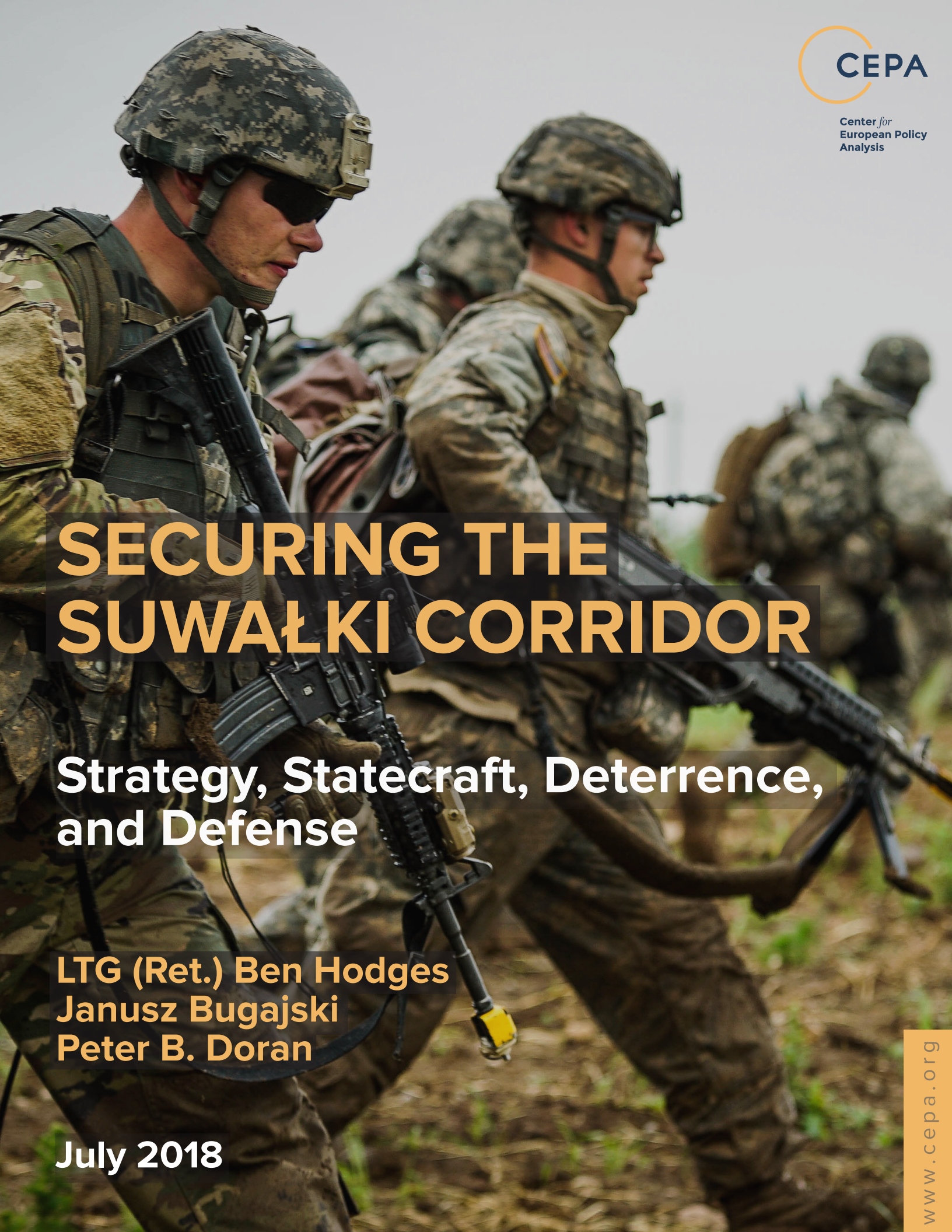

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Center for European Policy Analysis

SECURING THE SUWAŁKI CORRIDOR

Strategy, Statecraft, Deterrence, and Defense

LTG (Ret.) Ben Hodges
Janusz Bugajski
Peter B. Doran

July 2018

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Center *for*
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Analysis

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The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) is a 501(c)(3), non-profit, non-partisan, public policy research institute. Our mission is to promote an economically vibrant, strategically secure, and politically free Europe with close and enduring ties to the United States. Our analytical team consists of the world's leading experts on Central-East Europe, Russia, and its neighbors. Through cutting-edge research, analysis, and programs we provide fresh insight on energy, security, and defense to government officials and agencies; we help transatlantic businesses navigate chaning strategic landscapes; and we build networks of future Atlanticist leaders.

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Cover page: Exercise Saber Strike 2017 in Suwałki. Photo credit: NATO.

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The Issue

A 65-kilometer wide stretch of land between Belarus and Kaliningrad—the Suwałki Corridor—is some of the most important territory within NATO's borders. It is NATO's physical link between the Baltic littoral to the north and the European plain to the south. If this Corridor is not fully secured, NATO's credibility as a security guarantor to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia could be seriously undermined. An enduring solution requires fresh ideas in strategy, statecraft, deterrence, and defense. To help policy makers tackle such a threatening scenario, CEPA has prepared this landmark report to consider the challenges and opportunities that the Suwałki Corridor presents to all NATO members.

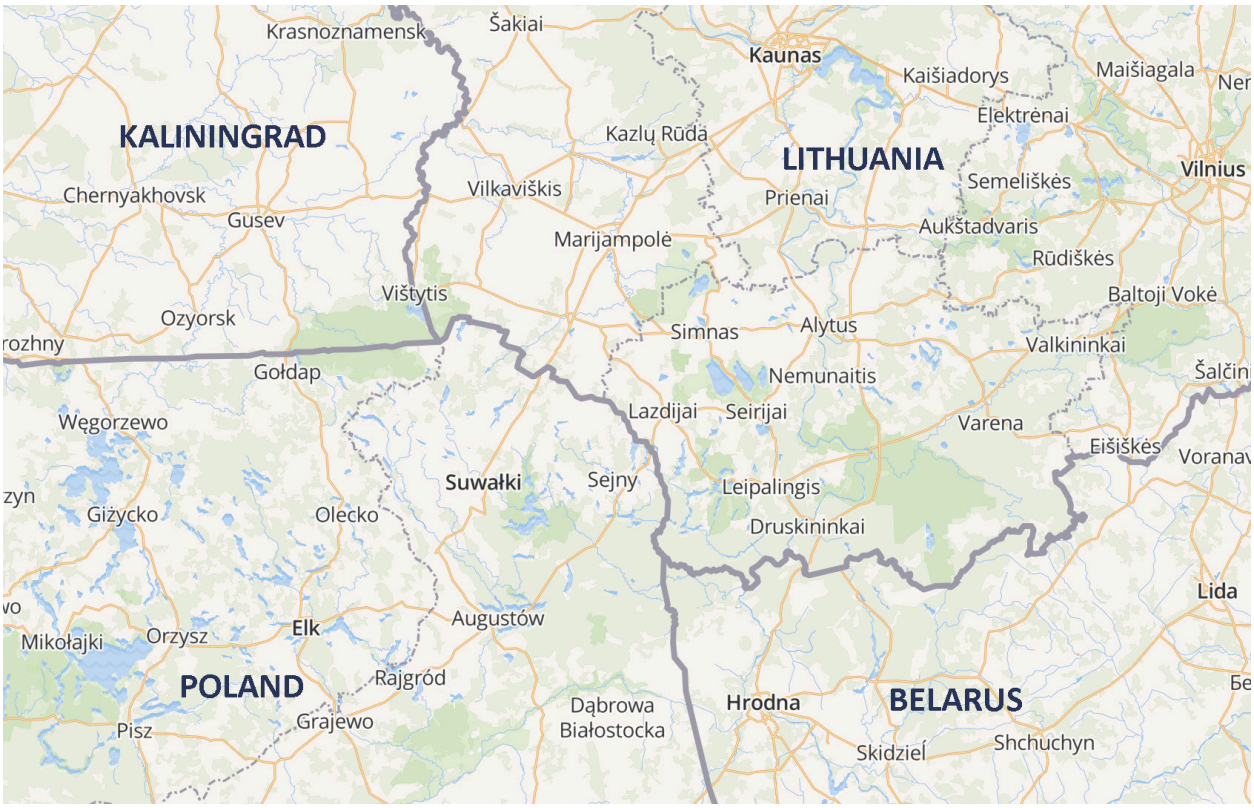

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Table of Contents

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dear Reader,

At the start of 2018, CEPA set out to examine the defining security challenge of our time: the Suwałki Corridor. Much as the challenge presented by the Fulda Gap once drove NATO to redefine its strategy, statecraft, deterrence, and defense during the Cold War, Suwałki now demands the same attention—perhaps, even more. At stake across this narrow, marshy strip of land is nothing less than the credibility of NATO. The organizing dilemma: a compelling solution to the Corridor's problem-set has eluded the Western Alliance—until now. With transatlantic policymakers and frontline practitioners in mind, CEPA is proud to publish this landmark report, Securing the Suwałki Corridor: Strategy, Statecraft, Deterrence, and Defense.

The findings and recommendations in this report are based on an extensive analysis of the Suwałki problem in terms of strategy, statecraft, deterrence, and defense; a comprehensive review of existing literature; on-the-ground fact-finding tours and site visits; and extensive discussions with senior practitioners, decision-makers, and experts from the United States and Europe. In the process, CEPA has incorporated unparalleled insight and real-word experience—relative to previous published works—on questions regarding Moscow's motives and capabilities, as well as NATO's force posture, logistical capabilities, and potential reinforcement via the Suwałki Corridor in a crisis.

CEPA would like to thank those who contributed their insight, expertise, and deep professional knowledge to this effort. While not inclusive of all, CEPA offers special thanks to:

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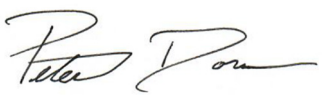
Sincerely,



Peter B. Doran
President and CEO
Center for European Policy Analysis

FINDINGS

An effective political and military alliance must understand its weakest points and undertake effective remedial action. The Suwałki Corridor is one such area. Current dangers emanating from the Corridor require new ideas in strategy, statecraft, deterrence, and defense.

In the event of an unwanted future crisis between Russia and NATO, the Kremlin's land forces operating from the Kaliningrad exclave and Belarus are in a position to close the Suwałki Corridor and impede NATO as a security guarantor to its three Baltic members: Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The moment that a contest for control of Suwałki starts—likely from a hybrid or non-kinetic trigger—any dispute with Russia could escalate with alarming speed. It will be exceptionally difficult to "off-ramp" or "de-conflict." This is a primary reason why NATO's Cold War-era strategy and force posture needs an update. The Alliance must keep pace with new dangers. Western forces need to be closer to areas where NATO members face a threat; their positioning around Russia's borders should demonstrate the readiness, resolve, and speed of allies to respond when challenged.

By now, NATO allies and partner countries should have no doubt: Russian forces pose a threat to the territorial integrity of the entire transatlantic Alliance. This danger is not exclusive to low-intensity, hybrid forms of conflict. The Suwałki Corridor is where the many weaknesses in NATO's strategy and force posture converge. If Russia attempted to establish control over the Suwałki region, or even threatened the free movement of NATO personnel and equipment from within the borders of Kaliningrad and Belarus, it could cut the Baltic states off from the rest of the Alliance. This would make reinforcing the Baltic states by land exceptionally difficult. Deterring any potential action (or even the threat of action) against Suwałki is therefore essential for NATO's credibility and Western cohesion. In learning how this can be better accomplished, the applicable lessons from Suwałki can and should be applied throughout NATO's eastern frontline.

Despite NATO's ironclad commitment to the defense of all member states, questions remain about the overall effectiveness of the Alliance's "tripwire" deployments in Poland and the Baltic States. These questions embody the age-old strategic problems of space, time, and scale.[1] If an opponent knows the location of a tripwire, they might simply avoid it (space). Meanwhile, the lack of a permanent presence of U.S. and other allied troops is premised on an assumption: small national militaries, local citizen reserves, and paramilitary cadres, together with the limited combat power of allied tripwires, will significantly impede an attacker. This delay (time) will theoretically allow for the arrival of counterattacking NATO forces, who will almost immediately move up through Central and Western Europe with overwhelming firepower and numbers (scale). There are a lot of "ifs" and assumptions embedded into this strategy—perhaps too many to mitigate the danger of retaliatory escalation by Russia or guarantee the success of NATO's defensive operations.

If Russia attempted to challenge NATO, its leaders must wager that they can swiftly exploit doubts, uncertainties, and political cleavages within the Alliance. It is a calculated gamble—but one that is not entirely without merit when seen from Moscow's perspective. Should the Kremlin try to test NATO,

its potential opening moves are almost unlimited: from low-threshold "hybrid" probes, limited or temporary incursions, or rapid "stab, grab, and hold" maneuvers aimed at creating a *fait accompli* at the negotiating table. Russia could seek to maintain its "escalation dominance" across multiple battlefield domains, as well as in the realms of diplomacy and strategic communications. All points could converge at Suwałki.

> "The **Suwałki Corridor** *is where the* ***many weaknesses*** in NATO's **strategy and force posture converge**."

Right now, the Suwałki Corridor is perfectly suited as a focal point for Russian action. The militarization of Kaliningrad and Russia's Western Military District continues to intensify. Moscow is in a position to use Belarusian territory as either a staging ground for operations against NATO, or for employing advanced A2/AD capabilities to lock down allied movement. Either option is a potential threat to Suwałki and the Alliance as a whole. But the Suwałki region should not be viewed in isolation. For Russia, closing the Corridor is likely to be part of a broader strategic offensive. The aim would not necessarily be to hold Suwałki but to deny it to NATO and its reinforcements.

In the opening phases of a crisis, Russia will almost certainly have the benefits of speed. Open source estimates put the number of total active forces in the Western Military District of Russia (*e.g.*, NATO's eastern border) at 330,000. The question is: how rapidly can NATO forces mobilize to contest Russian actions in the theater of conflict? The speed and nature of our potential responses should serve as the primary deterrent to Moscow's aggression. The findings and recommendations that follow are all calibrated to increase the speed of NATO's responses and limit Russia's freedom of action in a crisis.

To survive a Russian incursion, each state bordering Russia needs: (1) early warning of Moscow's covert subversion of a targeted area that can be thwarted or contained; (2) capable forces that can respond quickly; and (3) adequate infrastructure and prepositioned equipment to allow for the swift deployment of NATO troops. Preparing for crisis scenarios, offensive or otherwise, is a much more effective strategy in preventing war than complacency. Here's how that aim can be accomplished.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report is premised on the conviction that the most effective deterrent is one that leads Russia to avoid a test of NATO in the first place. It moves beyond the Alliance's traditional focus on defense-in-depth in favor of a more nimble "preclusive defense" of

Europe's eastern frontier. A preclusive defense is more likely to increase fear, doubt, and uncertainty in the minds of Russian planners and political leaders—factors which will preempt a challenge of NATO's readiness and resolve from the start. If executed correctly, a smart "preclusive defense" will lead Kremlin leaders to conclude that any attempted probe of NATO defenses—or any effort to fracture the Alliance politically—will fail. More alarming for Moscow: a preclusive defense will forestall Russia's "escalation dominance" in a crisis. And should Russian leaders act against their own interests, making the catastrophic miscalculation that they can challenge NATO, then the Alliance will be ideally positioned to switch from its deterrence posture to outright defense, quickly deploying and sustaining sufficient military forces to defend all territory protected under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. NATO can accomplish this with a mixture of near-, mid-, and long-term actions.

