

Can A Small State Defend Itself? The Case Of Latvia

By Atis Lejiņš, Director, Latvian Institute of International Affairs

INTRODUCTION

On the eve of joining the EU and NATO, Latvia is developing armed forces designed to defend Latvia against military aggression and meet the NATO requirement to develop specialized capabilities. Latvia is seemingly caught between two competing desires – to be able to defend itself based on the concept of total defence (similar to that of the Nordic countries), which is now claimed to be irrelevant, and to satisfy membership requirements advanced by NATO, mainly professional peacekeepers and specialized units. She must also be ready to supply troops to the EU's rapid reaction force.

The total defence concept (TDC) involves close co-operation between the military and civil defence systems, conscription, and the mobilization of civilian resources in case of a military threat or national emergency caused by natural catastrophes or major industrial accidents. The concept brings together military and civilian power. Today, the armed forces help in fighting forest fires and assist in mitigating the effects of flooding, as well as in search and rescue operations with helicopters. Accordingly, the new Joint Operations Centre will be housed together with the planned Crisis Management Centre in a new, hardened building complex on the outskirts of Riga.

The TDC serves to demonstrate that Latvia can be militarily defended, a requirement needed for NATO membership because of Article 5. One of

the most salient arguments against Latvia's admission to NATO was that it was too exposed to be defended; further, she would not be able to assist other NATO members in Article 5 situations. By building a reserve force based on mobile reserve battalions and the Zemessardze (Home Guard) as planned Latvia can contribute more when coming to the aid of another NATO member if Article 5 is invoked than she could if she had a small force of professionals earmarked only for NATO or the EU. However, membership in NATO logically precludes the possibility of a military invasion, it is said, and hence brings a certain amount of tension between nationally-driven defence needs and those required by NATO and EU membership.

Latvia today finds itself in a similar situation to NATO and former Warsaw Pact member states who need to reform their legacy armed forces for the needs of the 21st century, mainly to develop mobile units equipped with modern weapons and communications that can be quickly airlifted to war theatres or crisis areas anywhere in the world. However, there is also a big difference. Latvia has no legacy army – there were no national units during the almost fifty years of occupation by the Soviet Union – and Latvia has had to start from scratch in building up armed forces, not downsizing them.

Furthermore, Latvia as a small poor state, cannot acquire the military equipment that larger nations can afford, and hence, from the very begin-

ning, cooperated closely with the other two Baltic states of Estonia and Lithuania in pooling resources and in developing "niche" capabilities that are attractive to the Alliance. Latvian defence will not be based on battle tanks, heavy artillery, combat aircraft or attack helicopters, but rather on light, modern infantry weapons, C4I, small naval vessels, and coastal and air radar systems jointly operated by all three Baltic states.

The original idea upon regaining independence was based on the traditional armed services paradigm similar to that of the Cold War legacy states. Latvia quickly ran into difficulties in finding the necessary financing and stagnation soon set in. A new approach had to be found in order for the armed forces to gain credibility both internally and externally.

A formula was found at the end of the 1990s in the form of the TDC, which coincided with the Membership Action Plan (MAP) cycles introduced by NATO at the Washington summit in April 1999. This resulted in incorporated the NATO elements into the TDC – the TDC had to be modified in line with the Partnership Goals (PGs) agreed between NATO and Latvia, which are similar to the Force Goals (FGs) developed between NATO member states and NATO. What appeared to be a disadvantage for Latvia in not having any armed forces in 1991 became an advantage when the ground was prepared for comprehensive defence reform in 1999, which began to be implemented fully in 2002 and is to be

completed by 2008. Undeveloped and small armed forces made the task much easier since vested interests had yet not taken firm root. For example, the previously envisaged force of 50,000 ready reserves was scaled down to 26,000.

EU AND NATO MEMBERSHIP: END OF THE SECURITY DILEMMA?

Prospective NATO membership and the post 9/11 situation have raised questions about the idea of total defence concept is still relevant, yet history cannot be ignored since it has, as the ancient Greeks knew already, the bad habit of repeating itself, albeit, to be sure, in different forms. The short history of Latvia since 1991 demonstrates how insecure Latvia was in her search for security guarantees. There is no guarantee that the next ten years can be any better despite EU and NATO membership. The best that can be said is that Latvia will be safer in an increasingly volatile international setting and among dramatic change in interstate relations. *Realpolitik* is likely to prevail increasingly over international institutions and law even within regional organizations such as the EU and NATO.

