



ANALYSIS

CONSTRUCTING DETERRENCE IN THE BALTIC STATES

| JONATAN VSEVIOV |

FEBRUARY 2021

RKK
ICDS

RAHVUSVAHELINE KAITSEURINGUTE KESKUS
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
EESTI • ESTONIA

Title: Constructing Deterrence in the Baltic States
Authors: Vseviiov, Jonatan
Publication date: February 2021
Category: Analysis

Cover page photo: US soldiers take part in a massive amphibious landing during the Exercise Baltic Operations (BALTOPS), a NATO maritime-focused military multinational exercise, on June 4, 2018 in Nemirseta on the Baltic sea in Lithuania. AFP / Petras Malukas / Scanpix

Keywords: deterrence, Baltic states, NATO

Disclaimer: The views and opinions contained in this paper are solely those of its authors and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the International Centre for Defence and Security or any other organisation.

ISSN 2228-2076

© International Centre for Defence and Security
63/4 Narva Rd., 10120 Tallinn, Estonia
info@icds.ee, www.icds.ee

political systems. A military conflict with Russia in the Baltic states would be catastrophic for all parties involved. Getting deterrence right is thus essential for the security of the wider Euro-Atlantic region.

A military conflict with Russia in the Baltic states would be catastrophic for all parties involved

INTRODUCTION

Deterrence is the prevention from action by fear of consequences; it is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction.¹ Or, to be more precise: deterrence is the effective communication of a self-enforced prediction that activity engaged in by another party will bring forth a response such that no gain from said activity will occur, and that a net loss is more probable.²

Both as intellectual concept and as actionable strategy, deterrence is complex and multifaceted. This is certainly so in the Baltic region, where no one action or policy alone can guarantee security. As evidenced by the high number of different deterrence-oriented activities that NATO collectively or its member states individually undertake in the region, this seems to be well understood. But there are very few attempts at comprehensive description of deterrence in the Baltic region – of what is being or should be done to ensure success, why and how.

Both as intellectual concept and as actionable strategy, deterrence is complex and multifaceted

The Baltic states are, however, in a strategically seismic location on the front lines of a relationship characterised by competition, and mutually exclusive strategic aims and

¹ *Department of Defense Dictionary 1994*, quoted in Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations 89 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

² Adam Garfinkle, "An Observation on Arab Culture and Deterrence: Metaphors and Misgivings", in Efraim Inbar (ed.) *Regional Security Regimes: Israel and its Neighbors* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 28–29.

This paper is an attempt to provide a framework for thinking about how to establish and maintain deterrence in the Baltic region, focusing on the military aspects. I will propose a three-tiered approach to building credible deterrence in the region, with the three pillars represented by (1) the Baltic states' own forces; (2) the deployed presence in the region of other Allies' capabilities; and (3) the Alliance's ability to reinforce the Baltic states and conduct a wider operation to deny gains and impose unacceptable costs on the aggressor.

1. THE SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS FOR A FUNCTIONING DETERRENCE POSTURE IN THE BALTIC STATES

A number of specific characteristics, many of them unique, need to be taken into account when constructing deterrence in the Baltic region.

First, while the Baltic states are not the only region where NATO has a land border with Russia, it is the only one where both sides' politically, economically and militarily vital areas are in such geographical proximity:

on the NATO side, all three Baltic states have the totality of their territory within about 300 kilometres of Russian borders; and on Russia's side, its second-largest city, St Petersburg, is only 160 kilometres from NATO's border in Estonia.

Secondly, the Baltic states are the only major region in NATO where the Alliance does not enjoy conventional military superiority.

Although the three Baltic allies have invested over 2% of their GDP on defence, the size of their economies means that in absolute terms they are among NATO's smallest spenders.³

The Baltic states are the only major region in NATO where the Alliance does not enjoy conventional military superiority

At the same time, their combined territorial extent is significant: together, they are around half the size of Germany, with their combined Eastern border about the length of the Cold War boundary between East and West Germany, plus an additional border for Lithuania with Russia's Kaliningrad region. Hence, the ratio of forces to square kilometres to be defended is low, and the balance of forces overwhelmingly in Russia's favour.

