



The Canadian Defence Policy Review

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February 17, 2017

A modest NATO line in Eastern Europe? Defending the Baltics

NATO is now establishing what the *Globe and Mail* called “a modest NATO force to draw a line in Eastern Europe”¹ and what NATO itself calls its “biggest reinforcement of collective defence since the end of the Cold War.”² Either way, it hasn’t erased doubts about the willingness, or wisdom, of the alliance’s threat to take direct military action against Russia and thereby raise the spectre of nuclear weapons use. Indeed, these eminently rational doubts could sensibly be elevated to the level of firm policy – not only because any military confrontation in serious danger of descending to nuclear use ought never to be regarded an option, but also because redressing Baltic vulnerability to Russian interference has more to do with strong governance than heightened military firepower.

In his farewell address, President Barak Obama spoke about challenges to democracy – including growing inequality, demographic shifts, terrorism – and warned that how democracy is practised impacts not only politics and the economy, but also America’s ability to protect its homeland. In other words, the security foundation of any state is good governance. Military forces are obviously directly relevant to national security, but it is respected, fair, and inclusive democratic institutions and processes that are the bedrock on which a durably secure national home is built.

It’s a reality that applies to the Baltics, but it is rarely reflected in the go-to responses of states when they are feeling vulnerable. After decades of failed military adventures, high-profile military mobilizations remain the default response to vulnerability, and part of the reason can surely be found in another January Presidential farewell address, this one by Dwight Eisenhower in 1961. In it the former General of course issued his famous warning of the “unwarranted influence” – “economic, political, even spiritual” – of the military-industrial complex. Five and a half decades later, it is the ongoing failure to heed both of those warnings – that the links between governance and security are key, and that the overweening influence of the military distorts behaviour – that reflexively drives states toward sabre rattling in response to security challenges.

The Russian military threat and NATO response

The point is obviously not that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and its allies should be sanguine about threats of Russian interference. The threat is by all accounts real. The US Council on Foreign Relations conducted a survey last November of foreign policy experts inside and outside of government who identified the threat of a military confrontation between NATO and Russia over Eastern Europe as one of only a few “top tier” threats for 2017. The experts actually judged the likelihood of a direct east-west military clash to be “moderate,” but understandably said the impact would be “high” if it happened. A severe crisis involving North Korea was seen to be in the same category. Increased violence in Afghanistan, another top tier threat, was judged to be the reverse – highly likely but of only moderate impact on international peace and stability.³

On the military threat to the Baltics, a US Rand Corporation study concluded that, without further NATO counter measures, the Russians could quickly (within 60 hours) reach the outskirts of the three Baltic capitals and leave NATO with some highly unpalatable options. In such an event, NATO could mobilize for a subsequent counter-attack that would inevitably pull it into a drawn-out war with the danger of going nuclear; it could launch an immediate nuclear response, with no guarantees about the outcome; or it could acquiesce and settle in for a fully resurrected and long-term Cold War with Russia. The study argued that with the right counter measures NATO could dissuade Russia from attacking in the first place. Early deployment of six or seven brigades (roughly 25,000 to 35,000 troops) to the Baltics, backed up with NATO's superior air and naval power, would demonstrate to Russia that it would not gain critical advantage from a military blitz.⁴

While NATO has put some 300,000 NATO troops on alert,⁵ its deployments to the Baltics are rather more modest than the Rand experts advised. NATO's Response Force has been expanded from 13,000 to 40,000 troops, including a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (the "Spearhead Force") of some 20,000 troops (of which 5,000 were designated to be ground forces). These "spearhead" forces are based in their home countries but available for quick deployment.⁶ NATO also agreed to deploy land forces (battalions of about 1,000 soldiers each) to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.⁷ Canada agreed to lead the force in Latvia, contributing about 450 troops which will deploy in the spring of 2017. There are other elements to NATO's Operation Reassurance, and more than 200 Canadian troops are deployed in Poland to conduct exercises and improve interoperability with states in the region (American deployments to Europe include some 3,000 troops to Poland and 300 to Norway in January 2017⁸). A succession of Canadian frigates is serving with NATO's Standing Maritime Group 2 in the Mediterranean, participating in exercises and operational visits – HMCS St. John's being the most recent ship to participate, carrying a crew of about 240, including an Enhanced Naval Boarding Party and a CH-124 Sea King helicopter.⁹ Earlier Canadian involvements have included fighter aircraft in the Baltic Air Policing mission.

