HOW TO DEFEND THE BALTIC STATES

By R. D. Hooker, Jr.

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Introduction

“On NATO’s eastern flank we will continue to strengthen deterrence and defense, and catalyze frontline allies and partners’ efforts to defend themselves.”


In recent years, the United States’ National Security Strategy and almost every major US think tank has called attention to the parlous state of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) eastern flank. There, some of NATO’s newest and smallest member states are threatened by an aggressive and revanchist Russian Federation. In particular, the three Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—face powerful Russian forces with tiny armies and modest defense budgets. Despite presidential guidance contained in the US National Security Strategy, these frontline countries remain all but undefended. For Russian President Vladimir Putin, the prize is tempting: an opportunity, at low risk, to seize NATO territory and fracture the Alliance. As an urgent priority, Washington, as leader of NATO, should take on defense of the Baltics as a critical priority. Indeed, without effective defense, there can be no effective deterrence.

Troops participate in Russia’s Zapad 2017 strategic-operational military exercise. (Source: Russian Ministry of Defense)
The Threat

Inside and outside NATO, in the Pentagon, in Brussels and in capitals like London, Berlin and Paris, many dismiss the threat altogether. On paper, the NATO allies possess far stronger economies and militaries than Russia, as well as nuclear weapons that make direct confrontation, according to the skeptics at least, all but unthinkable. According to this thesis, Putin is a pragmatic and careful leader¹, mindful of NATO’s potential strength and unlikely to test NATO resolve. This school of thought sees Russia’s aggression in Georgia, Donbas, Crimea, and Syria as aberrations or at least as lesser cases that do not apply here. To test this proposition, one can begin with a sober appreciation of Russian capabilities and likely intentions.

Russian Capabilities

First, what is Russia’s capability to conduct offensive operations in the Baltic States? While lacking the strategic mobility and power projection capabilities available to the United States, Russia is formidable along its periphery and especially in its Western Military District (MD), opposite NATO’s eastern flank.² On the ground, the Western MD includes the recently reconstituted 1st Guards Tank Army (1GTA), the 6th and 20th Combined Arms Armies (6CAA and 20CAA), and the 11th Army Corps in Kaliningrad.³ Also located in the Western MD but under national control are three airborne divisions and three Spetsnaz special forces brigades. These forces are supported by some ten rocket and artillery brigades as well as five air-defense brigades, including some 30 tank or motor rifle brigades/regiments, with one naval infantry brigade.⁴ Subtracting those forces defending Kaliningrad or retained to mask Ukraine or Poland, this force includes approximately 60 maneuver battalions and 50 artillery battalions. Perhaps half of these are combat ready and available to participate in an attack on

¹ “The escalation dynamics of this conflict are not favorable to Russia. A conventional entanglement can quickly spiral out into nuclear conflict, or escalate globally bringing the full power of the US military to bear against a Russia that is far too vast for its armed forces to defend. The risk and costs of a conventional incursion in the Baltics grossly outweigh Moscow’s prospects for military gains.” Michael Kofman, “NATO Deterrence and the Russian Specter in the Baltics”, The Wilson Center, August 9, 2016.
² The Western Military District and the “Western Operational Strategic Command” are distinct entities but commanded by the same 4-star officer. The latter functions as a Joint Strategic Command in time of war. Lester Grau and Charles K. Bartles, “The Russian Way of War”, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth Kansas, 2016, p. 29.
³ 1st GTA carries a famous designation dating back to the Great Patriotic War and is the only tank army in the Russian order of battle. “Endowing this newly re-established formation with such heritage can be seen as a clear political message intended to intimidate and to draw attention to its specific, overtly offensive operational role within the [Russian] military.” Igor Sutyagin and Justin Bronk, “Russia’s New Ground Forces”, Routledge Whitehall Papers, August 2017, p. 95.
⁴ All Russian divisions and brigades have their own organic artillery and air defense units as well. Of note, Russian tank and motor rifle brigades include two tubed artillery and one rocket battalion—far more artillery than NATO brigades.
the Baltic States on short notice. They would constitute the first echelon and would spearhead a potential invasion in the first 30 days. They are equipped with some of the most lethal weapon systems in the world, including the T-14 Armata tank, the S-400 air-defense system, the Bastion anti-ship missile system, the Kalibr anti-ship and land-attack cruise missile and the Iskander ballistic missile.

At sea, the Russian Baltic Fleet is equipped with 8 destroyers and frigates, 25 coastal corvettes, and 2 submarines, supported by an assortment of minesweepers, amphibious-assault and logistics vessels. Though not a blue-water force, the Baltic Fleet is substantial, particularly when supported by land and sea-based anti-ship missiles like the Kalibr system. Kaliningrad, the fleet’s home port, is the only port in western Russia that is ice free year round. More than half of Russian large ship construction and container traffic worldwide is centered on St. Petersburg—more evidence that having NATO on its doorstep is deeply concerning to Russian leaders.

In the air, the Russian Air Force boasts 1,176 combat aircraft, including 139 long-range bombers, 222 air-defense fighters, 265 ground-attack planes, and 378 dual-role fighter/ground-attack aircraft, as well as 376 attack helicopters. Given operational readiness rates and the need to cover the rest of Russia’s vast territory, perhaps one-third of these, or some 400 of all types, could be made available for operations against the Baltic States. The Russian Air Force has no fifth-generation fighter aircraft in operational squadrons, but has significant combat experience.

In the nuclear arena, Russia is well-equipped with air-, sea- and ground-launched tactical nuclear weapons that give teeth to its “escalate to de-escalate” narrative. Fielded weapons include nuclear-capable short-range ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles that can be launched by ship or aircraft. Experts disagree on whether or not Putin might contemplate a first use of nuclear weapons when the existence of the state is not at risk. At a minimum, such use would invite world-wide opprobrium and risk uncontrolled escalation. Western political

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5 Slightly less than half of Russian manpower consists of short-term conscripts whose combat effectiveness must be rated significantly lower than professional “contract” soldiers, who are concentrated in more elite units such as the Spetsnaz and airborne formations and, to a lesser extent, in the 1st GTA. Charles Dick, “Russian Ground Forces Posture Towards the West,” Chatham House Research Paper, April 2019, p. 4.

6 Remaining Western MD conventional forces contain many conscripts and would require 30–60 days to absorb reservists and be brought up to full strength. Lack of collective training would make them less effective than their more ready counterparts. Interview with Dr. Daniel Burghart, Professor Emeritus, National Intelligence University.


leaders should respect Russia’s capability but not be bullied by Russian threats. The US, United Kingdom and France also possess nuclear arsenals that will surely give Putin pause.  

Both nuclear and conventional forces have been repeatedly tested and rehearsed, most recently in the large scale Zapad 2017 exercise. The Russian military’s ability to alert, marshal and deploy forces has been demonstrated not only in exercises but in actual military operations. Based on observing these exercises, a fair estimate of the time required to launch an offensive against the Baltic States, from receipt of mission to execution, is seven to ten days. This leaves NATO very little reaction time. 

Multiple studies have concluded that these forces are ample to overrun the Baltic States in a matter of days. Defended by small standing forces (totaling four brigades, with no tanks or combat aircraft and little artillery and air defense), the Baltics have little to fall back on except memories of the “forest brothers,” partisans who fought the Soviets at the end of World War II. They will fight bravely but to little avail. As for NATO, given the current level of readiness, most experts conclude that it would take months to assemble and commit the forces required; only a single, multinational NATO battalion is stationed in each country as a token “tripwire” force. The fight will be over long before NATO can intervene.

“Most experts conclude that it would take months to assemble and commit the allied forces required to defend the Baltic States.”

14 “Recent improvements to readiness and to the ability to move forces quickly within Russia, combined with the density of anti-access/area-denial capabilities arrayed to defend the Russian heartland, provide Moscow with a much greater ability to project force against countries on its borders, including not only Ukraine and Georgia but also NATO members and allies in the Baltic region.” Scott Boston et al, “Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe,” RAND Research Report, 2018, p. 2.
16 A prevailing argument in some circles is that local resistance by reservists and tiny Baltic special forces can “delay, disrupt and deter” Russian aggression by imposing “very costly” losses. These arguments for the most part lack serious analysis of force ratios and time/space factors. As presently constituted, the defense establishment of the Baltic States will collapse in a matter of days with near certainty. For a sample of these arguments see: Stephan J. Flanagan et. al, “Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance,” RAND Corporation Research Report, 2019, p. 8-12.
Critics of a stronger Baltic defense often argue that NATO’s “potential” strength is enough to deter Putin, and that vague threats to horizontally escalate the conflict at points far removed from the Baltic region will dissuade him. However, as we have seen, this fight will be over well before NATO can take the field, with every prospect that our NATO allies will then shrink from the massive effort required to retake the Baltic States.18 As for horizontal escalation, few concepts are as poorly understood or dangerous.19 Rather than extend the conflict globally, with the high risk that matters will spin out of control, US leaders will work to localize and “tie off” the conflict lest it become too unmanageable altogether.

**Russian Intentions**

If Russia’s capability to overrun the Baltic States is clear, what evidence do we have of Russian intentions? A good place to start is with the words of Putin himself and his closest advisors. On multiple occasions, Putin has asserted the right to intervene using military force to “protect” ethnic Russians living abroad:20

> I would like to make it clear to all: our country will continue to actively defend the rights of Russians, our compatriots abroad, using the entire range of available means.21

According to Russian sources, Putin sees the return of the Baltics and other former Russian territories as a matter of “historical justice” that will be attempted “sooner or later.”22 In 2015, Russian parliamentarians and the Russian state prosecutor questioned the 1991 recognition of Baltic independence by the State Council, laying the legal groundwork for reincorporation.23 In that same year, Russian intelligence officials meeting with US counterparts issued a “stark warning” that military force, including nuclear weapons, could be used against any buildup to defend the Baltic States. According to these officials, Putin viewed “any attempt from NATO’s side to […] step up its presence in the Baltics as a declaration of war.”24

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18 “The majority view is that Russia would very likely succeed in seizing any territory on its borders if it chose to do so.” Michael Fitzsimmons, “Horizontal Escalation: An Asymmetric Approach to Russian Aggression?” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Spring 2019, p. 100.

19 With its origins in the Cold War, the concept of horizontal escalation was considered but not adopted in the Reagan administration on the grounds that “as a strategy to deter or defeat Soviet aggression it was neither clear nor credible.” Fitzsimmons, p. 106.


21 President of Russia Vladimir Putin, speaking to a conference of Russian ambassadors, July 1, 2014, Official Website of the President of Russia.


23 In the same year the same tactic was employed to justify the annexation of Crimea. Arial Cohen, “Putin Explores Legal Loopholes to Take Back the Baltic Nations,” *Newsweek*, July 16, 2015.

Russian threats are also backed up by European dependence on Russian energy, supplied at below-market rates. Much of central and eastern Europe is wholly or largely reliant on Russian oil and natural gas, a critical vulnerability that may intensify when the Nord Stream Two project comes online in 2020. Particularly in colder months, the ability to cut off energy supplies at will represents a powerful weapon. The Baltic States in particular are vulnerable—100 percent of their natural gas is imported from Russia. Attempts by the European Union to develop alternate sources have so far proven ineffective. Energy security—or rather its lack—gives Putin substantial leverage and influence across Europe, enabling him to intimidate his neighbors at any time.25

Given Putin’s repeated use of military force and public rhetoric, the common view that Russian aggression in the Baltic region is “unlikely” or “low probability” seems puzzling. However, less wishful thinking seems to arise the farther east one travels. In a recent report from the Tallinn-based International Center for Defense and Security, Baltic and Polish security experts take a cold and objective view of Russian intentions based on daily contact and observation over many years:

Russia’s ambitions and intentions are clear—to break up the post–Cold War security architecture, to undermine NATO and the EU, and to weaken the Transatlantic link—and these goals are not going to change for the foreseeable future.26

Indeed, Russian chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, has gone so far as to note the “disappearance of the line between states at peace and their shifting to a state of war.”27 Russian behavior in the Baltic region supports his thesis. A constant stream of propaganda, subversion, disinformation, border provocations, airspace violations, cyberattacks and intrusions (not to mention aggressive and unsupervised troop deployments and “snap” exercises) portray a more or less continuous mode of confrontation just below the level of kinetic activity. Moreover, government-sponsored propaganda asserts the right of ethnic-Russian communities to declare independence, similar to the situation in Donbas.28 The intention is clearly to “pressurize” the Baltic States and induce a degree of fear, uncertainty and intimidation.

