

# Cold Warriors and Tomorrow's Battlefield

## Defending the Baltics

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### ABSTRACT

The Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are a potential flashpoint for conflict between Russia and NATO. There is concern that the Baltic region is dangerously under-prepared for a future Russian invasion. War gaming conducted by the Department of Defense and NATO militaries in conjunction with the RAND Corporation suggests that Russian military forces could capture the Baltic capitals of Riga and Tallinn within 72 hours of the start of a conflict. This study aims to ascertain why Russia would invade the region, how Russia could succeed, and how NATO could resolve a potential conflict and deter future aggression. NATO and the Baltic States are already on the right track to increase their conventional deterrence, but Russia remains the wild card that NATO must continue to balance.

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### INTRODUCTION

There is a very real possibility that one day a conflict will break out along the Baltic-Russian border that could draw the United States and NATO into direct conflict with Russia. The most likely scenario begins with ethnic Russians initiating a low-level insurgency before they begin losing to local military forces and are reinforced by a fast-paced Russian invasion. Baltic military units backed by NATO's quick reaction forces are then forcefully pushed back to the capitals of Riga and Tallinn. Their defenses collapse in quick succession and the Baltic States fall under Russian control. While these events seem unlikely, the outcome described above is the result of a series of actual war games conducted by the RAND Corporation in Washington D.C.<sup>1</sup> To come to this conclusion,

RAND developed a map-based tabletop exercise, because existing models were deemed inadequate to represent the scenario. Players included RAND analysts, civilian and uniformed members of the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, NATO Naval Command, and European military staff. The scenario's results showed that the current force posture in the Baltics was not sufficient to defend against a conventional Russian military invasion.

This paper aims to understand how the Baltic States are preparing for such a scenario and why they are the most likely targets for Russia's geopolitical expansion. It argues that the Baltic States and NATO can deter Russia with a credible defense against conventional Russian military forces. The following discussion will include an assessment of the Baltic's security environment, a contextualized analysis of Russia's goals, a brief discussion of the aforementioned invasion scenario, and its implications for the future of NATO's eastern frontier.

## **UNDERSTANDING BALTIC SECURITY**

From 1945 until the fall of the USSR, the Baltic states - Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania - were puppet states under Soviet control. Since 2004, however, all three states have joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). These countries border both Russia and Belarus to the East, the Baltic Sea to the West, and the Russian territory of Kaliningrad Oblast to the South. A border about 40 miles long connects Lithuania to Poland, its closest NATO ally. Because of this landlocked proximity, RAND argues "a direct military escalation of the conflict would most likely take place [in the Baltic Region] or in the Black Sea Region... Therefore, the Baltic Sea Region has moved from the periphery of security politics to the center of attention," according to the Baltic Development Forum.<sup>2</sup>

Today, NATO plays an important role in providing security and deterrence for the Baltic States. NATO's supplying of weapons, training, and the stationing of rotational forces all are designed to deter Russian expansion. Every NATO member state has the right to invoke Article 5 of the NATO treaty if it comes under attack. Article 5 provides for the collective defense of each alliance partner and is the very heart of the treaty. This notion of collective defense was a key reason behind the Baltic States' decision to join NATO. Before analyzing the military security component, however, it is important to briefly talk about other forms of security and insecurity, as they are just as vital to stability in the Eastern European region.

As stated in the Baltic Development Forum's *The Baltic Sea Region: Challenges and Game Changers* report, "The majority of the economies around the Baltic Sea are faltering because of domestic and/or external factors, challenging the region's competitiveness."<sup>3</sup> Economic factors are compounded