Third, reinforcement of the Baltic states with forces from other parts of NATO would have to use narrow land-, air- and sea corridors, which are vulnerable to Russian capabilities in Kaliningrad and Belarus and in Leningrad and Pskov oblasts. At the same time, successful reinforcement of the Baltics in a period of

Even a limited confrontation in the Baltic states would be likely to lead to strategic consequences with immense difficulty in controlling escalation

tension, crisis or war would by definition render Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast extremely vulnerable. As the bulk of Russian capabilities in its Western Military District (which in a crisis or war situation would constitute a threat to NATO's reinforcement of the Baltic states) are simultaneously vital for the defence of Russia's key strategic areas, a regional confrontation in the Baltic states has the potential to escalate quickly into a major confrontation, as it would simultaneously threaten the vital interests of both sides.

Taken together, an analysis of these factors leads to the conclusion that even a limited

confrontation in the Baltic states would be likely to lead to strategic consequences with immense difficulty in controlling escalation once a crisis or war was underway.

In order to deter such a course of action, NATO's posture and activities should credibly communicate both the will and the capability to make even limited gains unlikely, while imposing unacceptable costs on the aggressor.

There are two reasons why this is particularly difficult.

- 1) Even if the Baltic states defend their territory vigorously, they cannot by themselves defeat an incursion or inflict sufficient costs to overwhelm the adversary's potential indirect gain, in the form of an altered European security architecture and diminished credibility of American alliances.
- 2) The ability to inflict unacceptable costs lies with Allies with more significant military capabilities, who are, in turn, affected by Russia's ability to match whatever costs they decide to inflict on it, thus leading to the classic credibility problem inherent in any extended deterrence situation.

In light of this, a successful posture in the Baltic states would have to incorporate, in one coherent policy, measures that would underpin both the credibility of near-automatic response to aggression and the ability to inflict sufficient cost, using a combination of

different players to achieve both. Hence, the posture should communicate the following:

- First, that any incursion into the Baltic states would result in a guaranteed and immediate military response, notwithstanding the potentially catastrophic results that escalation could lead to.
- Second, that any incursion into the Baltic states would involve other Allies and thus the response would be multinational from the first moment of the conflict.
- The third element of the posture must convey that, in such a conflict, NATO is willing to and capable of imposing unacceptable costs on the aggressor, while making even limited success for the latter unlikely. While costs can be imposed in and from regions far from the Baltic states,

³ NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2013-2020)," press release PR/CP(2020) 104, 21 October 2020, 7.

notion that even limited success is unlikely would have to be achieved in the Baltic states themselves, through a viable reinforcement strategy.

I will discuss the details of each component in the next three sections. I describe them as (1) unavoidability of response, (2) unavoidability of multinational response and (3) unavoidability of defeat (for the aggressor).

2. UNAVOIDABILITY OF RESPONSE

That a country would militarily defend itself when attacked is inherently a more credible notion than anything else in the extended deterrence construct; hence, the main responsibility for communicating this falls upon the Baltic states themselves. Their armed forces would need to have a posture that communicates both the intent and the capability to defend their territories, whatever the political or military context and no matter how significant the political and military risks involved.

That a country would militarily defend itself when attacked is inherently a more credible notion than anything else in the extended deterrence construct

This might seem like a simple proposition; it is nevertheless not automatic or necessarily self-evident. The question of messaging the political cohesion of the Alliance is beyond the scope of this paper; of interest here is what, if anything, can be done by the Baltic states through the posture of their forces to maintain the credibility of this element. Two mutually reinforcing options merit consideration.

First, the Baltic states' armed forces should disperse the locations of their installations and routine activities in a way that ensures peacetime military presence in every region of their territory. This would place their militaries in position, thus reducing the need to escalate rapidly by moving forces in the event of a crisis.

