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Security At The Polish-Lithuanian Border Kaliningrad, Suwalki Gap and Russia

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The Suwalki Corridor, a 65-kilometer-wide small strip of territory between Belarus and Kaliningrad, is one of NATO's most crucial areas, as it represents a tough to defend land. This is owing to the fact that it acts as NATO's physical connection between the Baltic area and the European continent to the south. The Kaliningrad region was historically part of Eastern Prussia; however, it was taken over by the Soviet Union after WWII, and it continues to operate as a federal subject of the Russian Federation, even though it is completely separated from the Russian mainland. Moreover, the Suwalki corridor links Kaliningrad with Belarus, a Russian ally.

It becomes apparent that if the Corridor is not adequately safeguarded, NATO's reputation as a security guarantee to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia might suffer significantly. A long-term solution requires novel approaches to strategy, statecraft, deterrence, and defence. With regard to any potential escalation in the Suwalki corridor and the Kaliningrad area, both the NATO Alliance and Russia have various advantages and disadvantages. NATO's primary vulnerability is its dependence on public opinion, which restricts its capacity to respond to Russian aggression fast enough to prevent a *fait accompli*. This is also a result of the nature of the Russian threat; the Russian strategy in the area in regard to the use of force reflects a multi-variant approach that exploits 21st century tools with the aim of halting NATO's response due to the ambiguity of such threat.

The present analysis is driven by the Kaliningrad region's unique importance for both Russia and the NATO Alliance. The study's goal is to determine the nature of the Russian threat in the Suwalki gap, as well as examine the Polish-Lithuanian cooperation on those grounds along with the broader implications for NATO and European defence. More importantly, the most crucial aspect of NATO's and Europe's response to Russia's actions in the area concerns their political will to protect their Baltic partners; their willingness to use force against a Russian threat while bearing the costs and dangers. In sum, this study aims at providing a holistic approach while examining the challenges that the Suwalki Corridor poses to NATO and Europe.



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ACRONYMS

| | |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| A2/D2 | Anti-access/area denial |
| BSR | Baltic Sea Region |
| CSDP | Common Security and Defence Policy |
| EU | European Union |
| ISR | Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance |
| LITPOLBAT | Lithuanian – Polish Peace Force Battalion |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| RSFSR | Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics |
| US | United States |

INTRODUCTION

It has been over three decades since communism was abolished in the Baltic area and Eastern Europe. In the years after, the Baltic and Eastern European countries have charted a new, faster path to integration with the West. All three Baltic republics and Poland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) within 15 years after regaining independence. However, the advent of a more assertive Russia over the last decade, since the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, has generated concerns about the Baltic republics' and their new Western partners' relative security. Each Baltic nation has a sizable Russian-speaking ethnic minority population,

particularly in Latvia and Estonia, where the figure is at least 25%. Putin has already asserted publicly that he has “a right and a responsibility” to safeguard Russian-speaking peoples across the globe, not only within Russia. In a 2015 interview with Charlie Rose, Putin said, “Do you think it’s reasonable that 25 million Russians are suddenly abroad? Russia was the world’s most divided country. Is it not a problem? Perhaps not for you. However, that is an issue for me.” This mindset has created insecurity for those in Western organisations concerned about the integrity and defence of their member states, particularly in the years after Russia invaded NATO- and EU-prospective Ukraine and supported separatist

rebels in Eastern Ukraine.¹

Furthermore, Russia's behaviour continues to have a major impact in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). One of the most important areas – for both NATO and European security – concerns the Suwalki Corridor, a 65-kilometre wide stretch of land between Belarus and Kaliningrad and along Poland's north-eastern border and Lithuania's southern border.² The Suwalki Gap, like the Fulda Gap before it, is both strategically positioned and militarily vulnerable.³ The area's importance lies in the uniqueness of the border, as it is the only land link between the three Baltic States (Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia) and Poland. Hence, it serves as the only land link between the Baltic states and the rest of the European continental area. In a hypothetical conflict scenario, NATO would have to transport troops and supplies from Poland to the Baltic countries via this gap, which Russia would have to shut to prevent this. Consequently, one of the most significantly dangerous scenarios for the Baltic area would be isolation from its NATO partners.⁴ In a conflict between NATO and Russia, the area could become a theatre of armed conflict if Russian forces operating from Kaliningrad decide to close the corridor.⁵

Moreover, the Kaliningrad Oblast has many

Russian ground and air troops stationed there; among them, some are equipped with 1100 main battle tanks, 1300 armoured combat vehicles, dozens of Scud and SS-21 surface-to-surface missiles, and 35 advanced Su-27 fighter aircraft.⁶ The Oblast is at the forefront of the Baltic region's future due to its status as a Russian exclave amid an increasingly interdependent Europe. Therefore, it is evident that Kaliningrad is significant in the broader pan-European context of regional security and stability.⁷

This paper will first provide a historical context regarding the Suwalki Gap and investigate the reasons behind Russia's adamant stance towards the area. Second, the nature of the Russian threat will be examined. Third, the Polish and Lithuanian cooperation and the broader implications for NATO and European security will be investigated. Many academics have written on the Kaliningrad area, its "double periphery status", and the Suwalki Gap as a study subject, particularly in the early 2000s before the EU's eastern enlargement. This paper will try to identify the strategic implications of this area regarding hybrid warfare; the latter aims to delegitimise NATO and challenge the status quo in the area to replace it with a new one, in which Russia has more influence.⁸

1. Matt Cesare, "Russian Encroachment in the Baltics: The Role of the Russian Media and Military," Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 14, 2021, accessed November 4, 2021. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/12/russian-encroachment-in-the-baltics-the-role-of-russian-media-and-military-2/>. See also Leopold Scholtz, "The Suwalki Gap dilemma: A strategic and operational analysis," *Militaire Spectator*, November 17, 2020, accessed November 15, 2021. Available at: <https://www.militairespectator.nl/thema/strategie-operaties/artikel/suwalki-gap-dilemma>

2. Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, and Peter B. Doran, "Securing the Suwalki Corridor: Strategy, Statecraft, Deterrence and Defense," Center for European Policy Analysis, July 2018, 15, accessed October 12, 2021. Available at: https://cepa.org/cepa_files/2018-CEPA-report-Securing_The_Suwa%28C%28%28ki_Corridor.pdf

3. Gregory Fetterman, "The Suwalki Gap A Proving Ground for Cluster Munitions," *Military Review* (July-August 2018): 43, accessed October 24, 2021. Available at: <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/July-August-2018/Fetterman-Suwalki/>

4. Viljar Veebel, "Why it would be strategically rational for Russia to escalate in Kaliningrad and the Suwalki corridor," *Comparative Strategy* 38, no. 3 (2019): 182, accessed October 24, 2021. Available at: DOI:10.1080/01495933.2019.160665.