by rapidly aging populations and low birthrates. The current ethnic Russian community in the Baltic States presents further security threats. In 2011, there were 1,051,520 ethnic Russians in the Baltic States (556,422 in Latvia; 321,198 in Estonia; and 174,900 in Lithuania), a decrease from 1,726,000 in 1989, the year of the last census during the Soviet era.<sup>4</sup> Comparatively, this is about 1/6 of the total Baltic population of 6,194,803 (2015). In 2007, Estonia moved a statue commemorating the Soviet liberation from the Nazis. This sparked outrage among Russian minorities. “A perceived attack on the identity of a subordinate group is likely to provoke a nationalist backlash, as occurred in Estonia,” notes Stephen Herzog.<sup>5</sup> As this case illustrates, the governments of the Baltic states must contend with the Russian minorities and their treatment as a part of internal security. Minor actions on the part of the government could have drastic consequences, as Moscow closely monitors the treatment of Russians residing outside its borders.

With these considerations in mind, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been proactive in developing new security strategies. James Corum of the U.S. Army War College writes “the new NATO nations take security very seriously...the newer NATO nations and the three Baltic States have been among the most enthusiastic participants in the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq and the NATO mission in Afghanistan.”<sup>6</sup> The Baltic states are all striving to reach the requisite two percent of gross domestic product (GDP) defense spending goal. Estonia, a strong participant in the Afghanistan campaign, surpassed its two percent goal in 2015. The increase in spending was used to purchase equipment for the army and enhance cyber defenses.

In more than two decades of independence, the three Baltic States have formed a political and security culture that is firmly linked to the West, and especially to the transatlantic alliance. The security environment in Europe is constantly evolving, though NATO’s focus has been and will continue to be Russia. A published military doctrine of the Russian Federation (2010) openly calls NATO an “enemy.”<sup>7</sup> It refers to NATO expansion as a dangerous endeavor and cites militarization along its border as provocative. Corum notes that the Baltic States recognize Russia as their greatest existential security threat and have made serious efforts to support both the Western security system while contributing to the U.S. global security strategy.<sup>8</sup> When the United States began to focus on the Global War on Terror, NATO struggled to realign itself with the threats of the 21st Century. However, when Russia invaded Crimea and began its hybrid warfare campaign in Ukraine in 2014, NATO could formally re-classify Russia as its greatest existential threat.

Domestic politics within the Baltic States typically avoid confrontational language or anything that could provoke Russian aggression. In *The NATO Research Review*, Keir Giles writes that consequently “official government statements and policy papers...do, indeed, specify many of the threats to and

concerns about security, but there is also a tendency to avoid commenting candidly about ongoing security concerns.”<sup>9</sup> Government officials reference security threats without explicitly naming the Russians. As former territories of the USSR, the Baltic States have a special perspective on Russia that most NATO countries do not. According to one Latvian senior official, “After that long experience, we know how the Russians think, and we can read between the lines.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the Baltic States played a key role in forming the NATO strategic concept for 2010, “[mounting] a quiet but effective lobbying effort to influence [the concept].”<sup>11</sup> Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea in 2014, and increased belligerency in Ukraine and Syria have prompted NATO to recognize Russia’s ongoing status as a threat and further reinforced the 2010 NATO strategic concept. As an Atlantic Council report notes that “[Russian maneuvers] ... include provocative overflights and the harassment of air, land, and sea traffic of many neighboring countries; financial manipulation; kidnapping and illegal border crossings; snap military exercises; and casual threats of using nuclear weapons.”<sup>12</sup>

However, the West must understand Russia’s political use of military force, especially Putin’s regular boasts about Russian nuclear capabilities. European security expert Mark Galeotti argues that “contrary to recent hyperbole, these actions do not presage a military attack; rather, they are meant to distract, dismay, and divide the West.”<sup>13</sup> Moscow understands how to play the long game, sowing disorder in European political institutions. A conventional war between Russia and NATO is not a priority for Moscow, but the idea of war is a useful tool to advance its interests.