Second, the rules and regulations of the Baltic states that govern defence should include a mandate for organised armed resistance by their armed forces in the event of aggression, even in situations where no such specific political decision is explicitly made. This is important in case of a decapitating attack, but also as a way to reduce the likelihood of an aggressor's success through political pressure. The goal here, too, is to communicate that aggression is likely to result in military confrontation, and hence could not succeed through intimidation alone.

As to the capabilities of the Baltic states themselves, three additional questions must be addressed.

First, how much capability is needed? If the goal is to convince a potential aggressor that any incursion would lead to conflict – which in turn, thanks to other elements of the posture, would eventually lead to the aggressor's defeat and unacceptable costs – then clearly a Baltic states' force that is insufficient in size and ability to force the aggressor to commit its regular forces in a highly visible manner would be too small. The other side must assume that, even in the case of a limited incursion, the Baltic states' forces, together or separately, would be able to respond in a way that would force the aggressor to commit its conventional forces and undertake major manoeuvres, thus making deniability of its involvement untenable and the notion that a major conflict has erupted convincing. Thus, the Baltic states would need to deploy conventional forces able to conduct intensive manoeuvre warfare against a larger conventional force and whose defeat would require the other side to commit at least several brigades in direct operations.

At least some of the Baltic states' forces should be at a high level of readiness, with an ability to increase rapidly the readiness of the rest

Secondly, the issue of time needs to be addressed – more specifically, when and for how long should the forces of the Baltic states be able to sustain organised defence? In any

realistic scenario, it is likely that the adversary would attempt to use speed to its advantage, creating as much confusion over developments as possible, in order to achieve a *fait accompli* quickly. Hence, at least some of the Baltic states'

In addition to conventional manoeuvre-capable forces, the Baltic states would need to deploy survivable unconventional capabilities in the form of Special Forces and a territorially dispersed militia

forces should be at a high level of readiness, with an ability to increase rapidly the readiness of the rest. In addition, the Baltic states should be able to sustain organised military defence for at least as long as it would plausibly take for larger reinforcements from other Allies to arrive. This, in turn, would need to be communicated through NATO's reinforcement exercises, which would need to involve an element of movement into the Baltic states as a matter of routine.

It is nevertheless possible for a potential adversary to conclude that it could, under certain circumstances and with the element of surprise on its side, conduct a rapid operation to crush the conventional forces of the Baltic states before significant reinforcements could arrive. This could lead to a problematic assumption that, even if conflict is unavoidable in principle, an adversary could create, perhaps in a limited area, a *fait accompli* with such speed and decisiveness that it would incapacitate the Baltic states' response before it even begins. This leads to the conclusion that, in addition to conventional manoeuvre-capable forces, the Baltic states would need to deploy survivable unconventional capabilities in the form of Special Forces and a territorially dispersed militia that would communicate an intent and capability to sustain armed resistance even in situations where manoeuvre-capable forces are either destroyed or unable to respond.

Third, the question of space—or, more precisely, where would the Baltic states need to be able to respond? Given their role as guarantors of the notion that any incursion would lead to

conflict, the Baltic states would need to field forces that are able, at least in the earliest phases, to respond kinetically to incursions in all domains. Thus, any construct that omits the Baltic states' own ability to at least contest these domains in the initial phases of an incursion lacks overall credibility.

Taken together, then, it appears that, for the purposes of supporting the three-pillared construct of deterrence, the Baltic states' own forces would need to include elements from both the conventional and unconventional realms, that are

- 1) pre-authorised, within reasonable parameters, to conduct full-spectrum defensive military operations in the event of aggression
- 2) located and routinely operating in a geographically dispersed manner, persistently present in all of their countries' regions at a high level of readiness
- 3) able to initiate defensive operations rapidly, without allowing for a *fait accompli* to settle in, including in border areas and islands
- 4) able to respond kinetically to incursions in the first phases of any conflict, and in all domains in a manner sufficient to force the other side to visibly commit its regular forces, making plausible deniability impossible
- 5) able to sustain defensive operations until Allied reinforcements are likely to be able to arrive.

