

The Russian Challenge

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With its double aggression against Ukraine in Crimea and the Donbass, Russia has reemerged as a strategic competitor to the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). To most observers, this feels sudden and unexpected, but these actions appear to have been approaching inevitability for two decades.

Many in the West misinterpreted the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). It was celebrated like the victory over Germany in May 1945 was—a defeat of a society so total that what emerged on the other side would be fundamentally different. The death of Leninism was viewed the same way; it was seen as an historical watershed permitting a country with no history of viable democratic institutions, strong civil society, or an independent economy responding to “bottom-up” market signals to transform itself—with the helpful assistance of the Cold War’s “victors”—into

something new, free, and ready to integrate into the West’s web of norms and practices.

Instead, from late 1989 through the end of 1991, the conditions were actually more like what followed the armistice that ended World War I in November 1918—the internal collapse of a political and economic system unaccompanied by a basic societal transformation away from authoritarianism. While sectors of Russian society were open to an experiment with more liberal politics and economics, powerful forces were able to shape the emerging systems to their own advantage, creating a top-heavy oligarchy that fostered economic and political chaos—a kind of Weimar Russia—that, by the turn of the century, had laid the foundations for a recentralization of political power under the skilled politician and ex-Chekist Vladimir Putin.

Russia today believes it has tried democracy and that democracy catastrophically failed it. It is a Russia whose behavior is fueled by resentment of, and anger at, the West. Like China, it has a nar-

rative of humiliation—if not for a century, at least for 20 years—with its interests disregarded, its aspirations denigrated, its suffering ignored, and its rightful place as a nation of the first rank usurped.

Given this context, this Perspective presents an argument about how to confront potential Russian aggression in the Baltic region, drawing on years of expertise analyzing the region and on the results of numerous wargames conducted by the RAND Corporation. We articulate that argument by answering a series of questions.

What Does Russia Want?

Russia is a great power by any relevant definition.¹ It wants what any great power wants:

- internal stability
- secure borders, meaning, inter alia, a preponderance of influence in the areas along its periphery
- a favorable balance of power with other states it recognizes as peers
- general acceptance that it has a legitimate say in any issue touching on its self-defined interests.

Russian goals are problematic from the U.S. point of view, first, because Russia's border regions include multiple countries with which the United States has treaty commitments and that have no desire to live in a Russian sphere of influence.

These goals are similar to U.S. goals—consider, for example, the Monroe Doctrine's insistence that the United States would not tolerate other great powers' interference in the Western hemisphere. However, Russian goals are problematic from the U.S. point of view—first, because Russia's border regions include multiple countries with which the United States has treaty commitments and that have no desire to live in a Russian sphere of influence. Second, many of Russia's neighbors are discomfited by some of its approaches to securing its local *droit de regard*—which have included direct imperial expansion, the acquisition of clients or satellite states, or attempted subversion. The Kremlin's recent behavior has done nothing to assuage the concerns of those who find themselves ensconced on its borders.

A third reason Russia's goals are problematic has less to do with Russia per se and more to do with the nature of the international order, the dynamics of which doom great powers to some degree of competition. This competition can be exacerbated or mitigated by a variety of factors, but empirically we find that a great power will seek to maintain a favorable balance of power with other actors in the system. This tends toward the creation of "security dilemmas": In this case, Russian actions to increase its own perceived safety are seen by others as increasing the threat to them, compelling countervailing actions, which in turn motivate further Russian steps to protect itself. Unchecked, a security dilemma can devolve into an arms race and crisis-ridden competitions—and ultimately, into war.

Ameliorating these pressures is why the United States and its allies are pursuing a two-part strategy of dialogue and deterrence toward Moscow. This approach seeks to reduce incentives for any Russian military action by bolstering NATO's posture along Russia's vulnerable eastern frontiers while striving to reopen chan-

nels of communication with an eye toward reducing tensions and identifying opportunities for cooperation with Russia. The pernicious logic of the security dilemma is that neither party is inclined to credit the nonhostile intentions of the other; however, coupling actions that maximize defensive benefits with ongoing dialogue aimed at reducing overall distrust may mitigate the most-dangerous consequences and avoid a spiral toward war. In any event, given that security dilemma dynamics are almost inevitable features of great power competition, eschewing prudent deterrent measures in the hope of avoiding such dilemmas would seem unwise.

Why Would Russia Attack NATO?

On any given day, Russia almost certainly has no intention of attacking NATO outright. Countries by and large do not go to war with one another on whims. But the challenge for NATO is not to deter Russia on any given day; it is to deter Russia on the one day that war seems, to Moscow, a viable option given the choices available.

Broadly speaking, a country can go to war—or at least choose rationally to go to war—for one of only two reasons.² The first is because it feels compelled to—war appears to be the least awful option among the array of bad options available. This was the situation that Japan saw itself in relative to the United States in 1941. Japan viewed all the other choices as unacceptable; thus, war—even one that Tokyo understood to be potentially disastrous—was the only alternative that offered even a prospect of achieving Japan’s objectives.³

The second reason a great power will go to war is because it sees an opportunity to achieve a strategic goal—usually quickly—at a price that it is willing to pay. In the past, these were the wars—

inevitably expected to be “over by Christmas”—to which countries sent their soldiers with parades and thrown flowers.