New "Mobile Tripwires"

The first actionable step that can be taken immediately is to upgrade the static nature of NATO's tripwire forces with "Mobile Tripwires." As the organizing problem with tripwires (*i.e.*, forward deployments under Operation Atlantic Resolve North-East) is that Russia can avoid them, NATO should deny opposing planners this luxury. To this end, U.S. Army Europe Avengers could offer one meaningful solution. These offer a highly mobile short-range air defense capability. By ensuring that one battery of this battalion (at a minimum) is always permanently forward deployed in the Baltic States, U.S. Army Europe can not only provide a short-range air defense capability in the Baltics—a high value to allies—but the inherent mobility of this capability means that it can be constantly repositioned—anywhere that Indicators and Warnings (IW) of a threat might emerge. And because this mobile

Avenger Air Defense System. Photo credit: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Scott Tynes.

Suwałki Corridor, pg. 5

tripwire can move quickly and with surprise, Russian leaders will never be entirely certain that a test of NATO (hybrid or otherwise) will not put their forces into immediate contact with a mobile tripwire. This will considerably decrease Russia's certainty and substantively increase the deterrent effect of NATO's forward deployed units. In time, other similar allied capabilities can be included into the "Mobile Tripwire" deterrent. The U.S. Avenger Battalion is an important first step.

A Better "Sustainment Network"

A second actionable step that the Alliance as a whole can take would be to channel its efforts into increasing NATO's sustainment network—via Germany, Poland, the Baltics, and Black Sea Region—to all forward deployed forces. This can be accomplished by reducing the "friction" of cross-border mobility on account of infrastructure limitations and red tape, especially at the Polish-Lithuanian border; vastly increasing the ability of all allies to procure and maintain Heavy Equipment Transports (HETs) in order to speed assembly and resupply; reducing Baltic energy dependency on Russia, so that NATO forces have adequate stocks of fuel and gas to support aviation, ground movement, logistics, and Command & Control (C2) sites—ideally from baseload power that does not come from Russia; and by substantially expanding the current (highly limited) logistical footprint of "enablers" who support Operation Atlantic Resolve North-East. The current deployment should grow into a permanent and robust network across all of Poland and the three Baltic States. Here, the United States can lead from the front. Presently, a small-scale rotational deployment of U.S. logistical units at Marijampolė, Lithuania and Lielvārde Air Base, Latvia are highly valuable to the success of Operation Atlantic Resolve North-East. They are also limited in their capacity. By substantially increasing the size and capabilities of these units on a permanent basis, amplifying their capabilities with contributions from other NATO allies, expanding the network at Lielvārde, and extending it into Estonia, the United States can make a high-impact, material contribution to NATO's overall responsiveness and reinforcement in the event of a crisis. Indeed, such a step would communicate to Russian planners the seriousness and deep preparation behind Western resolve to uphold the Article 5 commitment to frontline allies. Additionally, the expansion of such a network into the Black Sea region (through Romania, Hungary and the Czech Republic) is equally important and essential to the sustainment of a unified NATO response to Russia. Logistics are the backbone of all deterrence—and the Alliance needs far more capacity across the entire Eastern Flank to achieve it.

The additional recommendations that follow are likewise calibrated to increase NATO's speed of recognition, decision-making, and reinforcement. Indeed, the shorter the response time, the greater the deterrent. When combined with steps to limit Russia's options, NATO allies will be in a better position to prevent a crisis in the first place.

Speed of Recognition

NATO often faces an inherent time-disadvantage compared to Russia, which uses multiple forms of power to create ambiguity and achieve its desired effects, including a combination of cyber capabilities, disinformation, civil unrest, unidentified military or paramilitary units, and other

instruments. These make identifying Russia's intentions difficult. For this reason, the speed of recognition of a potential threat determines the effectiveness of NATO's counter-capability. A slowly reacting NATO would create a pronounced imbalance in the speed of recognition in the event of a crisis. NATO can work to mitigate this inherent disadvantage through:

- **Greater allied synchronization and intelligence sharing,** especially when it comes to IW and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR). This will accelerate the speed of recognition. Russia's Zapad 2017 exercises were the best example thus far of allied intelligence sharing in action. Building on this success and improving trust when sharing classified information between allies would only facilitate the speed of recognition. This means fully resourcing and orienting allies and agencies to the above indicators and integrating robust intelligence-sharing capabilities across the entire alliance and with other partners, especially Finland, Sweden, and Ukraine. This also means rebuilding Russian language and regional expertise, in addition to leveraging the existing expertise of Baltic allies and partners. Special Operations Forces (SOF) could also train local militia units to increase the speed of recognition, along with local embassies that have existing relationships with local agencies.

- **More effective use of NATO exercises to test our recognition capabilities:** Saber Strike 2018 (SS18) exercise provided an opportunity to find weaknesses in NATO's speed of recognition. By trying new concepts, the existing infrastructure network, the role of Command and Control (C2), and the requirements for an effective integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) architecture, among other factors, NATO could assess where the speed of recognition falls short. Such efforts help ensure that the level of intelligence-sharing demonstrated during Zapad 2017 becomes the norm.

- **Increasing the "speed of trust" between allies:** In practice, this means that all allies should work towards a higher degree of political trust inside the Alliance when it comes to IW and ISR sharing. This would improve the "speed of relevance" for valuable information, ensuring that decision-makers have it more quickly. Indeed, NATO's response to Russian probing or aggression in Suwałki hinges on identifying dangers early by increasing the "speed of trust" in intelligence sharing.

Speed of Decision-Making

Political and military leaders must be able to move as fast—or faster—than Russia, so as to decrease the opportunities for the Kremlin to test the Alliance in the first place. Presently, there is no clear definition among allies as to what defines a "crisis." This uncertainty could impede decision-making during low-threshold and hybrid conflict scenarios. Indeed, the authority granted to the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and the North Atlantic Council (NAC) depends on whether NATO faces a crisis situation or not; and it could determine the speed of allied reinforcement. Greater speed in decision-making can be achieved by:

- **Increasing options under peacetime conditions:** The SACEUR and the NAC should be empowered to authorize Crisis Response Measures (CRMs)—including the ability of forces to start movement, draw ammunition, and deploy—outside of standing authorities even under apparent peacetime conditions. Likewise, it will be key for the NAC to delegate authority for alerting and preparing the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) without

NAC-specific approval. NATO Command must be enabled during a crisis, superseding political control over the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) forces in order to place more responsibility in the hands of commanders. This will allow for the swiftest response to the real-world ambiguities of a low-threshold conflict.

- **Upgrading Staff Structures:** An Army division staff can be established in Poland as well as an Army War-fighting Corps staff structure in either Poland or Germany. As part of the EUCOM (European Command) framework, U.S. Army Europe has been managing land operations for Operation Atlantic Resolve for almost three years. The Mission Command Element (MCE) in Poznan also manages the limited footprint of U.S. Army forces in the northern, central, and southern Atlantic Resolve areas. However, a DIV HQ in Europe is needed rather than current 90-day rotations. A fully capable division staff in Poland would send a strong deterrence message, fully manage Atlantic Resolve activities, integrate them with allies, conduct detailed operational coordination and planning with host nation forces; and lead the effort on SHOCK Exercises. Such a move would also be fully compatible with Warsaw's current proposal for a permanent division formation of U.S. forces on Polish soil. Indeed, the two ideas support each other. A Corps HQ can conduct a full spectrum of operational planning with host nations, lead preparation for integration of multiple reinforcing divisions, and facilitate REFORGER style exercises.

Speed of Reinforcement

Increasing NATO's speed of reinforcement will hinge of the efficacy of the sustainment network established across frontline Europe. From Western Europe through Poland and into the Baltic States, bridges must be crossed, but they are not necessarily prepared for heavy vehicles. This will require more engineers and infrastructure investment. To this end, rail heads and rail loading ramps likewise dictate the speed of reinforcement. And once in theater, more fuel, oil, storage, and related logistical facilities are going to be needed to support allied forces. If national red tape at border crossings were radically diminished or eliminated, and relevant infrastructure investments were made now, the Alliance as a whole would benefit thanks to a greater ability to reinforce allies. This can be accomplished by:

- **Allowing for Dual-Use Burden Sharing:** Infrastructure improvements to rail, bridge, and port facilities are greatly needed to improve the speed of reinforcement. A portion of allied spending should be earmarked for sustainment and dual-use infrastructure to be counted toward NATO's 2 percent benchmark. Such investments must obviously serve a clear and demonstrable military purpose. These would include HETs, rail capacity, and pipelines through the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA), and not necessarily spending exclusively within defense budgets. NATO should likewise consider adopting a shared calculation that allows a portion of investments in dual-use infrastructure to be applied to a country's defense spending benchmark. Such a step would help the alliance as a whole increase the speed of reinforcement where and when it may be needed most.

- **Empowering commanders:** NATO's military response should also be depoliticized by placing more responsibility in the hands of military commanders and deciding beforehand what should be accomplished to avoid delays in responding to a Russian attack. This would include establishing a

Rear Area Operations Command (REOC) in Germany with capabilities to mobilize and push Alliance forces eastward. Additionally, Multinational Corps North East in Szczecin, Poland should provide connecting tissue for NATO deployments in the Baltic region.

- **Expanding Deployments:** Integrating NATO Special Forces within existing Baltic force structures would make the threat of effective Baltic insurgency operations against Russian occupation forces far more credible. Land-based and sea-based missile defense deployments can also be increased in the European theater. The Baltic States may need assistance and support in acquiring air defense weapons (including man-portable air defense systems) and attack and transport helicopters. Efforts should be bolstered to enhance intra-Baltic and Baltic-Nordic defense coordination with improvements in training, interoperability, C2, logistics, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. In addition, prepositioned equipment is important for war planners. It allows them to "set the theater" in advance of a conflict, thereby making the deployment of combat forces easier and faster.

- **Decreasing "Friction" in Communications:** NATO's lack of native interoperability in military communications networks, plus conflicting national classification regimes, inhibit the speed of reinforcement. In a Suwałki crisis, NATO forces will not benefit from their familiar Afghanistan military communications network or immediately enjoy Signal Operating Instructions (SOI). NATO needs interoperability procedures in place now, protocols for "Secure but Unclassified" communications (as is currently the case in the Syria theater), and seamless infrastructure for Digital Fires.

- **Decreasing "Friction" in Mobilization and Movement:** In the case of Suwałki, slowdowns when moving across the Polish-Lithuanian border could inhibit the speed of NATO reinforcement in a crisis. This can be minimized through bilateral agreements and by altering EU laws that regulate the cross-border movement of military equipment and munitions; and lowering the time required to transfer heavy equipment from one rail gauge to another. Mobilization can be additionally improved through the effective organization of personnel and resources, including RSOM (Reception, Staging, Onward Movement). Improved Alliance coordination is also needed in naming roads, maps, and communications in one planning theater.

> "**The shorter** the response time, *the greater* **the deterrent**."

- **More Heavy Equipment Transports:** HETs allow for the swift overland movement of equipment (such as Main Battle Tanks) and supplies into a theater. In the event of a crisis at Suwałki or elsewhere, HETs will be invaluable. They are also exceptionally limited at present. More are needed to provide for an effective deterrent; and to maximize NATO's speed of reinforcement. Allies should consider reviving Cold War-era programs that subsidized private-sector HET owners and operators—on the condition that such vehicles were made available to the armed forces as needed. This model could be updated for today's requirements.

Limiting Russia's Options

NATO must present a united front that communicates to Russia that the Kremlin will not enjoy dominance in the escalation cycle of an unwanted crisis. A prime goal should be to prevent Moscow from dividing NATO over Article 5. This can be done by updating and broadening the definition of what constitutes an attack so as to reflect new developments in contemporary warfare (*e.g.*, cyber-attacks, information warfare, and other forms of low-threshold conflict). We can begin to limit Russia's options through:

- **Better Signaling:** Moscow should have no doubt that military aggression—hybrid or otherwise—will never be limited to a single NATO member but will involve the Alliance as a whole.[2] The United States may even need to expressly reassert that its extended (nuclear) deterrent is the backbone of its ironclad commitment to Article 5. Any Russian use of nuclear weapons will be met with an overwhelming and devastating NATO nuclear response—thereby undermining Moscow's confidence that it can ever prevent the injection of U.S. and NATO forces into a contested theater.

- **Better Planning:** NATO's current planning, preparation, contingencies, and exercises should be further refined and calibrated so that they are flexible and tailored to different variants and stages of possible escalation by Russia—from subversion or infiltration to limited conventional operations. All planning should include contingencies for Russia's use of Belarusian territory and Kaliningrad to threaten the free movement of NATO reinforcements through Suwałki via long-range fire—without an actual military incursion. NATO leaders will need to seriously assess any operational restrictions that would allow Russia to escalate with impunity from inside its own territory (Kaliningrad and Belarus) without fear of a direct NATO response against Russian forces within these territories.

- **More Firepower:** Essential to answering Russia's A2/AD capabilities is improving NATO's nearby long-range firepower, including Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS), High-Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARs), and 155mm artillery with Rocket-Assisted Projectiles, all of which could strengthen regional fire cooperation. A Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) would also heighten NATO's counter-A2/AD capabilities.

- **Preparing for Escalation:** NATO must plan its deployments for various forms of military escalation. For example, the Baltic air-policing mission can be transformed into an air defense operation. The Alliance also requires an offensive component that can counteract Moscow's aggressive operations by targeting Russia's staging areas, airports, radar installations, sea and river ports, and logistical nodes employed in the event of war if defensive capabilities alone prove insufficient to deter a military assault.

- **Reinforcing the Automatic Nature of Article 5:** As a key component of deterrence, NATO should underscore that an attack on any ally will elicit punishing military strikes—even without a vote by all members. Indeed, individual states can immediately act to unilaterally defend an ally under Article 5. In the case of the United States, this could mean strikes deep inside Russia against infrastructure and energy facilities, as well as cyber attacks to shut down Russian communications, disrupt economic activity, and provoke societal dysfunction.[3] Above all it must be clear: the individual

response of all allies to defend members of the Washington Treaty is an obligation, not an option. Peace and security depends on it. This will be especially relevant if a full vote by the Alliance to invoke Article 5 is delayed.

- **Demonstrating Penalties:** Additional combat scenarios and demonstrations of our responses can be indicated by NATO leaders to dissuade a Russian test of the Alliance. This should not be limited to the military sphere. The regular training of law enforcement and regulatory authorizes via "financial snap exercises" will help to demonstrate additional allied capabilities and the political resolve to immediately seize Russian financial and real-estate assets in the West should an unwanted crisis develop.

- **Capitalizing on Exercises:** Military drills and exercises are essential, since they can be used to find weaknesses and evaluate new concepts and defense requirements. This includes discovering the speed at which units can move, testing road networks, the combining of national units, and assessing levels of command among battle groups. Exercises should also be organized for effective Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) in the region. Brigades moving into combat could be threatened from multiple sides; hence, the need to be ready for different combat tasks, including the possibility of army aviation attacks and Special Forces assaults on NATO formations.

- **Develop NATO officers:** A new generation of NATO officers can be trained and educated on the problem presented by NATO's Eastern Flank by studying today's challenges in the Suwalki Corridor, similar to how NATO studied, learned, and innovated from the challenge presented by the Fulda Gap during the Cold War. Already, Polish National Defense University officers and Baltic Defense College officers have begun visiting the Suwałki Corridor for staff rides and battle planning discussions. This should be expanded, professionalized, and seeded across NATO as part of the curriculum at NATO and NATO members' professional military courses and training.

