

What's Really Behind Estonia's 'Border Dispute' with Russia?

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The tiny Baltic nation of Estonia is attempting to revive a so-called “border dispute” with Russia in order to position itself as one of NATO’s “frontline states” against the Eurasian Great Power, which Tallinn expects will result in more military support from the bloc that its ruling party could then leverage for domestic political purposes, though this plan could very easily backfire if Trump demands that the country — which is experiencing a population decline and economic slowdown — pay its “fair share” just like the US’ other “allies” in exchange for the selfsame support.

Estonia surprised Russia after its Foreign Minister said last month that the border treaty between the two countries was [unlikely to be ratified](#) because of Tallinn’s unhappiness with Moscow’s lack of adherence to the outdated and legally void Treaty of Tartu. This 1920 agreement established the interwar border between the two but was replaced by a slightly modified territorial status quo following Estonia’s accession to the USSR in 1940. Although it’s since become popular in Estonian society after the end of the Old Cold War to claim that the country’s incorporation into the Soviet Union was done under duress and was therefore “illegal”, the fact remains that Estonia tacitly agreed to retain its USSR-era borders after investing substantial sums of money in developing infrastructure along the joint frontier with Russia, something that the Russian Embassy in Tallinn was [quick to point out](#) following the Estonian Foreign Minister’s provocative statement. Observers should also be reminded that the two countries already signed a border treaty in 2014, but it’s the subsequent ratification process that’s now suddenly being politicized by the Estonian side.

This begs the question of why that is, especially at this present moment in time, and the answer is that Estonia most likely believes that it can leverage its refusal to ratify the treaty and the media publicity related to this decision in order to receive more military support from NATO that the country’s leaders can then manipulate for domestic political purposes. It’s unrealistic to expect Russia to make any concessions on its internationally recognized territory in order to avoid this possible escalation scenario, so the intention behind Tallinn’s move must have more to do with NATO and domestic politics than any serious desire to reclaim its so-called “lost territories” that are now almost entirely populated by Russians as it is. In fact, considering that Estonia literally regards the over one-quarter of its population that are ethnic Russians as second-class citizens by making it extremely difficult for them to receive the civic rights that they’re entitled to by international law, as well as regularly suspecting them of being “fifth columnists”, it wouldn’t make sense for Tallinn to want to increase the numbers of this demographic through the annexation of Russian-populated land unless it planned to ethnically cleanse those people immediately afterwards.

All of that's unrealistic though but is being brought up just to [show the insincerity](#) behind Estonia's territorial demands and prove that even the state itself knows that Russia won't budge a single inch on this issue, not that it actually even wants it to anyhow for the reason that was just explained. Rather, the ruling party hopes that it can exploit this manufactured dispute for the purpose of receiving more military support from NATO that it can then manipulate through perception management tactics to improve its own domestic political standing. On the surface, it's not exactly implausible that the bloc and its American hegemon would be receptive to this since they have an interest in "containing" Russia, even though the speculative outcome of a more muscular military presence in this former Soviet Republic would violate the (at this point mostly symbolic) NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. Regional heavyweight Poland, which is one of the most pro-American states in the world, also envisages expanding its influence throughout the "[Three Seas Initiative](#)" (TSI) by making the "Baltic Brothers" its "junior partners" in a de-facto modern-day revival of the former Commonwealth, which could function as the US' "[Lead From Behind](#)" proxy in the region.

Having said that, Poland has also set a new precedent by offering to pay at least \$2 billion for the "honor" of hosting more American servicemen, which conforms to Trump's demands that his country's "allies" pay their "fair share" in exchange for continued military support. Washington is already in negotiations about this with Seoul, Tokyo, and soon even Berlin, so it's unlikely that it'll compromise on its own policy with Tallinn just for the sake of scoring a "cheap shot" by "containing" Russia via a new deployment there. The US knows that Estonia wants an American military base since the country literally [asked for one](#) last year and recently bragged in early November about how it "[punches above its weight](#)" in NATO because of how committed it is to the bloc. It's therefore not unbelievable that Tallinn might have chosen this exact time to manufacture a "border dispute" with Russia in order to create the so-called "publicly plausible" pretext for the US to satisfy its request, but there are a couple of problems associated with this, not even counting the regional security one for Moscow if Washington finally agrees to its Baltic "ally's" proposal.

The first is that the US and NATO already acknowledge the uncontested legality of Estonia's borders with Russia because otherwise they wouldn't have been able to accept the country's membership into the bloc. NATO doesn't allow members with current territorial disputes to join, which is one of the reasons why both Georgia and Ukraine have yet to do so. It's indeed possible that the Trump Administration might unilaterally announce a change of policy in this respect that could throw the bloc into even more confusion than it's already in following Macron's dramatic declaration that it's "[brain dead](#)". Even in the event that the US and/or some NATO countries agree to acknowledge Estonia's "border dispute" with Russia as "legitimate", then the next problem is whether or not this tiny country with a [declining population](#) and in the midst of an [economic slowdown](#) can even afford to pay Trump's prospective "protection fee", which might further contribute to its economic problems that could in turn accelerate its out-migration and thus jeopardize its already fraught strategic stability as a state. Should this scenario come to pass, then it would essentially amount to the ruling party sacrificing the state's long-term strategic interests in exchange for short-term political benefits, which would inevitably destabilize the country and ironically do what Russia is regularly accused of wanting to do without any evidence whatsoever.

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