With adequate capabilities and smart posturing, the Baltic states can ensure the credibility of their response to aggression

3. UNAVOIDABILITY OF MULTINATIONAL RESPONSE

With adequate capabilities and smart posturing, the Baltic states can ensure the credibility of their response to aggression. As they lack sufficient power to impose a high enough cost on an aggressor and ensure defeat of the incursion, the posture requires this second element: the unavailability of a multinational

response, intended to instil credibility in the notion that, in the event of incursion, there is no plausible way that NATO, or, at a minimum, key Allies, could remain uninvolved.

The easiest, and surest, way of ensuring the credibility of military response by other Allies at levels equal or similar to that of the Baltic states themselves is to have forces from other Allies deployed to the Baltic states and integrated into their forces.

This presence should be seen as a bridge connecting the greater credibility of host nations' response with the higher capability of other Allies. Without such a connection, the credibility of NATO's deterrence posture would be open to question.

Allied military presence should assure that Allied involvement in any incursion is guaranteed

NATO's overall deterrence posture should thus present a construct whereby, in simplified terms, a conflict would be likely to evolve as follows:

- 1) In the event of an incursion, the Baltic states respond kinetically, forcing the aggressor to either cease its operation or escalate by committing large conventional formations beyond reasonable deniability.
- 2) As an unavoidable effect of this, other Allied forces in the region are directly impacted significantly enough to reduce the likelihood of their remaining unengaged.
- 3) NATO, or at least individual Allies with relevant capabilities, reacts to the developing situation in a way that makes success for the aggressor unlikely and imposes unacceptable costs on it.

Steps 1 and 2 are, of course, important in enhancing the credibility of step 3.

Herein lies the dual purpose of Allied military presence: it should assure that Allied involvement in any incursion is guaranteed, while also instilling credibility in the notion that Allies would indeed react to it in a defeat-ensuring and cost-imposing way. This provides a number of answers as to the

general description of what a desired deployed presence should look like.

With the possible exception of the maritime domain and in respect of some elements of air power, the deployed presence is useful only if it is located in the Baltic states themselves

First, as an incursion could theoretically be initiated in any domain, either as an end-state in and of itself, a first step in a wider multi-domain incursion, or as a test of NATO's resolve, a deployed Allied presence should likewise be visibly present in all domains.

Secondly, with the possible exception of the maritime domain and in respect of some elements of air power, the deployed presence is useful only if it is located in the Baltic states themselves.

Due to the clear distinctions that characterise this region, deployment near the Baltic states or frequent visits of Allied forces to them (in order to participate in exercises, for instance), while useful for other reasons, cannot be used as a substitute for deployment in the Baltic states. In principle, an ally could of course respond to a developing incursion from a nearby region or with long-range assets from further afield. The problem would be one of credibility, especially if such a response could lead to further escalation. Allied military presence in the Baltic states should address this problem by making it clear that the involvement

Allied deployed forces should be closely integrated into the forces of the host nations, and this should be clearly communicated via all means

of other Allies in an incursion would not require additional decisions to be made but would be a likely outcome of an incursion purely because of their forces' location.

Third, Allied deployed forces should be closely integrated into the forces of the host nations, and this should be clearly communicated via all

means, including exercises. This is critical for the deployment to function as a bridge between the increased credibility of response from the host nation and the greater capabilities of the sending nations; the closer this integration, and the better it is communicated, the stronger the bridge. Ideally, Allied deployed forces and host-nation forces should be in the same chain of command. There are reasonable limits to this, as every sending nation would naturally wish to maintain political control over its forces; but, from the perspective of an ideal deterrence posture, at least some level of command authority should be delegated to the tactical commanders of the host-nation forces: for instance, in the case of an Allied battalion, to the Baltic states' brigade commanders. If it is routinely communicated through military exercises that the Allied battalion always moves out of base when the Baltic brigade of which it is part does so, the notion that this battalion is likely also to join the brigade in conducting defensive operations becomes more credible.

