

Horizontal Escalation: An Asymmetric Approach to Russian Aggression?

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Abstract¹

This article examines whether horizontal escalation strategies—threats to geographically expand a conflict—can help deter Russian aggression or manage escalation in a US/NATO-Russia crisis. After summarizing the current pitfalls of conventional and nuclear deterrence strategies in Eastern Europe, the article highlights horizontal escalation's brief prominence in US Cold War strategy. It then develops and applies a simple analytic framework to four examples of horizontal escalation options in the context of a crisis over Russian aggression in the Baltic region: strikes on Russian forces deployed in Syria; interdiction of Russian ships and seaborne commerce; strikes on bases in Russia's Far East; and an invasion of Crimea. The analysis ultimately yields a skeptical view of horizontal escalation, yet finds a limited role for it in the US/NATO strategic toolkit. Under most circumstances, its costs and risks appear likely to outweigh its benefits. Its promise of coercing or distracting Russian leaders in a Baltic crisis is highly constrained. However, horizontal escalation's potential benefits for deterrence before a crisis and signaling during a crisis justify greater attention and planning than they have received to date.

The frontiers of Eastern Europe are again the subject of military planning in the capitals of NATO allies, spurred by Russia's military modernization and its demonstrably renewed willingness to employ military tools of coercion and aggression. While direct conflict between US and Russian

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militaries remains improbable, grave concerns familiar to Cold Warriors regarding deterrence and escalation management have returned to national security strategy debates.

Planners and scholars, alike, have revived earlier work on strategies for deterrence in Europe, concerning both conventional and nuclear military operations. As in previous generations, however, deterrence is fraught with difficulty.² Tools of denial face significant obstacles, from open terrain, to advanced weapon range and precision, to political and budgetary pressures in NATO governments. Tools of punishment and cost imposition risk being too ineffectual to affect Russian behavior on the one hand, or too provocative to avoid Russian nuclear employment on the other.

While existing literature is rich on traditional tools of deterrence and escalation management, relatively little attention has been given to “asymmetric” approaches. During the Cold War, historian John Lewis Gaddis defined US asymmetric approaches to its containment strategy as those involving “shifting the location or nature of one’s reaction onto terrain better suited to the application of one’s strength against adversary weakness.”³ At the level of grand strategy, asymmetric approaches can take a wide variety of forms spanning political, military, economic, and other tools.

At the level of military strategy, one asymmetric approach to deterrence came to be known as horizontal escalation. Strategists have defined horizontal escalation as widening the geographic scope of a conflict, and contrast it with vertical escalation, an expansion of a conflict’s intensity through the amount of force or the types of weapons or targets involved.⁴ Its logic is principally coercive, designed to convince an adversary to abandon a course of action by imposing costs or threatening interests not previously imperiled by the conflict. In the contemporary context of a confrontation with Russia, this could involve constructing NATO threats to military or economic targets on Russia’s Pacific, Southern, or Northern periphery, or even holding at risk Russian assets and interests outside Russian territory.

During the Cold War, horizontal escalation was the subject of considerable contemplation and planning at senior levels of the US government. It became a particular focus in the late Carter and early Reagan administrations as a possible means for deterring or responding to a Soviet invasion of Iran or aggression elsewhere in the Persian Gulf. It also

played an important role in the development of the US Navy's Maritime Strategy in the 1980s.

Such strategies suffered from significant shortcomings in their Cold War incarnations, and many would suffer still today. At the same time, however, traditional conventional and nuclear tools of deterrence and escalation management face daunting challenges and risks of their own. US policymakers and planners would benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of all the possible deterrence tools.

Horizontal escalation is not the only asymmetric approach deserving of further study in this context. Tools of economic coercion, offensive cyber operations, counterspace operations, information, and political warfare, and even unconventional warfare are highly relevant to US-Russia competition. Indeed, some of these tools are already prominent elements of the US and NATO strategy for confronting Russian aggression. However, horizontal escalation strategies are distinct in their military character, their geographic separation from the area of conventional aggression, and the scarcity of their analytic treatment in security policy literature.

This article attempts to address this analytic gap by considering the question: can horizontal escalation strategies help deter Russian aggression or manage escalation in a US/NATO-Russia conflict? The article first examines asymmetric approaches to deterrence and escalation management by summarizing the current pitfalls of conventional and nuclear deterrence of Russia. Second, it reviews the Cold War history and logic of horizontal escalation as a means to build a simple analytic framework for assessing horizontal escalation options. Next, it applies that framework to four examples of US/NATO horizontal escalation options in the context of a crisis over Russian aggression in the Baltic region.

The analysis ultimately yields a skeptical view of horizontal escalation, yet finds a limited role for it in the US/NATO strategic toolkit. There are three core challenges with horizontal escalation. First, the options most capable of affecting Russian strategic decisions are at least as likely to prompt further escalation as to induce restraint. Second, in the high stakes scenarios where horizontal escalation is most needed, Moscow's resolve to endure high costs is at its strongest. Third, horizontal escalation options can carry significant costs and risks beyond unwanted further escalation.

Another difficulty with a horizontal escalation strategy is the uncertainty inherent in identifying and manipulating an adversary's values and escalation thresholds. However, horizontal escalation can help the US and NATO use this uncertainty to their deterrent advantage, complicating Moscow's decision-making. And if deterrence fails, horizontal escalation options can offer potentially effective means for signaling US and NATO resolve to incur costs, take risks, and ultimately see their collective defense mission succeed.

Pitfalls of Deterring Russia

Both conventional and nuclear military strategies are demonstrably problematic for deterring or managing a crisis with Russia. To set this discussion into the proper context, it is important to acknowledge the limited ambit of deterrence and escalation management in the overall US and allied strategies. As with the Soviet Union in the Cold War, Russia's threats to US and NATO interests extend well beyond the military realm.⁵ Indeed, as news headlines regularly attest, Russia finds ready avenues of influence and disruption in cyber operations, information operations, political manipulation, and economic coercion, which it can pursue at lower cost and risk than military aggression.⁶

Nevertheless, the potentially dramatic stakes of a military confrontation in Europe guarantee an evergreen relevance for military deterrence and escalation management. Such scenarios are worth close analysis and careful planning, particularly those that might ensnare NATO treaty allies. This premise is widely shared among Western governments⁷ and is based largely on four straightforward observations. First, Russia has demonstrated its willingness to challenge the norms of territorial sovereignty. Its 2014 annexation of Crimea and its thinly veiled operations in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine are the main exhibits in this case. However, its military presence in Moldova's Transdnistria region, its 2008 war with Georgia and its 2007 cyber attacks on Estonia are also relevant. These operations coexist with a pattern of military exercise behavior, including provocations by tactical aircraft buzzing US ships and aircraft, that seems designed to signal Moscow's readiness to engage in military conflict to protect its interests in its "near abroad."⁸

Second, Russia has been engaged for the past decade in a major military modernization program for both nuclear and conventional forces. While these modernization efforts have faced and will continue to face

serious constraints, their achievements are significant. Improvements in technology, training, readiness, manpower, and logistics have created a military force far superior to the one that stumbled through its war with Georgia a decade ago.⁹

Third, Russia's stated policy and military doctrine single out the US and NATO as the pre-eminent threats to Russian security.¹⁰ While experts can and do debate how defensive or escalatory Russian doctrine is or how closely crisis behavior might adhere to declaratory policy, there can be little doubt that war on NATO's Eastern flank is a core preoccupation of Russian strategists and planners.

