

COMPARING THE MILITARY POSTURE OF NATO FORCES WITH THAT OF RUSSIAN
FORCES IN AND AROUND THE BALTIC REGION

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With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania regained their independence for the first time since 1945. Less than 14 years later all three nations were formally admitted into the NATO alliance and the European Union in 2004. To Russia, the expansion of NATO and the EU to their western border is viewed as nothing less than a direct threat. Russia does not trust the West and holds nothing but contempt for the independence of the Baltic states. Over the past 12 years we have seen a resurgent Russia act out to prevent further Western expansion towards its borders when they invaded Georgia in 2008 and annexed Crimea and initiated a separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Moscow has shown it is prepared to use military force as an instrument of policy and the Baltic nations might be in their crosshairs next. Although there are many facets to the threat that Russia poses with information operations, cyber-attacks, and hybrid warfare, a traditional invasion is by far the worst-case scenario. The U.S. and NATO are not currently postured to defend the Baltics from a Russian invasion and responding to such risks escalating a regional conflict into a potential nuclear confrontation. In order to deter a Russian military incursion, the Baltic states need to increase their Total Defense and Unconventional Warfare capabilities and the U.S. and NATO should commit more forces forward and focus on developing non-kinetic effects to counter Russian Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities.

The Baltic region is immensely important to Russia. 60% of their maritime exports pass through the Baltic Sea and they maintain a strategic bastion at the Kaliningrad Oblast, a Russian exclave located on the Baltic Sea and sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland. The area is also culturally and sentimentally important to Moscow. Kaliningrad itself is regarded as symbol of honor to the sacrifices made to secure a Soviet victory during World War II. Additionally, around 16% of the population in the Baltic region is ethnically Russian and there are significant

Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia. Moscow views itself as the protector of all Russians both inside and outside of their borders and has previously acted to protect the interests of ethnic Russians when they invaded Crimea in 2014. There is concern that Russia may take similar action against the Baltic states and for good reason. Andrey Illarionov, Vladimir Putin's former top economic adviser, told a Swedish newspaper in 2014 that "Putin has his eyes on eventually reclaiming Estonia" as well as the rest of the Baltics. While Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania's NATO membership might have protected them from becoming the next Crimea so far, incorporating them into the alliance might have destabilized the region and set the stage for Russia's revanchist actions.

Russia not only has the will to take back the Baltic region, but they also possess the military might to do so. NATO's presence along their border provoked a perennially insecure Kremlin and after the Georgia conflict in 2008 they pledged to modernize 70% of their military hardware by 2020. This modernization was in addition to the efforts they undertook to reengineer their Integrated Air Defense Systems (IADS) after watching the U.S. easily overpower Iraq's Soviet made equipment during Operation DESERT STORM. To that end, Russia now possess a deadly array of long-range, strategic Surface to Air Missile Systems (SAMS) and advanced radars designed to detect and engage Low Observable (LO) aircraft and munitions. With these modern systems deployed in Kaliningrad and along Russia's western border Moscow can effectively enforce a No-Fly Zone or an A2/AD bubble over most of the Baltic region without needing to forward deploy their strategic SAMS outside of their sovereign territory. Along with their formidable A2/AD capabilities to control the air domain they can also easily overmatch and outpace NATO ground forces currently stationed in the region. Wargaming analysis done by the RAND Corporation in 2015 concluded that with a force of 22-27 Battalion

Tactical Groups (BTGs) from the Western Military District and Kaliningrad, Russia could isolate the capitals of Estonia and Latvia within 30-60 hours. Given Russia's significant time-distance advantage and their overwhelming military might in the region they possess the capability to quickly occupy the Baltic region and establish a multi-layered defense under an almost impenetrable A2/AD bubble while they wait for NATO to organize a response.

