With the change of power in the United States following the degradation of four years of NATO - US relationship degradation, the rhetoric in the White House has changed. Even before his presidency, Joe Biden has reaffirmed his strong commitment to the North Atlantic Alliance and underlined the importance of reinforcing the US-EU ties. But what does "strengthening the transatlantic partnership" actually mean? We should consider that NATO served its purpose marvellously during the cold war, and its contribution to peace is enormously appreciated. However, it seems that NATO needs an entire reorganisation in terms of cyber warfare, global repositioning, and reconsideration of new member states, as well as the challenges that NATO may face nowadays. Although Asia, particularly China, and other emerging markets are rising in significance, the relationship between Europe and America remains strong. Billions worth of trade every day, lots of shared interest, shared values, and most importantly, a shared leap in democracy unite the states.

When we talk about the importance of reinforcing the transatlantic bonds, we must highlight the Baltic region. Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, as the most pro-US countries in Europe, the leaders of democracy among post-Soviet states and the frontline warriors of the NATO community, are at the centre of those changes. Since its accession, Baltic states have constantly represented their affection for economic freedom, liberal democracy, and human rights. But there are challenges for NATO to ensure the Baltic allies are safe from Russian aggression in the region. The upcoming plan on deepening the partnership is valuable for Baltic countries since there are peculiarities in their status quo. The reasons for this are as follows.

To begin with, the geographical location makes Baltics more vulnerable in the sense of invasion. The only NATO ally there is Poland, neighbouring Lithuania. Russia surrounds almost every corner and continues its opportunistic or imperialistic behaviour. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the Russian Federation increased provocation actions, involving both air and land activities close to the European borders. Since 2015, the Russian air activity close to European airspace has increased by 70% (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2016, p.16). And most importantly, we should note that Russia does not look at Baltic countries as a separate target but as a part of NATO (Estonian Foreign Intelligence, 2019, p.6). From this perspective, an eventual Russian attack on the Baltic states would not arise because of Russian interest in these countries but rather the need to shift the Balticsearegion's power balance during a larger-scale conflict with the West.

And, when discussing the response of the Baltic states to Russian aggression, three levels can be considered: national, NATO, and the EU (European Army Interoperability Center, 2019, p.16). Since the moment of accession, the Baltic countries have demanded an extensive involvement of NATO in their territories. Investment grew mainly in land forces at the national level, including mechanisation, artillery, anti-tank, air-defence, and territorial defence. Also the instability of the EU's Southern border, coupled with the increasing threats coming from the East, has pushed the EU to develop renewed initiatives for cooperation. However, as countries with relatively small populations, their armed forces remain relatively small and limited in military capabilities. Consequently, the Baltic states' defence planning relies heavily on their NATO membership (Congressional Research Service, 2020, p. 12).

Moreover, Baltic states took a position to operate separately from each other. The core military security problem for the Baltic States is the lack of cooperation and coordination between these states. The three countries have three different models of the military. Not all Baltic States have military attachments in one another’s capitals. Intra-regional cooperation on arms procurement is yet to show success. Illustratively, the Baltic States failed to agree to purchase air defense systems jointly and ended up fielding three separate systems (Tabuns, 2019, p.1).Furthermore**,** the lack of their own fighter aircraft forces the Baltic states to rely on their NATO allies to police and defend Baltic airspace. NATO launched the Baltic Air Policing mission in 2004. The mission originally consisted of rotating four-month deployments of four aircraft. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, deployments increased from 8 to 12 aircraft at a time. The Baltic states contribute to mission costs, including by providing ground services for the aircraft and supplying aviation fuel (Congressional Research Service, 2020, p. 15).

