

Hybrid or Not: Detering and Defeating Russia's Ways of Warfare in the Baltics - the Case of Estonia

by Henrik Praks¹



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The European security architecture and the North Atlantic Alliance as its key pillar are facing a stern test. Today's Russian Federation under the leadership of President Putin is a revisionist power seeking to change international order. In Europe its ultimate aim is to extend its influence and control westward and to re-define the post-Cold War security architecture. Russia may objectively be a declining power but it is asserting itself in an increasingly confident manner and working on exploiting Western weaknesses. War with Georgia in 2008, annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern parts of Ukraine in 2014, involvement in Syrian conflict in direct opposition to Western interests – these are only the most open and blatant examples of Russia's actions.

So far Russia has refrained from directly challenging the territorial integrity and sovereignty of a NATO member nation, but it would be a mistake to think that the regime in Kremlin would not be ready to attempt this. The experience of strategic surprises caused by Russia tells not us to rule out something because it seems implausible in our eyes. Russia has repeatedly shown that it is ready to use military force to achieve its political aims and has brought the prospect of "old-fashioned" territorial conquest back to the 21st century European landscape.

In its neighbourhood Russia is seeking revenge for perceived geopolitical injustice² and wanting to re-establish domination over neighbouring countries. There is widespread nostalgia for lost its imperial past and many in Moscow still refuse to acknowledge the Baltic states as genuinely sovereign

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² In 2005 President Putin characterised the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century." See "Putin deplores collapse of USSR," *BBC News*, 25 April 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4480745.stm>



countries,³ considering them instead as legitimate targets of Russian expansionism. Besides the geopolitical angle Russian foreign policy conveniently uses an ethno-nationalist dimension. As part of its concept of *Russkij Mir* (Russian World) the leadership in Moscow sees its mission as the protection of all Russians or Russian-speakers.⁴ Russia has openly proclaimed for itself the right not only to protect its citizens, but also so-called “compatriots” abroad.⁵ The presence of large numbers of ethnic Russians on their territory makes the Baltic states, especially Estonia and Latvia where they make up more than quarter of the population,⁶ tempting targets. It is reasonable to assume that this self-declared need to protect the rights of Russian compatriots and citizens would be used as a convenient cause to justify both to domestic and international audiences any direct Russian intervention in the Baltics.

But there is also another argument which could dictate the Kremlin’s motivation to try something aggressive in the Baltics. Russia may not be so much interested in the Baltic states themselves, but might use them as a convenient place to try to demonstrate the uselessness of NATO. Humiliating the United States, and by extension NATO as a perceived tool of American foreign policy, is generally seen as a major strategic aim for the Kremlin. Therefore it would be reasonable to assume that Russia would look for opportunities to test NATO and its Article 5 commitments, and, if attainable, eventually undermine and break the Alliance.

Besides having at its possession a wide range of military

and other capabilities and tools that could be used to intimidate and attack neighbouring countries, Russia has also shown an ability to make decisions and act very quickly. It has been able repeatedly to surprise the international community by brazen and creative moves. The experiences have shown that Moscow is prepared to take very large risks, relying on brinkmanship and escalation.⁷

In general, President Putin could be described as an opportunist who will look at ways to target Western weaknesses and exploit vulnerabilities. If he senses a window of opportunity he may try to exploit it. The risk is that Russian leadership with its distorted world view will indeed believe that the West is weak, and that NATO is dysfunctional and unable to protect its members. Therefore, Moscow may decide at some point that it can take action in the Baltics.⁸

To impose its will on others Russia has been employing a strategy which combines all elements of its power. While the term “hybrid warfare” may not be the best description of Russia’s approach to conflicts and is not used by Russians themselves,⁹ it has been widely adopted internationally, including by NATO. Hybrid warfare is used to describe the employment of, in a co-ordinated way, a mixture of military and non-military components to achieve political ends. Alongside traditional and modern tools of warfare and subversion it can also include coercive instruments like economic acts, political and diplomatic pressure, information operations, and so on.

³ In an absurd move in summer 2015 Russian Prosecutors Office launched, on request of two deputies of Russian State Duma from ruling United Russia party, an investigation into the legality of Soviet Union’s 1991 recognition of Baltic states independence. See “Russia examines 1991 recognition of Baltic states independence,” *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33325842>.

⁴ Andrei Piontkovsky, “Putin’s concept of the Russian World threatens all territories with a Russian population,” *Hudson Institute*, March 24, 2015, <http://www.hudson.org/research/11165-andrei-piontkovsky-putin-s-concept-of-the-russian-world-threatens-all-territories-with-a-russian-population->

⁵ “Moscow to Continue Protecting Rights of Compatriots Abroad – Putin,” *RIA Novosti*, 1 July 2014, <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20140701/190775132/Moscow-to-Continue-Protecting-Rights-of-Compatriots-Abroad-.html>

⁶ According to the results of the population censuses in 2011 ethnic Russians made up 25,2% of the inhabitants in Estonia and 26,9% in Latvia. The number of Russians in Lithuania is significantly lower and constitutes 5,8% of the population. For the results see “2011 Population and Housing Censuses in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania” June 11, 2015, <http://www.csb.gov.lv/en/dati/e-publikacijas/2011-population-and-housing-censuses-estonia-latvia-and-lithuania-42875.html>

⁷ In fact one can go back to the Russian operation in 1999 to seize the Pristina airport in Kosovo as an example of such moves. While in the end not bringing to Russia any strategic gain the operation for a while threatened to cause a conflict between NATO and Russian armed forces.