- **Protecting Civilians:** In a crisis, controlling civilian traffic on primary and secondary roads around Suwałki will be a major challenge. Decisions need to be made now on how local and national governments will communicate precise instructions, public information, and emergency alerts to civilians. Frontline allies need comprehensive civilian contingency plans to determine the leadership structure during a civilian crisis, calculate the number of potential displaced civilians, determine the direction they are likely to move for relative safety, and to consider if they should remain in cities or disperse in the countryside. Moreover, plans and preparations need to be made for defending major cities from potential air, missile, and artillery attacks by Russian forces.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The findings and recommendations in this report focus on two key dimensions—NATO responsiveness and reinforcement—in order to help locate gaps in the Alliance's deterrent capabilities, preparedness, resupply, logistics, and cohesion. It serves to better inform NATO policymakers about the significance of the Suwałki Corridor and how it can be defended from Kremlin subversion and potential military assault.

While the overall Baltic land border with Russia and Belarus stretches nearly 1,400 kilometers, this strategically vital region of NATO is physically connected to the rest of the Alliance by a single overland link: the Suwałki Corridor. It is a relatively small strip of land that contains only two narrow highways and one railway line, and presents significant impediments to maneuver. If Russian forces ever established control over the Suwałki region, or even threatened the free movement of NATO personnel and equipment through it, they would effectively cut the Baltic States off from the rest of the Alliance. Such an outcome could make reinforcing the Baltic States by land exceptionally difficult. Deterring any potential action—or even the threat of action—against Suwałki is therefore essential for NATO's credibility and Western cohesion. And in learning how to deter potential Russian aggression, the applicable lessons from Suwałki can and should be applied throughout NATO's Eastern Flank.

Since the Kremlin's military attack on Ukraine in 2014, the Alliance has intensified its determination to defend member states that border Russia and Belarus. NATO has bolstered its deterrence capabilities in the Baltic region by establishing a network of rotational forces, warehousing equipment, and holding regular exercises. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, the Alliance agreed to deploy four multinational battalion battle groups on a rotational basis into Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. These units, often called tripwire forces, are led by the UK, Canada, Germany, and the United States, respectively. Their purpose: to deter Russia and demonstrate that any military action against an ally would automatically trigger the influx of a 40,000-strong rapid-reaction force and a full-scale NATO counterassault. This step was welcomed and needed. The current challenge for NATO is how to buttress its existing tripwire capabilities, including troops, transports, logistical support, and infrastructure, for quickly mobilizing reinforcements to defend allies in the event of a crisis. This is the key to providing a fully effective and robust deterrent against future Russian probes of allied solidarity and resolve.

> "The most **effective deterrent** *is the one that* leads Russia to **avoid a test of NATO** *in the first place*."

Despite NATO's commitments, questions have been raised since the 2016 Warsaw Summit about the overall effectiveness of current tripwire deployments in Poland and the Baltic States. If an opponent knows the location of a tripwire it might simply avoid it. The positioning of military hardware without the permanent presence of U.S. and other allied troops is therefore premised on a two-part assumption:

Assumption 1: In event of attack, national armed forces and civilian reserve corps, together with limited contingents from NATO tripwire forces, will be able to impede or delay an aggressor long enough for;

Assumption 2: The timely reinforcement by distant NATO units who will prevent a territorial *fait accompli* at the peace table.

Recognizing these assumptions, however, Moscow is in a position to exploit the predictable doubts, uncertainties, and political cleavages which could emerge inside the Alliance during a crisis. Consequently, Russia could decide to test NATO's response in several possible scenarios, whether through a low-threshold "hybrid" probe, a limited or temporary incursion, a rapid thrust to capture territory, or by threatening a wider war if NATO responds forcefully. Some or all of the above operations could be conducted consecutively or simultaneously.

The Suwałki Corridor is particularly vulnerable given the continued, intensified militarization of Kaliningrad and Russia's Western Military District. All the while, Moscow is able to use Belarusian territory as either a staging ground for offensive operations against NATO, or for positioning advanced A2/AD (Anti-Access Area Denial) capabilities pursuant to its military-political agreements with Minsk. Either option is a potential threat to Suwałki and the Alliance as a whole. For Russia, closing the Suwałki Corridor is likely to be a part of a broader strategic offensive in the region. In this case, the aim would not necessarily be to hold Suwałki, but rather to deny access to it to NATO and its reinforcements.

River crossing exercise prepares Germany to lead NATO's VJTF in 2019. Photo Credit: NATO.

Open source estimates put the number of total active forces in the Western Military District of Russia (*e.g.*, NATO's eastern border) at 330,000 troops. Moscow's arsenal of weapons includes multi-layered air defense, mobile coastal defense, land- and sea-based cruise missiles, and tactical ballistic-missile platforms. Moscow has also positioned WMD-capable Iskander ballistic missiles in Kaliningrad. With a striking range of 500 kilometers, these missiles can target critical infrastructure, counterforce assets, troop concentrations, C2 facilities, and civilian populations in a wide arc across Poland and the Baltic region. An additional strategic threat comes from the Russian Baltic fleet, whose ships, in the near term, include Kalibr Land Attack Cruise-Missile capabilities. The advanced variant of Kalibr reportedly has a 2,500-kilometer range—effectively reaching most of Europe.[4,5]

Although NATO does not have comparable military capabilities in the Baltic zone, it does possess significant assets in Germany and other parts of Europe that can be deployed in the event of a crisis. The question is how rapidly these forces can be mobilized to enter a contested theater. In theory, the speed and strength of NATO's military response should serve as a deterrent to Russia's initial aggression, with its effectiveness increased by accelerating recognition, decision, and reinforcement. But how might this work in practice?

This report includes actionable recommendations for maximizing the Alliance's effectiveness in terms of **deterrence, defense, and counter-attack** (noted earlier). In addition to a guaranteed NATO surge of reinforcements, each state bordering Russia requires three fundamental elements for its defense:

- Early warning of Moscow's covert subversion of a targeted area, so that it can be thwarted or contained;
- Capable local forces that can respond quickly to an assault on national territorial integrity; and
- Adequate infrastructure and equipment that is prepositioned to allow for speedy deployment of NATO troops.

Planning for a military offensive is a much more effective strategy for preventing war than complacency, particularly if the Kremlin perceives complacency as weakness. As this report demonstrates, a primary goal for NATO's Eastern Flank should be to construct a more active and effective deterrent.

Map data adapted from © Mapbox.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SUWAŁKI CORRIDOR

The Suwałki Corridor is a 65-kilometer wide (straight-line) or 104-kilometer (border length) strip of territory along Poland's northeastern border and Lithuania's southern border. Situated between Belarus and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, it serves as the only land link between NATO and its three Baltic members, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This choke point could become a primary target of armed conflict in the event of hostilities between Russia and NATO.

The Suwałki Corridor is vulnerable not only because of the militarization of Belarus and Kaliningrad—which straddle it on both ends—but also because of broader historical, political, and demographic factors. This report assesses several potential scenarios of Russian subversion and intervention, including challenges to the status of Kaliningrad, the manipulation of cross-border minorities, and disputes with Belarus as pretexts for violating NATO territory and testing allied solidarity. It also examines Russia's vulnerabilities and disadvantages, both political and military, in the event of a crisis over Suwałki.

The significance of the Suwałki Corridor was insufficiently addressed before Russia's seizure of Crimea and its broader attack on Ukraine in 2014. This was largely because Western governments had previously assumed that a Russian military assault on a neighbor was unlikely, even though Moscow seized territory from Georgia in August 2008. Although Warsaw and Vilnius periodically raised the question of Suwałki and their own military vulnerabilities in the region, such warnings were often viewed in Western capitals as sensational or provocative

at a time when many governments were focused on rapprochement with Moscow. However, any optimism about the Kremlin's intentions was sobered by the Russian attack on Ukraine, which continues to this day. NATO leaders understood that it was vital to monitor all indicators and assess any warnings that Moscow planned to disrupt the Suwałki Corridor.

In the event of conflict between Russia and a NATO member state, Russia's land forces operating from the Kaliningrad exclave and through Belarus could attempt to close the Suwałki Corridor. While sharing about 1,400 kilometers of land border with Russia and Belarus, the Baltic States are linked to the rest of the Alliance by this 65 kilometer-wide land corridor between Poland and Lithuania. This narrow strip of land is lodged between Russia's Kaliningrad exclave and Belarus and has only two narrow roads and one railway line passing from Poland to Lithuania. If Russian forces ever established control over this Corridor, or even threatened the free movement of NATO forces and material through it, they could cut the Baltic States off from the rest of the Alliance and potentially obstruct allied reinforcements advancing by land through Poland. Suwałki is therefore critical to the speed of any NATO attempt to reinforce and defend the three Baltic States.[6]

In examining the Suwałki choke point, this report locates gaps in NATO capabilities, preparedness, responsiveness, reinforcements, C2, logistics, and cohesion. The report is intended to better inform U.S. and European policymakers and security experts on the significance of the Suwałki Corridor and how it can be reinforced and defended, so as to deter a Russian challenge to NATO. It also considers options for allied air and sea reinforcement if the Suwałki land route were blocked as well as non-traditional forms of deterrence, the potentially ambiguous role of Belarus, and the vulnerabilities of Kaliningrad. Broadly, it considers these problems in the context of increasing the speeds of recognition, decision, and reinforcement of NATO and its members.

> "The **Suwałki Corridor** was **insufficiently addressed** *before Russia's seizure of Crimea*."

In geographic terms, it is useful to view the Suwałki region as a box, linking four countries and four major cities: Białystok, Poland; Hrodna, Belarus; Vilnius and Kaunas in Lithuania; and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. Throughout history, this route between the Baltic littoral to the north and the European plain to the south has served as an artery for armies, empires, and Great Power conflict.[7] During several wars, major invasions and retreats took place north or south of the Suwałki region. Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia moved through and eventually

retreated toward the Suwałki Corridor.[8] His 250,000-strong invasion force moved between Insterburg (Volodino) and Hrodna to Kovno (Kaunas) on its way to Smolensk in June 1812, passing through the Suwałki region. Later, in December 1812, Napoleon's decimated and retreating forces stayed north of Minsk on their way to Kovno, returning through the Corridor.

Similarly, during World War I, the Suwałki Corridor was used as an avenue for the movement of troops on the Eastern Front. During the First Battle of the Mazurian Lakes (September 1914), it was here that Paul von Hindenburg's Eighth German Army expelled Russia's Second and First Armies from German territory. Russian troops retreated through a region encompassed by Stallupönen in the north and Augustów in the south, with Suwałki in the middle.[9] Later, during the Second Battle of the Mazurian Lakes (February 1915), the Central Powers traversed the Suwałki Corridor to the southeast to launch an offensive against Russia. Once again, movement through Suwałki was part of a broader offensive through a region stretching from present-day Vilkaviškis in Lithuania and as far south as Elk in Poland, with Suwałki in the middle.[10]

During the Lithuanian-Polish War in 1919, fighting again occurred near the Suwałki Corridor. In the subsequent Polish-Soviet war of 1919-1921, Poland defeated the Soviets at the Battle of the Niemen River in September 1920, just south of the Corridor between Suwałki, Hrodna, and Białystok. This created the opportunity for Polish forces to capture Vilnius in October 1920.

During World War II, troop movements generally occurred on the flanks of the Suwałki Corridor, not directly within it. An exception was in October 1939, when German forces moved through Suwałki to the East Prussian-Lithuanian border, occupying that territory in line with the August 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Hitler and Stalin.[11] In November 1939, 20,000 Soviet troops entered Lithuania through Vilnius, close to Suwałki, and advanced to the borders of

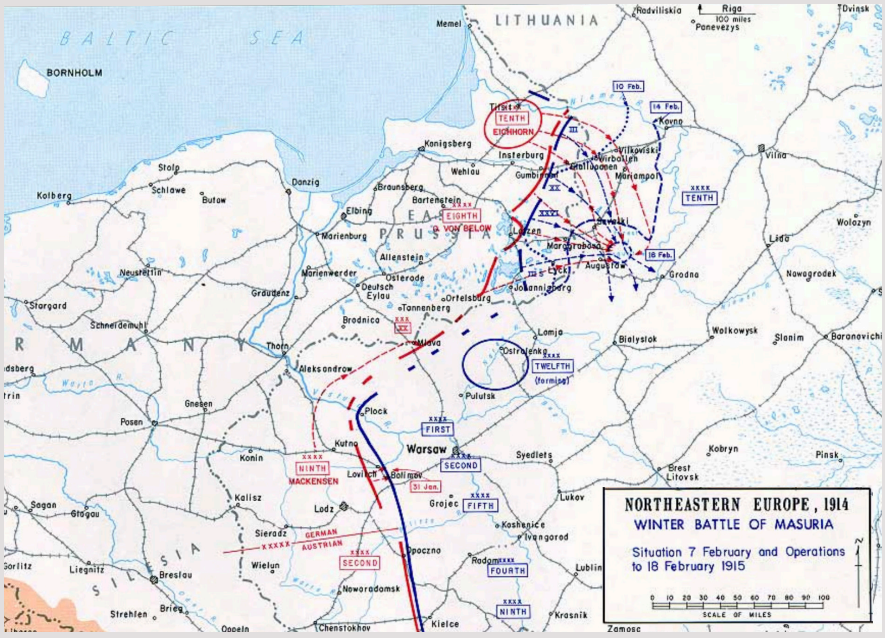


Photo Credit: U.S. Military Academy.

German East Prussia. Later, in August 1944, Soviet forces attacked East Prussia's border near the Mazurian Lakes and fought German troops in the Suwałki Corridor. Soviet armies encircled German forces and thickened their lines to block any Wehrmacht counterattack.

Terrain and Maneuver

Lessons from past military campaigns in and around Suwałki have immediate relevance for 21st century NATO planners. Indeed, all allies can benefit from studying how the region's terrain and hydrology have dictated—and more often impeded—the movement of armies in the past. One of the most significant takeaways: large parts of the Suwałki Corridor can be a nightmare for maneuver. The region's confined rolling fields are disrupted by chain lakes, rivers, streams, thick stands of forest, and muddy soil during rainy seasons, favoring the defender. Only two narrow roads physically connect the Polish-Lithuanian border—making for a tight and predictable funnel through which to move brigade-sized or larger formations.

In terms of precise topography, the Lithuanian side of Suwałki generally has more open terrain amenable to maneuver mechanized forces from Kaliningrad or Belarus's Hrodna *oblast*. The Polish side of Suwałki has greater forest cover and hilly areas that would be more conducive to light infantry or operations by Special Forces. Hence, while a Russian thrust on the Lithuanian side of the border may be intended to sever and hold territory, Russian interventions on the Polish side would be better suited to ambushes, holding entrenched defensive positions, and facilitating the destruction of infrastructure to hinder NATO deployments and reinforcements. Different kinds of potential military operations could of course be conducted simultaneously. Finally, it is important to assume that Russian forces will be as familiar with Suwałki's terrain as allied units. Russia periodically conducts reconnaissance work on Polish and Lithuanian territory. Poland has closed cross-border traffic with Kaliningrad after several incidents of hostile reconnaissance by suspicious persons from the exclave. These persons reportedly engaged with members of the local administration and displayed a particular interest in local infrastructure, utilities, and food and water supplies.[12] Previously, border controls had been lenient along the Poland-Kaliningrad border. Kaliningrad residents could travel 25 kilometers into Poland without a visa, allowing them to purchase cheaper goods unavailable in the exclave while benefitting Polish businesses along the border. Following the illegal annexation of Crimea, suspicious activity increased between 2014-2016, and border controls were bolstered ahead of Exercise Anaconda 2016.