Even so, should the West take these provocations seriously? After all, Putin is known to bluster and his fulminations on the Baltics might be just that. However, a wealth of evidence points to the contrary. In fact, there are sound and credible political, historical and geographical reasons for Russia to covet the Baltics that are recognizable to any competent strategist and military planner.

For starters, the Baltic States represent exactly the kind of emerging, prosperous Western democracies and “color revolutions” on former Soviet territory Putin is known to detest and fear. Indeed, such fears are precisely why Russia invaded Donbas. Furthermore, each Baltic State possesses ethnic-Russian minorities, especially Estonia and Latvia. They were also at different times part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. They stand between Mother Russia and Kaliningrad, home of the Russian Baltic Fleet, leaving the fleet isolated and separated by 300 kilometers from the Russian border. As former US Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich proclaimed during the 2016 US presidential campaign, Estonia is virtually a “suburb” of St. Petersburg, Russia’s western capital. Wrenching the Baltic States from NATO control would restore the strategic depth Russia lost in the 1990s, fracture the Alliance and transform the European security environment in profound ways. It would also sound the death knell for future NATO expansion for Ukraine and Georgia. These are all tempting rewards.

“While Russian aggression in the Baltic States is not certain, clear indicators suggest that strong steps should be taken now. The price of miscalculation could be far higher.

There are other prizes as well. Successful confrontation with the West feeds Putin’s narrative of the return of Russian greatness, which includes standing up to Western attempts to “disrespect” and “isolate” Russia and deny Russia’s rightful place in the international order. As one noted expert opines, “Russia’s borders are, for its leadership, provisional—determined by accidents of history—and to be adjusted when necessary.” Successive military interventions have only strengthened Putin domestically, helping him to consolidate his control of the state apparatus. For Putin, Russian aggression in Chechnya, Georgia, Donbas, Crimea and Syria have proven that military force can be used successfully without eliciting a forceful response from the West. Putin’s

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30 “If Russia could engineer a situation to warrant military action against a NATO member, so that it was responding to a situation rather than provoking a crisis, the reward of weakening NATO and calling into question America’s value as an ally would be extraordinary, as it would revise current European and global power balances…”. Murphy and Schaub, p. 6.


campaigns also demonstrate Russian opportunism in the face of weakness and vulnerability. He has now invaded his neighbors and gotten away with it multiple times in little more than a decade. Defeating NATO would cement Putin’s place in Russian history. For all these reasons, it is perhaps high time to rethink the “Putin would never dare” narrative.

Therefore, given the debate over Putin’s threats and actual intentions, under what circumstances would Putin contemplate overt aggression in the Baltics? A number of scenarios are plausible: a political or economic crisis threatening to destabilize Putin’s regime (and thus suggesting a “patriotic” distraction); US involvement in a major crisis elsewhere, opening a window of opportunity; US or European internal disputes that might threaten a cohesive Alliance response; or political perturbations inside the Baltic States. These and other scenarios represent opportunities for Putin to act that could occur at any time. Hence, while Russian aggression in the Baltic States is not certain, the clear indicators suggest that strong steps should be taken now. The price of miscalculation could be far higher.

Many assume that the preferred Russian method will be to employ “gray zone” or “hybrid” approaches to confuse and hinder a strong NATO response. Still, while these activities can help shape and “prepare” the battlespace, it is not clear that key Russian objectives can be achieved in this way alone. After Crimea and Donbas, few would accept Russian denials or disinformation. Both the NATO secretary general and the US

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34 “The Baltic Region is where the Alliance is most vulnerable to Russian aggression.” Billy Fabian et. al, “Strengthening the Defense of NATO’s Eastern Frontier”, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019, p. 2.

35 The largest Latvian political party, the ethnically Russian “Harmony,” has close ties to Putin’s United Russia party, while the pro-Russian, far right “Order and Justice” party in Lithuania joined the governing coalition and was given the Ministry of Defense in July 2019.
president have made it clear that any violation of Alliance territory by Russian troops will activate Article 5.36 Additionally, while the Baltic States are not able at this point to resist a conventional Russian offensive, they are much better prepared to cope with Russian cyberattacks, paramilitaries and separatist movements.37

Insignia-less Russian troops deployed to Crimea in February 2014. (Source: VOA/Wikimedia Commons)

As there is convincing evidence Russia may seriously consider an offensive campaign in the region, what steps are required to deter Russia and defend the Baltics? There are at least three major areas in need of increased attention and effort. These include "setting" the theater to conduct and support major combat operations; providing in-place forces that can successfully defend for up to 30 days; and reducing the time required to deploy NATO reinforcements.

In recent years, congressionally appropriated European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) funds totaling some $15 billion have been provided to US European Command to enhance command and control (C2), exercise programs, pre-positioned equipment sets and sites, airfield capabilities, etc. EDI represents a major financial investment. However, progress on interoperability, military mobility, C2 and the readiness of NATO allies in general has been slow. Here, urgent progress is needed, not more conferences and debates. In broad strokes, the theater lacks the kind of logistics infrastructure, C2 architecture, networked air defense, engineer preparation and long-range capabilities needed to conduct major military operations in the East. While much of the required combat power can come from the US, NATO collaboration within these frameworks and capabilities is essential for effective deterrence and defense. Some of this work is underway. Recently, the North Atlantic Alliance committed to establishing a rear-area command in Germany to address theater logistics. In addition, the European Union’s "Permanent Structured Cooperation in Defense” (PESCO) initiative is intended to address military mobility.

On the ground, the forces in place are currently far from adequate for defense, but the situation is not hopeless. Because the defender has certain inherent advantages (such as knowledge of the terrain and the ability to emplace obstacles and fortifications), the forces required to defend can be smaller. The standard planning figure is a ratio of one to three—that is, the defender requires approximately one-third of the attacker’s combat power to successfully defend. In the Baltics, these ratios are achievable. At the same time, however, combat power is more than numbers. For example, Russian preponderance in heavy forces and artillery greatly increases the striking power of their brigades relative to NATO light or motorized brigades. Training, leadership, morale and better technology can help to offset an opponent’s numerical superiority.

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39 As one example, only one of the US Army’s 15 Patriot high altitude air defense battalions is located in Europe at present. At least two more would be required to defend prepositioned equipment sites and other critical infrastructure in Poland and the Baltic States in time of war.
As mentioned above, a reasonable estimate of Russian ground forces available for operations against the Baltic States in the first 30 days is approximately 30 maneuver battalions and about 25 artillery battalions. (A similar-sized, follow-on echelon consisting of less-ready units brought up to full strength with reservists could be employed within a 30- to 60-day window). Given the greater striking power of Russian units, in-place defending forces should total some 15 maneuver battalions (at least one-third of these armored or mechanized) and 12–15 artillery battalions. Today, the Baltics can muster just 11 active infantry battalions (mostly light infantry) and four artillery battalions (mostly towed, 105-millimeter), with no tanks. The three Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battalions can be added, but their actual combat power is low. As most studies conclude, these forces will be overwhelmed in short order.

**Russia’s Likely War Plans**

While actual Russian war plans are unknown, it is likely that the smaller 6th Combined Arms Army (CAA), augmented with a Russian airborne/air-assault division and a Spetsnaz brigade, would be tasked to overrun Estonia. The objective here is to ensure control of the Gulf of Finland and the approaches to St. Petersburg as well as the eastern Baltic. The Baltic Fleet’s naval infantry brigade could then conduct amphibious landings to secure key islands.

The much larger 1st Guards Tank Army, potentially with a second airborne division attached, will in all likelihood strike in the direction of Kaliningrad, cutting off the Baltic States altogether and preventing NATO reinforcements from entering the region. Elements of this force would then wheel north to overrun Latvia. A thorny question for Russian planners is how to deal with Poland. Many experts assume that Russian forces will attack from jumping off positions in Belarus and pass through the 64 mile-wide Suwalki Gap in northeastern Poland, the shortest and most direct path to Kaliningrad. However, that route will ensure that Russian forces take on the Polish Armed Forces, among the best in NATO, with their almost 1,000 tanks and 100 fighter aircraft. An alternate route through Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, avoids Polish territory and may well minimize Polish participation inside the Baltic States. In the author’s opinion, this approach is more likely.

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41 6th CAA is assigned only two maneuver brigades in peacetime.
42 1st GTA is assigned two divisions and two separate brigades in peacetime. As a higher readiness formation, the author estimates that 1st GTA can attack on short notice with five of its eight maneuver brigades.
43 See LTG (Ret) Ben Hodges et al, “Securing the Suwalki Corridor: Strategy, Statecraft, Deterrence and Defense”, Center for European Policy Analysis, July 2018. Belarus’s role in this scenario is unclear. Its armed forces are closely aligned with Russia’s and include three active maneuver brigades. However, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has signaled a desire for closer relations with the West and NATO at times to avoid direct control from Moscow. This scenario assumes that Belarus will acquiesce to the use of its territory by Russian forces but would not participate in aggression against NATO.
44 In this scenario Poland would likely retain most of its forces for national defense while committing modest forces to NATO operations in the Baltic States. Polish planners will certainly fear Russian retaliation for allowing NATO forces to base and transit through Poland and will posture accordingly.
45 The author is indebted to Brigadier General (ret.) Peter Zwack, former US Defense Attache in Moscow, for these insights.
In terms of airpower, Russia’s air assets are decidedly inferior to those of NATO, both in numbers and quality—with two important caveats. First, it is unlikely that the full inventory of NATO’s combat aircraft will be brought to bear. Even those countries that vote to confront Russian aggression may balk at sending strong forces, leaving the heavy lifting to the US and others. Also, the advanced air-defense systems based in Kaliningrad and just across the border inside Russia are dense and highly capable. Until they are reduced or eliminated, NATO air forces will find it difficult to operate to full effect or with acceptable losses. Russia can expect to fight with local air superiority or parity early in the campaign. For this reason, dealing with Kaliningrad first is imperative.

Most studies posit an extended air campaign, but that will take time the Baltic States do not have.

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46 The 22nd Air Defense Regiment in Kaliningrad is equipped with the S-400 (NATO “SA-21”) system, arguably the most advanced in the world with a range of 250 km, an altitude of 200,000 feet, a speed of Mach 6 and a hit/kill probability of 90 percent against fast maneuvering targets. An SA-21 regiment can deploy up to 48 launchers. Franz Stefan-Grady, “Russia Accepts New S-400 Air Defense Regiment Into Service,” The Diplomat, November 7, 2018. The total number of Russian air-defense systems available for use in a Baltic scenario includes 272 long-range surface-to-air missile launchers, 72 medium-range launchers, and 288 short-range launchers. Boston, p. 9.

47 “Russia has an advantage in advanced integrated air defenses that renders NATO’s numerical advantage usable at high risk to all its fourth-generation aircraft.” Ibid, p. 7.

