

**RUSSIA INVADES THE BALTIC STATES:
HOW AND WHY NATO MUST LIBERATE THE REGION**

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ABSTRACT

Russian aggression and malign influence continues to rise throughout the European theater. The threat from Russia is currently focused on Ukraine, but that could easily shift north to the Baltic region. The key difference between Russian threats to Ukraine and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania is that Ukraine is not a NATO member and therefore does not enjoy the protections of Article V, Collective Defense of the NATO treaty. However, the deterrence of NATO's Article V clause will only go so far in protecting the Baltic region from attack by Russia. The strategic importance of NATO upholding the principle of Article V and defending the Baltic states cannot be understated. A Russian attack on the Baltic states would have the potential to reorder the framework of European security and tip of the balance of power firmly in Russia's direction. The operation to liberate the Baltic region would be difficult, but it must be a no fail mission to avoid the disastrous consequences of failing to uphold Article V would bring to the strategic interests of the United States in maintaining European security and shaping the world order in our favor.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to explain the threat Russia poses to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which in turn threatens the European security framework as it has evolved since World War II and the end of the Cold War, as well as to US national security. A Russian invasion and occupation of NATO's Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) is the fastest way for Russia to upend the framework of European security, drastically reduce the strategic advantages enjoyed by the West and the United States in particular. This potential conflict is no longer a thought that can be attributed only to fear mongers. Increasing Russian aggression in Europe since its illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014 has changed the calculus in the Baltics from 'Russia won't invade' to 'when Russia invades.'¹ A Russian invasion of the Baltics would test the Alliance to its limit, testing US and NATO member nations' resolve to uphold treaty obligations, but failure will not be an option to safeguard the long-term security interests of members of NATO or US strategic interests in maintaining a network of alliances which is a uniquely American security advantage and a tremendous source of strength.²

Initially, this paper assumes a rapid Russian invasion of the Baltic states resulting in territorial control and overthrow of governments. First, it will discuss the strategic implications for NATO of a successful or unsuccessful operation to liberate the Baltics. This will frame the next discussion of how NATO could develop a campaign plan and implement operations to liberate the Baltics. This will identify the critical problems and constraints associated with an armed conflict in the Baltics. Finally, this paper will briefly touch on how to deter a Russian invasion to avoid the situation where Russia is able to gain such a foothold so quickly in the Baltics.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF FAILING TO LIBERATE THE BALTICS

If Russia is able to invade, occupy, and hold the Baltics while fending off a NATO counter-attack, NATO itself could collapse along with the foundations of Western security for the last 70 years.³ While this effect may seem extreme, it is not completely unrealistic and is a goal of Vladimir Putin.⁴ The principle of collective defense is the bedrock of NATO and is enshrined in the Alliance's founding treaty as Article V: "...an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all..." which allows members to use "armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."⁵ This means that if attacked, the Alliance members are obligated to collectively defend the attacked member and restore its security. Russian forces occupying the Baltic states is in direct contradiction to the North Atlantic Treaty and their continued occupation would invalidate NATO's purpose for existing. If NATO were to collapse, the collective economic and military strength its members currently enjoy over Russia would be gone leaving a power vacuum in Europe for Russia to step into other Eastern European countries with little resistance.

Even if NATO did not disintegrate following unsuccessful attempts to liberate the Baltics, its effectiveness at maintaining European security would be eroded. US and European prosperity would decline due to new worries of NATO's ability and willingness to defend its members. The credibility of NATO would be lost and Russia will achieve its goal of disrupting both European and US security arrangements. In this light, NATO's ability to garner support from member states to achieve a common security goal will suffer and decline. Different organizations or even nations could begin competing with NATO, and hence the US, to become the new Western guarantor of security. The strategic consequences for failing to uphold Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty are disastrous for the US and Europe and a great victory for

Russia as well as opening windows of opportunity for other authoritarian regimes and strategic competitors in the world.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF SUCCESSFULLY LIBERATING THE BALTICS

Successfully liberating the Baltic states from Russian occupation would prove to the world the importance and credibility of NATO, and of the US, in demonstrating resolve to uphold and defend strategic interests. NATO and the US share the common interest of a stable and peaceful Europe. While the US provides the bulk of NATO security guarantees, the alliance is an important force multiplier for US strategic interests that is able to project unmatched power across the globe. Since the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO has struggled to define its role and relevance to a 21st Century security environment. Russian aggression over the last decade has been a reminder of NATO's continued importance for guaranteeing security across Western democracies and free markets. As victors in this sort of conflict, NATO would have enhanced leverage and advantage over Russia with the ability to garner concessions to improve the security of NATO as well as the continued economic prosperity of its members. The successful liberation of the attacked Baltic states would lend credibility and legitimacy to the defensive alliance.