The Fulda Gap

Drawing on lessons from more recent history, there are equally valuable insights that can be gained from examining the importance of the Fulda Gap in West Germany during the Cold War.[13]

The Fulda Gap is historically viewed as a potential flashpoint for the beginning of World War III. At Fulda, approximately 990,000 NATO troops once faced an estimated 1.2 million Warsaw Pact forces in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, both backed by medium-range nuclear missiles.[14] Soviet forces enjoyed several prospective avenues of approach through West Germany, including the North German plain, for a thrust toward the German port of Bremerhaven. A breakthrough at Fulda would have split U.S. forces in Germany in two. Moreover, a potential defeat of the American army at Fulda would have sent a

powerful signal that NATO could not match Soviet military power. The Red Army may have subsequently been in a position to overrun the remainder of mainland Europe.

More important than the overall balance of forces at the Fulda Gap is its legacy for first defining and then re-shaping western military thinking. The stand-off at Fulda provided a focal point for the tactical and operational modernization of NATO forces near the end of the Cold War. The specter of thousands of Soviet tanks storming through the Fulda Gap necessitated the development of new weaponry, particularly in qualitatively superior airpower. Tactical and operational revolutions in the U.S. military led to innovations in the Tactical Air Command (TAC), including Low Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night (LANTIRN) for F-15 and F-16 aircraft, and new approaches to training and logistics. Likewise, there was a revolution in aggressive ISR and IW capabilities and operations, in order to better monitor local enemy border activity. In the 1980s at Fulda, the United States also employed a wider range of rotary-wing platforms, including AH-64 attack helicopters, and modern M2 and M3 Bradley infantry and cavalry fighting vehicles, and the M1 Abrams Main Battle Tank.[15] Indeed, it was the prospect of having to engage a potentially overwhelming surge of Warsaw Pact armor that prompted the U.S. military to enable the M1 Abrams to destroy multiple targets in rapid succession and adapt the Bradley into not only a world class troop carrier and fighting vehicle, but an extremely lethal anti-armor weapons platform.

> “Large parts of the **Suwałki Corridor** can be a **nightmare for maneuver.**”

The need to better defend the Fulda Gap likewise sparked careful study and conceptual, technological, and structural innovations that propelled a speedier end to the Cold War. This is perhaps the most applicable lesson of the past: when faced with a new or dynamic military challenge, modern armies must adapt—fielding novel concepts in strategy to mitigate their vulnerabilities. What was true for Fulda is equally relevant for Suwałki. Like Fulda, Suwałki provides Russia with an attractive opening by which it might see an opportunity to test NATO. And it is here where the shadow of Fulda may impede the Alliance’s 21st century response to a challenge in the Suwałki Corridor.

Defense-in-Depth, Then and Now

During the Cold War, NATO’s organizing concept for Europe was premised on the principle of defense-in-depth. At potential flashpoints like Fulda, allied forces enjoyed the geographic depth necessary to trade space for time. The luxury of space in Western Europe therefore allowed NATO armies the option of making a temporary retreat in response to a Soviet attack. If such a retreat ever occurred, it would have been followed by a regrouping and concentration of allied forces—and the

launch of a NATO counteroffensive to retake lost ground. In this way, NATO was prepared to cede territory to an attacker in exchange for the time needed to muster a counterattack. Such an approach was ideally tailored to the circumstances of the Cold War. However, NATO armies have not fundamentally updated their approach since the stand-off at Fulda.

Today, Allied force posture is still premised on the overall defense-in-depth concept of the Cold War: NATO is willing to concede land to an attacker (*e.g.*, at Suwałki) in exchange for the time needed to roll out reinforcements or mount a liberation campaign. In this new setting, the greatest risk to NATO is that an effective counteroffensive for lost territory would be so significantly delayed that it would result in a loss—perhaps a permanent loss—of allied territory.[16] And when the Alliance was finally prepared to mount an effective counterassault, the potential for casualties and greater escalation by Russia would be substantially increased.

What has changed since the Cold War is Russia's updated use of low-threshold, hybrid warfighting. Over the course of its recent wars, invasions, and interventions—Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), the Donbas (2014-present), and Syria (2015-present)—the Russian military has steadily perfected a "stab, grab, and hold" strategy for achieving military aims. This operational approach is calibrated to evade the traditional mechanisms that undergird NATO's strategy of collective defense. And while hybrid war is not new, Russia's evolving way of war is radically different from the all-out conflict that allied planners had previously prepared for at the Fulda Gap. Instead, Russia's 21st century warfighting is ambiguous, deceptive, multi-pronged, and exceptionally effective at slowing down or confusing the counter-moves of its opponents. It should not be underestimated.

The overarching problem: Russia's methods of warfare are changing, but NATO's organizing strategy and force posture are still moored to Fulda and Cold War conceptions.[17] In the

U.S. Army M1A2 Abrams tanks in Hohenfels, Germany. Photo credit: SGT Alexander Skripnichuk.

contemporary European security environment, defense-in-depth is a sub-optimal response to prevent low-threshold, hybrid conflicts; at limiting their risk of escalation once they begin; and at swiftly ending conflicts should they erupt.

- First, the opening moves against NATO by a continental land power will almost certainly be clouded in a fog of cyber confusion, uncertainty, doubt, disinformation, and electronic interference. Identifying what is happening and who is responsible will be difficult to discern—at least initially. This will likely impede a decisive political response in international bodies like the NAC.[18]

- Second, by ceding NATO territory from the onset under the current defense-in-depth strategy, the Alliance inadvertently increases the likelihood that an attacker will secure a territorial *fait accompli* before a single shot in collective defense is fired. All could be lost before NATO forces ever enter the fray.

- Finally, should an Article 5 liberation campaign by allies ensue, the attacker is almost certain to claim that it is the victim of unjustified escalation and aggressive war. In the era of hybrid conflict and confounding propaganda, facts are distorted, aggressors masquerade as victims (see Syria), and public opinion is manipulated and confused.

Indeed, NATO's vulnerabilities to these "hard" and "soft" dimensions of hybrid warfare are acute—a fact of which Russia is undoubtedly aware.

At the onset of a crisis, Western political options and military priorities are likely to be unclear. Allied cohesion is likely to splinter. Different parts of the Alliance will almost certainly pursue competing diplomatic and military next-steps. While some member states may seek a robust military response at the first indication of external aggression, others could push for a negotiated settlement (*i.e.*, accept a territorial *fait accompli*) or otherwise seek to restrict allied operational objectives under Article 5. The fear: inadvertently escalating a localized dust-up on a far-off frontier into a limited- or regional-conventional war involving the entire Alliance. This is the danger of defense-in-depth.

In willingly trading lost ground to an attacker at a place like Suwałki—by upholding NATO's old defense-in-depth strategy—the Alliance accepts that it intends to permit the physical severing of its three Baltic members from Poland in the opening phase of a crisis. More daunting: any attempt to retake the highly defensible territory of Suwałki from an aggressor will almost certainly impose high costs on NATO in terms of allied political cohesion, military and civilian casualties, the destruction of property and infrastructure, and the risk of further escalation by Russia. Thus, Western political and military leaders would be wise to reconsider the wisdom of securing Europe's entire northeastern shoulder based on the Cold War-era force posture of the past—one that retains more than two-thirds

> "Russia's ***methods of warfare*** are ***changing***."

of NATO military power in Western Europe and far away from likely zones of conflict.

Much like the Fulda Gap once symbolized the Cold War's organizing strategic challenge—and ultimately catalyzed military innovations that have defined Western warfighting since the First Gulf War—the Suwałki Corridor now presents a problem-set of similar significance. While grounded in land warfare, the recommendations in this report are ultimately intended to resolve NATO's new strategic challenge through an emphasis on speed, responsiveness, and reinforcement. These recommendations not only apply to the Suwałki Corridor itself, but to other vulnerable locations between the Baltic and Black Seas.

Why Suwałki Matters

Significantly, the Suwałki Corridor is more important for today's Russia than the Fulda Gap was for the Soviet Union for three main reasons:

- The Suwałki Corridor separates mainland Russian-Belarusian territory from the fortified Kaliningrad *oblast* and its accompanying Baltic Fleet Headquarters.
- Cutting off the Corridor would potentially strangle the Baltic States and prevent the dispatch of NATO assistance in case of a Russian attack.[19]
- Closing the Corridor would provide Moscow with a contiguous military front between the Baltic Sea and Ukraine, consolidate its political stranglehold over Belarus, and more directly threaten Poland's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In this context, comparisons with the "Gdańsk" or "Polish Corridor" on the eve of World War II conveys the powerful symbolism of this region. For NATO, Suwałki represents a challenge not only to its strategy and capabilities but also to its credibility as a guarantor of mutual defense.[20] NATO cannot allow the Suwałki Corridor to be breached and repeat the Allied failure to help Poland at start of World War II. In September 1939, Germany initiated its war of aggression against Poland using a "hybrid"

> "Russia's **21st century warfighting** *is ambiguous*, deceptive, multi-pronged, and ***exceptionally effective***."

catalyst as a pretext, by staging several false flag operations and claiming that Polish forces had attacked German territory. German troops subsequently overran the Polish Corridor. The United Kingdom and France stood pat despite common defense pacts with Poland. This left Poland at the mercy of a full-scale German and Soviet military invasion and—in effect—shattered European cohesion and unity.

In a strategic and historical context, geography and transportation infrastructure are additional

factors that expose the importance of Suwałki. Unlike in Western Europe and the United States before the Second World War, highways and infrastructure networks designed for fast military mobilization across vast spaces were not built in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Baltics, at that time or thereafter.[21]

One impediment: the Polish-Lithuanian border inside the Corridor is exceptionally vulnerable to territorial aggression by Russia. While Polish and American forces are presently located near Suwałki, the actual Corridor is not immediately defended; and the release of nearby units in a crisis will depend on political authorization. This means that the physical, legal, logistical, and operational seam that runs along the Polish-Lithuanian border (representing the break between NATO's Operation Atlantic Resolve in Poland and Atlantic Resolve North-East in the Baltics) is exceptionally easy to stab, grab, and hold against an eventual counterattack.

A second impediment: Suwałki offers relatively easy terrain for a Russian military incursion from either Kaliningrad or Belarus: there are limited rail and road capacities for NATO reinforcements into the region, trains must change from the European to Russian track gauge at the railhead between Poland and Lithuania, and Russian and Belarusian military training areas are located near the Corridor. It is from these training areas that a Russian military exercise could easily serve as cover for a concentration of forces prior to offensive operations. Indeed, Russia successfully employed this exact kind of cover to camouflage preparations for operations against Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014)—and it bears consideration when examining future IW related to Suwałki.

In combination, the above factors make the Suwałki Corridor especially vulnerable to attack—and they could impede an effective Western response to a crisis. Indeed, it is NATO's current strategy and defense-in-depth force posture that is inadvertently amplifying some of the largest vulnerabilities on this frontier. The question therefore becomes: how do we prevent a test of NATO from ever being attempted? Understanding the Kremlin's strategies, scenarios, and vulnerabilities is key.

KREMLIN STRATEGIES, SCENARIOS, AND VULNERABILITIES

The primary goal of Moscow's foreign and military policy is not the territorial conquest of Europe. In fact, Russia wants to avoid all-out war with NATO.[22,23] Rather—in the face of diminished economic capabilities—the Kremlin seeks to restore Russia as a major pole in a "multi-polar" world.[24] To achieve this end, Russia seeks to dismantle Western unity and reverse the predominance of the United States within the broader Eurasian region—an area that Moscow designates as its zone of privileged interests. As such, its vision of "Eurasia" loosely includes the former Soviet Union and adjacent regions, with Russia projecting its influence into former communist-controlled regions such as Central Europe and the Balkans. In Eurasia, Russia's primary goal is therefore to exert its influence over the foreign and security policies of its neighbors so they will either remain neutral or support the Kremlin's international agenda. The objective is neo-imperial, but the project no longer relies on Soviet-era ideological allegiance.

Moscow's Strategies

When assessing Moscow's current strategies, it is important to distinguish between Russia's security interests and the Kremlin's ambitions. It is abundantly clear that Russian security is neither challenged by NATO, nor threatened by the addition of neighboring states to the Washington Treaty. The collective defense protections afforded under Article 5 of this treaty do, however, impede the Kremlin's ability to control the politics and geo-strategic orientation of individual member states. This is partly because NATO guarantees the territorial integrity of all treaty-bound allies. Moreover, the institutional bulwarks of NATO help to strengthen individual members against malign influences, state capture, or nefarious interference by the Russian state. Such protections offer a significant challenge to the Kremlin's neo-imperial goals. Consequently, its strategies and tactics are elastic and eclectic. It employs flexible methods, including enticements, threats, incentives, and pressures, to overcome these protections and achieve its goals. Its primary aim: to dominate its neighbors.

Moscow's strategic objective in Europe is to disrupt, divide, make irrelevant, or eliminate NATO as a security organization and defense guarantor for states along Russia's western borders. To accomplish this goal, the Kremlin seeks to diminish the U.S. role in Europe, subvert or destabilize NATO members, and help elect national leaders who will display neutrality or even hostility toward the Alliance.[25] Russia engages in a range of operations to achieve these targets, constantly looking for weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and leverage among its adversaries. Moscow also creates ambiguities, sends mixed messages, and denies its aggressive moves in order to confuse Western policymakers and delay or defuse any concerted and effective response. Complicating matters: the Kremlin is well aware of NATO's intricate decision-making processes; and Moscow seeks to leverage this bureaucratic sclerosis by expanding cleavages between allies.[26]

"Gerasimov Doctrine"

The often-cited "Gerasimov doctrine," named after Valeriy Gerasimov, chief of Russia's General Staff, has been extensively covered in existing military literature.[27] But, the idea of "new generation warfare" should not be glamorized

Exercise Saber Junction 2012. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Europe.

or exaggerated as some novel or advanced form of strategy. It simply re-sequences and re-combines familiar elements of penetration, subversion, and conventional warfare that have been practiced by Moscow for generations. Aside from direct military actions, the Kremlin can deploy numerous "soft power" tools to undermine the confidence of allies—such as the Baltic States and Poland—in NATO's Article 5 guarantees, to alarm the public in NATO countries about the alleged dangers of trying to defend their territories from Russia, and to weaken the Alliance's unity and cohesion. For Moscow, "soft power" has a different meaning than it does in the West. In the EU and NATO, "soft power" signifies a form of institutional attraction through economic and other benefits that develops relations with nearby states. For the Kremlin, "soft power" means all tools short of all-out war that may weaken and defeat an opponent.[28] It is a significant difference—one with which NATO must contend.

Offensive Scenarios

When considering potential offensive scenarios against the Alliance, it is important to remember that Suwałki is NATO's corridor and Russia's gap. Russia may seek to close the gap; NATO must keep its corridor open. This conceptual difference between corridor and gap is crucial for understanding the underlying strategic tension of Suwałki. The Kremlin's gap represents the territorial separation of the Union State of Russia and Belarus from Russia's territorial exclave of Kaliningrad. By contrast, NATO's corridor represents a physical link to its member states along the Baltic. It is imperative that the Alliance kept its corridor open so as to deter any potential test of NATO's cohesion, a military blockade, a *cordon sanitaire*, a low-threshold territorial probe, or an outright attack on the Baltics. In this context, it is valuable to examine the pretexts that Moscow could use to justify military action in

the region; the state-generated disinformation that would precede and accompany such an initiative; and the triggers that could launch a Russian assault against NATO territory—willingly or through miscalculation.[29]

Pretexts

Moscow can use several pretexts to pressure Poland and the three Baltic countries. In all cases, such action will almost certainly include a propaganda and disinformation offensive that rises to some form of covert or direct intervention. The Kremlin can also manufacture diversions to confuse and distract NATO intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance away from a looming attack on the Suwałki Corridor. This could entail inflaming various unresolved disputes around Russia's borders, including intensifying the armed conflict with Ukraine, reviving the separatist conflicts in Georgia or Moldova, or rekindling the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the occupied territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. NATO needs constant monitoring and up-to-date information on Russia's activities in the Baltic region, including in the military, political, economic, energy, informational, and social domains.