Also, deterrence and escalation outcomes in a regional crisis with Russia are critically important to the US beyond the direct local consequences of any conflict, grave as they may be. The US commitment to NATO's collective defense is the lynchpin of American alliance commitments globally. Hence, even otherwise minor crises are likely to have long-term effects for US power and global security, in terms of demonstrating strengths, weaknesses, and levels of resolve in American defense of its stated commitments abroad.¹¹

These factors have prompted a fresh focus in Western capitals on the low-likelihood but high consequence scenario of a NATO-Russia war. As military analyst Michael Kofman wrote in 2015, "Perchance the broadest and most vexing question for US decision-makers and experts today is this: How do we deter Russia? It is as vague as it is recurrent."¹² Taking up this challenge, a group of US and European experts framed the problem this way:

Basic deterrence principles apply here. Deterring Russia from escalating a conflict will require convincing Moscow that either the costs of escalation will be too high, the benefits will be too low, or that there will be significant payoff from demonstrating restraint in terms of achieving an acceptable outcome or avoiding an unacceptable one.¹³

This formulation reflects one of the classic frameworks for thinking about deterrence, which distinguishes deterrence by punishment from deterrence by denial.¹⁴ The former seeks to induce restraint by promising to inflict prohibitive costs on an adversary in response to its aggression. The latter seeks to directly prevent the adversary from attaining its goals or realizing the benefits of its aggression.

In principle, as noted strategist Lawrence Freedman points out, "denial is a more reliable strategy than punishment because, if the threats have

to be implemented, it offers control rather than continuing coercion. With punishment, the [adversary] is left to decide how much more to take. With denial, the choice is removed.”¹⁵

However, denial can be difficult, demanding substantial capabilities to be deployed and ready at or near prospective points of attack. For the US, with its global security interests and robust capabilities to project military power, deterrence by punishment holds considerable appeal by promising deterrence without large formations of forward-stationed forces. For this reason, US extended deterrence over the years has relied heavily on deterrence by punishment.¹⁶ Importantly, the credibility of denial usually depends on conventional force capabilities, while punishment may incorporate threats of both conventional and nuclear strikes. Consider now both conventional and nuclear deterrence in contemporary Europe.

Conventional Deterrence of Russia

The central problem of NATO’s conventional deterrence of Russia is the difficulty of denial, given local force balances. Local balances are particularly important in conventional deterrence since an adversary may believe a quick victory in a limited area would be sufficient to deter major intervention by an outside power, even one that had superior capabilities overall.¹⁷ While US forces, not to mention NATO forces together, are superior to Russian forces in aggregate, Russia can much more easily bring to bear superior force quickly in areas immediately adjacent to its borders. This includes moving large numbers of ground forces forward relatively quickly. It also includes robust capabilities to thwart NATO counterattacks, in the form of what is often called anti-access and area denial (A2/AD). These capabilities include advanced integrated air defense systems and diverse offensive missile systems that can accurately target bases, infrastructure, and shipping throughout most of Europe. Particularly important to this latter capability is Russia’s Kaliningrad Oblast, a Russian “exclave” between NATO members Poland and Lithuania, stocked with advanced missile capabilities.¹⁸

Prospects for a conventional NATO-Russia match-up have generated a sizable literature in the national security policy community in the past few years.¹⁹ The majority view from that body of analysis is that Russia would very likely succeed in seizing any territory on its borders if it chose to do so. Thus NATO would face a choice between a costly, risky

counterattack and accepting a *fait accompli* while attempting to negotiate a Russian withdrawal.²⁰ In light of this kind of prevailing analysis, it is no wonder that US military leaders have been candid in worrying about the strength and credibility of US and NATO deterrence in the region.²¹

In theory, significant improvements in NATO's capabilities to deter by denial are within reach. Many analysts have recommended substantially increasing forward deployed ground and air forces in Eastern Europe²² even beyond the four rotationally-based battalions sent to Poland and each Baltic state as the "Enhanced Forward Presence" (EFP) following the NATO-Warsaw Summit in July 2016.

However, further bolstering conventional force presence in the Baltic region comes with significant drawbacks. One concern is the potential for such deployments to exacerbate existing tensions and thereby make conflict more likely. In this regard, more deployments certainly play into President Vladimir Putin's strategic narrative of pervasive Western aggression and encirclement. More concretely, the forces could potentially undermine so-called "crisis stability," by generating incentives in a crisis for preemptive reinforcement (by NATO) or attack (by Russia). As analyst Martin Zapfe points out, NATO's Baltic EFP also presents Russia with opportunities for subversion of NATO cohesion, if NATO troops were seen to cause local civilian casualties, became focal points for protests by local Russian minorities, or even become terrorist targets.²³ Additional deployments would also be expensive, potentially controversial within NATO, and could raise concerns about NATO's commitment in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act to forswear permanent basing of "substantial combat forces" in the territories of new NATO members.²⁴ Finally, and most fundamentally, it is not clear that deploying additional conventional forces to the Baltic would achieve the basic goal of deterrence by denial. Even a force considerably larger than the EFP would be vulnerable to a concerted Russian offensive.²⁵

Whatever forward conventional deterrent posture NATO chooses, there remains the acute problem of reinforcement if deterrence fails. Deploying additional ground forces from the US, or even from elsewhere in Europe, faces considerable logistical challenges and would take many weeks even in the most favorable circumstances. Moreover, many of the missile and air defense forces integral to Russia's operations in such a scenario would be located in Russian territory. As a result, US air and missile forces seeking to halt or roll back Russian advances would be

forced to attack Russian territory in substantial numbers. The escalatory dynamics of such a move are hard to predict, but cannot be considered without explicit reference to nuclear weapons.

Nuclear Deterrence and Escalation

The other “traditional” tools for deterrence and escalation management in the US-Russian context are nuclear weapons. The prospect of nuclear strikes in response to aggression has for several decades been the pinnacle of deterrence by punishment. However, as with conventional deterrence, though for different reasons, US and NATO nuclear deterrent capabilities are strong but far from ironclad. Moreover, should deterrence fail, escalation challenges are myriad, and the prospects for managing escalation highly uncertain.

One concern is that the very power of nuclear weapons gives rise to serious questions about their credibility as a deterrent in the context of limited conflicts when limited interests are at stake.²⁶ Many analysts also fear that the dynamics of nuclear escalation in a US-Russia conflict might currently favor Russia for two key reasons.²⁷ First is the potential asymmetry of interests between the two powers in an Eastern European crisis. If the US sees the credibility of alliance commitments at stake, but Russia sees the survival of its current regime potentially threatened, then Russia may ultimately be willing to run greater escalation risks. So if Thomas Schelling’s canonical analysis was correct, that nuclear crises are “competitions in risk-taking,” then Russia may gain the upper hand.²⁸ As in the Cold War, extended deterrence on behalf of allies is inherently harder to make credible than direct, bilateral deterrence.

The second concern is Russia’s large arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons, which affords diverse and unique opportunities for limited, targeted escalatory steps.²⁹ Russia’s recent policies and behavior offer some evidence that they aim to exploit these potential advantages. New patrols by nuclear bombers and heightened exercise tempo for strategic forces have been accompanied by considerable rhetorical saber rattling from Russian leaders, with generals, ministers, ambassadors and President Putin, himself, levying nuclear threats against various NATO allies.³⁰

However, what would Russia actually do in a crisis? There is ample debate among Western analysts about doctrinal interpretation and Russia’s real proclivity to use nuclear weapons.³¹ The often-cited shorthand for Russia’s policy of “escalate to deescalate” obscures more than it reveals.

It does appear evident that Russia is increasingly exploring non-nuclear tools of escalation management, enabled not only by its conventional force modernization but also by a growing set of offensive cyber and counterspace capabilities.³² Still, the basic fact remains that Russia maintains an arsenal of thousands of deployed non-strategic nuclear warheads. Overall, the potential for deliberate nuclear escalation is not trivial.

