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NATO Transformation

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NATO'S ENHANCED FORWARD PRESENCE: CHANGING THE ESCALATION DOMINANCE CALCULUS IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

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The article is assessing how NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic states and Poland has altered the strategic balance in the Baltic Sea region. Before 2016, Russia enjoyed clear escalation dominance there. However, the deployment of multinational, combat-ready NATO forces with the logic that any attack on them would induce a collective NATO response has changed this calculus. Since then, the burden is on Russia, whether the three Baltic states are worthy enough for Moscow to take up a major war against NATO.

The present analysis¹ intends to assess how the Enhanced Forward Presence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has changed the escalation dilemma in the Baltic Sea region. Escalation itself in the military context could be interpreted as “an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants”.² The qualitative change of the conflict, i.e. the crossing of thresholds, is a key element in the escalation discourse. Escalation dominance means, using Herman Kahn's classical definition³, that one side has the ability to escalate the conflict in such ways that are either expensive or disadvantageous to the adversary.

It is also important to note that although escalation is often perceived as an interactive process between two or more actors, in fact escalation might also be unilateral. One side may decide that deliberately crossing an important threshold may grant sufficient benefits, including even victory, particularly if the adversary is taken by surprise, or is in a politically, militarily, economically, or socially unbalanced position, when the escalation occurs. Such an option might be particularly tempting, if the attackers could calculate that a symmetrical answer is unavailable for the other side due to the shortage of necessary capabilities or to the lack of political will.

¹ The article was prepared with the support of the research grant No. 129243, titled *Tradition and Flexibility in Russia's Security and Defense Policy*, provided by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office of Hungary.

² F.E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*, RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, 2008, p.8, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG614.pdf access: 20 December 2018].

³ H. Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*, Transaction Publishers: Washington, 2009.

The Post-Crimea Situation in the Baltic Sea Region

This was exactly the type of scenario that was the main source of concern in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania from 2014 on. In the spring and summer of 2014, thus following the Russian invasion of the Crimean peninsula and the breakout of hostilities in Eastern Ukraine, there were widespread fears in the Baltic states about the danger of a Russian attack similar in nature to the ones conducted against Ukraine.

Hypothetical scenarios included mobilization of the Russian-speaking population of Estonia and Latvia along a pro-Russian secessionist agenda, supported by Russia's special forces infiltrating the two countries. Parallel to generating domestic instability, Russia would have been likely to line up massive conventional forces along the borders of the Baltic states, most probably under the pretext of a similar snap exercise that was seen along Ukraine's Eastern border during the invasion of Crimea. Such a move would have had considerable deterrent effect on the Baltic governments, namely that any action taken against the pro-Russian rebels would have provided Moscow with a pretext for a massive conventional attack, for example by claiming the right to defend Russian compatriots.

In 2014-2015, there were no NATO forces stationed in the Baltic states, except the minuscule Baltic Air Policing mission, which usually consisted of four fighter jets at the same time, as well as some 50-100 support personnel deployed. Hence, in the initial few days of any Russian destabilization effort or a military attack, the three Baltic governments

could not have relied on any other defence than their own small armed forces.

Under such circumstances, according to many analyses prepared at that time, Russian armed forces would have needed approximately 60 hours⁴ to occupy all three Baltic States after launching an open, full-scale attack, supported by the already strong pro-Russian local insurgency. Although advancing Russian troops would have suffered considerable losses from the desperate resistance of the regular armed forces of the Baltic states and would have needed to face a lasting irregular partisan-type of resistance, neither of these would have changed the outcome: the quick occupation of all three Baltic countries.

Thereafter, it was highly likely that after securing control over the occupied Baltic states, Russia would not have continued the attack against Poland. Instead, most probably Moscow would have declared its intention not to advance further and suggest a ceasefire, but at the same time would have threatened NATO that Russia's reply to any counter-attack effort would include one or more nuclear strikes. This latter element would have been clearly in line with the long-lasting concept of Russian military thinking on the role of nuclear weapons as a tool of de-escalation.⁵


A Tough Choice for NATO

Hence, in case of a Russian attack against any of the Baltic States, NATO would have needed to face a cruel dilemma of whether it is worth risking an all-out nuclear war against Russia for the sake of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. One option would have been

⁴ D.A. Shlapak, M.W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank. Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*, RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, 2016, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND_RR1253.pdf access: 20 December 2018].