⁸ For example former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has stated that “there is a high probability that he will intervene in the Baltics to test NATO’s Article 5.” See Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, “Putin could attack Baltic states warns former NATO chief,” *Daily Telegraph*, 5 February 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11393707/Putin-could-attack-Baltic-states-warns-former-Nato-chief.html>

⁹ Instead the Russians have been referring to “new generation warfare” or “non-linear warfare.” Janiz Berzinš, “Russian New Generation Warfare is not Hybrid Warfare,” in Artis Pabriks and Andis Kudors (ed.), *The War in Ukraine: Lessons for Europe*, University of Latvia Press, 2015. Also available on http://eng.appc.lv/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/War_in_Ukraine.pdf



In this light, this paper explores the nature of the Russian challenge in the Baltic region as the most exposed area of the NATO alliance. It will use Estonia as a case study, but similar issues would also apply in the case of its Baltic neighbours Latvia and Lithuania. It will also compare the experiences the conflict in Ukraine has provided and compare them with the current situation in Estonia. The paper also elaborates on steps Estonia, other Allies, and NATO as a whole should take to respond.

Exploring Russia's leverages and Estonia's vulnerabilities

Since regaining its independence in 1991 Estonia has regularly experienced various forms of political, economic, and military pressure by its Eastern neighbour. These have been accompanied by intensified information warfare, intelligence activities and, more recently, cyber-attacks. These measures are aimed at forcing the Estonian government to change its policies in a way considered favourable for Russia.

As Russian-style hybrid warfare, where Moscow is able to select the place, time, and means, plays to Russia's strengths and targets perceived weaknesses of the opponent(s), it is necessary first to identify Russia's strengths and Estonia's weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

Political and Economic Tools

Russia would probably prefer to achieve its strategic aims in Estonia by establishing hegemony over a country through diplomatic and economic pressure. Existence of an obedient government which would enable Russia to exercise political domination would presumably suit Moscow well. While there are pro-Russian political

forces in Estonia, the general political consensus among Estonia's political elite and society as a whole, has been steadfastly unfavourable to Russian aims. The policy of integrating politically, militarily and economically to the West has been pursued by all Estonian governments and it is extremely unlikely that this would change.

A tool which Russia has been actively using in Europe to gain influence and to divide and rule has been its economic leverage, including through exploitation of energy dependence. In Estonia, Russia has been attempting to apply economic pressure through steps like selective trade embargoes and cut-offs of Russia's transit trade. However, the usefulness of these means has been limited. Trade with Russia, while being undoubtedly important for Estonian economy, constitutes less than 10% of Estonia's foreign trade.¹⁰ Also while almost all the natural gas used in Estonia presently comes from Russia,¹¹ gas itself accounts for only about 10% of country's energy supply.¹² Therefore while economic levers to pressure Estonia undoubtedly exist, the economic factor will not by itself enable Russia to achieve its goals.

The Potential Role of Local Russian Speaking Population and the Possible Employment of Hybrid Models

The weaknesses Ukrainian state had in the spring of 2014 could be in general identified as: 1) existence of areas where the population had grievances towards central government and sympathies towards Russia; 2) corrupt and partly disloyal local administrations and internal security structures; 3) militarily Ukraine was significantly weaker than Russia and its armed forces were unprepared for this kind of conflict.¹³ Both in Crimea and initially in Donbass the Ukrainian authorities remained mostly passive, gave the initiative to the opponent and enabled

¹⁰ "Statistical Yearbook of Estonia 2015," *Statistics Estonia*, <http://www.stat.ee/90733>

¹¹ Since 2014 Estonia can also receive gas through the LNG terminal opened in Lithuania, but until additional LNG terminals are built in the region the overall dependency on supplies from Gazprom will remain.

¹² "Baltics can keep lights on if Russia turns off the gas," *Reuters*, 7 May 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/07/us-ukraine-crisis-baltics-analysis-idUSBREA460JN20140507>

¹³ For an analysis of Russia's actions and Ukrainian weaknesses see Andras Racz, "Russia's Hybrid War: Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist," *Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, 2015.



the “separatists” to gain ground.¹⁴ Also as the Ukrainian state is not part of any alliances it was therefore mostly left without external assistance to deal with the situation.

In Crimea the conditions were particularly ideal for Russia as they also already included the on-site presence of Russian military assets, something which cannot be replicated in Estonia. Of more relevance could be the use of tactics similar to what were used in the beginning in South-East Ukraine. There initially a hybrid playbook was followed with Russian regular and irregular forces operating covertly together with local activists, thereby attempting to present it as an entirely spontaneous and local rebellion. Russia could conceivably attempt in Estonia similar kind of subversive campaign in order to form a seemingly local “spontaneous” resistance movement for creating some kind of hybrid and low-intensity conflict situation which they hope would lead to major destabilisation of the country. It would then aim to portray the issue as an internal conflict and hope this would remain sufficiently in “grey zone” so that the Allies would not have a stomach to intervene, thereby undermining Alliance solidarity with Estonia. This should then allow Russia to hope to dictate its terms to Estonia.