This can already be discerned in the different attitudes of EU members toward the question of whether Lithuania should be exempted from Schengen rules as an EU member because of the Russian insistence that no visas should be required for her citizens travelling between Kaliningrad and "continental" Russia through Lithuania. A "corridor" for Lithuania would directly affect the security of neighbouring Latvia, as she too might have to forgo a visa regime for Russian travellers. Poland, a much bigger state, is exempted from any more discussion about a non-visa "corridor" through her territory. There, Schengen rules will be strictly applied.

Upon regaining independence in 1991

the overriding concern of Latvia was how never again to lose independence. The memory of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 was very much alive but there was also a widespread feeling that Latvia should have offered armed resistance in the autumn of 1939 when Moscow demanded, and got, bases on Latvian territory (followed a year later by full annexation).

The answer in how to "secure the irreversibility of restored independence" as formulated in the Foreign Policy Concept of Latvia and unanimously adopted by the parliament (Saeima) in April 1995 was to achieve the twin goals of achieving membership in the EU and NATO and close co-operation between the three Baltic States. These goals were self-evident: Latvia had a huge neighbour to the east that was either unpredictable or only too well predictable, while the policy of pre-World War Two neutrality had ended in catastrophe for the people and hence neutrality was a non-starter from the very beginning. At the same time the realization that the Baltics states hung separately because they had not hung together in 1939 was a powerful motivating force propelling all three countries to make good on past mistakes. Good neighbourly relations with Russia were also spelled out, but with the unwritten caveat that these should not develop to the point of losing independence once again.

Except for co-operation with Estonia and Lithuania, with whom a number of joint military projects were started and which have grown in number over the years, Latvia ran into serious obstacles in attempting to join the EU and NATO, and in establishing good relations with Russia. There was

nobody in the West that was willing to support Latvia in gaining EU and NATO membership, while the honeymoon with democratic Russia (Yeltsin) in the struggle against the Soviet Union (Gorbachev) soon evaporated as both countries came to grips with differing foreign and security policy ambitions.

The West was ready and able to help Latvia in everything else except in extending security guarantees to her, and that meant taking into account the sensibilities of Russia. The German Chancellor Helmut Kohl demonstrated this stance by arguing in the *Financial Times* as late as 15 December 1995, that the Baltic states should not be considered in the first wave of EU enlargement because to do so would encourage their desire for a defence guarantee. He echoed the thoughts expressed by the British foreign minister Sir Douglas Hurd at a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg a year earlier on 4 October 1994 where he said that the proximity of the Baltics to Russia gave rise to security problems which could make their membership in the EU hard to accept. He explained that "we all have great sympathy for the Baltic states, not only in words. But we do not know how the security arrangement will be solved."¹

The security arrangement was resolved to the benefit of the Balts thanks to intense lobbying by the Nordics in the EU and support for the admission to NATO by the USA. The danger of splitting the Balts on the part of the West was averted when all three states were put on a level playing field in their bid for EU and NATO membership. There was a brief moment when Latvia could have been denied membership in both organiza-

¹ Atis Lejiņš, "Joining the EU and NATO: Baltic Security Prospects at the Turn of the 21st Century," in Atis Lejiņš (ed.), *Baltic Security Prospects at the Turn of the 21st Century*, Kikimora Publications, Helsinki, 1999, pp. 16-17.

tions because of its isolation, mainly, in not having a Finland or a Poland as neighbours. This was the worst nightmare scenario possible. Today, however, we see a jostling between the EU and Russia over Schengen rules with regard to Lithuania, which has direct bearing for the other two Baltic states. A successful resolution of the EU-Russia quarrel that does not undermine the territorial integrity of Lithuania should pave the way for readmission treaties between Russia and all three Baltic states that have long been sought by all three Baltic capitals as well as the ratification of the Baltic borders with Russia, an issue Russia has held in abeyance with the aim of stopping the Baltic states from joining NATO and the EU. The EU, quite unexpectedly, is thus already playing a decisive role for the security of the Baltic states. NATO is not playing any role in settling the "corridor" issue with Russia.

Another issue that has emerged recently is the question of control of oil and energy transit routes and companies in the Baltic states, where it appears that Russia is in the process of regaining control of these vital economic entities upon which much of the GDP in the Baltics depend.

