



DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY

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Russia, NATO, and Baltic vulnerability

The Pentagon is sending state-of-the-art F-22 fighter aircraft to Europe for the first time, further confirmation that NATO and Russia have locked themselves into increasingly provocative military behaviour from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea. Both sides obviously believe demonstrations of intimidating military capacity enhance security, but it's an article of faith unsupported by evidence. In fact, vulnerability to military interference in states small or large owes much more to political weakness than to military weakness or the lack formidable friends. In other words, preserving national sovereignty and defending against foreign predators – in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, for example – depend much more on the quality of governance than on military preparedness and defence.

When Russian Parliamentarians, demonstrating that the art of provocation in Russia extends well beyond its president, recently questioned the constitutionality of the process by which Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania gained their independence after the fall of the Soviet Union,¹ the Baltics, not surprisingly, became even more nervous than they already were. With their significant Russian-speaking populations (about one-quarter of the populations of Estonia and Latvia, and about six percent in Lithuania), which the Russian President insists are deserving of his protection, the Baltics are looking to NATO for security assurances. Even Russia's only non-NATO Arctic neighbours, Finland and Sweden, are making a show of edging closer to the Alliance.²

NATO's default response is to flex its military muscle. The F-22, primarily an air-to-air fighter, meaning it is oriented toward combat with other advanced fighters, such as Russia's, is thus to be part of the "European Reassurance Initiative" designed, as *Defense News* put it, "to soothe concerns among European allies in the face of increased Russian aggression."³ Canadian Naval, Air, and Land forces have also been deployed under "Operation Reassurance."⁴ Of course what NATO and Russia are now doing is anything but reassuring. In this worsening climate of political suspicion, they are jointly preparing to do precisely the one thing they must obviously never do (and which, frankly, they are unlikely to do over the Baltics) – that is, go to war with one another.

War games have once again become a primary means of NATO/Russia communication (the Pentagon having explained that the F-22 mission in Europe is "designed to send a message to Russia"). In June of this year, NATO's "Allied Shield" exercise involved 15,000 personnel in land, air, and sea maneuvers along the frontier with Russia, including the first deployment of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force NATO established in the wake of the Ukraine crisis,⁵ simulating responses to everything from large-scale state-to-state attacks to low-level incursions and destabilization tactics. Already in 2014, NATO states conducted more than 200 NATO and national exercises in Europe⁶ and mounted a four-fold increase in air patrols and interceptions of Russian military aircraft in operations from the Arctic to the Black Sea, much of the increase focused on the Barents and Baltic Seas.⁷ In October, NATO will conduct a much larger exercise, involving up to 36,000 personnel.⁸

The Russians, for their part, have doubled their Barents and Baltic patrols and reconnaissance flights and have moved additional combat aircraft into Crimea.⁹ In March Russia launched an exercise in the Arctic involving 80,000 personnel that expanded to include all of Russia, leading a European Leadership Network study to conclude that the scale and scope of the exercise represented a simulated war against the US and NATO.¹⁰ Focused on Eastern Europe, as well as the Arctic, the exercise included operations in Russia's East for the purpose of demonstrating that even in the context of all-out war with the West, Russia would still have the means to counter "opportunistic" attacks from the East by China or Japan.

Military exercises do not reflect an *intention* to go to war, but it's not at all surprising that the Nordics and Baltics are nervous,¹¹ or that Russia regards NATO's heightened operations on its frontier as less than benign and a continuation of two decades of provocative expansion to Russia's doorstep. With escalating military patrols increasing the risks of direct military encounters between the two sides, the nervousness has rightfully spread far beyond those regions. The European Leadership Network's study¹² noted two prominent dangers. The first is that military exercises and posturing are themselves dangerous and destabilizing. A *Globe and Mail*¹³ report on the study quotes the independent Russian military analyst, Pavel Felgenhauer, warning that in the climate of current diplomatic estrangement between Russia and the West, even the smallest, probably unintended, military encounter could quickly lead to direct combat: "The lines of communication are closing and everyone is beefing up for an eventuality that could be very, very unpleasant." The dangers are clear, says Felgenhauer: "posturing is the path to war. It always has been." The second danger owes to the probability, widely acknowledged, that once the line of direct combat between NATO and Russia was crossed anywhere from the Arctic to the Black Sea, it would not remain limited but "would grow into full-scale war sooner or later."

