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## Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe

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# CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE AND LANDPOWER IN NORTHEASTERN EUROPE

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Alexander Lanoszka  
Michael A. Hunzeker





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LANDPOWER IN NORTHEASTERN EUROPE**

**Alexander Lanoszka  
Michael A. Hunzeker**

**March 2019**

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## FOREWORD

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* directs the Department of Defense (DoD) to prepare for a long-term strategic competition with other great powers. It minces no words in pointing to Russia's repeated attempts at economically, diplomatically, and militarily coercing its neighbors. Toward this end, the DoD emphasizes the need to strengthen the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) by getting partners to increase their share of the defense burden and modernize their forces, making them more capable and responsive if and when crises occur.

As challenging as this renewed competition with Russia may be, it is not entirely unprecedented. After all, the U.S. Army and its NATO allies spent nearly 50 years deterring Russian aggression during the Cold War. Thus, the U.S. Army has a large reservoir of institutional knowledge and experience from which to draw. At the same time, the common Cold War era practice of basing large numbers of American ground troops on allied soil no longer seems feasible. Post-Cold War basing decisions, budget constraints, and the need to devote resources to the India-Pacific region limit the number of combat troops available for forward deployment. Complicating matters further, Cold War deployment practices are least practical for NATO's most vulnerable members: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. As Dr. Alexander Lanoszka and Dr. Michael Hunzeker point out, a large military footprint in the Baltic region might provoke the very danger that NATO and its members are striving to prevent: a major Russian military response.

In light of these strategic constraints, what role can the U.S. Army play in enhancing local deterrence and

defense initiatives in the Baltic region? Dr. Lanoszka and Dr. Hunzeker argue that it is possible to balance the needs of deterring Russia with the imperative of reassuring NATO allies. They advocate a hedging strategy that prepares NATO for the worst-case scenario that Russia is irrevocably revisionist but offers it the diplomatic flexibility to manage Russia in case fear rather than imperial impulses drives Kremlin decision-making. More importantly, they note that Russia would have to overcome key liabilities if it were to decide on taking military action against NATO's northeastern European members. This monograph should inform how the U.S. Army and its local partners conceive of securing NATO's northeastern flank in its discussion of regional balance of power dynamics.



DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
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## SUMMARY

The Baltic region faces a challenging and uncertain future amid Russian provocation, subversion, and aggression. Though the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and its Baltic allies are already taking action, this monograph identifies how the U.S. Army can build upon existing measures to enhance defense and deterrence along NATO's northeastern flank.

Chapter 1 begins by assessing Russian intentions. Since intentions are hard to divine, it instead offers two plausible ways to think about Russia's goals and motivations: 1) Russia is a revisionist actor, motivated by imperial ambitions; and, 2) Russia is a defensive actor, motivated by fear and insecurity. Both viewpoints are consistent with Russia's recent behavior, but they yield contradictory strategic prescriptions. The United States needs a robust deterrence posture to stop a revisionist Russia, but such measures will provoke a defensive Russia. Conversely, the United States should try to assure a defensive Russia, but a revisionist Russia will perceive assurances as a signal of weakness. Without definitive intelligence on Russian intentions, the U.S. Army must thread the needle between two contrasting deterrent postures.

We then discuss Russia's capabilities, of which three stand out:

- Russia enjoys a decisive local advantage in terms of conventional military power over its immediate NATO neighbors;
- Russia is undergoing an intense, long-term military modernization program, has reorganized its major commands, conducts large-scale "snap

exercises,” and has invested heavily in modern weapons systems; and,

- Russia is adept at so-called “hybrid warfare,” using non-military tools while exploiting local escalation dominance to achieve its goals without triggering retaliation.

Nevertheless, we wish not to overstate Russia’s strength, and therefore conclude chapter 1 by considering Russian vulnerabilities:

- Russia enjoys local escalation dominance, but the United States and NATO possess global escalation dominance. NATO’s total defense expenditures exceed Russia’s by a factor of 10, whereas Russia’s modernization program seems less impressive in light of how little Russia spent on its military after the Cold War;
- Russia is itself vulnerable to anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies. Specifically, Russia needs the Suwałki Gap almost as much as the United States and NATO do because it is the shortest land route to Kaliningrad. Even if Russia manages to close the gap, the United States and NATO can just as easily do the same to Russia, turning it into a 110-kilometer no man’s land; and,
- Belarus may not be in Russia’s pocket. President Aleksandr Lukashenko knows that if Russia uses Belarusian territory to close the Suwałki Gap or otherwise strike at NATO, the United States and NATO will have a *casus belli* to strike targets inside Belarus and surge reinforcements through Belarusian territory.

Chapter 2 examines Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish capabilities and threat perceptions. We also assess the most likely and most dangerous scenarios facing each of them. The most likely scenarios are hybrid in nature, whereas the most dangerous involve a surprise invasion or conventional attack. Estonia and Latvia face the greatest risk of hybrid warfare. However, we should be careful not to overstate the effectiveness of such hybrid stratagems. Even if Russophones in Estonia and Latvia appear to support Russia's foreign policies, most do not want to live under Russian rule. Life in the European Union is strictly better than in Russia, even in the absence of clear citizenship rights. By contrast, Lithuania and Poland are relatively immune to the hybrid threat.

In all four cases, full territorial conquest appears improbable. This is especially true of Poland, as Russia would have to traverse Baltic and Belarusian territories to invade Polish territory. The Baltic States are more vulnerable, but Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian defense experts are more concerned about a limited incursion aimed at grabbing small portions of their territory as a test of NATO's resolve.

Chapter 3 outlines our threat assessment and policy recommendations. We agree that a worst-case, large-scale *fait accompli* attack against one or more of the Baltic States is unlikely in the near term. Regardless of Russia's underlying intentions, an invasion risks much and gains little, especially since a major war could easily spiral out of Moscow's control. We assess that Russia's most probable course of action is to continue doing what it has been doing for years: fomenting unrest, spreading disinformation, and engaging in low-level military provocations.



We thus recommend a hedging strategy, which allows the United States and NATO to act **as if** Russia were a defensive actor, while adopting less-provocative measures that complicate Russia's ability to launch a surprise attack **in case** it turns out to be revisionist. Our hedging strategy involves nine military measures, each serving one of three complementary goals: 1) improve early warning; 2) enhance deterrence in ways that are less likely to provoke Russia; and, 3) improve regional defenses against the hybrid threat.

## **IMPROVING EARLY WARNING**

### **Remember Belarus**

Russia cannot invade two of NATO's four regional allies—Lithuania and Poland—without first crossing Belarus. This constraint means that, to mount any kind of large-scale surprise invasion against those two allies, Russia must stockpile ammunition and supplies, establish field hospitals and maintenance depots, and pre-position assault troops and reinforcements inside Belarus. The United States should direct sufficient intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to detect such preparations.

### **Facilitate Regional Cooperation**

Helping our allies help themselves is both less provocative and less costly. Improving cooperation among Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland will enhance the region's ability to detect, deter, and defeat Russian aggression. The United States should prioritize regional intelligence sharing, war planning, and joint exercises. The U.S. Army and its Center for

Army Lessons Learned are well-suited to assist with these tasks.

### **Don't "Mind the Gap"**

Western fears over the Suwałki Gap are overstated and escalatory. The more the United States and NATO worry that Russia can quickly close the gap, the more they must adopt provocative force postures. The best way to reduce such fears is to realize that the gap only exists on a map. There is little to stop U.S. and NATO forces from bypassing it by moving through Belarus or Kaliningrad. Although such a move will violate Belarusian (and possibly Russian) sovereignty, the fact is that Russian and Belarusian forces cannot close the gap without physically occupying—or firing long-range weapons into—Poland. Both are unambiguous acts of war.

## **ENHANCING DETERRENCE-BY-DENIAL**

### **Plan for the Long Haul**

Vigilance, patience, and endurance pose a major challenge for the United States and NATO. Unfortunately, hybrid warfare and strategic patience play to Russian strengths and U.S. weaknesses, not least because the United States is globally committed and Russia is not. The U.S. Army can prepare for the long haul in several ways. The most important way is to consider permanently basing troops in the region. Given the political and logistical challenges of permanently stationing U.S. troops in the Baltic States, we recommend that the United States consider making

its rotational armor brigade combat team in Poland permanent.

### **Place Tripwires Where Russia Will Trip Over Them**

The U.S. Army armored brigade combat team in Poland largely functions as a tripwire. However, tripwires only work when an adversary actually trips on them. Russia might be able to use elite units, precision weapons, and drones to avoid these tripwire forces. Therefore, the U.S. Army should consider disaggregating its brigade combat team to cover as many potential targets and avenues of approach as possible.

### **Remember that A2/AD is a Double-Edged Sword**

Western defense and security analysts tend to see A2/AD as a threat. However, the United States can flip the A2/AD challenge on its head. The Multi-Domain Operations concept is an important step in this direction. Funding this initiative to turn it into a coherent doctrine with a dedicated acquisitions program should be one of the Army's highest priorities. The U.S. Army should also focus on improving its ability to strike targets in the air and at sea because Russia must have air and naval superiority to attack one or more of the Baltic States.

### **Clarify the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force's Role**

Many analysts think political, legal, and logistical obstacles will prevent the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) from rapidly deploying in a crisis. We think the VJTF suffers from a deeper conceptual problem: regional experts and policymakers do not

understand its purpose. Some see it as an enhanced tripwire—a force that ensures that Russian aggression will kill personnel from across NATO. Others see it as a combat-credible force in its own right. If NATO allies—especially those whom the VJTF was created to support—disagree on its purpose, then Russia is also probably confused. Miscalculation and inadvertent escalation can result on both sides. The U.S. Army should work with NATO to clarify the VJTF’s mission and purpose.

## **BLUNTING THE HYBRID THREAT**

### **Devote More Resources to Confront the Most Likely Threat**

To the degree that enhanced early detection and minimal deterrence measures reduce fears of a surprise invasion, the U.S. Army can redirect energy and resources to deal with the hybrid threat. The U.S. Army has a repository of lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan that are highly relevant, including network analysis, counterintelligence, strategic communications, local security, internal defense, and infrastructure resilience. The U.S. Army also has extensive experience working alongside the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development. It should help Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland develop their own “whole-of-government” plans for countering the hybrid threat.

## **Recognize That the Region Has One Flank, but Many Fronts**

U.S. analysts often treat NATO's northeastern flank as a single operational area. Yet more differences exist than similarities — differences Russia can exploit. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland have unique needs and vulnerabilities, while bringing a unique set of capabilities to the table. Measures that prove effective for one country might prove counterproductive for another. U.S. and NATO war planning must be sensitive to these differences.

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## INTRODUCTION

How can the U.S. Army best contribute to defense and deterrence initiatives on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) northeastern flank—a region that includes Poland and the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania? We began this project with four hypotheses in mind:

- First, although the logic of deterrence remains unchanged, Cold War approaches to deterrence are neither feasible nor desirable given domestic constraints and technological developments.
- Second, the so-called threat of hybrid warfare was overstated in this region.
- Third, the U.S. Army has significant institutional experience to handle some of the security challenges on the northeastern flank.
- Fourth, the U.S. Army can complement existing rearmament efforts of regional allies without unnecessarily escalating the present crisis.

We still believe these hypotheses to be largely correct. However, after meeting with 25 senior policy-makers, military officers, and academic experts during our visit to Poland and the Baltic region in May and June 2017, we realized that we needed to move beyond simply testing these four hypotheses. In particular, we no longer felt like a historical analysis of Cold War deterrence would be helpful. Certainly, the Soviet Union tried to subvert Western Europe by fomenting labor unrest and disseminating propaganda, whereas North Korea used various tools—ranging from covert operations to disinformation campaigns to border skirmishes—to unsettle South Korea and undermine its alliance with the United States. Yet what simplified



those cases was the social homogeneity of their populations and the unambiguous role played by nuclear deterrence. By contrast, the Baltic States vary in their military capabilities, demographics, and, by extension, ethnic ties to Russia. Most importantly, a large-scale invasion did not seem likely, even according to our interviewees in the four countries that we visited that otherwise worry of American commitments and Russian aggression. Lagoons and villages may be targets of military attack, rather than capital cities.

Still, though the geopolitical problems facing the northeastern flank are different from those that existed in the Cold War, we still believe that the basic logic of deterrence holds. That is, we must understand the extent to which a potential aggressor like Russia would be willing or able to attack Poland and the three Baltic States. Such an understanding must inform how the U.S. Army calibrates its policies and posture. It also means that the U.S. Army must recognize the peculiarities of the environment. We hope this monograph fulfills these aims by being sensitive to the various contextual factors that shape the region's security dynamics.

In this spirit, this monograph comprises three chapters. The first chapter examines a set of questions that are critical for tailoring defense and deterrence measures: what are Russia's intentions, capabilities, and pain threshold? These variables matter, because they bear on the ability and willingness of Russia to undertake offensive operations. Nevertheless, intentions in international politics are difficult to divine. We thus constructed two models that analysts can apply with an eye toward comprehending Russian intentions and making policy recommendations with logical consistency. Pain thresholds are also hard to

estimate, so we focus our attention on the obstacles and weaknesses that Russia would need to overcome if it were to launch a large-scale attack on NATO's northeastern flank.

The second chapter addresses important differences among the region's four NATO allies. We examine the most likely and most dangerous scenarios involving Russian aggression. Consistent with our initial hypotheses, we still believe that the threat of hybrid warfare—defined as the subversive manipulation of ethnic or economic ties to destabilize a target country under the shadow of conventional military power—is overrated. Obviously, we should remain concerned by Russia's propaganda and disinformation campaigns. However, we found little evidence that local Russophone populations are nascent fifth columns eager to rise up to do Moscow's bidding. Estonia, and to a lesser degree Latvia, are already taking important steps to integrate potentially alienated segments of their population with various political reforms. Finally, we think a large-scale conventional military assault is unlikely, not least because of the potential for nuclear escalation. Nevertheless, some small parts of the three Baltic countries could be vulnerable to a limited annexation effort.

The third chapter offers a range of policy recommendations for the U.S. Army. We argue that a worst-case, large-scale fait accompli attack against one or more of the Baltic States is unlikely in the near term. Regardless of Russia's underlying intentions, an invasion risks much, but gains little, especially since a major war could easily spiral out of Moscow's control. We assess that Russia's most probable course of action is to continue doing what it has been doing for years: fomenting unrest, spreading disinformation, and

engaging in low-level military provocations. Therefore, we suggest a hedging strategy, which allows the United States and NATO to act **as if** Russia is a defensive actor while adopting less-provocative measures that complicate Russia's ability to launch a surprise attack **in case** it turns out to be revisionist. Our hedging strategy is based on nine military measures, each of which serves one of three complementary goals: to improve early warning; to enhance deterrence in ways that are less likely to provoke Russia; and to improve regional defenses against the hybrid threat.

## CHAPTER 1. RUSSIAN INTENTIONS, CAPABILITIES, AND VULNERABILITIES

Textbook introductions to the concept of deterrence emphasize the need to communicate both the willingness and ability to impose unacceptable costs on an adversary. Yet, more fundamentally, successful deterrence requires an understanding of the intentions of an adversary. Indeed, deterrence assumes that the adversary wants to attack, but chooses not to do so in order to avoid unacceptable punishment or battlefield losses. Efforts to tailor deterrence must therefore account for three factors: the political ends that the adversary strives to achieve, the military means that the adversary has at its disposal, and the pain threshold above which the adversary incurs unacceptable costs.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explores these three factors in relation to Russia and the Baltic region. We begin with intentions. Recognizing the challenges in divining intentions, we argue that two contrasting models describe most assessments of Russia's goals, ambitions, and motivations. One model—the revisionist model—argues that Russia has maximal aims that involve restoring its empire and reasserting its status as a global superpower. The other model—the defensive model—sees Russia as seeking to protect its territorial sovereignty and preserve its current geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis the West. Each model has its own set of assumptions and yields contrasting estimates as to what is necessary for deterring Russia. Prescriptions for enhancing deterrence should follow logically from the model used. A revisionist Russia cannot be deterred on the cheap, whereas a defensive Russia might be provoked into aggressive behavior if deterrence begins to look like encirclement.

Following our discussion of Russia's possible intentions, we turn our attention to its military capabilities. Regardless of whether Russia really has aggressive intentions, many officials, pundits, and scholars agree that the local military balance in northeastern Europe strongly favors it. We review Russia's military capabilities and explain how Russia has gone about modernizing its forces and updating its doctrines.

Though we share the view that Russia enjoys a favorable local military balance, we argue that the predominant focus on its strengths diverts attention away from its weaknesses. As much as Russia's pain threshold is hard to estimate, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members would benefit from paying more attention to these weaknesses and understanding how they will complicate any effort to attack the alliance's northeastern flank. One example is that many planners and analysts usually see Belarus as providing Russia with strategic depth. Yet transporting troops, gear, and supplies through Belarus would be relatively easy to detect and would provide NATO with early warning. "Snap" exercises are another example. Observers often suggest that Russia's snap exercises indicate that it can transport large numbers of military personnel across territory in a short amount of time. Therefore, snap exercises generate anxiety that Russia has the ability to mount a surprise invasion. However, as we argue below, snap exercises are poor predictors of how well Russia could in fact launch an invading force and supply it in a contested environment.

We revisit this discussion in our conclusion. Even without considering the capabilities and resolve of Poland and the three Baltic states, we believe that a large-scale surprise attack is unlikely. For one, Russia

would only launch a surprise attack either because its intentions are irredeemably hostile and fundamentally revisionist or because it feels so cornered by NATO that it has to resort to preemptive operations. For another, Russia would need to overcome various handicaps in escalating militarily vis-à-vis NATO—handicaps that pertain to Kaliningrad, Belarus, logistics, and supply.

## **RUSSIAN INTENTIONS TOWARD NATO'S NORTHEASTERN FLANK**

To understand why Russia might want to attack NATO's northeastern flank and to estimate the price it is willing to bear to do so, we first examine Russian intentions. Unfortunately, intentions are hard to assess. History is littered with examples of states that missed or misinterpreted their adversary's motivations, aims, and red lines.<sup>2</sup> France and Austria failed to recognize Bismarck's "divide and conquer" strategy during the wars of German unification, whereas the United States failed to anticipate the Chinese intervention in the Korean war. The George W. Bush administration did not understand why Saddam Hussein acted as if he had weapons of mass destruction, just as Saddam misjudged Bush's willingness to fight over the matter. Aside from incentives to misrepresent true intentions, assessment is difficult because intentions exist "in the mind of the other." Even when a potential adversary wants to be transparent about its intentions, cognitive bias, historical experience, strategic culture, emotional needs, and institutional preferences make misinterpretation and misperception possible.<sup>3</sup>

Given these challenges, analysts and policymakers may prefer to infer intentions from capabilities. However, military capabilities are a poor indicator of intent

for three reasons. First, budget constraints, resource limitations, and opportunity costs mean that political leaders often prefer to acquire multipurpose capabilities that “get the most bang for the buck.” Second, most military capabilities have both offensive and defensive uses. For example, walls, fortifications, and minefields seem purely defensive, but they also fill an offensive role by freeing troops from defensive missions for offensive operations. Similarly, long-range missiles and high-performance fighter jets might seem like purely offensive capabilities. However, long-range missiles can hold targets at risk for deterrence purposes, whereas advanced fighter jets might be the only way to defend against advanced bombers and attack aircraft. An infantry unit can attack and defend, whereas an air defense unit can protect a city, just as it can provide cover for an assault force. Finally, the so-called offense/defense balance complicates our ability to draw a straight line between capability and intent, especially if new technologies and new warfighting doctrines sometimes make it easier to attack than to defend.<sup>4</sup> Under such conditions, an offense can become the best defense. Thus, even status quo states will start to acquire offensive weapons and assume aggressive postures.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, when technology and doctrine make attacking easier than defending, states that otherwise harbor aggressive intentions will nevertheless acquire defensive weapons and assume defensive postures.

