

## STAFF ANALYSIS

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### Showdown in the Baltics? A Red Line for Russia-NATO Relations

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After decades of more or less successful re-engagement and rapprochement between the West and the countries of the former Soviet Union, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the eruption of war in Eastern Ukraine have renewed Cold-War tension between the NATO alliance and Moscow. The most disturbing result of these events is a renewed suspicion that countries in the EU, long members of the project to “make war not only unthinkable but materially impossible,”<sup>1</sup> would again be subject to violent inter-state conflict.

In particular, there has been greater scrutiny and concern related to the security of the Baltic States: Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. These three former Soviet republics, which have small territories and limited military capacity, have been identified by Pentagon experts as prime targets for future Russian military incursion or assault.<sup>2</sup>

The possibility is already the topic of propaganda wars: a number of sources from the US and Europe insist that NATO’s military commitment to the Baltic states must be increased to prevent a Russian

invasion,<sup>3</sup> especially as each country is now a member of the Alliance, while Russian sources claim that this is a mere paranoid fantasy<sup>4</sup> or even a plot by NATO to create conflict itself.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of that speculation, both sides have been increasing their military presence in the area.

The question places NATO and Russia at a strategic crossroads. While Russian aggression towards Ukraine and the bolstering of NATO fortifications in Eastern Europe may be said to stir up old Cold War tension, open conflict in the Baltics would shatter the dream of an enduring *Pax Europaea* and revive a paradigm in which military might, rather than economic interdependence or diplomatic interest, stands as the defining driver of relations between the US, Russia and Europe. For this reason,

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<sup>3</sup> Coffey, Luke and Kochis, Daniel, “The Baltic States: The United States Must Be Prepared to Fulfill Its NATO Treaty Obligations,” *The Heritage Foundation*, 29 September 2015.

[www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/09/the-baltic-states-the-united-states-must-be-prepared-to-fulfill-its-nato-treaty-obligations](http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/09/the-baltic-states-the-united-states-must-be-prepared-to-fulfill-its-nato-treaty-obligations)

<sup>4</sup> In addition to Russian-language sources meant for domestic consumption, the publication *Russia Today* has produced a number of English-language articles that espouse this counter-narrative for Western audiences. For example, see: MacDonald, Bryan, “Despite NATO propaganda, Russia not planning to invade Baltic States,” *Russia Today*, 25 June 2015. [www.rt.com/op-edge/269746-nato-russia-baltics-invasion/](http://www.rt.com/op-edge/269746-nato-russia-baltics-invasion/)

<sup>5</sup> “NATO Wants to Create Conflict in Baltics – Russian Ambassador to Sweden,” *Sputnik*, 25 June 2015. <http://sputniknews.com/politics/20150621/1023669336.html#ixzz3pcfHOJFW>

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<sup>1</sup> Schuman, Robert, “Declaration of 9th May 1950 delivered by Robert Schuman,” *European Issue*, No. 204, 10 May 2011. [www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-204-en.pdf](http://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-204-en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ioffe, Julia, “Exclusive: The Pentagon Is Preparing New War Plans for a Baltic Battle Against Russia,” *Foreign Policy*, 18 September 2015. [http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/18/exclusive-the-pentagon-is-preparing-new-war-plans-for-a-baltic-battle-against-russia/?wp\\_login\\_redirect=0](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/18/exclusive-the-pentagon-is-preparing-new-war-plans-for-a-baltic-battle-against-russia/?wp_login_redirect=0)

the situation in the Baltics must be treated with caution so as to avoid leading global players across a dangerous red line.

