Section: Analysis

Baltic challenges for NATO’S VJTF

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The three Baltic states form NATO’s weak underbelly. All three are tiny, geographically isolated, and border on Russia. They are militarily exposed, and two of them have significant Russian minorities that can be exploited to justify Russian intervention. War games conducted by the US this fall have concluded that the US, and hence NATO, could not defend the Baltic states against a Russian invasion. We must ask therefore: is Putin willing to exploit this vulnerability, and, if so, can NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) make any difference? This short study examines this question from the perspective of the signals the Kremlin has sent so far, divided into intent, capability, and possible specific motives.

Kremlin intent

Since 2000 the Putin regime has sent four clear signals to anyone willing to see (which most of the Atlantic community “west of Warsaw” was not). First, it is outraged over the way the West has treated Russia since the collapse of the USSR, and it considers NATO as its enemy. Second, it is willing to use brute force, both domestically and abroad (Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014 on). Third, it has a strong centralized leadership under Putin, capable of making sudden dramatic moves. Fourth, despite his great tactical cunning (successful in part due to Western leaders’ inexperience with power politics) Putin is a strategic disaster, since he is unable to modernize the Russian economy.

These signals have been clearly stated in Putin’s public pronouncements (beginning with his 2007 speech at Wehrkunde); in Russian official documents (Security Strategy, Arctic Strategy, Defense Doctrine and more); in the Russian military buildup both nuclear and conventional; in the Russian military exercises and their scenarios (simulated NATO attack, simulated nuclear strike on Warsaw); in Russian military behavior (violations, flying without transponders, simulated nuclear strikes); and in their behavior invading Georgia and Ukraine.

Putin has delivered a very clear message. But the Atlantic community, west of Warsaw, was asleep. We mirror-imaged Russia, and when that was not possible we ignored it. We woke up only after Putin invaded Ukraine in 2014. We are now paying the price.

Kremlin capability

The Kremlin is developing a military capability to dominate Europe in three areas. First, it has consistently prioritized its Strategic Nuclear forces even in the dark decade of the 1990’s. The rationale was logical. Nuclear weapons represented one of the few factors that gave Russia great-power status in that dismal decade, and, the Russians argued, these forces were the final guarantee to prevent the West from slicing up the Russian Federation as it had sliced up the Warsaw Pact and the USSR. The net effect today, however, is that Russia has a rough nuclear parity with the US and the capacity to deter the US if needed.
Second, the Kremlin began modernizing its European nuclear forces as of the late 1990’s and began thinking about and exercising the use of nuclear force in Europe. This action was in contrast with NATO which stopped developing nuclear strategy in Europe and retained only a few hundred ageing B-61 gravity bombs. Thinking about nuclear options in Europe even became taboo. At the same time the US nuclear deterrent was decoupled from Europe. Again, the Russian rationale was logical. They claimed their conventional forces were so much weaker than those of the US (which they were) that the only way Russia could manage a conventional war in Europe was by compensating with tactical nuclear forces, which was the scenario they exercised in Zapad 2 in 2009. However, the net effect today is that Russia has the capacity to exert nuclear coercion in Europe and, if needed, to use nuclear force in Europe. For anyone who remembers the fear that accompanied any rise in nuclear alert levels during the Cold War, and the extraordinary efforts needed in terms of strategy, preparations and exercises, it is clear that NATO today is totally unprepared to deal with nuclear coercion. This is NATO’s greatest vulnerability, evident to anyone with the eyes to see, but which has been recognized only in the last few months.

Third, the Kremlin began a systematic ten-year modernization of its conventional forces in 2010. The goals were ambitious: 105 brigades with 24-hour readiness and 75% modern equipment. Nobody believed they could be fulfilled, and with the current Russian economic woes this achievement is even less likely. However, if Russia meets even half of these goals, it will have a force that can defeat any opponent along its European borders. To be sure, this military might will by no means match Soviet levels, but already today it gives Russia the ability to occupy adjacent territory before NATO can react and to defeat whatever NATO tries to throw at it initially. The U.S. Air Force is the only NATO component with sufficient speed and firepower to challenge Russia’s assets, but as RAND studies indicate, the Russian S-3/400 air defense systems, combined with a lack of USAF long-range precision stand-off missiles, mean that the cost is prohibitive.

To these considerations must be added Baltic vulnerability. First, the three Baltic states are essentially an island next to Russia. If Russia cuts off the narrow land border between Poland and Lithuania, the entrance to the Baltic Sea between Poland and Sweden, and Baltic airspace, they will be cut off from NATO support. Second, the Baltic states are tiny next to their giant neighbor. According to the IISS Military Balance 2015, standing ground forces in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania at best number 5,300, 1,250, and 7,500 men respectively. Even reinforced with one standing NATO brigade in each country these armies would be minute compared to the forces that Russia could move against them. Third, after over a decade of COIN NATO forces lack equipment, training and logistics for high-intensity conventional combat in Europe. The USAF could tip the scales, but as noted, the costs would be prohibitive, and even then the outcome uncertain. Fourth, 25% of Estonia’s population and 27% of Latvia’s are of Russian origin. While most of these ethnic Russians are happy to live in independent Baltic states, their presence offers Putin every opportunity to engineer a situation for a Russian Peace Keeping operation to rescue abused Russians.

Here one must add a crucial note. In the Atlantic community so-called ‘hybrid warfare’ has become the flavor of the day. However, that concept is also ‘so yesterday’. Putin has pulled that trick out of his hat and bamboozled a generation of naïve western politicians. But he is unlikely to try it again, precisely because it has been done, and now we are focusing on it. Second, the entire Russian conventional military buildup, doctrine and exercises focus on
high-intensity kinetic battlefield operations. While a hybrid-style coup attempt is not impossible, we must also expect and prepare for a far heavier conventional military threat. Indeed, as noted in the next section, there could be good reasons why Russia would want to draw us into precisely that sort of a spectacular war.