We do not have to reach back too far into history or try to identify with alien mindsets to find an example of why a country chooses war as a means to a desired end. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein—but also, perhaps more importantly, to begin an imagined remaking of the Arab Middle East.

As this example demonstrates, and perhaps it is needless to say, a war that begins out of perceptions of either necessity or opportunity often does not go the way the initiator expects.

Russia could at some juncture see itself in either of these two situations—and, importantly, it is the perception of the actor that matters, not the reality. In terms of the first scenario, Russia’s narrative of victimization describes Russia as bordered—indeed, nearly surrounded—by an implacably hostile NATO alliance that has advanced to its very frontiers, repeatedly broken promises, ignored Moscow’s interests at every turn, actively sought to overthrow regimes friendly to Russia (and indeed has tried to destabilize Russia’s own government), and uses a fictitious “Russian threat” to justify an ever more aggressive foreign policy and arms buildup. This certainly sets the preconditions for a scenario where the Kremlin, faced with some series of unfortunate events, domestic or international, could convince itself that military action against NATO represented the least bad of a range of terrible options, just as the Japanese leadership did in 1941. Like Japan, Russia might well be

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proven wrong, but the process of establishing that proof would be dangerous and costly.

Paradoxically, in some unforeseen future circumstances, the Russian leadership could also convince themselves that they were in the opposite position—that an opportunity existed to inflict a catastrophic defeat on the threatening NATO alliance by crushing its underprepared defenders in the Baltic states. Taking advantage of this opportunity would demonstrate via a shattering tactical victory NATO's strategic inability to fulfill its primary, foundational mission: guaranteeing the territorial integrity and political independence of its member states. In so doing, Russia would seek to divide the alliance to the point of dissolving it, break the transatlantic security link, and reestablish itself as the dominant power in Eastern and Central Europe. Although this strategy appears alien to current Russian thinking, the chance of inflicting such a devastating strategic blow on its longtime nemesis—and nearly three years of RAND wargaming and analysis strongly indicate that Russia could impose just such a defeat on NATO's eastern flank in the space of tens of hours—could, one fateful day, be seen in Moscow as justifying the profound attendant risks.⁴

However, the key thing to recognize here is that it is the *consequences* of failing to deter a Russian attack that make this a compelling problem, not necessarily its raw likelihood. Russia is the only country in the world that maintains the capability to destroy the United States—and, not incidentally, its European allies—as a functioning society, and any war with Moscow necessarily entails a risk of nuclear escalation that would endanger U.S. national survival. Absent something approaching absolute certainty that Russia would never, under any circumstances, attack any NATO member state—a degree of confidence that seems almost impossible to plausibly attain—the enormous costs and risks associated with a war make prudent hedging against the possibility seem a wise investment. It is an insurance policy against a catastrophic disaster.

A decade ago, few would have argued that such insurance was necessary to deter Russia. However, Moscow has now demonstrated a willingness to operate outside the boundaries of the accepted security order, including by using force to permanently alter international borders. It has engaged in cross-border aggression on three separate occasions, issued numerous verbal threats against NATO and member states, and, importantly, is carrying out a program of military modernization that, among other things, renders it more capable of committing both unconventional and conventional attacks against its neighbors.⁵ The risk has increased to the point where it can no longer be ignored.

What Kind of Warfare Will NATO Confront?

Russia's coercive operations along its European frontiers have sought to combine political, economic, information, and irregular warfare, along with conventional military operations and nuclear

threats in varying proportions to achieve its objectives. This blending has presented puzzling challenges to the West, which has often found itself flummoxed in developing appropriate responses to Moscow's actions.

In Chechnya, Georgia, Crimea, Donbass, and Syria, we have seen Russia demonstrate significant flexibility in how it applies military means to achieve political ends. If “little green men” will do the job, then “little green men” will be employed; if big green tanks are needed instead or in addition, bring on the big green tanks. If bombers salvaging dumb bombs from overcast skies or million-dollar cruise missiles are called for, Russia will launch them.

Thus, it is dangerous to think that Russia is limited to one or another form of military operations—particularly, that it is limited to modes short of outright cross-border conventional aggression. NATO needs to be flexible, adaptive, and smart; it needs to posture itself to deal with the full range of possible Russian actions, from the most to least ambiguous. The alliance cannot focus solely on those forms of Russian misbehavior it finds politically most convenient to contemplate, easiest to counter, or least worrisome.

Time is an important element in considering how to posture NATO to respond to the possible range of Russian actions. As it demonstrated in eastern Ukraine, Moscow is able to escalate fairly seamlessly from low-key support for indigenous troublemakers, to deploying special operators, to sending full-on conventional forces into battle. Even if NATO has to deal only with Ukraine-like interventions—versus “conventional” invasions—it needs to be able to respond promptly to the full range of potential Russian actions. Creating such a responsive and agile capability demands, among many other things, the forward positioning of capable heavy forces able to stand up to Russian counterparts.

What Constitutes Effective Deterrence Against Russia?

Deterrence is a mental phenomenon that we attempt to implant in our adversaries. It is a form of coercive logic by which we seek to forestall certain courses of action by convincing opponents that they cannot realize meaningful gains from undertaking these actions, either because we will prevent opponents from accomplishing their goals (deterrence by denial) or because we will extract other costs from them that are incommensurate with whatever they may ultimately receive as profits by taking the forbidden action (deterrence by punishment).

