

Deterrence By Denial to Prevent a Russian Invasion of The Baltic States

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14. ABSTRACT The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the ineffectiveness of the current U.S. and NATO deterrence by punishment strategy to produce the substantial effects necessary to stop Russian aggression. If Russia proves successful in Ukraine, momentum could lead to a future Russian invasion of the Baltic States. To deter this possibility from becoming a reality, the U.S. and NATO must protect their vulnerable Baltic State allies by doing more. Studies indicate shifting to a deterrence by denial strategy with adjustments to force posture, protection, and firepower within the region are essential. This paper identifies the realm of possibility regarding how to prevent the escalation of conflict in the Baltic States by deterring Russia's most dangerous course of action. It explains how a deterrence by denial strategy can be more effective than the current strategy in three key areas: forward forces, defensive posture, and degrading Russian Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. Finally, the paper provides recommendations on how these key areas can be adjusted to have an impact, and draws conclusions to suggest more must be done to deter Russia's interest in an invasion of the Baltic States.					
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INTRODUCTION

The United States' (U.S.) commitment to defend its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies under Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty has obligated its military assistance in regaining territory lost to a Russian invasion of the Baltic States.¹ This puts the U.S. into a complicated position where it would first seek to obtain air superiority, as historically has been necessary in previous conflicts. Establishing air superiority to defend the Baltic States would require destroying Russia's Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, primarily located in the Kaliningrad enclave.² The enclave contains the most lethal Russian Integrated Air Defense Systems (IADS), as well as nuclear capabilities, presenting a significant challenge for the U.S. and NATO.³ To target A2/AD, U.S. airpower would need to strike Russian (IADS) strategically positioned within sovereign Russian territory.⁴ In this kind of scenario, the U.S. would face classic Type I deterrence problems itself, which Herman Kahn describes as "deterrence against a direct attack."⁵ The enclave is considered an extension of the Russian homeland, and therefore, an attack on Kaliningrad is an attack on Russia.⁶ The current U.S. and NATO deterrence by punishment strategy would be unfeasible given the likelihood of Russian escalation to drastic measures. The probability of a Russian nuclear response would increase substantially. The decision would come from Russian President Vladimir Putin, who invaded Ukraine "to protect the civilian population and to 'demilitarize' and 'de-Nazify' Ukraine."⁷ To prevent the escalation

¹ David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, "Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank," (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 3, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.

² Matthew P. Stueck, "Kaliningrad Trap – Reconciling Airpower Theory With Peer Competitors," (PhD diss., School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, June 2018), 2.

³ Stueck, "Kaliningrad Trap," 2.

⁴ Stueck, "Kaliningrad Trap," 2.

⁵ Herman Kahn, *The Nature and Feasibility of War and Deterrence* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, January 20, 1960), 18.

⁶ Matthew P. Stueck, "Kaliningrad Trap – Reconciling Airpower Theory With Peer Competitors," (PhD diss., School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, June 2018), 2.

⁷ "United States European Command: Overview and Key Issues," (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 30, 2022), 2, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF11130.pdf>.

of conflict and Russia's most dangerous course of action – seizure of the Baltics – the U.S. and NATO must implement a deterrence by denial strategy. Shifting the deterrence strategy, and resourcing it appropriately, would send a strong message—the U.S. and NATO are a united, credible force with which to be reckoned. Russia must see the cost of invading the Baltic States as not worth the blood and treasure or the risk of a humiliating.