48 Taking Kaliningrad vice reducing it from the air is also necessary because flowing forces northwards into the Baltic States through the narrow Suwalki Gap, under long range Russian fires, will be very difficult.
For that reason, seizing the exclave from the ground at the outset should be considered. Russian ground forces there (two motor rifle brigades and one tank regiment with artillery) are substantial, but Russian leaders should understand clearly that unprovoked aggression against NATO will come at a high price. Part of that cost must be losing Kaliningrad, a constant irritant and friction point in peacetime and a crucial strategic fulcrum—for both sides—in wartime. Polish heavy forces, which are based nearby, along with US forces based in Poland are the obvious solutions for this mission.49

**NATO’s Posture in the Baltics**

A 2016 RAND Corporation study concluded that “the current NATO posture is woefully inadequate to defend the Baltic Republics” and cited seven maneuver brigades, with enablers, as the minimum ground force required for initial defense.50 At least three should be tank or mechanized brigades, as light forces cannot realistically contend with Russian tank and motor rifle units supported by massed artillery.51 Given the strong Russian advantages in artillery and electronic warfare, the author contends that at least three additional NATO brigades (one heavy and two light) are required.52 If fully manned, trained, equipped, competently led and adequately supported with artillery, ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) and air defense, this force can inflict significant casualties and delay Russian first echelon forces for up to 30 days.

An obvious solution is to upgrade Baltic military forces and to station one combat-capable, rotational heavy NATO brigade in each of the Baltic States. This option has met with strong opposition from NATO officials and leaders in capitals, usually on the grounds that Putin will see such a deployment as “provocative,” a charge easily dismissed since a force of this size cannot possibly pose an offensive threat. A “lack of infrastructure” in

49 Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg) was a Prussian and German possession for some seven centuries but was annexed by the USSR in 1945. The German population was forcibly removed and replaced with Soviet citizens. Today, the city is far removed from current German borders and is adjacent to Poland’s major Baltic port, Gdansk. In 1990, the German government renounced all claims to the city. Should Poland be asked to sacrifice to reduce Kaliningrad following Russian aggression, it seems reasonable to cede it to the Polish people as part of a postwar settlement. “Taking Kaliningrad would be ‘a natural indemnification for European territorial losses and a form of ‘compensation’ for the inclusion of Crimea into the Russian Federation,’ as Moscow political commentator Grigori Trofimchuk has pointed out.” Fredrik Westerlund, “Russia’s Military Strategy and Force Structure in Kaliningrad,” *Swedish Defense Research Agency*, May 2017. At a minimum, if returned to Russian control post-conflict, Kaliningrad must remain demilitarized.

50 Shlapak and Johnson, p. 1.

51 While not ideal tank country in many places, Baltic terrain lends itself to canalizing attacking forces at choke points. For this reason, and because the attacking Soviets were equipped with hundreds of tanks, the German Army Group Courland, which defended the area in 1944–1945, included a complete panzer army of two panzer corps. This force was cut off but held out successfully until the end of the war. Any attacking Russian force today will include hundreds of main battle tanks, advancing along or astride road networks. Anti-tank weapons can slow them and inflict losses, but dug-in defending tank units will be needed to survive heavy Russian indirect fire and stop Russian tank concentrations.

52 Current Russian doctrine stresses the “maneuver of fires,” placing great stress on the destruction of enemy formations and critical nodes by fire as the decisive element in ground combat. This accounts for the high numbers of rocket and tubed artillery units in the Russian order of battle as well as the emphasis on “reconnaissance-strike complexes” that can locate, target and strike the enemy quickly with devastating effects. Petersen et. al, p. 165.
the Baltic States is also cited as a reason to avoid stationing US or NATO troops there. Interestingly enough, in 1944 the existing infrastructure could support an entire German army group of 700,000 troops, including a mechanized panzer army. The Baltic States today are far more advanced and modern than in 1944. That they could support the introduction of NATO troops in far smaller numbers than in WWII seems assured.

**Host Nation Solutions: What Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania Can Do Themselves**

Nevertheless, stronger NATO ground forces in the Baltics do not seem politically feasible for now. The remaining option is to rely on host nation solutions. This approach will require significant security assistance to the Baltic States and strong support from key allies, but the Balts themselves must first step up. Although small in population and GDP, they are capable of much more than they are doing now. With a combined population of some 6 million, only 22,000 citizens are under arms. Most are contract soldiers who serve short tours of duty, although Lithuania has recently reintroduced nine-month limited conscription. Thirty thousand indifferently trained and equipped reservists are also on the books. In comparison, with a similarly-sized population, Finland fielded some 300,000 troops in the 1939 Winter War. Tiny Latvia fielded a 70,000-man army during its War of Independence in 1919. The Estonian army at the same time fielded 80,000. Today, Israel, a state with an equivalent population, fields an active army of 176,000 with another 465,000 upon full mobilization.

These examples show that the Baltic States can do much more to increase their own defense potential. Universal conscription for a period of two years, with fair compensation for those who choose to become career soldiers and officers, would yield an order of magnitude improvement in size and quality and provide the basis for expanding Baltic ground forces at lower cost than expensive professional soldiers.

A reasonable goal is for Estonia and Latvia to expand from a light brigade to a small heavy division commanded by a major general and composed of a headquarters, two maneuver brigades, and enablers such as a general support field artillery battalion and air defense, engineer, logistics and signal battalions—about 10,000 soldiers. Lithuania, with its larger population, can field a full division with three brigades (about 12,000 soldiers). Division headquarters should be commanded and staffed by Baltic officers, trained in the US, with NATO advisors and augmentees. At least one brigade in each division should be a “heavy” or mechanized

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53 Flanagan et al, p. 8–12.
54 Although the overall Israeli population is approximately 9 million, the indigenous Arab population and some ultra-orthodox religious groups and other exempted categories are not subject to conscription. The population eligible for conscription is thus about the same as for the Baltic States. Unless exempted, all citizens are subject to the draft at age 18 with males serving 2 years and 8 months. The Military Balance 2018, p. 340.
55 Short terms of service are counterproductive because a minimum of six months is required to adequately train a soldier. Discharging them into the reserve just a few months later means that active units have no stability or cohesion. For this reason, the US term of enlistment is a minimum of three years.
56 This can be done relatively quickly by converting one reserve brigade into an active formation.
formation consisting of one tank and two mechanized battalions. The other brigade should be motorized to allow battlefield mobility. Each brigade should include a direct support field artillery battalion (ideally self-propelled 155 mm howitzers), air-defense battery, engineer company, logistics company and signals company and be commanded by a brigadier. A general support 155 mm artillery battalion should be provided at division level, with one corps-level Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) battalion. Maneuver units should be liberally supplied with Javelin fire-and-forget anti-tank and Stinger air-defense systems. Reserves should be organized to provide combat replacements (recently discharged soldiers are best for this task) as well as territorial defense units to secure critical infrastructure.

These enhancements would yield a ground force of seven active brigades, including three heavy brigades—enough to initially defend and to impose significant costs on an attacking force. This would also provide extra insurance in the event that the NAC does not achieve unanimous consensus to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and go to war with Russia. In this case, the Baltic States buy themselves time for a US-led coalition to form.

While the Baltic States can certainly field larger forces demographically, they will need help financially. EDI provides a ready funding source, along with some security assistance from wealthier allies like Germany. There are other innovative ways to help as well. For example, the US Army maintains a large stockpile of excess equipment, including M1A1 tanks, M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles and many other items, in storage. With minor refurbishment (funded through EDI), some can be returned to full operational status and transferred to the Baltic States as excess defense articles, as was recently done when 162 M1A1 tanks were gifted to Morocco. For the first few years, US contract advisors can be provided to train new crews on maintenance and operations. Sustained finding would be required to ensure a regular pipeline of spare parts and ammunition.

While these enhancements could theoretically provide the minimum force to defend, in practice Russian combat experience, strong initial advantage in fires, electronic warfare, cyber, air defense and airpower mean

57 Organizing tank and mechanized battalions on the Russian model—with ten tanks or IFVs in each company, with one for the battalion commander for a total of 31 combat vehicles each—will simplify refueling, maintenance and command and control. The US model has four combat vehicles per platoon vice three and additional vehicles in the headquarters. Thus a Baltic heavy brigade with one tank battalion and two IFV battalions would feature 94 combat vehicles (tank or IFV), with perhaps a few added as operational floats for a total of approximately one hundred.

58 Each of the Baltic States also has a NATO “Enhanced Forward Presence” (eFP) battalion forward deployed. These are multinational formations with up to five countries represented in each. Accordingly, while useful as deterrent or “tripwire” forces, they do not represent actual hard combat capability, as national instructions to the participating contingents may and probably will differ.

59 With combined defense budgets of only about $2 billion, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania cannot hope to afford the heavy forces, air defense, field artillery, and other capabilities needed for effective defense. Financial assistance makes sense as the best way to help the Balts help themselves; every Baltic soldier is one fewer other NATO soldier required.

60 Some 2,000 operational M1 main battle tanks are stored at the Sierra Army Depot in the California desert, rendered excess by the 1990s drawdown following the end of the Cold War. Bradley Fighting Vehicles, ammunition and fuel tankers, engineer equipment and many other items are stored there as well. Current plans call for these tanks to be scrapped. Refurbishment options include “return to fully mission capable,” “return to like new condition,” or “upgrade to latest model,” with the latter being most expensive.

that significant NATO forces must arrive quickly to bolster the defense. The most likely candidates are fast-moving parachute units and US forces based in Poland.

These steps will go far to improve the ability of the Baltic States to defend themselves, but more is required. Like West Germany during the Cold War, the Baltic States should organize their national territories for defense. This means pre-chambering key bridges for demolition, stockpiling munitions and developing plans to emplace minefields in key locations in accordance with a national obstacle plan, hardening command posts and logistics storage areas, constructing field fortifications and preparing anti-tank obstacles along avenues of approach. Civil defense preparations, such as stockpiling food and medical supplies, potable water, oil and natural gas, will be needed (the Baltic States are heavily dependent on Russian energy imports). Such measures need not unduly disrupt civilian life, but they will go far to enhance deterrence and defense.

“Like West Germany during the Cold War, the Baltic States should organize their national territories for defense.”

The Balts might also consider innovative, low-cost approaches to defense such as cheap autonomous drones, improvised explosive devices, and commercial, off-the-shelf targeting technologies. In a recent paper, noted expert Thomas X. Hammes detailed numerous examples of how these approaches can be used to great effect at relatively low cost. In the Winter War, the Finns adopted similar measures by producing thousands of “Molotov Cocktails” that proved effective in countering Russian armored vehicles. Recent US experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate that with imagination, poor and low-tech opponents can pose formidable threats. There are strong lessons here for Baltic defense planners.

A comprehensive approach to Baltic deterrence and defense must also require theater air defense and long-range fires that are simply beyond the financial capabilities of the Baltic States, now or in the future. It is unlikely that neighbors or allies can or will supply this deficiency; while Poland is acquiring the long range MLRS as well as the Patriot theater air defense system, they will likely be dedicated to national defense. As a practical matter these needs must be met by the US. Due to range limitations, these units should be based in Poland, not Germany.

62 All three of the Baltic States are signatories to the Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel mines, a serious liability here. Russia, of course, did not sign the Treaty.


64 The Patriot system can defend against high-performance aircraft and ballistic missiles and has a maximum range of 160 km with a maximum altitude of 80,000 feet. The Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) delivers long range rocket fires at ranges up to 300 km. Both are mobile, and firing units can reposition to avoid enemy counterfire.
Command and Control Problems

Another thorny issue is command and control. As sovereign states, the Baltics exercise national control over their defense forces, but attacking Russian forces will ignore state boundaries and exploit these “seams” at every opportunity. Currently, there is no effective way to coordinate and synchronize Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian defense plans or operations in time of war. Even if sufficient ground forces are generated, without an effective C2 structure the defense will likely fail.