Three points need to be made before continuing with this discussion. First, there is nothing magical at work here. The logic that nations use to deter one another is the same logic societies use to deter criminals or that parents use to deter misbehaving children: If you try to do something wrong, we will either stop you or punish you.

Second, there is no need for any adjective in front of the word deterrence; the concept is complete in and of itself. *Nuclear deterrence* is just *deterrence*. *Twenty-first century deterrence* is just *deterrence*. *Assured deterrence* is just *deterrence*. It operates according to the same logic, is subject to the same limitations, and carries the

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same requirements. All the addition of such modifiers accomplishes is confusing the unwary.

Finally, the requirements for deterrence are and always have been the same and are primarily twofold. The first is capability: The deterrer must clearly have the necessary means to execute the deterrent threat. This is generally the easier of the two hurdles to surmount. Parents typically have rooms to which recalcitrant children can be sent without supper. Societies have police departments, courts, and prisons for dealing with criminals. And nations have the ability to employ diplomatic, economic, and military power to punish adversaries who cross forbidden lines.

It is the second requirement of deterrence that typically presents more of a challenge: credibility. The adversary must be reasonably convinced—and what “reasonably” means will vary from case to case—that the deterrer will in fact carry out her threat if the forbidden action is taken. If mom and dad have consistently failed to take away junior’s smartphone when he misbehaves, despite repeated threats to do so, junior will come to discount those threats—and may even feel unfairly treated if eventually his parents do in fact follow through on their threat. Similarly, an adver-

sary state will factor its estimate of the likelihood that its opponent will make good on its threat into its own calculation of whether to go to war.

A number of factors will influence that decision. Three that should be taken into consideration are

- the deterrer’s track record: Does it have a history of being true to its word or a pattern of backing down?
- the proportionality of the deterrent threat: Although there is no ironclad rule, threats where the response is broadly proportionate to the provocation tend to appear more credible. A punishment that more or less seems to fit the crime seems more likely to be brought into play.
- the linkages between the deterred act and the response: The more “automatically” the response kicks in when the forbidden act is committed, the more credible it is.⁶

By these criteria, a robust deterrent would (1) emanate from an actor known for making good on past threats, (2) be proportionate and in kind with the prohibited action, and (3) have a high degree of automaticity. Conversely, a weak deterrent threat would have one or more of the following characteristics: (1) The deterrer would be thought, fairly or not, to be feckless; (2) the threat would be disproportionate to the provocation; and/or (3) the response would be disconnected causally, temporally, or physically from the provocation.⁷

Are the ERI and eFP Sufficient to Deter Against Russia?

Through the U.S. European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) and NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) programs, the alliance seeks to set in place a deterrent force in the Baltics and elsewhere along NATO's eastern frontier with Russia.⁸ The logic is that by forcing any Russian attack to engage with a multinational array of NATO forces, deterrence is enhanced by "assuring" an overwhelming alliance response, regardless of the immediate outcome of the initial battle.

Both the ERI and eFP are important steps toward creating a military deterrent to Russian aggression against NATO's most exposed member states. Stationing NATO forces forward in the three Baltic republics and elsewhere on the territory of the alliance's easternmost members sends a signal to Moscow that the West is committed to defending itself against any form of attack, from low-level irregular incursion to full-blown invasion.

Forward stationing of forces also importantly indicates the alliance's recognition that conditions have changed since the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act was signed. In that document, NATO promised—"in the current and foreseeable security environment"—not to permanently station additional "substantial combat forces" on the Continent.⁹

Clearly, "the current and foreseeable security environment" of 1997 was not one in which Russia had on three separate occasions committed cross-border territorial aggression against United Nations–member sovereign states, nor annexed the territory of a neighbor. It was instead an environment where the vision of "one Europe, whole and free" was widely considered to include Russia,

which was seen as moving, if haltingly, toward a future that was, broadly speaking, democratic.

Objections to NATO's deterrent moves based on the proscriptions of the Founding Act defy the reality that the act has become an anachronism of another time, one that Russia, by its own actions, has definitively relegated to the ash heap of history. To believe otherwise is to accept that the act intended to countenance naked Russian aggression and the alteration of European borders by applying military force and that these considerations were part of "the current and foreseeable security environment" to which the signatories subscribed 20 years ago. These are hardly tenable propositions now.

eFP is placing four battalion-sized multinational "battle-groups" forward, one in each of the three Baltic states and eastern Poland.¹⁰

- In Estonia, the United Kingdom (UK) will provide the core of a battlegroup that will also include troops from Denmark and France.
- Latvia will host a battlegroup formed around a Canadian motorized battalion, reinforced by mechanized and armored companies from Spain, Italy, and Poland.

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- Germany will lead the battlegroup in Lithuania that will also incorporate soldiers from the Netherlands, Norway, and Belgium.
- The American 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment, based in Germany, will deploy a squadron to eastern Poland to serve as the core element of the fourth and final battlegroup, which is also incorporating troops from the UK and Romania.

However, the ERI and eFP, even in combination, are insufficient to prevent a rapid Russian overrunning of substantial swaths of Baltic territory; they were not designed for this purpose. The four eFP battlegroups will be spread along an 1,100-kilometer frontier involving the four aforementioned countries and Russia and Belarus, and they will be integrated into the national defense forces of each nation. While doing so provides an important symbol of alliance commitment to each country, a valuable training asset, and a useful increment of combat power, a single reinforced battalion is woefully inadequate to render any of the three Baltic states able to mount a credible conventional defense without substantial additional NATO reinforcement—especially additional heavy forces, which almost certainly cannot be brought to the front in time to prevent a Russian *fait accompli* overrunning of much if not all the territory of the Baltic republics.