Allied presence should, in all domains, be militarily capable of actual kinetic operations and be equipped, postured and trained in such a way as to communicate this

Fourth, the size of the deployed force should be sufficient to assure a potential aggressor that any operations against Baltic states' forces are likely to directly involve the deployed Allied forces in a way that makes it impossible to ignore their involvement in the conflict. This all but rules out the use of small Special Operations units for this purpose, as their involvement in borderline situations, even behind enemy lines with high levels of deniability on the part of the sending nation, tends to be the norm.

Fifth, the Allied presence should, in all domains, be militarily capable of actual kinetic operations and be equipped, postured and trained in such a way as to communicate this, and provided with rules of engagement that make this possible. This must be demonstrated through exercises, public statements and other means. If Allied units are militarily capable and

integrated with the forces of the Baltic states, the potential adversary's planners would have to not just assume their involvement in the event of an incursion but also – because of their capabilities – foresee their neutralisation in the event of conflict. This would also contribute to the credibility of the notion that any the response to any incursion would be unavoidably multinational.

Allied deployed presence should be decided and implemented in a way that would make rapid withdrawal unlikely and difficult to undertake

Sixth, as is the case with every other element in the construct, the Allied military presence should operate on the continuous principle of 24/7/365. A gap in presence, or in the capabilities of the force that is present, would be tantamount to a gap in the deterrence posture. Even if such a gap would not necessarily and immediately lead to confusion and escalation, frequent gaps over a longer period can do just that.

Seventh, Allied deployed presence should be decided and implemented in a way that would make rapid withdrawal unlikely and difficult to undertake. Decisions that underpin Allied presence should therefore preferably be formalised at NATO level and reinforced by binding bilateral and multilateral agreements, making sudden changes to the policy less likely. Hence, NATO-agreed arrangements for deployed presence are preferred to ad hoc bilateral deals.

The most strategically significant distinction between Allies' capabilities relates to nuclear weapons

Eighth, if the purpose of Allied deployed presence in the Baltic states is to function as a bridge between the credibility of host nations' response to incursions and other Allies' capabilities that are necessary to ensure both a high cost and real likelihood of defeat for the aggressor, the forces deployed should be from those Allies that possess such capabilities.

The most strategically significant distinction between Allies' capabilities relates to nuclear weapons. NATO's nuclear deterrence is primarily based on the capabilities of the United States, with the independent capabilities of the UK and France making an important contribution.⁴ For best results, it would seem logical to propose that those three be part of Allied deployment in the Baltic states.

Taken together, it appears that, for the purposes of supporting the three-pillared construct of deterrence, other Allies' deployed forces should meet the following core criteria:

- 1) be militarily capable and of sufficient size in all domains
- 2) include the US, the UK, France and, preferably, other Allies
- 3) use a construct that does not sacrifice military credibility
- 4) be as fully integrated as possible into the forces of the host nations, with command authority delegated to the maximum politically sustainable extent to host nations' tactical commanders
- 5) be present throughout the year
- 6) be underpinned by political decisions and implemented in a way that makes rapid withdrawal difficult.

⁴ The strategic forces of the Alliance, and particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies. The independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France have a deterrent role of their own and contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance. These Allies' separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of any potential adversaries. "The strategic forces of the Alliance, and particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies. The independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France have a deterrent role of their own and contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance. These Allies' separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of any potential adversaries." NATO, "[NATO's nuclear deterrence policy and forces](#)," 16 April 2020.

4. UNAVOIDABILITY OF DEFEAT

Recent years have seen the publication of a number of studies on the problem of military capabilities for a major conventional operation on NATO's Eastern periphery.⁵ The consensus view in all these seems to be that a major defensive operation in the Baltic states would be just that – a major operation, with a requirement for significant NATO forces to be used at a moment's notice.