Paradoxically, NATO may not be the safe harbour that Latvians previously believed. There is no doubt that the EU will enlarge, reform and adapt to the post-Cold War circumstances. It is an on-going process involving the interests of its members and soon-to-be members on all levels of life, including increasingly the military and security dimensions.

NATO has a much bigger identity crisis because it is a military organization which, invoking Article 5 for the first time after the attack on America on September 11, was sidelined by the nation for whose benefit NATO was ready to go to war - the USA - the

leader of NATO. The Alliance is transforming itself into a political and security organization with Russia as an unofficial member. If Russia comes to terms with her past, democracy takes root and a civic society becomes an established fact, then a post-Putin Russia quite possibly would not pose a security threat to Latvia, but if 'integrating Russia' into the West fails, or if it takes place at Latvia's expense, then security becomes an open question once again. Atrocities committed by Russia's soldiers in Chechnya against the civilian population are not hope-inspiring.

The concept brings together military and civilian power.

Latvia has both the geographical advantage and disadvantage of being the geopolitical centre of the Baltics where the East-West trade routes have criss-crossed through the centuries and hence has found herself a prize for great powers. The advantage came to the fore in times of peace as Riga developed into the biggest and wealthiest city in the Baltics but in wars the country was devastated. Both world wars, unlike as in Estonia and Lithuania, were fought bitterly on Latvian territory; World War Two ended in Berlin and in Courland, a western province in Latvia held by the German army until 9 May 1945. It was thus logical that Latvia, hosting the biggest city and ports in the Baltics, became the most russified Baltic republic during the Soviet occupation - the ethnic Russian population shot up from a pre-war 10 to 30 per cent by the time the Russian army left in August 1994.

The prospect of falling back into the Russian orbit galvanized the political

elite into taking action and steps were taken to increase defence spending in order to bring about sweeping changes in the military which had been neglected due to social pressures and the struggle to join the EU after the shock of EU summit in 1997 when only Estonia was invited to begin accession negotiations. Lithuania decided to place its bets on NATO, but Latvia, while wavering somewhat in a middle position between the EU and NATO, worked harder in the EU direction. From a low point of 0.67% in 1998 the share of the GDP allocated for military spending was raised to 0.92% in 1999 with continuous hefty yearly increases until the target of 2% is reached in 2003. In 2002 Latvia already spent 1.75% of the GDP on defence, an increase of 67% over the previous year.

Furthermore, the Saeima adopted a law on state defence financing in 2001 that requires the 2% ceiling to be maintained until 2008 when planned force goals are reached in order to leave no doubt whatsoever about Latvia's resolve during the ratification process by member states

The dramatic rises in defence expenditure translates into 32.68 million lats (55 m US\$) spent in 1999 to 90.95 m lats (152 m US\$) in 2002 and 121.36 m lats (202 m US\$) in 2004 when Latvia expects to be a full NATO member, which also coincides with the end of the journey for joining the EU, if the Latvian people so decide in a referendum in 2003. No referendum is necessary for joining NATO, even though the outcome is not in doubt. Unlike the EU, NATO is very popular in Latvia.

The money is invested to improve living conditions for personnel, increase wages, and develop the infrastructure with only one notable military purchase - the 3D radar from Lockheed Martin that will upgrade the Latvian

part of BALTNET, the air surveillance system established by the three Baltic states. Weapons for the developing armed forces presently come almost wholly from Sweden. Naval craft come from Germany, Sweden and Norway.

24% of the total that is allocated for defence is transferred to other ministries and authorities that contribute to national security and defence. The Ministry of Interior receives 14.74 m lats because the Border Guard Battalions were transferred to it from the MOD as required by the EU. From badly trained conscripts in the 1990s the Border guard is now a professional, well-trained force of some 3200 men and women which would be mobilized in wartime and would play a significant role in Latvia's defence. The Bank of Latvia, the Bureau of the Protection of the Constitution, the Crisis Control Centre and Translation and Terminology Centre, also receive lesser amounts.

