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COMMENTARY

THE BALTIC, POLAND, AND PRESIDENT TRUMP’S WARSAW DECLARATION

Don Thieme

There may be no greater potential flash point in Europe today than the Baltic Sea region (BSR). The convergence of the Kaliningrad outpost; the riparian powers, neutrals, NATO allies, and Russia; and economics and military force in general makes for an explosive brew that may merely simmer—or may boil over and ignite a larger conflict. While much of the debate focuses on the Baltic littorals and hinterlands, it is the Baltic Sea itself that sits, physically and strategically, at the center of the issue. It is critical for naval policy makers and scholars today to understand the history of the BSR.

Sweden, Finland, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, and Denmark all touch the Baltic Sea. Commercial and military ships ply its waters, their access controlled by Gotland Island and the Skagerrak, the strait between Norway and Denmark—one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. The waters are icy cold in winter and chilly even in summer—but climate change means that even in winter they are not as frozen and challenging as they were previously.

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This enables greater commercial flow—as well as greater access for the Russian Baltic Fleet to warm seas, albeit through easily contested waters. Finland and Sweden, while not members of NATO (although members of the European Union), nonetheless have integrated themselves intimately into many of the activities of the NATO member states within the BSR.

Several points impact how northern Europeans perceive Baltic history. After they returned from

the Crusades, the Teutonic Knights built an empire along Baltic shores. The new power in the region, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1386–1795), defeated the knights in 1410. The commonwealth defeated the expansionist Ivan IV, “the Terrible,” and occupied Moscow during the “Time of Troubles” in the early seventeenth century. While the Swedes wreaked havoc and mortally wounded the commonwealth during the “Swedish deluge” of the late seventeenth century, the commonwealth still mustered enough power to defeat the Ottomans at Vienna in 1683.

Economically, the reach of the Hanseatic League of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries extended from London and Flanders through the Baltic to Novgorod. Built around the lucrative grain and fur trades, the league provided a European common market with shared, enduring cultural and economic ties. This combination generated political power, drawing Peter I, “the Great,” to move his capital in 1703 from Moscow to a swampy piece of ground that today is Saint Petersburg. The work was performed primarily by Swedish prisoners from the Great Northern War, especially after the tsar’s resounding defeat of Swedish forces at Poltava in 1709. Peter moved to the Baltic at least in part because of the economic power concentrated there.

After the dissolution of the commonwealth and Poland—completed by the Third Partition, in 1797—Prussia, Russia, and Austria changed the power relations in the region. However, this did not alter the importance of the BSR, or that of the North European Plain that extends from Novgorod to Amsterdam. It was no accident that the thirteenth of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points specifically addressed the re-creation of an independent Polish state—which served as an excuse for the Hitler/Stalin invasions of Poland in 1939. From Grunwald in 1410 and Potsdam in 1945 to Solidarność in 1980 and the fall of the wall in 1989, the BSR and its peoples have been a centerpiece of power struggles in Europe. Nothing in the last twenty-six years, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union on Christmas Day 1991, has changed this essential set of historical facts.

Today, tensions are high, primarily because of naval maneuvers conducted to ensure access to the Baltic, reinforced by operations and activities in the littorals and hinterlands that control the approaches to the sea. While ZAPAD 17 drew much interest, it was only one part of the strategic-to-tactical maneuvering going on throughout the BSR—maneuvering that is increasing tensions and opportunities for actions and messages to be misunderstood. Northern Europe offers a complex mixture of naval and land forces; while geography and history might indicate that land-based power is the more important of the two, there is a reason the Baltic Sea remains the most heavily mined waterway in the world. It is worth remembering that the Soviets and Nazis fought over it bitterly during World War II.

In the maritime domain, even as ports such as Gdańsk/Gdynia and Szczecin (Stettin in German) develop their commercial intermodal transportation capabilities, military operations continue. NATO, along with Finland and Sweden, conducted BALTOPS this year. Russia used to participate in BALTOPS, but in recent years has reoriented its focus. In July 2017, it conducted RUSSO-SINO BALTIC MARITIME COOPERATION 2017 (also called Exercise JOINT SEA 2017). The Chinese sent a destroyer, a frigate, and a supply ship, with helicopters and naval infantry, to exercise with the Russian navy's frigate, fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, and naval infantry, especially in the waters off Kaliningrad. Next winter Norway will be the site of NATO's COLD RESPONSE exercise, which will involve thousands of troops from more than a dozen nations. Add to this a Baltic component of the regional missile-defense system, and one sees many operations and activities taking place in what was thought previously to be a strategic backwater, now turned regional pivot point.

Thus, when President Trump stopped in Warsaw en route to the economic summit in Germany in July 2017, he underscored the strategic importance of the BSR. Within Poland, the spot where President Trump made his speech was important at the micro level: plac Krasińskich, in front of the monument to the Warsaw Uprising. The monument serves as a symbol of Polish resistance to any external power. The symbolism Trump conveyed at Krasiński Square was even more important. Although the president drew criticism over his Warsaw stop, those criticisms missed the underscoring of the strategic importance of Poland and the centrality of the BSR to overall European security. The North European Plain links Russia and Germany geographically, yet culturally Moscow and Berlin are further apart than the thousand miles of road between the two capitals would indicate. Although there are many issues on which the Germans and Russians may agree (e.g., Nord Stream), there are at least as many about which they disagree—with millions of war dead and millions more displaced ethnic minorities underscoring the point.