A related concern is that of inadvertent escalation. The main problem here is that the most likely NATO response to a military crisis with Russia would include a major US conventional air operation involving capabilities and operations that may appear indistinguishable from an attempted disarming first strike against Russian strategic capabilities. This does not need to be remotely close to NATO's intent for it to raise fears among Russian leaders.³³

Collectively, these concerns have moved from the periphery of US defense policy to its center, as signaled in particular by the most recent *Nuclear Posture Review's* declared intent to supplement the US arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons.³⁴

The obstacles and risks of traditional deterrence on NATO's Eastern flank, then, are formidable. Such challenges are not NATO's alone, of course; they burden Russian strategy as well. In no small part, this accounts for Russia's vigorous exploitation of asymmetric tools, such as proxy forces, cyber weapons, and disinformation campaigns in its pursuit of security objectives in recent years. Indeed, asymmetry has become a hallmark of Russian strategy, hailed variously (and contentiously) as the "Gerasimov doctrine," "gray zone conflict," "new generation warfare," or "hybrid warfare."³⁵

A broad but important question for US and NATO is, what promise do asymmetric approaches have in shoring up conventional and nuclear deterrence and escalation management? It is into this strategic context if anywhere, that horizontal escalation options should fit. At least a few experts have seen some potential value in such approaches. Former NATO official Fabrice Pothier, for example, has recommended building "options to escalate horizontally, allowing allies to respond to a crisis in the Baltic by exerting pressure on Russia in other regions, such as the Black Sea or the Northern Atlantic."³⁶ Michael Kofman argues that NATO's best approach "is to shore up deterrence by punishment, . . . leveraging US air power and the Navy as a global force able to horizontally expand the

theater of conflict and inflict colossal military and economic punishment on Russia should it aggress against a NATO member state.”³⁷

These ideas echo debates of an earlier generation of policymakers grappling with an analogous strategic challenge. The next section uses those Cold War debates to develop a simple framework to analyze the promise or peril of horizontal escalation today.

Horizontal Escalation: An Analytic Framework

The origin of horizontal escalation as a formal concept is often traced to renowned strategist Herman Kahn, whose 1965 book *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* contrasts escalation by “increasing the intensity” of a conflict with escalation by “widening the local area of conflict.” These came to be known as “vertical” and “horizontal” escalation, respectively.³⁸

Senior US policymakers began explicitly contemplating horizontal escalation as a key tool of military strategy prompted mainly by a pair of geopolitical shocks in 1979: The Iranian revolution, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These setbacks exacerbated concerns among President Carter’s national security team about the threat of Soviet attacks in the Persian Gulf.

In a top secret 1980 paper, Pentagon staffers set about examining the potential for “Horizontal Escalation as a Response to Soviet Aggression.”³⁹ Ten specific options—such as supporting insurgent groups in Soviet client states, striking Cuba, or conducting naval blockades—were assessed for their potential to “convey to the USSR that the US has both the will and the capability to oppose any Soviet incursion into Iran and that the US military response will not be limited to Iran or even to Southwest Asia.”⁴⁰ The paper argued that to be beneficial, horizontal escalation options would need to: affect Soviet cost-benefit calculations of continued aggression; acquire bargaining chips to be used in settling the conflict; and/or force the Soviets to divert forces from its main effort. Also, benefits would need to be weighed against potential Soviet counterattacks in kind and the heightened risk of general war.⁴¹

However, the analysis ultimately produced divergent perspectives among its participants. Some, assuming the direct territorial defense of Iran itself to be infeasible, saw horizontal escalation as a risky but acceptable “alternative to acquiescence in Soviet control of Iran or to escalating to nuclear warfare.”⁴² Others, looking at the options as adjuncts to a direct defense of Iran were more skeptical. As senior policy official Walter

Slocombe wrote, horizontal options “that are feasible (like striking at Cuba) aren’t significant enough to affect Soviet capabilities or incentives in Iran, and those that would be significant (like a Chinese attack on the USSR) aren’t sufficiently feasible to be reliable.”⁴³

This ambivalence in the Pentagon and President Carter’s electoral defeat temporarily deferred further planning for horizontal escalation options. However, President Reagan’s national security team soon began thinking about the concept in more strategic terms, and horizontal escalation—often referred to as “counteroffensives”—featured in many discussions and policy statements in the first few years of the Reagan administration.⁴⁴ This new emphasis was codified in 1982, when the Department of Defense (DOD) *Annual Report to Congress* noted that with respect to the potential for Soviet regional aggression, “. . . our strategy is based on the concept that the prospect of combat with the US and other friendly forces, coupled with the prospect that we might carry the war to other arenas, is the most effective deterrent to Soviet aggression. . . .”⁴⁵ In that vein, administration officials argued that in response to a Soviet attack in the Persian Gulf, “the US should have the capability to hit back there or in Cuba, Libya, Vietnam, or the Asian land mass of the Soviet Union itself.”⁴⁶

The policy area where horizontal escalation probably gained the most traction during this period was in developing the US Navy’s maritime strategy. One advantage of the potent global US naval force envisioned in that strategy was the ability to attack simultaneously Soviet naval and land targets from the sea around the world, regardless of where Soviet aggression was initiated. This vision became one, though by no means the only, rationale for the significant buildup of naval capabilities initiated by the new maritime strategy.⁴⁷

While Reagan’s national security leaders never publicly repudiated their interest in horizontal escalation, references to the strategy dissipated after the administration’s first few years and never reappeared. Of course, the occasion to implement any horizontal escalation options never arose, and by the end of the decade, the concept’s relevance had been overtaken by history.

In its relatively brief moment in the spotlight, horizontal escalation had raised both interest and skepticism among policymakers. The skepticism was also reflected in the few analytic reviews the strategy received at the time.

In a 1983 article in the journal *International Security* titled “Horizontal Escalation: Sour Notes of a Recurrent Theme,”⁴⁸ scholar Joshua Epstein postulated four potential operational goals that horizontal escalation might serve: deterrence by punishment; “hostage taking” for the purposes of a bargained settlement to a conflict; “compensatory acquisition” of some valuable asset or territory; and fixing, diverting, or otherwise distracting an adversary’s forces and leaders.

An assumption at the heart of the strategy, Epstein argued, is that “the compelling effectiveness of the horizontal action will surely depend upon the value placed by the Soviets upon its target.”⁴⁹ In this regard, he uncovered some of the same challenges that the 1980 Pentagon analysis did. In particular, he echoed the conclusion that the most feasible targets would be unlikely to have much coercive value, while the most valuable targets would entail the highest risk of further escalation. He also flagged the potential downside of diverting critical US military resources toward execution of peripheral operations, a point which Reagan’s classified 1982 *National Security Strategy* acknowledged as well.⁵⁰ Based in part on these problems, he concluded that a horizontal escalation strategy to deter or defeat Soviet aggression was neither clear nor credible.

Epstein’s argument emphasized the great uncertainty involved in predicting Soviet reactions to various “horizontal” targets: “[E]ven with clear goals for horizontal escalation in mind, the selection of an appropriate target seems to require knowledge of the *Kremlin’s* valuations. An uncertain affair even in peacetime, the problem would be compounded in war when, among other things, values change.”⁵¹

Uncertainty is also a prominent theme in the only other major published analysis of horizontal escalation. “Second-Area Operations: A Strategy Option” was the product of a study conducted for the Office of the Secretary of Defense by the RAND Corporation in 1984.⁵² Their framing of the problem could serve almost equally well today as it did then:

A fundamental question is to what extent fairly small-scale, multi-front campaigns can effectively be substituted for and influence the balance in central theater confrontations . . . Sidestepping the risks of central war by undertaking a series of second-area operations may require making commitments that involve greater (if different) uncertainties than those arising in classic deterrent strategies or central front wars.⁵³

The authors identified a similar set of theoretical goals for horizontal escalation as the other analyses, including “coercion, acquiring bargaining chips, diverting enemy forces, and imposing attrition on an opponent . . .”⁵⁴ They also enumerated a similar set of risks of such a strategy, including unintended escalation, counter horizontal escalation by the adversary, and diverting resources that would be better employed more directly.⁵⁵ Overall, like Epstein, the RAND authors ultimately arrived at a skeptical view of horizontal escalation.