Other approaches for understanding intentions can be problematic. Official statements and speeches are an important but insufficient element in determining state intent because leaders spin, hedge, and dissemble. Archival records are often incomplete, highly classified, or given how long declassification can take,

outdated. Scholarly works on history and culture can be too broad to shed light on specific foreign policy issues, reflect the prejudices of their authors, and suffer from the same flaws as the official statements and archival documents on which they are based.

Recognizing these challenges, we took an alternative route. Rather than suggesting a single, definitive way to think about Russian intentions, we developed two competing perspectives based on official statements, expert testimony, and scholarly analyses: the revisionist and defensive models of Russian intentions (see table 1-1).<sup>6</sup> Individually, each model is distinct and logically consistent, thereby offering unique, observable indicators (that is, things that must be true if the model is right) and policy recommendations. This approach is preferable for two reasons. First, it offers the U.S. Army a dualistic approach for understanding Russian intentions. A single estimate is likely to be wrong or incomplete. Worse yet, it yields a single set of policy recommendations. If the estimate is off, then the recommendations become suspect. Moreover, as scholars working with unclassified, open-source information, we realize that the U.S. Army has better intelligence on Russian intentions than we do. Second, although some might argue that Russia is simultaneously revisionist and defensive, we think that there is virtue in constructing two unique and logically distinct models. Specifically, it allows us to generate a rigorous and coherent set of policy recommendations. If we treat Russia as simultaneously revisionist and defensive, we inevitably leave room for cherry picking the policy measures we prefer to those that are logically connected to—or consistent with—the underlying model. That said, we do not presume that we can tell the Army something it does not already know in



regard to assessing Russian intentions. Instead, we hope these models can help Army planners both evaluate the intelligence they already have and identify future collection priorities. Since each model generates a unique set of observable indicators, Army planners can evaluate the models by comparing the classified intelligence against those observable indicators.

	Revisionist Model	Defensive Model
Motivation	Imperial	Fear
Intention	Revise the status quo	Preserve the status quo
Stakes	Existential	Existential
Pain threshold	High	Low
Risk of surprise attack	High	Low, unless it feels extremely threatened and believes that offense is the best defense
Why act aggressively toward Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine?	To prepare for further expansion	To deter NATO
Why modernize the military?	To prepare for further expansion	To improve defensibility
U.S./NATO deterrence requirements	High cost and prone to fail	Low cost (assurances are more important than threats)

**Table 1-1. Summary of the Revisionist and Defensive Models Regarding Russian Intentions**

We should note that both approaches assume there are few differences between President Vladimir Putin and the Russian body politic. This simplifying assumption might also strike some readers as problematic, but we believe that his worldview aligns well

with much of Russia's elite and public opinion.<sup>7</sup> Many Russians appear to share a basic set of foreign policy beliefs.<sup>8</sup> They agree that Russia is a global power, not a regional one, and so deserves a seat at the table alongside the United States and China over matters that affect the international system. Unfortunately, they also might agree that the existing U.S.-led, post-Cold War European order conflicts with at least some Russian interests, and that Russia was not able to resist U.S. order-building in the early 1990s. Now that Russia is ready to reclaim its rightful place among European great powers, the United States and NATO continue to contain and undercut it. Widespread agreement also exists that Russia has a right and an obligation to protect Russians living abroad, especially those who emigrated—voluntarily or otherwise—to states that once made up the Soviet Union. Accordingly, Russia either needs or deserves a sphere of influence in its so-called “near abroad,” both as a buffer zone to protect against foreign invasion and as a marker of great power status.

Because Putin may be reflecting deep-seated foreign policy beliefs more than he determines them, three implications follow. First, we can understand Russia's intentions and motivations without knowing Putin's biography, psychology, or decision-making style. Second, regime change is unlikely to alter Russia's foreign policy trajectory. Obviously, the United States neither can nor should try to unseat Putin. Even if Putin were to lose power, his successor will probably use the same means to pursue the same ends for the same reasons.<sup>9</sup> Third, and most important, Russia represents an enduring challenge. It has long-standing interests in the Baltic region that are unlikely to fade, regardless of who controls the Kremlin. However, we

still must grasp Russia's specific goals, motivations, and red lines. We cannot definitively assess whether revisionist or defensive motives drive Russian behavior, but we can organize the logic and evidence behind scholarly arguments into two competing models, allowing the reader to form his or her own opinion. We start with the most extreme reading of Russian intentions: the revisionist model.

### **Russia the Revisionist**

The revisionist model depicts the worst-case scenario since it implies that the United States and Russia are in a zero-sum relationship.<sup>10</sup> Russia cannot achieve its security goals without disrupting the status quo, whereas the United States and NATO will not feel secure until they coerce Russia into giving up on its core goal.<sup>11</sup> Peaceful compromise is difficult, if not impossible, to reach. Moreover, deterrence is costly and prone to fail because a predatory Russia has a high pain tolerance. A revisionist Russia will attack the Baltic States unless it is convinced of one of two things: that it will not prevail on the battlefield, or that the United States will use nuclear weapons to defend its Baltic allies. Thus, if Russia truly is a revisionist actor, the price tag for deterrence will be measured in brigades and divisions, not companies and battlegroups.

The revisionist model assumes that Russia wishes to restore what it sees as its historical empire and sphere of influence. Specifically, Russia wants to reassert direct control over its near abroad, especially the former Soviet republics. Controlling the Baltic States will create a physical buffer between Russia's potential adversaries and its largest population centers. Because physical expansion is the only path to security, a

revisionist Russia recognizes that a free and united Europe—particularly one backed by U.S. security guarantees—will not tolerate aggressive expansion.<sup>12</sup> Europe, at least in its current form, is thus an existential threat. As Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Pavlo Klimkin avers, “The Kremlin increasingly sees Europe whole, free, and at peace, not as an opportunity for prosperous coexistence, but as a threat to its geopolitical agenda and regime survival.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, a revisionist Russia believes it cannot expand without first “breaking” Europe’s existing security architecture, a goal that requires discrediting NATO, cutting the transatlantic link, and undermining Europe’s regional norms and institutions.<sup>14</sup> Finally, a revisionist Russia has a high pain tolerance precisely because it sees expansion as essential for security. Since it cannot expand without fracturing NATO and isolating the United States, fulfilling these goals is essential. To be sure, a revisionist Russia will not blindly plunge into a war against NATO and the United States. It is still rational and will, therefore, exhibit strategic patience. In all likelihood, it will bide its time and challenge the United States and NATO in a piecemeal fashion until it believes the conditions are right for a bolder offensive.<sup>15</sup>

If Russia is revisionist, then no mystery abounds as to why it (presumably) launched a cyberattack on Estonia in 2007, invaded Georgia in 2008, or seized Crimea in 2014. These operations constitute “creeping annexation”: opening moves in a long-term, overarching campaign to re-establish control over Russia’s periphery.<sup>16</sup> Attacks on Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine act as shaping operations, sowing discord within NATO while destabilizing the region. They also helped the Russian military to refine its doctrines,

evaluate new weapons, and harden combat units. Finally, these operations deter other states within Russia's near abroad from aligning with NATO.<sup>17</sup>

Russia's military modernization program, described below, also serves a clear purpose. A revisionist Russia must prepare for a war of expansion. Because its armed forces fell into decay after the Cold War, a massive modernization program is necessary to ensure it has the military means to achieve its political ends. Moreover, large-scale, no-notice, snap exercises let the military rehearse for a fait accompli seizure of the Baltic States. By streamlining command and control practices, task organizing frontline units, and acquiring new equipment, the military is preparing for 21st-century high-intensity warfare. Indeed, reorganizing military districts creates an advantageous force ratio along NATO's northeastern flank. From the perspective of the revisionist model, developing anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities helps to challenge the U.S. ability to reinforce and to resupply its Baltic allies if war does break out.

If the revisionist model is correct, then only extreme measures will deter Russia. A Russia that believes expansion is justified and necessary will exploit any perceived gaps and weaknesses. It will be both patient and aggressive, constantly probing NATO while waiting for the opportunity to attack. It will likely seize any opportunity to realize its revisionist goals, particularly if it believes it can achieve them in a short campaign. Therefore, the risk of a surprise, large-scale attack of the type described in the oft-cited RAND study is highest with a revisionist Russia.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, since a revisionist Russia has a high pain threshold, the United States will need to commit significant combat forces to the region in order to convince

Russia that an invasion, no matter how large, will fail. Such a commitment might have to last for decades, if not generations, since Russia will take a long-term approach to achieving its goals. The United States and NATO cannot afford to let their guard down. With an irredentist Russia, expansion will always be a matter of when, not if.

Dealing with an implacable predator has an upside: the United States will not have to worry about inadvertently provoking aggression. Security dilemmas, whereby defensive moves by one state unintentionally inspire fear in another state, are not an issue because a revisionist Russia already wants to attack. Of course, Russia will try to spin narratives about NATO deterrence and defense measures so as to justify its aggression, but such claims are purely rhetorical. Only by preparing for war can the United States and NATO maintain peace with a revisionist Russia.

## **Defensive-Minded Russia**

The defensive model portrays a best-case scenario for the United States and NATO. It assumes that fear animates Russian behavior such that Russian aggression is a rational and predictable response to U.S. hegemony and NATO enlargement.<sup>19</sup> If fear drives Russian foreign policy, then the United States and Russia are not in a zero-sum relationship. The two sides should at least be able to identify an acceptable compromise that leaves both better off than engaging in a second Cold War. However, mutual suspicion will make it hard for either side to abide by that deal. Russia will worry that the United States would renege on any bargain once it had the opportunity to do so, and vice versa. Miscalculation, misinterpretation, and military accidents

could also provoke mutual fear, thereby undercutting bargaining and even sparking conflict.

Like the revisionist model, the defensive model recognizes that history shapes Russian foreign policy. However, whereas the revisionist model takes for granted that Russia seeks to reclaim its historical sphere of influence, the defensive model assumes that Russia is reacting to the painful legacy of repeated invasion by the West. From its perspective, Western European great powers have attacked or occupied Russian territory four times in the past 2 centuries (in 1812, 1854, 1914, and 1941).

A defensive-minded Russia is thus suspicious of the West in general and the United States in particular. The United States certainly claims that NATO, as well as the post-war international order it created and leads, has benevolent intentions and serves defensive motives. Russia, however, views the situation differently. From its perspective, the United States wants to prolong its “unipolar moment.” Instead of peacefully accepting its relative decline and the re-emergence of a multipolar international system (within which Russia will be a key player), the United States wants to maintain its status as the world’s only superpower, and will overthrow regimes that defy it. The invasion of Iraq, NATO enlargement, the Arab Spring, the so-called Color Revolutions, and the Libyan intervention are all part of this campaign.<sup>20</sup>

A defensive-minded Russia has three core goals: prevent NATO from expanding further along its periphery; re-establish stable relations with the Baltic States, to include clear borders, unimpeded access to Kaliningrad, and the restoration of trade ties; and retain the ability to protect Russian emigrants living in its near abroad.<sup>21</sup> Russia would naturally prefer that

NATO had not allowed Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to join. However, it accepts this unpleasant reality as the new status quo, if only because of the belief that it will risk much and gain little if it tries to reconquer those states.<sup>22</sup>

A defensive-minded Russia harbors decidedly status quo ambitions. From its perspective, the United States and NATO are the revisionist actors who must be deterred.<sup>23</sup> Whereas Washington worries about Russian subversion and military modernization, Moscow is convinced that the United States is the one waging an active hybrid war, and that U.S. military modernization—specifically, prompt global strike, ballistic missile defense, and space-based weapons—is fundamentally destabilizing.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, it interprets Western deterrent measures, including the European Reassurance Initiative, Operation ATLANTIC RESOLVE, and the Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups as threatening.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, if the United States and NATO are dealing with a defensive-minded Russia, then a security dilemma probably already exists.

The defensive model suggests that Russia's attacks on Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine were a form of signaling—specifically, Russia was clarifying its red lines.<sup>26</sup> It used cyber and military force to credibly signal its willingness to go to war to prevent further NATO expansion into its near abroad. These attacks also served to deter former Soviet states, particularly Belarus, from trying to realign with the West.<sup>27</sup> According to this interpretation, these attacks do not suggest that Russia will attack the Baltic States someday. Again, if fear drives Russian decision-making, then Russia recognizes that the risks and costs of a war with NATO vastly outweigh any conceivable payoff.



Of course, Russia inadvertently created a commitment problem when it invaded a sovereign state to send a signal. The United States, NATO, and the Baltic States can be forgiven for mistaking defensive motivations as revisionist ambitions. Russia could have better provided assurances alongside its threats. However, it will not be the first state to forget that deterrence requires threats **and** assurances.

For a defensive-minded Russia, military modernization improves its ability to defend itself. Although Western analysts highlight how Russia is spending heavily on offensive and A2/AD systems, they forget that such capabilities:

are particularly indistinguishable from Russia's defenses ringed around Saint Petersburg and Kaliningrad. The heavy concentration of Russian forces in regions that border on the Baltic States also reflects the concentration of Russia's population and industry in those very same regions.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, given the degree to which Russia ignored its conventional forces after the Cold War, it inevitably had to invest heavily in restoring them once it had the financial means.<sup>29</sup> Finally, a growing number of Russian military analysts believe that precision, long-range weapons are revolutionizing warfare.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, they believe that the offense will become the best defense in future wars. Such views explain why Russia might pursue offensive weapons despite preferring the status quo, nor are these views unprecedented. According to some scholars, European great powers held similar beliefs before World War I.<sup>31</sup>

The policy implications of the defensive model differ significantly from those of the revisionist model. Deterring a defensive-minded Russia should be

relatively easy because it is driven by fear and already prefers the status quo. Accordingly, Russia and NATO can coexist. Russia claims as much in its *2015 National Security Strategy*, suggesting:

the Russian Federation is prepared for the development of relations with NATO based on equality for the purpose of strengthening general security in the Euro-Atlantic region, assuming NATO is willing to take into account Russian interests and respect international law.<sup>32</sup>

Naturally, the United States cannot completely rule out a surprise, large-scale attack against its Baltic allies. Nevertheless, a surprise attack only makes sense if two things are true: first, that Russia feels existentially threatened by something that the United States and NATO have done; and second, that Russia believes the state of military technology favors the offense over the defense. That said, deterring a defensive-minded Russia should be possible with a relatively light and inexpensive military footprint. Assuaging Russia's fears will prove more challenging.

In the wake of Russia's 2008 and 2014 invasions, not to mention its ongoing operations in Ukraine, the United States and NATO had to establish a forward presence in the Baltic States to reassure those states. However, doing so risks justifying Russian paranoia. Thus far, NATO and the United States have primarily focused on reassuring their Baltic allies. Nevertheless, even with these relatively modest measures:

it is already obvious Russia is not interpreting NATO's actions in the spirit intended by the alliance, that is, as defensive measures aimed predominantly at reassuring NATO member states close to its borders.<sup>33</sup>

The United States must thread a needle between doing too little and too much. If the Baltic States believe that the United States is doing too little, then they may embrace armament programs that only deepen regional insecurity. If Russia believes the United States is doing too much, then it might find preemption or expansion necessary.

## **Summary**

The primary goal of this discussion is to ensure logical consistency between threat assessments and policy implications. Russia cannot be at once relentless in its pursuit of imperial restoration and easy to deter with a small company of U.S. troops in each individual Baltic country. Conversely, Russia cannot be so fearful and protective of the status quo that divisions of NATO forces must be placed on its borders. Policy must flow logically from assessments with the understanding that intentions are hard to divine, and that estimating them is prone to error. However, ascertaining the willingness of Russia to mount attacks and to accept costs is only part of the deterrence equation. Any analysis must incorporate Russia's ability to mount an attack.

## **RUSSIAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES**

Russia enjoys a highly favorable balance of power in the Baltic region.<sup>34</sup> Leaving aside its nuclear forces, consider how Russia can project conventional military power on the ground, at sea, and in the air. Since the military reforms of 2010, its forces have been divided between four military districts. Headquartered in Saint Petersburg, Russia's Western Military District is most relevant to NATO, given its proximity. Of the four

military districts, it also features the largest concentration of Russian military assets, with at least 300,000 troops. On the ground, it includes the 6th Army, 20th Army, and 1st Guards Tank Army; whereas, on the sea, it comprises the Baltic Fleet and the Northern Fleet of the Russian Navy. The Baltic Fleet is based mainly in the seaport town of Baltiysk in Kaliningrad and boasts an arsenal of several submarines and about 50 surface ships. The Western Military District also includes three divisions of airborne troops, as well as the 6th Air Force and the Air Defence Army.<sup>35</sup> By contrast, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have about 29,000 military personnel collectively, with Lithuania accounting for over half that number, and no fighter jets or modern main battle tanks of their own.<sup>36</sup>

As if this military imbalance were not bad enough, Russia also appears to benefit from favorable geography. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are huddled together on the Baltic Sea, attached to the rest of NATO on land only through the so-called Suwałki Gap—a land corridor between Lithuania and Poland flanked by Belarus and Kaliningrad. Russia might exploit these apparent advantages in several ways. It could target the Suwałki Gap, preventing NATO reinforcements from reaching the Baltic allies. Russia is already making efforts to militarize Kaliningrad in order to create a so-called A2/AD bubble. Locally based air defense systems and ballistic missiles could thus complicate NATO efforts to assist the Baltic countries by way of air and sea.<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, the eastern contiguity of the three Baltic countries with Russia, and the relative flatness of their territory, exposes them to a potential invasion force that could capture the cities of Riga and Tallinn within days.<sup>38</sup> Poland has a better geographic position, but its location on the western

side of the Sarmatic Plain exposes it to land invasion from the direction of the Russian city of Smolensk.<sup>39</sup>

Beyond geography and size, Russia is amidst an extensive modernization program to improve the quality of its conventional forces. Two factors encouraged this change. The first was the experience of the 1990s and early 2000s, when neglect and unsuccessful reforms made the Russian military beset by “top-heavy prestige, irrational deployment patterns, plummeting morale and occupational prestige, poor training, [and] outdated equipment.”<sup>40</sup> Protracted warfare in the Caucasus aggravated these problems, despite Russia’s success in quashing secessionist movements in Chechnya. The second was the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, which came on the heels of a major reform project. Though Russia achieved military victory within 5 days, the conflict revealed major problems with its command and control, infantry tactics, intelligence gathering, information technology, and precision-guided munitions.<sup>41</sup>

Dissatisfaction with the 2008 war prompted a new round of even more radical reforms. These changes were designed to streamline administrative structures, reduce the size of the high command, and increase the efficiency and responsiveness of the military.<sup>42</sup> The aforementioned Western Military District was a direct result of these reforms. It is an amalgamation of the Moscow and Leningrad districts, and integrates the ground, air, and naval forces contained within those former zones. Other initiatives to improve readiness have included large-scale snap exercises that test the ability of airborne forces and brigades to deploy within 24 hours.<sup>43</sup> The post-2008 reforms also precipitated a massive procurement program, whereby Russian military spending has grown from \$44.3 billion

in 2011 to about \$80.3 billion in 2014.<sup>44</sup> These expenditures served to acquire new land systems in addition to next generation drones, command and control networks, fighter jets, tanks, and warships.<sup>45</sup>

This modernization program is not strictly conventional. Russia's nuclear forces have also seen important changes and upgrades. Russia's 2014 *Military Doctrine* apparently lowered the threshold for nuclear use during a conflict, generating speculation that Russia might use a nuclear strike to de-escalate hostilities against an ally or its vital interests in the conventional domain.<sup>46</sup> Lending credence to these concerns is how Russia has deployed nuclear-capable, short-range Iskander-M ballistic missiles to Kaliningrad that are able to strike NATO capitals, including Warsaw.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Russia's nuclear modernization program has meant new intermediate-range, ground-launched cruise missiles, nuclear torpedoes, depth charges, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles.<sup>48</sup> Although some experts predict that Russia will remain compliant with New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), many worry about its willingness to deploy systems that were non-compliant with the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty.<sup>49</sup> Russian military exercises that simulate nuclear attacks, and statements by Russian politicians approving the use of nuclear weapons in situations that do not involve threats to Russian territory, only serve to deepen suspicion.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, Russian special operations forces ("Spetsnaz," short for *spetsialnoe naznachenie*) constitute another important capability. The most relevant Spetsnaz are drawn from the Main Intelligence Directorate, the Federal Security Service, the Foreign Intelligence Service, the Special Operations Command, and the 45th Special Forces Regiment of the