The existing solution is the NATO Multinational Corps North East (MCN-E), a German-Polish-Danish formation located in Szczecin, Poland on the Oder River near the German border. However, MNC-E is separated geographically from the area of operations (it is 900 km from Szczecin to the Lithuanian border) and does not currently possess a trained battle staff closely linked to the Balts. MNC-E can play a vital role in organizing the reception, staging and onward movement of reinforcing NATO forces in Poland, and it can provide a corps-level headquarters to command Polish forces should Poland itself be attacked. To provide C2 for Baltic ground forces, a Baltic corps headquarters with NATO-trained, Baltic commanders and staff officers and NATO augmentees is probably the best solution. “Importing” one of NATO’s many lower-readiness corps headquarters is not a realistic option.65

At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO established Multinational Division Northeast (MND-NE) in Elbląg, Poland. Its peacetime mission is to provide C2 for the eFP battalions. If trained and staffed appropriately, it can function as a division headquarters for reinforcing NATO brigades and battalions committed to the Baltic region in time of crisis or war. In this scenario, MND-NE is ideal to command and control the German brigade as well as the Danish, Canadian, Dutch and Belgian battalion battle groups identified as likely reinforcing formations.

Outstanding Issues in the Sea and the Air

At sea, US and allied naval forces in the region outnumber the Russian Baltic Fleet on paper, but maintenance problems and a lack of focus on the Baltic Sea reduce this potential capability.66 The Baltic Sea is one of the world’s great waterways—more than 3.3 million barrels of hydrocarbons transit the Baltic Straits every day (more than the Suez Canal), and more than 125,000 ships exit the Straits each year.67 Its control by Russian

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65 Denmark has offered and NATO has accepted a divisional headquarters, “Multinational Division North,” to be based at Adazi near Riga. However, a largely Danish staff commanding Baltic units does not seem ideal. A better solution would be for the Balts to “own” these formations and to grow their own commanders and staffs, with NATO staff assistance. See “NATO Agrees to Station Multinational Division North Headquarters in Latvia,” Baltic News Network, July 12, 2018.

66 For example, the entire German submarine force—six Type 212A diesel subs—is non-operational at the time of this writing. NATO’s Standing Maritime Group 1 consists of three destroyers (two US, one Polish) and operates in the eastern Atlantic.

naval forces in time of war would have huge financial consequences. Within 30 days, a naval task force of some 12–15 destroyers/frigates and 4–6 submarines can be assembled, with USNAVEUR serving as NATO’s Allied Maritime Command. (The Baltic States possess no naval capability aside from small numbers of coastal craft.) Maritime operations inside the Baltic Sea are complicated by the air threat, Russian sea mines and by Russian anti-ship missile systems. Carrier operations would seem to be ruled out altogether. While NATO naval units can and likely will launch cruise missile strikes from the western Baltic, maritime operations in the eastern Baltic will be problematic. Russia will conduct “sea denial” operations to relegate NATO maritime forces to the Baltic Approaches where their impact on the land campaign will be muted. Russian overmatch in the range and lethality of its anti-ship missiles is another complicating factor, although this is being addressed. Preventing allied supply and reinforcement from the sea will contribute to Russian campaign objectives in a major way. Relatively quickly, NATO can build up naval strength able to support a joint and combined campaign in the Baltic Approaches, but in the early days and weeks its presence will be limited. Successful operations in the eastern Baltic will be difficult and costly.

In the air, NATO can muster strong airpower in short order with US leadership. This effort would be commanded by the Commander, US Air Forces Europe/Commander NATO Allied Air Command out of the Combined Air Operations Center at Ramstein. In addition to the two fighter wings permanently based in Europe, the author estimates that a US bomber wing, an ISR wing and five additional NATO fighter wings will be required to overcome Russian air defenses, establish air supremacy and carry air interdiction and close air support missions. These, of course, require the early reduction of the Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) bubble in Kaliningrad. While this is underway, NATO airpower must still contest the airspace. This will result in losses, but NATO cannot cede the air to the Russians at the outset and hope to prevail on the ground.

**Readiness of NATO Forces**

For the first 30 days following a Russian incursion, in-place Baltic forces as described above, with some early arriving NATO reinforcements, might effectively hinder and degrade Russian forces if supported by theater air defense and long-range fires as well as NATO air and naval forces. The parameters of success can be defined as retaining control of national capitals for 30 days, denying linkup with forces in Kaliningrad and attriting Russian first echelon forces by 50%. However, these forces are “not sufficient for a sustained defense of the

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68 In the near future the Navy’s RGM-84D Harpoon Block 1C and the Air Force’s Long Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM—to be fielded as the AGM-158C) will address this threat. Franz-Stefan Grady, “Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile Reaches Early Operational Capability on US B-1B Bomber,” *The Diplomat*, December 20, 2018.

69 Multiple senior naval officers consulted for this study expressed the view that lack of sea room, Russian overmatch in maritime, air- and ground-launched anti-ship missiles and sea mines will make maritime operations in the eastern Baltic extremely high risk. Currently, US surface warships are armed “predominantly for defensive anti-air warfare” and “lack weapons with the range to attack ships […] outside enemy anti-ship cruise missile range.” Bryan Clark, “Commanding the Seas: The US Navy and the Future of Surface Warfare,” *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2017, p. ii.
region or to restore NATO members’ territorial integrity.” To restore national borders and remove Russian forces, reinforcing NATO or coalition heavy forces will be needed.

Here, the challenge is not the availability of NATO reinforcements but rather their readiness. 30 days should be ample to alert, marshal and deploy high readiness forces, such as NATO’s “Very High Readiness” Joint Task Force (VJTF), a brigade-sized formation. However, this “spearhead” force rotates among the nations and cannot move without unanimity in the North Atlantic Council. The VJTF lacks prepositioned equipment in northeast Europe, and at any point in time the framework unit may be far from the operational area. Interoperability among allies, especially in areas like secure digital communications, airspace management, and fire support coordination, remains less than ideal. While helpful, the VJTF is far from the answer.

“[Local Baltic and multinational Alliance battalion] forces are not sufficient for a sustained defense of the region or to restore the [Baltic States’] territorial integrity. To restore national borders and remove Russian forces, reinforcing NATO or coalition heavy forces will be needed.”

A better solution is to look to the US—the undisputed leader of NATO—and to NATO’s strongest allies, the British, French, Germans and Poles. Today, the US maintains a heavy brigade combat team with some enablers in Poland on a nine-month “heel to toe” rotational scheme. A US Stryker brigade is based in Germany, with a US airborne brigade in Italy. All should be available to fight well within 30 days. Additionally, the US can deploy at least one division from the continental United States inside the 30-day window.

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70 Shlapak and Johnson, p. 1.
71 It should be noted that 30 days does not constitute "Very High Readiness." The US 82nd Airborne Division is continuously postured to deploy a full brigade anywhere in the world in 72 hours, with the lead battalion task force in the air in 18 hours. Prepositioning ammunition and supplies in Tallinn and Riga for the reinforcing US airborne brigades, as well as annual exercises, will be necessary. With available air and sealift, the US can deploy a full heavy division from CONUS to the Baltic region in less than 30 days.
72 Stoicescu and Praks, p. 10.
73 In June 2018, NATO defense ministers agreed “in principle” to the US-proposed “30-30-30-30” initiative, obligating the Alliance to field 30 battalions, 30 warships, and 30 air squadrons within 30 days. If achieved, this will go far to meet the requirements for rapidly deploying combat forces needed to deter and defend in the Baltic region. See Ian Brzezinski, “Defining Success at NATO’s Summit: Political Unity and Military Readiness,” The Atlantic Council, July 3, 2018.
74 These three brigades do not have a divisional headquarters with enablers. If employed in a Baltic scenario, they would probably be attached or placed under the operational control of other US or NATO divisions.
One option that merits serious consideration is the recent Polish offer to finance and base a US heavy division in Poland. To keep costs down and avoid congressional opposition, this force should rotate every nine months and fall in on prepositioned equipment already present in the theater. (The garrison and families would remain in the continental US.) The MLRS-equipped corps field artillery brigade (the 41st FA brigade now based in Germany) should be repositioned to Poland. A division-sized presence in Poland will enhance the US’ ability to exercise regularly in the Baltic States; dramatically reduce response times; materially alter the balance of forces; and improve both deterrence and defense. At the same time, a single US division cannot pose an offensive threat.

For its part, the United Kingdom maintains two rapidly deployable brigades: the 16th Air Assault Brigade (actually a parachute formation) and the Royal Marine Brigade, which can be available in 30 days or fewer. At current readiness, a minimum of three months, and perhaps four, are required to scale up to divisional strength with armor. The same is true of France and Germany. These timelines are much too slow. France and the UK must provide a combat division no later than D+30 if NATO is serious about defending the Baltic region. Other allies might contribute smaller units, which can be helpful politically and in securing key installations and nodes, but they will not significantly alter the correlation of forces.

Poland is a bright spot in an otherwise depressing picture. With four heavy divisions plus a parachute brigade (and with Patriot and MLRS acquisitions underway), Poland can mount a stout defense of its national territory, though its ability to offer troops for the defense of the Baltic States is less clear. Still, defending the Suwałki Gap, securing Polish territory for staging and onward movement, and holding Kaliningrad at risk are major contributions. It is also likely that Russian planners will withhold strong ground units (probably the 20th CAA) for potential use against the Poles, lessening the pool of combat units that can be used against the Balts. The bulk of Polish ground forces will remain on or near Polish territory for this reason.

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76 US prepositioned equipment storage sites are currently located in Germany and the Netherlands, some 1,500 km from the Baltic States—far too great a distance to support realistic timelines. Kohn, p. 9.
77 Cost is often cited as an argument against a division in Poland. Given that much of the equipment is already purchased and prepositioned in Europe, and that the Polish government has offered to defray up to $2.5 billion annually, this argument is not convincing. According to senior officials on the Army Staff, the costs of deploying and sustaining a rotational heavy division in Poland are well below the Polish offer. See also Shlapak and Johnson, p. 11.
79 The Polish Ministry of Defense announced the formation of a fourth heavy division, the 18th “Iron” Division, in 2018. The unit will be operational with a divisional headquarters and two brigades by the end of 2019, with the third brigade and the divisional logistics battalion ready by 2022. Other enablers (i.e., the divisional artillery and air-defense regiments) will be complete by 2026.
80 “As a state bordering Russia and its satellite Belarus, [Poland] focuses primarily on the defense of its own territory. The bulk of its forces would probably not be available to respond to a contingency on the territory of the Baltic States.” Stoicescu and Praks, p. 8.
In terms of campaign strategy, NATO must also consider C2 arrangements for follow-on forces. A reinforcing echelon consisting of two US divisions and a division each from France and the UK with smaller allied contributions, requires one trained and resourced corps headquarters. The obvious candidate is the “ARRC,” the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps based in the UK.81 The corps headquarters must be fully operational at D+30 days, with an advanced command post and initial operating capacity on the ground at D+14 days.82

These follow-on forces will generate a requirement for a land component command (to provide C2 for the corps already mentioned). NATO’s Allied Land Command is charged by NATO to be prepared to provide C2 for the conduct of land operations in time of war. In practice, however, it is not trained, manned or equipped for the job—in NATO parlance, it is not “fit for purpose.” A better solution is to reestablish the US 7th Army as an operational field army headquarters, akin to US Central Command’s (CENTCOM) 3rd Army, on the backbone of US Army Europe. Restoring a four-star rank to that command position is also prudent, as a three-star commanding three other three-star corps commanders is not ideal (the US Air Force and Navy component commanders in Europe are four stars while the Army component commander was reduced to three stars during the Barack Obama administration). Here again, there is much work to be done.