There has been wide speculation whether the region of North-East Estonia with its largely Russian-speaking population and especially the town of Narva which lies immediately on the border with Russia and where 95% of inhabitants are Russian-speaking, would be the next

target of such Russian hybrid warfare.¹⁵ By different indicators the area is significantly less integrated to Estonian society¹⁶ and it is also economically in a poorer state than the Estonian average.

The ethnic factor itself is certainly a vulnerability for Estonia. Russia treats ethnicity as a powerful weapon and it has instrumentalised its “compatriots” policy as a means to hamper the integration of Russian-speakers into Estonian society and keep instead them segregated.¹⁷ To this end it has been financing organisations and elements in Estonia who defend and advance its policies.¹⁸ Surveys have shown that among Estonia’s Russian-speaking inhabitants, levels of identification with the country and trust in state institutions are significantly lower compared to ethnic Estonians. Also there are fundamental differences in evaluating the activities of Russian leadership.¹⁹

At the same time, although it would be probably fair to say that the Russians in Estonia are confused and have mixed feelings, this does not necessarily translate into willingness to change their status and become subjects of Russian Federation. Economic welfare and social security in Estonia, even in its poorest areas, is clearly of higher standard than in Russia. This is a fundamental difference compared to situation in Ukraine.²⁰ The inhabitants of North-East Estonia, for example, can see themselves the differences each day if they visit the areas on the other side of the border.²¹ In Estonia there are also no organised groups of any kind who would advocate separatism. The

¹⁴ An important exemption was the second biggest Ukrainian town Kharkiv, where the response of the Ukrainian side to the initial occupation of town’s administrative building in early April 2014 was swift and thereby probably avoided the escalation of the situation there along the Donbass scenario. See “How separatism was tamed in Kharkiv,” *Euromaidan press*, 15 May 2014, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2014/05/15/how-separatism-was-tamed-in-kharkiv/>

¹⁵ “Is Narva next?” has been often asked in international media. See for example Gordon F.Sander, “Could Estonia be the next target of Russian annexation?” *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 April 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0403/Could-Estonia-be-the-next-target-of-Russian-annexation>; Chris Morris, “Nervous Estonians look to the West as Russia fears grow,” *BBC News*, 3 September 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29054128>

¹⁶ “Estonian Society Monitoring 2015,” http://www.kul.ee/sites/default/files/kokkuvoteeim_2015_en.pdf

¹⁷ For a study of the Russian compatriots policy and other influence tools see Mike Winnerstig (ed), “Tools of Destabilization: Russian Soft-Power” and “Non-military Influence in the Baltic States,” *Swedish Defence Research Agency*, December 2014.

¹⁸ “Kremlin’s millions: How Russia funds NGOs in Baltics,” 4 September 2015, <http://en.delfi.lt/nordic-baltic/kremlins-millions-how-russia-funds-ngos-in-baltics.d?id=68908408>

¹⁹ “Estonian Society Monitoring 2015;” “Public Opinion and National Defence,” April 2015, http://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article_files/public_opinion_and_national_defence_2015_march_0.pdf

²⁰ Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves has pointed out: “The average Russian miner in Donetsk gets 200 euros a month. The average Russian miner in Estonia gets 2,000 euros a month.” See Lally Weymouth, “*The West Has Been in a State of Shock*,” *Slate Magazine*, 29 September 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/09/estonian_president_ilves_interview_the_relationship_between_nato_and_russia.html

²¹ For a more extensive discussion see Andres Kasekamp, “Why Narva is not next,” *Estonian Foreign Policy Institute Paper Series*, http://www.evi.ee/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/EVI-mottepaber21_mai15.pdf



violence and destruction witnessed in Ukraine should also have shown what may happen when you invite conflict to your doorstep; this has also helped to cool heads.

However, the danger of manipulation by Russia cannot be dismissed and, although in smaller numbers than in Ukraine, elements susceptible for trouble exist in Estonia. A major problem is that significant part of local Russians live in a separate information space dominated by Russian government controlled media which is engaged in massive and sophisticated hostile information activities. In 2007, during the so called Bronze Soldier crisis, Russian propaganda played an important role in skilfully instigating an emotional outburst leading to rioting.²²

Russia's extremely intensive and prominent use of media as a propaganda and disinformation tool has been widely noted.²³ A renowned Kremlin propagandist, Dmitri Kiseljov, has declared that "information war is now the main type of war."²⁴ In relation to Estonia Russia's information warfare has been in full swing for many years. It has been targeted at Estonian society, both Estonian and non-Estonians, but is also used internationally to bring pressure on Estonia from its NATO and EU allies. The main messages Russia has been promoting are alleged discrimination against Russian-speaking people and support of Nazism, but also increasingly a message of Estonia as a kind of failed country with no prospects.²⁵ The aim is to create distrust and dissent towards Estonian authorities, depress the society and weaken its morale.

At the moment no immediate cause which could lead to the creation of social and political unrest is visible. However, by instigating provocations and using mass propaganda it is conceivable to picture an emergence of a heated situation where a certain number of local Russians would come to the streets and ask for the support of Moscow. Provocations have always been one of the tools in the arsenal of Soviet and Russian special

services. Also, in reality Russia would not necessarily need massive local support for its propaganda purposes, but only the illusion of it. In South-East Ukraine, while the majority of population remained passive, a small minority of activists was able to present a picture of popular rebellion. Moreover, like in Ukraine, to make trouble Russia could try to insert "Putin's tourists" concealing themselves as locals.

