

**BETWEEN NEUTRALITY & NORMALCY?**  
**The Security Status of the Baltic States in a Period of Historic Transition**

**SUMMARY**

Since the end of the Cold War several neutral states have taken a more flexible approach to their security status. Some show signs of wanting in time to dispense with neutrality altogether. For the Baltic states to declare themselves neutral would be clearly out of step with this trend.

A commitment to neutrality would moreover foreclose certain options in the Baltic states' relations with European and Transatlantic institutions at a time of considerable uncertainty as to their future policies on extension of full membership and modalities for non-full member participation in their activities.

It would therefore be unreasonable to expect the Baltics to accept any change in their status at this juncture. There could, however, be benefits in being open to discussion of possible adoption at a later stage (say, after the IGC of 1996) of a policy of qualified sovereignty for a transitional period.

**THE NEUTRALITY PROPOSAL OVER THE SHORT-TERM**

The Baltic states' ongoing negotiations with a view to concluding Association Agreements have generated the suggestion in EU circles that the three countries' accession to full membership should be made conditional on their declaring their neutrality.

The rationale for this proposal would seem to be the following.

1. EU membership would mean an end to the Baltic states' current WEU status as "associate partners", obliging them to choose between
  - observer status such as neutral Ireland's (probably the pattern for Austria, Finland and Sweden when they accede to the EU in 1995), or
  - full WEU membership as is the case for 10 of the current 12 EU members.
2. Full WEU membership would mean that the Baltics states would be party to both the security guarantee and the obligations of Article V of the Brussels Treaty. This would be compatible with NATO membership. Indeed, as current arrangements have all WEU full members being NATO full members, it would presuppose NATO membership.
3. For the Baltics to declare their neutrality would relegate them to observer status at the WEU, ie "passive" members with a seat at the WEU table but not enjoying the security guarantee of full members or required to contribute to full members' security; this would not be compatible with NATO membership;

(It is also conceivable that the Baltics could elect to be WEU observer members notwithstanding their retention of full sovereignty. This is in fact the case of NATO member Denmark. If they did not become EC members, a fourth alternative would be for them to become associate members of WEU such as Turkey, Norway and Iceland: ie, NATO members with no restrictions on their military sovereignty but not, or not yet, EU members.)

4. For the Baltic states to declare their neutrality would reassure Moscow, as it would rule out the prospect of Russia having to contend with two politico-military alliances on its strategic doorstep, and at most allow for the Baltics' observer status at the WEU and PfP participation in the NATO context.
5. Baltic neutrality would therefore obviate Russia's security concerns, and in the process facilitate EU expansion.

### THE LARGER CONTEXT

It is unfortunate that this issue has worked its way onto the Baltic-EU negotiating agenda at this stage. These are still early days as concerns the elaboration of European security and defence policies which are both common and credible. At the earliest, it will be the next IGC in 1996 which indicates whether the movement is towards (more)

- **Europeanisation** of EU members' decision-making in the area of security and significant pooling of national defence resources (eg, the - unlikely but theoretically possible - constitution of a rapid-action Eurolegion volunteer force answerable to a European President, in turn accountable to the European electorate);
- **Renationalisation** of security decision-making in response to a waning communality of security perceptions, fading defence budgets, reentrenchment of national bureaucracies, etc;
- **Intergovernmentalism à la Maastricht**, whereby more security tasks are placed on the European agenda at the same time as national prerogatives are enhanced relative to those of the Commission, while the Europarliament retains little or no security role.

Concurrently, the United States is still in the process of defining the parameters of its post-Cold War stance in Europe, influenced as it does by decisions in European fora at the same time as it influences them. How the Transatlantic Relationship and the European Community will develop and interact in the next few years is an entirely open question.

Under current circumstances, a decision by the Baltic states to declare neutrality or to undertake a commitment to become neutral at a later stage would therefore be taken in a vacuum. For EU members to look to the Baltic states to take a step of this nature now is to expect them to put the institutional cart before the geopolitical horse.