⁵ M. Kroenig, *A Strategy for Deterring Russian Nuclear De-Escalation Strikes*, Atlantic Council: Washington, April 2018, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/Nuclear_Strategy_WEB.pdf access: 20 December 2018].

to launch a counterattack regardless, thus risk that Russia keeps its word and delivers a nuclear strike. Though by the conventional logic of nuclear confrontation, this initial strike would have been limited in size, it is still highly unlikely that consensus could have been reached among NATO countries in favour of a counterattack under such conditions – and definitely not fast enough to help the attacked Baltic states.



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The second option would have been to accept the fait accompli, and abandon the defence of the Baltic states, for the sake of avoiding the danger of a NATO-Russia armed conflict that could have gone nuclear. However, this option would have fatally eroded the credibility of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, that is granting collective defence, thus constituting the most fundamental component of NATO. By demonstrating in practice that the collective defence guarantee of NATO was vague and useless, Russia would have been able to inflict serious damage on the Alliance, and probably also to put an end to the NATO approximation ambitions of a number of post-Soviet and Western Balkan countries, namely of Ukraine, Georgia, Macedonia, and back then also Montenegro. Besides, such a defeat of NATO would have probably decided

also the question of Sweden's and Finland's possible NATO accession for good.

There was also a third option, namely NATO escalating itself, following basically the same logic that was used in the Cold War, i.e. threatening by escalation in order to avoid defeat. From the perspective of the escalation, the problem NATO would have had to face was the following: Once Russia has overrun the three Baltic states and has unilaterally stopped fighting thereafter, the political and military burden would have been on NATO's shoulders to increase the tensions again and launch an attack on the Russian forces deployed to the Baltic states, risking an all-out war, including possible nuclear strikes.

As the rapid overrun of the Baltic states would not have caused major direct military losses to any other NATO countries, it was also highly uncertain whether the Alliance would have had the necessary coherence for an Article 5 type answer. First, as some NATO countries have been openly and harshly critical of the sanctions introduced against Russia, concerns were reportedly high that the same countries could be reluctant to support a collective NATO response to a Russian military attack of limited size, i.e. to an attack that would have affected "only" the Baltic states.

Public opinion was not encouraging either. In spring 2015, Pew Research Center conducted a detailed survey that produced highly concerning results: To the question whether their countries should defend an attacked NATO ally, only a median of 51 per cent of respondents said yes.⁷ The highest ratio was achieved by the U.S. and Canadian populations, where 56 and 53 per

⁶ Interview with a competent NATO official, Latvia, autumn 2015.

⁷ J. Dempsey, *NATO's European Allies Won't Fight for Article 5*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 June 2015 [http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=60389 access: 20 December 2018].


cent agreed, respectively. In Europe, British respondents scored the highest, with 49% in favour of using military force to defend a NATO ally, closely followed by Poland, where the result was 48%. However, in Germany only 38% agreed that Berlin should use military force to protect its NATO allies.

Under such circumstances, it was not surprising that concerns were high about both NATO's willingness and ability to defend the Baltic states. Hence, had Russia opted for a unilateral escalation, Moscow would have probably enjoyed clear escalation dominance over NATO.

NATO's Steps to Change the Escalation Calculus

Realization of the fundamental vulnerability of the Baltic states to a Russian attack urged the Alliance to take several steps to tackle the problem. Already at the Wales Summit held in September 2014, NATO made a commitment⁸ to strengthen collective defence and implement reassurance measures towards its Eastern members. Reassurance measures included continuous, though limited air, sea, and land presence in the Eastern part of NATO – meaning in practice the Baltic states, as well as Poland and Romania – on a rotational basis, preparing for the rapid deployment of larger forces, establishing a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). It was also agreed about a gradual increase of defence spending to 2 per cent of the GDP of NATO member countries. Commitments were made to strengthen the command and control structures on the Eastern flank, along with necessary logistics and infrastructure, besides launching a massive series of exercises preparing for collective defence scenarios. However, no major combat-ready, defensive forces were deployed to the Baltic states.

Measures adopted in Wales were aimed mostly at shortening NATO's reaction time had a crisis erupted in the Eastern part of the Alliance. However, these steps were yet unable to address the fundamental strategic problem, to be exact Russia's clear escalation dominance in the Baltic Sea region mentioned above.