An important difference between the situation in Ukraine in spring 2014 and the present situation in Estonia is the determination and capabilities of Estonian state to resist such scenarios. In Estonia the state controls the whole territory of the country. It would be difficult to envision Russian operatives deployed undercover to Estonia in secret in significant numbers without this being noticed by Estonia's security services. There is also no reason to believe that in case of internal disturbances local police would be disloyal or have low morale. In Ukraine the military was in the beginning not ready to fight against Russians, but Estonian Defence Forces have always prepared exactly for that. It should also be noted that as the Estonian military does not use Soviet/Russian armament or equipment this would not allow the other side to claim that the "insurgents" arsenal comes from captured governmental stocks, a claim Russia has blatantly tried to use in Ukraine.

But wars never repeat themselves. While the possibility of covert warfare employing unconventional methods should not be excluded and needs to be planned for, in Estonia's case Russia could easily aim to exploit a different vulnerability.

For example, it may well be related to the field of cyber security. Estonia is one of the most wired countries in the world and the functioning of the state is dependent on computer networks. After the infamous 2007 cyber-attacks against Estonian government, media and banking websites, which were presumably executed by Russian state-sponsored hacker groups, there have been

²² In spring 2007 Estonian authorities' decision to relocate a Soviet-era World War II monument from central Tallinn to a military cemetery caused a protest which turned into confrontation with police and looting.

²³ It has been characterised as "weaponisation of information." See Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money," *The Interpreter*, 22 November 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/the-menace-of-unreality-how-the-kremlin-weaponizes-information-culture-and-money/>

²⁴ Peter Pomerantsev, "Inside Putin's Information War," *Politico*, 4 January 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/01/putin-russia-tv-113960>

²⁵ "Estonian Internal Service, Annual Review 2014," https://www.kapo.ee/cms-data/_text/138/124/files/kapo-aastaraamat-2014-en.pdf



no large scale cyber crises in Estonia. However, cyber threats are becoming more numerous and sophisticated and in 2014 Estonian Information Security Authority reported considerable increase in the severity of the incidents.²⁶ With Russia investing heavily in offensive cyber capabilities Russian cyber espionage in particular has grown to become a very significant danger.²⁷ While the overall Estonian capacity for handling cyber risks can be considered satisfactory a future determined and co-ordinated cyber assault against its critical information infrastructure would be a complex challenge. If successful, cyber-attacks could cause real damage through interruption of critical services, thereby disrupting and destabilising society.

Russian Military Power and the Opportunities it Provides for Moscow

Hard power has always played an important role in Soviet and Russian thinking. After the mixed experiences from war with Georgia in 2008 Russia launched massive military reform and modernisation programmes focused on qualitative improvements of its forces. Russia has been working to raise the combat readiness and reaction speed of its armed forces and on forming a pool of rapid intervention forces. These could exploit opportunities for easy wins and rapidly take control of territory before the other side could undertake a serious response. As a result Russia has increased confidence in its own military potential.

Also in Ukraine its military power has performed a central role as the constant threat of an overwhelming conventional attack has been one of the main leverages Russia has had there. In spring 2014, under the disguise of “exercises,” Russia massed large concentrations of its armed forces to the east of Ukrainian border thereby preventing Ukraine from taking more forceful attempts

to regain lost territory.²⁸ The initial hybrid experiment in Donbass did not bring about the anticipated success, so Russia had to intervene in summer 2014 with regular troops to prevent its proxies from being militarily overwhelmed.

As part of its flexing of muscles Russia is displaying its military strength at the borders of neighbouring countries airspaces and maritime zones. In case of Estonia, in 2014 Russian aircraft violated its airspace seven times.²⁹ The overall number of intercepts made by NATO Baltic Air Policing Mission in 2014 was more than 130, triple the number of the previous year.³⁰ These activities can also be characterised as testing borders and NATO’s reactions. The continuation of the elements of this type of coercive pressure and intimidation and testing of Baltic states and their allies resolve, should be expected.

Russia’s recent practice of regularly organising “snap exercises” contributes to intimidating its neighbours. By regularly conducting such exercises Russia tries to get other nations used to them and thereby create a “new normality.” But they can also be used to hide intent and mask preparations for real attack and the manoeuvres themselves could be used to transition quickly to military operations. This threat of strategic surprise means that the warning times of a potential military attack are drastically reduced.

In the Baltic region Russia enjoys clear military superiority as it is overwhelmingly stronger than local nations and retains this advantage also compared to the present overall NATO force posture in the region. In recent years Russia has expanded its military presence in the Baltic Sea region. New units and bases have been opened and new equipment received. This has included deployment of most advanced weapon systems – Iskander-M ballistic missiles, S-400 long-range air defence system - which in the event of the conflict

²⁶ “Estonian Information Services Agency, 2014 Annual Report,” https://www.ria.ee/public/Kuberturvalisus/RIA-Kyberturbe-aruanne-2014_ENG.pdf

²⁷ For issues relating to Russian cyber espionage see Patrik Maldre, “The Many Variants of Russian Cyber Espionage,” *ICDS blog*, <http://www.icds.ee/blog/article/the-many-variants-of-russian-cyber-espionage-1/>

²⁸ Heidi Reisinger and Alexander Golts, “Russia’s Hybrid Warfare: Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence,” *Research Paper No. 105*, NATO Defense College, November 2014.