Crisis

In sparking a crisis, Russia's options are limited only by the creativity of its war planners. Such activities may include the use of paramilitary or proxy forces (e.g., "little green men"), the activation of alleged "sports club" members as inciting agents, or the deployment of plausibly-deniable armed mercenaries (as in Syria and Ukraine). The dangers are many. Russian services could "lose" a maritime mine outside of a Baltic port, thereby cutting off energy deliveries by sea; or leverage the continued existence of unexploded ordnance and chemical weapons from World War II in the region to create confusion and fear, while blocking sea-lanes and ports to NATO resupply and military traffic. Nord Stream 2, the planned undersea natural gas pipeline between Russia and Germany, could also be used for military purposes—either as cover for increasing Russia's military presence under the guise of "protecting" the pipeline, or by fitting sensors along its route, thus enabling Moscow to better track the movement of NATO vessels.

Allied planners also need to closely monitor indicators of an impending military action by Moscow, including forward deployments of airborne forces, increasing rail activity toward Baltic and Polish borders, deployment of large, newly formed military units including tank divisions, enhanced Russian Baltic Fleet readiness, and increased frequency of airspace incursions across NATO territory.[30] In particular, NATO decision-makers should carefully evaluate the following potential scenarios, among others. One or more of these scenarios could be activated while the Kremlin provokes or escalates a diplomatic dispute with a Central European or Baltic capital.

Significantly, the following real-world, near-future examples are not intended to be wholly predictive of Russian actions. Rather, their purpose is to highlight the fragile geopolitical conditions surrounding Suwałki; the need for all allies to think more thoroughly about the many flashpoints that could precede a crisis; and the requirements of better preparing for them.

1. Kaliningrad Access: For several years, the Kremlin has been seeking exclusive control over a military transit corridor across Lithuania to its exclave of Kaliningrad. This territory constitutes the sliver of land on the Baltic coast

that the Soviet Union annexed from Germany and added to the Soviet Union's Russian Republic (one of the 15 republics of the USSR) at the close of World War II. In this scenario, Moscow's demands would be preceded by public statements from the Kremlin that Kaliningrad is too distant and isolated from the mainland territory of the Russian Federation.

> *"Moscow's strategic objective in Europe is to* **disrupt, divide, make irrelevant, or eliminate NATO** as a security organization and ***defense guarantor***. *"*

Moscow has previously issued warnings that Kaliningrad could be deliberately cut off by Vilnius and Warsaw in a NATO invasion. Adding to Kaliningrad's supposed isolation are real-world plans to desynchronize the Baltic States from the Russian electric grid by 2025. In this scenario, the desynchronization of the Baltic grid from Russia allows the Kremlin to amplify claims of Kaliningrad's isolation and vulnerability. The scenario escalates when, in a heated diplomatic environment, Russia's Special Forces stage an act of sabotage by blowing up a rail junction along the Lithuanian border. This creates a pretext for Moscow to justify the swift establishment of an overland route across to Kaliningrad—and without allied supervision. This scenario is modeled on exercises conducted in Kaliningrad on a regular basis, which revolve around an effort to carve out an actual corridor between the exclave and Belarus-Russia. Lithuanian and Polish officials calculate that Moscow could stage a provocation along Kaliningrad's border by claiming that the local population is in danger of isolation, encirclement, or attack; rally the local population; and dispatch troops to guarantee a direct military corridor to Russia.

2. Kaliningrad Instability: A variant of the Kaliningrad Access scenario, this sequence envisions the deployment of Russian military forces into NATO territory in order to suppress local political instability within the exclave. The catalyst occurs when civic unrest in Kaliningrad leads to local calls for closer political links with the EU. This is similar to events that unfolded in Ukraine during the Euromaidan revolution—and something that the Kremlin will be determined to thwart at almost any cost. Ominously, officials in Kaliningrad have already accused participants of Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution of infiltrating the exclave through Poland and Lithuania.[31] Moreover, Kaliningrad's population is showing signs of frustration with economic stagnation, the bite of Western sanctions on Russia, and federal budget shortfalls. Some protest actions have been reported.[32] In the hypothetical scenario envisioned here, electrical power shortages in Kaliningrad prompt a new round of public protests and lead to proposals for transforming the exclave into an EU-linked Euro-region. This political instability precipitates a crackdown by the Kremlin—one necessitating the establishment of a

"temporary" transit corridor for the movement of additional Russian forces across Lithuanian territory. Opportunities for escalation abound in this scenario: from confrontations with local constabulary units during the transit of Russian forces across NATO territory, to the disruption of electricity and gas connections with Russia, and shortages of food and water supplies inside the exclave. The escalation phase of this scenario serves as the plausible justification for a "peaceful" *cordon sanitaire* to facilitate the transit of the Russian military across Lithuania. The net result, however, is that the "temporary" corridor to Kaliningrad becomes permanent.

3. Nationalist Irredentism: Some Russian ultra-nationalist groups have campaigned for expanding Kaliningrad's borders to the prewar frontiers of Germany's East Prussia.[33] This move would incorporate parts of Poland and the Lithuanian port of Klaipėda into a potential new territorial formation inside Russia. Historically speaking, three-quarters of Germany's former East Prussia is now part of Poland and Lithuania, with the balance belonging to Russia. Moreover, the Kremlin has demonstrated its willingness to redress ethno-historical grievances by redrawing the borders of its neighbors by force. In the hypothetical scenario envisioned here, the Kremlin uses the historical division of East Prussian lands around Kaliningrad as a pretext to question the legitimacy of the exclave's current borders. This would be similar to the dubious territorial assertions Moscow made in advance of its illegal annexation of Crimea, where Russia's pretext was the supposedly unlawful transfer of Russian territory to Ukraine in 1954.

In this hypothetical Kaliningrad scenario, Russian officials similarly issue calls for Moscow to "reclaim" Polish or Lithuanian territory that was historically—and thereby "legitimately"—part of Kaliningrad. The scenario escalates when local Russian speakers stage highly provocative actions along the Polish or Lithuanian borders in order to stoke tensions with Warsaw or Vilnius; and it culminates in the demolition of border crossings. These actions are intended to provoke a Polish or Lithuanian reaction, one that necessitates a "justifiable" Russian military intervention. In tandem with these efforts, Moscow seeds the public discourse over the border dispute with NATO states through a coordinated propaganda campaign to support Russia's rationale for expanding and reuniting Kaliningrad with mainland Russia.

> "Suwałki is ***NATO's corridor*** and ***Russia's gap***."

4. Localized Minority Unrest: Moscow has tried to benefit from political, ethnic, and social turbulence in various parts of the Baltic region in order to keep its neighbors off balance. It has exploited the Russian minority and language questions and depicts the Baltic governments as failing to meet European standards for state protection of the Russian minorities in these countries. The Kremlin claims the right to represent and defend the interests not only of ethnic Russians but all "Russian speakers" in order to highlight alleged victims of Baltic repression. Kremlin assertions that Baltic governments discriminate against

Russian speakers, despite the conclusions of international human rights organizations, contribute to heightening tensions. Moscow can stir or manufacture discontent among the Russian minority, as well as among the Belarusian minority around the Suwałki region, and prompt government responses that constitute a *casus belli* for the Kremlin. This could be used to justify various forms of intervention that would not automatically trigger NATO's Article 5 security guarantee.

Moscow could further ratchet up its disinformation operations to foment destabilization for which domestic law enforcement and intelligence services may be unprepared. It may subsequently manufacture claims of attacks on Russian or Belarusian civilians in Lithuania or Poland and rapidly spread disinformation through social media networks to exacerbate tensions. Such a scenario could be accompanied by cyber-attacks on local infrastructure and government ministries, and the use of provocative physical sabotage on key infrastructure—the purpose of which would be to aggravate public unrest and conflict. Such a move would be followed by declarations that Moscow was obligated to intervene to protect allegedly endangered "Russian compatriots" or "Russian speakers" against growing threats to their safety. Previously, Germany employed variants of this technique against both Czechoslovakia and Poland as a pretext for its military interventions in the late 1930s. It is a timeless and well-established method for shifting blame away from a military aggressor and onto its victims.

5. Belarusian Spillover: Moscow has deployed a variety of triggers when engineering armed assaults on its neighbors. In Georgia, the trigger was Tbilisi's attempt in August 2008 to forcefully regain the breakaway region of South Ossetia, a conflict that Moscow helped to provoke and then used as an excuse for its military invasion. In Ukraine, the Kremlin depicted the Euromaidan revolution, and the subsequent fall of Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014, as a "fascist" coup. This precipitated a Russian attack on the country, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and the spillover of a proxy "insurgency" in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. The Belarusian Spillover scenario follows a similar—but not identical—template. After Moscow becomes dissatisfied with the political loyalty of Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, it stages a coup to remove him. Russia's state-run disinformation outlets shift responsibility for the ensuing political and social instability onto the West and accuse NATO members of attempting to "tear" Belarus away from Russia. The scenario escalates with the outbreak of violent civic protests in Minsk, either engineered by Moscow or arising spontaneously as a local reaction to Russia's aggression. The ensuing disorder requires Russia to exert itself militarily inside Belarus on the pretext of guaranteeing public peace and tranquility. In reality, the intervention is a cover for a military *anschluss* of Belarus by Russia and the creation of a vassal state—that is fully dependent on Moscow. Much like the real-world events witnessed in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, such a scenario allows for the deployment of large-scale Russian military formations close to a neighboring international border: the Suwałki region. Used in combination with localized minority unrest (noted above) and cloaked in the fog of chaos and uncertainty, Russia would be in a position to justify the projection of its military power near, into, and through NATO territory—all while plausibly shifting the blame for instability onto the targets of its aggression.

6. Humanitarian Pretexts: Another potential trigger for Russian military incursion would be one camouflaged as emergency humanitarian relief. Moscow has previously used this ploy to cover the deployment of its "white trucks" used in eastern Ukraine during the early stages of the Donbas campaign (2014). Other sources for a supposed humanitarian emergency arise from the new nuclear power plant that Belarus is constructing near Vilnius at Astravec, just twelve miles from Lithuania's border. The facility gives Moscow a powerful psychological weapon should it choose to foment rumors of a serious accident. The evacuation of Vilnius and surrounding areas could precipitate regional chaos and provide cover for an intervention on the grounds of "humanitarian relief" and the protection of Russian or other minorities near the Belarusian border. Other instruments that could be used by Moscow to precipitate a civilian crisis may include chemical spills, energy cutoffs, or blockades of food and medical supplies through a Baltic port. Potential refugee flows from Lithuania to Poland, or from northeast Poland caused by a civil emergency, could in turn hinder NATO military operations, as displaced populations overload the narrow roads leading through Suwałki and impede the movement of reinforcements.

7. Terrorist Attacks: Moscow may use the pretext of pre-empting or responding to terrorist threats, or actual attacks, as well as acts of sabotage against Russia's infrastructure, to stage a cross-border incursion. Its armed interventions on Georgia's territory on the pretext of eliminating Chechen jihadists during and after the Second Russo-Chechen War (1999-2002) serve as a precedent. In this scenario, a real or manufactured terrorist attack on Russian or Belarusian territory triggers an armed incursion couched as a "hot pursuit"

Target observer during Exercise Dynamic Front 2018. Photo credit: NATO.

operation to protect civilians, towns, and infrastructure. Such interventions escalate into the blockade of particular roads and railways and the seizure of critical local infrastructure, including energy distribution networks. Notably, Moscow could itself engineer acts of terrorism and sabotage on NATO territory, including cyber attacks on civilian infrastructure, water contamination, or the blockade of Baltic ports on the pretext of detecting chemical weapons or other deadly agents in harbors.

The net result of engineering one or more of these scenarios, possibly simultaneously, would be the seizure of NATO territory in or around the Suwałki region. From there, Russia would be in a position to manipulate public opinion through disinformation operations, create deep political cleavages inside the Alliance, and rapidly escalate if NATO intervened to retake lost territory. The key for Russia is to demonstrate that when a member of the Alliance asks for urgent support under Article 4, or collective defense under Article 5, it would not arrive in time. If and when help eventually comes, Russia has a myriad of escalation options that include the threat, or potential use, of nuclear weapons, as Russia's current strategy dictates. Therefore, a key element to ensuring the security of the Suwałki Corridor is to emplace the right amount of deterrence now—not react in response to an Article 4 or 5 situation.

On balance, these conditions would invariably place the Alliance in a serious dilemma: whether to accept a territorial *fait accompli* from Moscow, and thus irrevocably damage NATO's credibility as a security provider, or mobilize a robust counteroffensive in the face of Russian escalatory threats and armed resistance. In any event, the risk of further escalation from that point forward would be substantial.

As during the Cold War, the best deterrence to Russia is a multi-layered one. This includes "deterrence by punishment," whereby Russian planners understand that they will incur a unified military response—potentially including America's extended nuclear deterrent—if NATO's eastern frontier were ever threatened.[34,35] The other layer, "deterrence by denial," seeks to prevent conflict in the first

> "The best ***deterrence to Russia*** is a ***multi-layered*** one."

place. This is achieved by creating so much fear, doubt, and uncertainty in the minds of Russian leaders that they never test NATO in the first place.[36] Regardless of Moscow's capabilities, if Western deterrence is credible, then peace will prevail. Thus, the organizing question of deterrence narrows down to a fine point: what does Russia fear? Indeed, what are the vulnerabilities that worry the Kremlin most?

Russia's Vulnerabilities

Russia has more numerous economic, social, political, cyber, ethnic, religious, and regional vulnerabilities than Europe or the United States. Western policymakers therefore need to devise a comprehensive strategy

for locating, monitoring, and exploiting such weaknesses. For Moscow to be deterred from future aggressive behavior, its leaders will need to be convinced that the country's vulnerabilities can be exploited to cause potential territorial loss or military defeat. Russia's chief vulnerability is its relative power imbalance with the West. A close second is Russia's system of governance based on authoritarian centralism—i.e., the "power vertical" and "sovereign democracy." As occurred at pivotal points in Russia's history, if a government suffers military defeat, or is seen as failing to effectively defend the country, it is not replaced through democratic elections but through violent revolution and the collapse of Russia's state structures. This is the greatest weakness of Russian leaders.

As a result of its internal vulnerabilities, Moscow is only likely to attack a NATO state if it is certain that it will succeed in its objectives. Above all else, President Vladimir Putin must avoid public failures and the appearance of weakness or incompetence, both in the eyes of his domestic constituencies and internationally. This helps to explain the Kremlin's military adventurism in the aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution. NATO's political steadfastness, military readiness, speed of reaction, logistical prowess, and strategic resilience increase the likelihood of Putin's ultimate failure in a test of direct strength against the West. If the Kremlin faces off against these elements of Western power it will fail. When aligned correctly, these are also the factors that will ultimately serve to deter Russian territorial aggression. Despite their neo-imperialist rhetoric and claims of military superiority, Russian officials fear Western power and technology. The battle of deterrence therefore centers on these factors. In the psychological domain of deterrence, NATO needs to undermine Moscow's confidence in its own success. This is particularly true as Russians have rarely fought Americans—some exceptions being in 1918, where U.S. troops supported Russian Whites against the Reds; in the air during the Korean War; and most recently in Syria—and therefore has no true historical baseline against which to measure its chances of success against U.S. forces.

