

The Suwalki Gap dilemma

A strategic and operational analysis

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In NATO circles, considerable concern was caused by Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggressive posture, especially since the invasion, occupation and annexation of Crimea, and his support for separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine. The general expectation was that any future aggression would either come in Ukraine or the Balkans, or perhaps rather in the areas adjacent to the Baltic Sea. There, it is feared, Putin could try to regain control over the Baltic republics, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, territories that used to be part of the Soviet Union until its demise at the end of 1991.¹ If that happens, the operational focus would fall on the so-called Suwalki Gap, the some 90-km-wide gap between the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and the nominally independent ex-Soviet republic of Belarus. It is through this gap that NATO would have to rush reinforcements and supplies from Poland to the Baltic republics, and it is this gap that Russia would have to close to prevent that. It is possible that events may quickly spiral out of control once the fuse is lit. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to analyse the strategic and operational aspects surrounding the possible scenarios regarding the Suwalki Gap in the event of a Russian attempt to retake the Baltic republics.



The article begins by analysing the broad Russian approach to international politics and how the Russians view their own place in the world, after which these insights will be applied to the Russian position towards the Baltic states. Subsequently, NATO's contrasting view is analysed, as is the crucial operational importance of the Suwalki Gap between Poland and the Baltic states for countering a Russian offensive. The article concludes with a possible scenario of how such a Russian offensive against the Baltics may unfold, and how it may escalate very quickly into a general war.

Vladimir Putin's grand strategy

When trying to read Vladimir Putin's mind to assess his grand strategy, several things must be kept in mind. The first is a maxim by the British strategist Sir Basil Liddell Hart, who drew up

several battlefield guidelines for military commanders. One of them was: 'Take a line of operation which offers alternative objectives. For you will thus put your opponent on the horns of a dilemma, which goes far to assure the chance of gaining one objective at least – whichever he guards least – and may enable you to gain one after the other.'²

Liddell Hart was, of course, writing about the operational level of war, but his words may

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1 See for instance Larisa Brown, 'Putin's dry run for invading Europe', in: *Daily Mail*, 21 December 2017.

2 Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York, Praeger, 1954) 348.

German soldiers of NATO's Very High Readiness Task Force conduct a river crossing training

PHOTO NATO, MARC-ANDRE GAUDREULT





A Ukrainian soldier sits atop a BMP-1 infantry-fighting vehicle during Exercise Combined Resolve in Hohenfels; the 2014 Russian take-over of Crimea and part of Ukraine was an important wake-up call for the West

PHOTO NATO

equally apply to security strategy as well. With this in mind, let us read one pair of analysts' uncertainty: 'Many analysts emphatically insist that Russia is fundamentally revisionist. Others reject this interpretation and maintain precisely the opposite. The first camp believes that Russia harbours irredeemably expansionist ambitions and strives to reassert imperial control over the region. Though Russia is willing to use force to achieve this goal, it is content to use subversion and provocation to shape conditions until the time is right for a *fait accompli*. The second camp takes a more sympathetic view and portrays Russia as a defensive actor. Fear rather than imperial impulses animate Russian foreign and defense policy. It begrudgingly accepts that Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland are members of NATO. Yet Russia is justifiably

concerned that the United States will do everything in its power to prevent Russia from occupying its rightful place as a great power peer... Compounding the problem is that Russia's actions are entirely consistent with both narratives.'³

A third element is the introduction of the concept of hybrid warfare (called 'new-generation warfare' by the Russians)⁴ by the Chief of the Russian General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov. In an article in a Russian military journal in February 2013, he wrote of new methods of warfare, which he defined as 'military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special-operations forces. The open use of forces – often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation – is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.' He went on, referring to 'non-standard' applications of force: 'Frontal engagements of large formations of forces at the strategic and

3 Michael A. Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, 'Threading the needle through the Suwalki Gap', 26 March 2019. See: <https://www.eastwest.ngo/idea/threading-needle-through-suwa%C5%82ki-gap>.