Airborne.<sup>51</sup> These forces have also seen major changes to their organization and doctrine following the 2008 Russia-Georgia war.<sup>52</sup> Spetsnaz provide the military element of so-called hybrid warfare since they could undertake covert activities intended to soften targets through subterfuge or to undertake special reconnaissance ahead of kinetic operations. Spetsnaz may have engaged in such activities in Crimea just before its formal annexation by Russia.<sup>53</sup> Concerns abound in the Baltic countries that Russia would similarly use Spetsnaz forces against them, either to seize small portions of territory or to destabilize local society.<sup>54</sup>

To be sure, Russia does not appear to view these capabilities in isolation from one another. Dima Adamsky argues that Russia practices what he calls “cross-domain coercion” that:

operates under the aegis of the Russian nuclear arsenal and aims to manipulate the adversary’s perception, to maneuver its decision-making process, and to influence its strategic behavior while minimizing . . . the scale of kinetic force use.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, Kristin Ven Bruusgaard highlights how Russia practices “strategic deterrence,” in which it uses a “coordinated system of military and non-military . . . measures taken consecutively or simultaneously . . . with the goal of deterring military action entailing damage of a strategic character.”<sup>56</sup>

Russian conceptions of new-generation warfare fit these descriptions. Associated with Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, this notion of warfare sees wartime and peacetime as becoming increasingly blurred with one another. Accordingly, states use non-military, non-kinetic measures to obscure their aggressive intentions, sometimes making

rhetorical appeals to humanitarian interventions in order to fool international audiences. Economic sanctions, disrupted diplomatic ties, and political pressure can still constitute war and, therefore, states only resort to employing military power in the advanced stages of a conflict.<sup>57</sup> Russia thus has a holistic and integrative view of how military and non-military tools can be coercive, regardless of whether kinetic operations are taking place. That said, notwithstanding how this implied definition of war encompasses non-violence, we should emphasize that this view of coercion is not unique to Russian defense planners, and we would be wrong to overstate the importance of Gerasimov's doctrinal writings.<sup>58</sup> Chinese political elites see propaganda as a useful adjunct to hard power, whereas American decision-makers understood the value of psychological warfare during the Cold War.<sup>59</sup>

## **RUSSIAN HANDICAPS AND VULNERABILITIES**

There is a tendency within policy and scholarly literature to portray Russia as a giant that has the power to impose its will unilaterally on its much smaller neighbors. However, as one of our interviewees reminded us, "it is important not to overestimate the adversary just as much as it is important not to underestimate it."<sup>60</sup> Almost stereotypically, observers ascribe to Russia a high degree of pain tolerance—a belief perhaps inspired by how the Soviet Union incurred massive battlefield losses during World War II. Although we cannot identify the pain threshold above which Russia incurs unacceptable costs, we believe that Russia would almost certainly incur significant costs if it were to launch a major attack against NATO, even if nuclear weapons were not used. In the following discussion, we review Russian weaknesses



and handicaps to identify possible opportunities for NATO members to bolster the alliance's northeastern flank.

### **Weakness One: Local Escalation Dominance Without Global Dominance**

Russian military capabilities are impressive at the local level, but they lose their luster once we adopt a global perspective. Simply put, Russia has local escalation dominance vis-à-vis neighbors to its immediate west, but it does not have global escalation dominance vis-à-vis NATO. Russia shares borders not only with NATO members to its west but also China and Japan to its east. It needs a large security apparatus to address multiple threats both within and outside its borders. Russia also faces unfavorable demographic trends, limiting the recruitment pool and reducing prospects for future economic growth.<sup>61</sup> Russia thus faces a disadvantageous global balance of power that will become even more unfavorable as time goes by. Russia is outmatched by the United States and will be outmatched, if it is not already, by China. Because of U.S. military capabilities, NATO is in a more advantageous situation. Total NATO defense expenditures exceed those of Russia by a factor of 10. Even if we exclude U.S. defense expenditures, European NATO members still spend more than twice as much on their militaries than Russia. Of course, European allies vary in their operational readiness and willingness to fight Russia. However, because the United States has a significant nuclear weapons arsenal, any overt attack against a NATO member could trigger Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, creating escalatory dynamics that might go beyond what Russia might find acceptable.<sup>62</sup>

The irony is that Russia has been modernizing its forces and incorporating so-called new generation warfare into its doctrine not out of strength, but out of weakness. Russia used “little green men” in Crimea to create enough confusion that more powerful, outside actors were unsure of how to respond. Little green men also served to deter an unwanted response, lest the United States and its NATO partners provide Ukraine with lethal arms or significant diplomatic support.<sup>63</sup> However, even with respect to Ukraine, the Kremlin has experienced difficulties in achieving desirable military and political outcomes. It expanded its support for separatist forces in eastern Ukraine during the summer of 2014 precisely because Ukrainian forces were beating back rebels in the Donbas region.<sup>64</sup> Crimea was relatively easy to take because Russia already had a significant military presence there. Crimeans were much more favorably predisposed to Russia and leaving Ukraine.<sup>65</sup> If eastern Ukraine was supposed to be an easy case for Russia to use its military power for political gain, then the experience must have been a sobering lesson for Moscow.<sup>66</sup>

The fact that Russia increased its defense spending by 70 percent since 2008 seems less impressive when we remember that Russia allowed its conventional forces to fall into disrepair in the 1990s.<sup>67</sup> The Soviet Union was spending nearly US\$300 billion per year on defense at the end of the Cold War. By 1998, Russian defense spending fell to US\$21 billion.<sup>68</sup> In fact, Russia’s modernization spending might be “salvaging measures that were long overdue, rather than *per se* as a quest for ‘remilitarization’ [*italics in original*].”<sup>69</sup> Some analysts even cast Russia’s current spending spree in a positive light. Bettina Renz suggests:

although a stronger Russian conventional military poses certain challenges to NATO and the West, it is clear further decay would have been a poor alternative . . . there is the danger that insecurity can pressure an adversary to adopt competitive and threatening policies. This is particularly dangerous if the only tools available for pursuing such policies are nuclear weapons.<sup>70</sup>

Although we are more skeptical than Renz of the intent behind Russia's reform and modernization efforts, Russia's defense budget remains small relative to that of the United States and its allies. In 2016, Russia spent US\$58.9 billion on defense, whereas NATO's 29 members collectively spent almost US\$1 trillion.<sup>71</sup> The United States still spent US\$604.5 billion despite sequestration.<sup>72</sup>

Nor will a spending spree solve all of the Russian military's myriad problems. Many Russian units, particularly non-specialized, general-purpose forces, have yet to benefit from Russia's increased defense budgets. Instead, modernization spending has disproportionately gone to elite special operations and airborne units. Elite units of this sort may be useful for the sorts of operations conducted in Crimea or eastern Ukraine, but the difficulties experienced by Russia in the latter region suggests key limits to their effectiveness. Russia would require more than elite troops to mount a large-scale invasion. To launch a major invasion against the Baltic States, Russia would inevitably have to rely on its general purpose forces. These forces still largely consist of conscripts equipped with outdated weapons, vehicles, and gear.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, because of Western sanctions, Russia's military has had difficulty importing advanced weapons. Nor is indigenous production a viable substitute. Historically, Russia's defense industry has proven incapable

of keeping pace with U.S. technological superiority.<sup>74</sup> Many Russian ground units thus rely on upgraded and updated Soviet-era weapons.<sup>75</sup> For all of these reasons, Russian operations in Crimea and Ukraine did not reveal much in terms of Russia's ability to wage a prolonged, high-intensity, combined arms fight against a first-rate adversary.<sup>76</sup>

### **Weakness Two: Kaliningrad and the Suwałki Gap**

Russia is apparently using Kaliningrad to build an A2/AD bubble in the Baltic region. In an invasion scenario, Russia could use long-range precision weapons to "close the Suwałki Gap," preventing NATO from reinforcing the Baltic States by land. However, we think the Suwałki Gap is not as much of a liability as commonly assumed.<sup>77</sup> To begin with, the Suwałki Gap exists only on paper. Lines on a map, not geography or impassible terrain, create the gap. Provided it has the political will, NATO could bypass the gap by pushing reinforcements through Belarus (or even Kaliningrad). NATO leaders might be willing to risk horizontal escalation since Russia would have trouble isolating the Baltic States without resorting to a major offensive.

Similarly, the Kaliningrad enclave represents a potential hostage that NATO could use as leverage against Moscow. As Stephan Frühling and Guillaume Lasconjarias write, "making use of the A2/AD capabilities in the Kaliningrad enclave, which is isolated from the Russian mainland itself and hence liable to be besieged by NATO, also represents a strategic gamble for Russia."<sup>78</sup> Similarly, in his fictional novel about a Russian invasion of the region, former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe General

Richard Shirreff depicts the capture by NATO special operations forces of Russian nuclear-tipped Iskander missiles and exchanging them for the withdrawal of Russian forces.<sup>79</sup> Thus, NATO could develop offensive capabilities that put Russian military assets located in Kaliningrad at risk, thereby fixing them into position. Because most of the land forces stationed in the Russian exclave are defensive, NATO could isolate them with its own fighter jets and air defense batteries.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, A2/AD weapons in Kaliningrad are particularly vulnerable, given the enclave's lack of strategic depth. A Russian effort to close the gap from Belarusian territory would provide the United States and NATO with a *casus belli* to strike targets inside Belarus (even beyond those being used for A2/AD purposes), and to use Belarusian territory as an alternate route to send reinforcements into Lithuania. Thus, although Kaliningrad may be an asset in the opening phases of an actual militarized conflict between Russia and NATO, the strategic advantages it gives Russia will fade quickly as that conflict progresses.

Finally, Russia needs the Suwałki Gap almost as much as NATO does. Though cut off from Russia by over 350 kilometers at the narrowest point, Kaliningrad is about a fifth of that distance away from Russia's only regional ally, Belarus. Assuming Belarus gives Russia *carte blanche* to maneuver forces through Belarusian territory—an assumption we challenge below and in chapter 3—the Suwałki Gap would become the shortest land bridge to Kaliningrad. Since NATO will try to prevent Russia from resupplying and reinforcing Kaliningrad via the Baltic Sea in a major conflict, Russia may need to use the Suwałki Gap instead. Even if Russian A2/AD assets managed to close the gap to NATO, the United States and NATO

could just as easily close the gap to Russia, turning the corridor into a 110-kilometer no man's land.<sup>81</sup>

### **Weakness Three: Belarus**

Many analyses gloss over Belarus and assume that it would submit to Moscow in any crisis scenario. Though identifying Belarus as an extension of Russia may be a useful planning assumption, doing so risks overlooking potential opportunities that could benefit NATO.<sup>82</sup> First, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko has expressed major policy disagreements with Putin in the past, especially in regard to how Russia handles its territorial disputes.<sup>83</sup> Second, despite Belarus' participation in Russian military exercises, uneven integration characterizes their two armed forces. Though parts of the Belarusian Army are questionable in their loyalty toward Minsk, Belarus has been reluctant to provide basing to Russian military assets.<sup>84</sup> For example, it has stymied efforts by Russia to forward deploy fighter jets and other military assets on its territory.<sup>85</sup> It has also been slow in doing its part to develop air defense systems with Russia. Third, one may reasonably conclude that Lukashenko's primary goal is to retain political power in Belarus, having retained tight rule over the country since becoming President in 1994. He may be averse to participating in any offensive military operation that could further destabilize the region or expose him to a NATO counterattack.<sup>86</sup>

U.S. and NATO defense planners might also be able to use Belarus as an early warning indicator that Russia is preparing for a large-scale invasion. Politically, Lukashenko could attempt to extract concessions from Russia because Russian forces will need to

use Belarusian territory to reach Lithuania and Poland, or to compensate him in the likely event that U.S. and NATO forces strike targets inside Belarus. At a minimum, U.S. and European human intelligence assets can attempt to detect internal bargaining between Lukashenko and Putin. At a maximum, the United States (or an intermediary) can covertly signal that it will avoid striking targets inside Belarus, provided the regime provides early warning that an attack is imminent. However, even if such attempts to create and exploit cleavages between Minsk and Moscow fail, Belarus can still help the United States and NATO detect preparations for a worst-case scenario invasion since large-scale invasions require large-scale logistical preparations. Because Belarus borders three of NATO's five allies in the region, Russia will inevitably need to use it for staging, transit, medical evacuation, maintenance, and command and control.

Russia will also have trouble concealing the kinds of preparations needed to launch a massive fait accompli attack. For example, in analyzing wargamed invasions of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, one study assumes that Russia would employ 4 tank battalions, 5 mechanized infantry battalions, 5 motorized battalions, and 10 artillery battalions.<sup>87</sup> A force of this size contains hundreds of tracked and wheeled vehicles.<sup>88</sup> Weight and size restrictions mean that tank and mechanized infantry battalions must use larger roads and stronger bridges. Furthermore, tracked vehicles such as main battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles break down frequently, therefore requiring an extensive network of maintenance points and spare parts. Russian planners will also prefer to use trains and heavy equipment transport trucks to move tanks and infantry fighting vehicles to their staging areas rather

than driving them under their own power. Finally, invasion units will require thousands of tons of fuel, water, food, and ammunition per day. To offer an approximate sense of this logistical challenge, a U.S. airborne brigade of 3,400 soldiers—a relatively “light” unit in terms of logistical demands—uses 300 tons worth of food, water, fuel, and ammunition per day while in combat.<sup>89</sup> Armored units use at least twice as much material. Russia will have to preposition most of these supplies, preparations that the United States and NATO can readily detect using human, signals, and satellite intelligence.

Although some senior U.S. and NATO commanders argue that the West cannot distinguish between preparations for a large-scale exercise and preparations for a large-scale attack, such claims do not withstand serious scrutiny. As we discuss below, a fundamental difference exists between a snap exercise and a snap invasion: Russia knows that the United States and NATO can resist and retaliate against an invasion. Therefore, even if the Kremlin hopes to achieve a best-case, lightning-quick, fait accompli land grab, it must prepare for a worst-case scenario in which its limited operation spirals uncontrollably into an unlimited war with NATO. The logistical preparations needed to support a snap exercise of the largest size, scale, and duration imaginable still pale in comparison to the types of preparations Russia would need to take to hedge against the risk of a general war against the West.

#### **Weakness Four: Logistics and Supply**

Observers have decried the snap exercises that Russia has undertaken in its western and southern territories since 2009. These exercises are an opportunity



for regular and reserve units to test their readiness in the event of large-scale war. Some have involved as many as 155,000 military personnel,<sup>90</sup> and they appear to demonstrate that Russia can transport 60,000 troops by air in 72 hours.<sup>91</sup> Many analysts thus worry that these snap exercises will help Russia launch an invasion of Baltic territory at relatively short notice and thus achieve strategic surprise.

As impressive as these snap exercises are, they do not necessarily indicate that Russia is preparing to attack NATO. Renz suggests, "Russia is using its military power for swaggering," enhancing its image such that other countries take it more seriously.<sup>92</sup> The ultimate aim may not be to undertake aggressive expansionism, but to raise the international prestige of Russia through these displays of force. Moreover, snap exercises give military authorities an opportunity to identify corruption and deception, that is, to ensure the success of military reforms, since organizational biases and impediments have thwarted previous efforts. The June 2016 snap inspection of the Baltic Fleet led to the dismissal of many high-ranking officers, including the fleet's commander, precisely because the inspection revealed mismanagement and misreporting.<sup>93</sup>

More importantly, snap exercises offer a poor predictor of how Russia would supply its military forces in wartime. Lift capabilities are challenging even for the United States, which, for all of its capability gaps, still has more experience projecting power than any other country in the world. Transporting 60,000 soldiers in 72 hours is an impressive capability. Nevertheless, U.S. and NATO planners should avoid overestimating Russia's capabilities by "over-learning" from its snap exercises. First, these exercises take place during peacetime. Second, the logistical footprint needed

to support an invasion and subsequent occupation is much larger than the footprint needed to support a peacetime exercise, especially if Russian planners have to counter U.S. and NATO efforts in interdicting supplies and harassing rear areas. To be sure, U.S. and NATO planners must prepare for Russia to do the same. However, in an invasion scenario, the United States and its allies have the advantage of defending and falling back on their support assets, whereas Russia would have to move further away from its rear areas. Simply put, the fact that Russia can transport 60,000 troops into an uncontested environment for a peacetime exercise in 72 hours does not mean that it can transport 60,000 troops into a highly contested environment for invasion and occupation in the same period of time.

## **CONCLUSION: CAN RUSSIA MOUNT A SURPRISE ATTACK?**

Strategist Richard Betts once observed, “most major wars since 1939 have begun with surprise attacks.”<sup>94</sup> Conversely, others argue that conventional deterrence is more likely to work when the adversary does not believe it can achieve a quick victory.<sup>95</sup> To what extent can Russia suddenly launch an attack in the hopes for obtaining its battlefield objectives in as short a time as possible?

Answering this question requires, first, determining whether Russia would even want to launch a surprise attack and, second, whether Russia has the capabilities to do so. A surprise attack could reflect the logics of both the revisionist and defensive models of Russian behavior. According to the revisionist model, Russia would launch a surprise attack in order to maximize gains at the expense of NATO. It would only

do so when the timing is right, however. By contrast, the defensive model holds that Russia would launch a surprise attack in order to preempt what it perceives to be militarily or politically subversive operations by NATO. These two models suggest different postures that NATO should adopt, from a hard-deterrence posture implied by the revisionist model to a more conciliatory one based on reassurance implied by the defensive model. Thankfully, Russia might not have the capabilities to launch a large-scale surprise attack owing to various difficulties it would experience in climbing the escalatory ladder vis-à-vis NATO, defending Kaliningrad, compelling Belarus, and managing logistics and supply.

The analysis so far has abstracted the region; that is, we have not yet considered differences in the national attributes of Poland and the Baltic States in our assessment regarding the likelihood of Russian aggression in the region. The next chapter develops our analysis further by disaggregating the region.

## ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 1

1. Christopher H. Achen and Duncan Snidal, "Rational Deterrence Theory and Comparative Case Studies," *World Politics*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 1989, pp. 150-152.

2. Some scholars distinguish between motivations and intentions since "motives are primitive, that is, they are inherent features of states. In contrast, intentions—what a state intends to do—result from the interaction of a state with its international environment." We argue that isolating one from the other is both arbitrary and impractical. We thus use the term intentions to refer to both intentions and motivations. Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 38.

3. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976; Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," in Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp. 3-22; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992; Jerel A. Rosati, "The Power of Human Cognition in the Study of World Politics," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2000, pp. 45-75; Janice Gross Stein, "Psychological Explanations of International Decision Making and Collective Behavior," in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons, eds., *Handbook of International Relations*, London, UK: Sage, 2012, pp. 195-220; and Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.

4. Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1978, pp. 167-214; and Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, pp. 14-27.

5. Many analysts, including prominent Russian strategists, think cyberweapons, global precision strike, drones, and other capabilities make attacking easier than defending. Alexander Velez-Green, *The Unsettling View from Moscow: Russia's Strategic Debate on a Doctrine of Pre-emption*, Washington, DC: Center for New American Security, 2017; and Michael Kofman and Andrey Sushentsov, *What Makes Great Power War Possible*, Moscow, Russia: Valdai Club, 2016, available from <http://valdaiclub.com/files/10683/>.

6. Our schema reflects the divide in international relations theory among structural realists. Offensive realism sees great powers as being so uncertain of each other's intentions that they strive to maximize power through regional hegemony. By contrast, defensive realism holds that states prefer the status quo and would only undertake aggression under narrow circumstances. See Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Security Seeking Under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2000/2001, pp. 128-161.

7. For different conceptions of Russian nationalist interests, see Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 69-87.