Criteria for Evaluating Approaches

The Cold War analyses discussed here generally had convergent views on the relevant criteria for evaluating potential US horizontal escalation strategies against the Soviet Union. The most important considerations for an option can be addressed under three headings: its potential value; its escalation risk; and its costs to other priorities.

The principal source of potential value is coercion, where an option’s promise to punish Russian aggression and impose costs on its behavior is intended to deter or alter its behavior. Another related source of leverage could be to establish new bargaining chips for use in a negotiated end to a crisis. Finally, a horizontal option may have a more direct operational benefit by forcing a diversion of adversary resources, capabilities, or leadership attention.

At the same time, an option may increase the risk of further escalating a conflict. Unwanted escalation could take the form of vertical escalation, with Russia increasing the intensity of its aggression. With sufficient provocation or misinterpretation, this escalation could include Russian initiation of nuclear attacks in some form. Alternatively, Russia could respond “in-kind” through counter horizontal escalation on vulnerable US/NATO assets or interests in locations outside Europe or the US. It is important to note that escalation risk for each option must be considered not relative to inaction, but rather to the considerable escalation risk of more direct responses to aggression.

Finally, an option may entail costs to other US or NATO priorities. These costs could include the diversion of forces needed to support deterrence or counteroffensives in Europe or Asia, political costs in persuading or defying allies and partners, and risks of losses to allied military forces.

Scenarios of Interest: Deter or Manage What?

As is often the case in analysis of military strategy, some of the most consequential scenarios are also the least likely. As noted in the first section of this article, the scenario that has garnered the most attention of US and NATO military planners and analysts is a conventional confrontation between NATO and Russian forces in the Baltic region. While less likely than more surreptitious means of aggression,⁵⁶ a conventional invasion there would threaten not only regional security but also the credibility of NATO's collective defense and American extended deterrence commitments worldwide. Immediately at stake would be prospects for nuclear war and the viability of the NATO alliance.

As a result, the US military began focusing significant attention on plans for conventional warfare with Russia beginning fairly soon after Russia's aggression in Crimea and Donbas.⁵⁷ Of course, the Baltic states cannot afford to be sanguine about Russian restraint in a crisis. As the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Services' 2018 threat assessment summarized it, "the threat of a direct Russian military attack on NATO member states in 2018 is low," but "the only existential threat to the sovereignty of Estonia and other Baltic Sea states emanates from Russia."⁵⁸

Thus, a low-probability, high consequence Baltic invasion is the scenario best suited for analyzing the prospects for US/NATO horizontal escalation options. It is in this scenario where the shortcomings of other conventional and nuclear options are most acute, and where the stakes of the crisis would be most likely to prompt US leaders to give serious consideration to running the risks inherent in horizontal escalation.

A Russian invasion in the Baltic region could take several different forms. For purposes of this analysis two features are key. First, the attack must be of sufficient scale to seize Baltic territory and hold it against a concerted counterattack. This condition unambiguously confirms the implication of NATO's Article V requirement for a significant collective response. Second, Russia's initial aggression must not be accompanied by the use of nuclear weapons or any other major attack on US soil, since these developments would most likely render moot any plans for horizontal escalation.

Russia could have many strategic objectives in launching an attack, but the most likely one would be preventively shoring up defenses against a Western attack, especially in establishing a direct territorial link to Kaliningrad through Belarus and Lithuania. Naturally, such a course

of action would entail great risks for Moscow but is also consistent with some pre-emptive strains of thinking in contemporary Russian strategy.⁵⁹

Horizontal Escalation Options

There is a wide range of options for horizontal escalation against Russia in a crisis. In theory, Russian assets and interests anywhere in the world could be candidates for holding at risk, from its settlements in the Kuril Islands (disputed by Japan)⁶⁰ to economic interests in Latin America.⁶¹ While a comprehensive assessment is beyond the scope of this article, this section briefly analyzes four military options the US and its allies could pursue outside Northeastern Europe in the context of Russian aggression against a Baltic neighbor: 1) strikes on deployed Russian military forces in Syria; 2) global interdiction of Russian ships and seaborne commerce; 3) strikes on military bases in Russia's Eastern Military District; and 4) an invasion of Crimea to expel Russian forces and restore Ukrainian sovereignty.

As a set, these options represent a spectrum regarding both their geography and the scale of operation likely required to execute them. They comprise some of the most significant available options, and also serve to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of a wider set of potential options. The focus here is principally on conventional military operations. Cyber, counterspace, financial, information, and other tools should be profitably analyzed in the context of asymmetric deterrence and escalation management. However, they would likely be employed in any response to Russian aggression and do not fit comfortably in the framework of horizontal escalation. Thus they are not addressed here.

For ease of comparison, each option is presented in a standard format. A general description is followed by assessments of each of the three criteria defined in the previous section: the option's potential value; its risk for unwanted escalation; and its potential costs for other US priorities. Finally, a summary evaluation is presented for each option.

Strike Russian Forces in Syria

Option description. As of this writing, Russia maintains a significant deployed military force in Syria supporting the regime of embattled President Bashar al-Assad in its civil war. The size and shape of this force have varied since its initial deployment in 2015, and its details have been

partly shielded from public reporting. However, there are likely a few thousand Russians in Syria attached to various air, naval, and ground force units.⁶²

These forces would be relatively vulnerable to US attack in a crisis. They operate out of fixed locations in Syria, such as the naval base at Tartus and the Hmeimim air base near Latakia, which are close to air and sea approaches open to NATO forces. The deployed forces are accompanied by some sophisticated defense systems, including S-400 long-range surface-to-air missiles⁶³ and Syrian operated anti-ship cruise missiles.⁶⁴ In combination with Russian naval forces in the Mediterranean and Black Seas, these capabilities have given rise to concerns over the establishment of a major Russian A2/AD complex in the Eastern Mediterranean region.⁶⁵ However, it seems unlikely, barring significant changes in posture, that these defensive capabilities would be sufficiently robust to defeat the sort of multi-axis air- and sea-launched cruise missile attack US forces would be able to muster on relatively short notice.⁶⁶

Potential value. The Syrian option does not hold many prospects of seizing Russian forces as bargaining chips or prompting diversion of significant Russian resources away from Northern Europe. The former would be prohibitively difficult and expensive for a relatively minor benefit, while the latter would simply be unlikely to materialize. The vulnerability of Russian forces in Syria to stand-off attack would be well understood in Moscow before its initiation of hostilities. Russia could choose to reinforce their Syrian defenses in advance of an attack in the Baltics; however, they would be highly unlikely to do so in any way they thought would compromise operations in the Baltics. The size of the Syrian deployment simply would not justify such a gamble.

Instead, the intended benefit from this option for the US would depend on the coercive efficacy of the costs imposed on Russia for its aggression. These costs could include dozens or even hundreds of casualties, loss of aircraft, ships, and equipment, plus the crippling of its expeditionary capability in Syria and the greater Mediterranean. Additionally, the strikes would highlight the potential for additional strikes in other locations. If successful, this option could also serve to disabuse elite and popular opinion in Russia of any expectation that its course of action in the Baltics would be an easy victory or could be sustained at low cost.