## HOW THE BALTICS PERCEIVE RUSSIAN ADVENTURISM

Since 2010, the Russian Federation has become resurgent in international affairs. Galeotti claims Russia “has been an economic dynamo and a basket case, an imperfect democracy and a tightening tyranny, a constructive diplomatic actor and a serial military aggressor.”<sup>14</sup> It has proven itself a necessity in international endeavors such as the P5+1 Iran Nuclear Deal and the Paris Climate Agreement. Yet, it continues to exhibit domestic aggression. Despite its global involvement in multilateral institutions, Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, active support of the Assad Regime in the disastrous Syrian Civil War, and continued propagation of violence in Eastern Ukraine exemplify its increasing hostility.

Andrei Tsyngankov reasons in the *Journal of Post-Soviet Affairs* that Russia’s President Vladimir Putin “has grown skeptical of relations with the West - the policy of improving ties with the United States under his designated successor Medvedev did not amount to recognition of the Kremlin’s objectives.”<sup>15</sup> At

home, Putin's ideological cornerstone is Russia's status as a culturally distinct power committed to defending its values and principles against those of the West. Speaking to experience on the National Security Council, Paul D. Miller contends that Putin's success is in part because he "has the most favorable international environment since the end of the Cold War to continue Russian expansion."<sup>16</sup> Political instability within the European Union, challenges to international law by countries like China, and the United States' own tentative foreign policy have fostered an environment with room for Putin to maneuver.

Evolving global conditions have impacted Russia's calculations and ambitions. A series of financial crises have weakened the European Union; the United States has fallen victim to uncoordinated foreign policy and challenges to its international order by China and other actors; war and revolution have continuously destabilized the Middle East; and consequently, Russia sees an opportunity in the chaos of global affairs. Gideon Rose of *Foreign Affairs* claims, "The only constant [with Russia] has been surprise, as the zigging and zagging has left outside observers, and even many Russians, scratching their heads."<sup>17</sup> One theory to explain the zealotry of Russia's resurgence is the centuries-old resiliency in the belief of its own exceptionalism.

History and ambition "furnishes Russia's people and leaders with pride, but it also fuels resentment toward the West for supposedly underappreciating Russia's uniqueness and importance."<sup>18</sup> But as Stephen Kotkin explains, the West's presumption of Russia as a backwards and antagonistic place alienates the Russian psyche that drives institutions to "oscillate between seeking closer ties with the West and recoiling in fury at perceived slights, with neither tendency to prevail permanently."<sup>19</sup> Part of this psychological isolationism has to do with Russia's geography. Its least-passable natural barriers are the Arctic and Pacific Oceans, and if history is any indicator, Russia's large frontiers are prone to incursion by hostile forces. Therefore, Russia has perpetually felt vulnerable and has often acted in ways that display a "defensive-aggressiveness."<sup>20</sup>

Russia's historical 'defensive-aggressiveness' can explain some of the friction seen today and illustrate why the Baltics may be the next target of Russian adventurism. Following the devastating German invasion in 1941 and the brutal fighting that ensued, the Soviet Union vowed never to let another "Operation Barbarossa" happen again. After the fall of Nazi Germany and the end of WWII, the Soviet Union established a series of satellite states along its natural border. These buffer states played an important role in the defense of the Soviet homeland, as Soviet strategists believed that the major battles of the Cold War would take place in East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania, or Bulgaria.

Following the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the westward gravitation of many of its former satellite states toward NATO or the European Union, Russia views its borders as exposed once again. Barring Belarus, Russia's only buffer against a theoretical invasion is its large presence of military forces along

its Western flank. From the Baltic Sea to Sevastopol, Russia is building up capabilities to undercut NATO's longstanding technological advantage.

Most of this modernization and positioning is happening where Russia borders conflict zones (Ukraine and the Middle East). Former Commander of U.S. European Command General Philip Breedlove explains how Russia is also building up its presence near its border with the Baltic States to match the West's capabilities stating, "although Russia's fighter aircraft do not currently match the West's, the country's advanced air defenses, coastal cruise missiles, anti-ship capabilities, and air-launched cruise missiles are increasingly capable."<sup>21</sup> In effect, Russia is attempting to establish anti-access/area-denial zones across its periphery, including the Baltics and the enclave of Kaliningrad.