It is essential to understand the relevance of an effective deterrence strategy consisting of intimidating force composition and defensive posture to prevent an adversary from taking action.⁸ In the Texas National Security Review, Tami Biddle makes the point that a deterrence by punishment strategy seeks to persuade an adversary by threatening painful repercussions for violating demands, while a deterrence by denial strategy aims to convince an adversary that military action would fail due to the defender's ability to prevent a successful attack.⁹ At the height of the Cold War, the U.S. and NATO forces operating in Western Europe implemented a deterrence by denial strategy against a potential invasion by the Soviet Union. The Alliance assessed that a robust force posture of upwards to 300,000 troops in Germany would convince Soviet forces that an offensive would be outmatched, unsuccessful, and detrimental.¹⁰ Years later, the U.S. significantly downsized its presence in Europe, leading to a shift in strategy to deterrence by punishment, with rotational tripwire forces, to create time and space for the arrival of reinforcements for the region's defense. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 confirmed that the current strategy has been ineffective, as the U.S. and NATO's painful financial sanctions have failed to end Russia's military action so far. As the West fears that the

⁸ Tami Davis Biddle, "Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 98, <https://tnsr.org/2020/02/coercion-theory-a-basic-introduction-for-practitioners/>.

⁹ Biddle, "Coercion Theory," 101.

¹⁰ Ambassador Alexander R. Vershbow (Ret.) and General Philip M. Breedlove, USAF (Ret.), "Permanent Deterrence: Enhancements to the US Military Presence in North Central Europe," (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, February 7, 2019), 23, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/permanent-deterrence/#current>.

Baltic States could be next, this paper suggests implementing an effective deterrence by denial strategy in three key areas: an increase in forward forces, bolstering a defensive posture, and a focus on non-kinetic effects that seek to degrade Russian Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities.

THEATER GEOMETRY AND INADEQUATE FORCE POSTURE

Figure 1: Map of the Baltic Region and proximity to the Kaliningrad Enclave, Suwalki Corridor, and Russia



Source: Congressional Research Service. The author added annotation to highlight the Suwalki Corridor.

Theater geometry and disparities in force posture create an ideal operational environment for Russia to completely isolate the Baltic region, preventing access to U.S. and NATO reinforcements. The entirety of the Baltic States’ eastern border of roughly 450 miles is shared with Russia and Belarus.¹¹ The western border of the Baltic States is the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland, creating a natural gap with Sweden and Finland. Throughout the Baltic States, the terrain consists of a robust network of roads and highways, increasing Russian forces’ potential

¹¹ David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 3, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.

for operational movement and maneuver from east to west and north to south.¹² The ability for Russian forces to utilize the highly developed infrastructure would create an advantage in the factors of time and space and a corresponding disadvantage for Baltic forces. The Russian troops would have the ability to traverse the region rapidly, gain territory, establish defensive positions, and facilitate multiple lines of operations to secure the operational objectives of the capital cities. The Baltic States' limited conventional force posture of roughly a combined 3 light infantry brigades would be a mismatch against a robust Russian attack.¹³

Situated on the southern border of the Baltic States, the northeastern edge of Poland, and along the Baltic Sea coastline is the sovereign Russian territory known as the Kaliningrad enclave. It is home to the Russian Baltic Fleet, which provides the force potential for obtaining sea denial or sea control within the Baltic Sea. Kaliningrad has an additional territorial advantage in the Suwalki Corridor, a 110-150 km-wide Polish and Lithuanian land border between the Russian enclave and Belarus.¹⁴ Due to its operational importance, Russia prioritizes the protection of the corridor by emplacing long-range artillery aimed against any NATO forces that might be sent to secure the region.¹⁵ Russia's control of the corridor would establish its line of communication between the enclave and the homeland, setting conditions for an invasion of the Baltic States.

The Russian Armed Forces are composed mainly of ground forces divided into 5 districts. The Western Military District operates along the Baltic States' eastern border.¹⁶ Russia significantly increased funding for modernization campaigns such as the Strategic Armament

¹² Shlapak and Johnson, "Reinforcing Deterrence," 3.

¹³ Shlapak and Johnson, "Reinforcing Deterrence," 3.

¹⁴ Shlapak and Johnson, "Reinforcing Deterrence," 4.

¹⁵ Shlapak and Johnson, "Reinforcing Deterrence," 4.

