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Kaliningrad and the Baltic Countries – A Russian Threat to NATO?

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Introduction - The Kaliningrad Oblast Area

In 2008, Russia illegally invaded the Republic of Georgia and still retains troops in South Ossetia. In 2014, Russia invaded the Crimean Peninsula of the Ukraine in order to ensure there was a corridor with Sevastopol, the home of its' Black Sea Fleet.[1]

Given Russia's demonstrated proclivity for unilateral intervention, Baltic states and NATO members Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia[2] remain understandably concerned regarding the recent build-up of Russian military forces along their Eastern borders. Analysts argue that Russian forces could deploy quickly in the Baltic region and could use an artificially created domestic crisis (i.e. disenfranchisement of Russian diaspora in those countries), similar to that used in the Ukraine, to show that NATO is unable to respond effectively, or not at all, to a threat posed by Russian troops and a significant naval Baltic Fleet.

[1] Eight countries in the UN recognize the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol as federal subjects of Russian. When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, Crimea became part of the independent Ukraine.

[2] These states joined NATO in 2004.

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A report from the Rand Corporation, a US think-tank, contends that Russia could overrun the Baltic States if it wanted to in 36 hours.[3] In its damming report, it said NATO's military assets in the Baltic countries were so mismatched with Russia as to be inviting a devastating war, rather than deterring it."[4] Rand said it carried out a series of war games exploring a scenario in which Russia tried to annex the capitals of either Estonia, Latvia or both, similarly how it seized the peninsula of Crimea. The outcome was "bluntly a disaster for NATO, the report found, with every play through of events ending with Russian forces in or at the gates of Tallinn and Riga within 60 hours." Russia outnumbered NATO ground battalions by almost two to one and possessed much heavier weaponry. The report concluded that NATO could not successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members.

A defense analyst has written:

> much has been written about the defense of the Baltic States since 2014; most of it pessimistic about NATO's ability to defend the Baltic States should the need ever arise. Few discussions get as far as actually considering war termination because the prospect of immediate defeat in the Baltic is so great and the challenges of forcefully re-entering the theatre of operations from Western Europe and across Scandinavia are so vast and formidable that thinking past them seems too far ahead.[5]

A 2018 report also from the Rand Corporation again confirmed that NATO would be overwhelmed by superior Russian firepower in the event of a war in Eastern Europe.[6] If war were to break out, the report warns, Russia could quickly overrun the Baltic region and use "brinkmanship to attempt to freeze the conflict." The authors of the report recommend that the growth of Russian military capability must be met with "a more robust posture designed to considerably raise the cost of military adventurism against one or more NATO member states."[7] The report goes on to state that the past 15 years NATO forces have been shifting their focus away from high-intensity, combined-

[3] A. Withmail, "Russia could overrun Baltic states in 36 hours if it wanted to, NATO Warned", *Independent*, 28 October 2016.
[4] Ibid.
[5] L. Milevski, "Prospective strategy for Baltic Defence", *Military Review*, Army University Press, 2017.
[6] S. Boston et al, "Russian has military advantage over NATO in Baltic Sea region – US analysts", *The Baltic Times*, 9 March 2018.
[7] Ibid.

arms combat, focusing instead on counter-insurgency operations in distant locations such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali.

Although NATO has deployed four multinational battalion-size battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland on a rotational basis, it is likely not enough. The 1,100 plus soldiers in the Latvian battle group are led by 450 Canadians; in Estonia it's Britain, in Lithuania it is the Germans and in Poland it is the US.

The Rand report also says NATO has around 32,000 troops in the Baltics; compared with Russia's 78,000.[8] NATO is also outnumbered 757 to 129 in tanks. The conclusion states that:

> Russia has retained a combined-arms force that emphasises mobility and firepower and trains to conduct larger-scale combined-arms operations. This gives Russian forces an important advantage in conflicts between mechanized forces close to the border. Russia can now field modernized weapons, improvements to readiness and experience gained in large-scale exercises and can rely on combat operations based in the Ukraine and Syria. Russia's improved logistical network allows it to mass significant forces within its borders. Russian firepower and home advantage means it could overrun and secure the Baltic region before the US and its allies have a chance to strike back by which time the war could already have been won – and not by NATO.[9]

As a result of such ominous predictions by military analysts, on 2 May 2018, Estonia began the largest military exercise since regaining its independence in 1991.[10] The exercise featured 15,000 service members from ten NATO countries and lasted 12 days. Estonia has already increased its' defense spending to reach the two percent defence spending target, in an effort to counter any Russian threat to the region.

[8] S. Boston, etal, "Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe: Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority," *Rand Corporation Research Report*, 2018.
[9] Ibid.
[10] N. J. Myers, "A Large Military Exercise First Started in the Baltics. Here is Why it Matters," *The National Interest*, 5 May 2018.