The United States will maintain a heavy brigade on a rotational basis, but it will be spread across the region, from the Black to Baltic Seas, in battalion- and company-sized packets. With sufficient warning and preparation, the unit could consolidate in a single location, but bringing together hundreds of combat and support vehicles, thousands of soldiers, and many tons of supplies from across a 2,500-kilometer distance would require substantial time

and coordination. It would also demand the availability at the right places and times of rail cars, heavy equipment transporters, and other specialized equipment (and the personnel to operate it) that, at least at present, are neither in adequate supply nor appropriately distributed within the theater.

As such, these units are, in essence, tripwires—triggers that, when engaged, fire off a much more powerful NATO response. The challenge the alliance faces is that this tripwire fails at least one and perhaps all three of the tests for a robust deterrent as described earlier.

If the tripwire is tied to a conventional response, it fails the linkage test because the tripwire is six months and over 5,000 miles long—the time it would take the United States to deploy an adequate force to mount a counteroffensive against a Russian force occupying the Baltics, and the sea and land distance between Riga and the ports in the southeastern United States where much of the heavy combat power needed for that campaign would come from. During that time, Russian forces would be reinforcing and digging in, while Russian diplomacy would be seeking to divide NATO. Russian leaders also would almost certainly be brandishing nuclear and other escalatory threats in an effort to reduce the likelihood of the counteroffensive ever materializing or weakening its force should it come to pass.

As an alternative, NATO could respond to the triggering of the tripwire by resorting to nuclear retaliation. However, in an era of rough East-West nuclear parity, this would seem to fail the proportionality test because it would risk igniting an escalatory spiral that could rapidly result in consequences far beyond the intentions of either side and well beyond the value to either of the stakes of the immediate conflict. Such escalatory risks can be a powerful

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deterrent to aggression *prior* to the initiation of conflict, but once deterrence has initially failed, invoking the threat and beginning the potentially uncontrolled fall down the escalation ladder would be a profoundly dangerous step that is hard to imagine the members of NATO agreeing to take. It is certainly difficult to imagine that they would reach a consensus swiftly, which strongly suggests that this approach would also fail the linkage test.¹¹

In the wake of an initial battlefield defeat, both alternatives also likely lack credibility based on the track-record criterion. Russia would be asked to believe that an always-fractious alliance that had been unable in peacetime to muster the will to deploy an adequate conventional deterrent force—a force of a handful of brigades with supporting appurtenances—would now, when confronted with one of the most dramatic defeat of arms at least since 1940 and after its catastrophic failure to live up to its founding and fundamental purpose of protecting the political independence and territorial sovereignty of its member states, rise in its unified might and fury, face down the most dangerous escalatory dynamics ever seen in war, and stay the course to liberation. It would require Russia to believe that the alliance would undertake a series of steps,

whether via conventional or nuclear means, that could result in the loss of thousands and potentially even hundreds of thousands to millions of lives and tens of billions to trillions of dollars in treasure should nuclear weapons be employed, when previously the alliance had only put a few thousand soldiers in the field to deter the cataclysm. Moscow could become convinced that this would prove an occasion to which NATO would be unlikely to rise. It could well be proven wrong in the event, but because the alliance's purpose is not to fight a war with Russia and win it but to deter war from ever happening, proving unexpectedly bellicose in response to aggression would constitute a strategic failure second only to failing to prevent that aggression in the first place.

NATO could, of course, resort to other forms of punishment. These could include economic warfare with measures well beyond those sanctions that have been imposed in a so-far ineffectual effort to force Russian disengagement from eastern Ukraine. Russia's energy exports to the West would undoubtedly be severed, sapping Moscow's budget of a critical source of revenue. Indeed, whether or not NATO chose a strategy of deliberate "punishment," Russia certainly would suffer, and likely would expect to suffer, substantial economic and political damage from any attack on an alliance member. The likelihood of incurring these costs should certainly create a deterrent effect, but again, given the magnitude of the consequences of a deterrent failure, there is a question about whether these are sufficiently reliable.

NATO might also choose to continue the fight after suffering an initial defeat, and alliance airpower would gradually erode Russian air defenses and mount steady attacks against dug-in Russian forces and their lines of communication. Over time, this air campaign would inflict meaningful attrition on the occupying Russian

forces, preparing the way for an eventual NATO counteroffensive to retake the occupied territory. As noted, this would be a risky and expensive course of action, considerably riskier and more costly than adequately defending the Baltic states in the first place.

NATO should seek to do more than put in place an unsure tripwire connected to conventional and nuclear responses of doubtful credibility and trust that Russia will find these threats sufficiently convincing to be deterred not today or tomorrow, but on the day when circumstances make war with the West seem a plausible option, should that unlikely day ever come. Again, the point is not that war between NATO and Russia is likely, now or in the future; it is that the consequences of it happening would be so horrific that putting in place a robust deterrent—one relying on the steel logic of military calculation and not on changeable Russian perceptions or mutable allied will—is desirable. It is well within the alliance's economic and military capacity to field the capabilities to present a conventional deterrent-by-denial. The expanded ERI and eFP are important steps on the path to this goal, but they are not sufficient ones.