There is a saying in Poland that Poland represents the walls of Christianity. John III Sobieski embodied this concept in 1683 when he defeated the Turkish armies outside the gates of Vienna. President Trump could have flown directly to Germany, but he chose to stop in Poland before flying to the G20 summit in Hamburg, where he would mingle with Merkel and Putin. By stopping in Warsaw he reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to NATO expansion and evoked the *Solidarność* era amid a new era of Mitteleuropa contention. It was no coincidence that the signing of a deal with Raytheon for Patriot missiles was announced nearly simultaneously.

By traveling to Warsaw, President Trump underscored U.S. involvement in the complex Polish-German-Russian relationship. By speaking at Krasiński Square,

he figuratively placed himself in the middle of one of the most contentious historical issues touching on that relationship: the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944. At that time, with Soviet armies advancing from the east, the Polish underground Home Army saw an opportunity to reassert native control of Poland for the post-Nazi era, before the Soviets could install a puppet government in Warsaw. But the Nazis counterattacked in a vicious urban battle that destroyed more than 80 percent of the city and killed roughly two hundred thousand Poles. Meanwhile, the Soviets declared an “operational pause”—and merrily watched the Germans and Poles kill each other. They calculated that this would make it easier to defeat Nazi forces and install their puppet government atop the ruins of the city, the country, and—most importantly—the resistance. As Stalin once quipped, trying to put Communism into Poland is like trying to saddle a cow; but brute force has a compelling political logic all its own. Furthermore, the Soviets knew that the inclusion of Polish ports within the future Warsaw Pact would constitute a critical component of their cordon sanitaire.

President Trump’s speech channeled four important historical messages toward the BSR and the rest of Europe. First, ninety-nine years ago, President Wilson’s thirteenth point had called for an “independent Polish state . . . [with] free and secure access to the sea . . . guaranteed by international covenant.” President Trump’s words echoed that call with the phrase “a Poland that is safe, strong, and free.” Second, he reasserted the U.S. commitment to NATO and the maintenance of peace by standing in front of a monument to the Polish underground that fought both Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Third, he reminded his audience of the importance of keeping modern Germany as a powerful, peaceful player within the realpolitik arena of central Europe, as well as greater Europe. Last, he reminded Russia that the United States is not ignorant of history (“As long as we know our history, we will know how to build our future”), and while the two countries may have been Allies during World War II, that does not mean we were friends then or during the ensuing Cold War. He also reminded his audience of Poland’s defeat of the Soviets in 1920 outside Warsaw—a battle witnessed by a young leader, Joseph Stalin. His message was not lost on observers in Warsaw, Berlin, Moscow, and the rest of Europe.

Finally, the Warsaw Uprising remains a hotly debated issue in Poland even today. I have friends and members of my extended family who fought both the Nazis and the Soviets from 1939 forward, and many dinners have been spent engaged in lively discourse over the costs and merits of the uprising. It destroyed the ability of the Polish Home Army to resist effectively, ensuring that the nascent Polish Communist party was able to assume control by 1948. The human cost—coming at the end of five years that saw both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany invade Poland in 1939, as Britain and France reneged on their security

guarantees to Poland, Nazi Germany invade the Soviet Union through eastern Poland in June 1941, and the Soviets invade Poland in 1944–45—was staggering. Yet despite the human and physical destruction, the uprising gave emergent Poland the moral high ground. It represented Poles’ assertion that they never would be compliant with Soviet rule and always would fight, by whatever means available, the occupation and oppression of Poland.

President Trump reaffirmed to Poland the U.S. “commitment to your security and your place in a safe, strong, and democratic Europe.” He supported the Three Seas Initiative, and called the Polish people the “soul of Europe.” And when he mentioned the “courage and will to defend our civilization,” he was speaking directly to that Polish concept of defensive walls, operative from the Middle Ages to the battle along Jerusalem Avenue during the uprising. And, most importantly, he seized the diplomatic initiative before traveling to Hamburg to meet with Chancellor Merkel and President Putin: he laid down a marker. While pundits may debate whether he made the best possible declaration, there is no debating that it sent an unequivocal message to Germany, Russia, Poland, and the rest of Europe. It is difficult in a single message to recall history, reassure partners and allies, and caution rivals, but in less than an hour, in front of a monument on Krasieński Square, President Trump did just that.

The populations of the countries touching the Baltic total 292 million, and those countries include two of the world’s largest economies. While many historians focus on the land battles that raged back and forth across Poland in 1939 and 1944–45, it should be recalled that the first rounds of the fighting were fired by ships into the cities lining the Gulf of Gdańsk, and that the largest maritime disaster ever, with an estimated 9,400 dead, was the Soviet sinking of *MV Wilhelm Gustloff* in January 1945. The maritime domain—and the land approaches, rivers, and other riparian components of the “Sea of Amber”—remains a critical factor, not only in naval strategy and operational concepts, but with regard to the broader security interests and points of potential conflict in northern Europe as well. While access from the high seas is a challenge in the BSR, the navigational restraints do not limit the influence of naval strategy. To challenge Mackinder: whoever controls the Baltic controls the granary of Europe—a truism at least since the time of Gustavus Adolphus. The impact of sea power and the fate of Europe—whether in terms of transiting warships or gas pipelines—are tied directly to the Baltic Sea. Strategists would do well to brush up on their history and follow the facts.