RUSSIA'S MILITARY CAPABILITIES

On the balance of deterrence, it is essential for NATO to first calculate Russia's military advantages in the Baltic region. This should be done in terms of troop and hardware concentrations, as well as the significance and proximity of forces in Belarus, Kaliningrad, and the rest of Russia's Western Military District. Collectively, this region contains the most numerous combat units of any military district in the Russian Federation, including the 1st Guards Tank Army and the 20th and 6th Combined-Arms Armies concentrated near Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and the Ukrainian and Belarusian borders respectively.[37] While some analysts believe Russia is poised to overrun the Baltic states with a conventional military thrust in a matter of days, other experts contend that Russia's military is better positioned to launch a conventional war in Ukraine and a "hybrid war" in the Baltic States, the opposite of what some Western leaders seem to expect in each theater.[38,39] While it is difficult to pinpoint Moscow's exact plans, by surveying the disposition of Russian forces and capabilities close to the Suwałki Corridor, Western planners can better estimate the prospects for any military offensive.

According to Russian officials, the international system is becoming increasingly unstable in several regions contiguous to Russia's borders.[40] However, the argument disguises the fact that many of these instabilities are fueled by Moscow's own aggressive and revanchist policies. Meanwhile, Russia's military exercises near the Lithuanian and Polish borders are intended to increase security pressure on allied governments in Vilnius and Warsaw. For instance, Russia's Zapad military exercises in the fall of 2013 simulated the creation of a land link between Russia and Kaliningrad, war-gaming the invasion of both Lithuania and

Russian Forces in Western Military District

Year	Type	Forces
2015	**Total (Western Military District)**	**104,969**
2018	**Total Active**	**900,000**
	Army	**280,000**
	Navy	**150,000**
	Air	**165,000**
	Strategic Rocket Force	**50,000**
	Special Forces	**1,000**
	Railway Troops	**29,000**
	Command and Support	**180,000**
	Paramilitary	**554,000**
	Reserve	**2,000,000**

Sources: 2015: Based on the *Suwałki Roundtable in Vilnius* (12 March 2018).
2018: IISS, *The Military Balance 2018*, p. 192.

Latvia and cutting off Lithuania from Poland. The Zapad exercises in 2017 likewise simulated a potential war against neighboring Western states. Russian forces have also rehearsed nuclear strikes on Warsaw. All the while, Lithuania remains under constant pressure to allow for a permanent military transit corridor under Moscow's control to Kaliningrad.

Since the onset of Russia's war against Ukraine there has been a surge in violations of Baltic air space by Russian aircraft despite NATO's reinforcing mission. Fighter jets escorting Russian warplanes flying from northern Russia to Kaliningrad perpetrated many of these violations. Russia's navy has engaged in exercises off the coast of the Baltic States and violated Lithuania's exclusive economic zone. Russian naval vessels have ordered commercial ships to change routes and obstructed the laying of an undersea power connection cable between Sweden and Lithuania. Since early 2015, the laying of the Nordbalt cable was disrupted at least four times by the Russian navy, which claims that it is protecting its "military exercise zones." The incursions of a suspected Russian submarine inside the Stockholm archipelago in October 2014, reminiscent of Moscow's Cold War escapades, alerted Vilnius to enhance the security of its new LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) terminal in Klaipėda. Fears have been heightened that Russian-sponsored saboteurs could stage an incident near the entrance to the port in order to close its operations.

The National Defense Management Center in Russia commands more than fifty state institutions involved in the national defense plan and at short notice can activate a new mobilization of reservists, logistical supplies, and troop exercises. Concurrently, threats along the NATO-Russia border continue to escalate as Russia builds up its armed forces, stages regular snap maneuvers and large-scale exercises, and threatens NATO members with outright war. One of the biggest dangers in this environment would be a miscalculation by Moscow. It would result in a rapid-but-limited assault inside NATO's borders but, significantly, may not trigger an Article 5 response by the allies. In such an eventuality, the Suwałki Corridor could become a key target. To better understand Russia's assertive security posture in this context, it is important to assess both the advantages and deficiencies of the Kremlin's military capabilities.

Military Advantages

Since 2008, Russia has been undergoing an ambitious modernization program to rearm its military.[41] The priorities have included upgrading its nuclear weapons stocks and introducing new hardware, communications, and weapons systems. Russia has simultaneously made steady advances in improving C2, increasing its ISR, integrating various military services, enhancing training and combat readiness, and improving its logistical capacities. Russia's regular "snap exercises" involve all of its armed forces and several military districts, often with joint inter-service and inter-agency operations.

Some of Russia's most capable military units are located in the Western Military District along NATO's Eastern Flank. In addition to traditional infantry, tank, and indirect fire units, they include Special Forces, lightly armed but more rapidly deployable airborne forces, and naval infantry, all of which increase the speed and flexibility of units that can be employed against the Baltic States and Poland. Moreover, Russia benefits from a numerical advantage over NATO forces opposite the Eastern Flank in terms

of manpower and in every major category of combat weaponry.[42] It possesses 22 maneuver battalions deployed in Russia's Western Military District, which includes the Kaliningrad exclave.

Military Deficiencies

When it comes to Russia's relative military deficiencies, perspective matters. It is important to bear in mind that Moscow's military reform and modernization program, launched in 2008, started from a state of decrepitude. Between 1991 and 2008, Russia's armed forces suffered a serious deterioration in combat readiness and equipment. By 1997, Russian defense spending had shrunk from 15 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1991 to about 4 percent of a much smaller GDP, while employment in the defense industry shrunk by 50 percent—from six to under three million personnel. Numerous attempts have been made to camouflage Russia's military weaknesses. For instance, in June 2016, a purge of senior commanders was conducted in the Baltic Fleet for exaggerating readiness levels during snap inspections, while reported levels of armaments production disguise the fact that many weapons are not new stock but simply upgraded and refurbished equipment.

> "Russia benefits from a **numerical advantage over NATO forces** *opposite the Eastern Flank* in terms of **manpower and in every major category** *of combat weaponry*."

Russia's modernization and mobilization has enhanced coordination between government ministries and intensified exercises involving both the armed forces and the domestic security services. However, continuing disputes at the top echelons of the military between traditionalist proponents of maintaining a large cadre of reservists and those focused on developing a leaner, combat-ready professional force have obstructed the application of a coherent military policy.

Despite Moscow's ambitions, its military modernization program is replete with problems. Military spending and weapons acquisitions are marred by extensive corruption, criminality, embezzlement, poor management, backward technology, and loss of access to defense industries in Ukraine. Russian forces also suffer from limited sustainability and strategic mobility due to inadequate logistics, rear-area support, and transportation assets. Undermanned units continue to rely on short-term conscripts and a limited cadre of contract service personnel. Western sanctions have also undermined Russia's ability to import and adapt technologies for military systems. The competence of some

of the country's military leadership has also been questioned, as evident in the dismissal in 2016 of the entire leadership of the Baltic Fleet for alleged dereliction of duty.

The number of Russian military forces available to occupy the Baltic region is insufficient to hold these territories for long periods.[43] Calculating troop numbers is difficult because of the frequency of Russian exercises that incorporate units from across the country. Russia's overall military numbers have decreased from 3.4 million in 1991 to 831,000 today.[44] While Russia still controls a sweeping expanse of territory, it possesses far fewer men-at-arms to defend it. Moscow is trying to address this force-to-space problem with rapid reaction teams, improved targeting and reconnaissance technology, and more battalion tactical exercises. However, in an offensive against the Baltic States, Russia's military would have little manpower to conduct rear-area operations, especially in the event of combat with NATO troops on other fronts—a highly likely outcome. Russia's National Guard would be required to maintain control in rear areas, but this force mostly consists of small police units with some Special Forces.

In recent years, Russia's military operations have not seriously tested its combat effectiveness, particularly against a sophisticated adversary such as NATO. In devising an effective allied deterrence and defense along the Eastern Flank, it is therefore crucial to remember that Russia's armed forces trail U.S. and other NATO forces in high-technology weaponry, in C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance), as well as in electronic warfare, conventional precision strike weapons, and unmanned aerial vehicles.

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF KALININGRAD

Sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland, the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic coast has witnessed intensive military activity in recent years. The total land area of the *oblast* is some 9,300 square kilometers. According to the 2010 census, the population of Kaliningrad stood at close to 940,000 people—a fourth of whom are either military personnel and their families or citizens linked with the armed services. In order to connect the exclave with the territory of the Russia-Belarus Union State, since 2003 the Russian military has enjoyed access through Lithuania. However, this access does not constitute a corridor, as any military transit is highly regulated and supervised. The purpose of this route is to supply Russian troops in Kaliningrad. While Vilnius supervises all military transport to Kaliningrad across its territory and rejects any extra-territorial agreements that the Kremlin has proposed, a new railway line is being built in the exclave toward the Lithuanian border. Somewhat disconcerting, this line is reminiscent of the railway construction in the Georgian province of Abkhazia before the 2008 Russian invasion.

As noted earlier (see Scenarios), Kaliningrad remains a brewing source of potential instability for Lithuania and Poland. Perhaps the greatest risk to NATO is that Moscow may demand unilateral control of the rail corridor to Kaliningrad (across Lithuania), or even stage a provocative attack on a Russian convoy, in order to justify some form of intervention around Suwałki. The Kremlin could also claim that Kaliningrad has been severed from outside economic and energy supplies by Lithuania, and then move to "unblock" the exclave. Russian military units in Kaliningrad could themselves stage a provocation against Lithuanian or Polish territory if Moscow decides to test NATO's resolve. The options for the Kremlin are nearly limitless. The problem for NATO: Kaliningrad is a bastion.

Inside Kaliningrad, Russia has positioned the headquarters of its Baltic Sea Fleet, as well as the Chernyakhovsk and Donskoye air bases. In the maritime domain, Kaliningrad houses a significant part of the 56 warship-strong Russian Baltic Fleet at the port of Baltiysk along with submarines and a naval brigade. Russia's naval and submarine fleet in the Baltic Sea boast accompanying electronic and cyber warfare capabilities. These compliment the capabilities of Russian aircraft. Across the whole Western Military District, Russia possesses 27 combat air squadrons and six battalions of assault helicopters. Russia has also modernized military airports and prepared civilian airports to support military needs. On

Russian Forces in Kaliningrad

Year	Type	Forces
2014	**Total**	**9,872**
2015	**Total**	**9,964**
2020 (projected)	**Three Brigades**	**14,611**

Source: *Suwałki Roundtable in Vilnius* (12 March 2018).

land, contingents of Russia's National Guard, established as an internal security force, and other irregular units such as Cossack groupings are also present in the territory.

As a hub for Russian military activity, Kaliningrad has become a well-defended platform that can challenge NATO across multiple domains simultaneously. The Kremlin's multiple A2/AD air, land, sea, electronic, and space "bubbles" now project outwards from the territory. These weapons can threaten the Suwałki Corridor and nearby environs in wide overlapping arcs. Electronic warfare systems tested at Zapad 2017 are also deployed in the territory. These could be used to disrupt NATO communications in the event of conflict. And should that conflict ever arise, Russian missiles and long-range fires deployed in Kaliningrad could block the eastern part of Poland and a large portion of the Baltic States from receiving naval or land support from NATO allies.

Indeed, the Kremlin's ability to project power beyond the borders of Kaliningrad is formidable. In 2012, Moscow began to deploy S-400 air defense missiles inside the exclave, bolstering existing S-300 anti-aircraft batteries. In combination, Russia's advanced air defense systems can paralyze the air space over most of the Baltic region and Poland.[45] In fact, Russia's S-300 and S-400 air defense systems deployed in Kaliningrad and near St. Petersburg, coupled with air defense systems in Belarus, provide overlapping regional cover that could hinder NATO's attempts to reinforce the Baltic countries in the event of a Russian attack.

Power projection from Kaliningrad does not stop with air defense assets. Moscow has likewise deployed multiple batteries of Iskander SS-26 tactical ballistic missiles, which are believed to be fitted with nuclear warheads. Boasting a striking range of approximately 500 kilometers, Russia's Iskanders pose an exceptionally grave danger to NATO. They can reach targets in the Baltic littoral as far as the German border and hit locations well inside Poland and around the Baltic capitals. In fact, the Iskander is specifically designed to destroy civilian population centers, critical infrastructure, military bases, counter-force assets, C2 facilities, and troop concentrations in a wide regional arc.[46] And Iskander is not the only threat. Russia has likewise deployed 3M-54 Kalibr (SS-N-27 Sizzler) cruise missiles to Kaliningrad. Individually, each one of these capabilities should be taken very seriously. In combination, the danger they pose to NATO is substantial.

> "The Kremlin's ability *to* **project power** *beyond the* ***borders of Kaliningrad*** is formidable."

Perhaps most concerning for NATO is Russia's sizable build-up of conventional land forces inside Kaliningrad. Right now, the total number of these forces is rising fast.

In 2015, Russian conventional forces in the exclave numbered just 9,964. As a result of on-going new deployments that include accompanying logistical and infrastructure support, Russia will have positioned nearly 15,000 soldiers within Kaliningrad by 2020.[47] This deployment into Kaliningrad will be formidable: equivalent to roughly half of the U.S. Army's total deployment across all of Europe. The alarming build-up of Russian forces raises a troubling question: if Moscow is not expecting conflict around Suwałki or nearby territories, then why would it need such a large and potentially destabilizing number of ground forces stationed in Kaliningrad?

The continuing deployment of Russian land forces in Kaliningrad is perfectly consistent with a hybrid or "stab, grab, and hold" operation against the Suwałki Corridor. In a textbook offensive operation against Suwałki, Russia would need five to six standard-type brigades (totaling ~30,000 men) to block and hold the region. The current military build-up inside Kaliningrad ensures that Moscow is part-way there. The Kremlin could easily provide the remainder from elsewhere in its Western Military District. During Zapad 2017 maneuvers, Russia mustered close to 100,000 men along NATO's borders. The forces required to seize Suwałki and defend against a NATO counterattack are well within Russia's means.

More troubling for NATO is that Russian forces need not put one foot onto NATO territory to accomplish their goals. Rather, they can simply deny the free movement of NATO troops and equipment through the Suwałki Corridor during a crisis. Use of sabotage operations by Special Forces and/or long-range fires from Kaliningrad and Belarus could accomplish this purpose. NATO planners should have no doubt: this danger is far from hypothetical. Russia has this ability right now. On July 11, 2014, elements of Ukraine's 24th Mechanized Brigade met a catastrophic end near the Ukrainian border town of Zelenopillya. After a mass rocket artillery barrage lasting just three minutes, the combat power of two battalions of the Ukranian 24th Mechanized Brigade was destroyed.[48] What remained was a devastated landscape, burning vehicles and equipment, 30 dead and 90 wounded.[49] This kind of operation in Suwałki would threaten NATO's reinforcement and resupply of the Baltic States. Artillery fire from Kaliningrad and Belarus could significantly impede the rapid reinforcement and resupply of NATO allies necessary to meet Article 5 obligations.

If an unwanted conflict over Suwałki ever emerged, NATO would have the theoretical ability to destroy or diminish Russia's nearby A2/AD capabilities. The catch: these assets will likely be positioned inside Kaliningrad and Belarus. Neutralizing them means striking inside Russian and/or Belarusian territory, either with kinetic or non-kinetic (i.e., cyber) means. While this would open the Corridor to NATO reinforcements in the short-run, the Kremlin would allege NATO escalation. In the worst case, a larger war could follow.

M1A2 Abrams during training in Lithuania. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Europe.

LESSONS FROM ZAPAD 2017

There were four main lessons from Zapad 2017 with respect to Russian capabilities: 1) size, 2) speed, 3) morale, and 4) intelligence-sharing.

