

**ESCALATION IN THE BALTICS:
AN OVERVIEW OF RUSSIAN INTENT**

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ABSTRACT

Russia poses a significant threat to the Baltics. Through hybrid warfare means, Russia has set the stage for invasion and occupation in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This paper begins with an exploration of the motivations and history Russia has for occupying the Baltics by primarily addressing the issues of energy dominance and the Baltics' precedence for insurgency. The Baltic states have whole-of-nation defense strategies in conjunction with NATO interoperability which should most likely deter a full-scale invasion on the part of Russia, despite Russia possessing military superiority. However, Russia has a history of sewing dissent through information operations. This paper addresses how Russia could theoretically occupy an ethnically Russian city of a Baltic country and explores what measures Russia may take to hold onto that territory. Specifically as it pertains to a nuclear response, Russia may invoke an "escalate to de-escalate" strategy, threatening nuclear war with intermediate-range warheads. This escalation would take place through loose interpretation of Russian doctrine and policy that is supposedly designed to protect the very existence of the Russian state. This paper concludes by discussing ways forward with research, specifically addressing NATO's full spectrum of response to Russia's escalation through hybrid warfare.

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INTRODUCTION

“Russia unabashedly seeks power,” is one of the few statements that most Western journalists would feel comfortable publishing regardless of political affiliation in 2020. How Russia seeks that power, and what its next steps look like, is a topic of contentious debate. In 2014, the world was shocked as “little green men” invaded Crimea¹. Since 2012, Russia has amplified its military presence at Kaliningrad while attempting to establish energy dominance in northeastern Europe². Russia has a vested interest in the Baltic states, and President Putin has increasingly indicated a desire to threaten nuclear action³. This begs the question: is Russia planning to invade the Baltics, and would it use nuclear weapons to keep the region under its control?

This paper begins by discussing Russia’s complicated history with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania: countries known for guerilla warfare and staunch patriotism. It also discusses Russia’s desire to recapture and revitalize ethnically Russian strongholds and why a full-scale invasion of any Baltic state is counter-intuitive to Russia’s goals. This paper will explore Russia’s use of hybrid warfare as well as Russia’s potential course of action for nuclear options in a conflict with NATO to ensure capture of Baltic territory.

SETTING THE STAGE: MOTIVATIONS AND HISTORY

Russia is a geopolitical realist, and it seeks to maintain power by keeping other nations dependent. Russia accomplishes this task through energy dominance. Much of Europe relies on Russia for oil which it exports across Baltic ports⁴. As countries begin to migrate toward alternative energy sources, such as Lithuania’s emerging natural gas industry⁵, Russia’s energy dominance in Europe is threatened. As a response, Russia is finding creative ways to exert its authority in the energy realm by amplifying its nuclear power presence. In November of 2020, a Russian-subsidized nuclear power plant known as Astravets opened in Belarus, 25 miles from the Lithuanian capital⁶. These recent developments have been highlighted as posing significant threats to Baltic security. If the Baltic states are not reliant on Russia for energy or compliant with their exports, Russia could face economic threats of more costly shipping and an overall lack of regional power, driving them to act militarily. Belarus is benefiting from the exchange through job creation and affordable energy amid a global pandemic that has otherwise cost nations employment and economic stability. One could speculate that if Russia were to pursue a military option in the Baltics, Belarus could serve as a forward-staging environment and ally against Lithuania⁷.

¹ Shevchenko, V. (2014, March 11). "Little green men" or "Russian invaders"? Retrieved December 14, 2020, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26532154>

² Lithuania, State Security Department of Lithuania. (2020, February 24). *National Threat Assessment 2020*. Retrieved November 27, 2020, from <https://www.vsd.lt/en/threats/threats-national-security-lithuania>

³ United States, Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense. (2018, February). *2018 Nuclear Posture Review*. Retrieved December 4, 2020, from <https://media.defense.gov>

⁴Ferris, E. (2020, July 1). Unplugging the Baltic States: Why Russia’s Economic Approach May Be Shifting. Retrieved November 24, 2020, from <https://russiamatters.org/analysis/unplugging-baltic-states-why-russias-economic-approach-may-be-shifting>

⁵ State Security Department of Lithuania, *National Threat Assessment 2020*

⁶Nardelli, A., Chrysoloras, N., & Seputyte, M. (2020, December 10). Atomic Plant at EU’s Border Spooks Leaders Amid Risk Warning. Retrieved December 10, 2020, from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-12-10/nuclear-plant-at-eu-s-border-spooks-leaders-amid-risk-warnings>