Can Airpower Provide Sufficient Deterrence Against Russia?

For 25 years, the West has enjoyed air dominance in every military conflict into which it has entered. American airpower in particular has ruled the skies over the Middle East, the Balkans, and Afghanistan, protecting U.S. and partner ground forces from enemy air attacks, providing responsive and reliable fire support, and enabling an unprecedented level of freedom of action not just in the skies but also on the ground and on the seas.

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Unfortunately, the air defense environment along Russia's periphery is much more capable than that presented by Iraq in either 1991 or 2003, let alone the Taliban or the Islamic State. While the United States today relies on evolved versions of the same weapons and tactics it used in 1991 to counter Saddam Hussein's surface-to-air defenses—the mission the U.S. Air Force calls “suppression of enemy air defenses” (SEAD)—the Russians have since then developed multiple new generations of improved radars and missiles. Today's most modern Russian surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) substantially outrange the United States' principal SEAD weapon, the High-Speed Anti-Radiation Missile; moreover, operating from inside Russia's borders, these SAMs can threaten nonstealthy combat aircraft, which will continue to constitute the bulk of the alliance's fleet for years to come, over much of the territory of the Baltic states.

Airpower thus suffers from two challenges in the Baltics. First, the time line of the fight, as revealed by extensive wargaming, is so rapid that there would be insufficient time for NATO's air forces to stop the Russian advance. Given NATO's existing and near-term posture, Russian forces could, in a short-warning scenario, inflict a decisive operational defeat on the alliance and reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga 36 to 60 hours after initiating an attack. Such

a rapid collapse of the alliance's defense simply would not allow enough sorties to be flown to deliver enough weapons to inflict enough damage (or adequately interdict lines of advance) to stop the advance. Without a sufficiently robust force on the ground to slow the enemy advance and shape the battlefield to increase the Russian forces' vulnerability to air attack—without an anvil—there is no aerial hammer.

The brevity of the time line is compounded by the severity of the air defense threat, which both bleeds off a large proportion of available sorties to the SEAD role and forces NATO's nonstealthy combat aircraft either to operate from long, standoff ranges—typically employing munitions that are less than ideal for use against moving armor—or absorb substantial attrition penetrating the defenses. In general, ground forces could expect only episodic and limited air support in the early days of any fight against Russia, while NATO's air commanders focus on defeating the Russian integrated air defense network and gaining sufficient freedom of action to operate without risking catastrophic attrition for very limited effects. And without more and heavier ground forces in the fight than NATO could currently muster, this fight would consist of a very few early days.

Airpower would also have limitations in preparing the battlefield for any NATO counteroffensive operations.

First, defeating the Russian long-range air defenses will require a considerable number of weapons landing on Russian territory, in Kaliningrad but also the western parts of Russia proper. Not only would this invite Moscow to launch tit-for-tat strikes against military targets in NATO's rear areas, including the U.S. homeland, but it could also entail significant escalatory risks. This is especially problematic given that the long-range air defense network that

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would provide coverage for Russian forces in the Western Military District and the eastern part of the Baltic states is also integral to the strategic defense of St. Petersburg and Moscow. Thus, substantially weakening or eliminating such defenses would be of more than tactical concern to the Kremlin.

Second, air attacks on ground forces are most effective when those forces are on the move and substantially less so when they are dug in on the defensive. Interviews with Iraqi commanders after the 1991 Gulf War revealed that units that properly dispersed and concealed their fighting vehicles weathered the 40-day air campaign—waged over open desert in an environment of total coalition air supremacy—with minimal losses.¹² To expect that Russian forces in the more challenging terrain of the Baltics would rapidly be ground down by allied air attacks would not seem to be a realistic strategy, especially if the forces are initially protected by a highly sophisticated SAM network and a competent air force, employing camouflage, concealment, and deception, and using jamming and other electronic warfare techniques to reduce the effectiveness of NATO's smart weapons.

Finally, ample evidence from World War II onward indicates that attacks against lines of communication are effective in degrading the performance of ground forces only when those forces are

compelled to engage in combat and consume large quantities of fuel, munitions, and other supplies. An army that is simply dug in awaiting attack is an idling engine, able to subsist on minimal resupply. Once NATO's counteroffensive begins, interdiction would certainly have a valuable role to play, but it is not a substitute for that counteroffensive.

What Approach Should Be Taken to Deter Potential Russian Aggression?

Put most plainly, the United States and NATO confront three related challenges in deterring Russian aggression in the Baltics (and, more generally, wherever NATO territory may be threatened).

The first step toward winning eventually is not losing immediately, which likely would be NATO's current fate. So, NATO needs to be able to stay in the game. The minimum requirement for deterrence by denial along NATO's frontier with Russia is to not present Moscow with the vision of an easy strategic victory—the chance to register a *fait accompli* against minimal resistance. While on any given day, the Russian leadership may not be tempted to seize even such attractive low-hanging fruit, the challenge NATO confronts is not to deter successfully on an average day; it is to deter on the one day out of a thousand, or 5,000, when Moscow, for whatever reason, sees the prospect of a crushing win over its most dangerous adversary as an attractive prospect.