8. Douglas Mastriano, *Project 1704: A U.S. Army War College Analysis of Russian Strategy in Eastern Europe, an Appropriate U.S. Response, and the Implications for U.S. Landpower*, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2015, pp. 33, 73; Statement of Dr. Fiona Hill, House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Hearing: Understanding and Deterring Russia: U.S. Policies and Strategies, February 10, 2016, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO), 2016; Statement of Dr. Evelyn N. Farkas, House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Hearing: Understanding and Deterring Russia: U.S. Policies and Strategies, February 10, 2016, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., Washington, DC: GPO, 2016; R. Reed Anderson et al., *Strategic Landpower and a Resurgent Russia: An Operational Approach to Deterrence*, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2016, pp. 35-37; and Bettina Renz, "Why Russia is Reviving Its Conventional Military Power," *Parameters*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2016, p. 26.

9. Stephen Kotkin, "The Resistible Rise of Vladimir Putin's Russia: Russia's Nightmare Dressed as a Daydream," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 140, 2015, p. 140; Statement of Hill; and Anderson et al., *Strategic Landpower*, p. 6. See also Alexander B. Downes and Lindsey A. O'Rourke, "You Can't Always Get What You Want: Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Seldom Improves Interstate Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2016, pp. 43-89.

10. Note that revisionist states can vary in whether they have limited or unlimited aims. That is, some revisionist states seek to change the status quo slightly through, for example, a grab of strategically valuable territory. Other revisionist states might be bent on regional, if not global, hegemony. We do not emphasize this analytical distinction in our discussion of the two models because we believe that it is hard to discern ex ante the extent of the aims a revisionist state might have. Moreover, given the power disparities found in the Baltic context, limited revisionist aims might nevertheless be interpreted as unlimited. For the standard discussion of revisionism in international politics, see

Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1994, pp. 72-107.

11. Statement of Anna Borshchevskaya, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Hearing: Russia's Strategic Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa, June 15, 2017, 115th Cong., 1st Sess., Washington, DC: GPO, 2017.

12. Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. 1-9; and Statement of Borshchevskaya, June 15, 2017.

13. Statement of Pavlo Klimkin, Senate, State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Subcommittee, Committee on Appropriations, Hearing to Broaden Understanding of Russia's Policies and Intentions Toward Specific Countries in Europe, March 7, 2017, 115th Cong., 1st Sess., Washington, DC: GPO, 2017.

14. Interview with government officials, Ministry of Defense, Riga, Latvia, June 2017; Interview with Major General Meelis Kiili, Commander of the Estonian Defence League, Tallinn, Estonia, June 7, 2017; Mastriano et al., *Project 1704*, p. 73; Anderson et al., *Strategic Landpower*, pp. 47-48; Statement of Dr. Evelyn N. Farkas, February 10, 2016; and Statement of Polish Ambassador Piotr Wilczek, United States Congress, Senate, State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Subcommittee, Committee on Appropriations, Hearing to Broaden Understanding of Russia's Policies and Intentions Toward Specific Countries in Europe, March 7, 2017, 115th Cong., 1st Sess., Washington, DC: GPO, 2017.

15. Interview with Saulius Gasiūnas, Director, Euro-Atlantic Cooperation, Ministry of National Defense, Vilnius, Lithuania, May 30, 2017.

16. Statement of Georgian Ambassador David Bakradze, Senate, State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Subcommittee, Committee on Appropriations, Hearing to Broaden Understanding of Russia's Policies and Intentions Toward Specific Countries in Europe, March 7, 2017, 115th Cong., 1st Sess., Washington, DC: GPO, 2017.

17. Statement of Polish Ambassador Piotr Wilczek, March 7, 2017.

18. David Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016.

19. Vladimir Putin, *Russian National Security Strategy*, Moscow, Russia, December 2015; John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5, 2014, pp. 77-89; Toal, *Near Abroad*; and Renz, "Why Russia."

20. Putin, *Russian National Security Strategy*; and Statement of Hill.

21. Matthew Rojansky, "Prepared Testimony for U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats: Hearing on 'U.S. Policy Toward the Baltic States'," March 22, 2017, p. 5, available from <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA14/20170322/105756/HHRG-115-FA14-Wstate-RojanskyM-20170322.pdf>.

22. Michael Kofman, "Fixing NATO Deterrence in the East or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love NATO's Crushing Defeat by Russia," *War on the Rocks*, May 12, 2016; and Rojansky, "Prepared Testimony," p. 5.

23. Statement of Hill.

24. Putin, *Russian National Security Strategy*; and Polina Sinovets and Bettina Renz, "Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine and Beyond: Threat Perceptions, Capabilities and Ambitions," NATO Defense College Research Paper, No. 117, July 2015, pp. 2-3.

25. Sinovets and Renz, "Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine," pp. 2-3.

26. Rojansky, "Prepared Testimony," p. 5.

27. Ibid.

28. Kofman, "Fixing NATO Deterrence"; and Rojansky, "Prepared Testimony," March 22, 2017, p. 5.

29. Renz, "Why Russia"; and Kofman, "Fixing NATO Deterrence."

30. Velez-Green, *The Unsettling View*, pp. 5-10.

31. See, e.g., Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1984, pp. 58-108.

32. Russia claims as much in its 2015 *National Security Strategy*.

33. Renz, "Why Russia," pp. 34-35.

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36. IISS, *The Military Balance 2017*, p. 67.

37. Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A. Hunzeker, "Confronting the Anti-Access/Area Denial and Precision Strike Challenge in the Baltic Region," *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 161, No. 5, 2016, pp. 12-18.

38. Shlapak and Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence*.

39. Interview with Jacek Bartosiak, Director of Wargaming and Simulations, The Pulaski Foundation, Warsaw, Poland, June 8, 2017.

40. Zoltan Barany, "Defence Reform, Russian Style: Obstacles, Options, Opposition," *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 1, March 2005, p. 33.



41. Athena Bryce-Rogers, "Russian Military Reform in the Aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War," *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2013, pp. 348-354.

42. Mark Galeotti, *The Modern Russian Army 1992-2016*, Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2017, pp. 26-27.

43. Gustav Gressel, "Russia's Quiet Military Revolution, and What It Means for Europe," *European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief*, London, UK: European Council on Foreign Relations Policy, October 2015, p. 4.

44. "Military Expenditure by Country in Constant (2015) US\$ m., 1988-1996," Solna, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, available from <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Milex-constant-2015-USD.pdf>.

45. Peter Doran, *Land Warfare in Europe: Lessons and Recommendations from the War in Ukraine*, Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2016, pp. 2-4; Douglas Mastriano et al., *Project 1721: A U.S. Army War College Assessment of Russian Strategy in Eastern Europe and Recommendations on How to Leverage Land-power to Maintain the Peace*, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2017, p. 114.

46. Nikolai N. Sokov, "Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike 'De-Escalation'," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 13, 2014, available from <http://thebulletin.org/why-russia-calls-limited-nuclear-strike-de-escalation>. That said, the 2014 *Military Doctrine* only decrees that Russia:

shall reserve for itself the right to employ nuclear weapons in response to the use against it and/or its allies of nuclear and other kinds of weapons of mass destruction, as well as in the case of aggression against the Russian Federation with use of conventional weapons when the state's very existence has been threatened.

Russian Federation, *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, approved by Russian Federation President V. Putin, December 26, 2014, Sec. 27.

47. Such deployments are consistent with a strategy of asymmetric escalation, which envisions the rapid first use of nuclear

weapons in response to conventional attack. Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 20.

48. Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Russian Nuclear Forces, 2016," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 72, No. 3, 2016, p. 125; and Jacek Durkalec and Matthew Kroenig, "NATO's Nuclear Deterrence: Closing Credibility Gaps," *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2016, p. 43.

49. Reached in 1987, this agreement prohibits the United States and the Soviet Union (now Russia) from deploying nuclear and conventional, short-range and intermediate-range missiles as well as their launchers. See, e.g., Ulrich Kühn and Anna Péczeli, "Russia, NATO, and the INF Treaty," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2017, pp. 66-99.

50. Kristensen and Norris, "Russian Nuclear Forces," p. 127.

51. Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas," *Parameters*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2016, pp. 14-15.

52. Tor Bukkvoll, "Military Innovation under Authoritarian Government—The Case of Russian Special Operations Forces," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 5, 2015, pp. 602-625.

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55. Dima Adamsky, "Cross Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy," *Proliferation Papers* 54, Paris, France: French Institute of International Relations Security Studies Center, November 2015, p. 7.

56. Russian Ministry of Defence quoted in Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Strategic Deterrence," *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 4, 2016, pp. 10-11.

57. Charles K. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," *Military Review*, Vol. 96, No. 1, 2016, p. 34; and Mark Galeotti, "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War," *In Moscow's*

*Shadows*, July 6, 2014, available from <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>.

58. Roger N. McDermott, "Does Russia Have a Gerasimov Doctrine?" *Parameters*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2016, pp. 97-105.

59. See, e.g., Kingsley Edney, "Soft Power and the Chinese Propaganda System," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 21, No. 78, 2012, pp. 899-914; and Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America's Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000.

60. Interview with Major General Meelis Kiili, Commander of the Estonian Defence League, Tallinn, Estonia, June 7, 2017.

61. For data on Russian demographic trends, see Sergey Aleksashenko, "The Russian Economy in 2050: Heading for Labor-Based Stagnation," Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, April 2, 2015, available from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2015/04/02/the-russian-economy-in-2050-heading-for-labor-based-stagnation/>.

62. Article 5 is not automatically triggered when a NATO ally falls victim to external attack. In addition, its invocation does not oblige NATO members to assist that ally.

63. Lanoszka, "Russian Hybrid Warfare."

64. See Andrew Wilson, "The Donbas in 2014: Explaining Civil Conflict Perhaps, but not Civil War," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 68, No. 4, 2016, pp. 646-649.

65. Toal, *Near Abroad*, pp. 232-236.

66. Some of our interviewees in the Baltic region found cause for optimism in Russia's inability to settle the conflict in eastern Ukraine on favorable terms.

67. Sinovets and Renz, "Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine," p. 4.

68. *Ibid*, pp. 5-6.

69. *Ibid*, p. 6.

70. Renz, "Why Russia," p. 28.
71. James Stavridis, "Testimony to the House Armed Services Committee: Understanding and Deterring Russia," February 10, 2016.
72. IISS, *The Military Balance 2017*, p. 19.
73. Renz, "Why Russia," p. 29.
74. Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US and Israel*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010; Alexander Golts and Michael Kofman, *Russia's Military: Assessment, Strategy and Threat*, Washington, DC: Center on Global Interests, 2016, pp. 3, 6.
75. Golts and Kofman, *Russia's Military*, p. 5.
76. Dmitry Gorenburg, "Crimea Taught Us a Lesson, But Not How the Russian Military Fights," *War on the Rocks*, May 19, 2014, available from <https://warontherocks.com/2014/05/cremea-taught-us-a-lesson-but-not-about-how-the-russian-military-fights/>; and Sinovets and Renz, "Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine," p. 5.
77. Shlapak and Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence*, p. 4; Wesley Clark, Juri Luik, Egon Ramms, and Richard Shirreff, *Closing NATO's Baltic Gap*, Tallinn, Estonia: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2016, p. 12; Gary Schaub, Jr., Martin Murphy, and Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Maritime Warfare," *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 162, No. 1, 2017, p. 33; Leszek Elak and Zdzisław Śliwa, "The Suwałki Gap: NATO's Fragile Hotspot," *Zeszyty Naukowe AON*, Vol. 103, No. 2, 2016, pp. 24-40; and Mastriano et al., *Project 1721*, pp. xxviii, 116.
78. Stephan Frühling and Guillaume Lasconjarias, "NATO, A2/AD and the Kaliningrad Challenge," *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 2, 2016, pp. 96-97.
79. General Sir Richard Shirreff, *War With Russia*, London, UK: Coronet, 2016.
80. Frühling and Lasconjarias, "NATO," p. 107. For a similar strategy in the Western Pacific, see Andrew Krepinevich, "How to

Deter China: The Case for Archipelagic Defense," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 2, 2015, pp. 78-86.

81. Shlapak and Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence*, p. 4.

82. The following discussion draws on Alexander Lano-szka, "The Belarus Factor in European Security," forthcoming in *Parameters*.

83. Yaraslau Kryvoi and Andrew Wilson, "From Sanctions to Summits: Belarus After the Ukraine Crisis," European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Memo, London, UK: European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2015, pp. 5-6.

84. Siarhei Bohdan, "Belarusian Army: Its Capacities and Role in the Region," *Analytical Paper 4*, London, UK: Ostrogorski Centre, 2014, p. 8.

85. Siarhei Bohdan, "Thwarting Plans for a Russian Air-base, Minsk Strengthens Its Air Force," *Belarus Digest*, October 12, 2016, available from <http://belarusdigest.com/story/thwarting-plans-russian-airbase-minsk-strengthens-its-air-force-27550>.

86. Political science research has found that the leadership tenure of warfighting, nondemocratic leaders depends much more on victory than their democratic counterparts. See Alexandre Debs and H. E. Goemans, "Regime Type, the Fate of Leaders, and War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 104, No. 3, 2010, pp. 430-445.

87. Shaplak and Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence*, p. 4.

88. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations*, Washington, DC: GPO, 2017, p. 53.

89. Michael O'Hanlon, *The Science of War: Defense Budgeting, Military Technology, Logistics and Combat Outcomes*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 145.

90. Gudrun Persson, ed., *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective—2016*, FOI-R--4326--SE, Stockholm, Sweden: Swedish Defense Research Agency, December 2016, p. 53.

91. Jeffrey Rathke, "Can NATO Deter Russia in View of the Conventional Imbalance in the East?" Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 30, 2015.

92. Renz, "Why Russia," p. 31.

93. IISS, *The Military Balance 2017*, p. 187.

94. Richard K. Betts, "Surprise Despite Warning: Why Sudden Attacks Succeed," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 95, No. 4, Winter 1980-1981, p. 551.

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## CHAPTER 2. ALLIED WORRIES, CAPABILITIES, AND VULNERABILITIES

The previous chapter discussed Russian intentions toward the various North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies in the Baltic region and Russian capabilities arrayed against or near each of them. Yet important differences characterize Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Setting aside Poland's relative territorial depth, a one-size-fits-all approach would be inadequate even for the other three northeastern European countries. Accordingly, reassurance strategies must be sensitive to contextual factors that affect threat assessments, political and military vulnerabilities, and constraints on defense policy.

Two scenarios seem to dominate regional perceptions of how Russia might undertake aggression against Poland and the Baltic States. One is usually cast as the most likely scenario, and consists of so-called hybrid warfare—a term used to describe how a belligerent state might exploit ethnic or economic ties to subvert a target state in the shadow of military power.<sup>1</sup> Recapturing former Soviet or imperial Russian territories, as in the case of Crimea, might not necessarily be the end goal. As Rod Thornton and Manos Karagiannis report:

from a Russian perspective, if Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania can be induced into a state of domestic turmoil, then they will be unable to act as effective NATO allies and thus can once more act as buffer states between core NATO members and Russian territory.<sup>2</sup>

With that said, we want to clarify that hybrid warfare is not a term that Russian military theorists or strategists use. Russia does not have a doctrine for waging



hybrid warfare, even if their descriptions of new generation warfare share the same basic conceptual traits.<sup>3</sup>

The second scenario is generally cast as the most dangerous: a large-scale land grab undertaken by Russia through conventional military means. Such was the subject of a well-cited RAND report on Baltic wargames published months before the 2016 Warsaw Summit. Despite allowing NATO a week of warning, the wargames found that Russian military forces could overrun local forces and reach Riga, Latvia, and Tallinn, Estonia, within 2 or 3 days.<sup>4</sup> Of course, this analysis has become somewhat outdated, thanks to NATO's deployment of four battalion-sized battlegroups and the presence of 5,000 U.S. troops in Poland. Nevertheless, the basic warning still stands: if we only consider force-to-space ratios and hold much else constant, Russia could achieve a *fait accompli* invasion of one or more Baltic countries. We examine the extent to which conventional aggression is likely against each of the three countries.

Some readers may argue that the entire Baltic region—specifically, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—constitute a single area of operations from the perspective of Russian military planning and, therefore, should not be divided up for analytical purposes. This critique has merit: any large-scale attack against any one individual NATO ally would likely lead to horizontal escalation, thereby involving more local NATO allies within the Baltic region. However, hybrid warfare is appealing precisely because Russia could leverage country-specific peculiarities in order to achieve tactical and even strategic objectives. Understanding hybrid warfare risks requires us to grasp local differences.<sup>5</sup>

We examine Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in turn. Table 2-1 summarizes key data on the gross domestic product (GDP), defense spending, population size, population share of Russophones, and territory size. We discuss their military capabilities before assessing their threat perceptions and the mostly likely and most dangerous scenarios of Russian aggression that they face.

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania	Poland
<b>GDP (in billions)</b>	23.5	27.9	42.8	467
<b>Defense/GDP</b>	2.14%	1.47%	1.5%	1.94%
<b>Population (in millions)</b>	1.26	1.97	2.85	38.52
<b>% Russophones</b>	24.8%	25.6%	5.8%	<1.0%
<b>Territory (in square miles)</b>	45.23	64.59	65.3	312.68

**Table 2-1. Key Statistics of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland<sup>6</sup>**

## ESTONIA

The smallest of the three Baltic States in terms of area and population, Estonia is situated on the north-eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. Its location has meant that Estonia has fallen under foreign influence or control for much of its history. Danish and then German elites dominated the territory of present-day Estonia when local urban centers were members of the Hanseatic League. Amid the power struggles among Muscovy, Sweden, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 16th and 17th centuries, Estonian

towns changed hands until the Greater Northern War (1700-1721) ended with the Russian Empire conquering and subjugating the whole of Estonia. A national awakening in Estonian society unfolded during the late 19th century. Estonia achieved independence shortly after World War I. The subsequent period of national sovereignty ended prematurely in 1940. Estonia lost its independence when it fell successively under Soviet, then Nazi-German, and again, Soviet control throughout World War II. It restored its political independence when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.<sup>7</sup>

This brief recapitulation of history illuminates why Estonia remains fearful of Russia, and why it has cultivated extensive linkages with the West since obtaining independence. This strategy has followed two tracks. The first involves membership in the European Union—a move that has consolidated liberal democracy at home and developed economic ties abroad, especially with other northern European countries. The second involves being a NATO ally. Since formally joining the alliance in 2004, Estonia has consistently spent at least 1.5 percent of its GDP on defense. It hosts a NATO Center of Excellence dedicated to cyber security and uses the alliance as a framework for bolstering ties with the United States. Estonia also participates in the U.S. Department of Defense State Partnership Program and a U.S. Department of State initiative called the Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe that strives to enhance economic and defense linkages in the region. Both institutions enjoy wide support in Estonia.<sup>8</sup>

We then discuss Estonia's military capabilities and threat assessments. Without assigning probabilities, we define the most likely scenario of Russian

aggression to consist of hybrid warfare, and the most dangerous to consist of direct military attack. Still, attention to nuance must guide our discussion of these scenarios.

## **Capabilities**

Estonia does not have, nor can it acquire, the robust military capabilities necessary for deterring Russia on its own. However, despite being the fourth-smallest NATO member, Estonia is one of the few allies that have met the 2 percent threshold in its defense spending. Unfortunately, its small size means that it spent just over US\$500 million on defense and received US\$2 million in U.S. foreign military assistance in 2016. With these modest sums, Estonia has chosen to focus on its ground forces. Since reinstating conscription in 2015, it has about 6,400 active duty military personnel—5,700 of which are in its Army. One benefit of reintroducing conscription has been to increase the size of the reserve to about 12,000.