4 Ulrich Kühn, *Preventing Escalation. A NATO Playbook* (Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018) 15.

operational level are gradually becoming a thing of the past. Long-distance, contactless actions against the enemy are becoming the main means of achieving combat and operational goals... Asymmetrical actions have come into widespread use, enabling the nullification of an enemy's advantages in armed conflict. Among such actions are the use of special-operations forces and internal opposition to create a permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state, as well as informational actions, devices, and means that are constantly being perfected.⁵

In his testimony before the Armed Services Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, Christopher S. Chivvis of the RAND Corporation translated the 'Gerasimov doctrine' into three objectives: Capturing territory without resorting to overt or conventional military force; creating a pretext for overt, conventional military action, and using hybrid measures to influence the politics of countries in the West and elsewhere. This includes information operations, using cyberspace, proxies, clandestine measures, and economic and political influence.⁶

The Russian take-over of Crimea, and part of Ukraine, may serve as an excellent example. During the night of 27-28 February 2014, heavily armed men, clad in camouflage uniforms without identifying insignia, appeared all over Crimea. They speedily moved to seal off all Ukrainian military bases and police stations, and occupied all key points in the territory, including broadcasting centres and government buildings. President Putin feigned ignorance, saying that these were 'local self-defence forces'. Later a clearly amused Putin admitted on television that the 'green men', as they became known, were in fact Russian soldiers acting under his command.⁷ Tactically, it was brilliant. By misleading and surprising Ukraine and the West, and using overwhelming force for the crucial first 48 hours, Putin ensured that Crimea was taken without a shot being fired.

In 2015, Putin told an American academic, Professor Daniel Treisman (University of California) that 'the operation to seize the

[Crimean] peninsula was 'spontaneous' and 'not at all' planned long in advance'.⁸ This fits in with the view that Putin is primarily an excellent tactician with an unerring eye for a gap, rather than a thoughtful strategist with a master plan. At times, he gives the impression that he would like to restore either the entire Soviet Union or, at any rate, the core areas, being the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic republics and, perhaps, Georgia.

Putin himself made it crystal clear: '[O]ur country will continue to actively defend the rights of Russians, our compatriots abroad, using the entire range of available means.' He added: 'I am referring to those people who consider themselves part of the broad Russian community; they may not necessarily be ethnic Russians, but they consider themselves Russian people.'⁹

German political scientist Hannes Adomeit concludes that the old USSR is Putin's 'conceptual point of reference', rather than 'a precise geographic and geopolitical frame of reference that determines his policies'. In 2008 Putin said at an international conference: 'The fall of the USSR was a great [sometimes wrongly translated as 'the greatest'] political catastrophe of the 20th century.' And in 2011 he said the USSR was simply 'Russia under a different name.' To him, above all, the USSR's value was in its status as a superpower, equal to that of the USA.¹⁰

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- 5 Valery Gerasimov, 'Russian military doctrine by General Valery Gerasimov' (translated by Robert Coalson). See: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/robert-coalson/russian-military-doctrine-article-by-general-valery-gerasimov/10152184862563597/>. In March 2019 Gerasimov repeated these thoughts in a speech in Moscow. See: Andrew E. Kramer, 'Russian General pitches 'Information' operations as a form of war', in: *The New York Times*, 2 March 2019).
 - 6 Christopher S. Chivvis, 'Understanding Russian 'hybrid warfare' and what can be done about it', Rand Corporation, 22 March 2017. See: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT468/RAND_CT468.pdf.
 - 7 Martin Murphy and Gary Schaub jr., 'Sea of peace' or sea of war: Russian maritime hybrid warfare in the Baltic Sea', in: *Naval War College Review* 71 (2018) (2) 1-2; Michael Kofman et al, 'Lessons from Russia's operations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine' (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2017) 5-25.
 - 8 Daniel Treisman, 'Why Putin took Crimea', in: *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016) (1) 47.
 - 9 Ivo Daalder, 'Responding to Russia's resurgence', in: *Foreign Affairs* 96 (2017) (6) 33.
 - 10 Hannes Adomeit, 'Putin's 'Greater Russia': misunderstanding or mission?', *Raam op Rusland*, 27 February 2019. See: <https://www.raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/roesski-mir/878-putin-s-greater-russia-misunderstanding-or-mission>.