Current arrangements call for Joint Force Command (JFC) Brunssum (or in alternate years) JFC Naples to provide C2 atop the land, air and maritime components. While appropriate for peacetime or less challenging contingency operations such as Libya in 2012, their suitability for challenging, high-intensity operations against the Russian Armed Forces is in doubt. These staffs require some months to transition from a peacetime establishment to a wartime footing. Following the model of US CENTCOM in the Gulf War, US European Command (EUCOM) is a better option.83 With augmentation from SACEUR’s Allied Command Operations (ACO) staff, EUCOM is clearly the most capable candidate for this mission. In a Baltic scenario, there can be no question that US leadership will be decisive, and this should be reflected in command arrangements starting at the top.

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81 In terms of force sizing and span of control, the ARRC can command and control the US, UK and French divisions as well as MND-NE, while MNC-NE controls Polish forces. According to NATO experts, the ARRC can deploy a forward or advanced headquarters to the Baltic region in 14 days from notification and the full headquarters in 30 days.

82 While standing up an additional corps headquarters in Europe has been discussed, this would give the ten-division US Army four standing corps headquarters, an expensive option. If deemed necessary, the EUCOM commander can bring forward the XVIII Airborne Corps (based at Fort Bragg, North Carolina), which can move within days of notification.

83 In the Gulf War, Commander US Central Command General Norman Schwarzkopf deployed forward and functioned as the overall Joint Force Commander (JFC), a model that has not been used since. The advantages of this approach include a larger and better trained battle staff, eliminating an intermediate echelon, the greater position power that can be brought to bear in a complex, multinational and joint environment and greater responsiveness and reach back to key decision makers in capitals and especially Washington.
Campaign Design

As multiple authoritative studies have concluded, NATO today cannot defend the Baltic States. The implications are clear: failure to defend in place for the first 30 days means a quick collapse before NATO can realistically intervene, the occupation of the Baltic States, and the probable splintering of the Alliance. Even if the initial defense is successful with the enhancements discussed herein, failure to rapidly reinforce means the eventual collapse of the defense and the likely reincorporation of the Baltic States into the Russian Federation. Taking back the Baltics as opposed to defending them reverses the odds, from 1:3 for defense to 3:1 for offensive operations—a daunting prospect requiring nine times as many forces.84 Campaign planning should anticipate—even demand—that required forces meet established timelines to negate Russia’s principal advantage: its geographical proximity.

For all these reasons, it is imperative that 1) NATO forces overcome the Kaliningrad air-defense bastion within 14 days to bring the Alliance’s airpower advantages into play 2); in-place forces and rapidly arriving reinforcements hold out for 30 days; and 3) heavy reinforcements arrive in strength and enter the fight not later than 30 days after commencement of hostilities. Today, NATO is not prepared to accomplish any of these objectives. As long as this is so, a window of vulnerability exists that Putin can exploit.

In this regard, most studies that examine Baltic security issues emphasize the cyber and information domains as critical and even decisive. There is much to these arguments. Russia’s ability to disrupt both civilian and military command and supply chains, air-traffic control, port operations, financial transactions and even national media has been clearly demonstrated. Effective cyber hardening and defense must be a priority. Both NATO and the Baltic States have worked hard in recent years to shore up these essential capabilities. The US and a few others can also mount powerful offensive cyber operations, though these will be executed at the national level and not by theater or operational commanders. It is also true that control of the narrative and effective information or “influence” operations may play a key role in shaping domestic and international perceptions of the conflict.85

Nevertheless, it is important to fully comprehend the nature of the conflict, as 19th century German military thinker Carl von Clausewitz put it: “neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.” A Russian invasion of the Baltic States will have “hybrid” dimensions, but it will not be primarily a cyber or information exercise, nor will it be carried out by paramilitaries or “little green men.” NATO will not defeat Russian aggression with artful themes and messages nor by disrupting Russian servers, as important as

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84 See John W. Nicholson, “NATO’s Land Forces: Strength and Speed Matter,” PRISM, Volume 6, Number 2. General Nicholson commanded NATO LANDCOM when this article was written.

these may be. The defenders must also destroy Russian tanks, sink Russian ships and shoot down Russian planes. The campaign will be waged with great violence, and policymakers must not mislead themselves or the public. To channel Clausewitz again, “[G]reat strength of character, as well as great lucidity and firmness of mind, is required in order to follow through steadily, to carry out the plan, and not to be thrown off course…”

This field, the battlefield of the mind and the will, is where the Alliance will ultimately win or fail.

The preceding discussion charts a course toward a stronger deterrence regime and, should deterrence fail, a defensive posture that can succeed in repelling Russian aggression in the Baltic region. Much remains to be done. A leisurely or complacent approach could be fatal. Assuming that these steps are taken, how might the campaign unfold?

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The Warfight

This scenario is a hypothetical but plausible depiction of likely Russian actions. In the event of Russian aggression in the Baltic States, Russian forces in the Western Military District would be alerted, assembled and postured to cross the border in as little as 7–10 days, possibly under cover of a “snap” exercise. Key indicators will include movement forward of field hospitals, bulk fuel and ammunition; marshalling of transport aircraft and rail cars; unit recalls; social media activity; deployment of large forces towards the border and into Belarus; and intensified information operations and border provocations, among others.

Russia’s 1st Guards Tank Army (GTA) and 6th Combined Arms Army (CAA), with attached forces, will conduct the attack. (The 6th CAA can initially field only one organic maneuver brigade.) The 20th CAA will remain in reserve but will be brought up to full strength over time. The Russian intention is twofold: if possible, to strike through Lithuania to link up with Kaliningrad, cutting off the Baltic States altogether; if not, to seize and hold Estonia and possibly Latvia to demonstrate NATO’s inability to enforce Article 5 and fracture the Alliance. The pretext would likely be claims that Russian ethnic minorities have been attacked or oppressed. NATO would see these preparations, and much would depend on an early decision to posture for defense. Russian disinformation would be intense and many allies would be hesitant to react. If the North Atlantic Council delays until after Russian forces have crossed the border, the lost time could be fatal. In this contingency, the US should immediately form a coalition based on its strongest and closest allies.

In this instance, one of the first calls the President should make is to his Chinese counterpart. China can play a key role in limiting or preventing Russian aggression; and at a minimum, it will be important to know if China has “greenlit” the invasion or if, as with Crimea, they had not been consulted. Chinese economic, diplomatic and even military leverage with Russia can tip the scales in this crisis, and national and Alliance decision makers must carefully assess whether and how China’s influence can be brought to bear to best advantage.

Ideally, in 48–72 hours, the NAC will order that defensive preparations commence. In the Baltic States, reservists will be recalled and active units will move into their designated general defensive positions. Civil defense preparations will commence, including preparations for cyber defense. US forces in Europe and the continental United States (CONUS) will alert, marshal and move to staging areas and departure airfields. Rapid reaction forces in the UK, France and Germany will do the same. The Polish Armed Forces will be placed on high alert.

If all goes well, the Baltic States will be arrayed for defense with seven active brigades and three eFP battalions, augmented by one US heavy brigade in Lithuania and US airborne brigades in Latvia and Estonia, before Russian forces reach NATO territory. Reserve units will secure critical infrastructure and provide local defense.
The Polish army will posture to defend the Suwałki Gap and the approaches to Warsaw as well as to threaten Kaliningrad.

On D-Day, the most likely Russian course of action will be an attack by the 1st GTA, with one tank division (with two brigades) and two airborne regiments, from Belarus on the axis Minsk–Vilnius–Kaunas–Kaliningrad.
The 1st GTA will attack Vilnius from the east and the south, supported by most of the army’s artillery and a Spetsnaz brigade. This will be the Western Military District’s and the 1st GTA’s main effort. A supporting attack, conducted with one motor rifle division (with two brigades) and one airborne regiment, will attempt to seize Riga along the axis Daugavpils–Jekabpils–Riga. This operation will feature parachute and heliborne operations in rear areas to seize key crossings over the Daugava River.\(^\text{87}\)

The Western MD will weight the 1st GTA’s attack with one rocket artillery brigade from the forces held under its control. The 1st GTA will hold one understrength motor rifle brigade in reserve to exploit success. The 11th Army Corps units in Kaliningrad will defend in place.

In the north, the 6th CAA will attack to seize Tallinn. The Baltic Fleet’s naval infantry brigade may participate in support. 6th CAA’s main effort, with one motor rifle brigade and one airborne regiment, will come astride the axis Narva–Rakvere–Tallinn with priority of fires from the 6th Army’s strong artillery. The army’s supporting attack with two airborne regiments will follow the axis Pskov–Pechory–Tartu–Tallinn. One Spetsnaz brigade will support.

These operations will follow major road and rail networks and will ignore national boundaries. As a theater reserve, the Western Military District will retain control of one air assault division, one Spetsnaz brigade, and one heavy artillery brigade. Spetsnaz units will not be used as maneuver units but will instead carry out attacks against critical nodes and infrastructure. They will be used boldly and aggressively deep inside Baltic territory and deserve serious consideration from commanders and planners.

In the attack, Russian commanders will advance aggressively under heavy artillery, supported by attack helicopters, fixed wing close air support, cyberattacks and electronic warfare. Small tactical drones will be used in “swarms” to spot artillery targets. While force ratios in terms of maneuver units are not overwhelming, Russian superiority in armor, artillery fires, electronic warfare and close air support will be strong. Combat experience will also provide an edge. They will show little regard for civilian casualties and will be prepared to sustain losses themselves. All Russian unit leaders will understand the importance of winning quickly, as every delay will give NATO more time to react.

Though not formal allies, Finland and Sweden are close NATO partners and key actors in the Baltic region who will likely not stand aside in the event of Russian aggression.\(^\text{88}\) From the Russian perspective, amphibious operations to seize Gotland in the eastern Baltic are possible and would yield important military advantages, but this would bring Sweden and possibly Finland decisively into the conflict and damage the narrative of

\(^\text{87}\) Russian airborne/air assault “VDV” forces (Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska or “Air-Landing Forces”) are in the process of adding a 3rd maneuver regiment to each division. VDV units are 100 percent mechanized, with far more firepower than NATO counterpart airborne/parachute units, and manned primarily with professional soldiers vice conscripts. Grau and Bartles, p. 359; Dick, p. 4.

\(^\text{88}\) “Sweden will not remain passive if another EU member state or a Nordic country suffers a disaster or an attack.” White Book on Sweden’s Security Policy and the Development of the Military Defence 2021–2025, Swedish Defense Commission, May 2019.
“protecting” ethnic Russians. As long as Gotland is not used by NATO troops or aircraft, Putin and his advisors may choose to exercise restraint here. Should Sweden cede use of its airspace to NATO, the Russian position would likely change.89 From the allied perspective, use of Swedish airspace, airfields and territorial waters would greatly enhance air and maritime operations, complicate Russian planning and materially alter the balance of forces.90 Accordingly, NATO should encourage Sweden and Finland to join the Alliance as full-fledged members in the event of Russian aggression. While not likely to send ground forces to the Baltic States, both nations can play key roles in resisting Russian aggression with their air and naval forces.91 Closer coordination and stepped-up engagement in peacetime will strengthen deterrence and yield important benefits in time of war.

“Though not formal allies, Finland and Sweden are close NATO partners and key actors in the Baltic region who will likely not stand aside in the event of Russian aggression.”

Many experts assume that Russia will launch fires deep into Europe to disrupt the marshalling of reinforcing allied troop formations. While possible, there are also strong arguments against widening the conflict in this way. Such strikes would cause widespread civilian destruction and casualties, unify NATO and turn international public opinion even more strongly against Russia and its narrative. NATO planners must prepare for Russian deep fires. Their use, however, is not certain. Politically, localizing the conflict as a “border” issue will yield benefits worth considering by Putin and his advisors.