Those are two dangers that make the currently intensified military operations in Europe especially reckless, but more than that, in the context of concerns about the insecurities of the Baltic States, the NATO operations are both ill-suited and ultimately irrelevant to the protection of sovereignty and security in vulnerable states.

They are ill-suited because they risk inflicting a price dramatically out of proportion to any foreseeable outcome. It should be axiomatically understood that no military confrontation that unleashed the advanced and massively destructive conventional arsenals of Russia and NATO against one another, and that risked escalation to nuclear weapons use, could ever be justified by the political, economic, territorial, or moral issues at stake. The destruction that would be wrought within a matter of hours, never mind days or longer, if Russia and NATO were to launch into all out armed conflict, would be so extensive and so consequential as to mean that it cannot be seriously entertained. NATO nevertheless still assumes that the one true antidote to Baltic vulnerability is to threaten precisely such armed confrontation.

That in turn speaks to the irrelevance of NATO's provocative military posture, because Baltic security is most clearly linked to political, not military, strength. That's the story that post-Cold War military intervention, unilateral and multilateral, tells. Invasions occur almost exclusively in contexts of chronic political instability, almost always in and around the world's most intractable trouble spots, against states that are internally divided, and against or in support of governments with little or no internal legitimacy. The context for military interventions is invariably political, not military, vulnerability. Attacks by individual states or multilateral military coalitions of the willing alike are launched into situations of advanced conflict, including levels of violence that equate to war, in which violent conflict is symptomatic of an utter lack of national consensus. Look at these post-Cold War invasions: multilateral interventions in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Haiti, Iraq, Serbia (re Kosovo), and Libya; unilateral interventions by the US in Panama and Somalia, by Russia in Georgia and Ukraine, by Ethiopia in Somalia, by Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and by Iraq in Kuwait. Common to all of the invaded states (with the exception of Kuwait), were conditions of advanced internal division and crisis.

The point obviously is not that internal crises justify invasions – this is not a matter of blaming the victims and justifying the exploits of major powers. Politically chaotic states are still sovereign, and their weaknesses are typically the product of a myriad of forces – some internal but many well beyond their control – and invading any state outside of self-defence or without explicit United Nations Security Council approval is still a flagrant violation of international law. And, by the way, as the record also shows, is much more likely to exacerbate discord than end it.

But what made states vulnerable to invasion was unstable internal political conditions, not a lack of military defence. Most were places of extreme human rights violations and among the world’s primary producers of IDPs (internally displaced persons) and refugees, and most showed little prospect for an early return to political stability. The primary lesson to be drawn from the past quarter century of military interventions in unstable states is therefore actually about politically stable states – that is, 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. Only one politically stable state was invaded in the past quarter century, Kuwait, and in the end it was the attacker that was destroyed.

It’s a lesson that the Baltic States ought to take special note of in the face of their heightened sense of vulnerability with regard to Russia – their current reality is that they are not riven by the kinds of politically chaotic environments that leave them vulnerable to intervention. They are basically well-governed spaces that enjoy political stability. Each sustains a strong national consensus in support of independence and the prevailing political order.

The Global Peace Index,¹⁴ an innovative ranking of the peacefulness of states, ranks all three of the Baltic republics in the top quartile with ratings of “high” levels of peacefulness, while Finland, Sweden, and Norway are obviously rated as “very high” in the peacefulness index (compared, for example, with Ukraine, which was ranked in the lowest quartile of very unpeaceful states well before Russia’s annexation of Crimea and accelerated destabilization in the east). Similarly, the Prosperity Index, a multi-indicator measure of wealth and well-being by the UK-based Legatum Institute, places all three Baltic States within the top one-third world wide.¹⁵

It is the Baltic States’ high levels of political stability and prosperity, and the legitimacy of their governments and public institutions, that radically reduce their vulnerability to Russian “help” for their Russian-speaking populations. But, of course, if the Balkan states were to substantially fail in fully integrating and holding the support and confidence of their Russian minorities, then they would indeed become much more vulnerable to interference.