### Military Escalation

According to the *Foreign Policy* publication, NATO efforts have been redoubled in the Baltics specifically because of the fact that Pentagon scenarios predicted that a potential invasion from the East could result in a Russian victory.<sup>6</sup> As a result, new efforts are being taken to equip, man and prepare the region to resist such an attack. Earlier this year, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia requested that NATO forces deepen their commitment and presence in the region; in September, the alliance opened Force Integration Units (NFIU) in all three Baltic States, as well as in Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. These NFIUs, while not military bases, help to promote collective security by acting as important points of contact for other NATO allies and can assist host countries with security planning and training.<sup>7</sup> This was coupled with speculation that heavy weapons would be brought onto the territory of the alliance's eastern European members, as well as NATO's "Allied Shield" exercises, which involved Sweden, the Baltic Sea, Poland and the three Baltic States.<sup>8</sup>

Russia has also increased its military forces and operational activity in the region, both on its Western front and centered in the enclave of Kaliningrad. Furthermore, Russia is pleased to display the strength of its military forces in the region and elsewhere. In March 2015, a "snap" exercise that involved some 80,000 Russian military personnel globally included the participation of the Northern Fleet (north of Finland, Sweden and Norway), the Baltic Sea Fleet, and airborne forces in operations near the Russian border with Latvia. These exercises were meant to mimic a scenario in which NATO and Russia went to war.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ioffe, Julia, "Exclusive: The Pentagon is Preparing New War Plans."

<sup>7</sup> "NATO Force Integration Units: Fact Sheet". Official NATO publication, September 2015. [www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2015\\_09/20150901\\_150901-factsheet-nfiu\\_en.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_09/20150901_150901-factsheet-nfiu_en.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Frear, Thomas; Kearns, Ian; and Kulesa, Łukasz, "Preparing for the Worst: Are Russian and NATO Military Exercises Making War in Europe More Likely?" *European Leadership Network*, August 2015. [www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/medialibrary/2015/08/07/ea2b8c22/Preparing%20for%20the%20Worst.pdf](http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/medialibrary/2015/08/07/ea2b8c22/Preparing%20for%20the%20Worst.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Frear, Thomas; Kearns, Ian; and Kulesa, Łukasz. "Preparing for the Worst."

Additionally, both NATO and Russia have discussed increasing the deployment of nuclear weapons in the region as well. In September, there were reports of US plans to upgrade the B61-11 nuclear bunker buster, also known as an earth-penetrating weapon (EPW), deployed at the Büchel base in Germany to the new B61-12; while the older model delivered superficial damage by exploding while airborne, the new version does not explode until it has penetrated underground and has the potential to deliver far more significant destructive power.<sup>10</sup> Reports suggested that Moscow's response would be to redeploy the Iskander-M tactical missile weapons system in the Kaliningrad enclave.<sup>11</sup> Once such an arms race begins, it will be difficult to stop — or to say with certainty that none of the weapons will be used.

The perceived threat of Russian-NATO confrontation has also had a strong effect on regional partners. Both Sweden and Finland, which have long resisted NATO membership, seem to be now increasingly tempted to join the alliance. While the addition of these countries would not greatly affect NATO's military capabilities, the symbolic weight of membership would be enormous. Already, Moscow has expressed significant disapproval. Russian Ambassador to Sweden Viktor Tatarintsev recently stated that "the country that joins NATO needs to be aware of the risks." Meanwhile, one of Putin's senior advisers and member of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, Sergei Markov, stated that Finland joining NATO could potentially "start World War III."<sup>12</sup>

### Russian Interests in the Baltics

While the sheer buildup of military forces around the region is enough to suggest a greater danger of an outbreak of further conflict, it is worth considering the possible motivating factors that would push Russia towards an outright invasion.

<sup>10</sup> Krutikov, Evgenii, "The US enters into a new conflict with Russia surrounding nuclear weapons/США пошли на новый конфликт с Россией вокруг ядерного оружия," *Vzгляд*, 23 September 2015. [www.vz.ru/world/2015/9/23/768262.html](http://www.vz.ru/world/2015/9/23/768262.html)

<sup>11</sup> Bodner, Matthew, "Kremlin Threatens Response to U.S. Nuclear Bomb Deployment in Germany," *The Moscow Times*, 23 September 2015. [www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/kremlin-threatens-response-to-us-nuclear-bomb-deployment-in-germany/535106.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/kremlin-threatens-response-to-us-nuclear-bomb-deployment-in-germany/535106.html)

<sup>12</sup> Braw, Elizabeth, "Sweden and Finland's awkward NATO tango," *Politico*, 24 August 2015. [www.politico.eu/article/sweden-finland-nato-russia-defense-nordic-military/](http://www.politico.eu/article/sweden-finland-nato-russia-defense-nordic-military/)

The first of these is the Soviet legacy. As former republics of the USSR, the Baltics, much like Ukraine, will always be seen by Russia as lost territory. However, there are significant differences. Unlike Ukraine, the Baltic populations were never perceived as “little Russians,” and despite significant Russian-speaking minorities, each of the three states hold clearly separate identities.

