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Speaking Softly with ISR
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The Baltic region is in a peculiarly unfortunate position. The Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are in the middle of two superpowers-Russia and NATO, who are constantly at odds and in constant political, military, cyber, and economic tension with each other. Russia in the 21st century is now pursuing methods to potentially re-integrate or annex parts-or all of the Baltic region. This poses a serious threat to NATO, including the baltic states, as well as other members of the EU, for NATO would begin to lose allies and face ever-expanding Russian influence. The United States and the countries of NATO need to work together to not fall behind the surveillance and early warning that is necessary to keep the Russian Bear in check. The two priorities that the United States and NATO need to focus on are 1. Increase ISR dominance, capabilities, and volume, coupled with transferring more responsibility and assets away from the United States and into NATO. 2. Maintain a vigilant watch over the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were once part of the USSR and when it dissolved in 1991 they assumed autonomy and independence. Starting almost from scratch, they have been rapidly advancing their government, constitution, economies, and military in the last 30 years. However, the separation from Russia after the Soviet Union fell has put them at odds with their former big brother-Russia. This tension has slowly increased over the last two decades after all three countries cozied up to-and became official members of NATO. The tension caused by having members of NATO on Russia's western border, close to both Moscow and St. Petersburg, lends itself to being the most likely region of the world to have a military conflict break out should either side feel threatened enough and see enough benefit and opportunity to do so.

The Baltics have had a long history of different rulers. Between World War I and World War II all three countries were invaded, under control, or fighting for their independence against Russia and/or Germany. After WWII the Soviet Union gained control of the Baltics and deported hundreds of thousands of baltic citizens and sent tens of thousands more to gulags across Russia. Between the late 1940's and mid 1950's the Soviet occupation was met with violence from the Forest Brothers, a partisan indigenous resistance force that fought against the USSR and communism (Jacobs). Finally, in early 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev started to loosen the Soviet reigns on the countries of Eastern Europe, this created an independent democratic movement that eventually led to the fall of the Berlin Wall later that year (Office of the Historian). After the USSR dissolved 2 years later in 1991, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania had already been building their governments, military, and transitioning away from a communist economy. This is all to say that the populations of Baltic States are not uneducated or inexperienced about what the Soviet Union had, and what Russia has to offer now and what methods they will use to take them by hearts-and-minds, or by force. Russia has been participating in non-kinetic conflict with the countries within NATO for several years already. Baltic officials agree that non-violent subversion is ongoing and the worst possible case scenario would be sowing resentment towards, and possible destabilization of the Baltic Governments (Radin). This subversion has the risk to gain influence and promote internal conflict within NATO and the baltic states. With Estonia and Latvia most vulnerable due to their large Russian presence, having 30% and 26% of the population respectively (EU).

With this increased focus by Russia, NATO will have to stay on top of combating any and all avenues taken to undermine the slight upper hand they have in the region. The United States has been funding and supporting the ISR effort across the Mediterranean, the Baltics, and the

Middle East. The ability for the United States to continue bearing the brunt of this effort both with resources as well as financially is beginning to become unfeasible if not undesirable. With the United States being the dominant provider of NATO airpower, and the increasing conflicts, exercises, task forces, and alerts happening around the globe, NATO needs to start acquiring more of the experience and responsibility to equip and maintain their air power (U.S Mission to NATO). Due to the increasing role that ISR assets are playing in modern day conflict, increases in investment of ISR capabilities should be a major priority for the U.S. and NATO. This increase in investment and capability will result in a more aware and informed command and control for the United States, NATO, and their allies. The routine ISR mission also creates more stable and anti-fragile day to day operations for the U.S. and its allies. By routinely detecting and monitoring Russian activity close to the border of NATO-member Baltic States resources can begin to understand what is “normal” and what is considered “pushing the boundary”. Teddy Roosevelt’s phrase of “speak softly and carry a big stick” still holds as true today as it did 80 years ago, the speaking softly being ISR capabilities monitoring and giving early-warning to NATO commanders, and the stick being the conventional, non-conventional, SOF, and nuclear capabilities that NATO countries keep on hand in case they need them. This capability of maintaining a big brother presence and yet not be threatening with combat assets close to the border may help to alleviate tension between NATO and Russia.