A major defensive operation in the Baltic states would be just that – a major operation, with a requirement for significant NATO forces to be used at a moment's notice

A more thorough discussion on the specific capability requirements for a major theatre-wide operation is beyond the scope of this paper; what is relevant, though, is that, for these significant capabilities to function in a deterrent manner, it must be assured that their

⁵ The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) assesses that NATO could be hard-pressed to overcome Russia's time-distance advantage and A2AD capabilities in an attempt to prevent a Russian military fait accompli in the Baltic region, and thus that a viable "theory of victory" exists for Russia to prevail in a limited conventional conflict with NATO. In the CSBA's assessment, enhancing the US military posture in Europe, in combination with European capability enhancements, could undermine this "theory of victory". Specifically, the CSBA recommends that the US forces' posture in Europe be enhanced by permanently basing a division HQ in Poland and a corps HQ in Germany; permanently basing fire and air defence units as well as division enablers in Poland; positioning a second armoured brigade combat team in Europe; investing in increased resilience of forward-positioned forces and infrastructure; and enhancing pre-positioned equipment, munition stocks and sustainment material. The CSBA also recommends a number of improvements to Polish capabilities, and increasing the readiness and responsiveness of the NATO Response Force: Billy Fabian, Mark Gunzinger, Jan van Tol, Jacob Cohn & Gillian Evans, [Strengthening the Defense of NATO's Eastern Frontier](#)" (Washington DC: CSBA, 2019), 37-42. In 2014 and 2015, the RAND Corporation examined the shape and probable outcome of a near-term Russian invasion of the Baltic states and found that, as currently postured, NATO cannot successfully defend their territory. The study goes on to recommend a total force of six or seven brigades, at least three of them heavy, some of them forward-positioned in the Baltic states to be used in defensive operations there: David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, [Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics](#) (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 6-10. It has also been suggested that, in order to defeat the forces of Russia's Western Military District and Kaliningrad, a NATO force would have to be several divisions in size: R.D. Hooker Jr., [How to Defend the Baltic States](#) (Washington DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2019) .

use in reinforcing the Baltic states is credible – something that is challenging even under the best of circumstances. A deployed Allied battalion is present in Estonia and hence helps in communication just by being there; that a significantly larger reinforcing force would be present in times of crisis does not help as, of course, it is not there right now. Mitigating this credibility deficit is crucial for deterrence. I suggest four measures to achieve this.

The Alliance should demonstrate that it has a suitably robust command structure intended and suitable for major conventional operations

First, to communicate that NATO intends to reinforce the Baltic states in the event of conflict, the Alliance should demonstrate that it has a suitably robust command structure intended and suitable for major conventional operations in those countries. Because of the size of the Baltic states' own forces and the deployed forces already in the region, NATO would have to demonstrate an ability to effectively command a multiple-brigade operation; having at least one division-level HQ in the Baltic states would be consistent with this. As is the case with deployed forces, for credibility it is important that key Allies that underpin NATO's strategic deterrence participate in this HQ.

A good way of ensuring both speed and credibility without a permanent peacetime footprint is through the prepositioning of equipment

Secondly, NATO must demonstrate that it can deploy forces to the Baltic states fast. A good way of ensuring both speed and credibility without a permanent peacetime footprint is through the prepositioning of equipment of at least some of the reinforcing units that NATO would need to use in defeating an incursion. Other important elements here are routine planning and exercises for such a reinforcement operation, to be conducted regularly and in coordination with the activities of the Baltic states' own forces.

These two points – the existence of a credible command structure for a reinforcement operation and the ability to actually reinforce, communicated through routine planning and exercising – require a deliberate communications strategy.

Third, NATO must address the imbalance of vulnerability that stems from Russia's advancing nuclear and conventional missile capabilities. This imbalance is particularly dangerous for NATO from the perspective of ensuring deterrence in the Baltic states, as it provides Russia with an option to deter NATO's reinforcement by holding a number of significant Allies hostage without NATO or individual Allies possessing proportionate countermeasures. There are several plausible ways in which NATO could address this imbalance. It could try to reinvigorate relevant arms control measures and attempt to curb Russia's advances.