⁷ State Security Department of Lithuania, *National Threat Assessment 2020*

Soviet occupation in the Baltics prior to the mid-twentieth century boasted a litany of atrocities to include mass deportations of ethnic Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians to Siberia⁸. Although Perestroika brought about national sovereignty for many Soviet satellites, the 21st century has seen a shift in Russian foreign policy to one of nostalgic imperialism. Some speculate that Putin's motivations in Europe are ethno-nationalistic as demonstrated by the invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Prior to the military occupation, Russia made its position clear that individuals of Russian heritage living in former satellites are, in fact, Russian. This was demonstrated in Ukraine through the administration of Russian passports to Crimean Russians⁹. Russia is repeating this phenomenon in the Baltics to aggravate sovereignty and fuel a sense of separatism. Over 80,000 people in Estonia and 300,000 in Latvia hold "non-citizen" status. Russia recently changed its travel policies to allow these non-citizens to visit Russia without visas, a privilege that was previously reserved only for former citizens of the USSR but has now expanded to their offspring¹⁰. Approximately one quarter of the population in Estonia and Latvia identify as ethnically Russian. Certain areas have much higher concentrations of ethnic Russians such as the city of Narva which is 82% Russian¹¹. Many Baltic Russians face discrimination over Russian being their primary language. In Latvia, Russian-speaking residents who do not know Latvian well enough can be fined up to 250 Euros and possibly lose their jobs¹². Russia shows open arms to a diaspora while their media capitalizes on the struggles of national identity prevalent in the Baltics. Although hybrid warfare will be discussed later, it is important to note that Russia's demographic aggravation in the region is a first step toward occupation.

DEFENSE POLICIES, ASSETS, AND INTENT

The 20th century's largest armed resistance, known as the Forest Brothers, was a 66,000 strong force that waged insurgency against the Soviets from 1945 through the 1990's. It is estimated that 10% of all Lithuanians either fought for or provided aid on behalf of the resistance¹³. Such a legacy of liberty from Russian occupation continues today in the national security and defense strategies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania¹⁴. Estonia's National Security Concept states, "In the event of a military attack, the entire nation will be involved in immediate defence (sic) and counterattack." Indeed, 2% of Estonian GDP goes to military expenses, and compulsory conscription ensures that wider breadths of citizens have a military training background in subjects of land, sea, air, and cyberspace based defense. Estonia constantly assesses its population's willingness to fight an invading aggressor, and the results indicate a strong sense of patriotism. This holds true even among ethnic Russians, 50% of whom would defend Estonia if invaded¹⁵. Each of the Baltic states has developed this total defense approach to

⁸ Strods, H., & Kott, M. (2002). The file on operation "Priboi": A re-assessment of the mass deportations of 1949 [Abstract]. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 33(1), 1-36. doi:10.1080/01629770100000191

⁹ Treisman, D. (2016, May/June). *Why Putin Took Crimea*. Retrieved November 29, 2020, from web.a.ebscohost.com. doi:0015-7120

¹⁰ Antsupov, V. (2017, April 06). Decree Signed: Young Estonian Non-Citizens Will Be Able to Travel to Russia Without a Visa. Retrieved December 9, 2020, from <https://ee.sputniknews.ru/society/20170406/5301505/Ukaz-podpisan-molodye-negrazhdane-Jestonii-smogut-ezditi-v-Rossiju-bez-vizy.html>

¹¹ Grigas, A. (2015, December 7). Russia's Motives in the Baltic States. Retrieved December 12, 2020, from <https://www.fpri.org/article/2015/12/russias-motives-in-the-baltic-states>

¹² Korneev, Y. (2019, October 06). The Language of Stumbling: How the Baltic States Are Fighting Russian. Retrieved December 4, 2020, from <https://iz.ru/928122/iurii-korneev/izyuk-pretknoveniia-kak-v-stranakh-baltii-boriutsia-s-russkim>

¹³ Georgian, E. (2017, May 11). A Brief History of The Forest Brothers. Retrieved December 09, 2020, from <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/lithuania/articles/a-brief-history-of-the-forest-brothers>

¹⁴ Flanagan, S., Osburg, J., Binnendijk, A., Kepe, M., & Radin, A. (2019). RAND. *Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance*, research reports. doi:10.7249/rr2779

¹⁵ Estonia, Ministry of Defence. (2017). *National Security Concept 2017*. Retrieved December 7, 2020, from https://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article_files/national_security_concept_2017.pdf

unconventional warfare which relies on civic participation in addition to interoperability with NATO allies¹⁶.

Kaliningrad exists to provide mainland Russia a forward staging environment for ground-based missile systems and air superiority against NATO forces west of the Baltics. The Lithuanian *National Threat Assessment 2020* highlights the risk Kaliningrad poses. Since 2012, Russia has built up its missile capabilities in Kaliningrad, many of which are nuclear capable. These missiles span from shorter range defense systems that reach out to 130 kilometers to the “missiles Iskander-M” that reaches out to 500 kilometers. Additionally, Kaliningrad has bolstered its aviation divisions which include fighter, bomber, and helicopter regiments¹⁷.