Escalation risk. A principal attraction of the Syrian deployment as a horizontal target is that it is clearly separated from Russian territory. This is one of the most important factors in mitigating the risk of vertical escalation. The strikes would not challenge Russian sovereignty and would be very hard to mistake for a prelude to attacks on nuclear forces or regime leadership. However, if Russia wished to respond to this option proportionately, it could probably do so, targeting US forces in deployed locations.

Costs to other priorities. A US strike on Russian forces in Syria could be conducted at a relatively low cost and risk to US forces. The principal opportunity cost of this option for operations in the Baltic region would be the munitions expended. Most or all of the strikes could be launched from ships and aircraft operating at or near locations also useful to support the central effort. This option entails attacking the territory of a state not a party to the European conflict, which could carry some political price for the US. Some US allies may not be supportive of this option for this reason. However, under the circumstances, Syria under the Assad regime would be perhaps the least problematic external state imaginable for such expansion of US combat operations against Russian interests.

Summary. Striking Russian forces in Syria is feasible, probably at a relatively low cost to the US and NATO. The option's escalatory risks are modest. However, this option's coercive value is sharply limited by the relatively small stakes involved in Russia's Syrian deployments as compared to the major gamble of a hypothetical Baltic invasion.

Interdict Russian Ships and Seaborne Commerce

Option description. The US and NATO could exploit their significant naval advantages over Russia to sweep the oceans of Russian ships and interdict Russian seaborne commerce. Russian naval deployments beyond its near seas are typically modest, and Moscow would likely be conservative about leaving its surface vessels far from home, and therefore vulnerable, in the event of a planned assault in the Baltics. Even so, in a crisis, a handful of Russian surface combatants operating in the Atlantic, Pacific, or Indian oceans may well be vulnerable to capture or attack.⁶⁷ Besides, at least some small fraction of Russia's 2,500 flagged merchant ships⁶⁸ would be at sea and largely defenseless against military interdiction.

More broadly, this option could include something akin to a distant naval blockade of Russia.⁶⁹ The large majority of Russia's commercial shipping transits the major port terminals around St. Petersburg in the Baltic Sea, Novorossiysk in the Black Sea, and Vladivostok on the Pacific coast. More than half of Russia's containerized seaborne trade and more than a third of its seaborne crude oil exports transit Baltic ports.⁷⁰ This traffic would likely be curtailed or stopped by a war in the Baltic regardless of any horizontal escalation strategies. Operationally, a coercive blockade would focus on interdicting Russian trade in the Pacific and possibly in the Mediterranean, if Turkey allowed Russian traffic to continue transiting the Bosphorus Strait. While mining of ports and other direct close-in attacks could be considered in this context, the principal concept here focuses on diversion, capture, or destruction if necessary, of ships bound to or from Russia by the US and allied naval forces positioned beyond the range of Russian land-based defenses.

Potential value. Analysts have explored a naval blockade as a coercive tool and an indirect alternative to attacking sophisticated A2/AD systems in Chinese scenarios extensively.⁷¹ However, no similar body of analysis exists for Russian scenarios. In theory, a blockade holds coercive promise distinct from strikes on limited military targets, in that it can limit the loss of life while exerting a growing effect over time. The costs accumulate, as opposed to being "sunk" as soon as the military option is executed. Moreover, seaborne trade is important to Russia's economy. Russia exports most of its crude oil and condensate production and relies on shipping for more than 80 percent of those exports.⁷² In turn, more than a third of the federal budget revenue comes from sources related to oil and gas activities.⁷³ Apart from denying Russia the financial returns on exports, the reduction in imports resulting from a blockade could create hardships for Russian consumers and some sectors of the economy.

However, there is a reason to doubt that the costs of a blockade would provide much coercive leverage in a Baltic crisis. One challenge with economic coercion is that it takes time to have any effect, time that Russia would use to consolidate and reinforce its tactical and diplomatic positions. There is some potential for a blockade, in concert with financial and cyber tools, to generate an economic shock in a short timeframe.⁷⁴ However, Russia enjoys substantial resilience against such measures. It is less dependent on seaborne trade than, for example, China or the US. It

is largely self-sufficient for energy and has extensive overland trade with China (among others), whose participation in any US or NATO-led blockade would be unreliable at best.

A related challenge is that the economic hardship likely to be imposed by maritime interdiction would be of relatively modest scale (given the factors noted above) and relatively diffused across Russian society. Unlike, for example, financial sanctions targeted at individual Russian elites, the hardships from a blockade would be spread across most of the economy and population, undermining its political potency. Russia is not historically known, after all, for wartime capitulation under economic hardships.

Escalation risk. An important but manageable escalation consideration for a maritime interdiction option is avoidance of any Russian perception that NATO naval operations were targeting its nuclear weapons-carrying submarines (SSBNs). A key mission for Russia's attack submarines and the surface fleet is the defense of a few "bastion" operating areas for the SSBNs.⁷⁵ Certainly, in the context of horizontal escalation strategy, the US and NATO would exercise caution not to target any ships associated with the defense of those bastions.

Global maritime interdiction, like the Syrian option, avoids attacks on Russian territory. It also holds out the possibility of imposing costs with military means, but without significant violence. This is a benefit for escalation risk. At the same time, the option introduces explicitly civilian targets in the form of both commercial shipping and economic hardship, which could serve to legitimize reciprocal Russian actions.⁷⁶ Such actions could—though need not—take the form of mirrored maritime interdiction responses. Russia's submarine forces would likely be fairly busy defending SSBN bastions and approaches to Russian waters and focusing limited offensive operations on military targets. Nevertheless, Russian attacks on US and NATO commercial shipping nominally unrelated to the NATO-Russia conflict should not be ruled out.

Costs to other priorities. On the one hand, blockading Russian commerce could provoke opposition from US allies, such as Germany and the Netherlands, who have major trading relationships with Russia, both as importers of Russian oil and gas, and as exporters to Russia's domestic market.⁷⁷ On the other hand, the extreme scenario of Russian aggression in the Baltics would probably have disrupted these relationships already, especially with NATO members. This would limit the salience

of objections from US allies to a blockade. However, at the same time, this also demonstrates that Russian leaders would have factored these potential effects into their plans for aggression from the outset, perhaps implying that they were prepared to endure the burdens of economic disruption.

Though detailed operational assessments are beyond the scope of this analysis, achieving a significant effect on Russian commerce appears plausible, but challenging. Enforcement of even a distant naval blockade would be resource intensive for US and NATO navies. Commercial shipping fleets are very large, and identifying Russian-flagged ships, much less Russian cargo on foreign-flagged ships, could be difficult. Large numbers of ships and aircraft would need to be dedicated to patrols, identification, boarding, escorting, and quarantining potential targets, not to mention disabling or sinking blockade runners. For the most part, these ships would not be available for other naval missions.⁷⁸

Maritime chokepoints on the approaches to Russia's main ports would facilitate blockade operations, though cooperation by countries abutting those chokepoints would be vital. In most cases, those countries are members of NATO, but blockading Vladivostok would depend on Japanese and South Korean support, two nations perhaps unenthusiastic about inviting Russian retaliation for a somewhat distant cause.

Summary. Interdicting Russian ships and seaborne commerce promises potentially meaningful cost imposition paired with reasonably good escalation management. In this way, it does offer some measure of deterrent value. However, barring an unexpected cascade of economic shocks, even successful execution of this option seems unlikely to levy sufficient punishment on Russia to effect a reversal of their aggression, especially given that much of the trade that would otherwise be subject to blockade may already be disrupted by the initial onset of the war. Moreover, the successful execution of this option would require extensive cooperation from allies and partners as well as the diversion of naval and air assets that could hamper operations in Northeastern Europe.