Putin's tactical brilliance does not mean that he has no grand strategy. Building on Putin's public utterances, Vasily Gatov offers the following reconstruction of Putin's highly nationalist world-view: 'Mother Russia is the absolute good. Positive, educated and well-behaved, it fosters the good for all the neighbors and even non-neighbors. Though sometime before Russia was humiliated and surpassed by some obscure forces, it persistently revives itself and wants to spread the good it represents. But the entire world is ruled by illiterate others (that are also forces from the past) who persistently conspire to harm Russia and its legitimate interests. All these others are villains by default; their goal is to dissect and destroy Russia. This is the world of negation and denial; all others are liars and hypocrites. In order to confront this terminal clash of civilizations Russia needs to employ the spiritual power of its history and faith. Russia is wealthy and resourceful and the others envy its richness and potential. In order to pursue their conspiratorial goals, others make propaganda against Russia, send spies and recruit traitors among Russians. Villains also are persistently lecturing an educated and ingenious Russia about what is appropriate and what is not. Cultured and reasonable Russia needs no lecturing from anyone. The behavior of the others shows their hypocrisy and evil goals.'¹¹

Putin and the Baltic states

Russia lacks defensible borders.¹² This facilitated the invasions by Napoleon in 1812 and Hitler in 1941. Therefore, the real Russian obstacles to invaders are its vast spaces and the intense cold of winter. The distance between Russia's western border and Moscow is so great that even the German mechanised forces, experienced in *Blitzkrieg*, did not reach the capital before the onset of the unbelievably cold winter weather. This was one of the reasons Josef Stalin placed



PHOTO NATO/BUNDESWEHR, MARCO DOROW

the greater part of Central Europe under his control in the late forties. Those countries offered a huge buffer territory which, added to the endless Russian distances, made any invasion by the West totally impossible.

However, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (NATO's communist counterpart) and of the Soviet Union itself in 1990-1991, changed Russia's geopolitical position dramatically. The more than 2,000 kms from Hannover near the intra-German border to Moscow were reduced to about 800 kms between the border of the nearest NATO member, Latvia, and Moscow. This contributed to a feeling of insecurity in the

11 Vasily V. Gatov, 'Contagious tales of Russian origin and Putin's evolution', in: *Society* 53 (2016) (6) 620-621.

12 Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map tells us about Conflicts and the Battle against Fate* (New York, Random House, 2012) 155.



Exercise of NATO's Very High Readiness Taskforce. Once the Baltic states are invaded, their fate is sealed

Kremlin; in the 2015 Russian National Security Strategy it is expressly cited as a threat.¹³

In an important policy speech in 2007, Putin identified NATO's eastward expansion expressly with America's aim – in his eyes – to dominate the world. He complained about '[o]ne single centre of power. One single centre of force. One single centre of decision-making. It is a world in which there is one master, one sovereign.'¹⁴

Putin himself expressed the Russian fear in 2014: 'Sometimes I think, maybe it would be better for our bear to sit quiet, rather than to chase piglets in the forest and to eat berries and

honey instead. Maybe they will leave [our bear] in peace. They will not. Because they will always try to put him on a chain... They will rip out its fangs and its claws. Once they've ripped out its claws and fangs, the bear is no longer needed. They will make a stuffed animal out of it... It is not about Crimea. We are protecting our sovereignty and our right to exist.'¹⁵

13 Joe Kyle, 'Contextualizing Russia and the Baltic States', Foreign Policy Research Institute, Winter 2019, 107.

14 Cited in Ivo Daalder, 'Responding to Russia's resurgence', in: *Foreign Affairs* 96 (2017) (6) 32.

15 Cited in Natalya Bugalyova, *How we got here with Russia: The Kremlin's World View* (Washington, Institute for the Study of War, 2019) 21.

As viewed from the Kremlin, the Baltic republics – and, more importantly, their membership of NATO – form a clear threat to Russia’s military security. The question is, how far would Moscow go? In the short term, it seems, not beyond covert measures to undermine Baltic independence. The presence of sizeable Russian-speaking populations in Estonia (25.2 per cent), Latvia (26.9 per cent), and Lithuania (5.8 per cent),¹⁶ may, however, provide the Russian government with a potential Trojan horse to stir up trouble. These Russian-speakers are concentrated in the border regions. For instance, 73 per cent of the population of the Estonian county of Ida-Viru are Russian-speaking, and the region’s largest city, Narva, contains 82 per cent of Russian-speakers.¹⁷ This may then be utilised as a pretext for an invasion.¹⁸

It is very unlikely that Russia is actively seeking to get embroiled in a war with NATO. Vladimir Putin is not Adolf Hitler. He may rather be seen as a chess master, looking for gaps in his opponents’ forces and striking only where there is a reasonable chance of success and where he can neutralise immediate countermeasures through deception and hybrid warfare. Based on what is known about Putin’s political convictions and his tactical flair, it may be assumed that he will wait until a suitable opportunity arises before striking. And then any actions will start off as plausibly deniable hybrid operations along the lines suggested by General Gerasimov.