¹⁶ Ambassador Alexander R. Vershbow (Ret.) and General Philip M. Breedlove, USAF (Ret.), "Permanent Deterrence: Enhancements to the US Military Presence in North Central Europe," (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, February 7, 2019), 17-18, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/permanent-deterrence/#current>.

Program (SAP) to increase combat readiness, update equipment, and re-arm forces in the Western Military District and Kaliningrad enclave.¹⁷ According to a Brookings Institute estimate, before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian force posture in these areas provided substantial mobility and firepower with approximately 800,000 combat personnel, roughly 947 tanks, 666 pieces of artillery, and 1,776 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs).¹⁸ Some may now see such a force as nothing but a paper tiger following Russia's debacle in Ukraine. However, history also provides profound examples of the error in underestimating Russia's ability to capitalize on favorable military opportunities, as in the Battle of Stalingrad during World War II.

The Russian advantage within this operational environment and force posture has led the U.S. and NATO for over two decades to recognize the growing vulnerability of the Baltic States. Specifically, NATO adjusted its force posture across all domains in the Baltics to reduce Russia's temptation to increase its sphere of influence. For the air domain, NATO increased its capability to 16 aircraft for the Baltic Air Policing mission.¹⁹ In the maritime domain, it provided 2 maritime groups for patrolling missions in the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas.²⁰ On land, it increased its NATO Response Force (NRF) to 40,000 personnel and created the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), consisting of a quick-reaction force of 5,000 personnel.²¹ In 2016, NATO developed the rotational enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), a tripwire force

¹⁷ Vershbow and Breedlove, "Permanent Deterrence," 17.

¹⁸ John B. Gilliam and Ryan C. Van Wie, "Feasible U.S. Steps to Strengthen NATO Deterrence in the Baltic and Poland," (Washington, DC: Brookings, March 2022), 7-8, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/feasible-us-steps-to-strengthen-nato-deterrence-in-the-baltics-and-poland/>.

¹⁹ Ambassador Alexander R. Vershbow (Ret.) and General Philip M. Breedlove, USAF (Ret.), "Permanent Deterrence: Enhancements to the US Military Presence in North Central Europe," (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, February 7, 2019), 24, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/permanent-deterrence/#current>.

²⁰ Vershbow and Breedlove, "Permanent Deterrence," 24.

²¹ Vershbow and Breedlove, "Permanent Deterrence," 24.

consisting of 4 multinational battle groups for deployments to the Baltics and Poland.²² In 2018, NATO created the NATO Readiness Initiative (NRI), known as the “Four 30s” plan.²³ It reduced the risk to the factors of time and space by providing capacity to execute operations with 30 air, maritime, and land elements within 30 days.²⁴ The recent tally of NATO forces within the Baltics and Poland consisted of roughly 18,549 personnel, 409 IFVs, 43 tanks, and 138 pieces of artillery.²⁵ Even so, NATO forward forces are still simply outnumbered and outmatched by the Russians.

ATTEMPTING TO BOLSTER A DEFENSIVE POSTURE

In spite of Russia’s operational force advantages in the context of the space of the Baltic operating environment, the U.S. and NATO have a varied history regarding European force posture. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. and NATO maintained sufficient forces in Europe for deterrence by denial. However, the fall of the Soviet Union temporarily eliminated the significant Russian threat and, seemingly, the requirement for a substantial U.S. deterrence force in Europe.²⁶ In the two decades following, with the hopes of a future partnership between Russia and the West, the growing demand for U.S. forces in the Middle East, and pivoting to the Asia Pacific region, the U.S. downsized its land forces in Europe.²⁷ In recent years NATO has

²² Vershbow and Breedlove, “Permanent Deterrence,” 24; “NATO’s Eastern Flank: Stronger Defence and Deterrence,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, March 2022, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/144032.htm>.

²³ Ambassador Alexander R. Vershbow (Ret.) and General Philip M. Breedlove, USAF (Ret.), “Permanent Deterrence: Enhancements to the US Military Presence in North Central Europe,” (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, February 7, 2019), 25, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/permanent-deterrence/#current>.