NATO's 2016 Warsaw Summit described its various actions as an "unambiguous demonstration" of its "solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression."¹⁰ With the Russian threat taken as obvious, the need to beef up NATO military operations along Russia's western boundaries is taken as equally obvious and appropriate. The *Globe and Mail* probably reflects the accepted wisdom when it concludes that "a modest NATO force to draw a line in Eastern Europe makes sense" and that Canada's readiness to help draw that line is "admirable" and is intended not to start a war but to avoid it.¹¹

But it is worth asking why a NATO military build-up along Russia's western frontier is prudent, while a Russian build-up along NATO's eastern frontier is provocative. It has once again become hard to affirm the value of trying to see ourselves as others see us when the other is Russia. But acknowledging that a Russian point of view can be both rational and very different from ours is not to acquiesce to Russian violations of international law with regard to the Ukraine, or to buy into a Trumpian take on the charms of Vladimir Putin. There has in fact been a striking, willful, failure to recognize the extent to which what the noted American strategic analyst John Mearsheimer has called the "unrelenting" efforts by the European Union and NATO to "make Ukraine and Georgia part of the West" would be taken as threatening by Russian and invite a hostile response.¹² The sustained effort to bring Ukraine and Georgia into the western orb made military escalations on both

sides of the NATO/Russia border largely predictable. Both sides justify their actions as essential to security, but the very same actions undermine the security of both sides by preparing to do the one thing they must never do, namely, launch direct armed combat between NATO and Russia. Such combat would deliver devastation to both sides, possibly including nuclear attacks, with consequences that would far outweigh any realistic security outcome or foreign policy objective pursued.

NATO's preparations for military confrontation with Russia in response to the latter's violations of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and other provocations, also ignores the rather prominent lesson available from an abundance of military combat in the post-Cold War era more broadly – namely, its near universal failure to produce positive, or even predictable, outcomes. In other words, post-Cold War armed conflicts, whether by individual states against political dissidents or by powerful coalitions of the willing bent on regime change, demonstrate the repeated failure of vastly superior military forces to successfully impose their will over the objections of radically weaker forces. The examples are familiar. The 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the interventions in Libya and Yemen all teach the same lesson, as do civil wars in Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and in a host of other locations – post-Cold War wars simply do not come close to producing political and social outcomes that justify their human and material costs. There is arguably one exception, the multilateral 1991 “Desert Storm” operation to reverse Iraqi aggression against Kuwait. It clearly achieved its objectives inasmuch as Kuwait was restored to its pre-war rulers, but there were enough extraordinary consequences to call even that “victory” into question – most notably, the post-Desert Storm Shia rebellion which led to Saddam Hussein's merciless counter attack that killed many tens of thousands of civilians, and the sanctions which produced a full decade of Iraqi victims numbering in the hundreds of thousands, most of them children.

The costs of post-Cold War military adventures have been relentlessly disastrous. In the Middle East, American notions of regime change in the name of spreading democracy certainly destroyed some scandalously undemocratic regimes, but, as Stephen Walt writes, they also “destroyed existing political institutions throughout the region and created ungoverned spaces in which violent extremists like Al Qaeda or the Islamic State could flourish.”¹³ And the relevance of all that for security efforts in the Baltics is that war as a deliberate policy tool for producing predetermined political outcomes isn't working. That in turn must at least call into question the notion that threats to go to war in defence of the Baltics should still be embraced as the pre-eminent response to their vulnerability. It's a notion that is in fact widely called into question and drives skepticism about NATO coming to the military defence of the Baltics – a particularly crass version of it coming from Newt Gingrich: “Estonia is in the suburbs of St. Petersburg,” he said, and “I'm not sure I would risk a nuclear war over some place which is the suburbs of St. Petersburg. I think we have to think about what does this stuff means.”¹⁴

A nuclearized defence inevitably becomes self-deterring. Would it be rational for continental Europe to risk military escalation up to a possible nuclear attack for the sake of defending Estonia? It's not that Estonia is unworthy of protection; it is rather that the risk of devastating destruction does not constitute protection. Even without the dangers of escalation to nuclear exchanges, and even assuming the briefest of conventional wars, full-on attacks employing state-of-the-art conventional arms against targets in contemporary Europe and Russia would leave in their wake levels of

destruction and devastation that no outcome could justify. So, why would NATO make good on such a threat, or, more importantly, what is the point of issuing such a threat in the first place?