5. Hodges, Bugajski, Doran, "Securing the Suwalki Corridor," 16. See also Scholtz, "The Suwalki Gap dilemma."

6. Mark Kramer, "Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia, and Baltic Security," PONARS Eurasia, Policy Memo 10, October 1997, 1, accessed October 13, 2021. Available at: https://www.ponarscui.asia.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/pm_00107.pdf

7. Arthur Collins, "Kaliningrad and Baltic security," (diss., Naval Postgraduate School, 2001), xiv.

8. Viljar Veebel, and Zdzislaw Sliwa, "The Suwalki Gap, Kaliningrad and Russia's Baltic Ambitions," *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 111, accessed October 17, 2021. Available at: DOI: <http://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.21>.



Source: <https://time.com/625738/suwalki-gap-escape-route/>

Suwalki Gap in the map

2018

BACKGROUND

When the Red Army took over Kaliningrad in April 1945, the city was known as Königsberg and served as the capital of East Prussia. Nonetheless, as agreed at the Potsdam Conference in 1945, the Soviet Union acquired the whole territory after the war. The new oblast was transferred to the Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics (RSFSR), and both the city and the oblast were renamed Mikhail Gorbachev Kalinin in April 1946. The region's importance to Moscow is reflected in its legal status. Rather than being linked to the new Baltic satellite states, it was designated as an oblast (region) of the Russian Federation, with its armed forces reporting directly to the General Staff. Simultaneously,

the area became the focal point for a massive military entrenchment effort, housing a diverse spectrum of land, naval, and air forces.⁹ As a result, even though the oblast was not linked to the rest of the RSFSR, the physical split was inconsequential as long as neighbouring Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia were all Soviet Union members. After the Soviet Union split at the end of 1991, Kaliningrad Oblast remained a part of Russia; however, it was suddenly surrounded by a recently independent Lithuania. As a consequence of the separation from Mother Russia, ground communications with the rest of Russia had to go through Lithuania and at least one of the two other newly independent states: Belarus and

9. Mark Galeotti, "Kaliningrad: a fortress without a state," IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin (July 1993): 56, accessed October 19, 2021. Available at: https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research/research-centres/ibru-centre-for-borders-research/maps-and-databases/publications-database/boundary-and-security-bulletins/bsb1-2_galeotti.pdf.

Latvia.¹⁰

Without a doubt, the loss of the Baltic ports in 1991 dealt a significant blow to the Kremlin. Following the demise of the Soviet Union and the loss of the Baltic republics, Putin was left with just two northern ports: Kaliningrad, which is ice-free all year, and Kronstadt, which is frozen in winter, though sophisticated ice breakers are assisting in alleviating that issue. Russia's Baltic fleet is now based at the western town of Baltiysk (previously known as Pillau) in Kaliningrad.¹¹

By the mid-2000s, it became evident that the potential to turn Kaliningrad into a laboratory for cooperation between the EU and

the Russian Federation had been squandered. Mutual suspicion and distrust between the two parties, the enlargement of both the EU and NATO combined with the regional conflict in Yugoslavia, and, later on, Iraq left no room for dialogue between the two parties. This resulted in rendering Kaliningrad a hostage between the EU and NATO on the one side and Russia on the other.¹² Following the outbreak of violence in Ukraine, Russia's exclave, its most westernmost area, was turned into Russia's most militarised outpost in Europe for the second time in its post-1945 history.¹³

RUSSIA'S ADAMANT STANCE ON KALININGRAD IN THE POST-CRIMEA WORLD

The gap is only relevant when one considers the political geography behind it. To the west of the gap, there is the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. To the east, the state of Belarus, one of the closest allies to Russia, further complicates the situation.¹⁴ Given that the Suwalki Gap rests between the Russian exclave, Lithuania, and Poland, it makes it important for both European and NATO collective defence due to the possible isolation of the Baltic region. For instance, a Russian invasion, unlikely as it may be, would rely on taking the

Baltics in less than a hundred hours, presenting a *fait accompli* before NATO could react effectively.¹⁵ However, for such a scenario to come into action, Russia needs a location where its capacity to mobilise and escalate is more significant than NATO's; as Veebel puts it, Moscow needs an area where it can respond with a superior force if escalation is to occur.¹⁶ The Suwalki gap and Kaliningrad are ideal for such a scenario. Therefore, a quick assault from Moscow's side might result in territory gains that would need a large-scale ground

10. Ibid.

11. Jiri Valenta, and Leni Friedman Valenta, "Russia's Strategic Advantage in the Baltics: A Challenge to NATO?" Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (2018): 12, accessed November 1, 2021. Available at: <http://www.ijstor.org/stable/682823>.

12. Sergey Sukhankin, "Kaliningrad in the Post-Crimea Russia: A Bastion or a Weak Link?" *Russie.Nei.Visions* 124, Institut français des relations internationales (September 2021): 8, accessed October 21, 2021. Available at: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/sukhankin_kaliningrad_2021_us.pdf.

13. Sergey Sukhankin, "David vs. Goliath: Kaliningrad Oblast as Russia's A2/AD 'Bubble'", *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 2, no.1 (2019): 95, accessed October 27, 2021. Available at: DOI: <http://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.20>.

14. Sebastien Roblin, "Why NATO Remains Vulnerable to the Suwalki Gap," *The National Interest*, April 25, 2021, accessed October 23, 2021. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/checkbox/why-nato-remains-vulnerable-suwalki-gap-183540>.

15. Ibid.

16. Veebel, "Why it would be strategically rational for Russia to escalate in Kaliningrad and the Suwalki corridor," 184.

battle to liberate them from the side of NATO.¹⁷

Sukhankin argues that Russia's policies toward the Oblast have been transformed since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. While it is distant from Russia's mainland, it benefits from being considerably closer to Russia's European opponents' major cities. Russia has recently extensively armed its Baltic exclave and sent additional soldiers to the Baltic States' borders and new ships to the Baltic Sea.¹⁸ A significant shift in the post-Crimea world concerns implementing a policy of remilitarisation of the area, which resulted in Kaliningrad's re-emergence as Russia's western military stronghold. For example, the conventional forces stationed in the exclave have increased; in 2015, conventional troops totalled 9,964, while it now has over 15,000 forces due to additional deployments that include logistical and infrastructural assistance.¹⁹

It must be noted that on the surface, Russia's actions might resemble those taken by the Soviet Union after its takeover of the Oblast. Nonetheless, despite any resemblance to the Soviet past, the situation differs from the previous one, given that the previous-Soviet Baltic Republics are now members both in NATO and the EU. Given that the Russian exclave is sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania, both of which are members of the EU and NATO, Kaliningrad faces some challenges that did not exist before 1991.²⁰

Kaliningrad became a hostage of reciprocal sanctions imposed by the Russian Federation and the West, which had a major effect on the Russian exclave's position, posing new difficulties for regional development.²¹ For instance, due to its lack of natural resources and its separation from the rest of Russia, the Kaliningrad Oblast is heavily dependent on Russia for oil and gas.²²

At the same time, the geopolitical situation differs; Russia's actions regarding the remilitarisation of the exclave were premised on the determination to reduce the military capabilities of NATO in case of a military escalation in the area. As a result, and in a clear departure from the pre-1991 strategy, Russia is strengthening certain pillars to resist the first assault by NATO, restrict access to its territory, and, if necessary, impair a prospective attacker's ability to operate from within.²³ More precisely, anti-access/area denial (A2/AD)²⁴ has lately become a phrase to identify Russia's plan to hinder, disrupt, or possibly prevent NATO troops from reinforcing the Baltic nations in the event of an Alliance-Russia escalation, as Russia can turn areas within that range into strategically and operationally isolated zones (bubbles).²⁵