Strike Eastern Military District Forces

Option description. Russia's Eastern Military District spans a major portion of Asian Russia East of the Ural Mountains. Compared to the Western and Southern Military Districts, the Eastern District's dedicated military capabilities are sparse, reflecting not only the relative scarcity of

assets to protect in the Far East but also a generally more benign threat environment.⁷⁹ That said, Russia's military modernization efforts in the past decade have included augmentation of capabilities in the Far East. These include new deployments to the Kuril Islands, the creation of a variety of new units in the region, and modernization of old equipment. Especially important is the enhancement of air defenses aimed at bolstering a defensive perimeter around the Bering Strait, the SSBN bastion in the Sea of Okhotsk and more southerly maritime approaches to the Russian Pacific coast.⁸⁰

Potential US targets in this option would include the surface ships of the Pacific Fleet and various Air Force and Army bases located within the range of stand-off strike platforms. This might include roughly a few dozen ships, over 200 combat aircraft, nine maneuver brigades and a variety of other support units, many located in the coastal Primorski Krai.⁸¹ Russian defenses against US attacks on these targets would be far stronger than defenses in the Syrian option. Nevertheless, US naval and land-based air forces could readily project sufficient strike capabilities to inflict substantial damage if such deployments were prioritized. To minimize the risk of ship and aircraft losses, the US would likely favor long-range cruise missiles such as the Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAM) and Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile—Extended Range (JASSM-ER) for these strikes.

Potential value. Like the Syrian strikes, attacks on Far East military targets would be aimed principally at imposing costs on the Russian regime for its Baltic aggression, and either implicitly or explicitly signaling the ability and willingness to expand those attacks. The symbolism of direct attacks on Russian territory would certainly be significant, especially if no such attacks had occurred yet in Europe. Moreover, the military losses incurred, especially in the Pacific Fleet, would represent painful setbacks to Russia's capability and self-image as an Asian power.

The option also offers a chance of prompting a diversion of Russian forces and resources, albeit only a small one. Most likely, Moscow would avoid drawing down any significant capabilities in its Western or Southern Military Districts in response to the attacks and probably would have consciously accepted the risk of some losses in the East before embarking on its aggression.

Indeed, partly, for this reason, it is unclear that strikes on the Eastern Military District would translate into major coercive leverage for the US

and its allies. If losses in the Far East were already factored into Russia's calculations over its Baltic plans, then this option would be unlikely to alter their course of action fundamentally.

Escalation risk. This option's escalatory risk is contingent on whether it was pursued before or after initiation of NATO combat operations in Europe. The escalatory dynamic would be substantially mitigated if NATO strikes had already begun on Russian territory in the vicinity of the Baltics. If they had not, this option could conceivably cross a threshold for Russia's leaders and prompt a limited nuclear strike or some other non-nuclear strategic strike on US or allied homelands. If they had, this option would only constitute an incremental escalation. Though Russian leaders might still have to reconsider their assessment of the scope of US/NATO goals in light of the expanded campaign, there is evidence that Moscow would be thinking about the conflict in a holistic geographic context from the beginning of the engagement.⁸²

Whatever the timing may be, there is the potential for Russian misinterpretation of strikes in the East to be seen as a precursor to a disarming strategic strike. This would be the case for any attacks on Russian targets close to nuclear facilities or forces. Care would need to be taken to ensure that no strikes were seen as targeting Russia's strategic forces in the region, including SSBNs based at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy and long-range aviation bombers at Ukraine Air Base near Belogorsk.⁸³ Another tactical consideration in this regard is that the American B-2 bomber (or its future B-21 successor) would theoretically be a plausible platform for performing these strikes and would allow for the use of shorter range munitions. However, since these US penetrating bombers are nuclear capable, there would be value from the escalation management standpoint of avoiding their use in this context.

Costs to other priorities. While Russian forces in the Far East would be hard-pressed to defeat a concerted US and allied effort, executing this operation would still involve considerable operational risk and demand dedication of substantial combat power. In addition to attack submarines, one or more carrier strike groups would likely be dedicated to the operation to provide more strike platforms and defenses. Guam could be used to generate land-based strike sorties from US territory. However, the operation would likely depend on Japanese support to provide basing for support aircraft for missions such as refueling, intelligence and surveillance, command and control, electronic warfare, and anti-submarine warfare.

The long-range cruise missiles that would be the primary tools for striking targets in Russia's Far East would also be heavily demanded for deterrence and combat operations in Northeast Europe in this scenario. Moreover, these weapons are a crucial element of US deterrence against Chinese aggression, so emptying US inventories of those weapons nominally apportioned to the Pacific theater would come with significant risk.

Summary. This option could succeed in damaging and signaling further harm to Russian interests of real value to leaders in Moscow. However, executing the option could entail significant escalation risks and trade-offs in the resources available for operations in Europe and would pose some risk to the forces involved. And, since the attacks would not be completely unexpected and would imperil interests ultimately smaller than those at stake in a Baltic crisis, they would be unlikely to result in either major operational benefits or decisive coercive effects.

Seize Crimea

Option description. Among the most extreme horizontal escalation options, US and NATO leaders might consider an invasion of Crimea. Since 2014, Russia has occupied Crimea, the peninsular province of Ukraine with unique Russian historical ties. While Russia's rule in Crimea enjoys some measure of local support, few countries recognize its legitimacy.⁸⁴ So a US/NATO offensive there would at least maintain the *de jure* features of avoiding placement of troops on Russian territory and could be justified by restoring Ukraine's rightful sovereign boundaries. The Kremlin, naturally, would not share this interpretation of these actions.

Strategically, such an offensive would require a major diplomatic effort to garner support within NATO. Operationally, it would require an allied combined arms effort rivaling the scale of that required for a counteroffensive in the Baltics. As noted below, Russian air and coastal defenses in Crimea are strong and growing. Accordingly, the first step of a NATO attempt to seize Crimea would be a major campaign of strikes to neutralize Russian defenses. This might require attacks on Russian air defenses deployed in Syria as well. The primary ground assault force would probably need to maneuver into and through Ukraine. Airborne and amphibious forces could play a role, but they would remain fairly vulnerable even after substantial suppression of Russian defenses. Implementing this option would depend on support from, at a minimum,

Ukraine and NATO allies adjoining the Black Sea. Besides Romania and Bulgaria, Turkey's support would be especially vital, given its unique influence over maritime and overflight access to the Black Sea.

Potential value. By threatening Russia's control over territory with an ethnic Russian majority population, which it has reclaimed as its own, this option imperils Russian interests of potentially commensurate value as those at stake in a Baltic crisis. Moreover, given the difficulty and risk for NATO in mounting the operation, Moscow may well discount the odds of such an attack in its own initial risk calculations. Together with Crimea's inherent importance to Russia, this factor makes this option more likely than the others assessed here to prompt Russia to reassess the costs and benefits of its Baltic aggression fundamentally. In this context, the prospect of NATO seizing Crimea could serve as a strong incentive for Russian leaders to seek a negotiated return to the status quo.

Operationally, this option would present a dilemma for Russia's prioritization of its force deployments. Uniquely among the options assessed here, a significant diversion of Russia's conventional forces is a plausible response. Crimea's relative proximity to the Baltics would make some timely reallocation of ground and air units feasible.⁸⁵ And the importance of defending Crimea would make this a real consideration in Moscow.

Escalation risk. For the same reasons that this option has the most coercive potential of those considered here, it is also the option most likely to prompt an escalatory Russian response. Many Russians never accepted the legitimacy of Ukrainian sovereignty in Crimea and saw it as part of the Russian homeland. And Moscow would be concerned not only about losing control of Crimea, itself, but about the potential for additional incursions in the region if NATO forces were to gain a secure foothold in Ukraine. These could include NATO movement into Eastern Ukraine, Moldova, contested territories in Georgia, or even into Southern Russia, itself.