²⁴ Vershbow and Breedlove, “Permanent Deterrence,” 25.

²⁵ John B. Gilliam and Ryan C. Van Wie, “Feasible U.S. Steps to Strengthen NATO Deterrence in the Baltic and Poland,” (Washington, DC: Brookings, March 2022), 8, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/feasible-us-steps-to-strengthen-nato-deterrence-in-the-baltics-and-poland/>.

²⁶ Ambassador Alexander R. Vershbow (Ret.) and General Philip M. Breedlove, USAF (Ret.), “Permanent Deterrence: Enhancements to the US Military Presence in North Central Europe,” (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, February 7, 2019), 23, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/permanent-deterrence/#current>.

²⁷ Vershbow and Breedlove, “Permanent Deterrence,” 23.

revamped its forward forces to counter Russia's operational advantage, but it still lacks sufficient forces to deter Russia from invading the Baltic States.

By 2012, the U.S. redeployed 4 heavy brigades permanently stationed in Germany, and by 2014, the U.S. Army presence in Europe consisted of 2 light brigade combat teams.²⁸ The Russian "separatist" annexation of Crimea that same year quickly raised concerns for U.S. defensive posture and capabilities across Europe.²⁹ Further concerns focused on the potential for the Baltic States to be next.

After Russian troops entered Crimea in 2014, the U.S. immediately reassured NATO of its committed Alliance against Russian aggression under Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty.³⁰ Even so, the U.S. response with respect to postures was still somewhat limited, with deployments of company-sized ground elements to the Baltic States, 6 F-15s to reinforce the Baltic Air Policing force, 12 F-16s to Poland, and roughly 4,000 troops to Europe.³¹ These additional tripwire forces augmented the NATO eFPs for the 2015 Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR) and the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI).³² In addition to the permanent U.S. Army brigade combat teams (BCTs) in Germany and Italy in 2017, the U.S. began "heel-to-toe" rotational deployments of an armored brigade combat team (ABCT) and combat aviation brigade (CAB) to Poland, to reduce the disadvantage of time-space and enhance deterrence.³³

²⁸ Vershbow and Breedlove, "Permanent Deterrence," 23.

²⁹ Vershbow and Breedlove, "Permanent Deterrence," 26.

³⁰ David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, "Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank," (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 3, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.

³¹ Ambassador Alexander R. Vershbow (Ret.) and General Philip M. Breedlove, USAF (Ret.), "Permanent Deterrence: Enhancements to the US Military Presence in North Central Europe," (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, February 7, 2019), 26, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/permanent-deterrence/#current>.

³² Vershbow and Breedlove, "Permanent Deterrence," 26.

³³ "United States European Command: Overview and Key Issues," (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 30, 2022), 1-2, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF11130.pdf>; Ambassador Alexander R. Vershbow (Ret.) and General Philip M. Breedlove, USAF (Ret.), "Permanent Deterrence: Enhancements to the US Military Presence in North Central Europe," (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, February 7, 2019), 26, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/permanent-deterrence/#current>.

With the increased Russian aggression since 2014, the U.S. has made significant efforts to bring back a permanent force posture in Germany to supplement the OAR rotational ABCT in Poland. These elements include 22,000 personnel within a CAB, missile defense command, artillery command, sustainment command, and an intelligence brigade with additional support elements.³⁴ In the past decade, the U.S. personnel has increased to over 60,000 throughout Europe, across all domains to supplement the permanent presence in Germany.³⁵ The Marines maintain a battalion-sized rotational presence in Norway, supporting OAR deployments.³⁶ The Air Force maintains a fighter wing in the UK with “47 F-15s alongside a tanker wing, an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) squadron, and a special operations wing of CV-22 Ospreys and MC-130 Hercules aircraft.”³⁷ The U.S. Air Force also has an F-16 Fighter Wing in Italy and an attack, tanker, and ISR squadron in Incirlik, Turkey.³⁸ In Southern Europe, the Navy maintains a presence of 4 Aegis-class destroyers at the Rota, Spain naval station, anti-submarine warfare (ASW) squadron in Italy, and a naval support station in Souda Bay, Greece.³⁹ To ensure the U.S. could support additional forces in response to a European crisis, it developed several preposition stocks and war reserve sites located in Norway, Italy, Belgium, German, Netherlands, and Poland.⁴⁰ The current U.S. force posture throughout Europe is roughly 100,000, however, it has yet to regain its Cold War presence. Although, this all seems like a considerable force increase in Europe to bolster the U.S. and NATO posture, it lacks the sufficient capabilities to effectively counter Russian advantages in the functions of protection and firepower.