The exclave has been classified as an A2/AD zone. In Kaliningrad, the added capabilities were anti-ship armament, air defences, and electronic warfare technology. Russia is deploying an astounding assortment of A2/AD

17. Kallberg, Hamilton, and Sherburne, "Electronic Warfare in the Suwalki Gap Facing the Russian 'Accompli Attack,'" 30.

18. Valenta, "Russia's Strategic Advantage in the Baltics: A Challenge to NATO?" 12.

19. Hodges, Bugajski, and Doran, "Securing the Suwalki Corridor," 39.

20. Sukhankin, "Kallingrad in the Posto-Crimea Russia," 5.

21. Alexander B. Sebentsov, and Maria V. Zotova, "The Kaliningrad Region: Challenges of the Exclave Position and the Ways to Offset Them," *Baltic Region* 10, no. 1 (2018): 90, accessed October 22, 2021. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2018-1-6>.

22. Sukhankin, "Kallingrad in the Posto-Crimea Russia," 17.

23. *Ibid.*, 11.

24. While the notion of 'anti-access and area denial' dates back to the 1990s in the US strategic establishment, its reality is as ancient as combat. Numerous instances show how to deny any potential for freedom of movement on the battlefield or, more broadly, the ability to even reach one's contested area. However, A2/AD became a topic of discussion in Europe only after Russia illegally seized Crimea.

25. Guillaume Lasconjarias, "NATO's Response to Russian A2/AD in the Baltic States: Going Beyond Conventional?" *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 74, accessed November 8, 2021. Available at: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.18>.

systems along the Baltic Sea.²⁶ Air defences, counter-maritime forces, and theatre offensive strike weapons like short- or medium-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and other precision-guided munitions are common components of A2/AD forces.²⁷ Lasconjarias argues that the Russia A2/AD approach can be seen in several elements:

1. Depth of manoeuvre: Through mobility, launchers can move quickly and avoid being targeted and destroyed whilst being able to strike far ahead.
2. Strategy of interior lines: Russia has recently developed a strategy of coordinating and synchronising all types of military units very closely, for instance, during the latest series of Zapad exercises.
3. Multi-dimensional capabilities: subsurface, surface, air, space, and cyber and a strong intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).²⁸

If permanently stationed in Kaliningrad, Russia's short-range Iskander (SS-26 Stone) ballistic missiles can attack infrastructure, bases, and force concentrations in Poland, Lithuania, and southern Latvia. This capability can extend to targets in Estonia and the entirety of Latvia when combined with the same sort of system situated on the western outskirts of the Western Military District. Such systems, in conjunction with Russia's air and sea-launched cruise missiles, have the capability of destroying critical nodes (ports, airports) and infrastructure required for the reception, staging, onward movement, and integration

(RSOI) of Allied forces deployed to the Baltic states, complicating NATO's rapid deployment operations even further.²⁹

Furthermore, Russia has strengthened its conventional military capabilities in the Baltic states to challenge NATO's supremacy. Russia's military is separated into regional districts, with the Western Military District responsible for the Baltic area. This District is home to Russia's most powerful regional unit, which includes three armies, two fleets, and a variety of additional ground and air assets. The Western Military District's force concentration, along with the superior calibre of several units, makes it an ideal staging place for large-scale conventional military operations against any opponent. Moscow also improved weapons and increased ground forces stationed in Russia's Western Military District, which encompasses St. Petersburg, Kaliningrad, and border territories surrounding the Baltic nations, and the military performed more severe drills. This area is home to around 120,000 soldiers and one tank division. These forces might be deployed to launch strikes on the Baltic nations through Belarus. The Kremlin has also stationed nuclear capabilities in Kaliningrad at various times, which alarmed NATO immensely.³⁰

Russia seeks to prepare for various scenarios and contingencies.³¹ The presence of ground forces in the Kaliningrad Oblast is entirely compatible with the "stab, grab, and hold" operation against the Suwalki Corridor. Russia would require five to six standard-type

26. NATO Parliamentary Assembly, "Reinforcing NATO's Deterrence in the East," Report, November 17, 2018, accessed November 5, 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3bM5555>.

27. Ian Williams, "The Russia – NATO A2AD Environment," Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 3, 2017, accessed November 9, 2021. Available at: <https://missilethreat.csis.org/russia-nato-a2ad-environment/>.

28. Lasconjarias, "NATO's Response to Russian A2/AD in the Baltic States," 77.

29. Clark, Luiik, Rams and Shirreff, "Closing NATO's Baltic Gap," 12.

30. Cesare, "Russian Encroachment in the Baltics."

31. Konrad Muzyka, and Rochan Consulting, "Russian Forces in the Western Military District," CNA Occasional Paper, June 2021, 4, accessed October 24, 2021. Available at: https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/Russian-Forces-in-the-Western-Military-District.pdf.

brigades to block and hold the area in a classic offensive assault against the Suwalki Gap, totalling 30,000 soldiers. Moscow is almost halfway there, thanks to the ongoing military build-up within Kaliningrad. The remaining might readily be supplied by the Kremlin from elsewhere in its Western Military District. During the Zapad 2017 drills, Russia mobilised approximately 100,000 troops around NATO's borders. The troops needed to occupy the Suwalki area and resist a NATO assault were fully within Russia's capabilities.³² However, a higher-level discussion about Russia's tactical and strategic challenge is required, of which A2/AD is just one component. Russia did not develop the aforementioned capabilities just to fight US access or limit freedom of movement in the Baltic theatre, a tough job in a wide continental theatre populated by NATO and European countries. Russian thinking is founded on a philosophy of war in which the opponent is seen as a system with important subsystems or nodes.³³ Therefore, despite the military build-up in the region in the post-Crimea world, Russia's approach towards the area is much more complicated.

Russia's goal is to build a multipolar world by undermining the unipolar international order dominated by the United States and, by extension, the West.³⁴

Traditional conflicts are no longer the primary danger in today's security environment. Instead, we are confronted with a variety of hybrid threats that demand a comprehensive security strategy. Military strikes play a modest, and sometimes secondary, part in contemporary warfare in today's shifting security environment. The most pressing issue that contemporary societies confront is the growing influence of insecurity at all levels of society. This may require a shift in thinking, in which typical threat assessments developed for a large-scale conventional conflict, like World War I and World War II, may become a thing of the past. Russia's influence operations often strive to expand the political chasm between Europe and the US and create an internal schism among NATO's key countries, which would aid in weakening Western cooperation.³⁵ Therefore, the next part will focus on the not-so-new Russian approach towards the area.