For the honest review, we should talk about the successful cooperation in the region. Moving back to history, the three states have a good record of coordinating policy positions, for example, Baltic Air Policing, or in their approach to the NATO Wales and Warsaw summits. However, aside from the flagship initiatives of the 1990s (BALBAT, BALTNET, BALTRON and BALTDEFCOL), when outside pressure and assistance heavily encouraged cooperation, the three states have achieved little together when it comes to concrete projects. The problem was that the three states have apparently been unable to generate sufficient political will to work together and overcome the challenges that inevitably arise in multinational defence cooperation (Nikers, 2019a, p.9). There is also a need for review in terms of the legal aspects of defence partnership. For example, the military cooperation between the three Baltic States is legally possible within the framework of institutional cooperation, joint procurement, common maritime and air defence patrolling operations, and cross-border civilian cooperation, which are not the most effective and quick ways during possible aggression. Baltic states should get rid of extra bureaucracy (Miluna and Poga, 2019, p. 53). Instead, for example, it is essential to form a common Baltic defence strategy by standardizing the crisis management policies, procedures, processes and laws across all three states. Even the defence terminology demands synchronization. Also, countries should try their best to raise their awareness of Baltic national and intra-regional capabilities and limits.

The other less tangible, measurable types of threats can be grouped under the definition of non-military threats. Including societal, economic and environmental actions carried with the use of the information and cyber attacks, often using the supply chain and infrastructure as leverage means. For example, in 2020, Russia was the first trading partner to Lithuania, the second to Estonia, and the fourth to Latvia. Before 2014 all the three Baltic countries imported 100% of their natural gas directly from Russia. After the Ukrainian dramatic event, some steps had been taken to diversify the import. Today Lithuania imports 58% of its natural gas from Russia, although Estonia and Latvia continue to depend on Russian natural gas (Congressional Research Service, 2020, pp. 17-18). If the political influence in the Baltic region has gradually faded, the economic one is still under question (Bergmane, 2020, p. 484). So, states should look for other sources,moreover, the need is dramatically increased by the economic sanctions, so it is better to minimize the dependence on the Russian economy.

The other non-military threat for the Baltic region is Moscow's use of the Russophone minority as political instruments against the West. Because of the Soviet period, historical and economic factors, 25.2 % of Latvian citizens and 24.8 % of Estonian inhabitants are of Russian descent. Lithuania is more homogenous, with 16 %. For example, there were signs of warfare, where the Russian speaking inhabitants in Vilnius received the brochures with disinformation on the economic situation in Lithuania and a call to participate in the resettlement of ethnic Russians from Lithuania to Russia (Nikers, 2019b, p. 96). That sort of propaganda was also used in Ukraine to disrupt the loyalty to the state. Baltic countries need to create a "defensive shield" to fight against Russia's disinformation and propaganda․ Moscow's primary goal is to form a positive opinion on Russia between local inhabitants by creating dissatisfaction with the relevant governments, shaping and misrepresenting historical facts and exploiting the vulnerabilities of the Baltc's political systems, economy, and society. Here the Lithuanian case can serve as a guide for the other two Baltic states and NATO's members, too. The roots of the anti-Russian propaganda and disinformation campaign originated in 2016 when Lithuania introduced temporary bans on Russian media outlets that breached preexisting media laws(THE BALTIC TIMES, 2016).Shortly after the Lithuanian parliament had adopted an ordinance restricting Russian media production content on Lithuanian TV. In 2018, the Lithuanian parliament adopted new amendments to the Public Information Law. TV channels in Lithuania must translate TV programs into Lithuanian "if these programs are produced in Russian or other non–EU languages and broadcast for longer than one hour and a half" (Thomas, 2020).

As for cyber security, Baltic states have done successful work in combating cyber attacks. According to the International Telecommunication Union's Global Cybersecurity Index 2020, among 194 countries, Estonia is the third after the US and the UK. Followed by the Russian Federation, Lithuania is the sixth cyber protected country. Latvia completes the list of the top 15 (International Telecommunication, 2020). The ranking is based on five pillars- legal, technical, organizational, capacity building and cooperation measurements related to cybersecurity. Since 2019, these countries have had Cyber Security Strategies. But we have to consider that rankings are not always reliable, and sometimes they do not represent reality in all its shapes. Despite establishing the NATO cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in 2008 (hosted by Estonia), several commentators have criticized the real cyber warfare capabilities of NATO. In a 2019 interview the former supreme allied commander of NATO Adm. James Stavridis, USN (Ret.), warned that "in cyber, and cybersecurity, we have the greatest mismatch between the level of threat and level of preparation" (Ackerman, 2019). New asymmetric or technological threats require extensive cooperation not only within but also outside of the Alliance. The security and defence sectors in the Baltic States need to build partnerships with the private and academic sectors, all of which will need to cooperate with each other to maintain situational awareness and a technological edge (The Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2020, p.159).