The ability to bring the economic and/or military power of 30 NATO member states to bear is unmatched in the world and "is a powerful message and powerful commitment."⁶ No single country can match the capabilities NATO as a whole is able to muster. No matter the notoriously slow decision-making process that must be supported by the views of all member states⁷, a victory over Russia in liberating NATO members from an invasion would confirm NATO's importance in securing Western democracies' interests. By demonstrating its ability to protect its members using Article V, NATO could potentially receive more applications for

membership from countries looking for the security guarantee that collective defense provides (e.g., Finland and Sweden).

HOW TO LIBERATE THE BALTICS FROM RUSSIA

The mission to liberate the Baltic states from a Russian invasion is no easy task. The Baltics are NATO's most vulnerable territory and the balance of power in the region is heavily tilted towards Russia.⁸ A Russian invasion into the sovereign territories of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania would be accomplished rapidly leaving the Alliance with a limited response options.⁹ Two critical issues for NATO's operation to liberate the Baltics are: 1) Russia's geographic advantage in the conflict (proximity to the Baltics, Kaliningrad, Belarus); and 2) The kind of conflict NATO is willing to fight (length, cost in terms of lives and money, nuclear weapon threat) in order to defend the Baltics. These two issues will form the general framework of how NATO should design a campaign plan and conduct operations to defend against a Russian attack and liberate the Baltic region from Russian occupation.

Russia possesses a large geographic advantage over NATO forces in regards to conflict in the Baltic region. From the Russian border to Tallinn is about 200 kilometers (125 miles), to Riga 275 kilometers (170 miles), compared to the shortest land routes from Poland to Riga and Tallinn being 325 kilometers (200 miles) and 600 kilometers (370 miles) respectively.¹⁰ This proximity affords Russia a crucial advantage in a conflict, which combined with NATO's notoriously slow and deliberative decision process could lead Russia to significant gains in the region before NATO can agree on an appropriate response.¹¹ Russia is able to reinforce troops at a much faster rate with a less complicated process than NATO due to the proximity of forces. NATO would be heavily reliant on flying or shipping in reinforcements to the region.¹²

Another geographic advantage held by Russia in this conflict is its exclave, Kaliningrad (sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland on the Baltic Sea). Kaliningrad is a great counterbalance for Russia to the military threat posed by NATO.¹³ Kaliningrad hosts what may be the most effective Integrated Air Defense System (IADS) in the world.¹⁴ The capabilities located in Kaliningrad “can deny NATO access to the Baltic states and slow, if not thwart US and NATO airpower should either respond to a Russian attack against any of the Baltic states.”¹⁵ Kaliningrad is a critical piece of Russia’s defense against any NATO operation into the Baltic region and essentially provides Russia with initial air superiority over the Baltic states.

The question of what to do about Kaliningrad is important, because if Kaliningrad is left untouched NATO will be unable to provide any kind of meaningful air power over the Baltics. The IADS from Kaliningrad would be able to stop NATO troop reinforcements by air and even by sea with the anti-ship missile capabilities and Baltic Fleet located there. According to a war-gaming study conducted by Rand in 2016, airpower is required from the beginning of a conflict with Russia to enable ground operations in the Baltics.¹⁶ Knowing this information, operations against Kaliningrad must be part of the effort to liberate the Baltics. The extent of those operations should at least be to bring down Kaliningrad’s IADS and enable freedom of movement for NATO forces from the rest of Europe to the east. Operations against Kaliningrad could even extend to annexing the Russian exclave to ensure it is not a threat again for future conflicts in the region. However, annexing Kaliningrad would likely be viewed as an offensive action rather than a defensive action that NATO claims is its purpose.

Another piece of Russia’s geographic advantage over NATO in a Baltic conflict is Belarus. Belarus and Russia are close allies based on their shared history and the formal creation of the “Union State” in 1999.¹⁷ Currently Russian troops are moving into Belarus to continue the

encirclement of Ukraine. In a conflict in the Baltics, Belarus would certainly play host to Russian forces. Belarus borders two NATO members, Lithuania and Poland, and sits on the east side of the Suwalki Corridor with Kaliningrad on the west side. The Suwalki Corridor is 65 kilometers (40 miles) wide and connects Poland with Lithuania, effectively becoming the only land link from central Europe to the Baltics. This is NATO's "most vulnerable choke point" in a conflict with Russia in the Baltics and provides an opportunity for Russia to "incapacitate NATO as a security provider for its three Baltic members."¹⁸ Protecting the Suwalki Corridor and denying its use by Russia to resupply Kaliningrad must be a key part of any strategy to liberate the Baltics to ensure there are multiple avenues of approach for NATO forces and stop Russia from being able to concentrate its efforts on just one of those avenues.