Sokolsky sees Russia as a "revisionist, neo-imperialist, and expansionist power determined to overturn the post-Cold War European security order, destroy NATO's cohesion, and restore its sphere of influence throughout the former Soviet Union."<sup>22</sup> The Kremlin, however, believes that NATO's decision to spread East threatens its traditional areas of influence. Furthermore, Moscow believes that the United States seeks to subvert the Putin Regime by promoting democracy in and around the country. Sokolsky argues, "Russia's estimates of the military balance with NATO are permeated by a deep sense of inferiority in terms of conventional prompt global strike capabilities, nuclear weapons, missile defenses, cyber weapons, and even the much-hyped hybrid forms of warfare – the Russian general staff, like NATO's military planners, are basing their plans on worst-case thinking."<sup>23</sup> This clear difference in how Russia and the West view the positioning of armaments increases the risk of accidental conflict or escalation. NATO planners understand Russia's view and actively weigh this against NATO deterrence deployments near Russia's border.

Kaliningrad, the westernmost region in Russia, is the key to understanding Russia's Baltic ambitions. The enclave is separated from Belarus by the Suwalki Gap—A 60 mile stretch of land between Poland and Lithuania. It is also 435 miles separated from the Russian mainland. It houses the Russian Baltic Fleet, as well as ground forces and an air force detachment with fighters, bombers, and helicopters, and an early-warning radar system, in addition to Iskander missiles.<sup>24</sup> Kaliningrad is geographically separated from the Russian mainland and all civilian and military traffic must pass through Lithuania and Latvia, which are both NATO and EU countries. Kaliningrad is critical to Russia's sphere of influence as Vanessa Gera claims, "in the long term, Russia's wish is to bring the Baltic Sea and the passages leading to it increasingly under its control, and to control it much like it does the Black Sea."<sup>25</sup> Russia's recent deployment of advanced S-400 surface-to-air missile systems in Kaliningrad provides an effective air-defense bubble over all the Baltics. This deployment is of serious concern for Baltic officials.

Even more concerning for the Baltic States and NATO is Russia's

deployment of Iskander ballistic missile systems (SS-20 Stone) to Kaliningrad. Writing on Russia's missile deployments, Gera explains that the Iskander system is a mobile missile system with a range of at least 310 miles and is capable of firing both conventional and nuclear warheads.<sup>26</sup> The deployment of both the S-400 SAM and Iskander systems, combined with Russia's officially-stated "escalate to deescalate" strategy is putting Western military strategists and policy-makers on edge. The outgoing Estonian president Toomas Hendrik Ilves commented on the missiles saying, "it seems to me that this is yet another step in the general context of escalation that we see, at least in rhetoric."<sup>27</sup> To avoid escalation, the following sections will argue that deterrence through strength and resolve is the only realistic way to achieve that goal.

## **NATO'S RESPONSE TO RUSSIAN AGGRESSION**

The annexation of Crimea was a crucial strategic turning point for NATO. The fall of the Soviet Union, ethnic unrest in the Balkans, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan put NATO in limbo. The relevance of the mission had diminished until Putin reasserted Russia as a Eurasian power. At the height of the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact was outmanned and outgunned by the Alliance, but today Russia is seen by many "as a superior military force", that is capable of overrunning NATO defenders along its vulnerable Eastern flank.<sup>28</sup> NATO and Russia are at a crucial point where a serious change in their relationship needs to occur. Richard Sokolsky comments, "the dynamics between NATO and Russia are a recipe for increased tensions, unintended consequences, and a growing risk of accidental conflict arising from the escalation of a military incident – moreover, military steps taken to bolster deterrence and defense could make the task of de-escalating a crisis more difficult."<sup>29</sup>