³⁴ Vershbow and Breedlove, “Permanent Deterrence,” 26.

³⁵ Vershbow and Breedlove, “Permanent Deterrence,” 27.

³⁶ Vershbow and Breedlove, “Permanent Deterrence,” 27.

³⁷ Vershbow and Breedlove, “Permanent Deterrence,” 27.

³⁸ Vershbow and Breedlove, “Permanent Deterrence,” 27.

³⁹ Vershbow and Breedlove, “Permanent Deterrence,” 27.

⁴⁰ “Defense Primer: Department of Defense Pre-Positioned Material,” (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, November 26, 2021), 1-2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11699/2>.

In response to Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. Army's BCTs in Germany and Italy, the rotational OAR ABCT in Poland, and the NATO eFPs formed the main response force intended to shore up NATO's capabilities.⁴¹ Further, the U.S. sent its Immediate Response Force (IRF) infantry brigade combat team (IBCT) and an additional ABCT to Germany, while NATO sent its VJTF to reinforce Europe.⁴² This response highlighted the capabilities gaps posed by the limited armor, artillery, and missile defense forces in Poland arrayed against a Russian force should the conflict widen. It must be remembered that the Western Military District and the Kaliningrad enclave alone, consisted of substantial mobility and firepower with approximately 800,000 combat personnel and thousands of tanks, pieces of artillery, and IFVs.⁴³ There was too much of and too clear an imbalance of mobility and firepower from rotational and permanent forces in Europe to credibly deter Russia. With Putin's unpredictable nature, the U.S. and NATO were encouraged to bolster their allied defensive posture to protect the Baltic States. While this force provides some deterrence by its mere presence, it could still be overwhelmed and could likely not stop a full Russian advance. There continues to be a significant disadvantage between the U.S. and NATO and Russian defensive posture. The sheer discrepancies in the numbers and capabilities of Russian forces, protection, and firepower would most likely overpower the U.S. and NATO forces in a force-on-force conflict and result in a decisive Russian victory.

KALININGRAD: RUSSIAN A2/AD ADVANTAGE

A stronger foundation in firepower and protection in Europe before the onset of hostilities could implement a more convincing deterrence by denial posture to prove to Russia that an invasion would likely fail, and thereby cause Russia to shift its risk calculus away from

⁴¹ John B. Gilliam and Ryan C. Van Wie, "Feasible U.S. Steps to Strengthen NATO Deterrence in the Baltic and Poland," (Washington, DC: Brookings, March 2022), 9, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/feasible-us-steps-to-strengthen-nato-deterrence-in-the-baltics-and-poland/>.

⁴² Gilliam and Van Wie, "Feasible U.S. Steps," 9.

⁴³ Gilliam and Van Wie, "Feasible U.S. Steps," 7-8.

attacking. However, with a bolstered U.S. and NATO defensive posture, Russia would likely place an even stronger emphasis on the A2/AD advantages it has historically had. Since the Cold War, Russia's limited alliances and perception of NATO as a threat led to its prioritization of Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. To deter Western influence in the Baltic States, Russia developed an arsenal of sensors and long-range missiles to initiate, when needed, an exclusion zone or "bubble" in the region.⁴⁴ Since 2014, the U.S. and NATO have remained concerned regarding Russia's A2/AD capabilities in conjunction with conventional forces which could deny NATO reinforcements access to the Baltics.⁴⁵ Russia's initiative to improve its A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, have only magnified the West's fears of a potential invasion of the Baltic States.