Estonia dedicates its defense expenditures toward equipping and staffing its army as well as improving its critical defense infrastructure for NATO use. Like Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia does not have its own combat air force; as a result, it has relied on the Baltic Air Policing mission since 2004 for its air defense. The Army has 100 armored personnel carriers and large numbers of Javelin anti-tank weapons. Estonia recently purchased 44 additional CV-90 infantry fighting vehicles from the Netherlands to improve its ground combat capability.<sup>9</sup> Estonia's maritime capabilities consist of several minesweepers. It used to participate in the Baltic Naval Squadron alongside Latvia and Lithuania, but has chosen to reorient its activities

under NATO auspices via the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1.<sup>10</sup>

It is also worth mentioning the Estonian Defence League (EDL)—a voluntary territorial defense organization with approximately 15,800 members.<sup>11</sup> The league is a citizens' initiative, which augments Estonia's military capabilities, provides a workforce for civilian support, and assists civil society authorities and police. Despite being larger than the active duty force, the Estonian Government does not include the EDL's budget in official defense spending figures. Together with the Estonian Defense Forces, its primary aim is to protect Estonia from foreign invasion. In wartime, however, the EDL could form the backbone of an organized insurgency capable of making annexation and occupation too costly for Russia to undertake.<sup>12</sup> Though its members come from all parts of Estonia, Russophones are not proportionally represented.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Estonian Russophones trust the EDL more than they trust NATO (36 percent to 22 percent)—a consequence perhaps of being exposed more to anti-NATO broadcasts coming from Russia than to anti-EDL broadcasts.<sup>14</sup>

## **Hybrid Warfare as the Most Likely Scenario**

One consensus view expressed by our interviewees is that hybrid warfare represents the most likely form of Russian aggression. In the words of the Estonian Internal Security Service's Annual Review of 2014:

Behind the escalation and utilization of the problems and related tensions in Estonia . . . lies Russia, with its toolkit of aggressive foreign policy, military activity, special service, information influence operations, and manipulation through the Russian diaspora.<sup>15</sup>

Discussions of Estonia's vulnerability to Russian hybrid warfare invariably focus on the former's Russophone population. Russophones account for approximately 25 percent of the population and reside in urban centers. Many of them relocated to Estonia during Soviet rule. Of the 15 counties that make up Estonia, only one—Ida-Viru in the northeast—has a majority Russophone population. Narva is the largest city in this country and sits on the border with Russia. The attention paid to Russophones is unfortunate: it risks assuming that they constitute a fifth column waiting to be provoked into destabilizing Estonian society and politics. Nevertheless, Vladimir Putin himself has publicly backed the so-called Compatriot Policy, whereby Russia would defend Russophones' rights beyond its borders, and concerns abound as to whether Russia might exploit these ethnic and linguistic linkages with Estonia for its own gain.

According to our interviewees in Estonia, Russian hybrid warfare is the most likely threat precisely because it has already been taking place at least since 2007, if not much earlier.<sup>16</sup> In that year, interethnic tensions between Estonians and Russophones exploded in 3 nights of rioting after the Estonian Government unilaterally decided to relocate a Soviet World War II memorial called the Bronze Soldier. In the weeks following the riots, an extensive cyberattack wreaked havoc on Estonia via email and comment spam, the defacements of political websites, and distributed denial of service attacks. Though Tallinn blamed Moscow for the cyberattack, Russia's complicity remains uncertain, despite the country imposing an economic blockade on Estonia.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, these ethnic tensions erupted in 2007, partly because Estonian and Russophone extremists felt threatened by the

softening boundaries between their respective ethnic groups.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the Bronze Soldier controversy aggravated concerns that Russia is using its so-called Compatriot Policy to undermine Estonia. This policy involves more than asserting the right to defend Russophones abroad. It also involves using various media, legal, and religious organizations to “fight against the falsifiers of history,” especially in regard to how Estonia portrays Soviet actions during and after World War II.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, during the Bronze Soldier controversy, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov condemned Estonia’s “blasphemous attitude towards the memory of those who struggled against fascism.”<sup>20</sup>

Concerns over the susceptibility of Russophones to hybrid warfare are rooted in their legal status. Over half of the Russophone population in Estonia (which amounted to 312,000 in 2016) did not have Estonian citizenship in 2000 and thus have not been able to enjoy the rights and privileges that come with it.<sup>21</sup> Their statelessness is itself a legacy of Estonia’s independence: the new state mainly gave citizenship to those individuals whose relatives were citizens during the interwar period before 1940. Though some of their co-linguists successfully applied for Estonian citizenship in the early 1990s, the application procedure was controversial for many Russophones. It involved demonstrating familiarity with the Estonian language and constitution, taking a loyalty oath, and fulfilling other requirements.<sup>22</sup>

The result is legal ambiguity for many Russophones. In the present-day case of the 90,000 Russophones who reside legally in Estonia, they have undefined citizenships and, thus, alien passports.<sup>23</sup> Due to their stateless status, many experience economic discrimination and suffer alienation from the

political system; they cannot vote or run for office, and they face difficulties in getting jobs. Whereas the unemployment rate among Estonians was 4.2 percent in early 2017, the concurrent unemployment rate for Russophones was 8.7 percent.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, conditions have steadily been improving for Russophones in Estonia. Some even have incentives not to acquire Estonian citizenship since their special status allows them to travel visa-free within the European Union and to Russia. Amended national citizenship laws have made naturalization easier—a move welcomed by the Russian Foreign Ministry.<sup>25</sup> Legislation approved by the Estonian Government in 2014 granted citizenship to all children under the age of 15 who had hitherto undefined citizenship, regardless of the status of their parents. Even before this bill's passage, some optimistic analysts concluded:

in Estonia, ethnicity is not politicized any more, and economic issues, and recently accession to the Euro-zone, have dominated the public debate and rendered the Estonian political path an unprecedented success story among former Soviet republics.<sup>26</sup>

Such declarations may be premature, but we have several reasons to believe that Russia's hybrid warfare efforts have thus far seen very little success. Despite intermittent tensions between the two ethnic groups, overall trends appear positive with respect to the integration of Russophones into Estonian society and politics. Moreover, although attitudes about history and identity might still diverge dramatically between the two groups, such disagreements might not be easily combustible material for Russia to use in fomenting civil unrest.<sup>27</sup> Hybrid warfare ultimately requires collective action. In other words, it only works when



there is both a strong, highly motivated external actor like Russia and a receptive group that is willing to contribute and incur the costs and risks of subverting the government. Insurgents fighting for *Novorossiya* (New Russia) in eastern Ukraine fit the profile. However, the dynamics that engendered that movement do not exist in eastern Estonia, largely because of European integration.<sup>28</sup> As one analysis concludes with respect to Narva:

while Narvan Russian-speakers remain resentful of the Estonian state, they also are wary of Russian overtures for fear of instability and lower living standards. . . . Many Narvans understand and experience firsthand the differences in living standards, stability, and relative openness of Narva, Estonia, and the [European Union] when compared to the Russian Federation.<sup>29</sup>

Provocateurs are necessary, but they are by themselves insufficient.

To be sure, our interviewees expressed different views regarding the responsiveness of Estonia to low-level aggression that might smack of hybrid warfare. Some interviewees noted that protests in Narva would provide NATO with an early warning signal regarding Russian bellicosity.<sup>30</sup> Estonia would respond to such a provocation swiftly, using its local security and police forces to suppress any agitation so as not to lose the initiative to Russia.<sup>31</sup> However, other interviewees contend that legal uncertainty would prevent such a “shoot first, ask questions later” approach. In any situation whereby Estonia is not in a state of war, but must respond to aggressive actions that fall under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, Estonian security forces would be uneasy about carrying out potentially unconstitutional actions, such as shooting suspected

foreign agents or requisitioning private property.<sup>32</sup> Yet others dismiss any such preoccupation with legal frameworks, arguing that the deployment of “little green men” in Estonia presupposes a much larger domestic or international crisis that might render those considerations moot.<sup>33</sup>

### **Direct Military Action as the Most Dangerous Action**

Our interviewees believe a wholesale grab of Estonian territory is highly unlikely, but they do think that Russia might try to seize a small portion of it. One contingency involves Russia taking over Narva, using the “fig leaf of local initiative” in order to assert a plausible justification for intervening.<sup>34</sup> Yet this act of aggression could run into the problems described earlier. Another possibility is that Russia could take Saaremaa and other islands in the West Estonian archipelago. They might do so in order to launch a naval attack on Latvia. Although these islands are Estonian territory, they are situated at the mouth of the Gulf of Riga.<sup>35</sup> Taking these territories would only have the benefit of tactical surprise, not strategic surprise, given Estonian suspicions of Russian intentions.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, in contrast to more subversive activities that make up hybrid warfare, such an action would likely trigger Article 5 considerations because it would represent a clear violation of Estonian territorial integrity and sovereignty. Nuclear escalation might even be possible, thereby presenting a situation of extreme danger for Estonia.<sup>37</sup> Still, in the absence of a full NATO response, Estonia would be easily outmatched so as to lose any set-piece battle against Russia. With that said, Estonia has already prepared for such a contingency with its

focus on irregular warfare and insurgency thanks to the EDL.

## **LATVIA**

Situated between Lithuania and Estonia on the Baltic Sea's eastern shore, Latvia has a relatively extensive coastline thanks to the shallow Gulf of Riga. Historically, the region that makes up contemporary Latvia has experienced much geopolitical tumult throughout history. German crusaders imposed Christianity on local peoples when establishing control over the region. Livonia—as the German crusader state came to be known—developed trade links with Western Europe via Riga's participation in the Hanseatic League. Between the 16th and 17th centuries, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Sweden jostled for local influence. Resolving the question of regional supremacy, the Great Northern War (1700-1721) ended with Sweden's defeat by Russia. Over the course of the 18th century, Russia gradually incorporated Livonia into its empire, and like many places in the central and northeastern regions of Europe, mass politics emerged in the late 19th century. The Young Latvian movement helped develop a modern nationalist identity, whereas the later New Current movement sought to awaken class-consciousness prior to the 1905 Russian Revolution. Latvian independence came after World War I and created a power vacuum in the Baltic region. Like Estonia, Latvia lost its sovereignty during World War II and experienced successive occupations by the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. The post-war Soviet occupation was brutal: retaliating against Latvian partisan warfare in the 1940s and 1950s, the Kremlin deported and imprisoned thousands of Latvians while

Russifying the population with language policies and internal Soviet migration. Latvia restored its independence after perestroika and glasnost reforms undermined local Soviet control.

Despite sharing a history of occupation, Latvia is unique among the three Baltic countries. Though it also developed links with Western Europe via the European Union and NATO, Latvia remains torn between the rest of Europe and Russia. This cultural ambivalence is partly because ethnic Russians comprise almost 27 percent of the population, while Latvians constitute 62 percent. The capital city of Riga is almost evenly split: Latvians and ethnic Russians make up 43 percent and 39 percent of the city's population, respectively.<sup>38</sup> The current mayor of Riga is an ethnic Russian and a member of the pro-Russian political party, Harmony. One effect of this domestic political environment is arguably manifest in how the Latvian Government spends its money. Of the three Baltic States, Latvia has the largest public sector, the highest levels of corruption, and the smallest defense budget.

Latvia's capabilities and threat perceptions, which are discussed in greater detail below, are inseparable from its domestic politics. As with Estonia, we see hybrid warfare as the most likely form of Russian aggression, and direct military attack as the most dangerous.

## **Capabilities**

Latvia's military capabilities are limited. It joined NATO in 2004 and chose to orient its defense spending to out-of-area military operations such as the NATO missions in Afghanistan. This decision demonstrated

Latvia's commitment to the alliance and allowed its armed forces to acquire combat experience. Unfortunately, focusing on expeditionary operations came at a cost to developing meaningful capabilities to defend its own territory.<sup>39</sup> This problem worsened with the 2008 financial crisis, after which, defense spending fell from 1.8 percent of GDP to less than 0.9 percent. The result was a 10 percent reduction in personnel and the cancelation of key Army modernization projects.<sup>40</sup> Defense spending increased after Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea. It was expected to exceed 1.5 percent of GDP in 2017, reaching 2 percent in 2018.<sup>41</sup>

The Latvian military is made up of 5,310 active military personnel and a volunteer national guard (*Zemesardze*) of about 7,900 personnel. Joint forces account for about half the active duty force, whereas 1,200 soldiers contribute to the one ranger and two infantry battalions that make up the regular army. Because the defense budget was the main casualty of post-2008 financial crisis austerity, Latvia's arsenal is beset by serious shortfalls. Only in 2014 did Latvia begin to acquire second-hand armored personnel vehicles, anti-tank weapons, and logistics vehicles. In the air, Latvia possesses several light transport aircraft and Soviet-era helicopter transports, thus making it reliant on the Baltic Air Policing for air defense. The Latvian Navy is scarcely better, with only a handful of minesweepers and patrol boats based in Liepaja.<sup>42</sup> Given these shortcomings, Latvia is focusing its modernization efforts on improving its facilities for allies' use. Thanks to the European Reassurance Initiative, Latvia received four Sentinel tactical air defense radars, and it has been making efforts to improve its airfields and its port at Liepaja.<sup>43</sup> Its military has also participated in recent military exercises like Anakonda-2016 and the

annual U.S. Army-led Saber Strike to ensure interoperability with other NATO forces.

Notwithstanding the uptick in defense spending and activity, domestic politics and economic capacity limit what Latvia can achieve. Its government abolished conscription in 2006, and has no intentions to bring it back. As the Latvian defense chief reported in April 2016, reintroducing it “would require huge budget allocations and reinvestments in infrastructure.”<sup>44</sup> Latvian defense officials believe that reintroducing conscription would entail such significant costs that the government could only afford it by eliminating the national guard or dramatically reducing the size of the active duty force. Moreover, reverting to conscription would probably reduce military readiness for up to 5 years as the Latvian armed forces made the necessary transitions.<sup>45</sup>

### **Hybrid War as Most Likely**

Just as in Estonia, regional experts believe that hybrid war is the most likely way in which Russia will try to undermine Latvian security.<sup>46</sup> Jānis Bērziņš argues, “the implication for Latvia is that the biggest challenge to its security and defense is Russia’s operationalization of the first and second phase of New-Generation Warfare.”<sup>47</sup> The first phase consists of “information, moral, psychological, ideological, diplomatic, and economic measures as part of a plan to establish a favorable political, economic, and military setup.” The second phase comprises “special operations to mislead political and military leaders . . . by leaking false data, orders, directives, and instructions.”<sup>48</sup> Russia has begun a Latvian disinformation campaign which intensified in the run-up to the 2018

national elections. In July 2017, news reports appeared in pro-Kremlin news agencies operating in Latvia that a potential civil war was in the offing.<sup>49</sup>

Discussions of hybrid war in Latvia inevitably focus on its sizable Russophone minority population. The population is concentrated largely in urban areas, but nevertheless has a major presence in the eastern provinces of Latgale.<sup>50</sup> As of early 2016, about 250,000 residents—mostly Russian—lack Latvian citizenship and, as a result, cannot vote or hold civil service jobs.<sup>51</sup> Russophones also perceive other forms of discrimination against them, including the 2004 educational reforms that require at least 60 percent of subjects taught in secondary schools to be in Latvian.<sup>52</sup> The issue of language rights re-emerged in a 2012 referendum that asked voters to approve of a law making Russian a second official language. Over three-quarters of those who voted rejected the proposition. A 2012 poll highlighted major gaps between Latvians and Russians in their attitudes and engagement with state institutions.<sup>53</sup> These attitudes reflect differences in how they perceive geopolitical events. Of non-Latvians, 41 percent endorsed Putin's foreign policy and Russia's annexation of Crimea.<sup>54</sup> Harmony is the largest political party that draws support from Russophones in Latvia, but other parties have refused to cooperate with it, given its past ties to the Kremlin. Despite being the governing party on the Riga City Council and having the most seats in the Latvian Parliament, Harmony remains the leading opposition party in national politics.<sup>55</sup>

Yet fixating on the Russophone threat risks counterproductive oversimplification. Latvia's Russophone population is in no way a potential fifth column. Survey evidence does suggest that ethnic Russians

are more likely to approve of Russia and its policy toward Ukraine, desire greater economic engagement with the East, and view NATO skeptically. Nevertheless, according to polls conducted in 2015 and 2016, most Russophones do not want Russia to involve itself politically or economically in Latvian affairs, nor do they want Russia to defend their rights and interests.<sup>56</sup> In essence, the Russophone population may hold benign views toward Russia, but these attitudes in no way suggest that they yearn to live under its rule.

Furthermore, the Latvian Government recognizes the danger of alienating a broad segment of its population. In 2013, it began a process that would allow dual citizenship and—similar to Estonia—permit the children of non-citizens to acquire Latvian citizenship as long as their parents make the request. It is also taking measures against Russian propaganda. Latvia's Interior Minister plainly stated that "a number of organizations use funding from the Russian state to spread the idea that Russian speakers are discriminated against and fascism is resurging in Latvia."<sup>57</sup> Because television channels originating in Russia usually have high production value and are freely accessible, they are able to draw audiences from members of the Russophone community.<sup>58</sup> When Russian disinformation does appear in Russian media sources, Latvia's reaction has consisted of fining or suspending broadcasters for presenting highly prejudiced news stories or incitements for war. Unfortunately, the fines have not been onerous, since they never exceed US\$5,000.<sup>59</sup> More proactively, Latvia has pursued plans to cooperate with Estonia and Lithuania to launch a Russian-language channel. Yet even these initiatives have their limits: such a channel might discourage Russophones from learning Latvian, while



existing Russian-language programming have failed to draw audiences.<sup>60</sup>

### **Direct Military Action as Most Dangerous**

Our interviewees agree that, although direct military action is the most dangerous scenario, it is also the least likely.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Bērziņš writes, “the probability of a frontal direct military [assault] from Russia on Latvia is very small,” so Russia would choose measures that would “not give ground for invoking NATO’s Article 5.”<sup>62</sup> Still, despite the infeasibility of developing a robust territorial defense capability, Latvia has begun developing conventional and unconventional capabilities to help deter Russia. Although the government does not seem to be considering a nation-under-arms concept at the policy level, it envisions a territorially distributed national guard capable of delaying operations in the event of a Russian attack. Specifically, following the defeat of Latvia’s regular forces, partisan warfare will ensue so as to make occupation costly for Russia.<sup>63</sup> That said, defense officials recognize that Russia might simply grab a small portion of Latvian territory—such as parts of the eastern region of Latgale—in order to trigger a crisis within NATO over whether to invoke Article 5.<sup>64</sup>

Some doubt whether Latvia would be able to wage an insurgency following an attempted annexation by Russia. The country may be half-covered by forest, but the combination of advanced sensors and a brutal counterinsurgency campaign by Russia might stamp out resistance quickly, unlike in the years immediately following World War II.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, even preparing for an insurgency is difficult within the Latvian context, not least because of the ethnic cleavages that

abound. It could be a wedge issue between ethnic Latvians and Russophones since it might necessitate creating an adversarial image of Russia that Russophones could find alienating. To be sure, these ethnic differences do not portend civil war. Our interviewees emphasize that such conflict is a very distant possibility, even if Russia were to try to instigate one. Still, the government has preferred to strengthen the professional military while improving alliance-related infrastructure.<sup>66</sup>

## LITHUANIA

Lithuania became a key player in the region not long after King Mindaugas unified various territories under his control in 1253. By the end of the 14th century, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania established a union with Poland, helping to defeat the German Teutonic Order. Pressure for an even closer alignment with Poland came amidst the threat posed by the Grand Duchy of Moscow. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was founded in 1569—a progressive and large, multicultural polity where culture and political liberty flourished until domestic political factionalism and external threats led to its eventual collapse and partitioning in the late 18th century. Present-day Lithuania fell under Russian rule. Despite the Polonization of its elites and the imperial policy of Russification, Lithuanian nationalists eventually began to clamor for greater cultural autonomy and national self-determination in the second half of the 19th century. As was the case with Estonia and Latvia, Lithuania acquired its independence after World War I, only to lose it again during World War II. Lithuanian partisans tried to resist Soviet rule in the post-war period. Irregular

warfare lasted through the early 1950s, producing over 30,000 fatalities and ending in failure. Lithuania regained its independence in 1990.

Similar to Estonia and Latvia, Lithuania has sought to deepen transatlantic and Western Europe ties by participating in NATO and the European Union. Yet Lithuania is distinct on multiple dimensions. Lithuania is the largest and most ethnically homogenous of the three Baltic States. Nevertheless, it perceives the Russian threat acutely because of its location between Kaliningrad and Belarus. Its geography provides it with strategic depth, while its demographics make it less susceptible to ethnic tensions. It is also not as ambivalent about its political relationship with the United States as Latvia is.<sup>67</sup> However, it has not demonstrated the same eagerness to spend on its defense as Estonia. It has rarely spent over 1.5 percent of its GDP on defense. However, in 2014, the Lithuanian Parliament passed a law committing the government to spend 2 percent by 2020, a threshold it finally crossed in 2018.

