in my place. They would embellish the truth to look normal and moderate in the eyes of the always-naïve Western-Europeans. As a start I want to make clear that during my contacts with friends in the three States about the Swedish declaration of solidarity to prepare my contribution after having accepted the challenge from the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences, I found little knowledge of the existence of the declaration. What is perceived in Sweden as a significant breach with the security-and defence-policy tradition, the Balts – maybe cynically – do not acknowledge as something that will enhance their chances of continued security and independence. It will take a continuous and focused effort to change their honest and real view of Sweden and the rest of Western Europe.

Attitudes to National Defence

Note that this article in no way represents Denmark's official view of the development and situation in the Baltic States. At the same time, I should underline that it has been an advantage to be a Dane, when seeking understand the real attitudes of the Baltic elites to defence policy and national armed forces. To a very significant degree the Baltic views mirrored that of Danish politicians from 1923 to 1989: A national defence effort is seen as hopeless, the difference of opinion is about whether you should do differently than in 1940, marking the national will to exist by fighting as long and hard as possible; or whether you should repeat the earlier-chosen option of just hoping that the invader will behave in a civilized way or that the great powers will to come to your assistance.

The only important difference between the attitude to a national defence effort in Denmark (and the other Nordic States) and the Baltic States is that the Baltic experience with thoroughly militarised Soviet society meant a de facto rejection of the Nordic model of total defence. No matter what view a Balt would otherwise have of national defence, he or she would reject the notion that all young men, even the sons of the elite, should do full and egalitarian national service, the best educated with the likelihood that they would have to serve longer as the result of having been selected for NCO or reserve officer training. In the Baltic States the pro-defence part of the elite considers the defence burden should be shouldered by a combination of volunteer nationalist militias, contract soldiers and – if necessary – those conscripts who could not avoid service by taking higher education. Everybody but themselves.

These pro-defence Balts would seek and get support from Anglo-Saxon advisors that hated conscription. Their narrow and ahistorical professionalism meant that they forgot or ignored the option they had to choose for themselves in the past when they were facing a direct threat. Only a few Balts, all Estonian, led by the long-serving Chief of Defence General Ants Laaneots, supported the Nordic model because of their understanding and admiration for what Finland had achieved.

Finnish-educated Estonian staff officers long campaigned for that model led by the very focused then regular officer Leo Kunnas - now a writer.

Baltic basic understanding of the history of the past 22 years and their situation

The Balts' understanding is that they regained their independence by their own action from the late 1980s, using a window of opportunity. They exploited the collapse of the Russian ability and will to keep control of their empire following the combination of economic breakdown and political liberalisation initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev. It was a repeat of the situation in 1918-20, where Russian defeat and disorganisation combined with first German and then Western military support to generate an increase in political ambition from autonomy-inside-Russia to full independence. Then and again now, support from the West was generally half-hearted and hesitant. Fortunately the U.S. became strongly positive fairly early, partly due to Baltic refugee communities mobilising the argument of U.S. non-recognition of their occupation, partly catalysed by political support from the Nordic States: Iceland, Denmark and Sweden.

On the other hand the consolidation of independence through NATO and the attached EU membership only succeeded due to the active policies of the U.S. They could not succeed here without outside assistance. However, the objective had to be reached before Russian weakness ended and the window closed. Other states such as the Nordic supported and catalysed that development and assisted in creating the necessary preconditions, but without U.S. leadership under both the Clinton and Bush administrations, 'Russia First' attitudes in the large European states would have left the Baltic States unsupported in the Russian 'near abroad' together with Ukraine, Central Asia and South Caucasus. The Balts are fully aware that their formal membership of the two organisations did not really change the higher priority given by Britain, France, Germany and Italy to political and economic ties to Russia than to their continued full independence and well-being. The Baltic States believe that there is only one real and effective support for their continued independent status. Their guarantor was, is and must be the U.S.