Aside from its proximity to the Baltics and the key land bridge connecting the Baltics to the rest of NATO, Belarus has offered to host Russian nuclear weapons.¹⁹ The threat of a nuclear strike by Russia in a regional conflict, such as the Baltics, is real. Russia maintains the option to use nuclear weapons in a first-strike capacity in order to coerce an adversary to agree to its terms in a strategy of "escalate to de-escalate."²⁰ NATO members maintain nuclear forces under the umbrella of NATO that include strategic assets as well as dual-capable aircraft and tactical nuclear weapons. Both NATO and the US hold the same policy of maintaining nuclear capabilities to impose costs so great on the adversary that the benefits of the adversary's use of nuclear weapons would be far outweighed by NATO's response.²¹ Russia's ability to stage and potentially launch nuclear weapons from Belarus changes the calculus of NATO and US planners use of nuclear weapons, especially if the deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus materializes and becomes public knowledge. If Russia were to threaten the use of nuclear

weapons to deter a NATO counter-offensive to liberate the Baltics, it would drastically alter the decision calculus of NATO members who do not want Europe to become the site of nuclear war.

The thought of the operation to liberate the Baltics becoming a nuclear conflict ties in with the second critical issue: the type of conflict NATO is willing to fight in order to liberate the Baltics from Russian invasion and occupation. Public perception and support is important to NATO's continued operations against Russia. Public pressure in democratic nations (all members of NATO) over the cost of war (resources and lives), constrains the war making decisions of national leaders.²² Using this thought process it's easy to see how the threat of nuclear war, with Russia's strategy of "escalate to de-escalate," could halt a NATO campaign to conduct operations to liberate the Baltics.

Even if Russia didn't threaten a nuclear response, NATO members may feel public pressure to stop their efforts if the cost of liberating the Baltics is too high in terms of lives lost or money spent. It would take a carefully coordinated information campaign from NATO allies to ensure the public remains committed to the success and sustainment of NATO, especially because of how the Russian new-generation warfare (NGW) doctrine is devoid of "any delineation between civilian and military realms."²³ Russia possesses significant capabilities to sway the opinions of NATO members' populace and NATO must be prepared to counter that capability in order to succeed in liberating the Baltics.

DETERING A RUSSIAN INVASION OF THE BALTICS

The costs and risks associated with a Russian invasion of the Baltics are incredibly high for NATO. This is why NATO must take immediate steps to prepare for a Russian invasion of the Baltic states and deter Russia from ever executing an invasion. Currently NATO has four battalion-size battlegroups deployed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland on a temporary

and rotational basis.²⁴ This is the same size as in 2016 when RAND war-gamed this exact scenario and determined that NATO would be unable to defend the Baltics sufficiently with these forces and Russian troops would reach Baltic capitals in under 60 hours of starting an offensive.²⁵ These trip-wire forces²⁶ are not enough to deter Russian aggression and an attack from Russia against these forces would “present NATO with a rapid fait accompli.”²⁷ According to the RAND war-game study, NATO must avoid the fait accompli by presenting Russia with the credible risk of conventional defeat, because historically nations are less likely to start conflicts if they expect them to be “protracted, costly, and of uncertain outcome.”²⁸

The steps to presenting Russia with credible risk of failure upon invasion and therefore credible deterrence are generally to increase NATO presence in all domains in the region. This includes increasing the number of battalions rotating through the Baltics at any one time. From an airpower standpoint the doctrine of Agile Combat Employment (ACE) will be a crucial part of deterring Russia. NATO should add frequent ACE deployments to the region utilizing the alliance’s mix of fourth and fifth generation fighters to augment the ground component. The combination of increased airpower and the unpredictability of ACE will be an important factor in Russia’s decision calculus for offensive operations in the region.

CONCLUSION

The world is focused on the Russian threat to Ukraine while NATO negotiates amongst its members to provide support to Ukraine as well as more meaningful support to the Baltic states bordering Russia. NATO needs to take credible action within its borders, more specifically in the Baltic region, to ensure Russia is realistically deterred from ever contemplating operations against a NATO member. A Russian invasion of the Baltic states would lead NATO into a conflict that would require the full support of NATO members in order to achieve victory and

liberate the Baltic region. The strategic consequences if NATO is unable to uphold its Article V commitments to the Baltic states will be disastrous for the security of Europe and the United States as NATO could cease to exist, delivering a serious blow to US strategic interests and national defense objectives. The security of Europe is crucial to not only US homeland security, but also the continued economic prosperity of the US. In order to avert this potential crisis and European security meltdown, NATO must posture sufficient forces in and nearer to the Baltics to deter Russian aggression and illustrate to Russia how seriously NATO takes its Article V commitments while reassuring all NATO members of their equity in the eyes of Article V. A strong and viable NATO is in the long-term strategic interest of Europe and the US. Russian aggression along NATO's eastern borders exposes the weakness and potential downfall of the world's preeminent military alliance, and a decline in US influence and power in Europe, and in other regions of the world. A conflict with Russia in the Baltic region would have the potential to dismantle the world order as we know it across the globe. The effects would not be contained to Europe, but would affect US partnerships and alliances worldwide. A Russian victory in the Baltics would certainly cripple US security efforts everywhere else in the world, which is why while this is a NATO issue it is also an issue for the US. The US must be willing to support and lead NATO in this endeavor to protect itself and pressure the alliance to take a more active role to ease the burden on the US and increase its effectiveness and capabilities to further deter Russian aggression.

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