## **Capabilities**

Lithuania has the largest military among the three Baltic States. However, it is still limited in its capacity. The army is the largest of the three services and consists of 6,200 soldiers, with another 4,850 in the active reserves. The navy is much smaller, comprising several patrol boats and minesweepers based in Klaipeda. Its air force mostly consists of medium and light transport aircraft as well as Soviet-era transport helicopters.<sup>68</sup> As such, it relies on the Baltic Air Policing mission to defend its air space. Despite having contributed forces to Iraq and Afghanistan in support of American-led and NATO operations, Lithuania

specializes primarily in territorial defense. To this effect, Lithuania has embraced irregular forces to ensure the indigestibility of its territory in case of foreign invasion. Border Guard and Riflemen Union units have about 11,300 personnel.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, Lithuania's military has suffered well over a decade of underfunding, leading one RAND report to conclude that, "[d]espite Lithuania's larger size," it possesses "military equipment roughly on par with that of much smaller Estonia."<sup>70</sup>

Lithuania has taken its defense posture more seriously since 2014. According to the 2017 *National Security Strategy*:

in the current period, the main threat for the security of the Republic of Lithuania is posed by aggressive actions of the Russian Federation violating the security architecture based on universal rules and principles of international law and peaceful co-existence.<sup>71</sup>

Lithuania reintroduced conscription for men between 19 and 26 and increased its defense spending by about 36 percent between 2015 and 2016.<sup>72</sup> Aside from paying for manpower increases, these additional expenditures have been directed at acquiring air defense systems, armored personnel carriers, howitzers, and improving military logistics.<sup>73</sup> The Lithuanian Government has also updated manuals to teach citizens how to stay safe during an invasion and how to participate in an armed resistance.<sup>74</sup> The Military Academy of Lithuania introduced a textbook for high school students in November 2016 to educate young citizens about national security and defense policy.<sup>75</sup> These initiatives reflect how Lithuanian defense planners believe that credible deterrence involves "preparing citizens for state defense and nonviolent resistance."<sup>76</sup>

## Hybrid War as Most Likely

Lithuania is unlikely to be susceptible to the hybrid warfare of the sort seen in Ukraine or possibly in Latvia.<sup>77</sup> Unlike Estonia and Latvia, Lithuania does not have many ethnic ties with Russia. Polish, the largest ethnic minority in Lithuania, accounts for almost 6 percent of the population. Russians make up the second largest minority at about 5 percent. Partly because it was not the target of Russification as much as the two other Baltic States, Lithuania implemented more liberal citizenship policies. It granted citizenship to all permanent residents without language and nationality requirements.<sup>78</sup> Both minority groups are relatively well-integrated in Lithuanian politics and society.<sup>79</sup>

To be sure, Russia has waged propaganda or disinformation campaigns against Lithuania.<sup>80</sup> Even as early as 2013, one security policy review warned of:

The creation and support of influence groups, . . . active informational, ideological policy and ‘history rewriting’, . . . fostering ethnic and political discord, weakening the integration of ethnic minorities in Lithuanian society, promoting distrust in the democratic political system of Lithuania, supporting specific political forces in the country.<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, Russia has since intensified its disinformation campaign against Lithuanian security interests. A Russian-language channel in Lithuania was suspended for 3 months after inciting tensions between Ukrainian and Russian nationals in 2015.<sup>82</sup> In one infamous case, Russian media falsely reported that German soldiers from the NATO battlegroup raped a Lithuanian girl.<sup>83</sup> Despite these efforts, our interviewees report that a large share of the Lithuanian population

is patriotic and practical-minded with respect to territorial defense. The vast majority of Lithuanians see defense as an honor and would be willing to take up arms.<sup>84</sup> Support for NATO also remains high: a Gallup poll conducted in 2016 found that 57 percent of Lithuanian respondents associate NATO with protection, while 13 percent saw the alliance as a threat.<sup>85</sup>

Lithuania does have an important non-military vulnerability: Russia supplies 70 percent of its energy. In the words of Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė, energy dependence constitutes an “existential threat” to Lithuanian national security. To diversify its energy sources so as to mitigate this problem, it has begun importing light natural gas from the United States by way of its newly reconstructed gas terminal at Klaipėda. Fearful that Russia might try to sabotage or wrest control of the terminal, the Lithuanian military has undertaken exercises comprising 3,000 troops to deal with “little green men” who might attack the floating terminal.<sup>86</sup>

### **Direct Military Action as Most Dangerous**

A large-scale military attack on Lithuania is highly unlikely. Kaliningrad already obviates the necessity of seizing and holding Lithuanian territory on military grounds. Moreover, Russian forces are currently tied down in eastern Ukraine.<sup>87</sup> Some even argue that the most dangerous period in Lithuanian-Russian relations has already passed, thanks to NATO’s presence.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, Lithuania is vulnerable to small territorial grabs. For example, Russia might try to annex the northern spit of the Curonian Lagoon, located on the Lithuanian-Russian border near Kaliningrad. Such a seizure of sovereign territory could test

NATO integrity, especially if it does not trigger Article 5.<sup>89</sup>

Lithuania has already adopted defensive measures. After all, from the 2017 *National Security Strategy*, first-order dangers to Lithuania are the:

*Conventional military threats* caused by the Russian Federation's capacity and will to use military force in order to achieve its objectives, concentration, and development of its military capabilities in the neighbourhood of the Republic of Lithuania as well as military activities lacking transparency and demonstrating power at the borders of the Republic of Lithuania and other NATO member countries [italics in original].<sup>90</sup>

The Lithuanian rapid-reaction force is arguably the most tangible measure taken thus far. Formed in late 2014, this 2,500-person force comprises a mechanized battalion, a motorized battalion, logistical support, a special operations unit, and an aerial contingent. This force would respond to hybrid scenarios by cooperating with local authorities to suppress riots and to take back seized government buildings.<sup>91</sup>

## POLAND

Poland is the largest country under review in terms of both land and population; located on the southern shore of the Baltic Sea, it does not share the same vulnerabilities as its Baltic neighbors to its northeast because of its size, and how it borders several other NATO members. Nevertheless, its geography has made Poland historically prone to invasion and conquest. Stretching at one point from the Baltic to the Black Seas in the late 15th century, Poland was a great power in its own right for centuries. Unfortunately, political infighting and relative decline meant

that Poland was erased from the map by the end of the 18th century. From that point until World War I, Poland was divided among the Russian, Prussian, and Austro-Hungarian empires. Polish nationalists successfully carved out an independent country in the imperial wreckage that resulted from that global conflict. Yet, like its Baltic neighbors, Poland was erased once more during World War II as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union fought for control of Central Europe. The Soviet Union eventually won and made Poland nominally independent but subject to its suzerainty. Poland regained its full independence when Moscow relinquished control in 1989.

Since regaining full independence after the Cold War, Poland has sought to integrate with the West to advance its economic welfare and enhance its security. The European Union has been a boon to Poland economically. Moreover, Poland is one of the few NATO members to spend about 2 percent of its GDP on defense. Poland has also positioned itself as a regional player that connects other Central European countries with their counterparts in Northern Europe. Poland has had mixed success promoting regional organizations like the Visegrad Four (alongside Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia) while contributing to other initiatives, like the energy-focused Three Seas Initiative. In the last decade, Poland has generally been critical of Russia, while supporting Ukraine and Georgia in their own pursuits to solidify ties with the European Union and NATO. Along with Lithuania, Poland even invoked Article 4 of the Washington Treaty to call its allies into a discussion regarding Russia's annexation of Crimea.



## Capabilities

One analysis published in 2016 concludes that the Polish Armed Forces would experience difficulties defending Poland against a large-scale Russian invasion. It highlighted deficiencies in its air defense systems and armored forces. As its author, Tomasz Paszewski observed, these deficiencies were the result of Polish defense planners believing erroneously that Poland could not be self-sufficient in repelling a major attack on its territory. Indeed, as early as 1992, these defense planners viewed guerrilla warfare as a way to buy time before reinforcements arrived, rather than as a coherent, bottom-up process to achieve national liberation. Only after 2012 did the Polish Government begin to address these concerns. Investments in territorial defense came under the banner of the so-called *Komorowski Doctrine*, named as such thanks to Bronisław Komorowski promoting the efforts of former Minister of Defence Tomasz Siemoniak.<sup>92</sup> The Polish Government has since redoubled these efforts by negotiating and renegotiating deals, two such examples are with Raytheon to develop a Patriot-based air defense system, and with Lockheed Martin to manufacture helicopters.<sup>93</sup>

Though Poland has a much larger navy and air force than the Baltic States, its ground forces still receive the most priority. Its current modernization program is focused on acquiring new armored vehicles, such as updated Leopard II tanks and artillery systems. Poland has also been developing subconventional capabilities. In 2016, the Polish Ministry of Defense created a new military branch called *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej* (Territorial Defense Army). Ostensibly, the Territorial Defense Army, which comprises

53,000 volunteers who train for 30 days a year, exists to wage guerilla warfare in the event of a Russian invasion.<sup>94</sup> Each *voivodeship* (or province) in Poland will provide at least one light infantry brigade. Regarding the Polish navy and air force, the air force is relatively modern, with a wing of F-16 fighters equipped with American AGM-158 Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles capable of striking 230 miles behind enemy lines. The navy is primarily dedicated to Poland's relatively short coastline on the Baltic Sea.

Poland also released a new *Defense Concept* in May 2017. This document declares that, "In the worst case scenario, Poland will be ready to conduct an effective defense operation, including fending off irregular hostile military attacks, whilst concomitantly providing significant contributions to collective defense."<sup>95</sup> Nevertheless, the document places the most emphasis on territorial defense and so observes, "The growing significance of the anti-access and area denial systems will be advantageous to the defensive intentions of Poland."<sup>96</sup> In envisioning the growth of Polish military personnel to 200,000 within the next decade—a number that includes the Territorial Defense Army—the Polish Armed Forces will expand its program of exercises and wargames so that the active duty forces and the Territorial Defense Army can operate jointly.<sup>97</sup> Poland is thus positioning itself to have one of the more capable militaries in Europe.

### **Hybrid War as Most Likely**

Polish President Andrzej Duda and Defence Minister Mariusz Błaszczak have referred to *wojna hybrydowa* (hybrid warfare) in various public remarks made when discussing potential Russian aggression.<sup>98</sup>

However, if we take seriously the notion of hybrid warfare, in terms of what Ukraine experienced and what the Baltic countries might face, Poland is not vulnerable.<sup>99</sup> It is too culturally and ethnically homogeneous, thereby offering few opportunities for Russia to exploit. Poland does not have a large Russophone population and Polish minority groups do not systematically lack certain rights in the way that certain Russian-speakers do in Estonia and Latvia. Polish citizens vary widely in political leanings and political polarization is acute in domestic society. Nevertheless, attitudes toward the Kremlin and its foreign policy are uniformly negative.<sup>100</sup>

Russia can still use information warfare against Poland. One strategy has involved painting Poland as a problematic member of both NATO and the European Union that is irrationally Russophobic.<sup>101</sup> Russia has stepped up such a campaign after the Polish *sejm* (Parliament) passed legislation calling for the removal of Soviet war memorials in Poland.<sup>102</sup> Another strategy has been to spread disinformation that could sow distrust between Poles and the growing number of Ukrainians who have come to Poland either to flee war or to seek employment.<sup>103</sup> More broadly, Poland benefits from NATO cohesion, so Russian efforts to undermine alliance solidarity by spreading falsehoods and cultivating friendly elites could hamper NATO's ability to present a unified voice on economic sanctions and deterrence.<sup>104</sup> Still, information warfare and hybrid warfare should not be conflated as such.<sup>105</sup>

### **Direct Military Action as Most Dangerous**

A ground invasion of Poland is very unlikely, if only because such an attack would require Russia to use Belarus as a staging ground.<sup>106</sup> Kaliningrad would

make a poor launching pad for offensive operations because it lacks depth and would be vulnerable to a counterattack. Indeed, owing to geography, Russia would likely attack Lithuania and perhaps the other Baltic States first before attacking Poland. Moreover, a clear violation of Polish territory is more likely to trigger Article 5 considerations, thus creating escalatory dynamics that Russia would prefer to avoid.

These observations do not negate Poland's recent efforts in improving its military capabilities in the name of territorial defense. To the contrary, they further increase the costs that Russia would have to pay in mounting offensive operations, thereby enhancing conventional deterrence-by-denial. Rightly or wrongly, Polish defense planners assume that Belarus is essentially Russian territory, such that Russia could project military power against Poland in a matter of days.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, Polish nationalism and Russophobia cannot be taken for granted, despite what some observers may think. An insurgency against a Russian invasion force may not be automatic due to the collective action problems that would arise. Advanced preparations can help resolve such issues.

## **CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS FOR A RUSSIAN ATTACK**

In the previous chapter, we assessed the likelihood of Russia mounting a surprise attack on NATO interests in the Baltic region. Without considering the attributes of the individual countries themselves, we concluded that such an attack was unlikely. In this chapter, we no longer treat the region as a monolith. Rather, we disaggregate it so as to highlight each country's unique attributes. We determine the most likely and most dangerous scenarios that each of these

NATO members face with respect to Russian aggression. The most likely scenarios are all hybrid in nature, whereas the most dangerous involve some sort of frontal assault.

Table 2-2 summarizes our findings. Unsurprisingly, Estonia and Latvia face the greatest risk of hybrid warfare—not least because Russia seems to be already undertaking active measures against those countries with the Compatriot Policy as its smoke-screen. That said, we caution against overstating the effectiveness of such hybrid war tactics, as well as the susceptibility of Russophone populations in those countries. Although members of those populations might agree with Russian foreign policy, they do not appear to desire becoming Russian residents. Life in the European Union is strictly better than in Russia, even in the absence of clear citizenship rights. By contrast, Lithuania and Poland are much less vulnerable to hybrid warfare, despite how Russia targets them in its own disinformation campaigns. They are relatively homogenous and critical of Russia so as to be relatively impervious to such efforts. In all four cases, full territorial conquest also appears improbable. This is especially true of Poland: Russia would have to traverse Baltic and Belarusian territory before it can launch a major ground assault. The Baltic States are more vulnerable, but the most likely scenarios consist of Russia grabbing small portions of their territory in order to probe weaknesses within NATO.

	Most Likely (Hybrid)	Most Dangerous (Direct Attack)
<b>Estonia</b>	Medium and already happening, but ethnic cleavages may be exaggerated, and Tallinn has improved its policy toward Russophones	Full territorial grab highly unlikely, but some small territorial conquests are possible (e.g., Narva)
<b>Latvia</b>	Medium and already happening, but Russophones have complex attitudes toward Russia and NATO	Full territorial grab highly unlikely, but some small conquests are possible (e.g., parts of Latgale)
<b>Lithuania</b>	Low, because of its relative ethnic homogeneity and general satisfaction of its minority communities	Full territorial grab highly unlikely, but some small conquests are possible (e.g., the Curonian Lagoon)
<b>Poland</b>	Very low, because of ethnic homogeneity and general anti-Kremlin predisposition	Full territorial grab extremely unlikely because of the difficulty of such operations

**Table 2-2. Summary of Most Likely and Most Dangerous Cases in the Four Countries**

## ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 2

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95. *The Concept of Defence of the Republic of Poland*, Warsaw, Poland: Polish Ministry of Defense, May 2017.

96. Ibid., p. 33.

97. Ibid., p. 43.

98. See, e.g., "Mogherini: Polska jest mocnym członkiem UE, cenimy jej wkład" ("Mogherini: Poland Is a Strong Member of the EU, We Value Its Contribution"), TVN24, June 2, 2016, available from <http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/prezydent-du-da-z-federika-mogherini-o-polityce-bezpieczenstwa,648974.html>; and "Błaszczak: WOT jest odpowiedzią na zagrożenia takie jak wojna hybrydowa," ("Błaszczak: WOT is the Answer to Threats such as Hybrid Warfare"), Forsal.pl, October 10, 2018, available from <https://forsal.pl/artykuly/1296009,blaszczak-wot-jest-odpowiedzia-na-zagrozenia-takie-jak-wojna-hybrydowa.html>.

99. Our interviewees agree that hybrid warfare has a low probability of being effective in Poland. However, they caution that Russia could use graduated levels of "active measures" that exploit Poland's political polarization. Interview with Polish defense experts, Warsaw, Poland, June 8, 2017.



100. See, e.g., Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes, and Jacob Poushter, "NATO Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid," Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, June 10, 2015, p. 10.

101. Our Polish interviewees almost uniformly acknowledged this danger.

102. Marta Kowalska, "Analiza: Rosyjska Kampania Informacyjna z Polską Ustawą Dekomunizacyjną w Tle" ("Analysis: Rosyjska Information Campaign with the Polish Decommunization Act in the Background"), Warsaw, Poland: Center for the Analysis of Propaganda and Disinformation, August 7, 2017, available from <https://capd.pl/pl/analizy/193-analiza-rosyjska-kampania-informacyjna-z-polska-ustawa-dekomunizacyjna-w-tle>.

103. Interview with Polish defense experts, Warsaw, Poland, June 8, 2017.

104. Rod Thornton, "The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare," *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 160, No. 4, 2015, pp. 40-48.

105. For example, cyber warfare is a different domain altogether inasmuch as it revolves around telecommunication systems.

106. Interview with Polish defense experts.

107. Interview with Jacek Bartosiak, June 8, 2017.

### CHAPTER 3. HEDGING AGAINST UNCERTAINTY

Northeastern Europe faces a challenging and uncertain future. Russian subversion and aggression are triggering fears of a second Cold War. The United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and local states have already responded by taking steps to mitigate the threat.<sup>1</sup> Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland are modernizing their security forces and revitalizing their defense postures. NATO tripled the size of its response force, created and exercised the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), and placed four multinational battlegroups in the region.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, NATO members are finally taking seriously their pledge to spend at least 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. The United States is investing billions in the European Reassurance Initiative, and has promised to maintain at least 6,000 forward deployed troops in the region.

Five years have passed since Russia's illegal seizure of Crimea, and hostilities have begun in eastern Ukraine. Fighting continues in and around Donbas, but the most dangerous phase of that crisis might just be over. Of course, Russia continues to undertake provocations, spread disinformation, and organize an unnerving number of large-scale snap military exercises.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, a major offensive against NATO's northeastern flank seems unlikely, at least in the immediate future. None of the 25 scholars, analysts, military officers, or senior government officials whom we interviewed believed that a large-scale Russian attack was imminent. For now, the situation appears to have stabilized. Russia is bogged down in eastern Ukraine, even though it could always extricate itself

from that quagmire at some cost of losing face. The United States and NATO have moved toward establishing a credible conventional deterrence posture in the region. As a result, the current strategic lull creates an opportunity for the United States to step back, take stock of its existing strategy, and consider potential alternatives.

We think U.S. Army planners should use this opportunity to wrestle with several important questions: What exactly is the United States and NATO trying to deter? What kind of adversary is Russia? Is it a revisionist state or is it motivated by fear and insecurity? Absent definitive intelligence on Russian intentions, the answers to these questions are not obvious. As argued in chapter 1 of this monograph, Russian behavior, including its military modernization and snap exercises, is consistent with both sets of intentions. We thus fundamentally disagree with those who think that the United States should infer Russian intentions from its capabilities.

This question is not academic. The best way to dissuade a revisionist actor from attacking is likely to provoke a defensive-minded actor. Specifically, to deter a revisionist Russia, the United States and NATO must make powerful threats supported by sizable military forces in the Baltic region. However, a large military presence in the region will make a defensive Russia feel more insecure, causing it to respond by increasing its own military power. The result is likely to be a costly and unstable regional arms race. Conversely, stronger assurances will assuage a defensive Russia's fear, but are likely to embolden a revisionist Russia. If U.S. planners and strategists can somehow ascertain Russia's intentions with reasonable confidence, then the next steps are clear. To deal with a revisionist

Russia, the United States and NATO must adopt a robust, deterrent posture, to include forward basing substantial numbers of troops in and around the Baltic region. A large, permanent, forward-based presence will be necessary to lend credibility to deterrence by denial, particularly in the face of Russia's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. However, if fear and insecurity motivate Russia, then the United States and NATO should instead maintain a light footprint in the region while concentrating on offering assurances.