It is clear that in reality, the ongoing conflict between western countries and Russia does not take place inside tanks or submarines but behind a computer. Russia has massively increased its cyber warfare capabilities and is particularly strong in social manipulation and other cyber attacks. In this context, there are signs of significant commitment over time to enable Baltic countries to develop their national defence further. For example, the Baltic states have already signed a five-year roadmap of defence cooperation at the Pentagon (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019), meaning that by 2024 the capability development and defence-related aid, training exercises, and cyber defence will be exercised with the US service. Officials emphasized the benefits of the program and said they look forward to its further development. And activated transatlantic relationships are the perfect opportunity for all - Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, to generate new partnership programs, agreements and projects against the Russian soft power.

Although Russia, China and other authoritarian countries do not represent a direct military threat to any country that is part of NATO, the traditional threats posed by them are not going to disappear. Concluding, we can mention, the lack of unity within the European Union and NATO is the biggest threat to their respective existence. It is obvious that a wrong move by Russia and the perception that the EU or NATO must confront an external enemy will immediately reunite their respective members. For example, wars with Georgia and especially with Ukraine, made Baltic societies antagonize Russian influence, moreover, NATO troops came to defend. Therefore Russia will continue to play its role behind the curtains or better behind a computer which so far has proven to be a far more effective tool than missiles and rifles (Nato Cyber Report, 2021, p. 32).

Baltics's productive and beneficial cooperation with NATO is not limited by the army alone, as both NATO and the Baltic states have other essential values and platforms to collaborate. Spending more than 2% of GDP on military purposes, the Baltic states should actively invest in human security assets such as healthcare and environmental protection. As Adam Smith identifies (Smith, 2007, p. 539), the defence of society is one of the primary functions of government, but the whole concept of "sufficient" is up for debate in any democracy. Baltic states should not take an image of "the West Berlin" (Bergmane, 2021), and they must avoid building their whole foreign policy rhetoric around Russian aggression. Keeping in mind that there were no substantial changes in the US-Baltic relations during the Trump administration, we should consider that we do not need a reconstruction of dramatically degraded ties, what we have seen in terms of EU-US relationships. For Baltics, the worst possible outcome has been making a choice between supporting major European allies or advocating for the US. For instance, should the Baltics be supportive of US troop withdrawal from Germany in order to relocate some of these armed forces to Poland or not (Kojala, 2020).

Warmed transatlantic relationships is a chance to develop existing bonds and to establish new roads and frameworks for further cooperation, for example, climate change. Lithuania’s experience linking energy security with the transition to clean energy is a valuable lesson for its neighbours and the international community (International Energy Agency, 2021). Thus, Lithuania can share its experience and best approaches for green ecology with the US. However, in this context, the EU also cooperates with China. The latter is still seen as a partner to fight climate change (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). And for the US, it is an impulse to take action and try to attract the EU by boosting the existing ways of cooperation.

Continuing the non-military cooperation, we should highlight that with the USSR's dissolution, the Baltic society's values quickly reoriented to pro-European standards. Nevertheless, it is still an issue with some fields of socio-economic lifestyles. The region continues to rely on the US and the EU to support. For example, after Poland, Latvia is the second-worst country in the EU in terms of LGBTQ+ inclusive legislation, while Lithuania and Estonia rank 22 and 17 out of (The European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2020). The Baltic states, especially Latvia and Lithuania, which currently do not have a gender-neutral civil partnership law, should welcome the existing norms in the transatlantic space and provide a safe environment for their LGBTQ+ communities. Otherwise, it can be seen as a problem to fit the EU and US social policy.

The Baltic states are likely to remain strong US allies and important US security partners in Europe. Analysts believe close cooperation between the United States and the Baltic states will continue for the foreseeable future in areas such as efforts to deter potential Russian aggression, the future of NATO, energy security, and socioeconomic issues. The Baltic states will likely continue to rely on the United States for leadership on foreign policy and security issues. In conclusion, US commitment to the Baltic security is a part of the US commitment to European security, and the former would not and cannot exist without the latter. Thus, strengthening the transatlantic ties is about building the partnership, reinforcing the power and preventing the threats. This attitude appears to be beneficial for both sides.

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