The requirements for this are nontrivial, but hardly overwhelming. RAND analysis indicates that a force of about seven brigades—including, importantly, three heavy armor brigades, in addition to the national defense forces of the Baltic states, and properly supported with fires, fixed- and rotary-wing aviation, engineering, logistics, and other enablers, and adequate head-

quarters capacity for planning and command—can prevent a *fait accompli*. To be very specific, this force—present and ready to fight at the outset of hostilities—would, if properly employed, enforce an operational pause on a Russian ground force of up to 40–50 battalion tactical groups while retaining sufficiently large lodgments outside Tallinn and Riga to protect those cities from the bulk of Russian artillery.

Our assessment is that this force could sustain itself on the defensive against the Russian offensive for up to 28 days. This leads to the second of the three challenges NATO faces: winning the game. While deterrence is greatly enhanced by the ability to deny Russia a quick win, ultimately the seven-brigade force appears inadequate to hold out indefinitely against the much larger and heavier Russian order of battle, let alone counterattack to evict them from NATO territory.¹³ Accomplishing this would require a substantial additional increment of force.

While our analysis of this question is substantially less complete than that of the “stay in the game” force, we currently estimate that an additional nine to 12 heavy-maneuver brigades—again, properly supported by fires and other enablers and arriving over time to gradually reinforce NATO's position—would need to be prepared to counterattack to restore lines of communication from Poland toward Riga, reinforce the defense, and eventually conduct a counteroffensive to drive the Russians back behind their prewar borders.¹⁴

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Both staying in the game and winning it—which, recall, are about putting in place the pieces of an unambiguously credible conventional deterrent posture—require more than combat troops. Today, NATO’s defense infrastructure—the array of headquarters, bases, logistics hubs, lines of communications, transportation assets, and the legal arrangements to facilitate the deployment and sustainment of forces—is woefully inadequate to support a warfighting posture east of the Oder River. U.S. support operations remain localized in southwestern Germany, more than 1,000 miles from the likely combat front east of Riga; attempting to support multibrigade operations from that distance would be logistically impossible. The United States, and especially, its European allies need to make careful, focused, but likely extensive investments in revamping and revitalizing NATO’s ability to receive, move, and support large combat formations along its eastern boundary, and especially in all three Baltic states.

Substantial work is still needed to determine precisely what needs to be done and according to which priorities. However, RAND’s wargaming suggests that NATO needs to be able to rapidly—in a span of roughly 45 days—mobilize, deploy, fight, and sustain up to 21 maneuver brigades, organized probably in two or three corps, in a full-scale conflict with Russia in the Baltics. Given current plans and capabilities, the Army might be expected to supply up to 12 of those brigades: up to three armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs) stationed in the Baltics (the “stay in the game” force); three more ABCTs that could quickly deploy personnel to fall in on forward-positioned equipment and supplies; and up to six additional armored, infantry brigade combat teams (IBCTs) or Stryker brigade combat teams.

All the investment in soldiers and equipment, railroad cars, and planning will be of little use if the alliance does not realistically exercise its plans and capabilities.

The Army should also anticipate potentially being called on to deploy and support three or four fires brigades—at least one permanently stationed in the region and another employing prepositioned equipment—and two or three combat aviation brigades.

Because NATO’s command and control structure relies on consensus decisionmaking by the alliance’s political leadership, the United States may also be obligated to provide at least one corps headquarters to perform prewar planning and warfighting command, at least in the initial stages of any fast-moving conflict.

Critical to all of this will be NATO’s approach to exercising and training. All the investment in soldiers and equipment, railroad cars, and planning will be of little use if the alliance does not realistically exercise its plans and capabilities. The successful deployment of the first “heel-to-toe” U.S. rotational ABCT in January 2017 was a sign of how far the U.S. Army, both at home and in Europe, has come in a very short time—such an exercise could hardly have been imagined, let alone executed, a few years ago. However, all involved recognize that the long-planned movement of a single brigade is hardly a full test of the scale and complexity of the activity that would be necessary to respond to a full-blown crisis in the region. Because the threat exists today, the United States and its allies must “spin up” to confront it with some degree of urgency. Robust and increasingly realistic deployment and warfighting exercises, com-

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bined with aggressive home station and predeployment training, are necessary.

All this will cost money. As the new administration and the Pentagon contemplate increases in defense spending, the Army has the opportunity—and the obligation—to make resource requests and allocations that result both in a bigger and more capable Army. The United States needs an Army better able to execute its most vital missions to support the nation’s most important interests, one of which is surely deterring conflict with the only other power able to extinguish the American way of life in a matter of minutes—Russia. This means, among other things, increasing the number of ABCTs in the force. The currently planned number of ten active heavy brigades (the nine current ones, plus another scheduled for conversion from an IBCCT) will be inadequate to support requirements in Korea, the Middle East, and Europe. Indeed, a war in Europe alone could demand six of them, a commitment that the planned force likely could not support and certainly could not sustain.

Finally, the United States and its allies must sustain deterrence—through the demonstrated capacity to stay in the game and

then win it—without behaving so as to unnecessarily increase the likelihood of blowing up the game.

As discussed earlier, any potential crisis or conflict with Russia would lie deep in the proverbial shadow cast by nuclear weapons. A strong conventional deterrent helps manage these dangers, first by decreasing the overall likelihood of a conflict erupting and, second, by reducing the pressure on the NATO side to contemplate immediate nuclear escalation either to ward off or redress a rapid defeat. However, a strong conventional deterrent may increase those dangers by magnifying fears on the Russian side of either a NATO offensive threat or of the potential consequences to Moscow of being conventionally defeated should it fail to be deterred.