Russia is a land power that sought to gain buffer territory against Western influence and expansion to post-Soviet territories.⁴⁶ Historically, Russia faced strong naval and airpower adversaries and, over the years, evolved its forces to counter their access to it by sea and air.⁴⁷ To protect against Western air offensives, Russia standardized overlapping radars and missile systems known as an Integrated Air Defense System (IADS).⁴⁸ Additionally, Russia focused on overlapping and combining its submarine-launched missiles, long-range anti-ship missiles, and land-based strike aircraft to deny NATO's control of the maritime domain in major adjacent waters.⁴⁹

The two primary locations for Russian modernized A2/AD capabilities are within the Kaliningrad enclave and St. Petersburg. Most of Russia's more advanced A2/AD capabilities are

⁴⁴ Robert Dalsjö, Christofer Berglund, and Michael Jonsson, "Bursting the Bubble," (Stockholm, Sweden: FOI Swedish Defense Research Agency, March 2019), 4, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4651--SE>.

⁴⁵ Dalsjö, Berglund, and Jonsson, "Bursting the Bubble," 4.

⁴⁶ Dalsjö, Berglund, and Jonsson, "Bursting the Bubble," 25.

⁴⁷ Dalsjö, Berglund, and Jonsson, "Bursting the Bubble," 25.

⁴⁸ Dalsjö, Berglund, and Jonsson, "Bursting the Bubble," 25.

⁴⁹ Dalsjö, Berglund, and Jonsson, "Bursting the Bubble," 26.

strategically positioned in the enclave to target U.S. and NATO land reinforcements traveling through the Suwalki Corridor, and maritime reinforcements attempting to access ports in the Baltic Sea. Some of the significant capabilities within the enclave include “the S-400, S-300 and Pantsir-S surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, Bastion-P coast defence systems using supersonic Oniks anti-ship cruise missiles, Bal coastal defence systems, Iskander-M ballistic missiles combined with Iskander-K land-attack cruise missiles, and the ship-based Kalibr cruise missiles.”⁵⁰ To protect St. Petersburg’s industrial base and significant military presence, the city is home to the Iskander missile system, air defense units with SAM Pantsir, and Bal missile systems.⁵¹ Moreover, the Russian A2/AD capabilities include the Baltic Fleet missile systems, extensive sea mining, and approximately 15 combat air squadrons.⁵²

The implementation of its A2/AD “bubble” during the annexation of Crimea shocked the U.S. and NATO and exposed NATO’s inability to assist.⁵³ For an invasion of the Baltic States, Russia will most likely attempt to implement its A2/AD “bubble” from the Kaliningrad enclave to block access and assistance from U.S. and NATO air, land, and maritime reinforcements to the Baltic States. Russia’s ability to achieve the anti-access and denial “bubble” would provide the first line of protection required for conventional forces to invade the Baltic States with minimal resistance. If the U.S. and NATO could provide a substantial enough deterrence through a denial posture combining both kinetic and non-kinetic effects to degrade the capabilities of a Russian A2/AD “bubble,” they would deny it the A2/AD advantage Russia currently holds.

⁵⁰ Dalsjö, Berglund, and Jonsson, “Bursting the Bubble,” 26.

⁵¹ Dalsjö, Berglund, and Jonsson, “Bursting the Bubble,” 26.

⁵² Dalsjö, Berglund, and Jonsson, “Bursting the Bubble,” 42.

⁵³ Dalsjö, Berglund, and Jonsson, “Bursting the Bubble,” 45.