²⁹ “Russian jets have violated Estonian airspace seven times in 2014,” *ERR News*, 19 December 2014, http://news.err.ee/v/main_news/d9073ae6-b932-415c-b3a6-ed893a20d06a

³⁰ Mark Kramer, “The New Russian Chill in the Baltic,” *Current History*, March 2015.



would present a serious anti-access/area denial challenge to NATO which would complicate the arrival of Allied reinforcements to the region. From Estonian perspective a particular concern is also the 76th Guards Air Assault Division in Pskov, one of Russia's most elite units, less than 100 kilometres from Estonian border.³¹ Moreover, Russia's recent large scale military manoeuvres, like Zapad 2009 and 2013, and numerous snap exercises have practiced massive deployments of forces over strategic distance.

In addition, geography makes the Baltic states vulnerable. They are exposed to attacks from Russian territory and with only a thin strip of land connecting them with Poland the three states could be cut off from the rest of the Alliance.³² Two neighbouring countries whose geographical location makes them vital to the defence of the Baltic countries – Sweden and Finland – are not Alliance members and the use of their territory for the defence of the Baltics cannot be taken as granted.

In response to Russia's moves the Allies have chosen to implement in the Baltic region a posture which involves persistent rotational deployment of rather symbolic company-sized trip-wire contingents from the United States, which will be backed by deployments from some European allies. This is complemented by the presence of fighter aircraft of the Baltic Air Policing mission and periodic deployments of additional land, air and naval assets for exercises and training. In addition, the United States has announced plans to preposition heavy weaponry.³³ Other measures agreed in the framework of NATO's Readiness Action Plan have included enhanced planning and the establishment of the NATO Force Integration Units.

Due to its present very light military footprint in the Baltic theatre the current NATO approach on responding to an emerging crisis relies on rapid response forces like the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and the rest of the NATO Response Force (NRF) which at the onset of the crisis could be deployed to the

territory of exposed allies. However, while Russia as a centralised authoritarian state can take decisions quickly, the corresponding capacity of NATO as an alliance of 28 democracies is in doubt. Besides political decision-making issues, the speed of NATO military reaction would be a factor by itself. Even with VJTF it will take at least several days until the force arrives in theatre.

Based on the above it would be reasonable to assume that the exploitation of Moscow's conventional military superiority and its speedy application would remain central to Russia's strategy. Instead of instigating a slowly boiling conflict which would provide Estonia and its Allies plenty of time to react, the Russian tactics could be built on a quick decisive military strike relying on speed, surprise and mass to seize and control territory. It would be designed to enable Russia to achieve its initial aims in time before Estonia itself would be able to react properly and the Allies muster forces to come to its assistance.

The Russian use of open military force against Estonia could take various forms. It could range from a very limited strike in terms of time, space and forces to major operation aiming at conquering whole of Estonia or even all three Baltic states.

Russia could, for example, execute a strike which results in it taking an area in north-eastern Estonia. By quickly seizing a geographically limited territory it would aim to test how far it can go. Even being able to grab and hold a small piece of NATO territory can be seen as triumph by Putin. In parallel Russia would gather a large contingent of forces with sophisticated air defence and fire support assets on its side of the border to provide cover for the troops on Estonian territory and present a threat of escalation. In the end Russia may believe that the crisis will end with another "frozen conflict" which would enable Russia to exert further pressure on Estonia. In case NATO reacts strongly Russia can also decide that the test has not been successful and could pull its troops back over the border and claim that the crisis is over.

³¹ Kaarel Kaas, "Russian Armed Forces in the Baltic Sea Region," *Diplomaatia*, June/July 2014, <http://www.diplomaatia.ee/en/article/russian-armed-forces-in-the-baltic-sea-region/> Also see "Everything You Wanted to Know About Russian Troop Locations (But Were Afraid to Ask)," *ERR News*, 25 March 2014, <http://news.err.ee/v/politics/9d430df6-c262-4d7e-88e8-4f3f791eb71e>, which quotes the same author.

³² A term "Suwalki Gap" (on the basis of the major town in the area) has been invented to refer to the strategic importance of the area. See Paul McLeary, "Meet the New Fulda Gap," *Foreign Policy*, 29 September 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/29/fulda-gap-nato-russia-putin-us-army/>

³³ "U.S. to pre-position tanks, artillery in Baltics, eastern Europe," *Reuters*, 23 June 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/23/us-usa-europe-defense-idUSKBN0P315620150623>



For Estonia due to its small size even a geographically very limited incursion would cause huge problems. Unlike Ukraine, the country does not have strategic depth. A conflict of the type seen in Ukraine, where one relatively small part of the country is a warzone, but most of the rest of the country continues its peaceful life, would not be possible in Estonia. The country's small size would also not allow to trade space for time in the context of large-scale military invasion.

Russia could easily muster the required military assets for performing a large scale traditional invasion. It has simulated rapid offensive operations against NATO during its military exercises which have involved full-scale military operations against a conventional hypothetical enemy in the Baltic operational theatre and cutting off the Baltic states from the rest of NATO countries. In case of the Zapad 2013 exercise various estimates put the number of Russian troops involved at over 70,000.³⁴ Open source references to war games testing such scenarios indicate that American experts believe that Russia could probably overwhelm the forces currently available on the territory of Baltic states in a matter of few days.³⁵

Whatever the extent of the invasion, the aim of the whole adventure would be to present NATO with a *fait accompli* on the ground. Assuming that Russia achieves quickly its military objectives the Alliance would be faced with a dilemma of how to respond and the NATO intervention could turn to be very difficult and costly. Russia's capable anti-access/area denial systems in the Kaliningrad area would provide a major military challenge by hampering the entry of Allied reinforcements. That would put NATO in a very difficult position because strikes on Russian territory would become necessary.