NATO is of special importance because of America's role in that organisation, and the active Baltic participation in Iraq and Afghanistan serves to keep up visibility in Washington (DC). It is an investment in solidarity that they hope will be reciprocated by effective U.S. support in a case of Russian pressure. When necessary such contributions to U.S. policy will take place in spite of Western-European opposition. The Baltic States consider that without the active U.S. lead in that respect in the Alliance, the European members would happily let the organisation slide the last short distance to becoming reduced to a traditional – and thus politically and militarily ineffective – collective security framework. The pre-aggression hesitancy and post-aggression appeasement of the 1930s would be repeated in a 'Pavlovian' way, having become second nature to the Western-European political elites. They are incapable in their arrogance of seeing motives anachronistically different from their own. They hope to convince by signalling understanding, by never suggesting that the other side could be anything but reasonable. Their proclivity has been clearly, awkwardly and brutally demonstrated by the deliberate suppression of the reality that the Russian integration of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia has no more made the country a satisfied state than the 1938

annexations made Germany one. Only the temporary fall in oil and gas prices punctured the Russian ego that drove the absorption of Georgia into the 'near abroad'.

When European NATO members are sceptical about concrete plans and preparations to safeguard the Baltic States against Russian pressure and potential aggression, they confirm in Baltic eyes that the naivety of Western-Europeans places them beyond pedagogic reach.

The recent French drive to deepen Russia-EU links (warmly supported by Italy and Germany makes Europe ever more irrelevant to Baltic and other East European security. Prompted by well-meaning optimists, NATO is escalating its efforts to consolidate and develop formal co-operation with Russia, driven partly by the need for access to support the Alliance effort in Afghanistan, a mission soon to be terminated. All ignore ostrich-wise the fundamentally unreformed character of the Russian political system. No demands are made.

The Baltic States cynically and pessimistically understand that no European is really willing or able to go to war over Narva, Kaliningrad transit rights or even Riga against an erratic, but nuclear-armed, Russia. Even the U.S. cannot do much if faced by a 'fait accompli'. Therefore Western support, including that of Sweden in the declaration of solidarity, must focus on creating a framework of deterrence that underlines the risk of uncontrolled escalation if the South-Caucasus game is tried in North-Eastern Estonia or elsewhere in the Baltics. That means the reestablishment of something similar to the cold-war NATO strategy of 'flexible response'. The strategy was a constructive formula that mirrored and respected the disagreement between the U.S. and its European allies about how to respond to Soviet aggression. Nobody could know in advance if aggression would end in a nuclear exchange. Underlining the risks of escalation is really what the American Post-Georgia exercise programme with the Balts is endeavouring to achieve bilaterally.

Some security policy-makers in the Baltic States understand that the move, encouraged by NATO pressure, away from self-defence structures based on conscription towards very small, heavily officered and administrated, expeditionary elements is undermining the ability to assist in a solidarity-based defence of the Baltic States. A Danish, Nordic-States-supported, advisory project from 1997 to 1998 that could have created a balanced capability to create both cheap self-defence forces and expeditionary elements was ignored and undermined. Only Finland and to some extent Poland have resisted the transformation fad. However, considering that only the U.S. could defend them anyway, they have happily joined the fashion move away from forces capable of territorial defence.

In the Baltic States the real effect of the Anglo-Saxon advice was to provide support to the part of the political spectrum dominated by the ex-Soviet nomenklatura that quietly believed and accepted the impossibility of defending the countries even against limited Russian operations like those in Georgia. People who thought than any attempt to build self-defence forces would be a futile waste of resources and possibly even seen and presented by the Russians as a provocative act. They were convinced that only the U.S. could save them, hence the fashionable move away from territorial defence. Such a choice was also a suitable framework for the later gradual reduction of the armed forces' budgets. Without realizing this in its arrogance, the Alliance undermined the influence of the

more defence-positive political forces that had sought to build up a symbolic self-defence force with a certain ability to create space and time for the deployment of assistance from outside. As already mentioned only Poland and Finland have had the determination to ignore the 'transformative' fashion.

The old NATO members, were, however caught by the costs of their advice when it became clear that one result was that the Baltic States could claim that Anglo-Saxon-led NATO pressure to create small deployable land forces had left the three states with a good claim to receive support in policing their airspace. After bickering and hesitation NATO had to accept a rotating deployment of fighter aircraft to the Siauliai air base.