In this way, any Russian aggression targeting the Baltics would simply not have the same cultural “reunification” argument that was made in the case of Crimea. Of course, a justification may be made flexible when necessary. In June 2015, it became known that Russia’s prosecutor-general had called into question the legality of the decision to grant the three states independence from the USSR in 1991, for example.<sup>13</sup> As part of Russia’s perceived sphere of influence — the so-called “near abroad” — the Baltic region will always be at risk of being treated within a post-Soviet, rather than a distinctly European framework of strategic diplomacy.

The second factor contributing to possible Russian aggression against the Baltics is the profound symbolic impact that this would have on the perception of NATO as an effective military alliance. If NATO were unable to defend its Baltic members, the promise of protection offered by the organization would have proven to be false, effectively ending decades of stability partially maintained by that assurance.<sup>14</sup> The threat of having to face a post-NATO paradigm, in which Europe was once again vulnerable to violent conflict, would seriously diminish the deterrent power of the NATO Alliance. It also means that in the face of Russian aggression, NATO forces would have to be relentless in their response — with potentially catastrophic consequences.

The third factor stems from the appeal of a direct challenge to the US global position and strategic posture. As the core force of NATO, any such weakening of the Alliance would not only deny the the US an important source of global legitimacy, but would also deride the image of US power projection and partner protection.

Moreover, such a scenario would also be a significant success in Russia’s bid to restore its lost prominence as a world power. Yet striking at NATO and the US by taking on the Baltics would not necessarily lead to the formation of a bipolar, yet stable world; instead, it would reintroduce violent, inter-state conflict to a continent that has been striving, with great success, for peace for more than half a century.

### **NATO, the EU and the “End of History”**

The implications of a successful Russian invasion of the Baltics go far beyond military-strategic importance and, in fact, strike at the heart of modern European identity. For decades, violence within and surrounding the EU region has largely been limited to the aberrant behavior of non-state actors (e.g. terrorist organizations), explained simply as the result of civilizational/ethnic tensions (the conflicts following the break-up of Yugoslavia, or the earlier Turkish invasion of Cyprus), or pro-democracy revolutions of 1989 that heralded the end of Soviet power in Eastern Europe.

The image of Europe as a battleground for modern inter-state warfare was, until the Ukraine Conflict, considered a thing of the past. Even then, Russian invasion of Ukraine was not seen as an invasion of Europe. In addition to the Ukraine’s strong economic and close cultural ties to Russia, the country’s relationship with the EU is one that European states rather prefer to keep friendly but distinctly at arms-length. In contrast, the three Baltic states have been full members of both the EU and NATO since 2004 and members of the Schengen Area since 2007.

While this is not meant as a defense of Russia’s actions, it does mean that an annexation of the Baltics would have a much stronger effect on Europe’s relationship with sovereignty and security than the events in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Moreover, an attack against any of the three Baltic states would carry much greater political weight because of the fact that it would violate decades of reliance on interdependence as a guarantor of peace.

The dream of post-war Europe promises generous welfare state protection and high standards of living based on free trade and stability through the elimination of violent conflict. Jean Monnet, the “founding father” of the European Union, suggested that European countries had the capacity to abandon hard power ambitions in favor of cooperation, as “beyond (states’) differences and geographical boundaries there lies a common interest” — peace

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<sup>13</sup> “Russia Reviewing Legality Of Baltics' Independence From Soviet Union,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 30 June 2015. [www.rferl.org/content/russia-examines-recognition-of-baltic-independence/27102853.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-examines-recognition-of-baltic-independence/27102853.html)

<sup>14</sup> Bodner, Matthew, “Russia’s Military Is a Paper Tiger in the Baltic,” *Institute of Modern Russia (IMR)*, 26 August 2015. <http://imrussia.org/en/analysis/world/2389-russias-military-is-a-paper-tiger-in-the-baltic>

and material prosperity through interdependence. Within the confines of Europe, this formula worked for decades to assuage internal military altercation.