Moreover, Russia could brandish its nuclear capability by openly threatening a limited nuclear strike to force

the Alliance to withdraw from a further conflict and compel negotiations. This would be in accordance with a Russian concept of using nuclear escalation to de-escalate a conflict.³⁶ Russia could believe that NATO would not dare to fight back when faced with an explicit threat of nuclear escalation. In this case NATO would have a difficult choice between the options of either open warfare with Russia for the re-conquest of lost Allied territory and the accompanying risk of escalating the conflict to nuclear level, or inaction which would deal a devastating blow to the credibility of Alliance.

Responding to Russia's Hybrid and Conventional Military Options

The Role and Possibilities of the Estonian State

Countering Russian hybrid threats is first and foremost a task for sovereign nations. The Estonian state and society as a whole should be strong enough to withstand the pressure and avoid presenting internal weaknesses that can be exploited by a skilful opponent. Good governance will decrease vulnerabilities and effectively working internal security structures are crucial to react quickly and decisively against attempts to exploit weaknesses. Here, the European Union, through its various policy instruments, should strengthen its activities in supporting member state's corresponding efforts.

An important element raising resilience will have to include strengthening of internal societal cohesion. In order to engage its Russian-speaking inhabitants more Estonia launched in September 2015 a separate Russian language public TV channel.³⁷ Whether it will manage

³⁴ Pauli Järvenpää, "Zapad-2013: A View from Helsinki," *The Jamestown Foundation*, August 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42762&cHash=117f8e9cf8f81cf90434084f6187a88e#.VDHMc1lCRdg

³⁵ Terence Kelly, "Stop Putin's Next Invasion Before it Starts," *Rand blog*, 20 March 2015, <http://www.rand.org/blog/2015/03/stop-putins-next-invasion-before-it-starts.html>; Julia Ioffe, "The Pentagon is Preparing New War Plans for a Baltic Battle Against Russia," *Foreign Policy*, 18 September 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/18/exclusive-the-pentagon-is-preparing-new-war-plans-for-a-baltic-battle-against-russia/>

³⁶ Nikolai Sokov, "Why Russia calls a limited nuclear strike "de-escalation"," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 13 March 2014, <http://thebulletin.org/why-russia-calls-limited-nuclear-strike-de-escalation>

³⁷ "Estonia launches its first Russian-language TV-channel," *ERR News*, <http://news.err.ee/v/Culture/entertainment/ba7558c7-7b24-4e02-9af5-ff5270acea40/estonia-launches-its-first-russian-language-tv-channel>



to break the dominance of Russian channels among local Russian speakers remains to be seen. The channel will face an uphill battle in the information space dominated by Russian information tools with then huge budgets and means.

A key lesson Estonia has learned from events in Ukraine is that the attacked country needs to fight back immediately. The Commander of Estonian Defence Forces, LtGen Riho Terras has declared that when the first Little Green Men appear they will be shot at.³⁸ Any armed men without insignia would be considered as terrorists and will be dealt as such. Estonia has reviewed its legislation to get rid of legal loopholes and enable swift reaction in case of scenarios involving an “attack from within” situations. It has been working on increasing unity of effort by establishing clarity between responsibilities and lines of command of internal security forces and the military.

Estonia’s national security and defence documents have established integrated defence and comprehensive security as fundamental principles upon which to base the nation’s response to crises. For example, in spring 2015 a whole-of-government exercise tested responses to scenarios ranging from attempts to turn a humanitarian emergency caused by an environmental accident into security crisis, cyber-attacks, attempts to disrupt electricity supplies, to mass riots and sudden outside military attack against key targets.³⁹ As establishing a working comprehensive and integrated approach combining various civilian and military efforts and resources is a difficult task, this is an area which needs constant prioritization.

One of main key problems for Estonia as a small state will always be limited human resources. If events get out of control the internal security resources could become strained. In this case a key component of Estonia’s response would be the voluntary defence organisation

Kaitseliit (Defence League). Many of the members of *Kaitseliit* are also assistant police officers and trained to handle internal security tasks. The Ukrainian experience has also shown the decisive role volunteers can have in protecting public and constitutional order.

In the military sphere, Estonia, as a frontline state, needs to further develop robust initial self-defence capabilities capable of inflicting substantial casualties on an aggressor. The state has already taken the need to invest into its national defence seriously. It is one of the few Allied nations which devotes at least 2% of its GDP for national defence needs. The defence budget for 2016 is expected to grow by further 9% and reach 2,1% of GDP.⁴⁰

Estonia has at least since the Russia-Georgia war been focusing on development of capabilities and acquiring armaments which are meant for the defence of its national territory. Therefore the war in Ukraine did not force much change in its capability development plans.⁴¹ Among the priorities are further developments of anti-tank, anti-air and fire support capabilities. Also from 2016 Estonia will start to introduce to service armoured manoeuvre capability based on CV 90 infantry fighting vehicles bought from Netherlands as part of the country’s largest ever defence procurement project.