The post-advice Baltic military forces became extremely over-administered by a relatively large corps of officers without mobilization assignments and deprived of any opportunity to gain practical troop or command experience. With the exception of the young and younger officers deployed with companies or platoons to distant mission areas, the uniformed cadres were reduced to becoming bureaucratic Potemkin Villages. However, they are not unique in that regression as any Western (or Eastern) reader with updated knowledge of their armed forces, combined with a critical sense, can see.

The Baltic States consider membership of the EU extremely important for all other reasons than short- and medium-term national security. As they do not anticipate any effective security from the EU in the event of Russian pressure or aggression, any declarations of mutual solidarity such as the Swedish are considered merely to be releases of political hot air for domestic consumption. The Baltic security elite considers (in my opinion correctly) that its position also mirrors the current Russian understanding. Both are rooted in the hard, traditional, geostrategic spheres of influence that have been rejected anachronistically by nearly all Western-European politicians in a flight from the heritage of their twentieth-century history. The Balts realise that until Russia faces its own twentieth-century history in the way Germany finally did, the vast country remains a security problem for its neighbours, especially those such as the Baltic States that used to be parts of Russian Empires. Right now, unfortunately, the opposite is happening: history is being deliberately twisted and mobilised as a tool of international misinformation and national ego-building.

How, then, can Sweden (and others) assist in avoiding Georgia-like scenarios in the Baltics?

It follows logically from the previous notes that to wait until an actual crisis or aggression occurs is too late. Post-event reactions will only lead to domestic political divisions at home, appeasement and deep frustration. The after-effects at home would and should trigger political accusations that would make the traumatic reactions of the post-Second-world-war handing over of Baltic refugees to the Soviets seem trivial. Swedish politicians must take the nearly impossible step of both realising and acknowledging that state leaders elsewhere think fundamentally differently than they do, and quietly adjust policies as a consequence of that awkward insight.

All action must – as a starting point – accept the understanding of both the Balts and Russia that the only really significant actor is the U.S. It must also face the fact that the EU is rather irrelevant and that the *maximum* that can be expected from NATO in a crisis with Russia is that no members will veto the action of ‘a coalition of willing member states’ grouped around the U.S. Even that maximum is not likely to be achieved in a timely fashion. The tendency is so strong to escape into neutrality and seek ‘compromise’, and U.S. influence in Western-Europe’s major-power capitals is far too limited, to ensure solidarity.

What, then, can Sweden do to show solidarity and enhance the security of the Baltic States? Let me list some options:

- Let Swedish Air Force units exercise forward deployment to Siauliai, South-Finnish and/or North-East-Polish airfields and thereafter participate in exercises together with the local units. No matter if the official scenario is limited to friendly exchange visits and search-and-rescue, it will be noted by Russia, the Balts and the U.S. A mildly deterrent and stabilising ‘normal picture’ will be the result even if Russia should declare its unhappiness.
- Let the Swedish Navy and Coast Guard exercises continue and expand the soon two decades of co-operation regularly with the Baltic Navies from their bases on the Baltic coast, close to Riga Bight and in the Finnish Gulf. Even if the co-operation were open to Polish, Finnish, Russian and other navies, it would add to ‘normal picture’ stabilisation. Donation of NATO-compatible communications equipment and logistic co-operation will reinforce the message.
- Let Swedish Army units or brigade headquarters join Baltic- and U.S.-led exercises in the Baltic, and accept operations under ‘operational command’ of the Baltic or U.S. HQ that is leading the exercise.
- Establish exchange programmes with the U.S. Air Force that include visits to and exercises on Swedish air bases in Southern and Central Sweden. No matter if the official scenario is limited to friendly exchange visits and search-and-rescue here, too, it will be noted and possibly even met by a Russian protest, confirmation that it was working.

These are only some immediate ideas. Any sort of new bilateral Swedish-Polish, Swedish-Finnish and re-intensified Swedish-Baltic co-operation would help. All participation of other Western countries in these types of co-operation with the U.S. and the Balts will reinforce the effect.