Of course, proponents of using the threat of war as a routine policy tool counter that the whole point of NATO's muscular military response to Russian behaviour is to prevent war, not to fight one. The objective is certainly that, but threatening war to prevent it cannot escape the reality that threats are only as good as the willingness to carry them out.

Even the Baltic defence ministers, meant to be the beneficiaries of NATO's military bravado, do not seem fully convinced by it. Estonia is practical enough to recognize that NATO will prove to be a reluctant military guardian of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, so it seeks to add another layer of defence and deterrence on its own – one that doesn't depend on NATO. Instead of relying exclusively on a small national military force to confront an invader head-on just long enough for it to be joined by a much larger NATO force, Estonia has set about mobilizing a citizen defence force. The Estonian Defense League (EDF), with its more than 25,000 volunteers in a country of just 1.3 million people and a standing army of 6,000,¹⁵ operates under the authority of the Defence Ministry and is designed "to increase the readiness of the people to defend Estonia's independence and constitutional order."¹⁶ Estonians point to resistance forces in Middle East conflicts as evidence of the effectiveness of decentralized insurgent movements against much more powerful occupiers. Lithuania too has issued instructions for civilian defence actions against an invader.¹⁷ The Swiss, of course, made civilian defence a cornerstone of their Cold War strategy for staying neutral. That's been the story of countless decentralized resistance movements for decades, including the partisan resistance movements in World War II. It is the deterrence of promising an aggressor that it will be denied the fruits of invasion and can expect to be dragged into a quagmire of endless actions against elusive local guerilla units bent on sabotaging the foreign occupying forces and promising any potential attacker that it could not expect the local population to acquiesce to the aggressor's will and rule.

Counter-productive military responses

NATO's expansionist and threatening posture also serves to produce a counter threat. NATO's post-Cold War penchant for expanding its sphere of operations to Russia's frontier, and then overtly reinforcing that threatening posture when Russia responds with its own provocations, has played into Vladimir Putin's narrative of the bold defender of a besieged Russia. As Stephen Walt puts it,¹⁸ "expanding NATO poisoned the once-cordial relationship with Russia and eventually provoked a harsh Russian backlash in Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere." The West's "biggest miscalculation...was the willingness of the Bush administration to consider Ukraine for NATO membership and the later backing by the Obama administration of EU efforts to offer Ukraine an association agreement."¹⁹

Similarly counterproductive is ballistic missile defence (BMD), in its US and European manifestations. A still unproven technology which Russia is politically loath to ignore, even though that would be the sensible response, adds nothing to North American or European security but detracts decisively from any inclinations toward European security mutuality. If there is indeed a consensus that the US and NATO should spend billions on a flawed and faltering technology in order to counteract the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, there is a simple way of at least ensuring that it not drive further wedges into east-west relations – and that is to mount it jointly with Russia and China. The superior

option would be for NATO/Russian/Chinese/Japanese cooperation in seeking to limit or ban strategic and intermediate-range missile defence while also working jointly to solve the DPRK challenge – which is ultimately not a defence challenge but a non-proliferation and disarmament challenge.

And, perhaps most counter-productive of all in the context of growing suspicion and military escalation, NATO's Warsaw summit saw fit reaffirm its decision to suspend all practical civilian and military cooperation between NATO and Russia.²⁰ At least, in 2016 there were, for the first time since 2014, talks on European security issues with Russia through the NATO-Russia Council.²¹

Threat is not primarily military

Most of all, NATO's military show of force doesn't meet the real threat. The Russian military threat is not one of overt attack. That Rand study suggested the Russians could gain an irreversible foothold in the Baltics in mere days, but to the extent that Russian irredentism is at play, direct military attack has not been and is not now likely to be the tactic of choice. In Georgia in 2008, Russia did intervene, but a European fact-finding mission²² confirmed that Russia acted in response to the Georgian government's attack on the pro-Russian separatist enclave of South Ossetia and in the context of an extended Georgian political conflict. Russia was able to launch a limited military foray into Georgia, without incurring major political costs, because of the ongoing unresolved Georgian conflict and the total lack of any national consensus over the preferred fate of the contested regions. The Ukraine, in a state of advanced dysfunction with elements of the local population largely sympathetic to Russia, lost the Crimea without a shot being fired. In Eastern Ukraine, where many shots have been fired, the threat also has not been overt Russian attack. It was not the absence of credible military defence, but the absence of elementary good governance that was the Achilles heel in Georgia and is in Ukraine. Similarly, it is the quality of governance, not the presence of NATO forces, that is most likely to determine the future of the Baltics.