With a superpower military, forward posturing of weapons systems out of Kaliningrad, and the potential for Belarusian support, it is clear that Russia possesses the asset advantage over the Baltic states. Despite the strength in assets, it is unlikely that Russia would conduct a full-scale, conventional invasion of any Baltic country. Such an attempt would provide a very clear “line in the sand” for a NATO response, as highlighted in Latvia’s security policy¹⁸. A surge invasion could result in catastrophic infrastructure damage across a region from which Russia seeks to benefit. Economically speaking, the risk of having to repair or replace ports, manufacturing hubs, roads, and railways outweighs any benefit from acquiring these amenities by force. As mentioned previously, the main focus of the Baltic states’ defense plans is whole-of-society action¹⁹. Citizens in the Baltics have a high willingness to fight, and state efforts have been made to encourage patriotism and discourage influence by Russian media. A conventional surge would be not only unprecedented but disadvantageous to Russia. Even if the Russian Federation threatened nuclear action to dissuade NATO, the Baltics would prove to be a protracted counter-insurgency operation for decades to come.

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE IN HYBRID WARFARE

Hybrid warfare is defined as a combination of “assertive policies, information operations, and covert and overt military and nonmilitary tactics.”²⁰ Through this definition, Russia has already launched multiple campaigns against the Baltics. Between amplifying existential dread by bolstering Kaliningrad and forging stronger economic partnerships in Belarus, Russia has capitalized on its skills in intimidation. Although Russia would be unlikely to attempt a full-scale invasion of the Baltics, one cannot assume that it would be unwilling to accept some degree of resistance as part of a limited invasion. Russia has allegedly added urban counterinsurgency through the integration of special operations forces and conventional forces in its routine military exercises. Flexing military capabilities, while pursuing aggressive economic endeavors, is a form of hybrid warfare. As a nonmilitary tactic, Russia has allegedly lodged cyber attacks in Estonia²¹ and Lithuania²². In terms of information operations, Russia sews dissent in the region through either antagonistic official rhetoric from the state or via its media’s propaganda. In 2007, Russian state rhetoric incited violence in the Estonian capital city of Tallinn after a relocation of a Soviet memorial²³. In recent years, Russian journalists have sought to discredit Baltic sovereignty by selectively describing their policies supporting national unity as being actively anti-Russian and

¹⁶ Latvia’s Security Policy. (2020, June 19). Retrieved December 06, 2020, from <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/security-policy/latvia-s-security-policy>

¹⁷ State Security Department of Lithuania, *National Threat Assessment 2020*

¹⁸ Latvia’s Security Policy

¹⁹ Flanagan et al., *Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance*

²⁰ Flanagan et al., *Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance*

²¹ Flanagan et al., *Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance*

²² State Security Department of Lithuania, *National Threat Assessment 2020*

²³ Flanagan et al., *Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance*

discriminatory against the Russian identity²⁴. If Russia is already engaging in hybrid warfare in the Baltics, one may ask what the next stage of escalation looks like.

One hypothetical example may be that Russia declares the treatment of Baltic Russians as inhumane and directs a “peace-keeping” presence in a border city with a mostly ethnically Russian demographic such as the aforementioned Narva. Russia may deploy troops without insignia operating as a paramilitary police and civil service force, and it may keep larger ground assets such as tanks and artillery postured just across the border in Russia. Such a small scale intervention cannot be equated to a surge. The Baltics’ reliance on NATO for defense against invasion would now serve as a disadvantage due to uncertainty as to whether this should drive a response on their part. If Russia attempts a long term occupation of a particular area, it is important to analyze the point at which nuclear options begin appearing in this spectrum of hybrid warfare.

