

CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE AND LANDPOWER IN NORTHEASTERN EUROPE

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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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