Once the Baltic states are invaded, their fate is sealed. The Baltic defence forces may slow down the invaders to a limited extent, but will not be able to stop them, let alone repulse them. In a series of wargames in 2014 and 2015, the RAND Corporation’s conclusions were stark: ‘As currently postured, NATO cannot successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members. Across multiple games using a wide range of expert participants in and out of uniform playing both sides, the longest it has taken Russian forces to reach the outskirts of the Estonian and/or Latvian capitals of Tallinn and Riga, respectively, is 60 hours.’¹⁹

At any rate, whether Russia is actively considering military action against the Baltics or not, Putin is clearly putting the West ‘on the horns of a dilemma’. According to the Russian minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, the Russian military forces in the areas adjacent to Norway, Finland, Poland and the Baltic republics were reinforced with two divisions and three independent brigades, as well as 5,000 units of new and overhauled weapons systems and pieces of equipment. More than 350 ‘military facilities’ were made operational.²⁰ In addition, the exclave of Kaliningrad (of which more later) has been reinforced with strong conventional land and naval forces and strategic missiles.²¹

At the same time, the Russian defence force has stationed three mechanised divisions along the Ukraine border.²² This means that the Russians are well-placed to strike wherever they want, while NATO is kept guessing as to the Kremlin’s intentions.

The view from Brussels

Obviously, the view from Brussels – and Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius – looks very different. NATO sees Russia as a threat. In 2013, the RAND Corporation analysed the Baltic states’ defence against a possible Russian invasion. The conclusion, as stated previously, was that ‘NATO cannot successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members’, especially that of the Baltics. At the most, it would take between 36

16 Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, ‘The Securitization of National Minorities in the Baltic States’, in: *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 10 (2017) (2) 26-45.

17 Joe Kyle, ‘Contextualizing Russia and the Baltic States’, 108.

18 Linda Robinson et al: *Modern Political Warfare. Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Washington, RAND Corporation, 2018) 85-102.

19 David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank. Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Washington, RAND Corporation, 2016) 1.

20 Jaroslaw Adamowski, ‘Amid Russian military buildup, Poland reacts’, *Defense News*, 27 August 2018.

21 Christopher Woody, ‘Russia appears to be building up its military bases near a weak point in the NATO alliance’, *Business Insider*, 11 July 2018. See: <https://www.businessinsider.nl/russia-building-up-military-base-in-kaliningrad-near-suwalki-gap-2018-7/?international=true&r=US>.

22 Catherine Harris and Frederick W. Kagan, *Russia’s Military Posture: Ground Forces Order of Battle* (Washington, Institute for the Study of War, 2018) 1.

and 60 hours for the Russian forces to reach the Estonian and Latvian capitals, Tallinn and Riga, on the Baltic coast. 'Such a rapid defeat would leave NATO with a limited number of options, all bad: a bloody counteroffensive, fraught with escalatory risk, to liberate the Baltics; to escalate itself, as it threatened to do to avert defeat during the Cold War; or to concede at least temporary defeat, with uncertain but predictably disastrous consequences for the Alliance and, not incidentally, the people of the Baltics.'²³

What would NATO's response be to such an invasion? There is some difficulty to interpret President Donald Trump's position. At various times, he has said that the US would not automatically come to the aid of small states threatened by Russia.²⁴ Nevertheless, NATO has taken measures to bolster the Baltics' defence. While the Baltics themselves have strengthened their modest military capability to 57,000 full-time soldiers and reservists,²⁵ NATO decided at its Wales summit in 2014 to establish an

'enhanced Forward Presence' of 5,000 personnel in the Baltics. This force – three infantry battalions, one in each of the Baltic republics, and a fourth in Poland – would consist of contingents supplied by several member states and rotated every few months. They would serve as a kind of 'trip wire' to slow down invasion forces and alert the rest of NATO. Then the so-called NATO Spearhead Force (13,000 troops) would be mobilised and made ready for deployment within 48 hours. It could be at the front within a week. This force's task would then be to win time for the rest of NATO to be made ready for a bigger war. Finally, they would be followed by the Very

23 Shlapak and Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank*, 1.

24 Max Fisher, 'Donald Trump's ambivalence on the Baltics is more important than it seems', in: *The New York Times*, 22 July 2017; John Wagner, 'Trump says defending tiny NATO ally Montenegro could lead to World War III', in: *The Washington Post*, 18 July 2018.