On the debit side, Russian forces are tied down in Ukraine, Russia has clear manpower problems, and the conventional modernization program is only halfway completed and delayed. Yet even then, NATO today probably could not stop Russia should it decide to occupy Latvia and/or Estonia, particularly if Russia employed nuclear coercion to paralyze NATO’s political will and cohesion.

**Kremlin motives**

If indeed the Baltic states are currently vulnerable to occupation, the question becomes whether Putin could be so crazy as to actually engage in a shooting war directly with NATO and hence the United States. Two basic considerations argue against this possibility. First, such actions would amount to a de facto declaration of war with the West and the United States and would decisively change the political climate between Russia and the Atlantic Community. Second, the outcome of such a gambit would be very hard to foresee. As Putin has learned in Ukraine, even what might appear a relatively clear-cut operation ends up getting bogged down and generating a number of unexpected problems. The likelihood of such unforeseen consequences, including Russian disasters, would multiply enormously in any attempt to invade the Baltic states.

On the other hand, six specific motives could prompt such an adventure, of which many could coincide. First is domestic unrest. If the Putin regime faced serious domestic tensions, an external military adventure could be seen as necessary in order to distract the Russian population, mobilize nationalism, and allow increased domestic repression. Here it is worth keeping in mind, first, that Russia will probably face increasing domestic dissatisfaction in coming years as the economy suffers. Second, each time Putin has used military force abroad, in Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014 and Syria 2015, his popularity ratings inside Russia have soared.

A second motive is grand policy. If Putin wishes to break NATO, then occupying one or more of the Baltic states is the way to do it. A successful invasion would deal a death blow to Article 5, and if this were accompanied by European nuclear coercion that paralyzed NATO’s ability to take any decisions, he would have broken NATO. The problem with this approach is that in all likelihood a second NATO would emerge from the ashes, smaller but far more cohesive and determined, and — as long it still included the United States — offering a far more serious and capable counterweight to Putin’s Russia.

Third is another grand policy objective: to teach Europe fear. For Russia, European leaders and their societies have been irritatingly childish and ignorant of realities. First and foremost among which is that one must respect brute force. A Russian occupation of one or more Baltic states, coupled with hard nuclear coercion, possibly accompanied by the actual detonation of a nuclear warhead, say over the Baltic Sea or over an uninhabited forested area, would wake European leaders up to realities and teach European leaders to show greater respect for Russia and Russian policies.
A fourth motive is linked to the Russian General Staff and security establishment. For them, Baltic independence, EU membership, and, above all, NATO membership constitute a knife at Russia’s throat and threaten the heart of Russia. We can assume that these officers and officials are constantly on Putin’s back, pressing him to remove this existential weakness. This is hardly a decisive argument, but in a situation where Putin is pressed and perhaps accused of being soft by his power elite, it could tip the scales in favor of invasion.

A fifth driver, underlying all of the above, is emotional. This is the feeling that Russia has the right to redress the wrongs inflicted on it by a ruthless and deceitful West since the collapse of the USSR. These feelings have been expressed by Putin, his power elite, the nebulous ideological circles beneath the Kremlin, and, through opinion polls, by much of Russian society. Retaking lost territory, especially if it also means ousting NATO from the same territory, is thus a way to redress the injustice. This is hardly a leading motive, but it underpins much of Russian hostility towards the West.

Finally, but by no means least, is the possibility of a completely inadvertent crisis, either in the Baltic region itself or elsewhere but transferred to the Baltic through a lateral escalation. This is, of course, what happened in Ukraine, when the unexpected tenacity of the Maidan opposition ousted Yanukovych, led Ukrainians to shift from Russia to the EU, and totally overturned Putin’s policies in an area of vital importance to Russia. Putin was thus compelled to react forcefully or look like a milk pudding, quite probably losing power shortly thereafter. The recent Turkish downing of the Russian Su-24 presents a similar threat, but in this case through lateral escalation, should Putin see an opportunity to punish NATO in the Baltic area.

**Conclusion**

NATO’s VJTF is not likely to have any great impact should Russia decide to invade one or more of the Baltic states. First, it would arrive too late or could not arrive at all. Second, even if it is in place, it is too small to stop a determined Russian invasion. And if Putin were to take such a drastic step, we can be sure his measures will be determined. Third, it adds no deterrent value as long as NATO lacks a credible nuclear deterrent and the ability to manage nuclear coercion.

This does not mean that NATO is helpless. But if it is to provide a credible deterrent and defense for the Baltic states, and Europe as a whole, it will need to build up the credible nuclear and conventional capabilities that are completely lacking at present. Such actions in turn will fuel the Kremlin’s concerns about the West and could lead to tenser relations between Russia and the West. But if we do not do take these steps, we risk being fatally vulnerable. Regarding Putin’s Russia, we have reached a point where we are damned if we do and damned if we don’t.

At present the Baltic states are almost certainly lost should Putin decide to occupy one or more. The real question is first, whether he and his entourage are willing to hazard the considerable uncertainties such a move entails, including the risk of massive mistakes and failures. Second, whether he believes the benefits of such a tectonic shift of the European and Atlantic security landscape would outweigh the costs. And here too the uncertainties
are enormous. Most likely such a move would thus come only \textit{in extremis}. In the coming years we can only hope that the Putin regime does not believe it has reached such a point.

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