At the outset, if the above planning assumptions are correct, the allied main effort will be to deny the attacker possession of Vilnius and its road and rail networks. Located close to the border with Belarus, Vilnius is the capital of the strongest Baltic state and a successful defense will go far to stall the Russian offensive, encourage allied forces and capitals, and frustrate Russian information objectives. Here, the early arrival of a US heavy brigade from Poland will be critical, ideally with supporting attack helicopters and MLRS systems. This reinforcement must happen before the onset of hostilities; otherwise, Russian airpower and rocket artillery may degrade, disrupt or prevent the formation from arriving in condition to fight effectively. (A second US heavy brigade should arrive from Poland by D+7). Force ratios here are favorable: four maneuver brigades (with some

89 Interview with Lars Hedstrom, Swedish Defense University, July 21, 2019.
91 Swedish forces include 97 Gripen fighter/attack jet aircraft and 147 patrol and coastal combatants as well as 5 diesel/electric submarines. Finnish forces include 62 F/A-18 Hornet fighter/attack planes and 20 patrol and coastal combatants. The Military Balance.
156 tanks and 277 infantry fighting vehicles, or IFVs)\(^{92}\) will defend against five, although Russian fires and close air support will be intense. Local topography, with many streams, river lines, swamps and forests, as well as urban terrain in the capital itself, favors the defense. Russian tank strength will outnumber the defenders, but anti-tank systems like the Javelin and the AH-64E Apache attack helicopter will help to even the odds.\(^{93}\) Lithuanian troops will be fighting to defend their national existence. Although close to the border, Vilnius must be held as long as possible to preserve the integrity of the defense. The prospects for success here are fair.\(^{94}\)

As already discussed, reducing the A2/AD bastion at Kaliningrad is imperative so that NATO airpower—the Alliance’s biggest advantage—can be brought to bear early in the conflict. A protracted air campaign will succeed but may take too long or result in severe losses to allied aircraft. Cutting rail and road links should be the first order of business. Once Russia violates NATO territory and initiates kinetic actions, Polish and US forces (specifically the 16\(^{th}\) Mechanized Division located nearby, the 11\(^{th}\) Armored Division based in southwest Poland, and the 6\(^{th}\) Airborne Brigade, plus one US brigade combat team, BCT, from the division based in Poland) should strike swiftly to overrun the exclave and eliminate the air-defense and missile systems based there.\(^{95}\) The loss of Kaliningrad will also neutralize the Baltic Fleet, which will lose its port and maintenance facilities.

This will be perhaps the key decision of the conflict. Russian propaganda will trumpet the "sacred soil of the motherland," and Russian leaders will threaten nuclear retaliation, while many allied leaders may blanch at attacking Russian territory. Here, strong nerves will be needed. Despite the angry messaging, Russian leaders will remember that they began the conflict, counting on NATO weakness and indecision, and they will not be willing to risk nuclear escalation and devastation over an isolated, small territory with no history of Russian occupation except in the post-war period. They cannot expect NATO to treat Kaliningrad with kid gloves. At

\(^{92}\) The US heavy brigade is equipped with 90 M1A2SEP tanks and 90 M2A4 Bradley Fighting Vehicles (BFV), as well as 18 M109A6 155 mm self-propelled howitzers. The Lithuanian division in this scenario is equipped with 66 M1A1 tanks, 99 M2A2 BFVs, and 88 German-made “Vilkas” Infantry Fighting Vehicles, along with 72 M109-variant howitzers. The US BFVs are armed with a 30 mm cannon as well as the TOW heavy anti-armor missile system. The “Vilkas” mounts a 30 mm cannon as well as the Israeli “Spike” long-range anti-tank system.

\(^{93}\) Currently, Russian available tank strength outnumbers the initial defense by a factor of 6:1. The addition of tank battalions in each Baltic division (one for Estonia and Latvia and two for Lithuania) adds 133 tanks to the NATO order of battle at the outset and, along with the 90 tanks from the US heavy brigade, alters the ratio to better than 3:1—a much more manageable figure, especially given NATO attack helicopter strength, the anti-tank systems mounted on IFVs and the presence of Javelin anti-tank systems in the Baltic States. Boston, p. 9.

\(^{94}\) Defending Vilnius means forward defense near the border, and some Russian fires will originate beyond Lithuanian borders. Whether to fire into Belarus (and, farther north, into Russian itself) will be a national and Alliance-level decision. Given that Russia initiates aggression in this scenario, the author believes that no sanctuary should be given Russian forces operating just across national borders. Strikes inside Russia against long-range artillery and air-defense systems active in the campaign risk escalating the conflict but may be necessary. Deep strikes far from the theater of operations, on the other hand, risk uncontrollable escalation.

\(^{95}\) These include the K-300P “Bastion” (NATO SS-C-5 “Stooge”) coastal defense missile system, the S-300 (NATO SA-10 “Grumble”) and S-400 “Triumf” (NATO SA-21 “Growler”) long-range air-defense system, the S-1 “Pantsir” (NATO SA-22 “Greyhound” medium-range air-defense system, and the nuclear-capable 9k720 “Iskander” (NATO SS-26 “Stone”) short-range ballistic missile system.
any rate, NATO air forces cannot fly effectively while Kaliningrad stands; and without NATO airpower, the campaign is probably lost.

The possibility of Russian use of nuclear fires here suggests a need for a clearer and more pronounced NATO nuclear policy, stating clearly that any use of nuclear weapons will be met with an immediate and proportional response. While Putin may not fear a NATO first strike in response to limited conventional aggression in the Baltic States, he must understand that he cannot achieve his objectives merely by threatening to use his nuclear weapons. He will not, in any case, take this decision lightly. But a firm declaration of NATO’s intent can greatly increase deterrence and reduce the chances of escalation.

In the north, Estonia will defend in sector with its two brigades and reserve formations against two attacking Russian brigades, supported by very heavy fires. The campaign plan described here also calls for the 173rd Airborne Brigade to fly in from Aviano Airbase in northern Italy and reinforce the Estonians before D-Day.96

96 Although classed as “light infantry,” US airborne infantry brigades are equipped with the Javelin “fire and forget” anti-tank missile system, and include vehicle-mounted heavy anti-armor missile systems in the heavy weapons companies found in each of their
HOW TO DEFEND THE BALTIC STATES

The defensive main effort will likely be on the narrow isthmus between Lake Peipus and the Gulf of Finland, centered on Narva and the high ground (the Sinimaed or “Blue” Hills) just to the west.97 The supporting effort will be to the south of Lake Peipus, oriented on Tartu. The defense will anchor on Rakvere and Tartu but, if necessary, will fall back on Tallinn. Some territory in the east may be lost, but retaining control of the capital is likely.

In the center, Latvian local forces will oppose the 1st GTA’s supporting effort, pitting two brigades and local reserves against two attacking brigades/regiments. Here again the terrain and force ratios favor the defender, and Russian superiority in fire support and combat experience can be offset by determined, dug-in defenders fighting to protect their homes. With no real operational reserves, Latvian forces will probably delay and fall back on the capital, while special operations and territorial units attempt to harass Russian logistics units. A stout delaying action in and around Daugavpils, with its important river crossing and highway intersections, will be crucial. This notional campaign plan calls for the deployment of a US airborne brigade from the 82nd Airborne Division to Riga prior to D-Day. With these forces, and despite Russian advantages in fires and airpower, the prospects for holding onto Riga and its approaches are good.98

In the initial defense of the Baltic States the US 10th Special Group, oriented on European contingencies, can play an important role. Its three line battalions include 54 “A” teams of 12 commissioned and non-commissioned officers each, with specialists in weapons, demolition, communications, intelligence, operations and combat medicine as well as certified Joint Tactical Air Controllers (JTAC) essential for integrating air support with ground maneuver. Each team is also equipped with secure voice and data communications systems. The Group’s 4th Battalion is organized into three-man “Jedburgh” teams optimized for stay-behind warfare. The company, battalion and group headquarters offer C2 nodes that can embed with, partner with and advise Baltic brigade, division and corps headquarters (augmented with US, Polish or other officers with experience in tank and mechanized warfare). The “A” detachments can embed with active and reserve Baltic battalions, providing secure connectivity and planning, intelligence and operations expertise.99 Their presence

97 Though far outnumbered, German and Estonian troops mounted a very effective defense from this terrain feature in July 1944, inflicting huge losses on the attacking Soviet force. In this battle 22,000 defenders successfully opposed 137,000 attackers. See Mart Laar, Sinimaed 1944: Battles of World War II in Northeast Estonia, (Tallinn: Varrak), p. 325.

98 The deployment of the two US airborne brigades is projected to take place before Russian troops cross the border and initiate kinetic operations. Russian leaders could decide to interdict and prevent the deployment, leaving Estonian and Latvian defense forces on their own initially. This could cause the defense to fail, leading to loss of Tallinn and Riga. However, forces arriving soon after (two US divisions, one French and one UK division and a composite NATO division) are strong enough to retake lost terrain, albeit at greater cost and with greater difficulty.

99 The 10th SFSG was relocated to the US in the 1990s less its 1st Battalion, which remained in Germany. To meet the timelines required, it should be returned to Europe.
on the ground and thoroughly embedded in Baltic units will add much to deterrence. Prior training and habitual relationships will, of course, be needed to make the most of this unique capability.\textsuperscript{100}

In this way, Baltic units can be “stiffened” by US Special Operations Forces (SOF) elements, with enhanced situational awareness and performance. US Special Forces operating with reserve Baltic units in rear areas and along Russian supply lines can also inflict serious damage and slow Russian progress. Key NATO “high-end” special operating forces will also participate, organized under a NATO SOF command element, to conduct strategic reconnaissance and direct action missions against high-value targets. In this campaign, close coordination between conventional and SOF units will be required—a continuing issue in recent conflicts.

Adequate coverage by NATO ISR platforms is another important consideration. At the Alliance level, NATO can deploy unmanned systems under the recently constituted Alliance Ground Surveillance (AGS) program, a fleet of five RQ-4 Global Hawk platforms. NATO AGS is supplemented by the NATO AWACS fleet of 20 E-3 Sentry aircraft. US Air Force and NATO aircraft and UAVs will certainly be deployed as well. Their capabilities are impressive, but heavy Russian air defenses (and perhaps cyberattacks) will make US and NATO systems like the RQ-4 and MQ-9 Reaper less effective in a contested, highly lethal air-defense environment.\textsuperscript{101} The Russian S-400 air-defense system, for example, can engage targets at altitudes far higher than the RQ-4’s service ceiling of 60,000 feet. As one authoritative study notes, “[A]dversaries will have the capability and intent to oppose or disrupt NATO air operations and will represent a serious threat to remotely piloted aircraft systems.”\textsuperscript{102} Once Russian air defenses are neutralized, NATO ISR can be used with effect for intelligence collection and dynamic targeting.

In the early stages, and indeed throughout the crisis, US space systems will play a critical role, providing global communications, navigation, focused surveillance, imagery (radar, infrared and multi-spectral), electronic intelligence, area reconnaissance, measurement and signal intelligence (MASINT) along with other capabilities vital to the campaign. Although US and Russian offensive and defensive capabilities in space are highly classified, attacking US space-based platforms is an option for Russian planners. To do so, however, would constitute a dramatic escalation, inviting a devastating response given the strategic importance of these assets. On balance, it is more likely that Russia will rely on speed and surprise and a short, localized campaign and not expand the conflict globally and into space.