THE SAWALKI GAP, THE BALTICS, AND HYBRID WARFARE

Threats are not necessarily geographically restricted; their nature can vary and take a hy-

brid form, making it difficult to hold a state accountable for its actions.³⁶ After the take-

32. Hodges, Bugajski, and Doran, "Securing the Suwalki Corridor," 39.

33. Michael Kofman, "It's time to talk about A2/D2: Rethinking the Russian Military Challenger," War on the Rocks, September 5, 2019, accessed November 9, 2021. Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/its-time-to-talk-about-a2-ad-rethinking-the-russian-military-challenge/>.

34. Mira Milosevich, "Russia's Westpolitik and the European Union," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Report, July 8, 2021, accessed December 6, 2021. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-westpolitik-and-european-union>.

35. Holger Molder, Vladimir Sazonov, Archil Chochia, and Tanel Kerikmaa, *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare: Influence Operations in Europe and its Neighbourhood* (Cham: Springer, 202), 4.

36. Gabrielle Ghio, "Assessing Operational Issues Within the Transatlantic Defence Environment: Western Confrontation with Russia in the Baltic Through the Lens of Military Mobility to Secure the Suwalki Gap," Finabel, May 18, 2021, accessed October 23, 2021. Available at: <https://finabel.org/assessing-operational-issues-within-the-transatlantic-defence-environment-western-confrontation-with-russia-in-the-baltic-through-the-lens-of-military-mobility-to-secure-the-suwalki-gap/>.

over of Crimea in March 2014, the notion of hybrid warfare further gained popularity as a way to explain the Russian military's success in the fight. While the notion remains popular in academic and policy circles, its analytical value is questioned. The term hybrid warfare, coined in the mid-2000s by the US military to describe an operational approach to warfighting that combines military and non-military methods, looked to be an acceptable analytical framework to help explain the Crimea operation's success.³⁷

In Western literature, hybrid warfare is most typically connected with US military strategist Frank Hoffman. Hoffman stated that the blurring of modalities of combat, who fights, and what technology are brought to bear provides a broad spectrum of variation and complexity that we term Hybrid Warfare.³⁸ The latter originally defined hybrid warfare as the simultaneous and adaptive employment of a "fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behaviour in the battle space to obtain political objectives."³⁹

The vast amount of material released on Russian hybrid warfare since spring 2014 reveals it is a hotly debated subject. Proponents claim that Russia has discovered a new method of war that both its neighbours and the West cannot resist. Other Western scholars, such as British Russianist Keir Giles, attribute the term's survival regarding Russia to a perceived novelty over Russia's active measures in

Ukraine in 2014. More precisely, as Keir Giles mentions:

"The distinctive Russian approach to operations in Ukraine gave rise to an impression among some observers that its military had employed fundamentally new concepts of armed conflict. The widespread adoption of phrases such as 'hybrid warfare' and 'Gerasimov doctrine' reinforced this perception of novelty and was indicative of a search for ways to conceptualise – and make sense of – a Russian approach to conflict that the West found at first sight unfamiliar."⁴⁰

However, sceptics argue that hybrid warfare is nothing new since indirect techniques and unorthodox tactics like proxy fighters, information warfare, psychological operations, and sabotage have been used by most regimes for many years.⁴¹ For instance, Laurence Freedman contends that even though the intervention of Russia in Crimea has been described as a prominent example of hybrid warfare, it does not constitute a new phenomenon.⁴² Moreover, Sibylle Scheipers also mentioned that "owning to its internal inconsistency, the concept of hybrid warfare seems to be difficult to operationalise into any form of purposeful action as by lighting the alleged effectiveness of a 'strategy' that leaves no room for defining its parameters of success."⁴³ Hybrid warfare is essentially a new conceptualisation of an existing reality from the aforementioned view. According to historical evidence, it has been a part of combat since antiquity. The only new

37. Bettina Renz, "Russia and 'Hybrid Warfare,'" *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3

(2016): 283–284, accessed November 18, 2021. Available at: DOI: 10.1080/13569775.2016.1201316.

38. Ofer Fridman, *Russian 'Hybrid Warfare': Resurgence and Politicisation* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11.

39. Maxim A. Suchkov, "Whose hybrid warfare? How 'the hybrid warfare' concept shapes Russian discourse, military, and political practice," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*,

32, no. 3 (2021): 415, accessed November 18, 2021. Available at: DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2021.1887434.

40. Keir Giles, "Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power," Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme, March 2016, accessed November 29, 2021, 2. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2016/03/russias-new-tools-confronting-west-continuity-and-innovation-moscow-exercise-power>.

41. Renz, "Russia and 'Hybrid Warfare,'" 284.

42. Suchkov, "Whose hybrid warfare?" 417.

43. Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare,"* 103.

element is that modern military and communication technology (internet, mobile phones, social networks, etc.) have accelerated the integration of regular and irregular troops, operational ideas, and organisational procedures.⁴⁴ It must be mentioned that, as Fridman contends, one element driving the debate over the hybrid warfare terminology concerns its politicisation regarding Russia's activities towards NATO's East European members. More precisely, the Baltic states, especially Estonia and Latvia, have been the most active in this process of interpreting Russian hybrid actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine as a new danger to the Western world's security and integrity. Due to the (very real) historical fear of their eastern neighbour, they have further politicised Russia's hybrid/information/cyber warfare as the primary threat to Western values to gain financial and military support access. At the same time, they manage to improve their traditional military power and reinforce their political legitimacy.⁴⁵

The notion of hybrid warfare is also useful as an explanatory framework to understand Russia's actions in the Baltics. Radin identifies three possible scenarios in which Russia can interfere in the Baltics: nonviolent subversion, which aims to discredit and affect the government of the Baltic states through propaganda, covert action and other nonviolent ways; covert violent action, in which Russia would use armed force in a nonattributable or deniable manner; and conventional aggression, which

is supported and legitimised through a variety of propaganda, covert action, and other forms of irregular warfare. These three categories aim to encompass the spectrum of probable Russian actions by including alternative scenarios offered by officials and experts in the United States, the Baltics, and other NATO nations.⁴⁶

Specifically, the actions taken by Russia, characterised by implausible deniability,⁴⁷ are not something new. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) notes the Russian doctrine at a strategic level, before a conflict occurs focuses on influencing, confusing, and demoralising its intended audience. This aims to destroy community cohesiveness and readiness to fight by creating cleavages and exploiting internal friction in targeted cultures.⁴⁸ Hence, in a more likely scenario, Russia's intervention in the Baltics could resemble previous (implausibly deniable) interventions in Ukraine and Georgia. Many policymakers and scholars have expressed their concerns regarding Russia's use of hybrid warfare against the Baltic states, especially Estonia and Latvia, where Russian-speaking populations live.

However, unlike Ukraine and Georgia, the Baltics are NATO and the EU members. As such, unless Russia is already engaged in open and direct military war with NATO or the US abroad, the Kremlin would naturally want to keep any operations against Estonia and other Baltic nations inside the bounds of NATO's Article 5. Based on this, Russia would employ

44. *Ibid.*, 44.

45. *Ibid.*, 121.

46. Andrew Radin, "Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses," Rand Corporation, 2017, 13, accessed October 23, 2021. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1577.html.