Weak governance leaves a society particularly vulnerable to disinformation and political destabilization campaigns, and the Budapest-based Political Capital research group, which studies Russia's engagement with extremist groups, says Russia continues to use Soviet era tactics of supporting fringe political groups with disinformation activities that help to shape events in foreign countries.²³ The Finnish Institute of International Affairs has also made the point that a prominent Russian strategy is to foster and encourage fringe political groups and organizations, whatever their political ideology or objectives might be, as a means of destabilizing or disorienting the European Union.²⁴ In the Nordic countries as well, the Russians, not necessarily the Russian government, have established links to extreme right-wing groups.²⁵ Such psychological operations or psychological warfare are not new concepts, but the means by which these can be pursued have certainly proliferated. The New York Times reports that Russia has been "deploying Orthodox priests, Russian-funded news media outlets like RT, spies and computer hackers to ride and help create the wave of populist anger now battering the foundations of the post-1945 European order."²⁶

In the Baltics, the strategy will be the same. The Baltics' historic links to Russia and their prominent Russian-speaking minorities make them attractive targets for an irredentist Russia. In Estonia, for example, which retains democratic institutions but shows signs of Russia-linked stress, the recent defeat of the coalition government has led to the formation of a new coalition with the Center Party, with strong support from Estonia's Russian-speaking population, a prominent part of the coalition.²⁷

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics recognizes that the real threat to his country's security is disinformation campaigns that aim to create political discord. These, he says, are "much higher on [Latvia's] security agenda" than any Russian weapons system. He is most wary of "propaganda warfare against our values."²⁸ And Latvia's State Secretary of Defense Janis Garisons says "the pro-Russian propaganda onslaught continues to be 'very dangerous' as an effort to undermine the will of the people to support their government. Without strategies in place to combat it, he said, all the upgrades in military readiness are worthless. 'When your society or your people lose will or trust in their country, in willingness to protect values,' he explained, you can be beaten 'without a battle.'"²⁹

The good governance response

Any hints of internal political dysfunction will be exploited – and the region's relative political and social stability remains its essential security foundation. The threat to the Baltics is political instability; its most reliable defence is good governance and economic development. NATO's overweening focus on military preparedness misses the central source of vulnerability to military interference. Vulnerability to military attack and interference owes much more to political weakness than to military weakness or to the lack of formidable friends. In other words, preserving national sovereignty and defending against foreign predators – in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland – depend much more on the quality of their governance than on military preparedness and defence. Politically stable states, with national institutions that enjoy the legitimacy that comes from broad public trust and support, are largely immune to military attacks and intervention, regardless of their size or military strength or lack of it. Or, to go back to President Obama's farewell, how well they meet the challenges of their democracies will determine how well they will be able to protect their homelands.

The great folly in the prevailing Euro-Atlantic security discourse³⁰ is the assumption that without demonstrations and threats of NATO military action the Baltics are defenceless. The opposite is true. The Baltic States have ready access to the most effective and proven defence against military invasion – namely, strong and respected governance and a buoyant national consensus in support of the prevailing order.³¹ To the extent that Russia wants to claim a mission to protect Russian-speakers in the Baltics, it benefits from perceptions of a sharp Russia/Baltics divide – a divide promoted by NATO through its priority attention to military confrontation. The front line of Baltic security is constructive governance that keeps on winning the support of all segments of their populations, and the promotion of a region at peace with its neighbors. It is the legitimacy of inclusive internal political processes in the Baltics, not military threats that no sane leadership would ever carry out, that will ultimately protect them from the Russian "help" they don't want.

Notes

¹ “Canada’s Christmas present to Moscow: A map,” *Globe and Mail* editorial, 22 December 2016. www.theglobeandmail.com

² Gabriel Samuels, “NATO puts 300,000 ground troops on ‘high alert’ as tensions with Russia mount,” *The Independent Online*, 07 November 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk>.

³ “Preventive Priorities Survey 2017,” Council on Foreign Relations, December 2016. <http://www.cfr.org/conflict-assessment/preventive-priorities-survey-2017/p38562>

⁴ David A Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics,” Rand Corporation, 2016. www.rand.org.