First, Zapad 2017 was larger in scale than indicated in official Russian reports and included unreported full-scale operations, conventional maneuver, fire support, and nuclear-asset training. Russia's claim that only 13,000 personnel were involved in the exercise was clearly false; this referred only to the part of the exercise within Belarusian borders, while the main focal point was actually in northwestern Russia, where extensive and sophisticated fire exercises coordinated by Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) were taking place. The nuclear component at the end of the exercise and participation from Russia's Southern Military District are further evidence of Zapad's real scale. Misleading fellow members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in this manner was a clear violation of the transparency and reporting requirements under the OSCE's Vienna Document.

Large exercises are not inherently wrong—and surely, with greater transparency, fear and anxiety on NATO's Eastern Flank about Zapad would have been reduced. But avoiding transparency is deliberately part of Russia's strategy of chaos and disinformation. It is also intended to numb NATO and normalize large Russian exercises along NATO's frontier, readying a potential opportunity for future surprise. Tellingly, Russia is already pursuing a similar strategy in the Sea of Azov by undertaking naval exercises in Ukrainian territory without Kyiv's permission. NATO must become more aware

of the true scale of Russian exercises and counter the dissemination of false Russian narratives—all the while holding Russia accountable for transparency and compliance with international agreements. Without increased transparency, there is greater risk of overreaction or unnecessary alarm.

Second, Zapad demonstrated Russia's ability to move equipment and forces quickly and smoothly from east to west and further into Belarus. More concerning than the actual firepower was Russia's logistical prowess in terms of speed compared to NATO. Russia's speed comes from its ability to reduce friction through infrastructure and capabilities. This includes the Antonov cargo aircraft as well as natural "interior lines" of movement within Russian borders. Unlike the many border crossings required in NATO reinforcement, Russia faces no international boundaries or customs procedures that could inhibit movement in a crisis. This is critical: in order for Russia to achieve its strategic objective of undermining the Alliance, it needs only discredit NATO as a security guarantor. This could be achieved with limited force and little time through a limited attack into NATO territory. It is Russia's prowess in time, space, and scale that is the basis for its tactical, operational, and strategic advantage in this area.

> "**Most concerning for NATO** *is Russia's sizeable buildup* **of conventional land forces** *inside Kaliningrad*."

In order to create an effective deterrent, NATO must counter with equally fast or faster movement. The alternative is a longer, more costly liberation campaign and long-term loss of NATO's credibility. Achieving the necessary speed requires increasing the speed of recognition, decision, and reinforcement. This will require NATO-EU cooperation. There must be no doubt that NATO is prepared to defend its members before Russia can act. Doing so would ensure that Russia does not miscalculate the resolve and capabilities of the Alliance.

Third, Zapad 2017 demonstrated the benefits of Russia's military modernization. While its modernization program is often underestimated in the West, Zapad showed an improvement in troop morale as a result of better pay, new military investments, and exercises. In coordinating exercises for fires and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in northwestern Russia—where there was the greatest force concentration during Zapad—Russian forces trained and refined their ability to employ large quantities and multiple variants of UAVs. This demonstrated increased capabilities in reconnaissance and intercepting and jamming communications, as well as the tactical use of long-range rockets and artillery using intelligence gained from UAVs. While these capabilities

were already demonstrated in Ukraine and Syria, it is important to note that this was a focus during Zapad. For NATO, the lesson is about the importance of achieving greater interoperability to ensure secure, tactical FM communications that cannot be intercepted, detected, targeted, or jammed. NATO must also have the ability to conduct digital counter-fire to neutralize Russian firing capabilities.

Fourth, NATO also learned a lesson from Zapad about intelligence-sharing. When tracking the IW of potential Russian military operations, NATO must move at the "speed of relevance." Right now, that speed is limited by the "speed of trust" between allies. During Zapad, NATO intelligence-sharing was much better—but more is needed. There will always be reticence among allies to divulge intelligence. But when it comes to the common threat posed by Moscow, greater intelligence sharing undoubtedly creates a swifter, more coordinated response.

During Zapad, intelligence and information-sharing among allies was the best in many years. It occurred on several levels and between multiple agencies, taking advantage of the superior knowledge, insight, and access to Russia that Eastern Flank allies have compared to the United States and many West European allies. This level of cooperation should be the standard, not an exception precipitated by exercising. The Alliance should assess the policies and security protocols that inhibit this capability—because ultimately, they are essential for increasing the speed of recognition.

THE BELARUS QUESTION

Belarus's geographic position is strategically important for the Kremlin. It projects Russian power toward two NATO members, Poland and Lithuania, and closes most of the terrain between Russia and its outpost of Kaliningrad. Only the Suwałki Corridor separates this territory from the Russia-Belarus Union State. Currently, Belarus is fully integrated into Russia's armed forces, even if its military is not officially part of Russia's Western Military District—an area that encompasses Kaliningrad and a vast stretch of territory from Karelia along the Finnish border to eastern Ukraine. The Belarusian government lacks operational decision-making powers over its armed forces; and since the early 2000s, Belarus has in effect been incorporated within Russia's Joint Operational Command. This includes Belarus' contribution to Russian integrated air defense systems. These capabilities will be vital for A2/AD operations in the event of a conflict with NATO. The Belarusian military is estimated at some 45,350 active troops and 289,500 reservists.[50] That number includes 10,700 in the army, 11,750 in the air force, 5,900 in the Special Operation Command, and 17,000 joint services forces. Belarus also has 110,000 paramilitaries, including border guards and Ministry of Interior troops and militia.

Although Russia and Belarus have established a joint Union State, Belarus remains the weakest point in Russia's regional defenses. Belarusian and Russian forces do not train in the same integrated fashion as NATO states and officials in Moscow realize that they cannot take for granted the loyalty of all elements of the Belarusian army. The use of Belarusian territory for joint military actions against a third party would require the approval of the government in Minsk. That is a significant factor. Moscow cannot assume that President

Belarusian Armed Forces

Year	Type	Forces
2008	**Total Active**	**72,940**
	Army	**29,600**
	Air	**18,170**
	Joint	**25,170**
	Paramilitary	**110,000**
	Reserve	**289,500**
2018	**Active**	**45,350**
	Army	**10,700**
	Air	**11,750**
	SOF	**5,900**
	Joint	**17,000**
	Paramilitary	**110,000**
	Reserve	**289,500**

Sources: 2008: IISS, *The Military Balance 2008*, p. 169.
2018: IISS, *The Military Balance 2018*, p. 185.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka would automatically allow Russian forces to move through Belarus to attack Lithuania or Poland and provoke a counter-strike from NATO (see the Belarusian Spillover scenario described above).

When it comes to Suwałki, Belarus is the great unknown. The Zapad 2017 military exercises demonstrated how Minsk is trying to balance Moscow's demands to use its territory as a military staging area with its desire to show that it has no aggressive intentions against the West. In the longer term, should the current military situation ease, Belarusian units might eventually be invited to participate in some exercises with NATO forces. This is for the long term, however; such an effort should only be pursued once Belarus demonstrates its clear and unswerving intention not to threaten NATO. In the near term, Belarus will be obligated to side with Russia in the event of a conflict with NATO. In a word, Belarus' military-political relations with Russia are complicated.

For their part, officials in Minsk are concerned about developments in neighboring Ukraine. This worry arises from two eventualities: (1) a Euromaidan-type revolt against the authoritarian government of President Lukashenka; or (2) an attempt by Moscow to replace the government in Minsk (or clip its wings) if Belarus veers too far in its current rapprochement policy with the West. Belarus is on the frontline between Russia and three NATO neighbors. To preclude a potential Euromaidan, and thus strengthen Belarusian sovereignty against a direct Russian takeover, Minsk has responded with a policy of political repression and "Belarusianization," stressing the history, language, and ethnic distinctiveness of Belarus' past.

Moscow uses the carrot of substantial economic assistance and the stick of threats to replace Lukashenka to keep Minsk in line. The Zapad 2017 exercises on Belarusian territory were an illustration of Lukashenka's predicament. They entangled Belarus in a Kremlin-sponsored deception that NATO represents a danger to both countries. Lukashenka must remain concerned that, in the event of a conflict with Russia, some of his military officers may prove disloyal and side with Moscow—as in Ukraine, where some officers in Crimea sided with Russia at the outset of Moscow's 2014 invasion. Most senior Belarusian officers were trained in Russia and maintain strong connections with Moscow's military and security services. These long-held relationships increase Lukashenka's weakness and amplify Putin's strength in Belarus.

Thus far, Minsk has resisted Moscow's pressure to allow the establishment of a permanent Russian military base on its territory. But Belarus has not declared outright neutrality and remains a member of the Moscow-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CSTO and the Russia-Belarus Union State Treaty of 1996 enable Russia to deploy its military on Belarusian territory in the event of war with a third party. Additionally, during the past year, Moscow has moved tanks and other heavy weapons into Belarus "for joint use," citing the Union State treaty.[51] This pretext permits Russia to exploit its rights under the treaty to camouflage its activities on Belarusian territory.

Belarusian political analysts claim that Minsk expects Moscow to offer substantial financial aid in exchange for the increase in Russia's military presence on the country's territory.[52] According to Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu, Moscow planned to bolster the number of its aircraft stationed at Belarusian air bases. Four Su-27M3 fighter aircraft were deployed at the Lida air base near the Belarus–Lithuania

border during 2014.[53] By the end of 2014, Baranovichi air base housed a regiment of 24 aircraft of Su-27M3 fighters. This doubled the number of Russian fighter aircraft stationed near the borders of Lithuania and Poland.

> “Belarus remains ***the weakest point*** **in Russia’s** *regional defenses*.”

Russian authorities also planned to build a separate air force base in Babruysk in the Mogilev region of central Belarus and pressured Minsk to approve its construction. This base would be a perennial threat to Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine and could enable Moscow to pull Belarus into a war with a neighboring state. There are indications that Lukashenka has opposed the base; if Moscow persists in demanding its construction, this may have the unintended consequence of spurring resistance to Russia’s dominance and convince Lukashenka to pursue a more independent policy. This could also weaken Lukashenka’s domestic position if the Kremlin decides to overthrow him.[54] It is this underlying dynamic that is envisioned in the Belarus Spillover scenario (see above).

Moscow is capable of rapidly turning Belarus into a forward base by incorporating it into Russia’s Western Military District. This would constitute a direct challenge to Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland. The deployment of Russian forces and bases inside Belarus would make it easier to embroil Minsk in military conflicts launched by the Kremlin. Questions remain whether, and to what extent, the Belarusian military would resist a Russian military takeover, remain neutral, or support Moscow. To effectively resist Russia’s aggressive moves or its entrapment in neighborhood wars, Minsk would need to declare neutrality, preclude military collaboration with Russia, and develop a sizable mobile national guard that could engage in partisan warfare against Russian forces. It is hard to imagine that Kremlin leaders would view this situation as compatible with their interests.

The Zapad 2017 exercises demonstrated that if equipment is prepositioned in Belarus, the amount of time needed for Moscow to launch an attack on NATO is significantly reduced, from days to hours. Moscow may position up to 400 tanks in Belarus under the latest military agreements with Minsk. This is in addition to armored vehicles and other heavy weapons. Nominally, these will remain under “Belarusian” jurisdiction in order to avoid the perception that Russia has established an official foreign base on Lukashenka’s turf. Moscow is nevertheless prepositioning heavy equipment in Belarus in case of future conflict. Most of the Russian weapons are reportedly being placed in Barisaw, Babruysk, and Baranavicy in the central areas of Belarus.

In recent months, military analysts have concluded that technological breakthroughs in Russian military aviation, in terms of reach and speed, and the expansion of the Chkalovsk airbase in Kaliningrad, suggest that Moscow may not actually require an air base in Belarus.[55]

Instead, the Kremlin is pushing Lukashenka to permit the installation of Russian ballistic missiles on Belarusian territory. Modifications of the Russian Su-27 fighter include stronger engines and improved avionics and radar, and the more advanced Su-35, with greatly improved radars and optics, has also recently come online. As a result, Moscow can still achieve its operational objectives against NATO using warplanes based far from the Western Alliance's frontline. Meanwhile, the Pokryshkin air regiment in Kaliningrad has been equipped with significantly upgraded weaponry to protect Russia's Baltic Fleet and stage attacks against NATO ground and naval units. Its complement of planes is being upgraded from the Su-27Ss to the more advanced Su-27SM3s, which can be used over Kaliningrad, the Baltic Sea, and Belarus.

In 2014, reliable estimates put the Russian population inside Belarus at 8.3 percent (out of 9.6 million). This excludes the larger share of Belarusians who speak Russian as their first language and identify with Russian culture.[56] Given that Belarus contains a sizable Russian minority—one that Moscow could use to support a Crimea-styled annexation—Lukashenka has been on the defensive, outspoken in his calls to protect Belarus' national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Sitting on this powder keg, Minsk is fearful of any attempt by Moscow to generate unrest inside its sovereign territory. Some Russian nationalists claim that Moscow should take back territory in Belarus—land that was once part of the Russian Republic in the Soviet Union. This would resemble the pretext that Russia used to justify its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Moscow could also engineer the creation of "people's republics" in eastern Belarus, as it has in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine in order to "federalize" the country and ensure tighter control of the Minsk government. An area to potentially exploit is the so-called "Belarusian Gap," the differences in opinion between Russians and Belarusians about Russian policies and military conduct. In polling, 80 percent of Russians in Russia support Putin's land grab in Crimea, compared to only 60 percent of Belarusians.[57] Along with some of the other policy distinctions between Minsk and Moscow carved out by Lukashenka, this could provide an opportunity for NATO and the EU to increase this gap.

The organizing problem for Minsk is real estate. In the 1920s, Moscow transferred from Russia to Belarus the *oblasts* of Vitebsk, Mohilev, and Gomel. As such, a new law passed by the Russian Duma concerning the "illegality" of Crimea's transfer to Ukraine in 1954 could now be extended to include Russian areas assigned to Belarus during Soviet times. This would follow the same legal reasoning used to justify the Kremlin's invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Putin set a troubling precedent when he used a dubious historical pretext to justify his invasion of Ukraine. Similar reasoning can now be used against Belarusian territory—with equally destructive revisionist consequences.

Loading of Heavy Equipment Transport. Photo Credit: U.S. Army.

POLISH-LITHUANIAN RELATIONS

Polish-Lithuanian relations have ebbed and flowed since both countries regained their independence from Soviet control in the early 1990s. Both states have proved to be exceptionally reliable NATO members and have forged various forms of political, economic, diplomatic, and military cooperation with the allies. They have also been outspoken on international forums with regard to the threat posed by Moscow to regional stability. Consequently, Russian officials regularly lambast both capitals for alleged "Russophobia." In the military arena, between 1997 and 2007 Lithuania and Poland deployed a Peace Force Battalion (LIPOLBAT), which served in various UN, NATO, and OSCE peacekeeping missions. In 2009, a Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade (LIPOLUKRBRIG) was created, with a Polish general taking command in 2016. The brigade achieved full operational capability in 2016. Headquartered in Lublin, Poland, it is designed to deploy for peacekeeping missions run by NATO, the EU, and the UN. Poland and Lithuania have also cooperated closely on deployed U.S.-led coalition and NATO missions to Afghanistan and Iraq. Spurred by U.S. leadership, Polish and Lithuanian Special Forces enjoy a particularly close relationship. In 2016, Poland joined the U.S.-led training mission in Ukraine, alongside Lithuanian, Canadian, and U.S. trainers.

