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THE BALTICS AND UKRAINE: GEOPOLITICAL HOTSPOTS

Numerous areas in the world are points of contention between countries, groups of countries in a geographic region, and transnational groups. These hot spots are contentious due to various kinds of historical grievances, disputes over boundaries, access to natural resources, concerns over treatment of ethnic groups within disputed territories, environmental and trade disputes, and religious differences. If not properly managed, these disputes can escalate to war.

Examples of geopolitical hotspots are the Baltics and Ukraine. There has been long-running contention between the Russian Federation and the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This tension has also affected nearby countries such as Belarus, Poland, Scandinavian countries such as Finland and Sweden, and other countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance. Tension also exists between Russia and Ukraine, which was once part of the former Soviet Union. This dispute has been part of centuries-long hostility between these two countries.

Numerous factors affect the relationship between the Baltic countries and Russia. These include the Baltic Sea trading relationships lasting several centuries through historic organizations such as the Hanseatic League. Multiple rivers also influence the relationship including the Neva River which flows into the Baltic at the major Russian city of St. Petersburg, the Pregolya River, which flows into the Baltic at the city of Kaliningrad in a Russian region geographically separated from Russia, and the Neman River, which also flows into the Baltic at Kaliningrad. The Narva is a major Estonian river whose source begins in Russia. Latvian rivers such as the Dauja and Daugava flow into the Baltic, as do the Bartuva and Venta rivers in Lithuania. These waters and adjoining rivers such as Poland's Vistula also flow into the Baltic and help create a physical environment influencing the agriculture, weather, and climate of these countries.

Agricultural commodities produced in the Baltic countries include dairy products, fisheries, forestry, livestock, and potatoes. The agricultural trade of these countries is heavily influenced by the Russian market and by political and economic conditions in European countries that are part of the European Union.

Religion is another factor influencing Baltic and Russian relations. The Baltic countries have a significant Christian traditions of Lutheran Protestantism and Roman Catholicism; the Russian Orthodox Church is influential in Russia; and there has historically been a Jewish presence in the Baltics, which was severely damaged by the Nazi Holocaust of World War II.

Russia controlled Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania between 1939 and 1990, when the former Soviet Union broke up and became the Russian Federation. The presence of significant ethnic Russian populations in these countries, and their economic, political, and social status has been of considerable concern to Russian leaders, who have tried to influence political developments within these countries through both traditional broadcast and social media. The Baltic Republics are part of the European Union (EU, as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), meaning that other NATO countries, including the U.S., would be legally required to militarily defend the Baltic countries should they be attacked by Russia.

The Baltic Republics and other European countries are also heavily dependent on Russia for energy supplies, such as natural gas and oil, which increases Moscow's leverage on these countries. These countries are working with the U.S. and other countries to reduce their energy dependence on Russia. This has included the U.S. and its NATO allies increasing their military support for the Baltic Republics by holding regular military exercises in these countries. The U.S. and its allies also seek to increase their ability to resist Russian aggression against the Baltics by nonviolent subversion, violent covert action, conventional military aggression, cyber attack, and other coercive measures.

Tension between Western countries, Ukraine, and Russia has also increased recently. Ukraine is a grain-rich country with significant iron, oil, and coal resources whose population is ethnically different than Russia and culturally closer to Poland. Ukraine has been independent since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Ukraine's ethnic groups include Ukrainians, along with a significant Russian population, Crimean Tatars, and other eastern European ethnic groups. Ukraine has been less successful in achieving widespread economic prosperity, political stability, and non-corrupt government than the Baltic Republics have.

There are significant religious factors involved in the dispute between Russia and Ukraine. Russian Orthodox has been the primary religion of Ukraine for centuries with some mixture of Ukrainian Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish faiths. Recent Russian actions against Ukraine caused the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to separate from Moscow and establish an independent church, though this has caused strong disagreement within this church's leadership.

In 2014, Russian president Vladimir Putin ordered a military invasion and conquest of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula based on "concern" over the status of ethnic Russians in Ukraine. Russia has continued providing military supplies, personnel, and support to pro-Russian elements in two eastern Ukrainian provinces, which has caused significant deaths and injuries. The U.S. and its NATO allies have imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions against Russia and increased their military assistance to and intelligence cooperation with Ukraine. Ukraine's not being a member of the EU and NATO limits the economic and military assistance it can receive from EU and NATO countries.

May 2018 saw Russia complete a bridge connecting the Russian-controlled eastern side of the Kerch Strait with recently annexed Crimean territory. Further escalation of this flashpoint occurred in November and December 2018 in the Crimean Peninsula's Kerch Strait when the Russian Navy stopped three Ukrainian military ships from entering the Sea of Azov. These ships were trying to reach the Mariupol port which is only accessible through the Sea of Azov. A Russian intelligence service now inspects all ships heading for Ukraine, which causes economic problems for Ukrainian ports in the Donbas region and further exacerbates tensions between Russia, the Ukraine, and western powers.

Some western security analysts have urged increased military assistance to Ukraine and expanded NATO presence in this region. Comparisons have been made with Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. Many observers have urged the U.S. and NATO to take more assertive action to resist Russian efforts to weaken Ukraine. Although Turkey is a NATO member, it has differences with the U.S. over policies as varied as the Black Sea and the Middle East, and it may seek to support Russia over Ukraine.

Geopolitical hot spots have historical origins that date back for centuries. These hot spots may achieve partial resolution for limited periods of time and then erupt and worsen again without warning. Conflict resolution over these issues, realms, and regions may not be immediately achievable. Besides affecting economic, environmental, religious, and political realms, such disputes affect air, land, and sea military operations. Continually developing military and communications technologies mean that news about these conflicts also affects cyber and space realms. Their impacts can be felt by individuals, organizations, and governments thousands of miles away due to globally interconnected communication, financial, and technological infrastructures.

The ability of the U.S. and other democratic countries to effectively respond to such disputes that may adversely affect their economic and security interests is limited by divisions between the U.S. and its allies over how to respond, as well as by divisions within individual branches of the U.S. government, such as the White House and individual chambers of the U.S. Congress, driven by divided partisan political control and personality conflicts.

Bert Chapman **Further Reading**

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