Any decision on the future security status of EU-integrated Baltic states is therefore premature. As such, it can probably be successfully resisted in the negotiations on the Association Agreements.

### **THE OPTIONS FOR THE MEDIUM TERM**

While the Baltic states are well advised to avoid making any commitments regarding possible changes to their security identity at this stage, discussion of possible formulae for the longer term, pros and cons and *caveats* can be usefully be encouraged.

The options are essentially three: in addition to neutrality and "normal" sovereignty, some form of hybrid status, ie *de jure* sovereignty with *de facto* qualifications on its practical exercise for a predetermined transitional period.

#### *NEUTRALITY*

Neutrality is clearly the least attractive option from the perspective of the Baltic states. Their publics and elites alike know that it did not work in the Europe of the 1930s and 1940s. They have little reason to believe that it would work in the radically different, but scarcely less dangerous, Europe of the 1990s.

The challenge is first and foremost to explain the drawbacks of neutrality to EU decision-makers. Three arguments in particular commend themselves:

- First, for the Baltic governments to accept neutrality would have an adverse effect on the prospects for a successful post-communist transformation of their countries. It would suggest to nationals in the Baltics, the diaspora abroad, sources of investment as well as financial and technical aid, etc, that governments of the Baltic states, anticipating a possible derailing of the reform process, were prepared to hedge their bets and prepare for accommodation with retrocessionist forces, at home and abroad. It would break the neck of reform.
- Second, it would encourage reactionary and imperialist circles in Russia to believe that the Baltics could be re-integrated on their terms. The political situation in Russia remains sufficiently ambivalent for this to have serious consequences not only for the strategic direction of Russian politics but for the security situation in Europe as a whole.

- Third, it would undermine the credibility of the European venture. An EU which is so weak as to succumb to pressures for Baltic neutrality emanating from Russia is not strong enough to provide a credible security guarantee to any of its members, let alone offer them a convincing "projet de vie".

#### "NORMAL" SOVEREIGNTY"

For the Baltic states, the difficulty with "normal" sovereignty in an alliance context is that it can exacerbate security headaches rather than relieving them. "Normal" sovereignty would mean, or more significantly it would be interpreted and deliberately misinterpreted in certain Russian circles as meaning, a "carte blanche" for the Baltic states to maximise potentially hostile military readiness on their soil by encouraging exercises on the part of befriended states, a foreign troop presence, nuclear coverage, and the like.

Because of Western reticence, little of this would actually be forthcoming. Nevertheless, it would be misused in the internal Russian debate to promote a more muscled security policy, and therefore one more potentially dangerous to the Baltics. As long as Russia's civil society is more a theoretical notion than a practical purveyor of policy options, this will remain a clear and present danger.

#### "QUALIFIED" SOVEREIGNTY

The third option - and to our mind the most advantageous - would be for the Baltic states to maintain their *de jure* status as non-neutral countries, while accepting limited restrictions on the exercise of military sovereignty during what is likely to be an extended transition period.

This would have two crucial advantages. Maintaining national sovereignty intact would counter fears that the Baltic states and their historic transformation might not be a viable venture. Keeping a low foreign military profile on Baltic soil would disarm the revanchist Russian right and left.

A qualified sovereignty status could be constructed in such a way as to project the gradual normalisation of the Baltics security status over time. For example, one could commence with a regime of "no foreign military presence" and proceed in stages to exercises involving foreign troops, their permanent stationing, etc. Ideally, the points at which the situation had become sufficiently relaxed to allow for such changes would intersect with those points at which such changes were no longer necessary.

At the same time, all present options from informal affiliation to full membership would be kept open. Neither full membership in NATO or full membership in both in NATO and the WEU, nor observer status at the WEU would be ruled out.

"Qualified" sovereignty would therefore provide the most benign setting for the Baltics' practical cooperation with or within Western security organisations as well as with the states of post-communist Europe.