Measures adopted in Wales were aimed mostly at shortening NATO's reaction time had a crisis erupted in the Eastern part of the Alliance


Had Moscow decided on an open, full-scale invasion of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, NATO would have still been unable to defend its Eastern members due to concerns related to reaction time and to the actual deployability of military capabilities. The minor units, deployment of which was decided upon in Wales, would have been clearly unable to either stop a Russian invasion or even win time sufficient for deployment of the larger NATO forces. Moreover, it was also questionable whether the presence of minor reassurance components would have been able to significantly strengthen the political coherence of the Alliance behind a possible Article 5 commitment.

The Tripwire of Enhanced Forward Presence

Fundamental change was brought by the Warsaw NATO Summit, held in July 2016, where it was decided that the Alliance would deploy multinational, combat-ready forces to the three Baltic states, as well as to Poland.⁹

⁸ *Wales Summit Declaration*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 05 September 2014 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm access: 20 December 2018].

Regarding the size of the forces to be deployed, a substantial analysis prepared by the RAND Corporation in 2014-2015 and published in 2016 argued for the need of deploying seven brigades, including three armoured brigades, as well as the necessary air and maritime components.¹⁰ his force would have been able to prevent a rapid Russian victory over the Baltic states, though would not have been enough for mounting a lasting and successful defence, let alone defeating the attacking Russian forces. The main objective would have been to win enough time for the arrival of NATO reinforcements. RAND argued that such a deployment would have changed Russia's strategic calculus by annulling the perspective of a quick victory and replacing it with the shadow of a lasting, prolonged war.



Measures adopted in Wales were aimed mostly at shortening NATO's reaction time had a crisis erupted in the Eastern part of the Alliance

NATO, however, opted for a different route. In Warsaw it was decided that altogether four multinational, combat-ready battalions would get deployed to the Eastern flank, one to every Baltic state, and a fourth one to Poland. Every battalion consists of a lead

nation, always a major military power of NATO, as well as of several other countries contributing. The battalion deployed to Estonia is led by the United Kingdom; the one operating in Latvia has Canada as the lead nation, while the battalion in Lithuania is led by Germany. Meanwhile, the United States is the leading force of the fourth battalion, deployed to Poland.

This was the first-ever case that combat-ready, multinational NATO forces were deployed to all three Baltic countries.¹² Though the participation of individual countries in these battalions, as well as the presence of particular national detachments in them are both rotational, the Enhanced Forward Presence as a whole is intended to be lasting. The deployment reversed the previously ongoing trend of decreasing British and Canadian presence on the European continent¹³; besides, it constitutes the return of Germany to the European theatre as a strong military power.

From the strategic perspective, the main novelty of the Enhanced Forward Presence is its core purpose, often described as a tripwire logic. The four battalions are not deployed to the Baltic states and Poland in order to hold up advancing Russian troops. Even the seven brigades suggested by RAND would not be able to do it. Instead, the four NATO battalions are deployed in order to

⁹ *Warsaw Summit Key Decisions. Fact sheet*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, February 2017 [https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_02/20170206_1702-factsheet-warsaw-summit-key-en.pdf access: 20 December 2018].

¹⁰ D.A. Shlapak, M.W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank. Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*, RAND Corporation: Santa Monica 2016, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND_RR1253.pdf access: 20 December 2018].

¹¹ *Boosting NATO's Presence in the East and the Southeast*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 10 September 2018 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm access: 20 December 2018].

¹² J. Lük, H. Praks, *Boosting the Deterrent Effect of Allied Enhanced Forward Presence*, Policy Paper, International Centre for Defence Studies: Tallinn, May 2017 [https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/ICDS_Policy_Paper_Boosting_the_Deterrent_Effect_of_Allied_eFP.pdf access: 20 December 2018].

¹³ J.R. Deni, *NATO's Presence in the East: Necessary but Still Not Sufficient*, "War on the Rocks" blog, 27 June 2018 [<https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/natos-presence-in-the-east-necessary-but-still-not-sufficient/> access: 20 December 2018].

make sure that a Russian attack immediately and undoubtedly induces a collective, Article 5 type answer from the Alliance. The reason is that the multinational composition of these battalions and particularly the involvement of important NATO military powers as lead nations guarantee that no Russian attack would be possible without putting considerable British, German, Canadian, and the U.S. forces in harm's way. In other words, if Russia attacks the Baltic states or Poland, it cannot avoid fighting, defeating, and, probably, destroying these four battalions. However, inflicting major losses on the U.S., British, German, and Canadian forces, as well as on a number of other NATO allies would work as a tripwire, i.e. would lead to a faster and more unified military response of the Alliance.