Should NATO not keep a close eye on Russia, their capabilities, and their movement, it could begin to destabilize the region. (Kühn) Russia’s use of subversion to sow distrust in NATO has been obvious propaganda so far, but that is most likely due to the fresh history the states have with Russia and the USSR. Should Russia succeed in painting the U.S. and NATO in a bad light to the populations of the Baltic states it could create a situation where they begin to leave NATO

voluntarily for a better relationship with Russia. If NATO cannot stop disinformation and subversion of the NATO and baltic state governments, the large Russian minorities within these states may become a dominant voice and potentially the governing voice of the people in the region (Kühn). Increasing reconnaissance in the region will be pointless if the people there slowly start to distrust and resent the United States and the larger western European allies in NATO. The most efficient way to de-escalate the Baltic region is to provide the surveillance and early warning to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia (Kirbyson). The Baltic States should also be taking more control of their own defense, they know what they need to be fighting since they are “on the front lines”. Basing troops near the eastern borders would make any country a little uneasy, and Russia, having been invaded before and knowing they don’t have the upper hand militarily will refuse to be put on their heels and respond in kind, stationing more troops on their western border (Ferguson). NATO exercises in the region show Russia that every country within NATO is both willing and able to fight any fight and we have all the tools and means necessary to counter whatever Russia can bring to the front line (USEUCOM). This counters the Russian strategic documents planning and promoting an increased use of SOF, ISR, and airborne forces (Flanagan). Keeping troops away from the border, coupled with manned, or un-manned ISR platforms can keep both NATO and Russia in check and working together. If a joint NATO effort can find a way to curtail Russia’s barrage of propaganda, and disinformation they stand a much better chance of retaining the Baltic States as members of NATO and maintaining the unified goal of fighting the spread and expansion of communism. Increased cyber and ISR efforts will provide a better picture of what Russia’s military troops are doing on their side of the border, and how their subversion is working on NATO’s side of the border. This is critical to knowing what effect Russia is having on the populations and how and where to spend resources to combat

Russia's hybrid warfare. While open source information is available to all countries within NATO, serious effort will need to be expended to combat the barrage of false news stories and fake history being fed through Russian media outlets and websites (Strout).

The second priority that NATO needs to focus on is Kaliningrad. The Russian exclave of Kaliningrad is the most prevalent kinetic threat to NATO and the most likely downfall of the above strategy. Kaliningrad is located just south of Lithuania and north of Poland. This region was once militarily neglected by Russia, lacking regular funding and manning rotations (Westerlund). However, new priorities and strategies have given Kaliningrad a new purpose (Brands). This state is the furthest west territory that Russia owns and has access to the Baltic Sea. This location alone allows it to have significant strategic economic and military importance. With Russia's main fear being NATO pushing too close to, and possibly consolidating its borders, Russia has good reason to build up and create layered defenses to protect the motherland of Russia further east. Russia vies for a natural border like the countries should be separated by, not something you need GPS coordinates to know when you step into another country. The desire to have natural borders has gone back for millennia (Marshall). Kaliningrad, while isolated, can detect and defend against any kind of conflict coming from the west and with the resources and assets being built and sent to Kaliningrad it would be a formidable opponent should NATO ever think about trying. (Westerlund)

The border between Lithuania and Belarus is quite small, only maybe 65 miles or so. Belarus is part of a Union with Russia and just like NATO, an attack on one-is an attack on all. This union has also put Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko in an uncomfortable position to be extremely reliant on Russia for economic support as well as reduced prices on resources (Mações). From this Union it is safe to assume that should Russia opt to go on the offensive first,

the 65 mile border between Lithuania and Poland would quickly be seized, connecting Russia to Belarus, and Russian-controlled Belarus to Kaliningrad. The threat of Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapon doctrine also allows them to make the first move and escalate both rapidly and aggressively to attain a specific goal and put NATO on its' heels (Woolf). The idea of having a secure ISR presence here would be early warning and detection of any large movements within the area. With the budgets of NATO members sometimes getting squeezed, the future of ISR needs to be unmanned aerial systems that can replace or augment manned ISR platforms, these inexpensive, efficient, and almost disposable aircraft allow operators and computers to control flight paths and bring back data to NATO on any movement that might put the Baltic States and NATO members at risk (Sprenger). Enhancing capabilities and numbers of assets that NATO can use throughout the region will drastically increase intelligence gathering, command and control, situational awareness, and early warning for NATO's semi-isolated partners. Unmanned ISR aircraft also allow greater flexibility to position these assets across Europe in different places depending on different situations happening along different borders or can be outfitted for humanitarian purposes within NATO, etc. (Everstine). The future of ISR is going to be chaotic development and analysis, but implementation of routine unmanned aerial vehicles and space based vehicles allow money, manning, assets, and attention to be focused on the future instead of routine flights and data collection. While Kaliningrad is becoming a strategic center of attention for Russia, and likewise the countries within NATO, it can also prove to be a solid line in the sand, where we monitor, and Russia does not feel threatened. The savings in resources, and manpower with unmanned systems being more routine will also keep Russia in check and NATO C2 well informed. The caveat to all of this defensive posture and maintaining vigilance is a willingness to act, if NATO and the countries within it say there is a point of no return, that

promise *must* to be backed up or our allies and enemies alike will begin to doubt our word and authority.

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