25 Kyle, 'Contextualizing Russia and the Baltic States', 109; Stephen Flanagan et al, *Detering Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance* (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2019).

A military parade in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, which turned out to be an excellent forward position to threaten both the Baltic states and Poland

PHOTO ANP/TASS, VITALY NEVAR



High Readiness Joint Task Force (27,000 troops), but these troops' presence on the battlefield would only be felt after 30 days.²⁶

It is here that the so-called Suwalki Gap comes into play. Before we come to that, there is another factor to be looked at, namely the role played by maritime connections across the Baltic Sea. According to a Danish analysis, 'The Baltic Sea is also a major conduit for energy supplies from Russia to Europe, which continues to be a major customer for Russian crude oil. The bulk of this traffic is shipped by tanker from the ports of Primorsk and Ust-Luga near St. Petersburg via the Baltic to northwestern Europe. Furthermore, the Nord Stream gas pipeline runs along the seabed. This consists of two parallel pipes that run from Vyborg in Russia to Greifswald in Germany. The first came on-stream in November 2011 and the second almost a year later. It is currently the longest undersea pipeline in the world.'²⁷

In other words, if a war in this region cuts the flow of gas and oil to Europe, it could have a devastating economic effect in the short term, especially on the NATO member states. In the longer run, of course, Russia too would suffer, but if the Russians could finish the operation rapidly and present the West with a *fait accompli*, things might return to 'normal' rather quickly.²⁸

The Suwalki Gap

The Suwalki Gap takes its name from a Polish town in the far north-east of the country, near the Lithuanian border. Squeezed in between Lithuania and Poland, there is a Russian exclave, approximately 140 square kilometres in size, known as the *Oblast* (region) Kaliningrad, named after the capital city, Kaliningrad. Until 1945, the city was the capital of East Prussia and known as Königsberg. East Prussia was a German

exclave which was divided into two pieces in 1945. The south-western half was given to Poland (then a Soviet satellite state), and the north-eastern half to the Soviet Union as the Oblast Kaliningrad. The German inhabitants fled or were forcibly expelled.

The region was placed under the administrative control of the Russian Federation, the dominant constituent state of the Soviet Union. While the USSR existed, this posed no problem. But when it fell apart at the end of 1991 into its 15 constituent republics, Kaliningrad found itself cut off from Russia, separated by the newly independent Belarus.

The existence of the region as an exclave poses strategic problems for Russia, but has also some advantages. The main problem was that its exposed position makes it vulnerable to attack and difficult to defend, unless very strong deterrent forces are stationed there. On the other hand, Kaliningrad turned out to be an excellent forward position, able to threaten both the Baltic states and Poland. And, being the base of medium-range nuclear missiles, it also threatens the Central European capitals of Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, Bratislava, and even Vienna and Berlin.

Should President Putin ever decide to take the Baltics, geography dictates an invasion from the Russian territory immediately east of Estonia and Latvia, as well as from Kaliningrad. This means that the Baltic republics may be invaded simultaneously from the east and the southwest, making any defence difficult.

If NATO theory is put into practice, the Alliance will then mobilise its Spearhead Force. While the Spearhead Force, together with the Baltic militaries, tries to slow down the Russian advance, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force will assemble along the border between Lithuania and Poland and try to hit the Russian invaders' southern flank.

This border, about 90 kilometres long, is the Suwalki Gap. But hitting the Russian invaders will not be easy. On the western side the border

26 Jens Ringsmose and Sten Rynning, 'The NATO Response Force: A qualified failure no more?', in: *Contemporary Security Policy* 38 (2017) (3) 447.

27 Martin Murphy, Frank G. Hoffman and Gary Schaub jr., *Hybrid Maritime Warfare and the Baltic Sea Region* (Centre for Military Studies, University of Copenhagen, November 1916) 7.