In 2019, the United States exited the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty after Russia violated it multiple times by testing intermediate range nuclear-capable missile systems. First signed in 1987, the INF treaty banned ground-based nuclear weapons operating in a 500 to 5500 kilometer range²⁵. This treaty forced the “fight” from the realm of regional nuclear deterrence to one of strategic deterrence. With Russia’s priorities becoming increasingly focused on regaining regional dominance, it should be clear that the types of weapons the INF treaty called to prevent are the precise threats that could come into play in the Baltics. Possession of the assets does not necessarily indicate the intent to employ them, but it should motivate preparation. The U.S. Department of Defense’s *2018 Nuclear Posture Review* alleges that Russia would use low-yield nuclear weapons in a first-strike capacity in order to achieve coercive advantages in lower levels of conflict. This allegation provides the justification for the United States to further develop its sea launch ballistic missiles (SLBM) and sea launch cruise missiles (SLCM) in order to raise the threshold for regional nuclear escalation²⁶. The United States considers Russian nuclear doctrine to promote an “escalate to de-escalate” strategy.²⁷ In other words, should Russia capture territory, and this gain were challenged by a substantial number of adversaries, Russia may threaten nuclear force as a means to hold its recent conquest. Many allege that Russia’s reliance on nuclear weaponry stems from a shortcoming in conventional capabilities and that Russian nuclear/conventional dual-role systems proliferate due to this insecurity²⁸. The most recent Russian military doctrine released in 2014 outlines Russia’s parameters for a nuclear strike to be when the “very existence of the state is in jeopardy.” This supposed existential threat could be from nuclear or non-nuclear weapons²⁹. In 2020, Russia released a comprehensive list of clarifying policies specific to nuclear deterrence that echoes the clause on an existential threat. However, this clarifying document places more emphasis on the concept of first-use and more emphasis on the protection of Russian territories. The final important takeaway from the 2020 guidance is that it authorizes President Putin to “inform the military-political leadership of other states...about the readiness of the Russian Federation to use nuclear weapons³⁰” effectively allowing him to make nuclear threats under fairly liberal guidance.

²⁴ Korneev, The Language of Stumbling: How the Baltic States Are Fighting Russian

²⁵ INF nuclear treaty: US pulls out of Cold War-era pact with Russia. (2019, August 02). Retrieved December 5, 2020, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49198565>

²⁶ United States, Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense. (2018, February). *2018 Nuclear Posture Review*. Retrieved December 4, 2020, from <https://media.defense.gov>

²⁷ Kirbyson, F. R., III. (2019). *Escalate to De-escalate: Speculation on Russian Nuclear Strategy* (Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2019) (pp. 1-20). Monterey, CA: Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive. doi:10945/63469

²⁸ Kirbyson, *Escalate to De-escalate: Speculation on Russian Nuclear Strategy*

²⁹ Russia, The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. (2015, June 29). *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*. Retrieved December 9, 2020, from <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>

³⁰ Russia, Official Internet Portal of Legal Information. (2020). *On the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence* (pp. 1-7). Moscow: Official Internet Portal of Legal Information. Retrieved December 6, 2020, from pravo.gov.ru

In an offensive, large-scale operation, none of Russia's nuclear doctrine provides the authority under which it could threaten nuclear action as a means to conquer territory. However, in a grey-zone hybrid conflict, it is possible that Russia could re-interpret this doctrine to allow for regional nuclear escalation. In this hypothetical scenario, Russia has already captured a small part of the Baltics that is ethnically Russian. Moscow is actively discussing annexing this territory, and a NATO response is underway which involves the deployment of the United States' SLBM's to the region. Moscow could allege that this NATO weaponry poses a catastrophic and active threat to Kaliningrad, Russian mainland, and the newly acquired territory. Under the 2014 and 2020 authority, President Putin possesses the ability at this point to discuss first-use options as a means of escalation. This escalation provides what the United States already foresees which is a coercive advantage to achieve a regional objective.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDED RESEARCH

Russia is demonstrating its ability to engage in conflict across the spectrum of hybrid warfare. This is particularly concerning in the Baltics where Russia has already initiated a campaign of information operations to capitalize on separatists sentiments. While the Baltic states have formidable self-defense mechanisms based around a whole-population response to invasion, NATO's plan to respond to a grey-zone conflict generates questions outside of the scope of this paper. Examples for continued research efforts include investigating the difference between a hypothetical NATO response in a limited-scale Russian invasion of a western European country such as Germany as opposed to an invasion of a nation like Latvia. NATO's nuclear deterrence policy is still primarily based around the idea of nuclear weapons serving as strategic assets³¹. As an organization, NATO recognizes this limitation as Russia concerns itself more-so with regional dominance and bolsters its arsenal of intermediate-range nuclear weapons³². It is advantageous to explore the best policy changes that NATO could enact for nuclear deterrence. Lastly, the roles of both the United States and NATO in preemptive Baltic protective measures are topics that should be addressed. As the United States withdraws from Afghanistan and the Middle East, it may seek to posture itself in forward staged environments as a means of competition through coalition exercises to deter Russian occupation. In conclusion, Russia's meddling in the Baltics is nonlinear. It takes place via a spectrum of hybrid warfare mechanisms, and nuclear escalation is a substantial concern. While the Baltic states have defense plans for invasions, it is paramount that the United States and NATO pursue continued efforts to evolve postures and policies in preparation for escalation along this complicated spectrum.

³¹ Nato. (2020, May 11). NATO's nuclear deterrence policy and forces. Retrieved December 15, 2020, from https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50068.htm

³² Cox, J. (2020, June 08). Nuclear deterrence today. Retrieved December 15, 2020, from <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/06/08/nuclear-deterrence-today/index.html>