Since we may never know Russia's true intentions, we conclude by recommending a hedging strategy. This strategy allows the United States and NATO to act as if Russia is a defensive actor while adopting less-provocative measures that complicate Russia's ability to launch a surprise attack in case it really is revisionist. Our hedging strategy is not simply about hoping for the best and planning for the worst. In international relations, preparing for the worst can make achieving the best hard. Instead, our strategy attempts to "thread the needle" between threats and assurances, identifying the least provocative way to issue credible threats without foreclosing the opportunity to offer credible assurances.

Our hedging strategy comprises nine military measures. Each serves one of three complementary goals: reduce the risk of a surprise invasion via early detection and other measures; enhance deterrence in ways that are less likely to provoke Russia; and improve regional defenses against the hybrid threat. In many ways, our proposed strategy is about assuaging our worst fears. After all, the idea of meaningfully assuring Russia might not be politically palatable until the United States and its allies feel they are secure against conventional and hybrid threats. By managing the

risks and consequences of a worst-case threat, the United States and NATO can free up resources to deal with the most likely threat—a persistent, low-grade campaign of subversion against allies in the Baltic region.

In this chapter, we start by assessing the threat, arguing that a large-scale, surprise attack is the most dangerous threat, but a continuous hybrid campaign is the most likely threat. We then discuss our policy recommendations.

## **ASSESSING THE THREAT**

Based on our background research and expert interviews, we assess that the worst-case scenario—a large-scale, fait accompli attack against one or more of the Baltic States—is unlikely, at least in the near term. We base our assessment on three considerations. First, due to uncertainty over intentions, Russia may not want to invade the Baltic States. As we argue in chapter 1, two competing models could capture Russian intentions. A revisionist Russia does want to occupy the Baltic States, to break NATO, and to upend the existing European order. Moreover, it will attack if and when the opportunity presents itself. However, as long as it does not feel existentially threatened and does not see an advantage in striking first, a defensive Russia does not want to reconquer neighboring territories, and so will not launch a surprise invasion. Without clear and compelling intelligence about Russia’s true intentions—something we have not found in the unclassified policy literature—Russian behavior and capabilities are just as compatible with defensive intentions as they are with revisionist intentions.

Second, should Russia be revisionist, it might still believe that an invasion risks much, but gains little.<sup>4</sup> Just because Russia wants to revise the status quo does not mean that it can. To repeat what Major General Meelis Kiili, Commander of the Estonian Defence League, said, "It is important not to overestimate the adversary just as much as it is important not to underestimate it."<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, why even a revisionist Russia would want to gamble on a major surprise attack remains unclear. The standard argument is that Russia wants to seize territory in the Baltic region to establish a buffer zone or undermine NATO by fomenting discord and inaction.<sup>6</sup> However, a blatant act of aggression is more likely to rally NATO by convincing previously skeptical members that Russia truly does harbor irredentist ambitions. Russian aggression against Ukraine galvanized widespread public support for increased defense spending throughout NATO and the Baltic States.<sup>7</sup>

Nor is Russia likely to win a full-blown war against NATO.<sup>8</sup> Its favorable conventional military balance vis-à-vis the Baltic States disappears if other NATO members, especially the United States, intervene.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Russia will lack the ability to prevail in a prolonged, high-intensity fight against NATO for the foreseeable future. Its modernization efforts have been uneven and have yet to impact most of its ground forces.<sup>10</sup> Despite conducting numerous high-profile, snap exercises, the Russian Army still has problems supporting fast-paced, high-intensity operations on an enduring basis.<sup>11</sup> Finally, a conventional war against NATO could easily spiral out of Moscow's control, and it could even escalate into a nuclear exchange. At the other end of the warfighting spectrum, the Baltic States will not be passive victims. Although they may

not be able to defeat a Russian invasion force, with or without help from the VJTF and Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) battlegroups, they do have the wherewithal to resist occupation. Local special operations units, territorial defense forces, and even popular resistance groups are likely to wage an unconventional campaign against occupation forces. Russia is not oblivious to these risks. In fact, its desire to stay below the escalation threshold helps explain why it relies on so-called hybrid approaches.<sup>12</sup>

Third, the United States, NATO, and the Baltic States have already taken many important steps toward deterring a revisionist Russia. Many of our interviewees, including those highly skeptical of Russia's intentions, suggested that Russia is unlikely to attack if it perceives the risks as severe.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, the collective effect of the European Deterrence Initiative, Operation ATLANTIC RESOLVE, the Readiness Action Plan, the EFP battlegroups, and increased defense expenditures and operational readiness among regional allies make it hard to imagine an invasion scenario that does not guarantee some form of U.S. and NATO intervention.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, even if a worst-case scenario is unlikely, several challenges still exist. Russia will almost certainly continue its hybrid campaign. Our interlocutors were virtually unanimous on this point.<sup>15</sup> Russia's most probable course of action is to continue doing what it has been doing for years: fomenting unrest, spreading disinformation, and engaging in military provocations. Regardless of its underlying intentions, these hybrid techniques are a useful and relatively low-risk tool. A revisionist Russia uses them to probe defenses and to shape conditions for a future invasion, whereas a defensive Russia uses them

to signal red lines and generate discord among the NATO states closest to its borders.

## **A STRATEGY OF HEDGING**

With this assessment in mind, we offer nine policy recommendations, which we divide into three groups: early warning, deterrence-by-denial, and defeating the hybrid threat. Readers will notice that seven of our nine recommendations focus on the least likely and most dangerous contingencies, whereas two of them focus on the most likely contingencies. The reasoning behind this seemingly odd misbalance is straightforward. After all, the most dangerous scenario may be the most consequential, and so efforts to address it by way of adjusting U.S. force posture might have the biggest impact on strategic stability. Hybrid warfare might be the most likely, but we give it less attention since we believe it to be overrated.

### **Early Warning**

#### *Recommendation 1: Remember Belarus*

For various reasons, Western strategists and analysts often overlook, discount, or otherwise ignore Belarus because it is Russia's only treaty ally, it depends economically on Russia, and it has supposedly integrated its military with Russia's. Accordingly, the United States and NATO assume that Minsk and Moscow are in lockstep.<sup>16</sup>

Paying more attention to Belarus is necessary for two reasons. The first concerns early detection. Russia cannot physically invade and occupy two of NATO's four regional allies—Lithuania and Poland—without



first crossing Belarus. This constraint means that to mount any *fait accompli* land grab or invasion of those two allies, Russia must stockpile ammunition and supplies, establish field hospitals and maintenance depots, and pre-position assault troops and their reinforcements.<sup>17</sup> Russia cannot organize such preparations overnight or even in a fortnight. If the United States and NATO direct sufficient intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to monitor these types of preparatory activities, they can improve their ability to detect an imminent attack. Moreover, sufficient early warning minimizes, and perhaps nullifies, many of the oft-cited concerns about whether the VJTF can quickly activate, move, and intervene. With enough warning, NATO can muster the political will and manage the military tasks necessary to employ its spearhead force. Sufficient early warning also buys time for the United States to mobilize its combat forces located at home and in Western Europe, for Baltic militaries to initiate their war plans, and for NATO to activate its enhanced response forces.

Some Western analysts will counter that Russia's snap exercises prove it can mount an invasion without first making standard preparations. At least one of our Lithuanian interviewees expressed this concern. However, we do not think that these snap exercises mean Russia can launch a sneak invasion.<sup>18</sup> For one, peacetime exercises are not a particularly accurate indicator of wartime capabilities. Snap exercises cannot replicate operations against a well-trained and well-equipped adversary. Units do not suffer heavy casualties during peacetime operations. They use far more supplies and expend far more ammunition in combat than they do during exercises. Clausewitzian fog and friction slow operations far more in combat than they

do in peace, not least because command posts, rear areas, and logistics trains come under fire. Russian defense planners are aware of these challenges. They will inevitably build a much greater degree of logistical, command and control, and ISR redundancy into a real-world operation than they do into their peacetime exercises. For another, the idea that Russia can execute a no-notice invasion or land grab assumes that Russia can keep such an operation limited. However, NATO will have a say in the matter. Russia knows that overtly attacking NATO allies risks retaliation. To prepare for an invasion or attack of any scale, Russia has little choice but to plan for a worst-case, large-scale war.

Unfortunately, the United States and NATO have allowed their regional ISR capabilities to atrophy.<sup>19</sup> At the end of the Cold War, the United States could track the movement of individual Soviet companies. Today, it tracks Russian strategic nuclear weapons and little else. The U.S. military should therefore take any and all possible steps to improve its ability to monitor and track conventional military forces, particularly in and around Belarus.

### *Recommendation 2: Facilitate Regional Cooperation*

Facilitating regional coordination is another way the United States can enhance early detection. Although especially true in regard to ISR collaboration, improving cooperation among Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland across a wide range of activities would improve the region's ability to detect, deter, and defeat Russian aggression. Two additional benefits accrue from helping these allies help themselves. First, if Russia is genuinely worried about U.S. and

NATO intentions, then steps that the Baltic States can take on their own will be perceived as less provocative than steps that require the deployment of additional U.S. assets. Second, the more the United States assists its allies in providing for their own security, the less it will have to spend on troop deployments.

Unfortunately, existing arrangements in intra-regional cooperation and coordination are insufficient. Some argue that a hub and spoke pattern of relations has emerged in the region.<sup>20</sup> Instead of collaborating with each other, local allies instinctively turn first to the United States and other NATO members.<sup>21</sup> The U.S. combat brigade in Poland, the EFP battlegroups, and the VJTF have inadvertently reinforced these habits.<sup>22</sup>

The United States should prioritize regional intelligence sharing and other forms of ISR cooperation, but at least three additional areas of regional collaboration need improvement. The first involves war planning. U.S. strategists and planners sometimes treat the Baltic States as a single, monolithic region. Such a mindset is worse than misleading. To the degree that Russia is trying to leverage historical grievances, linguistic differences, and ethnic cleavages, treating Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as interchangeable and undifferentiated obscures too many exploitable vulnerabilities. It also conceals how each country currently has its own plans for defending itself.<sup>23</sup> They coordinate too little in terms of operational planning. Nor do the Baltic States share their communications security plans, even during joint exercises.<sup>24</sup> As a result, gaps exist between the region's various deterrence and defensive postures.<sup>25</sup> The Baltic States and Poland may not need a single, unified war plan. However, each country faces a unique set of challenges, and given

that Russia can attack one in order to exploit the vulnerabilities of all, these countries need help synchronizing their preparations.

Second, the region needs more intraregional joint exercises. Bilateral exercises with U.S. forces or EFP battlegroups dominate the training schedules of all four countries' armed forces. Ironically, these exercises might hinder regional interoperability in a crisis, particularly if regional forces may have to confront the threat on their own until U.S. and NATO units arrive. Regional exercises are also less provocative than ones involving large numbers of U.S. and NATO troops.

Third, the region needs a joint center for lessons learned. Every unit in the region is constantly participating in training exercises. These exercises generate a trove of invaluable experience and data. Unfortunately, the four countries lack a centralized system for capturing, analyzing, and disseminating lessons learned.<sup>26</sup> The U.S. Army and its Center for Army Lessons Learned are particularly well-equipped to help establish a regional center for lessons learned.

One other way for the U.S. Army to support more regional coordination involves helping the Baltic States organize their own joint headquarters. Poland might be a good candidate to lead such an initiative. Much like a U.S. Army headquarters based in Poland, a Polish-led regional headquarters based in Poland could coordinate war planning, ISR integration, and after-action reporting. A Polish-led headquarters would be less provocative and would help reduce hub-and-spoke tendencies. To be sure, this proposal has downsides. The Baltic States might prefer U.S.-led coordination to Polish leadership. After all, mistrust may well be one reason they have not actively coordinated war plans, ISR, and lessons learned thus

far. Moreover, a Polish-led joint headquarters might create a false sense of capability if it is not really up to the task of integrating large numbers of U.S. and NATO forces in the event of an actual conflict. Since the United States and NATO would provide the bulk of combat forces in any such scenario, it might make sense to “train like you fight” by having a U.S. Army two-star command handle regional coordination in addition to its other responsibilities.

Still, we believe that a Polish-led regional headquarters is better than establishing a two-star, division-level headquarters in Poland, as suggested by Colonel Douglas Mastriano’s *Project 1704* research team.<sup>27</sup> According to *Project 1704*, a U.S. Army two-star headquarters could support regional collaboration and provide command and control for U.S. ground forces should a conflict breakout. However, a two-star U.S. Army headquarters brings with it at least three disadvantages. First, it is unambiguously provocative. Russia would almost certainly perceive (or act like it perceives) the creation of a U.S. Army division headquarters in Poland as evidence that the U.S. plans to put large numbers of American troops in the region. Second, putting a division-level headquarters in the region might reinforce hub-and-spoke dynamics instead of reducing them. After all, the goal should be to help the Baltic States and Poland cooperate directly with one another on an enduring basis instead of encouraging them to depend on the U.S. Army to coordinate and manage collaboration. Finally, a U.S. Army headquarters might simply treat regional coordination as a secondary, collateral task.

### *Recommendation 3: Don't "Mind the Gap"*

Western analysts are anxious over the Suwałki Gap.<sup>28</sup> These concerns are not only overstated, but also dangerously counterproductive and potentially escalatory. The more Western planners fear that Russia can close the gap in the earliest stages of an invasion, the more they might adopt provocative force postures. After all, the ability to isolate Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania quickly represents a tremendous first-strike advantage. To mitigate this danger, the United States and NATO must pre-stage large numbers of troops and equipment in the region to ensure it has enough combat power in the event that they are cut off. Alternatively, the United States and NATO must contemplate preempting a Russian attack. Both options are inflammatory and increase the risk of misperception and miscalculation.

Reducing concerns about a decisive Russian first-strike advantage will allow the United States and NATO to maintain a force posture that is less aggressive, less provocative, and less costly. One way to reduce such fears is to recognize that Russia cannot quickly or easily close the Suwałki Gap. The gap only exists on a map. Neither geography nor terrain can stop U.S. and NATO forces from bypassing the gap by moving through Belarus or Kaliningrad. Of course, some analysts might question whether the United States and NATO have the political will to violate Belarusian (and possibly Russian) sovereignty in a crisis. However, to close the Suwałki Gap, Russian and Belarusian forces must either physically occupy, or fire long-range weapons into, Polish territory. Both are unambiguous acts of war and clearly violate the sovereignty of a key NATO ally. Therefore, concerns

about NATO's collective resolve here are probably exaggerated.

By overstating the gap's importance to NATO and the United States, Western planners are inadvertently understating the degree to which the gap is a major vulnerability for Russia. The gap represents the fastest way that Russia can reinforce Kaliningrad by land. Given its arsenal of long-range precision weapons, the United States is at least as capable of closing the gap to Russia as Russia is of closing it to NATO. Second, NATO and the United States could threaten targets within Belarus. Indeed, Russia will be hard-pressed to threaten the Suwałki Gap from Kaliningrad alone. However, if Belarus launches strikes into the gap or allows Russian forces to use Belarusian territory to stage such strikes, then the United States and NATO have reason to retaliate. In fact, by threatening strikes against Belarus if it helps Russia close the Suwałki Gap, Washington might be able to create and exploit daylight between Minsk and Moscow.

We recognize that surging reinforcements through Belarus and/or Kaliningrad is unquestionably escalatory. Beyond questions of neutrality and sovereignty, U.S. and NATO forces will need to suppress Russian and Belarusian air defenses, disrupt command and control units, and neutralize reinforcements operating deep within Belarusian territory. Therefore, the United States and NATO cannot wait until a crisis breaks out to begin planning for this contingency. The political risks, costs, and benefits of escalating horizontally against Belarus and Kaliningrad must be considered well in advance. The same holds true for the detailed operational planning necessary for executing such a mission. Regional allies must be involved in this planning process.<sup>29</sup>

## Enhancing Deterrence-by-Denial

### *Recommendation 4: Plan for the Long Haul*

Vigilance, patience, and endurance are major challenges for the United States and NATO, especially if Russia attempts to wait them out by waging a long-term, hybrid campaign against the Baltic States. Unfortunately, hybrid warfare and strategic patience play to Russian strengths and U.S. weaknesses. The United States is globally committed, whereas Russia is not. The United States and NATO could lose interest in the region, whereas Russia will not lose interest in NATO's northeastern flank, given its proximity. With the exception of the Baltic States and Poland, neither Western Europe nor the United States considers the region a vital interest absent a Russian threat.

The United States in general, and the U.S. Army in particular, are at a disadvantage in terms of their ability to convince adversaries and allies alike that they will sustain their strategic focus on NATO's northeastern flank. The U.S. military can manage multiple threats simultaneously, but Russia or the Baltic States might believe that the U.S. military will become overstretched or otherwise preoccupied elsewhere. Concerns that the United States might lose interest in Europe are not unfounded. Many academic articles and policy monographs point to China as America's true long-term competitor, fostering a reasonable suspicion that the United States would prefer to concentrate on the Asia Pacific.<sup>30</sup> The ongoing standoff with North Korea could also preoccupy U.S. military forces. Others worry that the United States is overcommitted so as not to have sufficient military power to respond



to a Baltic crisis.<sup>31</sup> The risk of perceived strategic complacency is especially acute if the United States is dealing with a revisionist Russia. A Russia motivated by irredentist ambitions will be all too eager to exploit U.S. inattention. However, even a defensive Russia might intensify its hybrid efforts if it thinks it can convince the Baltic States to realign with Moscow without triggering a conflict. If they (along with Poland) worry that U.S. interest is flagging, then they could engage in provocative measures to convince the United States to pay more attention to them.

The U.S. Army is not in a position to mitigate many of these concerns, particularly those resulting from U.S. public opinion and grand strategy. However, it can consider a number of modest steps to convince its allies and Russia that it is prepared for the long haul, and to help ensure that the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish armed forces can sustain their current operational tempo. First, the U.S. Army should consider establishing a permanent presence in the region. To quote former commander of the U.S. European Command General Philip M. Breedlove:

presence is important, because presence equals trust. You can't rotate trust. You can't surge trust. You earn trust in long-term relationships. Our ability to use these European bases to project power on behalf of the alliance or other objectives is about that trust, that relationship, that long-term bond you get from forward-stationed forces.<sup>32</sup>

To date, the U.S. Army has relied upon forward-based rotational forces. However, the Baltic States and Poland—with the notable exception of Latvia—would prefer a permanent U.S. presence inside their respective countries. Many of our interviewees suggested that permanently placing a company-sized unit in

each country would significantly boost U.S. credibility.<sup>33</sup> Yet permanently basing independent U.S. companies in Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland is impractical. U.S. Army companies are not designed for sustained, independent operations because they lack the necessary administrative and logistical capabilities. This limitation is especially pronounced for motorized, mechanized, and armor companies, which require a robust maintenance and supply support chain. Moreover, U.S. Army companies are so small that they would likely undercut rather than enhance credibility. An infantry company does not have enough combat power to bolster each country's ability to defend itself against a large-scale conventional attack. Finally, a permanently deployed company is permanent in name only since the United States could easily evacuate a company-sized unit in a crisis, seriously undermining its ability to signal that it has "skin in the game."

For these reasons, permanently scattering U.S. Army companies (or even battalions) across the Baltic region seems neither realistic nor credible. Therefore, to the degree that the Army is willing and able to revisit this issue, we suggest an alternative: shift from the rotating armor brigade combat teams throughout Poland to basing an armor brigade combat team in Poland permanently. Such an approach has a number of advantages. First, unlike independent company-sized units, an armor brigade combat team meaningfully enhances U.S. and NATO combat power in the region.<sup>34</sup> Deterrence by denial is far more credible as a result. Second, permanently basing an armor brigade combat team in Poland enhances U.S. credibility to a far greater degree than rotating combat teams. Simply put, Russia and our allies know that it is far easier to stop a rotational program than it is

to withdraw permanently based troops. A rotational program therefore plays into Russia's hands if its long-term strategy is to play a waiting game with the United States. Finally, although permanently basing any U.S. troops in the region will provoke Russia, placing them in Poland should be less inflammatory than putting them in any of the three Baltic States.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, a U.S. armor brigade combat team operating out of Poland provides the United States and NATO with far greater operational flexibility than one based in Estonia or Lithuania.