The great folly in the prevailing European/Russian security discourse 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. All three Baltic states actively debate and struggle with questions of how best to accommodate their Russian minorities, but a lengthy analysis in Germany’s *Der Spiegel* noted earlier this year that they are largely succeeding. The Russian populations in the Baltics are primarily urban and continue to display basic loyalties to their Baltic countries, and while they also maintain distinct identities,¹⁶ *Der Spiegel* painted a picture of Baltic Russians as largely championing democracy. While they enjoy a cultural affinity to Russia, they do not think of Russia as their “home.” There are complaints in some instances of the ways Russians are treated, but *Der Spiegel* suggests the Baltics are reasonably effective in integrating their Russian populations, even as the challenges of building stable, inclusive societies are ongoing.

So, if NATO is indeed committed to reducing Baltic vulnerability, Europeans and North Americans will focus their attention on promoting prosperity and political stability by encouraging continued and improved inclusiveness and respect for the rights of minorities, and by helping all segments of the populations to maintain a stake in Baltic independence, identity, and stability – and they will stop risking military confrontations from which no one would escape with anything that could remotely resemble winning.

Even so, military provocations still lead, in part because they are essentially an ideological commitment and partly because both Mr. Putin and the NATO/Pentagon leadership find them useful for reasons other than the fate of the Baltics. Mr. Putin's own political fortunes, currently riding high, are served by stoking crises – diverting attention away from Russia's faltering economy and focusing instead on populist gestures of defiance of the West – and NATO and the West seem determined to help Mr. Putin by handing him an abundance of pretexts. NATO's expansion has long been more serious than a mere annoyance to Russia, and the latter's response to Finland and Sweden moving closer to cooperation with NATO was predictable. In response to a joint declaration by Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland (almost two-thirds of the states of the Arctic community) that they must collectively prepare for crises or incidents with Russia, the Russian Foreign Ministry drew the conclusion that "unlike in previous years, the Nordic defence cooperation positions itself as a foe with respect to Russia, with the potential of undermining the positive constructive relations established over the last decade."¹⁷ Each such instance, and particularly prominent shows of hostile military force near Russia's borders, is another in a steady stream of opportunities for Mr. Putin to wave the nationalist flag and divert attention away from his own domestic challenges. As a result, NATO's military bravado serves Mr. Putin's interests much more than those of the Baltics.

But NATO and the Pentagon can't seem to help themselves, being, as they are, heirs to a long tradition of promoting their own interests (namely, their budgets) through the aid of the Russian bogeyman. Despite spending ten times more on the military than does Russia, the Pentagon still argues it needs more to meet the Russian challenge. With an eye focused rather more tightly on Washington budget politics than on security in the Baltics, the Pentagon soberly declares "we're not as ready as we want to be."¹⁸

It's true, the Pentagon isn't ready. Not because it is under armed, but because it and NATO both think that the only way to be ready is to be militarily invincible. But it is mutual destruction, not invincibility, that is militarily available. Armed conflict with Russia, conventional or nuclear, does not include the possibility of a "win." Direct military conflict with Russia by NATO is in fact out of the question – at least if a minimum of sanity prevails – because there is no political, economic, or security interest that would be advanced or would warrant the cost. For that reason, direct military conflict remains unlikely (and public polling shows that key European populations, like the Germans and the French, increasingly reject military action in response to Russia's provocations¹⁹).