The Military Build-Up in the Kaliningrad Oblast by Russia - 2018

Russia has been concerned at the outset with Poland and Lithuania joining NATO in 1999 and 2002 respectively and then the European Union in 2004. As recently reported by C. Woody, Russia appears to be actively developing its military capabilities in the Kaliningrad area.[11] The Russians obtained this land in the aftermath of WW II, and its 86 square miles bordering Poland and Lithuania are of vital strategic value to Russia's interests. The author of the report notes that satellite imagery shows activity around a number of bunkers close to the naval and air bases which hosts the Baltic Fleet and Russia's 11th Army Corps. This 86 square miles of land bordering Poland and Lithuania is of vital strategic value to Russia's interests.

Woody contends that Russian weapons in this area is and will be a serious point of concern for NATO with the "transfer of nuclear-capable Iskander missiles to the Kaliningrad Oblast."[12]

These new bunker sites seem to suggest that they could be potentially servicing nuclear warheads for both the Air Force, Navy, Army, air-defence or for coastal defence forces.

In the same report, Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, the past head of the U.S. Army in Europe also voiced concerns regarding the "Suwałki Gap," which stretches between eastern Kaliningrad and western Belarus. This land connection is the only one between NATO forces and its' three Baltic member states: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.[13]

General Hodges remarked, "the Suwałki Corridor is where the many weaknesses in NATO's and force posture converge.[14] If Russia attempted to establish control over this region, or ever threatened the free movement of NATO personnel and equipment from within the borders of Kaliningrad and Belarus, it could cut the Baltic States off from the rest of the Alliance and hinder reinforcement efforts."

[11] Christopher. Woody, "Russia appears to be building up its' military bases near a weak point in the NATO alliance", *Business Insider*, 10 July 2018.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] LtGen. B. Hodges (retd), et al, Securing the Suwałki Corridor," *Center of European Analysis*, 9 July 2018.

As previously noted, the Kaliningrad Oblast area is a slim Russian corridor strategically sandwiched between two NATO countries, Poland and Lithuania. The Polish seaport of Gdansk is also on the Baltic Sea coast and located very close to Kaliningrad.

The Russian Baltic Fleet, under the direction of Vice Admiral Aleksandr Nosatov, is headquartered in Kaliningrad but its' primary naval base is located at Baltiysk. It is the oldest Russian Navy formation, established by Tsar Peter the Great in 1703. The fleet operations consist of naval and amphibious equipment of approximately 55 warships and several submarines.[15]

In 2014, the Fleet conducted tactical exercises for its' coastal forces, with more than 1000 motorized infantry soldiers and marines from its fleet and more than 250 military and special equipment units participating in the exercise.[16]

On 11 January 2018, the Russian Ministry of Defence announced the remobilization of the 689th fighter aircraft regiment in Kaliningrad.[17] The unit will be equipped with modern SU-35 and upgraded SU-27 fighter jets. The 689th regiment consists of three squadrons of about 36 aircraft. February 2018 marks the 10-year anniversary of the SU-35 maiden flight.[18]

This also comes at a time when the region is being equipped now with the Iskander-M complex (SS-26 STONE), which are designed to strike land targets.[19] These missiles increase Russia's capacity to target neighbouring NATO members and paralyse military operations on NATO's Eastern Flank. There are two versions of the missile; Iskander-M with a range of 500K and Iskander-K which can also be used to launch land-attack cruise missiles (SS-N-27 Sizzler), with a range of 2500K. This new military development means that this missile coverage would include the NATO Baltic states, as well as the Danish island of Bornholm.

[15] www.businessinsider.com, 10 July 2018.
[16] Ibid.
[17] A.M. Dyner, "PISM Spotlight: Russia Strengthens Military Presence in Kaliningrad," *PISM*. Poland, 15 January, 2018.
[18] Ibid.
[19] www.businessinsider.

The remobilization of the Russian Air Force 689th regiment and the addition of the Iskander missile systems would indicate a change in the balance of power in the Baltic arena. European NATO countries do not have a comparable type of missile system deployed in this specific area. In addition, the fighter aircraft will certainly be a challenge to the aviation wings of the various NATO countries in their mission over the territory of the Baltic countries.[20]

Conclusion

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s heralded a period of Western unilateralism but also put an end to previous levels of military investment.[21] Many western politicians believed that once the perceived threat from Soviet forces had disappeared, the era of great-power rivalry had come to an end.[22] Western allies now allocated defence funds to other program areas instead.