28 Murphy, Hoffman and Schaub, *Hybrid Maritime Warfare and the Baltic Sea Region*, 9.

ends at the Oblast Kaliningrad; on the eastern side at the Belarusian border. Belarus is an independent ex-Soviet state, but normally stays close to Russia in its foreign policy. It is quite conceivable that the country may allow Russia to utilise its territory for an invasion of Lithuania and to close off the Suwalki Gap.²⁹ The Kaliningrad region at the other end of the Gap is well-placed to plug the hole as well.

Any NATO force trying to get through to Lithuania and the other Baltic countries will, therefore, have to fight its way through a Russian army which, in the short term, will be considerably stronger. As Professor Mark Galeotti of the Royal United Services Institute points out: 'The Russian calculus is that there may not be a longer term, especially if it was able to threaten nuclear strikes or similarly-disabling precision conventional ones to a bring a conflict to an early end.'³⁰

In other words, although Russia's relatively weak economy makes the country vulnerable in a longer war, its stronger forces at the flashpoint give them an advantage not to be trifled with, especially if they succeed in achieving tactical and operational surprise. They may then confront NATO with a *fait accompli*, making a longer war unnecessary.

A study co-authored by a former General commanding US forces in Europe, Lieutenant-General Ben Hodges, makes it clear exactly how important the Suwalki Gap is. Three features are identified:

- It separates the Russian motherland from Oblast Kaliningrad and its naval bases.
- Cutting off the corridor could strangle the three Baltic states and prevent NATO aid from getting through.
- Closing the corridor 'would provide Moscow with a contiguous military front between the Baltic Sea and Ukraine, consolidate its political stranglehold over Belarus, and more directly threaten Poland's sovereignty and territorial integrity.'³¹

The Russians' possession of Kaliningrad is a very strong tactical and operational advantage. Logic

The exclave Kaliningrad poses strategic problems for Russia, but also some advantages

dictates that the Alliance will have to do something about the exclave very soon after hostilities break out. Nikolai Sokov, a Russian-American academic, refers to 'the artillery and short-range missiles' stationed in Kaliningrad. He paints an interesting picture of the difficulties NATO forces would encounter in the Suwalki region: 'Terrain is difficult and there are only two roads [as well as one railway line – LS] that allow fast reinforcement. The bottom line – Russia does not have to send tanks, as everyone fears, to prevent NATO reinforcements: it can use artillery or other strike assets to destroy the roads and keep them closed for a fairly extended period of time. If the RAND Corporation estimate (thirty-six to sixty hours) is to be believed, then these reinforcements should arrive hours sooner, perhaps in twenty-four hours or so. If one imagines a more efficient Russian offensive, then they should be in place twelve to eighteen hours after commencement of hostilities.'³²

Moreover, the report co-authored by General Hodges makes it clear that the vicinity is not very conducive to manoeuvre warfare: 'One of

29 Mason Clark and Nataliya Bugayova, 'Russia in review, May 9 – 13, 2019', *Institute of the Study of War*. See: <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2019/05/russia-in-review-may-9-13-2019.html>; David Axe, 'Is Russia trying to take over Belarus', in: *The National Interest*, 14 May 2019.

30 Mark Galeotti, 'Russia and NATO both think that time is on their side', *Raam op Rusland*, 17 April 2019. See: <https://www.raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/militaire-beleid/1267-russia-and-nato-both-think-time-is-on-their-side>.

31 Ben Hodges, Janus Bugajski and Peter B. Doran, 'Securing the Suwalki Corridor: Strategy, Statecraft, Deterrence and Defense', *Center For European Policy Analysis*, 9 July 2018, 22.

32 Nikolai Sokov, 'How NATO could solve the Suwalki Gap dilemma', in: *The National Interest* 1 May 2019. See: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-nato-could-solve-suwalki-gap-challenge-55347>.

the most significant takeaways: large parts of the Suwalki Corridor can be a nightmare for maneuver. The region's confined rolling fields are disrupted by chain lakes, rivers, streams, thick stands of forest, and muddy soil during rainy seasons, favoring the defender. Only two narrow roads physically connect the Polish-Lithuanian border — making for a tight and predictable funnel through which to move brigade-sized or larger formations.³³

The Kaliningrad problem

We have seen how the Oblast Kaliningrad, being cut off from the Russian motherland, is an exposed territory, but, at the same time, a valuable forward asset. Its main value lies in the possibility of augmenting a Russian invasion

into the Baltics from the east with a simultaneous advance from the southwest, of helping to close down the Suwalki Gap, and to blackmail the eastern NATO members with nuclear missiles.³⁴