NATO must address the imbalance of vulnerability that stems from Russia's advancing nuclear and conventional missile capabilities

There are known political difficulties with this option, some deriving from the inherent complexity of verification, others from Russia's unwillingness to adhere to such limitations.

Alternatively, NATO could attempt to develop a robust and capable missile defence system targeting Russian capabilities, thus neutralising them. This is challenging from a technical perspective, and would probably also raise concerns regarding its effect on strategic stability if it were to detrimentally affect Russia's future strategic deterrence capability. Another option would be to develop and deploy NATO's own systems to provide the Alliance, or at least key Allies, with a proportionate way of responding to potential blackmail.

Fourth, NATO should continue with its nuclear sharing arrangement, as a way of retaining American nuclear capabilities in Europe, providing the Alliance with a flexible strategic communications tool for nuclear deterrence

and demonstrating cohesion. One benefit of the is that it binds the European Allies to be defended to those whose capabilities are crucial for actually undertaking that defence,

NATO should continue with its nuclear sharing arrangement, as a way of retaining American nuclear capabilities in Europe

thus increasing the credibility of collective reaction to an incursion. Consequently, NATO's posture in the Baltic states would benefit from an arrangement whereby the latter would be integrated into NATO's nuclear mission by, for instance, placing the three countries' personnel in some of the positions necessary for its fulfilment. Such actions would be less directly involved with the geography of the Baltic states and thus also protected against potential accusations of provocation.

Taken together, it appears that, for the purposes of supporting the three-pillared construct of deterrence, NATO's ability to credibly communicate both its ability and willingness to defeat an incursion and impose unacceptable costs on the aggressor requires

- 1) an overall Alliance posture aimed at successfully conducting major combat operations at short notice
- 2) at least a division-level HQ deployed to the Baltic states
- 3) routine planning and exercising of reinforcement, potentially prepositioning some of the required equipment in the three countries
- 4) addressing the imbalance of vulnerability that stems from Russia's new missile capabilities
- 5) continuing NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement while finding ways for the Baltic states to contribute to it.

CONCLUSIONS

Ensuring credible deterrence in a dynamic environment is an ongoing task, and one that requires action on numerous fronts and constant adaptation. These must form, and be informed by, a coherent strategy, one that connects the activities of different actors engaged in the endeavour and does so at different levels of escalation.

In this paper, I have proposed a three-tiered approach to constructing effective deterrence in the Baltic states, one that connects the increased credibility of those countries' response with the greater capabilities of other Allies.

The three pillars of the construct are (1) the Baltic states' own forces, with the main task of communicating the unavoidability of response; (2) Allied deployed forces in the Baltic states with the main task of communicating the unavoidability of a multinational response; and (3) the Alliance's ability to reinforce the three countries and conduct a wider operation to deny gains and impose unacceptable costs on the aggressor, with the main task of doing just that. The three tiers are interconnected, rely on each other, and must be developed concurrently.

Deterrence messaging is difficult even in situations where the construct is simple, involving just one nation and potential direct attacks against itself. Complexity in this case would follow from the fact that, however effective a government, there are many moving parts in any bureaucratic system, and hence several ways in which a country might undertake actions that communicate things its leaders have no conscious desire to convey. In addition, as in any communications endeavour, the other side may not interpret the messages exactly as intended, or may do so only occasionally.

Deterrence messaging in a system that includes numerous actors is even more challenging. The deterrence posture in the Baltic states includes the three countries themselves, Allies with significant military presence in the region, the US as the main power on which NATO's overall military credibility stands, and other regional powers without whose cooperation it is difficult to foresee success in NATO's defensive operations in the area. Each of these have their own decision-making processes, domestic political dynamics, cost-benefit analyses, bureaucratic and military routines and so on. But for NATO's posture to be coherent, their activities must be closely coordinated. This is, of course, especially important – as well as challenging – in times of crisis, if for no other reason than the likelihood that the relevant actors will conclude that a crisis is upon them at different times, and probably with differing degrees of seriousness.