47. The term is used by Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich to explain many covert actions are openly secret. Such operations do not constitute a failure of covert action. On the contrary, some advantages exist, given that leaders can avoid constitutional accountability and at the same time try and coerce an opponent. For more: Rory Cormac, and Richard J. Aldrich, "Grey is the new black: implausible deniability," *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (2018) 478-479, accessed October 23, 2021. Available at: doi: 10.1093/ia/iiy067.

48. Jan E. Kallberg, Stephen S. Hamilton, and Matthew G. Sherburne, "Electronic Warfare in the Suwalki Gap Facing the Russian "Accompli Attack," *JFQ* 97, 2nd Quarter (2020): 33, accessed on October 28, 2021. Available at: https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-97/jfq-97_30-38_Kallberg-Hamilton-Sherburne.pdf?ver=2020-03-31-160230-160.

significantly different weaponry in its hybrid war against the Baltics than it would against Ukraine or Belarus.⁴⁹

For instance, concerning Estonia and Latvia, the concern focuses on Russia's possible exploitation of those Russian-speaking minorities to gain further influence. Russia seems to regard the Baltic States, particularly Estonia and Latvia, which have a sizable proportion of Russian speakers, as a privileged zone of interest.⁵⁰ Since Russia deemed the West to be a complacent protector of the Russian-speaking people in the Baltic States, Russia took it upon itself to carry out this job. In a galaxy not so far away, both imperial Russia and the Soviet Union attempted to maintain themselves through force in the region; only when the Russian/Soviet empires were weak did new entities, such as the Baltic States, arise. When the Russian/Soviet empires were powerful, smaller republics on their borders faced existential threats.⁵¹ The presence of Russian military forces in Kaliningrad and on the eastern borders of Latvia and Estonia adds to the rising anxiety among Baltic governments of a Russian destabilisation effort.⁵² However, one should keep in mind that, unlike Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, given the allegiance of many Russian speakers in the Baltics to their own states, as well as their superior economic well-being inside the EU, Russia will find it difficult to incite large-scale demonstrations or separatist movements, similar to those in

Ukraine.⁵³

Russia has identified NATO's flaws, and Moscow attempts to exploit them. Nonetheless, Russia must consider NATO's combined economic and military might. Russia enjoys a huge competitive advantage in these sectors, and Moscow has thus far refrained from utilising military action against the alliance. Instead, by ongoing interaction with NATO member states through intimidation, threats, or propaganda, Moscow has sought to divide the Alliance and dissuade NATO from expanding its influence into the post-Soviet area or taking effective counter-measures to Russia's activities.⁵⁴ Considering that Russia's actions will be covert and deniable, a reaction from NATO and the EU may be hampered due to the ambiguity.⁵⁵

At the same time, NATO is not sure how to react to Russian actions as it does not wish to antagonise Russia and at the same time does not want to be blamed for any escalation.⁵⁶ Russia's military goal is to establish a force capable of carrying out multiple missions with sufficient speed and accuracy to negate the West's numerical and technical advantages.⁵⁷ Simultaneously, Russia's disinformation efforts would turn public opinion against NATO waging war in response to Russia's humanitarian intervention.⁵⁸ *A fait accompli* strike, according to a US Army publication, is designed to accomplish military and political goals fast and then cement those victories so

49. Kalev Stoicescu, "Russia's Non-Conventional Hybrid Warfare: Estonia," Center for European Policy Analysis, January 29, 2021, accessed November 29, 2021, <https://cepa.org/the-evolution-of-russian-hybrid-warfare-estonia/>.

50. Sandis Straders, "The Baltic Predicament: Russia's Shadows," in *Small Baltic States and the Euro-Atlantic Security Community* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021), 167. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53763-0_5.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Cesare, "Russian Encroachment in the Baltics."

53. Radin, "Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics," 2.

54. Kuhn, "Preventing Escalation in the Baltics," 15.

55. Radin, "Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses," 1.

56. Lasconjarias, "NATO's Response to Russian A2/AD in the Baltic States," 74.

57. Jordi Akluran, Beran, Shura, Li, Rajski, Sarkes, and Castro, "Exposed Outpost Russian Threats to Baltic Security and Transatlantic Responses."

58. Roblin, "Why NATO Remains Vulnerable to the Suwalki Gap."

that any effort by the US to reverse the operation would incur unacceptable cost and danger.⁵⁹

Russia's primary hybrid warfare instruments against Estonia⁶⁰ are, without a doubt, its state-owned and specialised propaganda and misinformation networks. As in most other Western nations, they include the RT (previously

Russia Today) TV station and the Sputnik news agency, news website, and radio programme (formerly Voice of Russia and RIA Novosti). These two Kremlin news brands, with a practically worldwide reach and budgets that exceed those of the BBC, are Russia's inverted versions of CNN and Voice of America/Radio Liberty.⁶¹



US' Strykers from Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group Poland landed in Rukla, Lithuania in June 2017.

THE BELARUS VARIABLE

When examining security in the region, Belarus's position must be considered for various reasons. In addition to its apparent geograph-

ic position, Minsk is a strong political and military ally of Russia and is heavily reliant on Moscow in terms of economic and energy

59. Kallberg, Hamilton, and Sherburne, "Electronic Warfare in the Suwalki Gap Facing the Russian "Accompli Attack," 31.

60. Both Lithuania and Latvia have banned RT.

61. Stoicescu, "Russia's Non-Conventional Hybrid Warfare."

security. The prevailing notion is that Belarus is a close Russian ally. Presidents Alyaksandr Lukashenko of Belarus and Vladimir Putin of Russia may not get along personally, but they both rule autocratically. Minsk receives commercial and economic aid from Moscow. Belarus has also received money and equipment for its armed forces and a treaty commitment from Russia. In this way, the popular thinking is valid, but at the same time, it risks obscuring important incompatibilities between the two allies for NATO military planners. Over the previous decade, Minsk's foreign policy has grown more realistic. Belarus strives to strike a balance between its relations with Russia and the West.⁶²

For instance, Lukashenko has not been a big fan of Putin's approach to territorial and political problems in the post-Soviet zone. Despite international tensions, Belarus has decided to work with the post-Maidan authorities in Ukraine. His post-Crimea security manoeuvring has surprised some Belarus observers. As an outcome of his neutrality in Russia's dispute with Kyiv, Lukashenko was able to accommodate talks between key Western leaders and Russia to end hostilities in Ukraine's Donbas region, culminating in the two Minsk agreements and gaining Lukashenko, at least in his viewpoint, some regional and global prestige.⁶³

The situation, however, further changed in 2020. The 2020 presidential elections in Minsk were manipulated and were met with an unprecedented surge of protests. Significant political, informational, police, and se-

curity-related assistance from Russia has been critical in suppressing protests. The administration retaliated with sweeping crackdowns: security forces detained and tortured hundreds, and police murdered several others. Nonetheless, the Lukashenko administration has remained stable despite significant demonstrations. While the government has prevailed, its legitimacy has been irreparably tarnished both at home and abroad. The European Union and the United States have refused to accept the presidential election results and impose a fresh round of penalties on those guilty for the repression. Meanwhile, despite severe police responses and increasing weather conditions, anti-Lukashenko rallies have persisted in Belarus.⁶⁴

Russia was instrumental in preventing the fall of the Lukashenko regime. Since August 2020, Russia has continuously provided the political, media, and economic aid required to keep Lukashenko in power. During the height of the protests, the Kremlin's public position averted a split in Belarusian power and administrative elites. As a result, Belarusian foreign policy manoeuvring between East and West, a trend evident at the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, has come to an end as a result of the post-election situation: Minsk is now more reliant on Russia than ever before. As a result, analysing Russia's strategic choices and manoeuvring space in relation to the Baltic States, notably Lithuania, necessitates considering Belarus's involvement in the equation.