CREDIBLE DETERRENCY BY DENIAL: FROM TRIPWIRE FORCE TO BULWARK OF DETERRENCE

The rotational NATO eFPs only provide the Baltic States with a tripwire force capable of shortening the time-space gap for the arrival of reinforcements while lacking the force posture to deter a Russian *fait accompli*.⁵⁴ In a series of RAND Corporation wargames between 2014-15, NATO reinforcements were devastated as “Russian forces eliminated or bypassed all resistance and were at the gates of or actually entering Riga, Tallinn, and both, between 36 and 60 hours after the start of hostilities.”⁵⁵ To prevent such a catastrophe, NATO could begin to increase its forward forces by converting its rotational NATO eFPs to a permanent presence within the Baltic States and Poland. A RAND corporation study determined that a permanent presence of 7 brigades, 3 of which should be ABCTs, with additional air and artillery support, would be an effective deterrent.⁵⁶ The cost to sustain this sizable force would be considerable, with an annual estimated bill of \$2.7 billion.⁵⁷ Additionally, the significance of a force permanently present in the Baltic States could potentially provoke an unwanted Thucydidean escalation. Although, for almost two decades the Russian forces have become accustomed to the rotational presence of NATO eFPs, and an adjustment to a permanent presence in the Baltics would be unlikely to invoke a military response. Instead, a permanent presence would effectively deter Russian aggression by presenting Russia with the prospect of having to face an intimidating unified NATO force with compounded multi-country and non-state actor capabilities and forces.

⁵⁴ John B. Gilliam and Ryan C. Van Wie, “Feasible U.S. Steps to Strengthen NATO Deterrence in the Baltic and Poland,” (Washington, DC: Brookings, March 2022), 8, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/feasible-us-steps-to-strengthen-nato-deterrence-in-the-baltics-and-poland/>.

⁵⁵ David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 4-5, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.

⁵⁶ Shlapak and Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence,” 1-2.

⁵⁷ Shlapak and Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence,” 2.

To fill U.S. and NATO capability gaps with sufficient rotational and permanent forces, the Alliance’s protection and firepower capabilities in theater must be increased to strengthen deterrence. To this end, first, the U.S. should permanently station an ABCT with its equipment in addition to the current BCT located in Germany.⁵⁸ Although some studies suggest the conversion of the BCT into an ABCT would be more cost effective, the combination of a BCT’s mobility advantages with an ABCT’s protection and firepower far outweigh having one or the other.⁵⁹ The combined capabilities in Germany would facilitate the arrival of U.S. Army reinforcements in the Baltics with the speed, mobility, protection, and firepower necessary for credible deterrence.⁶⁰ Second, the U.S. OAR ABCT rotational “heel-to-toe” deployments to Poland should continue. This will provide a frontline deterrence force to respond upon notification of any Russian force mobilization.⁶¹ Third, the U.S. Army should improve its IRF by incorporating an ABCT with the IBCT as an elevated force capability.⁶² Although transportation officials suggest that it is not possible to airlift an ABCT’s equipment on a short notice deployment, a mitigation plan could facilitate the ABCT’s ability to draw preposition equipment once in Europe.⁶³ A U.S. Army initiative is currently underway to upgrade the preposition stock in Poland by 2023 to accommodate ABCT equipment requirements.⁶⁴ Incorporating 3 ABCTs in support of a deterrence by denial strategy would help close the capabilities gaps in tanks and artillery, reducing the probability of a successful Russian invasion based on force ratio comparisons.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ John B. Gilliam and Ryan C. Van Wie, “Feasible U.S. Steps to Strengthen NATO Deterrence in the Baltic and Poland,” (Washington, DC: Brookings, March 2022), 13, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/feasible-us-steps-to-strengthen-nato-deterrence-in-the-baltics-and-poland/>.

⁵⁹ Gilliam and Van Wie, “Feasible U.S. Steps,” 13.

⁶⁰ Gilliam and Van Wie, “Feasible U.S. Steps,” 13.

⁶¹ Gilliam and Van Wie, “Feasible U.S. Steps,” 13.