Sustainability is not just an American challenge; it is also a regional one. The Baltic States' ground forces are training and operating at an unprecedented level of intensity. Given their small size and limited resources, they will eventually need help if they are to sustain this intense operational tempo (OPTEMPO) for the foreseeable future. The U.S. Army is well-suited to help. Constant training creates significant wear and tear on gear and equipment. Regional ground forces lack institutional experience managing life cycle maintenance and budgeting, especially when operating at such an intense tempo.<sup>36</sup> The U.S. Army should offer its deep institutional expertise in planning for long-term logistical, maintenance, and supply support. A high OPTEMPO also adversely affects morale. Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian soldiers are unambiguously dedicated to the defense of their homelands and demonstrate high levels of morale, professionalism, and esprit de corps.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, they are unaccustomed to the current pace of operations. Over time, the psychological and emotional costs may accumulate. The U.S. Army has developed a wide range of tools, services, and best practices to help its Soldiers and their families deal with these challenges. It should

offer these lessons learned to its Baltic allies. Finally, the U.S. Army can improve long-term sustainability by helping its commanders manage their training expectations. Understandably, U.S. Army commanders want to train hard while deployed. Still, whereas any given U.S. Army commander deploys once in the region, the Baltic forces with whom they train are there permanently. The result is that U.S. commanders often approach training like a sprint when, from the perspective of their Baltic counterparts, it would be better if they approached it like a marathon. Otherwise, a real risk of burnout exists among the regional ground forces. At minimum, the U.S. Army should ensure deploying commanders understand which Baltic ground units they will be training alongside, and what kinds of training in which these units have already participated over the past year. A regional center for lessons learned can facilitate this type of predeployment information sharing.

*Recommendation 5: Place Tripwires Where Russia Will Trip Over Them*

The forward deployed EFP battlegroups and the U.S. Army armored brigade combat team represent genuine combat power. Nevertheless, their true purpose is to be a tripwire. Thomas Schelling aptly described the logic behind tripwire forces during the Cold War: "What can 7,000 American troops do against a Soviet invasion? Bluntly, they can die. They can die heroically, dramatically, and in a manner that guarantees that the action cannot stop there."<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, the EFP battlegroups and the U.S. Army armored brigade combat team enhance the deterrence of Russian

aggression because a major attack could kill NATO troops, thereby guaranteeing NATO's intervention.

The problem is that tripwires only work when the adversary actually trips on them. First, if Russia finds a way to attack the Baltic States without killing or wounding NATO and U.S. troops, then these forces will neither deter nor reassure. Unfortunately, Russia might be able to bypass the tripwire. It is investing heavily in long-range, precision weapons and remotely piloted vehicles, which are as useful for accurately avoiding targets as they are for accurately hitting them. Although the U.S. military pioneered these technologies partly to minimize collateral damage, Russia can use them to manage escalation risks during an attack. Worse yet, to the degree that Russia thinks it can pull off a *fait accompli* invasion without killing or wounding large numbers of NATO and U.S. troops, the risk of war and miscalculation increases. Second, Russia need not invade an entire Baltic country, let alone all three of them, to discredit NATO. Seizing a relatively small piece of territory in any one of them might suffice, particularly if that terrain has strategic, political, or symbolic value.<sup>39</sup> Again, if Russia thinks it can undertake a discrete land grab while avoiding NATO and U.S. forces, it might be willing to accept certain risks. Currently, the EFP battlegroups and U.S. Army armored brigade combat teams are not based on or near the places that are the most likely targets of a discrete land grab. Third, tripwires are designed to deter conventional and nuclear threats. They may not work against a hybrid threat, particularly if Russia prefers to use such nonviolent tools as agitation. Since the tripwires only work when NATO and U.S. personnel are killed and wounded, they are ineffective and perhaps even counterproductive against nonviolent

measures. Russia can use NATO and U.S. troops as evidence that the United States wants to occupy the region, or to prepare offensive operations of its own. It can spread lies about forward deployed troops committing atrocities and exploit the local tensions that arise when forward deployed troops are involved in training accidents or get into trouble.

We suggest two ways to improve tripwire effectiveness. Conceptually, U.S. and NATO planners should assess whether the nature of the threat means that small, forward deployed units cannot function as both a combat-credible force and a tripwire. In other words, Russia's precision weapons arsenal, the fact that it can achieve its goals via a discrete land grab, and its hybrid operations suggest that the two roles are now mutually exclusive. Combat credibility requires the ability to amass fighting power quickly. The fastest way to amass fighting power is to keep forces consolidated in the first place. Yet consolidated forces are easier to avoid (with precision weapons), occupy a relatively small swath of land (leaving more potential targets vulnerable to a quick land grab), and are more likely to irritate local citizens (making them an ideal target for propaganda). Practically, the EFP battlegroups should consider disaggregating such that platoon and company-sized elements cover as many potential targets of a discrete land grab as possible. Distributing battlegroup units throughout the region will certainly make it hard to consolidate combat power to repel an invasion.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, we think the risk is acceptable. First, a single battlegroup is unlikely to stop a large-scale, worst-case scenario invasion. U.S. and NATO planners should thus treat the EFP battlegroups as the tripwire that they are, rather than the combat-credible force that we would like them to be. Second, distributing the battlegroups to the maximum

extent possible significantly complicates Russian planning. It would be difficult for Russian war planners to avoid hitting NATO troops, thereby increasing their deterrent power. Finally, although public opinion toward NATO troops remains quite high right now, the confrontation with Russia will probably persist for years. Over time, a large, consolidated, and highly visible footprint is more likely to irritate locals than one that is small, distributed, and low profile. It also presents an easier target for hybrid operations.

*Recommendation 6: Remember That A2/AD is a Double-Edged Sword*

Western defense and security analysts usually portray A2/AD as a threat, not as an opportunity. To be sure, China, Russia, Iran, and other potential adversaries are investing in A2/AD capabilities to exploit uniquely American vulnerabilities. The United States has a far-flung alliance network. Opponents can use A2/AD to prevent the U.S. military from coming to the defense of one or more of these allies, thereby threatening the credibility of the entire system.<sup>41</sup> The Atlantic and Pacific Oceans that protect the United States also impede U.S. power projection, allowing adversaries to use A2/AD to make the costs of projecting power unacceptably high. In recent decades, U.S. ground forces have underinvested in key capabilities for operating in an A2/AD environment, particularly low-altitude, anti-aircraft defenses and amphibious assault landing craft. A2/AD is nevertheless a double-edged sword, especially for Russia. The United States has long been a leader in long-range precision technology. Despite Russia's recent modernization efforts, the United States has far more experience designing,

building, and using precision weapons. Russia is also vulnerable to long-range attack. Notwithstanding Prompt Global Strike, the United States has an array of conventional sea- and land-based weapons that can hold Saint Petersburg, Moscow, and other major population centers at risk. Furthermore, Kaliningrad is trapped between two NATO allies and the Baltic Sea, which means Russia needs the Sulwaki Gap almost as much as NATO does. A number of means are available to the United States and NATO to flip the A2/AD challenge on its head.

The U.S. Army can help in both blunting Russia's precision and A2/AD weapons, and in using these same capabilities against Russia in the event of war. The joint Army and Marine Corps Multi-Domain Operations concept is an important step in this direction.<sup>42</sup> Forward-based ground troops are inherently more resilient against long-range precision weapons than air and naval forces are. Ground troops are easier to disperse and can fight without relying on vulnerable supply systems, runways, and ports. They can make use of one of the most survivable forms of protection: the trench. At the same time, if ground troops are equipped and trained in accordance with an appropriate warfighting doctrine, they can use precision weapons to defend key population centers from air, sea, and land attack; deny access to strategically important maneuver space on land, sea, and air; and launch strikes against distant targets on the ground and in the water.

Training and equipping U.S., NATO, and Baltic ground forces to impose A2/AD challenges on Russia will significantly complicate Russian war planning while enhancing deterrence by denial. Regional defense officials point out that to attack one or more



of the Baltic States, Russia must first achieve air and naval superiority.<sup>43</sup> Yet NATO's existing deterrent measures have been land-centric.<sup>44</sup> Whether the EFP battlegroups and the U.S. armored brigade combat team are there to act as a tripwire, to fight as a combat-capable force, or to perform a combination of the two, both are equipped and trained to fight other ground forces. A better approach would be to arm and train these forces to fight across multiple domains. Of course, to achieve this goal, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps must first translate the Multi-Domain Operations concept into a coherent doctrine with an associated set of tactics, techniques, and procedures as well as dedicated acquisitions programs. Funding the Multi-Domain Operations initiatives should therefore be one of the Army's highest priorities.

*Recommendation 7: Clarify the VJTF's Role*

The VJTF is the subject of much criticism. Announced at the Wales Summit in 2014, the VJTF is a brigade-sized, multi-national, first wave response force ostensibly capable of mobilizing for deployment within 2 days. However, many defense analysts doubt the VJTF can actually perform its primary mission. Activating the VJTF faces the same political obstacles and constraints as any NATO collective action does, whereas various logistical and legal barriers could prevent rapid movement across Europe. The Supreme Allied Commander Europe also lacks the authority to hold realistic no-notice snap exercises.<sup>45</sup>

Without commenting on these existing critiques, we think that the VJTF suffers from a deeper conceptual problem: regional experts and policymakers do not agree on its purpose and role. Some see it as

an enhanced tripwire: a force that NATO can deploy in the early stages of a crisis to signal resolve, and to ensure that Russian aggression will wound and kill personnel from across NATO.<sup>46</sup> Others think it will serve as a combat-credible force in its own right by more than doubling the number of NATO troops in the Baltic region.<sup>47</sup> Some dismiss the VJTF entirely, convinced that the United States will instead provide the first reinforcements in a rapidly escalating crisis. Most disconcertingly, defense officials in at least one country suggested that the VJTF does not even factor into their contingency plans.<sup>48</sup>

The problem goes beyond semantics. If NATO allies—especially those whom the VJTF was created to support—disagree on its purpose and function, then it is highly likely that Russia is also confused as to its purpose, and what its deployment will signal. Confusion on Russia's part might give it some pause, but Russia might nevertheless dismiss the VJTF as a paper tiger, while allies see it as a source of insurance. Miscalculation and inadvertent escalation can result on both sides. During a crisis, Russia could interpret the VJTF's mobilization as an act of aggression, despite NATO intending to deploy it as an enhanced tripwire. Worse yet, if NATO members do not clearly understand what the VJTF is supposed to do, then they might squabble over whether to use it in the first place, delaying its employment above and beyond whatever other legal, logistical, and A2/AD obstacles it might already face. For these reasons, the U.S. Army and the U.S. Government should work with NATO to clarify what mobilizing the VJTF would and would not mean.

## Blunting the Hybrid Threat

### *Recommendation 8: Devote More Resources to Confront the Most Likely Threat*

Our first seven recommendations focus on improving early detection and enhancing existing deterrence efforts. Collectively, these measures suggest relatively inexpensive and non-provocative methods that the U.S. Army and NATO can use to hedge against the worst-case scenario: a surprise, *fait accompli* invasion of one or more Baltic States. However, we agree with the majority of experts and officials whom we interviewed: Russia is unlikely to launch a major attack against NATO's northeastern flank, at least for the foreseeable future. Therefore, our seven aforementioned recommendations mostly concern easing U.S. fears of a surprise conventional attack so that the U.S. Army and its NATO counterparts can focus on deterring and defeating the most likely threat: a sustained hybrid campaign. Unfortunately, the best tools for deterring a large-scale ground invasion are not necessarily the best tools for countering a hybrid threat.<sup>49</sup> Tank battalions and artillery batteries are essential for defeating, and therefore deterring, a conventional attack. However, they are less helpful for providing foreign internal defense, increasing social resilience, and countering disinformation campaigns. Large conventional units can even prove counterproductive, serving as fodder for hybrid operations.

We thus caution against letting worst-case scenarios drive planning. Even if Russia harbors revisionist ambitions, we have many reasons to believe that it will not invade the Baltic States. The U.S. Army and

NATO risk wasting finite resources if they focus on deterring such an attack. More problematically, if fear and uncertainty do motivate Russia, then implementing robust, conventional, deterrence measures risks provoking the very dangers that the United States and NATO wish to avoid.

To the degree that enhanced early detection and minimal deterrence measures would reduce U.S. and NATO fears of a surprise fait accompli invasion, the U.S. Army would be able to focus its energy and resources on the hybrid threat. Although this threat is mainly political rather than military, the U.S. Army can still help the Baltic States deal with Russia's hybrid campaign. The U.S. Army has spent the last 15 years conducting stabilization, reconstruction, and counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. These hard-earned lessons learned are highly applicable to the challenges facing the countries on NATO's northeastern flank. The U.S. Army can assist its Baltic allies by providing training and lessons learned on counterintelligence, strategic communications, network analysis, local security, and infrastructure resilience. It also has a wealth of experience working alongside the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development. The Army should consider working with both agencies to help Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland develop their own "whole-of-government" plans for dealing with hybrid warfare.

*Recommendation 9: Recognize That the Region has One Flank, but Many Fronts*

U.S. analysts tend to treat NATO's northeastern flank as a single operational area. To be sure, our NATO allies in the region have much in common. The

Soviet Union dominated all four countries during the Cold War, annexing Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania outright, while subjugating Poland as a satellite. All four share a border with Russia. Estonia and Latvia share a direct border, while Lithuania and Poland encircle Kaliningrad. All four are NATO members. With the exception of Poland, none have much strategic depth and are all vulnerable to a fait accompli surprise invasion.

Yet these superficial similarities obscure meaningful differences, differences that the United States can use to defeat the hybrid threat if it were to pay attention to them, but which Russia can also exploit to its advantage if the United States does not. As chapter 2 describes, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland possess unique cultural and sociopolitical characteristics. This point is of paramount importance if hybrid warfare is the most likely way Russia plans to influence our allies. The four countries have distinct demographics, differing in terms of ethnic composition, size, and distribution of Russian minority groups, as well as the degree to which Russophones have been integrated into state institutions and local societies. They also face unique geographic challenges with respect to Russia. Poland is about five times larger than Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, giving it the defensive depth that the others lack. Estonia and Latvia's shared borders with Russia makes both vulnerable to a surprise large-scale ground invasion, whereas Russian troops would need to transit Belarus to attack Lithuania or Poland. In an invasion scenario, Poland would be easier to reinforce than Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania.

Because of these important differences, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland have unique requirements and vulnerabilities. Each also brings a unique

set of opportunities and capabilities to the table. Defensive and deterrence measures that prove effective for one country might prove counterproductive for another. U.S. and NATO war planning must be sensitive to these differences.

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## CONCLUSION

The United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) face daunting challenges in the Baltic region. Regardless of its underlying intentions and motivations, Russia is behaving aggressively. Its military is more capable than it has been at any point since the end of the Cold War. Russian strategists are finding creative ways to put old tools to new ends. By combining diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power, Russia subverts the status quo and sows discord within NATO without crossing any red lines that might trigger retaliation.

These problems are formidable, but we have reason to be optimistic. Vladimir Putin appears to have overplayed his hand in Ukraine. Far from shattering NATO's cohesion and undermining its resolve, Russia's invasion and subsequent occupation of eastern Ukraine has reinvigorated the alliance. If anything, Russian aggression gives NATO something it has lacked since the collapse of the Soviet Union—a definitive *raison d'être*. NATO allies are taking much more seriously their commitment to pay a fair share for European security, taking prudent first steps toward enhancing the Baltic region's ability to deter and defend against a Russian invasion.

Nor is Russia an unstoppable adversary. It has many weaknesses. Indeed, Russian fears over those vulnerabilities might be driving its aggressive foreign policy. Even if this is not the case and Russia is indeed a relentless predator, it is nevertheless a vulnerable one. Russia has only one formal ally, and many neighboring countries are turning away from it. Russia's modernization efforts are uneven at best and should be kept in perspective, given how decrepit its military

became after the Cold War. Russia might be able to mobilize and transport tens of thousands of troops in a matter of days, but it still has not demonstrated an ability to support these forces over long distances while conducting high-intensity combat operations against a peer competitor.

The United States has many options for taking advantage of Russia's vulnerabilities. First and foremost, the United States has allies thanks to NATO and its far-flung network of bilateral alliances and partnerships in Europe and Asia. The United States, NATO, and their regional allies have already taken a number of crucial steps, including deploying the Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups and organizing the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. Second, the United States maintains a clear qualitative advantage in terms of long-range precision weaponry and the ability to employ them effectively in combat operations. Therefore, the United States and its allies have a number of options for flipping the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) threat on Russia. Finally, at least for the moment, the United States and its allies appear to have time on their side. The Zapad-2017 military exercises were not a pretext for a surprise invasion. Russian forces are still tied down in eastern Ukraine.

The United States thus has a rare opportunity to step back and consider its strategic approach to deterrence and defense along NATO's northeastern flank. After analyzing the intentions, capabilities, and limitations of both Russia and our allies, we recommend one possible set of minor course adjustments. We refer to these suggested measures in the collective as a hedging strategy. Although we see our nine recommendations as mutually reinforcing, we have no reason to believe that they cannot be considered and implemented

individually. Taken as a whole, our recommended hedging strategy seeks to fulfill three goals: improve early detection capabilities, enhance deterrence in ways that are relatively unprovocative, and improve regional defenses against the hybrid threat. Achieving these three goals should help the United States deter Russia and reassure regional allies more effectively while managing our own worst fears.

This final point is important, since fear appears to play an outsized role in the current strategic dialogue surrounding Russia. There is an important difference between planning for a worst-case scenario and allowing worst-case scenarios to drive planning. Planning for a worst-case scenario is prudent, but when we allow worst-case scenarios to drive planning, we tend to inflate the threat, thereby misallocating scarce resources and misperceiving the other side's intentions. Worse yet, basing our plans on worst-case scenarios could prove dangerously counterproductive; it risks provoking the very threat that we wish to deter, while causing us to overlook the many considerable advantages we possess.

The U.S. Army can support all three elements of our hedging strategy. In terms of enhancing deterrence: whether deployed on a permanent or rotational basis, U.S. ground troops are a uniquely powerful signal of American credibility. They are combat-capable, especially because they can entrench and disperse in the face of the growing precision weapons and A2/AD threats. They potently symbolize resolve, demonstrating that the United States has "skin in the game" to allies and adversaries alike. The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Multi-Domain Operations concept will make Landpower an even more effective and essential component of U.S.-extended deterrence. In

terms of improving early detection, the U.S. Army is better positioned than the other services to foster regional coordination. Ground forces form the majority of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland's armed forces. The U.S. Army should take the lead on either or both establishing or supporting a mechanism for regional command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance coordination. The U.S. Army also has extensive experience collecting, analyzing, and distributing lessons learned, and can help the Baltic region establish a similar system. Finally, in terms of improving regional defenses against the hybrid threat, the U.S. Army has deep institutional experience conducting stabilization, internal defense, and counterinsurgency missions. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have also given the Army a great deal of experience developing and implementing "whole-of-government" strategies. Accordingly, the Army is uniquely qualified to help allies blunt Russia's hybrid threat.

Ultimately, we realize that a hedging strategy is not risk-free. Some will argue that we are too sanguine about Russia's intentions, and that worst-case scenarios should drive U.S. planning. We acknowledge that our hedging strategy presumes that fear is as likely to motivate Russian behavior as imperial ambition. If this assumption is wrong and Russia is an implacable adversary, then the United States must devote more resources, and deploy far larger numbers of troops to the region. Conversely, others may argue that our points about horizontal escalation are too provocative and escalatory. We simply hope that the hedging strategy that we suggest can prompt an important conversation about how best to enhance conventional deterrence along NATO's northeastern flank.

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