Furthermore, helping Lukashenko risks an-

62. Aryom Shraibman, "The House that Lukashenko Built: The Foundation, Evolution and Future of the Belarusian Regime," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2018, 2, accessed December 8, 2021. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP328_Shraibman_Belarus_FINAL.pdf.

63. Lanoszka, "Strategic Enabler or Point of Vulnerability."

64. Heinrich Brauss, and András Rácz, "Russia's Strategic Interests and Actions in the Baltic Region," DGAP, Report no. 1, January 7, 2021, accessed October 31, 2021. Available at: <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/russias-strategic-interests-and-actions-baltic-region#2.5>.

tagonising Belarusian society, where Moscow remains popular but is widely seen as Lukashenko's primary source of support. If the Lukashenko administration faces internal opposition again, Putin may be tempted to intervene to avoid a replay of the 2014 Ukraine conflict. If Russian officials decide to act militarily to quiet Belarus, it will almost certainly be under the appearance of safeguarding its neighbour from a Zapad 2021 scenario in which the West is behind civil turmoil. This would entail seizing the Suwalki Gap; that would be the major, Rubicon-like line to cross because an attack on a NATO member would trigger Article 5 of the treaty.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, if Russia decides to strike the Baltic states and close the Suwalki Gap, NATO should be ready to escalate horizontally by attacking military sites in Belarus. However, if Russia explicitly urges Belarus to join the war effort, such horizontal escalation may be seen as unacceptable internationally. Even though Belarus and Russia have a high degree of alliance compatibility in peacetime, NATO military strategists should not assume that such policy convergence would survive a war. As a result, NATO may even seek to capitalise on the tension between the two partners to separate the two allies and impose further expenses on Russia.⁶⁶

POLISH- LITHUANIAN RELATIONS: FROM CONFRONTATION TO COOPERATION

Given how Russia has used ethnic conflicts in the past to achieve its interests in the post-Soviet space, such as those in Ukraine and Georgia, it is critical to discuss the region's ethnic tensions. By invading Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, Russia's leadership showed its readiness to plan an assault on its neighbours and alter recognised boundaries. If Moscow deems it is appropriate or necessary, it will use military force to accomplish its geopolitical objectives. As a result, this section will examine the link between the two Suwalki Gap safeguards: Poland and Lithuania. The Lithuanian-Polish relationship is difficult to

categorise. On the one hand, the two countries are allies and members of NATO and the EU. On the other hand, there are historical disparities that exist between them.⁶⁷ Even though the interaction between ethnic minorities is less of an issue in Lithuania than in the other two Baltic states, ethnicity-related conflict continues to occur.⁶⁸ The territory has been subject to Lithuanian-Polish tensions for almost a century. Tensions between the two countries lingered with the fall of the Soviet Union. Those are mostly related to the Polish minority in Lithuania, particularly regarding problems of

65. Eugene Rumer, "Fix Some of the Biggest Security Challenges Facing Russia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 21, 2021, accessed December 3, 2021. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/09/21/even-major-military-exercise-like-zapad-can-t-fix-some-of-biggest-security-challenges-facing-russia-pub-85397>.

66. Alexander Lanoszka, "Strategic Enabler or Point of Vulnerability: What Role for Belarus in Russia's Military Plans?" Modern War Institute, March 21, 2018, accessed October 31, 2021. Available at: <https://mwi.usma.edu/strategic-enabler-point-vulnerability-role-belarus-russias-military-plans/>.

67. Irina M. Busygina, and Anton D. Onishchenko, "The Polish minority in the Republic of Lithuania: internal and external factors, Baltic Region 11, no. 1 (2019): 45, accessed October 29, 2021. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2019-1-4>.

68. Busygina, and Onishchenko, "The Polish minority in the Republic of Lithuania," 43.

state-funded Polish education, Polish name and street spelling, and the repatriation of pre-Soviet ownership rights.⁶⁹ There is a significant minority in the Suwalki triangle, with the Lithuanians being largely concentrated in and around the three towns that make up the Suwalki triangle. More precisely, the town of Punszk, which has over 3.6 thousand people, or roughly 80% of the town's population, the town of Sejny has around 1.6 thousand Lithuanians, or roughly 30% of its population, whereas Suwalki has approximately 500 Lithuanians. Similarly, the Lithuanian minority in Poland's Sejny region complains about educational and linguistic concerns and monuments in Berzdyn, near Sejny, that are defaced and assaults on local Lithuanian language inscriptions.⁷⁰

Despite the two countries' collaboration, it is a disturbing indicator that Lithuanian extremists with a clear love for Russia periodically publish social media statements pushing Lithuania to regain the Suwalki triangle from Poland. While confrontation between the two nations is improbable, ethnic tensions in the region might spark local secession or even a request for the territory to be included in Kaliningrad (as pro-Russia radicals have suggested in the case of the Lithuanian port city of Klaipėda).⁷¹

Nonetheless, both nations are now members of NATO and the European Union. Despite their differences, military, economic, political, and other ties between Poland and Lithuania

are very strong. Furthermore, Poland and Lithuania coordinate on problems relating to ties with the Russian Federation.⁷² Since 1999 and 2004, when Poland and Lithuania respectively became members of NATO, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty has aided defence against large external threats, but its sufficiency was questioned after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and NATO's readiness and capacity to protect the Baltic nations was debated. One of the most frightening scenarios is a conventional Russian strike. Despite the improbability of such an assault, the threats remain high due to the harsh military balance that local NATO troops in the Baltic Sea Region face. The disparity between Russia and NATO remains a challenge from a strictly military standpoint.⁷³

As a result, Poland and Lithuania cooperate on military issues both bilaterally and within NATO. One of the most visible manifestations of Poland-Lithuania strategic collaboration is successful Polish-Lithuanian military cooperation.⁷⁴ The most obvious manifestation of their military collaboration was LITPOLBAT, a joint Lithuanian-Polish army battalion that served in different peacekeeping operations from 1997 to 2007. LITPOLBAT was dissolved in 2007, although it served as a major influence for forming the present Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade (LITPOLUKRBRIG). The brigade, headquartered in the historically significant and geographically central city of Lublin, today performs a com-

69. Agnia Grigas, "NATO's Vulnerable Link in Europe: Poland's Suwalki Gap," Atlantic Council, February 9, 2016, accessed October 22, 2021. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/nato-s-vulnerable-link-in-europe-poland-s-suwalki-gap/>.