On the first score, the operational realities of the situation should serve to mitigate Russian anxieties. Less than a handful of NATO brigades on Baltic territory, even backed by the alliance’s ultimately superior air and sea power, do not represent a credible offensive threat to the territory of the Russian Federation. Although Russia’s military and political leaders might see these three brigades as merely a beachhead for more significant deployments to come, they surely must understand that the notion of NATO mounting an attack on Russia with just three brigades is absurd on its face—even assuming that the alliance would, somehow, reach agreement to undertake such a course.

The latter fear is more difficult to mitigate because ultimately the prospect of precisely such a defeat is the basis of the deterrent NATO hopes to present. That said, the fear of increasing dangers can be at least partly managed by carefully communicating NATO’s intent to Moscow and by backing those words with appropriate actions.

Certainly the alliance that navigated the treacherous waters of the Cold War, from Berlin through Cuba to Reykjavik and the final opening of the Wall, can muster the diplomatic and strategic skill needed to deal with the current crisis and maintain peace and stability in Europe . . .

Thus, the alliance and the United States must continue to seek to maintain channels of communication with Russia, at the political and military levels. Only if the two sides are talking—even if about minor issues, such as managing incidents at sea or in the air—can they make progress toward allaying mutual suspicions, thereby rendering the mutual deterrence equation more stable and efforts to rebalance it less necessary.

The idea of talking with the Russians while maintaining a posture of military strength is neither contradictory nor new. For years, this two-track strategy has been the foundation of U.S. policy toward China, and it was the approach that characterized the last 25 years of the Cold War.

The United States and its allies consistently sought dialogue with the Soviet Union, from the narrowest questions of enhancing the safety of forces operating in close proximity to the broadest ones of human rights, but all the while making Herculean efforts to maintain powerful military deterrents against the prospect of Soviet aggression.

Once again, Washington and Brussels must learn to do more than one thing at the same time in their approach to Moscow.

Further, the latter must be prepared to reciprocate to ensure that the East-West relationship does not deteriorate into the kind of dangerous and crisis-prone mode that characterized the Cold War before the scorching crucible of the Cuban Missile Crisis adjusted perceptions and attitudes on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Conclusion

Along with China's reemergence in East Asia, the return of Russia as a disruptive force on the global stage marks the definitive end of the era of so-called unipolarity—an unprecedented period that was always destined to be a brief and anomalous perturbation of the post-Westphalian norm of a global system dominated by competition among great powers.

The United States and its allies reenter this competition somewhat by surprise and somewhat unprepared, but they are nonetheless well situated to win it. According to International Monetary Fund projections, in 2017, six individual NATO countries will have gross domestic products greater than that of Russia; just those half-dozen will produce 1,400 percent of Russia's wealth. Given this, the most powerful, wealthiest, and most technologically sophisticated alliance in history has in its means and power the ability to deploy three heavy brigades in peacetime and two or three corps in wartime as the price to deter a conflict whose costs, were it to descend, would range from the incalculable to the inhuman. Certainly the alliance that navigated the treacherous waters of the Cold War, from Berlin through Cuba to Reykjavik and the final opening of the Wall, can muster the diplomatic and strategic skill needed to deal with the current crisis and maintain peace and stability in Europe until a new vision of a free and united continent can emerge.

The politics within NATO of going even as far as it has with eFP have been challenging, and developing consensus to go further is not a given. NATO is a big ship, with 29 pairs of hands on the tiller, so its course is hard to predict and at best its turning radius is wide. Consensus-building and decisionmaking require time. Nonetheless, three years ago, no one would have predicted that spring 2017 would find the forces of Canada, the UK, Germany, France, Spain, and other member states deployed in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, postured to deter Russian adventurism. Further, the alliance is no stranger to energetic debates over its future course or to emerging from those debates stronger. We should thus be modest in predicting whether the allies will countenance any specific proposal for further enhancing their posture on the territory of NATO's eastern members.

For the Army, the challenges are similarly difficult but manageable. A new “U.S. Army in Europe” must be built, focused well to the east of the Fulda Gap, and able to respond with strength and agility to help defend NATO's exposed eastern members—particularly Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Capabilities long maintained, but more recently neglected—for rapid deployment, for large-scale sustainment, for high-tempo coalition fire and maneuver against a peer adversary—must be regained and updated to suit contemporary conditions. These are hard jobs, but ones for which the Army is suited. They are in keeping with its proudest traditions and its cherished self-image as the protector of the country's most vital interests and the winner of the nation's most dangerous wars. The coming months will see many decisions made that will determine whether the Army, the U.S. Department of Defense, the United States, and NATO will rise to the challenge Russia is presenting.

Notes

¹ For our purposes, we can employ John Mearsheimer's definition of a great power as a state having “sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world” and also possessing “a nuclear deterrent that can survive a nuclear strike against it” (*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W. Norton and Sons, 2001, p. 5).

² To qualify as “rational,” the choice to initiate war need only represent the end point of an internally consistent logic connecting means and ends. Put differently, leaders who, completely at odds with all available evidence, nonetheless believe that a potential adversary is about to launch a sneak attack on them could *rationally* choose to go to war if they could legitimately argue that taking such action would counter the perceived threat *if it existed*. In this context, “rationality” relates to the coherence of the decision, not the state of mind of the decisionmakers or the congruence of their decisions with what any (or every) other individual might have done in their stead.