As can be seen, timely decisions based on strategic indicators, before hostilities commence, are crucial to executing an effective campaign plan. In this scenario, critical decision points will arise with little margin for error. For example, the early and successful deployment of the US airborne brigades to Tallinn and Riga, and the US heavy brigade to Vilnius, during the period of strategic early warning (7–10 days) could well determine

\textsuperscript{100} The author is indebted to Colonel Vance Klosinski, a Special Forces officer and student at the National War College in 2019, for these insights.

\textsuperscript{101} The MQ-1 “Predator” remotely piloted vehicle was retired from service in 2018.

the success or failure of the initial defense, as could an early takeover of Kaliningrad. With these forces, NATO will oppose some 30 attacking battalions (all armored or mechanized, to include the Russian airborne battalions) with 30 battalions (9 heavy and 21 light).

The disparity in artillery is greater: Russian attacking artillery (including artillery organic to the maneuver brigades) totals about 25 battalions of self-propelled howitzer (152 mm or 122 mm) or rocket artillery, compared to 13 NATO battalions, most of which utilize towed 105 mm pieces. Here, fielding in the next few years 155 mm self-propelled howitzers to the Balts—versus the 105 mm towed systems they now possess—can be profoundly helpful. These ratios reflect the Russian advantage in heavy forces and powerful artillery, and make clear that NATO airpower must intervene for the defense to succeed.

“[T]imely decisions based on strategic indicators, before hostilities commence, are crucial to executing an effective campaign plan.”

A word about airpower may be in order here. In all conflicts since World War II, ground and air commanders have differed in how best to employ the United States’ strong advantages in the air. Airmen are predisposed to strike deeper “strategic” targets, viewing close air support and battlefield interdiction as sub-optimal uses of airpower. Ground commanders favor more closely integrated air/ground operations as the best way to achieve synergistic effects and maximize the potential of jointness. In the scenario presented in this study, given the lack of depth in the battlespace and Russia’s initial dominance in fires and air defense, NATO’s initial inferiority on land requires the closest possible coordination between air and ground. Anything less may cause campaign failure.

In the event that NATO political decisions are not timely, or if Russian air defenses and long-range fires interdict these deployments even before Russian troops cross the border, the campaign becomes far more difficult. Under such scenarios, the prospects for retaining control of Baltic capitals fall; the risks grow; and the need for more and heavier NATO reinforcements is greater. Here, NATO cohesion will be tested, and the will of political decision makers will be decisive. Casualties, and local reverses will happen. Opposition parties stoked by Russian propaganda and subversion will inflame and distort the debate. Putin will not commit

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103 The US maintains 500 M109A6 modern 155 mm self-propelled howitzers in storage as excess equipment. Two hundred of these systems could completely equip the proposed direct support and general support Baltic artillery battalions called for in this study (180 in the firing units, with 20 for training and maintenance spares). The Military Balance 2018, p. 49. The M109A6 has armor protection from small arms and shrapnel and can reposition much more quickly than towed systems—an essential capability when facing Russian counterfires.

aggression unless he is convinced that NATO lacks unity and resolve. The test for the Alliance will be the sternest in its history.

Should the North Atlantic Alliance undertake all of the above key actions successfully, Russian forces would be stalled in front of Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius at D+14. US and Polish forces will be in possession of Kaliningrad. The US heavy division based in Poland, with two organic brigades and the Stryker brigade, will be in Lithuania; the US 173rd Airborne Brigade will be located in Estonia; a brigade from the US 82nd Airborne Division will be in Riga; and UK, French, German and other contingents will be staging in Poland. Russian 1st echelon forces will be at 50 percent strength, with high losses in tanks and IFVs, while defending forces will have suffered 30 percent losses. Meanwhile, though failing to achieve campaign objectives on schedule, Russian forces will be in possession of sizable tracts of NATO territory. At sea, with the loss of Kaliningrad, the Russian Baltic Fleet will fall back on St. Petersburg, while still contesting the eastern Baltic and the Gulf of Finland.

At this point, Russian commanders can be expected to commit remaining Western Military District reserves—an air assault division, artillery brigade and Spetsnaz brigade—in a bid to overcome initial NATO resistance and achieve campaign objectives before strong NATO reinforcements arrive. (The division will probably be used as elite motor rifle troops in conventional ground operations.) Russia has two options: to employ these forces on the main axis of attack through Lithuania or settle for the more modest option of taking Estonia. With a full US heavy division on the ground in the vicinity of Vilnius and more on the way, the latter is more likely.
From D+14 to D+30 US forces will grow stronger with the addition of a second heavy division from CONUS, a corps-level artillery brigade and an army aviation brigade from Germany.\(^{105}\) (The US heavy brigade under MNC-NE will detach and rejoin its parent division once Kaliningrad is reduced.) The challenge now will be the race to reinforce. The Russian General Staff will have little to fall back on. Understrength Western MD units will still be laboring to absorb reservists and come to full strength. Russian airpower will have been blunted by the loss of Kaliningrad and NATO’s growing strength in the air. The 20\(^{th}\) CAA could be brought forward earlier than planned at less than full strength, but only at the cost of “uncovering” Ukraine; other forces from the interior (probably the 8\(^{th}\) CAA from the Southern Military District) must then reposition.\(^{106}\) Two weeks into the campaign, Putin will be on the back foot and momentum will swing in NATO’s favor, as world opinion decisively condemns Russian aggression. Much against his will, Putin must now transition to the defense and attempt to hold on to the territory he still occupies.

At D+30, the picture from Putin’s perspective becomes even darker. Three NATO divisions will now arrive (one each from the US, UK, and France) along with a German tank brigade, several NATO battalion battle groups, and the full Allied Rapid Reaction Corps headquarters, with a US fires brigade under command.\(^{107}\) The US 7\(^{th}\) Army (as LANDCOM) will now control three corps headquarters (MNC-NE, the ARRC and the Baltic Defense Corps), with 13 division equivalents under command.\(^{108}\) At this point, the Baltic divisions, after a month of intense combat, will hand over operations in Lithuania to the ARRC and focus on ejecting remaining Russian forces in Estonia and Latvia. The ARRC, now with four divisions, will push remaining Russian ground forces out of Lithuania and garrison the border.\(^{109}\) NATO airpower will be poised to achieve local air superiority, if not air supremacy, and NATO maritime and air forces will have inflicted serious losses on the Baltic fleet and gained control of the Baltic Sea. Increasingly frantic Russian threats to “escalate to deescalate”

\(^{105}\) NATO ground forces at D-Day will include the 48 AH-64E Apache attack helicopters from 3ID’s combat aviation brigade. At D+14, the corps-level 12\(^{th}\) Aviation Brigade’s 24 Apaches should be in the fight. At D+30 another 48 US Apaches will arrive with the US 1\(^{st}\) Cavalry Division, augmented by 24 Apaches from the UK’s 3\(^{rd}\) Army Aviation Regiment and 24 “Tiger” attack helos from the French 4e Brigade d’Aerocombat. This force totals 168 modern, all-weather day/night attack helicopters, capable of operations at low altitudes and masked by the terrain for survivability against Russian air defense. Well armored, the AH-64 aircraft is equipped with up to 16 “Hellfire” laser-homing anti-tank missiles with a range of 8 km, as well as a 30 mm chain gun mounted in the nose. The Tiger is similarly armed. All told, this represents a very formidable anti-tank capability.

\(^{106}\) “A substantial number of [Russian] forces are fixed in place by Ukraine’s 25 brigades.” Petersen et al, p. 162.

\(^{107}\) The US 18\(^{th}\) FA brigade is equipped with the HIMARS wheel-mounted rocket artillery system and would here act as corps artillery for the ARRC (the UK lacks corps artillery at the present time). All NATO brigades include a direct support artillery battalion (for light brigades, generally equipped with the 105 mm light towed howitzer; for heavy brigades, the 155 mm self-propelled variant). US airborne brigades have one battery of 155 mm and two batteries of 105 mm towed howitzers.

\(^{108}\) The chain of command and task organization at D+30 are as follows: USEUCOM with augmentation as JFC; US 7\(^{th}\) Army as LCC, USNAVEUR as MCC and USAFE as ACC; and three corps headquarters (the Baltic Defense Corps with the three Baltic divisions, 3ID, the 173\(^{rd}\) Airborne Brigade, an airborne brigade from the 82\(^{nd}\) Airborne Division and the Stryker brigade; MNC-NE with four Polish divisions; the ARCC with the US 1\(^{st}\) Cavalry Division, a UK and French Division and MNC-NE.

\(^{109}\) Based on the tactical situation, one or more brigades might be shifted from the ARRC to the BDC here.
will have failed to frighten NATO off, while private assurances that NATO has no intent to encroach further on Russian territory will mollify all but the most extreme of Putin’s advisors.

At this point, Russia will likely engage in anxious diplomacy to freeze the conflict in place in order to hold on to at least some Baltic territory. This would at least achieve a minimalist objective of undercutting NATO’s Article 5 guarantee. NATO leaders should ignore these overtures and continue the campaign until Russian forces have been evicted from NATO territory. Ceasefire offers “to facilitate negotiations” should be ignored as delaying tactics to allow Russia to generate more forces. Escalation in Ukraine’s Donbas can also be expected.

If there is a point in the campaign where Russian leaders are most likely to consider use of nuclear weapons, it is probably here. With the Russian advance slowing or halting, and large NATO forces on the way, tactical nuclear strikes might be seen as the last, best way to reverse a deteriorating situation. Here we must strive to distinguish between Russian public rhetoric, which seeks to frighten and intimidate Western publics, and hard military calculations. Would Putin countenance a first strike, when the West was not the aggressor and Russia’s survival is not at stake? Were he to do so, Russia would almost certainly risk a proportionate counterstrike on Russian soil, along with universal condemnation from the international community, with no assurance that escalation would stop there. While NATO must be prepared to stand firm and not cave to Russian bullying, the odds are against a Russian decision to use nuclear weapons in this circumstance.

As NATO moves toward military success, the end game will transition more and more into the realm of diplomacy. Leaders in capitals may want to entertain some Russian proposals, such as sanctions relief, the return of a demilitarized Kaliningrad, the possible incorporation of Belarus into the Russian Federation or concessions to ethnic-Russian minorities, as face-saving measures to facilitate conflict termination. The merits of these are outside the scope of this paper, but concessions that maintain core interests—the preservation of Baltic national territory and sovereignty and, by extension, NATO’s credibility and cohesion—should be carefully and thoughtfully considered. Ending the conflict quickly, even at the price of some painful concessions, may well be worth avoiding a longer, broader, more destructive war.

Conclusion

This paper explores campaign strategy and the steps needed to reassert credible deterrence and, should deterrence fail, a viable defense for the Baltic States. Yet the decision to correct our current weaknesses and deficiencies must be a national decision, taken by national leaders in the executive and legislative branches, and fully vetted with NATO. This approach will have important diplomatic, economic and informational dimensions not fully described here but nevertheless indispensable to success.

To date, the US has done little to “strengthen deterrence and defense on NATO’s eastern flank” or to “catalyze frontline allies’ ability to better defend themselves,” as called for in the 2017 National Security Strategy. In 2018, three times as much financial assistance went to Rwanda as to any of the Baltic States. Virtually none of the $15 billion appropriated to date for the European Deterrence Initiative has found its way to them. Yet, the defense of NATO’s eastern flank may be one of the most pressing national security issues of our time. Repeatedly, Russia has used force against its neighbors to regain control of its “near abroad.” Taking on NATO is clearly a big step. But if NATO is seen to lack cohesion, credibility and capability—and there are clear grounds to question all three—then the threat to the Baltics and therefore to NATO must be considered high.

“[T]he defense of NATO’s eastern flank may be one of the most pressing national security issues of our time.”