The more likely scenario for European military confrontation would be much less overt, focusing on the kind of low-level destabilizing tactics seen in Ukraine. But the key point here is that for such a tactic to be available to Russia in the Baltics or the Arctic there would have to be a significant level of discontent in the Baltic republics and Russia's northern neighbours. And if it ever came to active insurgent disturbances, there would be no credible military defence against it. Military actions against dissident insurgents that, with even minimal internal support, reject the legitimacy of their own state and that have the sympathy and concrete help of neighbours and operate in a context of serious political disarray are, to understate it, not promising. From Afghanistan to Ukraine to Syria, it is clear there is no winning against such forces – only insecurity, political disorder, and rapid economic decline are reaped.

That means the front line of Baltic and Arctic security is constructive governance that keeps on winning the support of all segments of their populations. 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 “Russia examines 1991 recognition of Baltic independence,” BBC, 30 June 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33325842>

² “Russia concerned by Finland and Sweden’s NATO rapprochement,” EurActiv.Com, 13 April 2015. <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/global-europe/russia-concerned-finland-and-swedens-nato-rapprochement-313709>

³ Aaron Mehta, “US F-22s Deploying to Europe,” 24 August 2015, *Defense News*. <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/air-space/strike/2015/08/24/f-22-deploying-europe/32289415/>

⁴ Operation Reassurance, National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, Government of Canada. <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad/nato-ee.page>

⁵ Wales Summit Declaration, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, 05 Sep. 2014. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm?selectedLocale=en

⁶ “NATO’s readiness Action Plan, NATO Fact Sheet, February 2015. <http://www.nato.int/>

⁷ Ian Kearns, Lukasz Kulesa, and Thomas Frear, “Russia-West Dangerous Brinkmanship Continues,” European Leadership Network, 12 March 2015. <http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/russia--west-dangerous-brinkmanship-continues-2529.html>

⁸ David Pugliese, “The coming war with Russia,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 21 August 2015. <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/the-coming-war-with-russia>

⁹ Kearns, Kulesa, and Frear, “Russia-West Dangerous Brinkmanship Continues.”

¹⁰ Thomas Frear, Ian Kearns, and Łukasz Kulesa, “Preparing for the Worst: Are Russian and NATO Military Exercises Making War in Europe more Likely?” *European Leadership Network*, August 2015. <http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/preparing-for-the-worst-are-russian-and-nato-military-exercises-making-war-in-europe-more-likely-2997.html>

¹¹ Yoel Sano, “Will Russia make a play for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania?” *Financial Times Blogs*, 23 March 2015. <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2015/03/23/guest-post-will-russia-make-a-play-for-estonia-latvia-and-lithuania/>

¹² Frear, Kearns, and Kulesa, “Preparing for the Worst.”

¹³ Mark MacKinnon, “Cold War redux: Could war games spark a European conflict?” *Globe and Mail*, 11 August 2015. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/cold-war-redux-could-war-games-spark-a-european-conflict/article25933074/>

¹⁴ *Global Peace Index 2015: Measuring Peace, Its Causes and Its Economic Value*, Institute for Economics and Peace (<http://economicsandpeace.org/>), http://www.visionofhumanity.org/sites/default/files/Global%20Peace%20Index%20Report%202015_0.pdf

¹⁵ The 2014 Legatum Prosperity Index, The Legatum Institute.
http://media.prosperity.com/2014/pdf/publications/PI2014Brochure_WEB.pdf

¹⁶ Jan Puhl, "The Baltic Front Where Putin's Empire Meets the EU," *Der Spiegel Online*, 03 July 2015.
<http://www.kyivpost.com/content/russia-and-former-soviet-union/spiegel-the-baltic-front-where-putins-empire-meets-the-eu-392715.html>

¹⁷ "Russia concerned by Finland and Sweden's NATO rapprochement."

¹⁸ Nancy A Youssef, "Pentagon Fears It's Not Ready for a War With Putin," *The Daily Beast*, 14 August 2015.
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/14/pentagon-fears-it-s-not-ready-for-a-war-with-putin.html>

¹⁹ A Pew Research Center survey this past June found that "at least half of Germans, French and Italians say their country should not use military forces to defend a NATO ally if attacked by Russia." Quoted in: David Pugliese, "The coming war with Russia," *Ottawa Citizen*, 21 August 2015. <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/the-coming-war-with-russia>