After a prolonged lull of about twenty years, Russia's military interventions into Georgia, the eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, has reminded Europe and NATO that it cannot take its' security for granted.[23]

Based on the recent incursions by Russia into the above territories, the NATO members in the Baltic are concerned about the capability of its other members to confront any possible Russian military attack into their respective areas. Based on recent developments, it is reasonable to address some of their concerns:

- Based on President Trump's recent comments concerning the newest NATO member Moldavia, would he invoke Article 5 of the NATO Treaty to assist the Baltic States if Russia invaded these countries?
- How effective would NATO's new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force be in responding to a major Russian incursion in the Baltic Region?

[20] Ibid.
[21] J. Stohs, "Into the Abyss? European Naval Power in the Post-Cold War Era," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 3 (Summer 2018): p. 13.
[22] C. Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment", Foreign Affairs 70, no. 1 (1990-91): pp. 22-23.
[23] Dyner, "PISM Spotlight," p. 33.

- The NATO battle groups in the Baltic States are led by the US in Poland, Britain in Estonia, Germany in Lithuania and Canada in Latvia, headed by 450 troops. One of the Canadian officers in the 1,100 Latvian Brigade noted that because of the mix of different nationalities, they do not train with them very often.[24] These include troops from Spain, Italy, Poland, Slovenia and Albania that make up the remainder of the battle group.

It, therefore, could be argued that Russian military units are much more homogeneous in carrying out military operations in the region, than their NATO counterparts consisting of a number of nationalities. In other words, how effective is the integration of various NATO countries operating together (i.e. lines of communication and command structures)?

- There are only a few European NATO partners who have achieved the 2 percent of GDP for defence spending. For example, German defence spending amounts to only about 1.2 percent. In a report in February 2018 on the Bundeswehr's equipment evaluation, it noted that half the country's Leopard tanks, 12 out of 50 Tiger helicopters and only 39 out of 128 Typhoon fighter aircraft were fit for action. At the end of 2017, none of the country's six submarines were at sea;[25]
- Roughly three-quarters of the US defence budget is directed towards regions other than Europe;[26]
- Some critics now argue that NATO's military capacity is actually improving, but the major problem is the political decision-making capacity of NATO members is deteriorating (i.e. response to Russia's incursion in the Crimean Peninsula);[27]
- NATO must recognize the importance of US command, control and intelligence capabilities;[28]

From the perspective of the three Baltic countries in NATO, it is clear there is a significant build up of military assets in the Russian Kaliningrad Oblast in 2018. Based on the geographical location of the Russian air and naval bases which are located just south of Lithuania and north of Poland, this increase in military strength should cause

[24] J. Ling, "Italian, Canadian troops work to thwart Moscow's efforts to extend borders in Latvia," *Globe and Mail*, 12 June 2018, p. A-10.
[25] "Outgunned," *The Economist*, 28 July 2018, p. 38.
[26] C. Bildt, "Did Helsinki herald the end of NATO?" *Globe and Mail*, 21 July 2018, p. A-10.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

concern for NATO, based on the recent incursions of Russia in Europe in the past decade. These strategic issues could be summarized as follows:

- The headquarters of the Baltic Fleet is located in Kaliningrad; with at least 55 warships and submarines available for naval and amphibious operations;
- Three squadrons of new fighter jets are now based in Kaliningrad;
- Iskander missiles have now been installed in Kaliningrad with the ability to strike any land targets in the three NATO Baltic countries;
- On the basis of recent satellite images, there is now a bunker array in the Kaliningrad Oblast, suggesting the possibility of the storing of potential nuclear weapons for the Russian Air Force and Navy;
- On the basis of the 2018 Rand report, Russian military forces would likely overrun the four NATO battle-groups located in the three Baltic countries and Poland in a very short period of time;

While there is growing evidence that Russian forces are increasing their military capacities in the region, the intentions of Russian leadership; are less clear. These may be driven by the following considerations:

- To what degree does current Russian leadership consider the Baltics part of its traditional geo-strategic "near-abroad"? Is it to the same degree as the Ukraine and Crimea?
- If the Baltic region is considered part of Russia's traditional geo-strategic near-abroad, what would be the main drivers in the strategic calculus of Russian leadership to attack NATO members to re-acquire the region, with the corresponding strategic fallout that would occur? They did not face the same strategic risk in the Crimea or Eastern Ukraine, as Ukraine was not and is not a NATO member.
- How concerned is Russia with respect to NATO's expansion in the Baltic region? Does current Russian leadership consider NATO moves into the region as seriously changing the balance of power in the region, to the degree it is prepared to undertake a pre-emptive attack on NATO members to eliminate the threat?
- Would Russia engage in any pre-emptive measure prior to an actual attack that would alert NATO forces to a possible intervention by conventional Russian forces (media/communication/information campaign regarding Russian diaspora

in the countries concerned, cyber attacks, garnering diplomatic support prior to an attack)?

- Are the ties between the US and Turkey deteriorating, prompting a critical rift in the NATO alliance?

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