⁶² Gilliam and Van Wie, “Feasible U.S. Steps,” 13.

⁶³ Gilliam and Van Wie, “Feasible U.S. Steps,” 13.

⁶⁴ Gilliam and Van Wie, “Feasible U.S. Steps,” 13.

⁶⁵ Gilliam and Van Wie, “Feasible U.S. Steps,” 14.

The U.S. must also consider forward basing a Multi-Launch Rocket System (MLRS) battalion from the U.S. and 2 Patriot batteries from Germany to Poland. Since air defense elements are already permanently stationed in Germany, permanent forward basing with the rotational OAR ABCT would be an effective posture. The MLRS battalion would require great logistical support for a permanent move to Poland where it would also supplement the OAR ABCT. The combined presence and strength of armor, protection, and firepower capabilities in Poland would provide a credible force for deterrence by denial against Russian aggression. The RAND study emphasized that should a convincing allied presence exist in Poland, Russia would conclude that an attack would “trigger a prolonged and serious war between Russia and a materially far wealthier and more powerful coalition, a war Moscow must fear it would be likely to lose.”⁶⁶ This should be the goal.

Finally, historically, Russia has demonstrated success in implementing its A2/AD capabilities to limit a country’s operational effectiveness, as in Crimea in 2014. For an invasion of the Baltic States, Russia would most likely prioritize achieving an A2/AD “bubble.” Therefore, the U.S. and NATO should reinforce its ability to produce hard power effects by also developing non-kinetic capabilities in cyber warfare to degrade the Russian A2/AD. The cyber warfare elements of such would focus on targeting Russian IADS to significantly degrade their capabilities prior to the onset of hostilities. The ability to disrupt Russia’s assessed impenetrable and highly valued air defense capabilities in competition ahead of conflict, could instill uncertainty and demonstrate vulnerabilities to the Russian forces. The non-kinetic campaigning could also magnify the U.S. and NATO’s advancements in cyber warfare and with potential corresponding ability to achieve desired effects in conflict. On the other hand, the increase in

⁶⁶ David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 2, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.

Russian doubt for the reliability of A2/AD capabilities and the capacity to achieve the access “bubble” could help convince Russian forces an invasion would be too costly to its forces.

Although critics suggest that the effects of cyber warfare can be provocative in nature, compared to the alternative is to allow the devastation of the Baltics by an unrestrained Russia. The benefits of engaging in cyber operations in the course of competition would seem to greatly outweigh the risks. Russia’s inability to obtain an A2/AD “bubble” would aid greatly in the implementation of an effective deterrence by denial strategy to prevent a Russian invasion of the Baltics States.

CONCLUSION

Russia’s recent invasion of Ukraine has been an attempt to reinvigorate the “iron curtain” strategy by isolating post-Soviet territories from Western influence and preventing NATO expansion. The current deterrence by punishment strategy has not convinced Russia to end the war in Ukraine. If Russia ultimately achieves its objectives in Ukraine, there is a growing fear that the Baltic States will be next. In 2017, one of Putin’s top advisors, Andrey Illarionov, reiterated, “Putin has his eyes on eventually reclaiming Estonia.”⁶⁷ This paper is not intended to provide the answer to this problem, but instead provides a starting point for a much broader discussion of what is in the realm of possible. The U.S. and NATO must do more to prevent a Russian invasion of the Baltics from becoming a reality, with the first step being to increase the deterrence posture sufficient to support a denial strategy. The mere presence of an increase in forward forces and a solid foundation of protection and firepower could change Russia’s calculus. The goal is to convince Russia that an invasion of the Baltics would be a devastating mistake with detrimental outcomes and a historical Russian loss against the West.

⁶⁷ Cody L. Zilhaver, “Russians in Estonia: A Case Study in Offensive Structural Realism,” (Washington, DC: The Strategy Bridge, June 16, 2017), https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2017/6/16/russians-in-estonia-a-case-study-in-offensive-structural-realism#_edn8.

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