Estonia’s national defence model is based on reserve forces who receive their training during conscription service. In May 2015 the country held its largest ever mobilisation and field training exercise, Siil 2015, to test procedures and control combat readiness. The bulk of more than 13,000 participating troops consisted of Estonian reservists. After successful execution of mobilisation Estonia would be able to have a main force of around 21,000 troops, although with only limited amounts of heavy firepower.

However, a defence system based on mobilization of reservists will in initial stages always be a disadvantage

³⁸ Sam Jones, “Estonia Ready to Deal with Russia’s ‘Little Green Men’,” *Financial Times*, 13 May 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/03c5ebde-f95a-11e4-ae65-00144feab7de.html#axzz3nhEuUeA0>

³⁹ Mikk Salu, “Pool aastat enne Eesti sõda Aslaaviaga (Half a year before Estonia’s war with Aslavia),” *Eesti Ekspress*, 22 June 2015, <http://ekspress.delfi.ee/news/pae-vauudised/pool-aastat-enne-est-i-soda-aslaaviaga?id=71746723>

⁴⁰ Craig Caffrey, “Estonia to increase defence spending to 2,1% of GDP,” *IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 30 September 2015, <http://www.janes.com/article/54924/estonia-to-increase-defence-spending-to-2-1-of-gdp>

⁴¹ Andres Vosman, “Learning the Right Lessons from Ukraine” in *European Defence Planning and the Ukrainian Crisis: two contrasting views*, Ifri Security Studies Center, June 2015, http://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/fs58petersson_vosman.pdf



compared to an enemy who can draw on regular troops in high readiness mode. The Estonian defence planners have realised the need to increase the availability of quickly useable forces and capabilities. Here the end of ISAF mission has been beneficial because for the first time its single battalion-size combat unit consisting of regular soldiers – the Scouts Battalion - is now almost fully stationed on home territory and ready for national defence duties. Likewise the *Kaitseliit* organisation would provide a key part of the rapid response capability.

In sum, Estonian security and military forces should be well-positioned to handle hybrid scenarios which involve protesters backed up by small numbers of armed people. If Russia would start to insert organised armed formations –be they “volunteers” or members of Russian military and security structures – over the border to support troublemakers inside Estonia, this would constitute a clear armed incursion. Considering that this would be a repeat of a by now familiar picture seen in Ukraine it should not be that difficult for Estonia to prove Russia’s direct involvement to other Allies and request NATO’s assistance to deal with the intruders. Using the same tactics employed in Ukraine would deprive Russia from element of surprise and as this kind of *maskirovka* would be too obvious the attempt to maintain deniability would not succeed.

At the same time in case of the threat of open military intervention neither Estonia nor the other Baltic states will have the military capability to themselves deter Russia. This is due to the basic asymmetry of the sizes between the states. From this follows the question regarding the right Alliance defence and deterrence posture in the Baltic Sea region to deter possible Russian aggression and help exposed Allies, like Estonia.

NATO’s Deterrence and Defence Posture in the Baltic Region

The Allies have repeatedly sent messages to Moscow of their determination to uphold the obligations of Article 5 security guarantees to Baltic states.⁴² But to be credible

signalling needs to be backed up by capability. Red lines which are not backed by hard power may invite the adversary to test them.

The Alliance will never embrace the full spectrum of challenges embodied in hybrid warfare and instead must remain focused on military issues. At the same time, this does not mean that there would not be areas where NATO could not support national authorities in tackling hybrid threats. For example, NATO has a role in establishing situational awareness to understand what is happening, identify hybrid tactics, recognise the threat and quickly identify who is behind it. Other areas where the Alliance has relevance within its mandate are cyber domain and strategic communications.

An essential element of the response when it comes to many types of hybrid scenarios are Special Operations Forces, which are exactly designed, trained and equipped to address that part of conflict spectrum. SOF personnel from other Allied nations are already actively training with their Baltic colleagues. Allied SOF can support resiliency and resistance potential of the country, it can also be directly involved in scenarios which remain below the level of direct conventional military action.

For more conventional military scenarios, however, the present Alliance force posture in the Baltic theatre is not sufficient. While clearly the present reassurance measures are steps forward in diminishing Alliance vulnerabilities and providing a very important message of Alliance solidarity, they cannot be seen as sufficiently credible in removing the possible temptation for the Russian leadership to try to test the Alliance in the Baltics. Russian aggression would most likely be built on speed and mass as Moscow would aim to avoid a drawn-out conventional military campaign against NATO forces. Therefore there may be extremely short time available for NATO to react before Russia achieves its initial objectives and hopes that the logic of de-escalation would start to restrain Alliance’s options.

Therefore the focus of NATO’s strategy in the Baltic region would need to be on minimizing the risk of Russian forces gaining significant territory which later

⁴² The most public commitment was made during a visit to Tallinn on 3 September 2014 by U.S. President Barack Obama. See “Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia,” <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-people-estonia>



could be enormously difficult and costly to reverse. Following from this, the Alliance needs to consider that policies and force structures would prove most effective in defending against, and thereby deterring, Russian military aggression.

The presence of conventional allied military forces able, if necessary, to inflict significant costs to the Russian military should be the key deterrent message. Only by removing the overwhelming local military advantage of the opponent will NATO convincingly take away the very incentive for the Russian leadership to strike. It would be much more credible than a promise to retaliate, which would involve overcoming the Russian A2/AD challenge, and would also diminish the threat of ending up in a situation where the Alliance would face Russia's coercive threat of nuclear use.⁴³

Moreover, a strong allied conventional military posture in the Baltics would be important not only in closing off easy conventional military opportunities for Russia, but also in countering the employment of hybrid tactics. As seen in Ukraine the credibility and effectiveness of Russia's unconventional methods rests to a large extent on the potential threat of use of conventional military force. Therefore a strong allied military presence would deny Russia an opportunity to use military blackmail to support its hybrid methods.