⁵ Gabriel Samuels, “NATO puts 300,000 ground troops on ‘high alert’ as tensions with Russia mount,” *The Independent Online*, 07 November 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk>.

⁶ “NATO’s Readiness Action Plan,” NATO Fact Sheet, July 2016. <http://www.nato.int>

⁷ “NATO’s Readiness Action Plan,” NATO Fact Sheet, July 2016. <http://www.nato.int>

⁸ “More US Marines deployed near Russian borders,” *The Washington Times*, 18 January 2017. [WashingtonTimes.com](http://www.washingtontimes.com)

⁹ Operation Reassurance, Department of National Defence, last updated on 12 January 2017. <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad/nato-ee.page>

¹⁰ NATO’s Warsaw Summit Communiqué, Warsaw, 8-9 July 2016. <http://www.nato.int>

¹¹ “Canada’s Christmas present to Moscow: A map,” *Globe and Mail* editorial, 22 December 2016. www.theglobeandmail.com

¹² Derek Davison, “Bacevich and Mearsheimer on Obama’s Legacy,” 17 January 2017. <http://lobelog.com>.

¹³ Stephen M. Walt, “The World Can Have Peace and Prosperity, If It Wants,” *ForeignPolicy.Com*, 23 December 2016. <http://foreignpolicy.com>.

¹⁴ Reena Flores, “Newt Gingrich: NATO countries ‘ought to worry’ about U.S. commitment,” *CBS News*. 21 July 2016. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/newt-gingrich-trump-would-reconsider-his-obligation-to-nato/>

¹⁵ Andrew E. Kramer, “Spooked by Russia, Tiny Estonia Trains a Nation of Insurgents,” *New York Times*, 31 October 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com>.

¹⁶ Gateway to Estonia, National Defence. <http://www.eesti.ee/eng>.

¹⁷ Jan Osburg, “Unconventional Options for the Defense of the Baltic States: The Swiss Approach,” *Perspective*, The Rand Corporation, 2016. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE179.html>

¹⁸ Stephen M. Walt, “The World Can Have Peace and Prosperity, If It Wants,” *ForeignPolicy.Com*, 23 December 2016. <http://foreignpolicy.com>.

¹⁹ Niall Ferguson, “The Russian Question,” *ForeignPolicy.Com*, 23 December 2016. <http://foreignpolicy.com>.

²⁰ NATO’s Warsaw Summit Communiqué, Warsaw, 8-9 July 2016. <http://www.nato.int>

²¹ “Stoltenberg: NATO to hold talks with Russia,” EurActiv.com, 16 December 2016. <http://www.euractiv.com>. NATO explains that: “All practical civilian and military cooperation under the NRC with Russia was suspended in April 2014 in response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. But channels of political dialogue and military communication were kept open and the NRC as such was never suspended. Since then, two NRC meetings took place in 2014 and three in 2016, as well as two meetings of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council including Russia (in 2014 and 2015).” http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50090.htm

²² “Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, Report,” BBC News, September 2009, news.bbc.co.uk.

²³ Andrew Higgins, “Intent on Unsettling E.U., Russia Taps Foot Soldiers From the Fringe,” New York Times, 24 December 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com>.

²⁴ Andrew Higgins, “Intent on Unsettling E.U., Russia Taps Foot Soldiers From the Fringe,” New York Times, 24 December 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com>.

²⁵ Andrew Higgins, “Intent on Unsettling E.U., Russia Taps Foot Soldiers From the Fringe,” New York Times, 24 December 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com>.

²⁶ Andrew Higgins, “Intent on Unsettling E.U., Russia Taps Foot Soldiers From the Fringe,” New York Times, 24 December 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com>.

²⁷ Andrew Higgins, “Intent on Unsettling E.U., Russia Taps Foot Soldiers From the Fringe,” New York Times, 24 December 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com>.

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²⁹ “Latvia faces hybrid threat as EU, NATO boost defenses,” *Deutsche Welle*, 04 December 2016. <http://www.dw.com/en/latvia-faces-hybrid-threat-as-eu-nato-boost-defenses/a-36616678>.

³⁰ Elements of the following paragraphs are taken from: Regehr, “Canada and Euro-Atlantic Security,” The Simons Foundation, Canadian Defence Policy Review Briefing Papers, 5 August 2016. www.thesimonsfoundation.ca/projects.canadian-defence-policy-review-briefing-papers.

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