So far, NATO has taken steps to mitigate the risk of military confrontation while still responding to Russian aggression in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere. For example, NATO and the European Union have placed economic sanctions on Russia in an attempt to put increasing pressure on Russia's energy and financial sectors. In regard to what NATO can do to further coerce Russia, Sokolsky argues that "Moscow seems to have a penchant for heavy-handed geopolitical games, [and] perhaps the best tactic is to concentrate on its vulnerabilities."<sup>30</sup> The sanctions have targeted Russia's dependency on Western capital and financial systems, though Moscow appears to be willing to let ordinary Russians pay the price. This course of action is ultimately self-defeating for the West. Finally, Galeotti argues, "the tougher the line, the more the West plays into Putin's own nationalist narrative: that Russia is a beleaguered fortress in a hostile world, and that compromise with the West is to undermine the country's sovereignty and betray its history and destiny."<sup>31</sup>

In terms of active measures to prepare for a possible conflict, the Baltic States

have undergone a transformation in military modernization. First, they procured new weapons and equipment to augment their Soviet-era militaries. The United States and other NATO allies have provided training and support to modernize the Baltic's battlefield tactics and operations. In addition, the Baltics have hosted high profile NATO exercises for decades, including BALTOPS 16.<sup>32</sup> Director of Transatlantic Security at the Atlantic Council Magnus Nordenman reported this exercise gathered "some 6,000 personnel, 45 warships, and 60 aircraft from 17 nations, including the United States, Germany, the U.K., and the Netherlands, along with the littoral states of the Baltic Sea who are NATO members."<sup>33</sup> In the wargame played by RAND, however, modernization and training alone mattered little in the face of heavy mechanized Russian divisions racing to the sea.

Modernization was kickstarted by the 2007 cyber-attack on Estonia. This cyber-attack highlights Baltic security vulnerabilities in several critical areas. There is a subtle distinction between cyber-crime and cyber-war, but both expose the vulnerabilities of a sovereign nation. Estonia suffered a cyber-attack on its political and economic infrastructure, an attack that had the potential to be crippling to the nation's ability to govern and maintain stability. The event sparked an aggressive campaign in the Baltics and throughout Europe to increase cyber defense and conventional capabilities. Furthermore, the 2007 event exposed the fragility of ethnic tensions in the region.

Because Estonia, like most Western states, relies on digital networks and internet for critical infrastructure, vulnerabilities can be exploited with devastating effect. European Commission and NATO technical experts could not directly attribute blame to Moscow, though there is every reason to believe they are responsible. Regardless, the attack proved that Baltic security must be prepared to face Russian dangers from both inside and outside their borders. Following the 2007 attack, Estonia attempted to invoke Article 5 of the NATO Charter to defend against Russia, a serious move that implied Estonian perception of an attack.

Shlapak and Johnson's work at RAND offers recommendations based on military deterrence. RAND concluded that "having a force of about seven brigades, including three heavy armored brigades – adequately supported by airpower, land-based fires, and other enablers on the ground and ready to fight at the onset of hostilities – might prevent [NATO's rapid defeat]."<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that this posture would not be sufficient for a sustained defense of the Baltics, but it would be enough to alter Moscow's strategic calculus. Since the annexation of Crimea, NATO has increased its presence in Eastern Europe and the Baltics have been the focus of major changes.

In early 2017, new NATO deterrent forces arrived in the Baltic States and Poland. Of these forces, the main U.S. component is comprised of about 1,000 soldiers from the 2nd Cavalry Regiment based in Vilseck, Germany.<sup>35</sup> In 2016 the Wall Street Journal reported that "Germany sent forces to Lithuania, Canada will send troops to Latvia and by late 2017, the British will have a battle group

in Estonia.<sup>36</sup> To increase the effectiveness of forces fighting on Europe's eastern frontier, "the governments of the Baltic States and Poland have reached all the necessary political, financial, and technical agreements to implement one of the most ambitious projects inside the European Union –the unified Trans-European Transport Network," according to a 2016 Jamestown Foundation report.<sup>37</sup> Improved logistical networks, including a unified rail system known as "Rail Baltica" will be able to move soldiers and equipment rapidly to potential front lines. The military importance of railways is clearly demonstrated: "a typical train can move up to 120 armored units – tanks, armored vehicles or other machines – in a single trip," according to the Jamestown Foundation report.<sup>38</sup> Rail and road travel is increasingly important in the Baltic region, as airspace will likely be contested in the event of a conflict with Russia.