Any NATO general pondering how to respond to a Russian invasion of the Baltic states will have to focus on Kaliningrad as well. If the planned NATO counteroffensive is to happen, the threat from Kaliningrad will have to be neutralised at all cost and very quickly. Therefore, according to Sokov, a 'massive increase of NATO presence in the vicinity of the Suwalki Gap should remain part of the menu of options'.³⁵

Another obvious course of action is to take out the Russian military in the Kaliningrad region almost from the first hour of fighting. This may entail a ground offensive to occupy the region. But that would be very risky in view of the huge military buildup in the exclave and the danger of escalation, perhaps even to the nuclear level. The other alternative is an overwhelming air

33 Hodges, Bugajski and Doran, 'Securing the Suwalki Corridor', 18.

34 Sokov, 'How NATO could solve the Suwalki Gap dilemma'.

35 Ibidem.



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Lieutenant-General Ben Hodges
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the Suwalki Gap*

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and missile bombardment to paralyse the Russian forces in the vicinity right from the beginning. In the light of the incomparably smaller risk to NATO, it stands to reason that this option would be favoured by the Alliance's military and political structures. That would, however, only be possible if the NATO forces in Poland and Lithuania are considerably strengthened.³⁶ Kaliningrad, in any language, amounts to a very tough nut to crack.

A war scenario

Let us now imagine a – theoretical – war scenario between Russia and NATO in the Baltic region.³⁷ Given the Russian propensity for avoiding conventional clashes in favour of hybrid warfare, it is logical to assume that Russia will not attempt a full-scale invasion after a period of increasing tension and build-up of its forces along the border. That would give NATO ample warning to start countermeasures. Instead, one may assume a lightning strike without warning. Combined with a smoke screen, figuratively speaking, to place NATO 'on the horns of a dilemma' and mislead the West, this would slow down any NATO response considerably. It stands to reason that the invaders would strive to stay, as it were, below the Article 5 threshold as long as possible.

In an ideal situation – from Moscow's perspective – NATO could even be persuaded not to intervene at all. One may assume that Russia will see to it that a plausible excuse for its own military movements is given, one that effectively paints NATO as the aggressor, instead of Russia.

In the light of the Crimea intervention, one may imagine heavily armed 'green men' in unmarked uniforms popping up in the eastern regions of Estonia and Latvia adjacent to Russia, and in the western part of Lithuania next to Kaliningrad. The Kremlin says that the Baltic states are conducting operations against the Russian-speaking areas close to the Russian border. Confusion reigns in NATO capitals as intelligence services and politicians scramble to make sense of what is happening.

The 'green men' are rapidly reinforced, and within 24 – perhaps 36 – hours, it is clear that they are in fact Russian troops. By which time they are well on their way to the Baltic coast and the three republics' capital cities. The Baltic military and the NATO troops in these countries succeed in slowing down the Russian advance, but not in stopping it. At the same time, asymmetric tactics, information and cyber warfare, are used to disrupt infrastructure and to increase general confusion. As the RAND Corporation concluded in a 2017 report: 'Information warfare is part of the Russian approach to non-linear warfare that encompasses old and new methods and tools. One such example is the Soviet 'reflexive control' that aims to interfere with the decisionmaking processes of the adversary through disinformation and deception and the use of today's information technologies and media, not only in Russian but many other languages. It also encompasses 'strategic masking,' which is spreading disinformation via media and manipulation of the adversary into believing reports of military movements. With the proliferation of information technologies and the amounts of private information that people make available online, national governments, international organisations and societies have become more vulnerable to information warfare.'³⁸

To this one may add the fact that Russia's military intelligence department, known by its acronym GRU, is known to have recruited inhabitants of regions (such as the Baltics) which

36 Charlie Gao, 'NATO's worst nightmare: Russia's Kaliningrad is armed to the teeth', in: *The National Interest*, 25 May 2018. See: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/natos-worst-nightmare-russias-kaliningrad-armed-the-teeth-25958>.

