

PROJECT 1721

*A U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE ASSESSMENT ON RUSSIAN STRATEGY IN EASTERN EUROPE
AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO LEVERAGE LANDPOWER TO MAINTAIN THE PEACE*

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Vladimir Putin's grand strategy is to reassert Russian influence in Europe. To achieve this end, Putin needs to diminish the credibility of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), especially in the Baltic nations. There are two military approaches that Putin can pursue in pushing NATO out of the Baltics: (1) a direct attack or (2) apply pressure in the form of ambiguity (often called hybrid warfare). The "unthinkable option" of a direct attack on Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania would be a high-risk move that could only come if American leadership is weak and NATO's commitment to its Baltic Allies is diminished. In such an all-or-nothing gamble, the goal for Russian forces would be to quickly seal off land, air, and sea access to the Baltic Region within 36-48 hours. The narrow Suwalki Gap, just 65 km wide, is where Russian troops would easily sever all land access to the Baltic nations from Poland and the rest of NATO. Once the land route is cut, Russian anti-aircraft and anti-shipping assets would make it too risky for U.S. and other NATO forces to arrive to expel the invaders.

The second, and more likely, option for the Kremlin is to use ambiguity. This would take the form of fomenting a "local" (exported from Moscow) ethnic Russian separatist movement similar to what was witnessed in Ukraine. Such an eventuality would occur in an area with a high ethnic Russian population in either Estonia or Latvia (Lithuania's ethnic Russian population is but 6%). These would not be the "little green men" of Crimea. The separatists, who would really be Russian Special Operations Forces (SOF), would appear as civilians seeking independence for the "discrimination" that they suffer from Estonians or Latvians. Moscow's goal would be to destabilize

the region in a way where no direct connection between the Kremlin was evident. The purpose of this ambiguity is not just to provide Putin plausible deniability, but, more importantly, to cause the NATO Alliance to dither and delay on taking action. NATO, not known for quick action, would act slowly to determine if the crisis was foreign or domestic.

As NATO dithers, debates and delays a decision, the opportunity for a low-risk move to destroy the Alliance would begin. Moscow would order a large force along the borders of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to intimidate the Alliance and to provide covert support to their separatist movement. As security deteriorates and the local population suffers deprivations, Putin would announce a humanitarian mission to end the distress. Of course, Moscow would pledge that the army would be withdrawn from the disputed area once security is restored. However, before the Russian troops depart, there would be a referendum with the ethnic Russian population appealing to Putin to remain. This would be followed by an annexation of the land by Moscow. Thus, without firing a shot, the NATO Alliance could be undermined with the simple act of annexing a modest piece of Baltic land without going to war with NATO. The brilliance of this strategy of ambiguity is that, should NATO respond in uncharacteristic rapidity, Putin could merely deny any involvement and wait for another opportunity to try such an action when and where the environment was more favorable. However, there are concerted steps that NATO and, specifically, the United States can take to prevent either of the dangerous actions delineated above from coming to fruition.

The armed forces of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania must be capable, survivable, and maneuverable. This is why acquiring mid- to long-range weapons could make these nations less appetizing to Moscow. If attacked, these offensive weapon systems could wreak havoc to Russian command and control nodes and transportation hubs and disrupt the movement of Russian forces. This would provide the Baltic nations with a credible military capability and a “capacity to deter by denial as well as to deter by punishment.” Concurrently, the United States should help reduce the anxieties of our allies by stationing robust military assets in the region. This would complement U.S. Army Europe’s (USAREUR) campaign plan of making “30,000 American Soldiers look like 300,000.” The genius of USAREUR’s plan is to blend the Active Army with the Army National Guard and Army Reserve to support the European Theater. Part of this expansion is what should be called “Deploy Forces to the Baltics (DEFORTIC).” Using the Return of Forces to Germany (REFORGER) model from the Cold War, the goal is to have units rapidly fly soldiers into the region to use American equipment already staged there. This reduces the arrival time of “over the horizon” forces considerably.

Rasa Juknevičienė, a Member of Parliament and former Lithuanian Minister of Defense, brilliantly stated, “The biggest provocation for Putin is empty security promises. Lithuania’s policy in 1940 was not to provoke Stalin and Russia. Look at what that got us.” The Baltic Nations had a policy of not provoking the Soviet Union in the late 1930s and in 1940. History demonstrated that weakness encouraged aggression. In 1940, Stalin demanded that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania open their borders to the Red Army, which they did, in an endeavor not to provoke or antagonize Moscow. This weakness resulted in the invasion and occupation of these lands that within a year would suffer unimaginable horror and deprivations at the hands of Moscow. This is yet another example of appeasement inviting aggression. The idea that inaction and weakness is a reasonable course of action for the United States and NATO is a hazard-

ous and dangerous approach that historically has only resulted in costly and bloody wars. Indeed, the “[c]osts to deter Russia now is far cheaper than the costs later,” as “Russia always goes for the weak one.”

“There is a race for the Baltics; the side which comes first with substantial forces will prevail. To prevent conflict, there must be strength and resolve.” If NATO acts with determination, war can be averted and peace preserved. However, the window of opportunity for the Allies is closing. The emerging Russian “strategy of ambiguity” is a direct threat to the NATO Alliance. Yet, it can be deterred now with resolve and a modest forward deployment of American forces in the region. The United States can change the calculus in the region and avert a perilous move by Russia with a simple commitment of a brigade in the Baltic Region. NATO has an opportunity to prevent the unthinkable from happening.

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