Based on that the following steps should be taken:

- 1) As a start, the whole Alliance effort in support of frontline allies should be framed as deterrence instead of reassurance. Its focus has to be on countering the potential threat, rather than merely on the insecurities of exposed allies. NATO needs to fundamentally re-evaluate its defence strategy and posture and restore deterrence as central element of Alliance's strategy.
- 2) Forward positioning of capable Allied forces on the ground in Baltic states and Poland will be a compelling way to communicate the determination to confront aggression and raise the costs for the attackers. If Russia realises that due to the presence

of forces capable of fighting it cannot rapidly achieve its objectives, it would refrain from launching aggression as it would have nothing to gain from it. Therefore this is the best guarantee against the danger of Putin miscalculating.

3) The exact parameters of deployed forces would need to be determined by military planners on the basis of their deterrent value. Even more important than troop sizes would be that their presence would address the capability gaps facing local Baltic forces. For example the present NATO Baltic Air Policing Mission should be enhanced to become a Baltic Air Defence Mission. Besides air assets it should involve medium-range air defence, a capability which at the moment is totally lacking in the region.

4) For the implementation of this deterrence posture, U.S. political leadership and strong American presence on the ground is essential. It would avoid any perception of disengagement and the impression that U.S. interests in Baltic security are secondary to other global interests. Further, the Russian political and military leadership undoubtedly takes American military power very seriously.

5) U.S. troops should be accompanied by deployments of force components from major Western European allies – France, Germany and the United Kingdom. This would signal the commitment of the most capable European allies to deterrence and wider transatlantic burden-sharing. The importance of deployments from France and the United Kingdom would also include the fact that these two nations are nuclear powers.

6) The Allies should also support the strengthening of defence capacities of Baltic states by for example donating surplus, but still capable armament and equipment to Baltic armed forces. This kind of military assistance would enable the exposed allies to increase their self-defence capabilities and thereby contribute to the overall Alliance defence and deterrence posture.

⁴³ For an excellent discussion on the merits of having sufficient forces on the ground see Jakub Grygel and Wess Mitchell, "Limited War is Back," *The National Interest*, 28 August 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/limited-war-back-11128>



7) In addition to the forces deployed in the territories of exposed allies and the ones assigned to the VJTF and NRF, the Alliance will need to identify and prepare sufficient number of follow on forces to enable NATO to surge its military forces as needed and conduct sustained operations. This is tied to the need for overall improvement of the readiness and responsiveness of NATO forces.

This will not be cheap, but to believe that Russia can be deterred without costs would be naïve. Also these costs would be nothing compared to potential strategic consequences of a successful Russian attack. Deterrence is far easier and cheaper than compelling the aggressor to reverse a move what has already been made. On the other hand nothing would do more to invite Russian aggression than signalling NATO's lack of resolve and unwillingness to bear costs. In the context of messages like the one provided by the results of the 2015 poll by the Pew Research Center, which showed the general reluctance of European populations to use military force to defend a NATO ally attacked by Russia, leaving such impression would be especially dangerous.⁴⁴

Conclusions

The Alliance and its members need to be ready for long-term confrontation on NATO's exposed eastern flank which will involve military, unconventional, information and other dimensions. Russia has proven that it has a habit of making surprises and that it can pose a direct threat to its neighbours on short notice. As limited armed conflicts along NATO's eastern flank have become a thinkable possibility the Baltic area will be the Alliance's most exposed region.

In case of Estonia the country has to prepare for different scenarios and make itself as inconvenient opponent as possible. It would need to work to further increase its resilience against unconventional warfare, all kinds of diversionary acts and provocations, massive foreign propaganda. This all will contribute to the deterrence and diminish chances of being the next victim of Russian aggression.

While it may be tempting to draw direct parallels between some areas in Ukraine and in Estonia, this would be misleading. The Estonian state is also much less vulnerable than Ukraine was. Still, in Estonia the ethnic factor will remain a concern as it could be conveniently used by Moscow to provide a cause and justification for the intervention. While further strengthening of internal societal cohesion is something for Estonia to deal with this itself is a vulnerability which objectively could only be diminished, but never completely eliminated.

While considering threats emanating from Russia an emphasis focusing mostly on hybrid threats would be wrong. Russia's fixation with hard power and the military advantages it enjoys in the Baltic region mean that military power could be the tool which Russia would prefer to use. Russia may see the Baltic theatre as the place to try to test and eventually break NATO.

Ensuring the effectiveness of deterrence in the Baltic region has to be a central feature of the new policy of containment which should guide Western thinking about handling the Russian challenge. NATO's present conventional vulnerability in the region itself can cause strategic instability and should therefore be addressed. Deterrence worked during the Cold War and there is no reason to believe that it could not be adapted to the present circumstances. Restoring the credibility of NATO's deterrence and defence posture should therefore be the central part of Alliance's strategic adaptation.

⁴⁴ "NATO Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid," Pew Research Center, 10 June 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/10/nato-publics-blame-russia-for-ukrainian-crisis-but-reluctant-to-provide-military-aid/>