Part of NATO's motivation was also that deploying forces of such size as RAND suggested could have been perceived by Russia as a threat. Seven brigades, three of which are armoured, and even the others that are highly mobile, supported by the necessary artillery, air, and naval components could theoretically pose a significant threat to Russia's western regions, and possibly even to St. Petersburg. However, the four battalions altogether constitute no meaningful threat at all, and Russia is well aware of it.¹⁴

Nevertheless, one needs to be aware of the fact that even the Enhanced Forward Presence would not be sufficient for actually defending the Baltic states. In case of a Russian attack, all three Baltic states would

get occupied, at least for a while, so NATO's realistic objective is not the defence of the Baltic states from a Russian attack, but a liberation of them thereafter.



The Enhanced Forward Presence and the tripwire logic behind its deployment from 2016 on have considerably weakened the escalation dominance Russia had earlier enjoyed

Substantial hardships need to be addressed in the Enhanced Forward Presence also in terms of interoperability, shortage of certain capabilities, and duplication of others.¹⁵ There are also concerns about whether the whole tripwire would actually work, i.e. whether the losses sustained by certain major NATO countries would be really sufficient for generating a robust Article 5 answer.¹⁶

Conclusions

The Enhanced Forward Presence and the tripwire logic behind its deployment from 2016 on have considerably weakened the escalation dominance Russia had earlier enjoyed. Before the Warsaw Summit decisions, in case of a rapid and decisive Russian attack on the Baltic states the burden would have been on NATO's shoulders to escalate further and risk an all-out, possibly nuclear war – or to not escalate and admit defeat, risking the overall loss of credibility of the Alliance. Meanwhile, NATO did not have the same escalation ability

¹⁴ P.K. Baev, *The Military Dimension of Russia's Connection with Europe*, "European Security", Vol. 27, 2018 [<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09662839.2017.1399876?needAccess=true&instName=SOAS> access: 20 December 2018]; interview with a Russian expert, Moscow, April 2018.

¹⁵ J.R. Deni, *NATO's Presence in the East: Necessary but Still Not Sufficient*, "War on the Rocks" blog, 27 June 2018 [<https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/natos-presence-in-the-east-necessary-but-still-not-sufficient/> access: 20 December 2018].

¹⁶ D.P. Chamberlain, *NATO's Baltic Tripwire Forces Won't Stop Russia*, "The National Interest", 21 July 2016 [[https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/natos-baltic-tripwire-forces-wont-stop-russia-17074?nopaging=1/](https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/natos-baltic-tripwire-forces-wont-stop-russia-17074?nopaging=1) access: 20 December 2018].

against Russia in the Baltic Sea region, due to the lack of both capabilities and willingness.

The deployment of four multinational battalions to the Baltic States has changed this escalation calculus. By strengthening its military capabilities on the Eastern flank and increasing the probability of the collective, Article 5 response to a Russian attack, NATO turned the escalation problem around. For Moscow, it is not possible any more to change the status quo quickly and particularly not without directly attacking the U.S., British, German, and a number of other non-Baltic NATO forces. In other words, before the Enhanced Forward Presence, NATO had to confront the dilemma of whether it was able and willing to risk an all-out war against Russia for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Since 2016, however, it is Russia that has to face the same question, i.e. whether it is worth risking a major, lasting war against NATO for the three Baltic states.

Of course, Russia still has the theoretical possibility of escalating by attacking the Baltic states and the NATO forces there, while the Alliance is still unable to do the same against Russia, as the four battalions are evidently not sufficient for any such adventures. Hence, a significant asymmetry still prevails in the escalation potentials of Russia and NATO in the Baltic Sea region.

However, since the Enhanced Forward Presence has become operational, Russia's escalation dominance is largely over. Moscow cannot escalate any more without taking up much higher risks and potential costs than it would have had to take up before 2016. Theoretically, Moscow might still opt for an all-out attack against the Baltic states by calculating that the internal incoherence as well as slow reaction could prevent the Alliance from giving a meaningful, collective response. However, in practice it is highly unlikely that under such circumstances Kremlin would risk a major war against NATO.

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