³ An excellent account of Tokyo's decision to accept war with the United States can be found in Eri Hotta's *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2013). In considering how these situations develop, it is vital to recognize that while outside actors may influence what options a country's leadership sees as available and how it assesses their relative acceptability, those judgments are the country's alone to make. Given that the stakes of war or peace with a great power could hardly be higher, and the cognitive pressures of being on the precipice of such a conflict hardly greater, U.S. leaders should be modest in their expectations of how precise and persuasive they are likely to be in shaping an adversary's perceptions at such a crucial moment.

⁴ RAND has explored the scenario of Russian conventional aggression against the Baltic republics in an ongoing series of wargames beginning in 2014. This work, which has involved participants from throughout the U.S. defense and intelligence enterprises and various NATO members, concluded that the alliance defenses in the region would face catastrophic failure in 36 to 60 hours (David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1253-A, 2016. As of September 25, 2017: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html). Others examining the problem have also concluded that NATO “finds itself now ill-prepared to deter Putin or respond effectively should Russia launch a large-scale or even small-scale invasion of an alliance member” (Julianne Smith and Jerry Hendrix, *Assured Resolve: Testing Possible Challenges to Baltic Security*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2016).

⁵ It can credibly be argued that in doing all of this, Russia is reacting to Western behavior that, beginning in the early 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union, not only offended its sense of self-worth as a great power but concretely reduced its actual security (see, for example, Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, London and New York: I. B. Taurus, 2016). This Perspective will not seek to settle the question of how much of Russia's behavior results from legitimate concerns over its own security, how much from opportunism, and how much from strategic intent. What can be said is that its actions do lie outside what virtually all countries—including, at times at least, Russia itself—agree to be the norms of international behavior. They have also excited great concern about its future intentions among many of its neighbors, including U.S. allies.

⁶ While there is broad agreement among students of deterrence that the twin pillars are capability and credibility, there remains substantial debate about what goes into both, especially the latter. The three credibility criteria are far from the only ones that could be applied. As a set, they have the advantages of being plausible, internally consistent, and not disproven.

⁷ There is a substantial debate among theorists as to whether reputation—the deterrer's "track record"—matters. For example, in *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threat* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007), Daryl G. Press examines a handful of cases of both deterrence failure and success and concludes that balance of forces and interests matter more than reputation. If true, this contradicts one of the three points discussed here, but it reinforces the strength of the argument overall because a NATO that appears unwilling to make the effort to mount a credible defense of its most-exposed members would seem to signal a relatively weak interest in its security and, of course, demonstrates limited capability to secure them. In *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), Jonathan Mercer makes a similar argument based on a similar set of case studies. Like Press, his work is subject to criticism for selection bias—neither he nor Press address the Allied failure to deter Japan in 1941, nor China's 1950 failure to deter the U.S. advance to the Yalu, nor the U.S. failure to deter Mao Zedong's subsequent intervention in Korea—arguably the three most recent significant instances of a deterrence failure among great powers. Also, the literature on reputation focuses entirely on its effects on *crisis* deterrence; while important, this ignores reputation's potential impact on *general* deterrence.

⁸ NATO prefers the lowercase *e* in *eFP* to distinguish the acronym from *EFP* ("explosively formed projectile"). Note also that, Russian arguments to the contrary, NATO does not accept that eFP violates either the letter or spirit of the Founding Act.

⁹ In the same document, Russia signed on to the "acknowledgement of the vital role that democracy, political pluralism, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and civil liberties . . . play in the development of common prosperity and comprehensive security; refraining from the threat or use of force against each other as well as against any other state, its sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence in any manner; respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states and their inherent right to choose the means to ensure their own security."

¹⁰ All information regarding the composition of the four battlegroups was compiled from reports in the media.

¹¹ The United States could unilaterally choose to use nuclear weapons, as could the UK or France. Whether any of the three capitals would be willing to undertake such a momentous choice, with the inevitable consequences for all of NATO, without allied consensus, seems dubious—at least to the author.

¹² *The Gulf War Airpower Survey: Summary Report* (Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 1993, p. 106) found that the simple expedient of employing earthen berms to protect Iraqi armor in the Kuwait theater of operations appeared to contribute significantly to an order of magnitude difference in losses during the Desert Storm air campaign.

¹³ As the discussion should make clear, the seven-brigade force cannot conduct a forward defense of the Baltic states; significant amounts of territory would likely be lost to the initial Russian offensive. We have not conducted any analysis of the size of the force needed to hold the line far forward.

¹⁴ NATO's air forces would also likely require reinforcement to make up for losses during this time frame. However, the most crippling problem confronting NATO's airpower after the first few days of conflict would be shortfalls in the most modern and effective weapons and munitions.

About This Perspective

This Perspective updates previous analysis published by the RAND Corporation about Russia as a source of military competition and potential conflict with the United States and its allies. It is one of several summary assessments produced to support an examination of the major drivers of U.S. national security policy and strategy. This publication takes into consideration the history of post–Cold War Russia and presents an argument about how to confront potential Russian aggression in the Baltic region, drawing on years of expertise analyzing the region and on the results of numerous wargames conducted by RAND. We articulate that argument by answering a series of questions.

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