1999 coincided with a new parliament elected at the end of 1998 and a new government that was the most stable in the history of Latvian democracy during which time one defence minister intent on military reform retained his portfolio for the full four year term, a remarkable achievement in Latvian politics. It was during this time that Latvia did her "homework" for NATO and passed the exams successfully in the form of three completed MAP cycles with the fourth MAP for 2003 adopted by the government in September this year and subsequently submitted to NATO. In meeting the Baltic defence ministers in Tallinn in June this year under the auspices of the Baltic-American charter, the American Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced that there are no shortcomings on the part of the Baltic states with regard to prospects for NATO membership.

THE ARMED FORCES IN A NEW ENVIRONMENT

Beginning in 1995, when the first national security concept was adopted by the government, Latvia has adopted the full package of strategic and operational documents and laws needed to strengthen the state and develop the armed forces under the umbrella concept of total defence. Security threats included recognition of non-traditional challenges such as organized crime and corruption, poor social integration, especially important because of the Soviet legacy of a nationally skewed demographic situation, building a civic society, and economic development. The documents include sophisticated threat and risk analysis upon which the reforms of the armed forces are based. The bulk of these documents were adopted only after 1999 and in close cooperation with NATO in the form of the Annual National Programme (or MAP) submitted annually to NATO and reviewed by NATO through the Planning and Review Programme (PARP). PARP also includes the 61 PGs agreed upon by Latvia to be fulfilled by 2008.

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The armed forces development plan envisions that by 2008 Latvia will be able to mobilize a force of 26,000 soldiers that will have been trained and armed under one unified system. (See Tables 1 and 2.) 65% of soldiers will be professional, demonstrating thereby that there is a 'creeping' departure from the conscription system. The navy already is 90% professional. The armed forces have been reorganized

from the classical system into a functional structure divided into three groupings: the logistics system; training and management forces; operational forces under the Joint Operational Commander (COM) and Joint Operation Centre responsible for current peace-time operations and preparations for war. An important achievement has been the adoption and implementation of the planning, programming, budgeting system (PPBS) without which no reform would have been possible.

By 2003 Latvia will be able to contribute to NATO a fully equipped battalion, LATBAT, of 750 men, and special forces, including medics, demolition experts (EOD) and military police. These same forces can be allocated to the EU also. Latvian EOD experts fulfil one of the niches required by NATO but they also a "naturally grown product" because of the two world wars and former Soviet training ranges. Unexploded ordnance covers over 100,000 hectares of Latvia and since 1993 some 4,000 large shells have been disposed of annually, thereby involving the armed forces in co-operation with the Latvian Environmental Protection Agency.

Another niche is a Naval and Diving Training Centre in Liepaja on the Baltic coast where frogmen are trained for mine disposal. Latvia has some 80,000 left-over mines in her territorial waters with some 80 mines a year being blown up by the Latvian navy, often together as part of BALTRON (the joint Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Baltic naval squadron), exercises.

Latvia's shortcoming is that she lacks logistical capability. She cannot transport supplies to her units serving under NATO command in Bosnia, Kosova, Macedonia and elsewhere. For this she depends on other NATO states.

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The discipline of meeting NATO requirements and strong financing has brought about effective reform resulting in an upsurge of popular support for the armed forces. The MOD today can serve as a model for reform and efficiency for other ministries to follow; armed forces reform have contributed significantly to the modernization of Latvia, the very basis of a state security today.

11 September 2001 did not change the course of Latvia's security and defence; she was already on the right track. The government adopted an action plan against international terrorism a month after the attack. Based on the investigation carried out by the

Crisis Control Centre, 103 measures are to be implemented by all ministries, except those for culture and economics. The burden is shouldered by the Ministry of Interior, followed by the Ministry of Transportation. The MoD and MFA have less to do .

It is ironic that the countries that were not considered to have any chance of joining NATO even until 2001 today are singled out by the American ambassador to NATO Nick Burns as a model for NATO members to follow in their efforts at military reform. He pointed out at the NATO Riga Summit of Aspirant Countries in June this year that by pooling resources the Baltics have shown how greater cost-effec-

tiveness can be gained .

The only question that remains to be answered is what role will NATO play for the security of Latvia in the future and what role Latvia will play in the shaping of the new NATO? With regard to the latter question it is already clear that by only co-operating closely together will the other Baltic states will she manage to be at the centre of events, and not dragged along by force of events. This equally holds true for the EU, but here Latvia has two more potential allies on the continent than in NATO, namely Finland and Sweden. In the final analysis, however, it will be the USA that will remain the main guarantor of Baltic security. ■