37 Several such scenarios have been written. Anders Puck Nielsen, 'How would a war between Russia and the West play out?', *Romeo Squared*, 1 January 2018. See: <https://romeosquared.eu/2018/01/01/the-military-scenario/>; Kris Osborn, 'NATO vs. Russia in a war for the Baltic states: Who wins?', in: *The National Interest*, 8 November 2018. See: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/nato-vs-russia-war-baltic-states-who-wins-35532>; Ulrich Kühn, *Preventing Escalation in the Baltics: a NATO Playbook* (Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018); Douglas Barrie et al, *Defending Europe: Scenario-based Capability requirements for NATO's European Members* (London, International Institute for Strategic Studies, April 2019).

38 Marta Kepe, 'NATO: Prepared for countering disinformation operations in the Baltic States?', *The Rand Blog*, 7 June 2017. See: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/06/nato-prepared-for-countering-disinformation-operations.html>.

Russia could arguably forcibly annex. These would spread fake news or instigate riots against the Baltic governments in order to lessen their capacity to resist an invasion. Baltic officials refer to 'Russian influence tactics' and 'sleepers cells'.³⁹ This would fit in entirely with General Gerasimov's hybrid warfare doctrine.

In the meantime NATO mobilises its Spearhead Force and rushes it to the border between Poland and Lithuania. In addition, Poland fears that the Russians will not stop at the border and orders a general mobilisation. The NATO troops,

in conjunction with the Polish, move up to the Suwalki Gap. They are, however, slowed down by Russian air attacks, causing considerable casualties. Other reinforcements are brought in by sea, but subjected to severe Russian air and naval attacks originating from the Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg areas. NATO bombers and warships unleash a concerted bombardment on Russian troops and military installations in the Oblast Kaliningrad, dealing the Russians a heavy blow.

Things now get dangerous. If the Russians fear that NATO may invade Kaliningrad, they may decide to escalate the war, which hitherto has been confined to the Baltic area. According to

39 'How the Baltic states spot the Kremlin's agents', in: *The Economist*, 1 August 2019.



NATO exercise around the Suwalki Gap

PHOTO NATO

the usually very well-informed US investigative journalist Bob Woodward, Russia 'had privately warned [Defence Secretary General Jim] Mattis that if there was a war in the Baltics, Russia would not hesitate to use tactical nuclear weapons against NATO'.⁴⁰ But even if that does not happen, they may very well widen the operational area by stirring trouble or even invading Ukraine and the Balkan NATO members. If that threshold is passed, what started off as a regional clash may degenerate into a Third World War.

To prevent this scenario, a RAND Corporation study found, a force of about seven mechanised brigades, including three heavy armoured

brigades, adequately supported in the air and at sea, was the minimum required to defeat the Russians.⁴¹ However, even the Very High Readiness Force does not provide this. And that assumes that the forces reach the operational area in time to prevent the Russians from confronting NATO with a *fait accompli*.⁴²

It does not seem as if NATO would be able to prevent Russia from occupying the Baltic states. As with Crimea, if the Russians have possession of the Baltics, it is extremely unlikely that they will relinquish their gains. They will probably sit tight and wait for the storm to subside.

NATO, therefore, has two options and one hope. The first option is to continue pretending that its present countermeasures are adequate to stop and even roll back a Russian invasion, and to do nothing further. The second is to increase its defence spending considerably and to establish ready forces strong enough to deal with Russian aggression. In the absence of this, one hope remains: That President Putin will not risk a full-blown war with NATO, even one he can win in the short term. If so, it will not be because NATO's present countermeasures have intimidated him, but rather because Russia's vulnerable economy cannot sustain a war with NATO for any considerable period of time. Nevertheless, a seasoned observer like ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger, Chairman of the Munich Security Conference, writes about 'our sleepwalking into a serious confrontation over the Baltics'.⁴³

It is a huge dilemma for Western leaders. How to deter Russia without provoking a general war? It will require nerves of steel as well as an absence of the kind of testosterone which one finds in abundance in too many world statesmen. Perhaps for inspiration one could look to the likes of Otto von Bismarck, rather than Donald Trump. ■

40 Bob Woodward, *Fear. Trump in the White House* (London and New York, Simon & Schuster, 2018) 132.

41 Shlapak and Johnson: *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank*, 8.

42 Kyle, 'Contextualizing Russia and the Baltic States', 113.

43 Cited in Ulrick Kühn, *Preventing Escalation in the Baltics: a NATO Playbook* (Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018) i.