This dream was inextricably coupled with the promise offered by NATO: while EU members states in the NATO alliance were expected to maintain a minimum level of defense spending, external military threat was ultimately to be countered through the combined efforts of the alliance and especially the protection through US military commitments of defense and support.

A number of analysts have described the disparity of defense spending within Europe as “free-riding,”<sup>15</sup> arguing that the noted generosity of many European welfare states is only made possible through the offset of a subsidy of US military support.<sup>16</sup> While a state’s choice of welfare policy is more complex than this argument suggests,<sup>17</sup> the fact is that European NATO member states rely heavily on US soldiers, arms, and equipment. An invasion of the Baltics, especially one not entirely countered by NATO forces, would shatter the belief that European states can place military defense spending anywhere but first as a budget priority.

Perhaps most importantly, an act of open aggression against any EU country by Russia would put to rest any illusion that the fall of the Soviet Union heralded Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History.” A central goal of Russian foreign policy is not only to challenge the US and its NATO partners in pure military terms, but to call into question the “unabashed victory”<sup>18</sup> of Western liberalism over competing paradigms.<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that

Russia wants to fully reinstate the pre-1991 status quo. Instead, such a move would aim to upset the sacred borders of the “elite and exclusivist” EU while defying the US’s role as hegemonic protector.

### **Conclusion: A Potential for De-Escalation**

Rising tension surrounding the Baltic region presents the US, its European allies and Russia with an important decision regarding the course that the modern Western world will take. On the one hand, interests are often zero-sum: the US and other countries associated with the NATO alliance cannot tolerate a situation in which their security is threatened, just as Russia under Putin cannot tolerate a world of unilateral power in which it is not given a position of authority. The Baltics provide a stage on which each power may assert itself, either as the enduring hegemon, or as a new challenger.

On the other hand, the strong symbolic significance of the Baltics means that zero-sum approaches may result in catastrophic escalation. Western powers have too much to lose in the event of an invasion, as membership in NATO and the EU define these three countries as sacred ground. NATO will continue to increase air and ground force protection, as well as reach out to regional partners for military backup, while counting on the threat of disproportional retaliation to dissuade Russia from open conflict.

For its part, Russia will most likely continue to insist that NATO is acting as the aggressor and respond with its own military buildup. Thankfully, while Russian incursions show that it is not afraid to tease and test Western response at the edges, Putin has room for maneuver and can avoid an open conflict in the Baltics without losing face.

There is also hope that the promise of relative stability and material prosperity achieved through the maintenance of the Pax Europaea will eventually persuade or coerce Russia to turn away from a strategy based primarily on military aggression. Energy, trade, and financial markets have both linked and significantly enriched the developed world. While the appealing premise of an ascendant Russia may be enough to bring the country through the current sanctions and oil crisis, support for any greater national sacrifice would demand a great national purpose — one that an invasion of the Baltics would simply not provide. With hope, the grim reality of what such an invasion would herald will only prevent Russia and NATO from crossing this red line.

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<sup>15</sup> Carpenter, Ted Galen and Tupy, Marian, “U.S. Defense Spending Subsidizes European Free-Riding Welfare States,” *CATO Institute*, 12 July 2010.

[www.cato.org/publications/commentary/us-defense-spending-subsidizes-european-freeriding-welfare-states](http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/us-defense-spending-subsidizes-european-freeriding-welfare-states)

<sup>16</sup> “The Welfare State and Military Power,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 December 2009.

[www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704107104574573711965511326](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704107104574573711965511326)

<sup>17</sup> For a thorough review of the ideological underpinnings of patterns of welfare state provision in the Western world, see: Esping-Andersen, Gøsta, *The Three Worlds of Welfare State Capitalism*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. “The End of History?” [www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm](http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm)

<sup>19</sup> Similar arguments are made regarding the goal of new Russian nationalism in general in: Parland, Thomas, *The Extreme Nationalist Threat in Russia: The Growing Influence of Western Rightist Ideas*. (London: Routledge, 2004).

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