Neither the U.S. or NATO are currently postured to deter or defend against a Russian invasion in the Baltics. Thanks to a dramatic force reduction in Europe since 1980, the U.S. has gone from 200,000 soldiers stationed in the region to only 33,000. Also, since 2006 the U.S. Army has closed over 100 European sites maintaining just 2 Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) in Europe on a permanent basis with the preponderance of its forces stationed in Italy and Germany. In response to Russia's actions in 2014 the U.S. and NATO increased their investment and deployments in Europe. Through the European Defense Initiative (EDI) \$6.5B was projected to be invested in 2019 towards equipment like tanks and Patriot Missile Systems. The NATO Response Force (NRF) was also enhanced to include the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), a multinational brigade comprised of five maneuver battalions, supported by air, maritime and special forces. NATO also established the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), four multinational battalion-sized battlegroups based in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.

This is a good starting point, but it is not enough. The current increased troop levels and investment still could not match even a limited Russian attack, they would only serve as a trip wire. According to wargaming accomplished by the RAND Corporation in 2015, the minimum ground force required to stave off a Russian attack in the Baltics long enough for substantial aid to arrive is 7 brigades, 4 U.S. and 3 Allied. Given how difficult, dangerous, and time-consuming it would be to try and surge personnel into the Baltic region in response to Russian aggression

the U.S. and NATO should seriously consider establishing a more robust permanent presence in Europe. Lt Col Tommy Petersson of the Swedish Air Forces argues that we should make the Headquarters of a Multinational Corps Northeast in Poland fully operational. I agree with Lt Col Petersson and believe we should go a step further and establish Poland as the location to base a permanent presence of up to 7 brigades to deter Russia aggression in the Baltics. In Poland, this force would be far enough away from Russia's border to avoid escalating Russian insecurity but close enough to send the message that NATO is prepared to respond if Russia invades the Baltics. As Illimar Ploom, Zdzislaw Sliwa, and Viljar Veebel write regarding Russia, "any credible deterrence happens less by denial and more by punishment."

If Russia initiates an invasion into the Baltic region and the U.S. and NATO have not established a more robust forward presence in Europe, then they risk attempting to expel a dug in Russian force protected by their A2/AD bubble. Given the tenets of traditional U.S. Airpower theory and employment, it stands to reason that one of the first moves the U.S. and NATO would take in this scenario would be to try and establish air superiority and pop Russia's IADS bubble. This would mean targeting Russia's strategic SAMS in their sovereign territory and, due to the layers of protection around said SAMS and their ability to engage incoming aircraft as well as missiles, would involve sending waves of cruise missiles at the SAMS to try and overwhelm them. This large-scale attack could destroy millions of dollars in Russian defense equipment but also cause significant infrastructure damage to Russian cities and numerous casualties to Russian citizens. This would undoubtedly escalate the conflict and risks provoking a nuclear response by Moscow. To avoid this situation, the U.S. and NATO must focus on developing non-kinetic options to degrade Russian IADS via cyber and/or information domains to prevent a Baltic scenario with Russia from escalating out of control.

The Baltic states themselves also need to enhance their defense capabilities to increase deterrence against a Russian invasion. Due to their meager military forces Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania should continue to focus on developing their total defense and unconventional warfare capabilities. Total defense is a whole-of-society approach to national defense and unconventional warfare involves activities such as resistance, sabotage, subversive activities, and intelligence collection. In most cases, this is something that they have already identified to increase deterrence against Russian aggression. The Baltic states have a rich history of civilian based resistance and their governments have launched campaigns in the last few years to educate the public on different ways to resist should they temporarily lose control of the country to an invading force. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania need to continue to refine these capabilities to demonstrate to Russia that invading the Baltics would come at the high price of a protracted insurgency and civilian-led resistance.

In summary, the U.S. and NATO should focus on three areas to protect the Baltics and deter Russia from invading. First, more troops should be committed forward and a large force of up to 7 brigades should be permanently established in Poland to enable rapid response to a Russian invasion and deter Moscow from considering military action in the Baltics. Second, the U.S. and NATO must invest in developing capabilities to degrade Russian IADS via non-kinetic means like cyber to minimize their A2/AD bubble and allow U.S. and NATO air operations without risking dangerous escalation towards a nuclear confrontation. Third, the Baltic states should continue to invest in and develop their total defense and unconventional warfare capabilities as an additional deterrent to Russian military action in the Baltic region. I believe that if the U.S. and NATO pursue these three strategies, they can affectively deter Russia from invading the Baltics while avoiding cornering Russia and risking further escalation.

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