The Baltics have likewise increased their overall defense spending. An IHS Market report found "Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia increased spending on new defense equipment from \$210 million in 2014 to \$390 million in 2016 – together by 2018, those three countries are expected to spend around \$670 million a year on new equipment."<sup>39</sup> Baltic defense budgets are expected to reach a peak of over \$2 billion by 2019 per IHS Jane's Annual Defense Budgets Report 2016. In tandem, the Baltics are seeking to reduce their dependency on Russian energy. In the face of the Ukraine Crisis, European countries saw a reduction in energy flowing from Russia as a retaliatory response to sanctions. As the Baltic Sea region remains connected to the old Soviet-era electricity system, the Baltic States are accelerating electricity integration projects with the European Union to reduce their energy dependency.

In effect, NATO and the Baltic States are working towards rebuilding a robust military deterrent able to alter Moscow's strategic calculations. Increased allied presence, prepositioning, and the rotation of troops since the invasion of Ukraine have reenergized NATO's defense efforts along Europe's Eastern Frontier. In addition, major financial and resource investments in transportation and energy infrastructure projects have bolstered NATO's readiness capabilities. These investments will allow for a rapid and sustained deployment of forces. The integration and build-up of rail systems allows for movement in areas where airspace will likely be contested or controlled by hostile anti-access/area-denial operations. Despite these plans, the Baltics remain at a strategic disadvantage and vulnerable to a Russian attack.

## **METSJEESUSEID! (WOLVERINES!) OR WHAT HAPPENS IF RUSSIA INVADES?**

The RAND report estimates that in an invasion scenario, Russian forces would reach the Estonian capital of Tallinn or the Latvian capital of Riga within 36 to 60 hours with "U.S. and Baltic troops – and American airpower – proving

unable to halt the advance of mechanized Russian units and suffering heavy casualties."<sup>40</sup> In such a scenario, NATO's current disadvantages would limit its options for a response, as Chief National Security Correspondent with *Foreign Policy* Dan De Luce states "The United States and its NATO allies could try to mount a bloody counter-attack that could trigger a dramatic escalation by Russia, as Moscow would possibly see the allied action as a direct strategic threat to its homeland. A second option would be to take a page out of the old Cold War playbook, and threaten massive retaliation, including the use of nuclear weapons. A third option would be to concede at least a temporary defeat, rendering NATO toothless, and embark on a new Cold War with Moscow."<sup>41</sup>

A conflict in the Baltics would likely begin similar to the Ukrainian invasion as a hybrid war in which local militants seek to gain control of their regions with covert help from Moscow. During the Cold War, NATO was prepared for an overt attack by Russia, but today it faces more ambiguous threats in its most fragile regions. More alarming still is the fact that NATO has yet to figure out how to rapidly and successfully address a hybrid conflict. NATO is concerned that a conventional military response to a hybrid warfare crisis would make the alliance be seen as the aggressor.<sup>42</sup> So far, NATO has done little more than deploy quick reaction forces to the Baltic region. These moves, however, are being criticized by Russian officials as a ploy to build up forces along the Russian border. This further exacerbates the tensions and increases the risk of accidental war.

NATO must find a balance between posturing and signaling. It must station its forces to be able to militarily defend against an attack, yet concurrently persuade Russia that its intent is purely defensive in nature. Too many forces in the Baltics could lead to escalation, but the rotation of quick reaction forces throughout the region signals a commitment to defense. Posturing is even more sensitive and can have a profound effect on deterrence. NATO's most powerful deterrent is likely to be the use of its new rapid reaction force [since 2006] – the force isn't intended to engage in combat, but it would show the alliance's support for a threatened member and hopefully persuade Moscow to lower the pressure.