70. *Ibid.*

71. *Ibid.*

72. Busygina, and Onishchenko, "The Polish minority in the Republic of Lithuania," 46.

73. Margarita Šešelgytė, "Lithuania as Host Nation" in *Lessons from the Enhanced Forward Presence, 2017-2020*, ed. Alexander Lanoszka, Christian Leuprecht, and Alexander Moens. (NATO Defense College, 2020), accessed October 28, 2021. Available at: <http://www.istor.org/stable/respq27710.15>.

74. Andrius Krivas, "Lithuanian-Polish Military Cooperation," *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review* 7 (2001): 1, accessed November 1, 2021. Available at: <http://lfpri.lt/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/LFPRI-7-Krivas.pdf>.

parable, if not enhanced, duty to its predecessor.⁷⁵

Moreover, NATO air troops monitor the air-space of the three Baltic states on a rotational basis, and Lithuania and Poland are looking to expand their cooperation in this area as well. Following a meeting with the Polish Chief of Staff in 2018, Major Neimontas, spokesman for the Lithuanian Chief of Defence, stated that the commanders would discuss possibilities for integrating Lithuanian and Polish air-space surveillance and air defence systems. In addition, Rajmund Andrzejczek, the Chief of the Polish Army, claimed in Vilnius in 2019 that Poland's new missile defence system may also reach Lithuania.⁷⁶

In September 2020, a combined meeting of the Lithuanian and Polish Cabinets was conducted at the Palace of the Grand Dukes in Vilnius, where current and future essential measures for the two states were addressed, accomplishments were recognised, and directions for future collaboration were set. The gathering was conducted on 17 September 2020, since on that day, 81 years ago, the Soviet invasion against Poland started, determining the destiny of Lithuania. The joint meeting of the Lithuanian and Polish Cabinets, chaired by the two countries' Prime Ministers, Saulius Skvernelis and Mateusz Morawiecki, was held for the first time in the two countries' modern history and was attended by Vice-Prime Ministers, over 20 Ministers, and Government Chancellors from

both countries. The combined conference was preceded by bilateral talks between the Prime Ministers and Ministers in charge of their respective portfolios, during which current issues of bilateral cooperation and future prospects for improving ties were addressed.⁷⁷

President Nausda came to Krakow at the invitation of Poland's President Andrzej Duda and paid a visit to the Polish Special Operations Component Command on Sunday morning (POLSOCOM). The Presidents of Lithuania and Poland addressed regional security and new threats to regional stability, including the increased influx of illegal migrants, the unpredictable conduct of the Belarusian government, and Russia's aggressive approach toward neighbouring nations.⁷⁸

Broader Implications: European Defence and NATO

In less than 20 years, the Baltics and Poland went from being part of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block to full members of NATO and the EU. Both Poland and Lithuania perceived their participation in NATO as a way to protect their interests – the organisation that emerged triumphant in the cold war fight and was now, slowly but persistently, adjusting to new challenges.⁷⁹ As such, their security might very well be a litmus for the future viability of both NATO and the EU.⁸⁰ The obstacles to transatlantic cooperation are directly connected to the Alliance's cohesiveness and capacity to agree on a mode of operation and establish a strategy that addresses diverse requirements

75. Belafi, "The Suwalki Gap & Lithuanian – Polish Cooperation."

76. Ibid.

77. Government of the Republic of Lithuania, "Guidelines for future cooperation between Lithuania and Poland set," September 17, 2020, accessed November 6, 2021. Available at: <https://rv.lt/en/news/guidelines-for-future-cooperation-between-lithuania-and-poland-set>.

78. President of the Republic of Lithuania, "Polish President Andrzej Duda will pay an official visit to Lithuania," October 15, 2020, accessed December 8, 2021. Available at: <https://www.lrp.lt/en/media-center/news/polish-president-andrzej-duda-will-pay-an-official-visit-to-lithuania/36896>.

79. Edyta Posel-Czeżcik, "Lithuania, Poland, Transatlantic Dimension," Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review 7 (2001): 1, accessed November 9, 2021. Available at: <http://lfp.r.lt/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/LFPR-7-Posel-Czeżcik.pdf>.

80. Jordi Vasquez, Ozan Beran Akturan, Alex Shura, Yiyang Li, Michal Rajski, Oscar Sarkes, and Alex Castro, "Exposed Outpost Russian Threats to Baltic Security and Transatlantic Responses," European Horizons, accessed October 29, 2021. Available at: <https://voices.uchicago.edu/euchicago/exposed-outpost-russian-threats-to-baltic-security-and-transatlantic-responses/>.

and goals.⁸¹ As a response, NATO needs to act to reassure such countries that their collective defence pledge still applies and show Russia that it would staunchly protect all members, regardless of their location or size.⁸² This necessity derives from Russia's behaviour in the post-Soviet space; the latter has been embroiled in two conflicts in its near neighbours since 2008. Although these conflicts took place in opposite directions (southern for Georgia and western for Ukraine), they all had one goal: to deny NATO, or the Euro-Atlantic in general, a presence in the nations that Russia deems to be inside its exclusive area of influence.⁸³

Before 2014, NATO's Baltic defence system was modest since the expected Russian threat was not substantial. To put things in perspective, the most notable example of escalation between a Baltic state and Russia occurred in 2006 with a large cyber-attack on Estonia. The dispute emerged as a consequence of Estonia's desire to relocate a monument commemorating the Soviet liberation of Estonia during WWII. Frustrated with Tallinn's "ingratitude", Russians replied with diplomatic and hostile techniques such as cyber-targeting government and public buildings and waging an aggressively anti-Estonia and pro-Russia media campaign. None of these efforts succeeded in significantly harming Estonia and its Western orientation.⁸⁴

This situation changed with the Russian an-

nexation of Crimea in 2014. In retrospect, the Readiness Action Plan (RAP)⁸⁵ was an important first step in NATO's approach to adapting to the changing security environment after 2014. The execution of the plan, which formed part of NATO's strategy to further bolster its deterrence and defensive posture, was applauded by NATO members during the Warsaw Summit in 2016. In 2016, the United States and Germany deployed battlegroups to Orszys, Poland, and Rukla, Lithuania, respectively. NATO sees such deployments as a defensive reaction to a Russian strike to close the Suwalki Gap and cut off NATO's access to the Baltic States.⁸⁶

However, these measures are not enough. Due to the terrain and military balance of the area, NATO confronts considerable obstacles in safeguarding its Baltic partners. Russia has a significantly greater military footprint in the area than NATO and can rapidly replenish equipment and soldiers via road routes. On the other hand, NATO would have to fly or ship troops in, which would take far longer. Furthermore, Moscow continues to conduct large-scale military drills predicated on hostile scenarios against neighbouring governments like Poland along NATO's borders. Zapad 2021, the most recent, peaked in September 2021.⁸⁷ Zapad remains an important demonstration of military power aimed at maintaining coercive credibility in the eyes of Washington. Zapad 2021 was also held

81. Vittorio A. Stella, "NATO Security Challenges" in European Union Security and Defence: Policies, Operations and Transatlantic Challenges, ed. Georgios Voskopoulou, (Cham: Springer, 2021), 191-193.