Ensuring that these activities, undertaken by several countries, do indeed send a coherent message in peacetime requires significant effort, and doing the same in times of crisis increases this. This can only be achieved through constant planning and policy coordination.

Finally, it is clear that the players involved in this deterrence construct must possess the required capabilities in order for the overall concept, and its individual elements, to work.

A quick review of unclassified and publicly available material is sufficient to conclude that current capabilities are, in several ways, insufficient. Determining which of these gaps present a tolerable risk (but which, on the other hand, need to be urgently addressed), requires further analysis, one that is possible only by considering the whole construct and the different tasks its various elements are intended to fulfil.

RECENT ICDS PUBLICATIONS

REPORTS

Juurvee, Ivo, and Mariita Mattiisen. *The Bronze Soldier Crisis of 2007: Revisiting an Early Case of Hybrid Conflict*. Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, August 2020.

Sherr, James. *Nothing New Under the Sun? Continuity and Change in Russian Policy Towards Ukraine*. Tallinn: ICDS Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, July 2020.

Jermalavičius, Tomas, Priit Mändmaa, Emma Hakala, Tomas Janeliūnas, Juris Ozoliņš, and Krystian Kowalewski. *Winds of Change, or More of the Same? Impact of the 2018-19 Election Cycle on Energy Security and Climate Policies in the Baltic states, Poland and Finland*. Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, May 2020.

Kacprzyk, Artur, and Łukasz Kulesa. *Dilemmas of Arms Control: Meeting the Interests of NATO's North-Eastern Flank*. Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, April 2020.

Hodges, Ben, Tony Lawrence, and Ray Wojcik. *Until Something Moves: Reinforcing the Baltic Region in Crisis and War*. Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, April 2020.

BOOKS

Raik, Kristi, and András Rácz (eds.). *Post-Crimea Shift in EU-Russia Relations: From Fostering Interdependence to Managing Vulnerabilities*. Tallinn: ICDS Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, 2019.

POLICY PAPERS

Loik, Ramon. "Volunteers in Estonia's Security Sector: Opportunities for Enhancing Societal Resilience." ICDS Policy Paper, June 2020.

Baranowski, Michał, Linas Kojala, Toms Rostoks, and Kalev Stoicescu. Tony Lawrence (editor). "What Next for NATO? Views from the North-East Flank on Alliance Adaptation." ICDS Policy Paper, June 2020.

Brauss, Heinrich, Kalev Stoicescu, and Tony Lawrence. "Capability and Resolve: Deterrence, Security and Stability in the Baltic Region." ICDS Policy Paper, February 2020.

Raik, Kristi, and Josef Janning. "Estonia's Partners in the EU Coalition Machinery: Maximising Influence in the EU through Coalition-building." ICDS/EFPI Policy Paper, January 2020.

ANALYSES

Kuusik, Piret. "Under Pressure: Nordic-Baltic Cooperation During the COVID-19 Crisis." ICDS/EFPI Analysis, February 2021.

Teperik, Dmitri, and Oksana Iliuk. "The Universe of Resilience: From Physics of Materials Through Psychology to National Security." ICDS Analysis, January 2021.

Muzyka, Konrad, and Rukmani Gupta. "A Relationship of Convenience: Russian-Chinese Defence Cooperation." ICDS Analysis, November 2020.

Stoicescu, Kalev. "Stabilising the Sahel: The Role of International Military Operations." ICDS Analysis, July 2020.

Kuusik, Piret. "Through the Looking Glass: The Nordic-Baltic Region and the Changing Role of the United States." ICDS/EFPI Analysis, June 2020.

Raik, Kristi. "Estonia in the UN Security Council: The Importance and Limits of European Cooperation." ICDS/EFPI Analysis, April 2020.

All ICDS publications are available from <https://icds.ee/category/publications/>.



ICDS.TALLINN



@ICDS_TALLINN



ICDS-TALLINN



WWW.ICDS.EE



INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
63/4 NARVA RD., 10120 TALLINN, ESTONIA
INFO@ICDS.EE

ISSN 2228-2076