Estonia is taking a proactive approach to face the Russian threat, though its efficacy is yet to be seen. Michael Totten writes in *World Affairs Journal*, "As the northernmost Baltic country stands no chance in a conventional fight with the Russians, the Estonian Defense League is preparing more than 25,000 volunteers, including women and children, to fight a deadly insurgency against a Russian invasion."<sup>43</sup> The Defense League is "training them to make IEDs and strike Russian convoys in hit-and-run attacks, and the government is encouraging everyone to keep guns and ammunition in their houses and hidden in backyards and forests."<sup>44</sup> However, since Estonia is in good standing

with NATO, their preparations should never be called upon in this worst-case scenario. The Estonian Defense League and NATO work together on a range of issues. Most recently, the two organizations have cooperated on localized cyber-defense initiatives in Estonia.

## CONCLUSIONS

NATO is no longer as strong or resilient militarily or institutionally as it should be. The alliance has been weakened because of non-traditional conflicts, disengagement due to a lack of existential threat, and years of financial crisis and austerity in Europe and in the United States. On the other hand, Vladimir Putin has led a resurgent Russia in sometimes shocking outbursts of adventurism. Following Ukraine, and more recently Syria, the Baltics are speculated to be the next target of Russian aggression. This aggression may take the form of overt military invasion or a more covert form of hybrid warfare.

At present, the Baltics are not able to defend themselves even with the help of NATO, which they are likely to receive in full force. The RAND report, though not absolute, sheds light on a very real scenario for the Baltics. Prepositioned Russian forces along the border and in Kaliningrad are capable of shutting down Baltic air and sea space during the onset of a high-intensity conflict. Experts claim it would take a matter of days to close the gap between Russia and the Baltic Sea, conquering Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the process. Fortunately, none of these events have happened yet, which means NATO can still work to prevent this scenario from ever happening.

The RAND report explains, “The first step to restoring a more-robust deterrent is probably to stop chipping away at the one that exists.”<sup>45</sup> NATO is deploying rapid reaction forces in each Baltic state, and it is not just the United States that is helping. Germany, Great Britain, and Poland are among the chief contributors. Deterrence should start, though with a clear signal to Russia and other potential adversaries that the United States and Europe have returned their focus to the European neighborhood. Increased rotation of heavy units through the Baltics, as well as improved development of infrastructure, create a favorable environment for ground forces that cannot rely on air or sealift.

Russia and the West are currently incapable of reconciling their political and historical differences. The aim of every party involved in the Baltic Region should be the continuation of peace and prosperity on the European continent. Yet, the Baltic region remains a flashpoint between NATO and Russia. Since Russia is intent on positioning military forces in the Baltic region, NATO must respond in kind. NATO is not deliberately antagonizing Moscow with the deployment of additional forces to the Baltic Region. But it must continue to read how the Kremlin responds an increased tempo of training and rotations

of combat forces.

The Baltic region is in the sights of leaders from Washington, Brussels, and Moscow. Aside from Russian posturing with deployments and exercises, there is no indication of an imminent crisis in the region. Russia's shift in attention to Syria should not be taken as a free-ride by NATO. In addition to strengthening the alliance's resolve, this "down time" should be used to carefully navigate the geopolitical landscape and bolster defenses while moderating escalation with an overly sensitive Russian regime. NATO is on the right track with many members agreeing to increase their spending to meet the 2 percent of GDP required by the treaty. In addition to this, enhanced NATO deployments to the Baltic Region is being fully supported with funding and material. If the Baltic States are the next front line against Russian aggression, NATO must maintain their commitment and sustain its presence in the region to deter and defeat any possible contingency.

#### ENDNOTES

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