As with any US/NATO strategy, limited Russian nuclear use is one plausible escalatory response.⁸⁶ Non-nuclear escalation responses specific to this option might include widespread targeting of military and infrastructure targets in Southeastern Europe, which Russian missile attacks might otherwise have de-prioritized.

Costs to other priorities. Seizing Crimea is clearly the most dangerous and costly of the horizontal escalation options. Since annexing Crimea, Russia has conducted a major buildup of military capabilities

there, creating what some analysts see as a Black Sea A2/AD “bubble.”⁸⁷ The port city of Sevastopol was already home to Russia’s Black Sea fleet. It recently added substantial capability, including naval infantry, air, and coastal defense missiles, and new frigates and corvettes equipped with highly capable KALIBR anti-ship and land attack cruise missiles. The fleet has also expanded its diesel-electric submarine force from one boat to seven.⁸⁸ Russia is completing a major bridge complex over the Kerch Strait to link Russian territory directly to Crimea, a move motivated in significant part by military considerations and accompanied by the development of defensive plans and capabilities.⁸⁹ While the bridges could be neutralized early in a conflict, Russia would still maintain the capability to reinforce Crimean defenses through the air, across the Sea of Azov,⁹⁰ or even overland through Eastern Ukraine.

So given Russia’s current and planned posture in the Black Sea region, an assault on Crimea would pose many similar challenges to the hazardous Baltic counteroffensive that it would aim to obviate. And, recent augmentations of NATO Black Sea capabilities notwithstanding,⁹¹ mounting such an operation would certainly impose trade-offs on NATO’s prioritization of force deployments, perhaps even to the extent of precluding a credible simultaneous counteroffensive threat in the Baltic.

Politically, the option’s feasibility is far from assured. NATO consensus, difficult under any circumstances, may prove particularly elusive on such an ambitious yet indirect strategy. Even if the US was willing to proceed in the absence of NATO consensus, Turkey’s willingness to play such a central role in military operations against Russia is highly uncertain, given recent trends in Russian-Turkish rapprochement.⁹² Another political concern that this option would raise relates to the longer-term durability of US extended deterrence. The Baltic states and perhaps other US allies may see the choice inherent in this option of avoiding a confrontation of Russia’s territorial aggression as undermining American commitments to NATO defense particularly or its treaty commitments more broadly.

Summary. Among the horizontal escalation strategies assessed here, seizing Crimea is the most formidable option with the best chance of changing Moscow’s calculus regarding Baltic aggression. However, the option is also the most likely to prompt unwanted Russian escalation, including nuclear use. The option also faces significant operational and

political obstacles to implementation, to a degree comparable to a direct counterattack on Russia's Baltic encroachment.

Conclusions and Implications

The question posed at the beginning of this article was: Can horizontal escalation strategies help deter Russian aggression or manage escalation in a US/NATO-Russia conflict? The preceding analysis suggests an answer of "yes," but only with significant caveats.

In important respects, the problems that plagued the strategy of horizontal escalation in the Cold War remain relevant in confronting Russian aggression today. Just as analysts and Pentagon planners found in the early 1980s, contemporary horizontal escalation options that are feasible are not significant enough to change Russian incentives in a major crisis. And options that are significant enough to promise strategic effects are fraught with operational challenges, escalatory risk, or both. All the same, the threat of horizontal escalation could help deter Russian initiation of aggression and help signal resolve in a crisis.

Four basic conclusions emerge about horizontal escalation as a tool for deterring and managing escalation with Russia.

1. Horizontal Escalation's Potential Value and Its Escalatory Risk Are Correlated

This point is perhaps obvious, but central to the strategic problem. US and NATO leaders contemplating horizontal escalation strategies face an inescapable dilemma. Threatening—or even seeming to threaten—those interests of greatest value to Russian leaders, such as territorial control, strategic weapons, or regime stability, could just as easily provoke escalation as induce restraint. By contrast, the Syrian and maritime interdiction examples above illustrate how threatening less vital but still important interests, such as deployed military forces and trade, can help manage escalation risk. Even then, however, some risk remains.

The Pentagon's 1980 analysis highlighted this general problem as well, finding that:

The only category of ripostes which has the possibility of raising Soviet costs to a level commensurate with the gains of occupying Iran involves a major escalation of the conflict . . . Such actions, however, carry heavy risks of rapidly expanding the conflict to a worldwide NATO-Warsaw Pact war with the attendant risk of nuclear escalation.⁹³

2. In High Stakes Scenarios, Coercing with Punishment Is Difficult

Because of horizontal escalation's inherent risk of provoking further escalation, US and NATO leaders would most likely only consider such options in scenarios where relatively high stakes were involved, such as the hypothetical Baltic crisis. Running high risks for lesser stakes would be hard to justify. However, it is precisely this kind of scenario where Russian resolve would be greatest and therefore most difficult to break with threats or imposition of punishment.

If Moscow were to invade a NATO ally, it would undoubtedly be prepared to incur costs and accept risks along the way. The kinds of costs involved in the options analyzed in this article—such as economic hardships from interdicted trade or military losses in Syria or the Eastern Military District—would likely have already been factored into the original decision to attack the Baltics. This problem was also evident to the Pentagon planners in 1980, who noted: “There is no US and allied riposte against Soviet interests . . . that would clearly equal or exceed in value the political, military, and economic gains the Soviet Union could be expected to achieve....”⁹⁴

This point harkens back to Schelling's distinction alluded to earlier between deterrence and compellence.⁹⁵ Horizontal escalation, it turns out, presents a special case of the general rule that compellence is harder to achieve than deterrence. What about deterrence? Might the prospect of facing such US/NATO attacks make an unlikely scenario even more remote? The next point focuses on this conundrum.

3. Uncertainty About the Effects of Horizontal Escalation Is Both a Liability and an Asset

Evaluation of any horizontal escalation option is subject to considerable uncertainty, especially regarding adversary perceptions, values, and escalation thresholds. Understanding how adversaries would perceive their own (much less their adversaries') stakes and risk tolerance and expected outcomes is inherently difficult. In Richard Smoke's classic examination of escalation, his historical case studies show that escalation failures most often occur because of a fundamental failure on the part of policymakers to comprehend how the world looked to others and understand basic assumptions, goals, and options of decision makers in other capitals.⁹⁶ As noted earlier, uncertainty was also a prominent

theme in the two cited non-government studies of horizontal escalation in the 1980s.

This uncertainty has strategic value to Russia, to be sure, and it is in their interest to remain somewhat opaque regarding intentions and escalation thresholds. However, such uncertainty can cut both ways, and it is here that horizontal escalation's deterrent value gains a foothold. Russia's leaders may share the general conclusions of this analysis, and the others cited here, that horizontal escalation options are probably either too modest to be effectual or too costly and risky to be attractive. But the merits of the case are not so stark as to inspire great confidence that the US and NATO would reject horizontal escalation. Accordingly, if US and NATO forces gave Russia indications, either explicit or implicit, that they were planning for execution of such contingencies, this could influence Moscow's cost-benefit analysis before launching overt aggression.

4. Horizontal Escalation Could Be Valuable as a Signal of Resolve

Previous analyses of horizontal escalation identified its potential benefits as coercive punishment, seizing bargaining chips, and diverting valuable adversary resources. But there is another plausible benefit that does not appear to have been part of the discussions of horizontal escalation in the Cold War: shaping Russia's perceptions of the stakes that the US and NATO see in a crisis and its expectations about what they might do next. In other words, horizontal escalation could help signal resolve.