This paper lays out a way ahead to address this critical vulnerability without unduly burdening the Alliance or any member state. The steps described are each important and must be addressed: setting the theater, strengthening in-place forces and improving the timeliness and quality of reinforcing forces. A comprehensive program is needed, with sustained support across the US government and NATO, to ensure success. The costs are not prohibitive, especially considering NATO’s great wealth. The alternative is ominous to contemplate.

111 The deployment of the US heavy brigade to Poland and the placement of EFP battalions in Poland and the three Baltic States were initiatives approved by the Obama administration.

112 In this scenario, the US deploys only two of its ten active Army divisions, none of its 28 National Guard brigades, no Marine forces and only a fraction of its air- and seapower. France and the UK provide only a single division, Germany a single brigade, and Belgium, Canada, Denmark, and the Netherlands a single battalion, with small air and naval contingents. Seventeen Allies provide no ground troops at all. The Baltic States and Poland, on the other hand, are fully committed.
Annexes

ANNEX A

**Russian Order of Battle, Western Military District (WMD)**

**Supporting Units Under WMD Control**
- 79th Guards Rocket Artillery Brigade
- 45th Heavy Artillery Brigade

**Russian Airborne Troops Located in the WMD**
- 76th Guards Air Assault Division
- 98th Guards Airborne Division
- 106th Guards Airborne Division
- 45th Guards Spetsnaz Brigade
- 2nd Spetsnaz Brigade
- 16th Spetsnaz Brigade

**1st Guards Tank Army**
- 4th Guards Tank Division
- 2nd Guards Motor Rifle Division
- 6th Tank Brigade
- 27th Independent Guards Motor Rifle Brigade
- 96th Reconnaissance Brigade
- 53rd Anti-Aircraft Rocket Brigade
- 112th Rocket Brigade
- 288th Artillery Brigade

**6th Combined Arms Army**
- 138th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade
- 25th Motor Rifle Brigade
- 9th Guards Artillery Brigade
- 268th Guards Artillery Brigade
• 5th Air Defense Brigade
• 26th Guards Missile Brigade

**20th Guards Combined Arms Army**
• 3rd Motor Rifle Division
• 144th Guards Motor Rifle Division
• 1st Independent Guards Tank Brigade
• 49th Air Defense Brigade
• 448th Rocket Brigade

**11th Army Corps (Kaliningrad)**
• 11th Tank Regiment
• 7th Guards Motor Rifle Regiment
• 79th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade
• 336th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade
• 25th Coastal Missile Brigade
• 152nd Guards Missile Brigade
• 244th Guards Artillery Brigade
• 183rd Fleet Ground Forces Rocket Regiment
• 22nd Guards Air Defense Regiment
• 44th Air Defense Division
  – 183rd Guards Air Defense Regiment
  – 1545th Air Defense Regiment

ANNEX B

NATO Ground Order of Battle (Notional)

Baltic States (Available D-Day)
• Hqs Baltic Defense Corps
• 1st (Estonian) Division
  – Heavy Brigade
  – Motorized Brigade
  – Artillery Battalion (155) (GS)
• 2nd (Latvian) Division
  – Heavy Brigade
  – Motorized Brigade
  – Artillery Battalion (155) (GS)
• 3rd (Lithuanian) Division
  – Heavy Brigade
  – Motorized Brigade
  – Motorized Brigade
  – Artillery Battalion (155) (GS)

US (Available D-Day)
• 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized) (based in Poland)
• 173rd Airborne Brigade
• 1st Brigade, 82d Airborne Division
• 10th Special Forces Group

US (Available D+14)
• 2nd Cavalry Regiment (Stryker)
• 41st Field Artillery Brigade (MLRS)
• 12th Aviation Brigade

US (Available D+30)
• 1st Cavalry Division
• 18th Field Artillery Brigade (HIMARS)
• 108th Air Defense Brigade
• 20th Engineer Brigade
Poland (Available D-Day)

- MNC-NE (Szczecin)
- 16th Mechanized Division
- 11th Armored Cavalry Division
- 12th Mechanized Division
- 18th Mechanized Division
- 6th Airborne Brigade
- 1st Aviation Brigade
- 25th Air Cavalry Brigade

NATO (Available D+30)

- ARRC
- 3rd (UK) Division (GBR)
  - 7th Armoured Brigade
  - 16th Brigade (Air Assault)
  - 3 Commando Brigade (Royal Marines)
  - 3 Regiment Army Air Corps (AH64)
- 3rd (FRA) Division
  - 2nd Armoured Brigade
  - 6th Light Armoured Brigade
  - 11th Parachute Brigade
  - 4th Brigade d'Aerocombat
- MND-NE
  - 9th Panzer Brigade (DEU) (VJTF)
  - 1st Gardehussarregiment (DEN)
  - 1st Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment (CAN)
  - 2nd Commando Battalion (BEL)
  - 1st Marine Combat Group (NLD)
ANNEX C

NATO Air and Maritime Order of Battle (Notional)

United States Air Forces Europe / Air Component Command

- 3rd Air Force (Ramstein)/603rd Air Operations Center
  - 31st Fighter Wing (F-16)
  - 48th Fighter Wing (F-15C/D, F-15E)
- 1st Fighter Wing (F-22)
- 388th Fighter Wing (F-35A)
- 121 (UK) Wing (Typhoon, F-35B)
- 3rd (FRA) Fighter Wing “Escadre de Chasse” (Mirage 2000)
- 7th Bomb Wing (B-1B)
- 363rd ISR Wing

United States Naval Forces Europe / Maritime Component Command

- US 6th Fleet
  - USS Ross (DDG)
  - USS Carney (DDG)
  - USS Ramage (DDG)
  - USS Stout (DDG)
  - USS Mitscher (DDG)
  - USS Normandy (CG)
  - HMS Northumberland (frigate)
  - HMS Iron Duke (frigate)
  - HMS Daring (destroyer)
  - HMS Dauntless (destroyer)
  - HDMS Iver Huitfeld (frigate)
  - HDMS Niels Juel (frigate)
  - ORP General Kazimierz Pułaski (frigate)
  - ORP General Tadeusz Kościuszko (frigate)
  - FGS Sachsen-Anhalt (frigate)
  - FGS Bremen (frigate)
  - HMS Windsor (SSK)
  - HMS Victoria (SSK)
  - ORP Orzel (SSK)
  - FGS U-31 (SSK)
ANNEX D

Campaign Strategy Framework

Problem Definition: “How to deter and defend against Russian aggression in the Baltic States.”

US Vital Interest: “Protect and defend the territory and populations of US treaty allies.”

 Desired End State: “The Baltic States remain sovereign, intact, independent and in NATO, with no Russian troops on Baltic soil.”

Strategic Concept: NATO deters and defends with 7 Baltic regular brigades (3 armored/mechanized), 13 Polish brigades and 5 US brigades at D-Day; and 13 division-equivalents at D+30. US and Polish forces attack and occupy Kaliningrad no later than D+14. NATO air forces with 7 fighter wings (1 nuclear capable), 1 bomber wing and 1 ISR wing establish air parity at D+14 and air supremacy at D+30. NATO maritime forces with 14 destroyers/frigates, 4 submarines and 8 minesweepers secure the Baltic Approaches at D+14 and defeat the Russian Baltic Fleet by D+30. All Russian forces ejected from the Baltic States by D+45.

Campaign Planning Assumptions:

• Seven to ten days of strategic early warning.

• Belarus allows use of national territory by Russian forces; Belarussian forces do not participate in Russian aggression.

• NAC votes unanimously to oppose Russian aggression OR US-led coalition forms incl. France, UK, Poland, Germany.

• Russia can employ no more than 50 percent of Western MD forces in the first 30 days.

• Russian forces available through D+30 are 30 maneuver battalions, 25 artillery battalions, 400 fighter/bomber aircraft, 150 attack helicopters, 33 surface combatants and 2 submarines.

• NATO ground forces do not violate Russian territory (excludes Kaliningrad).

• No horizontal escalation by US forces; military operations limited to the Baltic region.

• Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania field a total of 7 brigades (3 armored/mechanized) under three divisional headquarters and a corps headquarters.

• US and NATO states decline to base larger forces in the Baltic States in peacetime.
Military mobility issues are resolved to enable rapid movement across Central and Eastern Europe.

US and NATO stocks of precision guided munitions are adequate to execute the campaign plan.

US stations a rotational heavy division with enablers in Poland, able to deploy and fight on D-Day.

Kaliningrad A2/AD systems destroyed/neutralized NLT D+14.

US prepositioned equipment sets for a reinforcing heavy division with enablers are located in western Poland.

US 173rd Airborne Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division Ready Brigade, 10th SFG in-place to defend at D-Day.

US Stryker brigade, artillery brigade, aviation brigade based in Europe available at D+14.

US-based heavy division, artillery brigade, ADA brigade and engineer brigade available at D+30.

ARRC, UK division, French division, German panzer brigade, Danish, Canadian, Belgian and Dutch battalion battle groups available D+30 (ARRC advanced command post operational from D+10).

USAFE as ACC ready at D+14 with 7 fighter wings (one nuclear capable), 1 bomber wing, 1 ISR wing (E-3 Sentry, RQ-4 Global Hawk, MQ-9 Reaper).

USNAVEUR as MCC ready at D+14 with minimum 12 destroyers/frigates, 4 submarines, 8 minesweepers, 15 P-8 Poseidons.

US 7th Army as LANDCOM ready at D-Day to function as LCC.

SACEUR/CDR USEUCOM functions as JFC.

Key Decision Points:

- Intelligence finding that Russian aggression is imminent? (D-7)
- NAC decision to oppose Russian aggression? (D-7)
- Baltic and Polish forces placed on full alert? (D-7)
- Deploy Europe-based US forces into the Baltic States? (D-7)
- Mobilize critical high-demand/low-density reserve component units? (D-7)
• Flow CONUS-based forces to Europe? (D-Day)

• Flow NATO forces to the Baltics? (D-Day)

• Attack Kaliningrad from the ground? (D-Day)

• Deliver counterfires inside Russian territory following aggression? (D-Day)

• Respond to Russian threat or use of tactical nuclear weapons? (event-driven)

• Continue NATO military operations until all Russian forces are ejected from NATO territory? (event-driven)
ANNEX E

Situation Maps¹³

Force Laydown at D-Day

Force Laydown at D+14
Force Laydown at D+30
Author Biography

Dr. Richard D. Hooker, Jr. is a Distinguished Senior Fellow at The Jamestown Foundation. A University Professor, he holds The Theodore Roosevelt Chair in National Security Affairs at the National Defense University. He previously served as the Director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies at NDU and as Dean of the NATO Defense College in Rome. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the International Institute of Strategic Studies, and the Foreign Policy Research Institute. A former White House Fellow, Dr. Hooker taught at the United States Military Academy at West Point and held the Chief of Staff of the Army Chair at the National War College in Washington, DC. As a military officer and senior defense official, he served in the White House in the administrations of Presidents George H. W. Bush, William J. Clinton, George W. Bush and Donald Trump in the Executive Office of the President and National Security Council.

Dr. Hooker graduated with a BS from the US Military Academy in 1981 and holds MA and PhD degrees in International Relations from the University of Virginia. He is a Distinguished Graduate of the U.S. National War College, where he earned an MS in National Security Studies. He has authored more than sixty articles and six books on security and defense-related topics. Dr. Hooker has lectured extensively at leading academic and military institutions in the United States and abroad, including Harvard and Oxford. Prior to his retirement from active duty, Dr. Hooker served for 30 years in the United States Army as a parachute infantry officer in the United States and Europe. While on active duty he participated in military operations in Grenada, Somalia, Rwanda, the Sinai, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, including command of a parachute brigade in Baghdad from January 2005 to January 2006. His military service also included tours in the offices of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army.