82. Brauss, and Rácz, "Russia's Strategic Interests and Actions in the Baltic Region."

83. Muzyka, and Consulting, "Russian Forces in the Western Military District," 4.

84. Cesare, "Russian Encroachment in the Baltics."

85. The Readiness Action Plan, agreed upon at the Wales Summit in 2014, marked the start of the most significant bolstering of NATO's collective defence since the Cold War's conclusion. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, Allied Leaders welcomed its execution, saying that this comprehensive package of assurance and adaptation measures now serves as the core of the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture. See more NATO, "Readiness Action Plan," accessed November 1, 2021. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_119353.htm.

86. Ben Challis, "Endnotes." Belarus beyond 2020: Implications for Russia and the West, European Leadership Network, 2020, accessed October 28, 2021. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25716.3>.

87. Ulrich Kuhn, "Preventing Escalation in the Baltics: A NATO Playbook," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008, 13, accessed December 2, 2021. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kuhn_Baltics_TNT_final_WEB.pdf.

on Belarussian territory and was based on the scenario of Belarus being destabilised by hostile agents supported and directed by the West.⁸⁸ A report commissioned by the International Centre for Defence and Security in Estonia argued that NATO's position is not sufficiently robust and re-affirmed its overall lack of credibility.⁸⁹

As Hodges suggests, one way Russia could threaten the unity of the Alliance concerns the demonstration of NATO's inability to protect its eastern, frontier state members. This concern derives from the lack of consensus on providing practical assistance to vulnerable partners, especially in the Baltics and in the Balkans.⁹⁰ Therefore, one way to do that is by closing the Suwalki Gap and marginalising the Baltics. Russia, in that scenario, could take

advantage of its interior lines of movements. As such, protecting the corridor is essential for the Alliance. For NATO forces to be an effective deterrent, they should be able to move faster than Russian ones.⁹¹ NATO must take measures with the aim of preventing a strategic pause that could undoubtedly follow an aggressive Russian action in the Baltics.⁹²

Moreover, Russia's ability to escalate tensions with NATO through non-kinetic operations (propaganda, cyberattacks, or criminal operations) cannot be countered militarily. As a result, NATO must increase its efforts to support its members and collaborate closely with the EU to strengthen civilian resilience – that is, societies' ability to deal with and absorb shocks.⁹³

Based on the above, roundtable coordination



NATO's flag

Date: 2019

88. Rumer, "Fix Some of the Biggest Security Challenges Facing Russia."

89. Wesley Clark, Juri Luik, Egon Rams and Richard Shirreff, "Closing NATO's Baltic Gap," International Centre for Defence and Security (May 2016): 15, accessed November 8, 2021. Available at: https://icds.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/7/CDS_Report-Closing_NATO_s_Baltic_Gap.pdf.

90. Ryszard Parañanowicz, "The Military-Geographical significance of the Suwalki Gap," Security and Defence Quarterly 17, no. 4 (2017): 16, accessed October 27, 2021. Available at: <https://securityanddefence.pl/THE-MILITARY-GEOGRAPHICAL-SIGNIFICANCE-OF-THE-SUWALKI-GAP/103175/0,2.html>.

91. Ben Hodges, Securing the Suwalki Corridor Ep. 1 with LTG, CEPA, video, July 11, 2018, accessed November 5, 2021. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhMH-Vy5_R0U.

92. Lasconjarias, "NATO's Response to Russian A2/AD in the Baltic States," 75.

93. Kuhn, Preventing Escalation in the Baltics, 69.

and on-the-ground interoperability among member states are critical for carrying out cooperative actions, emphasising the fast reaction capabilities in the event of an emergency and serving as a credible deterrence to any possible threat.⁹⁴ Further adaptation continues to be important; for example, a comprehensive strategy for deterrence and defence should provide NATO with more choices to react to any threat. Such a reaction should be a proportional action compatible with NATO's international obligations.⁹⁵ However, maintaining NATO's unity is thus a critical task for the alliance, which poses a military and political challenge to NATO in a variety of ways. The Alliance's defensive and integrative coherence and constancy in emphasising the premises of NATO unanimity are the most important basis for preserving security.⁹⁶ Russia's conflict strategy appears to be extensive, encompassing everything from propaganda to potential nuclear use. Failure to identify a sound response that addresses the threat in its entirety may be hazardous.⁹⁷

Within the scope of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU has made significant progress in recent years in enhancing the capabilities and mechanisms required for civilian and military crisis response. On the one side, the EU's peacekeeping operations and civil-military conflict prevention missions in non-European areas contribute to transatlantic security and burden-sharing. However, NATO is solely responsible for collective defence. Given the large overlap in

membership between the two organisations, employing EU mechanisms to strengthen European states' armies and capabilities also strengthens NATO. For instance, Finland and Sweden have a close relationship with NATO, including frequent political conversations and talks on security in the Baltic area, intelligence sharing on hybrid warfare, and training and exercise coordination.⁹⁸

Europeans are worried, but they don't seem to be able to come up with a common, realistic response. Instead, they debate what to do, including calls for "strategic autonomy." Increased European defence capabilities are an absolute necessity to improve deterrence against Russia and shoulder a greater share of the burden for the continent's defence.⁹⁹ Europe's defence needs to cut the umbilical cord from the US. This need derives from several geopolitical changes. Three significant shifts have occurred in recent years, resulting in a new geopolitical setting to which the EU has been forced to react. The first is connected to the Obama administration's announcement of an American pivot to Asia. It refers to the strategic shift in US priorities toward Asia and the Pacific, significantly altering Washington's commitment to European security. After the Trump administration took office, the American viewpoint regarding the contribution to the European defence had further been altered. The new approach by Washington does not wish to continue carrying the burden of protecting the West.¹⁰⁰

94. Ghio, "Assessing Operational Issues Within the Transatlantic Defence Environment."

95. Ibid. see also Brauss, and Rácz, "Russia's Strategic Interests and Actions in the Baltic Region."

96. Parafianowicz, "The Military-Geographical significance of the Suwalki Gap," 16.

97. Ulrich Kuhn, "Preventing Escalation in the Baltics,"

98. Brauss, and Rácz, "Russia's Strategic Interests and Actions in the Baltic Region."

99. Robert Dalsjö, and Michael Johnson, "Autonomy, Cacophony, or Coherence: The Future of European Defence," War on the Rocks, May 7, 2021, accessed December 3, 2021. Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/autonomy-cacophony-or-coherence-the-future-of-european-defence/>.

100. Fotini Bellou, "The Strategic Context of the European Security and Defence Policy" in European Union Security and Defence, 26.

CONCLUSION

Russia's military participation against the Baltic states is currently unlikely, as Moscow tries to avoid a direct military conflict with NATO and the United States in Europe. The region seems to be low on Russia's list of foreign policy priorities for the time being. However, as Russia reshapes its position in practically every corner of the world in preparation for a worldwide confrontation with the US, strate-

gists cannot help but see the Baltic region as a prospective theatre of operations in a conflict between Russia and NATO.¹⁰¹ The latter does not require more eastern presence to counter Russian actions; rather, it requires Russia to believe that European and NATO forces have the capability and that its governments are willing to get there quickly.

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