If Russia did seize control of some portion of the Baltic States, one of its chief objectives would then be to deter a NATO counteroffensive to regain the territory. To achieve this deterrence, it would be counting on its initial local military advantages, divisions within NATO over the importance of specific territorial stakes, and the shadow of nuclear war. On the other side, NATO's goal would be to force a Russian withdrawal without having to execute a counteroffensive. NATO could only hope to achieve that by making the counteroffensive appear highly credible. Effective mobilization and resilience of the military capabilities for that attack would be the principal means of demonstrating that credibility.

However, this is also where means of signaling resolve could play an effective supporting role. If a horizontal escalation option (or options) were executed in the midst of a Baltic crisis—after a successful Russian *fait accompli*, but before a counterattack—this could signal US/NATO's

willingness to accept significant costs and risks to achieve its goals. This could in turn help convince Moscow that its deterrence strategy was destined to fail, a seemingly necessary pre-condition for achieving a negotiated Russian withdrawal. This point does nothing to eliminate horizontal escalation's drawbacks, but it does add an important new dimension to US and NATO's deliberations on developing horizontal escalation strategies to confront Russian aggression.

In sum, horizontal escalation strategies are worth examining for US and NATO strategists, but should only be considered for employment with great caution. Under most circumstances, their costs and risks appear likely to outweigh their benefits. Their promise of coercing or distracting Russian leaders in a Baltic crisis is highly constrained. However, horizontal escalation's potential benefits for deterrence before a crisis and signaling during a crisis justify greater attention and planning than it has received to date.

Greater attention to horizontal escalation would require reviews of plans and capabilities in US and NATO organizations. Expanding planning for horizontal escalation would be valuable for two reasons. First, none of the options for responding to Russian aggression is particularly attractive, so it is natural to develop and test a wide portfolio of options, even ones that are unlikely to be executed. Costs and benefits of any course of action are highly contingent, and leaders can benefit from a rich menu of options in a crisis. Second, planning offers the opportunity—without making any commitments or costly investments—to expose Russian leaders to the notion that aggression against NATO or the US might put its interests everywhere in the world at risk. Whether this message is conveyed overtly or covertly, it exploits the inherent uncertainty of a prospective crisis in the service of deterrence.

Concerning capabilities, if horizontal escalation is to be credible for signaling resolve, specific options would need to be operationally plausible. From a political standpoint, this would require some diplomatic spade-work both inside and outside NATO, to determine which options would garner which kinds of support, and to coordinate planning and signaling. From a military standpoint, many horizontal escalation options are already fairly credible without greater marginal investment in military capabilities. On the other hand, operational feasibility of some options may be constrained by capacity rather than capability; that is to say, by quantity, not quality.

Given the importance of a standoff strike to both a Baltic counteroffensive and horizontal escalation options (not to mention deterrence of other adversaries), long-range cruise missile inventories may be the most logical candidate for expansion in this context. Some options could also buttress arguments for expanding major elements of force structure; a robust maritime interdiction option would benefit from larger NATO navies, for example. Or, a Crimean invasion conducted in conjunction with mounting a Baltic counterattack might benefit from larger NATO armies. However, given the extraordinary expense of such capability enhancements, it is hard to imagine horizontal escalation strategies having a force planning influence on this scale. In expanding its asymmetric options, the US and NATO must take care not to impose costs on the wrong side of the competition inadvertently.

Finally, it is critical to reiterate that horizontal escalation should be thought of as a niche element in an integrated set of asymmetric tools for deterrence and escalation management. These tools span the full range of elements of power and thus underscore the importance of greater integration between conventional and nuclear operational planning, across geographic, functional, and national military headquarters, and between military and non-military tools and organizations.⁹⁷ Ultimately, it is a holistic, coordinated strategic campaign—not a “silver bullet”—which offers the best hope of navigating the daunting challenges of any military confrontation in Europe. **SSQ**

Notes

1. The author is grateful for input and feedback from James Blackwell, Stephen Blank, Robert Bovey, William Chambers, Susan Clark-Sestak, John Deni, Christopher Hickey, Daniel Rosenfield, Michael Wheeler, Heather Williams, and an anonymous reviewer.

2. For an argument emphasizing the continuity between Cold War and contemporary deterrence problems, see Austin Long, “Deterrence: The State of the Field,” *NYU Journal of International Law and Politics* 47, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 357-377, <http://nyujilp.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/NYI204.pdf>.

3. John Lewis Gaddis, “Containment: Its Past and Future,” *International Security* 5, no. 4 (Spring 1981): 80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538714>.

4. Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965); Forest E. Morgan et al, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND, 2008), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG614.html>; Kerry M. Kartchner and Michael S. Gerson, “Escalation to Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century,” in *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century*, ed. Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry M. Kartchner (Stanford, CA:

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Stanford University Press, 2014). Also see Fred Charles Ikle, *Every War Must End*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 38-58.

5. This article uses the term “deterrence and escalation management” to encompass strategies both for preventing and responding to Russian aggression. While the term “coercion” does not appear in this formulation, the concept of coercion is included. Following Thomas Schelling, coercion is often seen as taking one of two forms: deterrence (to prevent another’s action); or “compellence” (to induce another’s action). This article discusses prospects for reversing Russian aggression that has already begun – the “compellence” portion of applicable coercion strategies – under the broader label of “escalation management.” See Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 69-78; 174-176.

6. Timothy Thomas, “The Evolution of Russian Military Thought: Integrating Hybrid, New-Generation, and New-Type Thinking,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29, No. 4 (2016): 554-575, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2016.1232541>.

7. See for example, President Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017), 25-32, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; Directorate-General for External Policies, Policy Department, *Facing Russia’s Strategic Challenge: Security Developments from the Baltic to the Black Sea* (Brussels: European Parliament, November 2017), [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603853/EXPO_STU\(2017\)603853_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603853/EXPO_STU(2017)603853_EN.pdf); NATO Press Release (2016), 100 of 9 July 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

8. For overviews of these activities, see, Keith B. Payne and John S. Foster, “Russian Strategy: Expansion, Crisis, and Conflict,” *Comparative Strategy*, 36, no. 1 (March 2017), 1-89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2017.1277121>; Igor Sutyagin, *Russia Confronts NATO: Confidence Destruction Measures*, Royal United Services Institute, Briefing Paper, July 2016, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20160706_igor_russia_confronts_nato_7.pdf.

9. For overviews of Russian military modernization, see Keir Giles, *Assessing Russia’s Reorganized and Rearmed Military* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/03/assessing-russia-s-reorganized-and-rearmed-military-pub-69853>; US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2017), <http://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf>; and Gudrun Persson, ed., *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective, 2016* (Sweden: FOI, December 2016), <https://www.foi.se/report-search/pdf?fileName=D%3A%5CReportSearch%5CFiles%5C5fa9f89b-8136-4b15-9aaf-1d227ace90a0.pdf>.

10. *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*, (Moscow, Russia: Security Council of the Russian Federation, December 2015), <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>; *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, December 2014, <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>.

11. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 35-91.

12. Michael Kofman, “The Seven Deadly Sins of Russia Analysis,” *War on the Rocks*, 23 December 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/the-seven-deadly-sins-of-russia-analysis/>.

13. As summarized in Paul Bernstein, “Countering Russia’s Strategy for Regional Coercion and War,” (Washington, DC: National Defense University, March 2016) 3, https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Countering_Russia_Strategy_for_Regional_Coercion_and_War.pdf.

14. Credit for this framework is usually attributed to Glenn Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961),

14-16. Also see Michael Gerson, "Conventional Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age," *Parameters* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 2009): 32-48, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/articles/09autumn/gerson.pdf>

15. Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2004), 39.

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