Despite these highly positive developments, ethnic friction points and historical memories—including periods of conflict in the 20th century—have contributed to geopolitical drag on relations between Warsaw and Vilnius.[58] Lithuanian and Polish troops clashed in the Sejny Uprising of 1919 and the Battle of the Niemen River of 1920. The two states signed the Treaty of Suwałki recognizing Puńsk, Sejny, and Suwałki as part of independent Poland. However, Vilnius, the historical capital of the Grand Duchy of

Lithuania, was captured by Polish troops in 1919 and the inter-war government in Warsaw pursued a policy of "Polonization" among the Lithuanian population. Relations between Poland and Lithuania remained tense throughout the period between the two World Wars. Moscow exploited rifts between the two nations after it seized a third of Polish territory during World War II by awarding Vilnius to Lithuania when forcefully incorporating the latter into the Soviet Union.

The position of ethnic minorities on either side of the common border has been a source of conflict. On the Polish side, a Lithuanian minority is concentrated in and around three towns: Puńsk, totaling about 3,600 or approximately 80 percent of the town's inhabitants; Sejny, with about 1,600 Lithuanians or about 30 percent of its inhabitants; and the Suwałki region, with some 500 Lithuanians. The Lithuanian minority in Sejny district has voiced complaints regarding their educational and language rights. In October 2015, bilateral tensions were heightened by the decision of newly elected Polish President Andrzej Duda to veto a law allowing the use of national minority languages (including Lithuanian) in Polish districts as a secondary language. Polish frustrations over the rights and obligations detailed in the Polish-Lithuanian Treaty of 1994 also persist. In February 2018, the intensity of disputes diminished when Duda made a well-received state visit to Vilnius, resulting in an increase in bilateral good will. That said, historical memories run long in the Polish-Lithuanian relationship. Natural filial sentiments for protecting the history, language, culture, and traditions of ethnic brethren on the other side of the common border run deep for both countries.

The Polish minority in Lithuania numbers some 200,317 people, according to the Lithuanian census of 2011, or 6.6 percent of the population.[59] It is concentrated in the Vilnius and Salcininkai regions in the south of the country. The Russian ethnic population totals 176,913 people, or 5.8 percent of the population, clustered mostly in the eastern part of Lithuania along the Belarusian border. Most of the Polish population in Lithuania, the largest minority in the country, inhabits the Russian information sphere, especially older Sovietized and Russified citizens who have experienced only limited influence from Poland. Exaggerated claims of official discrimination against the Polish minority provide ammunition to nationalists in Poland and have on occasion undermined relations between the governments in Warsaw and Vilnius. A recent breakthrough continuing the momentum of the "Duda-thaw" is the fact that Poles in Lithuania now have access to Polish broadcast channels from their homeland. Many Poles in Lithuania had previously boycotted Lithuanian broadcasting in favor of Russian outlets, including Russia Today, because of Polish language restrictions in Lithuanian schools and restrictions on dual-language street signs in predominantly Polish areas.

The challenge for NATO is that Moscow seeks to exploit the bilateral cleavages between Vilnius and Lithuania's Polish minority, harming Lithuania's reputation in the West and negatively affecting bilateral ties with Warsaw. The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (EAPL), a Lithuania political party, has taken pro-Kremlin positions over Ukraine and has cooperated closely with leaders of Lithuania's Russian minority.[60] During recent parliamentary elections, the EAPL combined with the Russian Alliance, representing the Russian minority. This arrangement was reportedly fostered by the Russian embassy in Vilnius. Russian minority leaders receive assistance from Moscow and a radical movement,

"Be Together," spreads pro-Moscow, anti-American, and traditionalist propaganda in an attempt to capture support from other conservative movements in Lithuania.

The EAPL has eight seats in Lithuania's parliament and is run as a hierarchical organization with little dissent or opposition. It also controls two local governments in Vilnius and Salcininkai and periodically has representatives in the central government.

> "***Moscow seeks to exploit*** the bilateral cleavages *between Vilnius and* **Lithuania's Polish minority.**"

It has focused on various grievances of the Polish minority, such as the lack of bilingual place names and the inability to use the Polish alphabet in official documents. Some Lithuanian critics contend that making concessions to the EAPL will simply escalate its demands to make Polish a second state language. This could become a wedge issue that will favor separatism.

Local analysts complain that successive Lithuanian governments have allowed Polish and Russian minority leaders to isolate their communities. One area where there is opportunity for improvement is for Warsaw to be more active in pulling the Polish population away from the Russian-dominated information sphere. Alternative Polish parties and NGOs in Lithuania need support and Lithuanian parties must be more engaged in minority affairs. Joint projects with Poland in the Vilnius and Salcininkai regions could counterbalance Russia's negative influences and investments. These are especially needed in infrastructure and job creation.

In addition to latent local Polish-Lithuanian tensions, there is also some potential for the revival of territorial disputes. Some radical Lithuanian groups periodically assert on social media that Lithuania should regain the "Suwałki triangle" from Poland, while some Polish nationalists claim the Vilnius region as part of Poland.[61] While the potential for outright conflict between the two countries is remote, it is feasible that ethnic tensions could be exploited to stir demands for local territorial autonomy, separatism, or at the very least to inhibit inter-state cooperation in the event of a Russian attack or attempt to undermine allied cohesion.

Similarly, Moscow exploits tensions between Lithuania and Belarus, evoking past territorial disputes with Belarus and Russia. In the Vilnius region, historical ownership rights are claimed by some nationalist Russian and Belarusian sources, providing Moscow with opportunities to incite Lithuanian-Belarusian frictions.[62] Claims that the Lithuanian capital was Belarusian for 600 years and illegally became Lithuanian during the Soviet period provide valuable historical cover for a potential military incursion. As Russia demonstrated with its illegal annexation of

Crimea, historical precedents—even fake or manufactured ones—can serve as justification for Russia's use of force to redraw borders and shape international opinion. In addition, a key message of Russia's state propaganda is that NATO has launched an arms race and seeks a confrontation with Russia. Hence, the membership of Lithuania and Poland in NATO allegedly poses a direct threat to the security of both Russia and Belarus. This provides ample propaganda camouflage for a potential crisis.

POLISH-LITHUANIAN DEFENSE POSTURES AND CAPABILITIES

While no frontline ally is able to individually compensate for the existing force imbalance with Russia, NATO must nonetheless address the proximity—or lack thereof—of Polish, Lithuanian, and Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) forces near Suwałki. Three improvements to defense capabilities in Poland and Lithuania are essential for greater deterrence in Suwałki.

First, every effort must be made to eliminate the "seam" between Poland and Lithuania along their shared border. This can be achieved through improved Polish-Lithuanian cooperation and integration so that their force postures and capabilities are complementary and provide mutual flank protection. Establishing a common command to oversee the border region would also help. For example, command of the Multinational Division Northeast Headquarters could be shared between Polish and Lithuanian Armed Forces, while Denmark could provide another Division Headquarters for Latvia and Estonia. Greater unity of command would achieve heightened cooperation and reduce friction along the border.

Second, for air and missile defense, while Poland's current capabilities improved dramatically with its purchase of the MIM-104 Patriot, Lithuania will have to find other means of protecting critical assets and facilities necessary for reinforcements, such as airports, seaports, and C2 facilities. Effective air and missile defense requires layered and integrated capabilities that can simultaneously handle multiple threats, including incoming missiles, long-range rockets and artillery, fixed and rotary wing aircraft, and UAV swarms. Such

Poland's Armed Forces

Type	2008	2018
Total Active	**127,266**	**105,000**
Army	**79,000**	**61,200**
Navy	**11,600**	**7,400**
Air	**28,466**	**18,700**
Special Forces	**N/A**	**3,400**
Territorial	**N/A**	**800**
Joint	**8,200**	**13,500**
Paramilitary	**21,400**	**73,400**
Reserve	**234,000**	**N/A**

Sources: 2008: IISS, *The Military Balance 2008*, p. 142.
2018: IISS, *The Military Balance 2018*, p. 135.

Lithuania's Armed Forces

Type	2008	2018
Total Active	13,850	18,350
Army	12,500	11,650
Navy	450	700
Air	900	1,100
Other	N/A	4,900
Paramilitary	14,600	11,300
Reserve	6,700	6,700

Sources: 2008: IISS, *The Military Balance 2008*, p. 136.
2018: IISS, *The Military Balance 2018*, p. 124.

a scenario would necessitate (1) transitioning from air policing to air defense, which would be a new mission profile for NATO air forces, (2) adding Short-Range Air Defense (SHORAD) capabilities to Lithuania around those critical assets, which would be ideally suited for countering UAVs and also incoming rotary winged aircraft carrying Special Forces capable of disabling or seizing key infrastructure, and (3) having Germany and the Netherlands, both of whom have Patriot capabilities, providing coverage over the Baltics. Altogether, this would necessitate an annual, large-scale, and sophisticated NATO air and missile defense exercise to train personnel and demonstrate these capabilities to the Russian Federation.

Third, for ground defense, Lithuanian and Polish forces must use obstacles and territorial forces to develop a defensive concept that capitalizes on the restrictive nature of the region's terrain and protects the Suwałki Corridor from incursion or isolation. Sufficient quantities of land mines, barrier materials, and engineering equipment and units must be deployed to protect the Corridor and prevent Russian forces from rapid movements along avenues of approach originating in Kaliningrad and Belarus. Territorial forces that are routinely drilled and rapidly mobilized can provide the necessary "thickening" of forces in the region. Such forces would install and build obstacles, disrupt incoming Russian forces, and buy time for regular formations to deploy and defeat Russian forces. Poland has also embarked on an ambitious program to develop professional Territorial Defense Forces (TDF). Currently, there are five established brigades in the most threatened regions, with more brigades coming across Poland in the next few years, including up to 50,000 TDF troops. Poland's TDF will be armed like light infantry and will include short range air defense and anti-armor capabilities, which could deter any Russian cross-border designs on Poland. As Poland and Lithuania improve TDF capabilities, they should study and emulate best practices from allies where feasible, including Estonia and, for large-scale, rapid mobilization of reserves and territorial forces, Finland.

Reloading Howitzer during Exercise Dynamic Front 2018. Photo credit: NATO.

NATO'S MILITARY POSTURE

Ultimately, the defense of NATO's frontier and Eastern Flank must be coherent—from Norway to the Black Sea. The focus cannot be solely on Suwałki, as this risks leaving NATO vulnerable in other parts of the Eastern Flank.

To establish a coherent deterrent along the frontier at Suwałki and beyond, NATO must address the challenge presented by its current defense-in-depth strategy for defending its eastern members. Concentrating forces in the interior and leaving the Suwałki Corridor undefended is predicated on the assumption that NATO can "create the certain knowledge" in Russia's mind that a counter-offensive will be "swift, certain, and overwhelming" if the Corridor is taken—and by trading space for time, NATO accepts "the danger of losing territory up front."[63] Of course, given that the Corridor's terrain is conducive to holding and defense—rather than movement and counter-offensives—retaking lost territory is no guarantee. Defense-in-depth and the strategic environment of Suwałki are mismatched.

Instead, NATO should prioritize space over time. There are several ways to do so. One approach could be improving the current system of IW. This could involve a combination of technical sensors, Special Operations Forces integrated with local special forces units, increasing and improving intelligence-sharing between agencies such as embassies and commands, and more active air defense through both the Air Force and ground units equipped with radar. Another approach could be a greater U.S. presence along the frontier, which would strengthen deterrence, as long as Alliance unity of command and effort are simultaneously prioritized. Indeed, unilateral decisions to deploy U.S. troops into Poland, Lithuania, or other frontline states could undermine the coherence of the Alliance if perceived as provocative, particularly in the case of a long-term deployment.

Rotational forces could offer an effective deterrent capability without risking friction within the Alliance. Increasing the size and capabilities of U.S. logistical units would also significantly improve the deterrent and operational capabilities of the Alliance and—if deterrence failed—its counter-capabilities. Increasing ammunition, fuel-handling and storage capabilities, improving transportation and convoy support capabilities, and enhancing maintenance for aviation and armored units would also help achieve this goal. These are available through the U.S. Army's National Guard and Reserves and are ideally suited for rotational deployments. Finally, deployment of U.S. Army Avenger short-range air defense units into the Baltic region would provide a much-needed capability. These highly-mobile units could move around designated areas of operation so that Russian planners would not know their precise location—in effect, serving as "Mobile Tripwires" that would greatly strengthen the deterrent effect. Further, strengthening the U.S. Mission Command Element (MCE) into a full Division Headquarters as part of C2 will help coordinate U.S. Army actions in support of, or separate from, NATO activities. It would also increase the effectiveness of the operational integration of U.S., Polish, Lithuanian, German, and other NATO forces alongside existing NATO structures and further exercises. Additional structure to the modest U.S. divisional C2 slice-element deployed to Poland will necessarily enhance (1) exercise and training effectiveness to deter and better prepare for combat; (2) coordination of regional operational activities; and (3) create conditions for flexibility to quickly address a regional NATO Article 4 or 5 situation. Additionally, the U.S. should consider periodic rotational division-size exercises on the Eastern Flank to exercise higher-level rapid response and massing of combat capabilities with the aim of deterring and defeating an enemy ready to engage in joint, multi-echelon, multi-domain combat with NATO.

NATO Armed Forces

Date	Type	Forces
2008	**Total Active**	**3,729,605**[64]
2018	**Total Active**	**3,128,520**[65]
May 2017	**VJTF Spearhead**	**13,000**[66]
May 2017	**eNRF**	**40,000**[67]
February 2018	**NATO eFP**	**4,692**[68]

River crossing during Exercise Saber Strike 2017. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Europe.

CONCLUSION

Any effective political and military alliance must understand its weakest points and undertake effective remedial action. The Suwałki Corridor, a 65-kilometer wide strip of territory linking Poland with Lithuania, is NATO's most vulnerable choke point along its Eastern Flank. In the event of armed conflict between Russia and NATO, Russia's land forces operating from the Kaliningrad exclave and from Belarus could attempt to close the Suwałki Corridor and incapacitate NATO as a security provider for its three Baltic members.

This report locates and gives recommendations for closing the gaps in NATO capabilities, preparedness, responsiveness, reinforcement, logistics, and cohesion. It serves to better inform policy makers on how the Suwałki Corridor can be reinforced to defend against Kremlin subversion and potential military assault. If Russian forces established control over the Suwałki Corridor, it would cut the Baltic States off from the rest of the Alliance and turn their reinforcement by a land route into a difficult undertaking. Defending Suwałki is therefore essential for NATO's credibility and Western cohesion.

The Alliance has intensified its determination to defend its most vulnerable members bordering Russia. It has bolstered its deterrence capabilities in the Baltic region by establishing a network of rotational forces, warehousing equipment, and holding regular exercises. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO agreed to deploy four multinational battalion battle groups on a rotational basis in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. These units are led by the UK, Canada, Germany, and the U.S. respectively

and are deployed to deter Russian military incursions that would trigger a rapid influx of a much larger contingent of NATO troops.

The multinational forces are positioned as a tripwire that, if breached, would trigger the deployment of a 40,000-strong rapid-reaction force and a full-scale NATO counterassault. The challenge for NATO is to create the capabilities, including troops, transport, and infrastructure, for quickly mobilizing reinforcements to defend each ally. Such a posture is the key to an effective deterrence. The Suwałki Corridor is particularly vulnerable given the continued militarization of Kaliningrad and Russia's Western Military District. For Moscow, closing the Suwałki Gap is likely to be a part of a broader strategic offensive. The aim would not necessarily be to hold the area but to deny it to NATO and its reinforcements. Although NATO does not have comparable military capabilities to Russia in the Baltic zone, it possesses significant assets in Germany and other parts of Europe that can be deployed in the event of crisis. The focus must be on guaranteeing that these forces can be mobilized to rapidly enter the combat theater. Indeed, the speed and nature of NATO's military response should serve as a deterrent to Russia's initial aggression. In addition to a guaranteed surge of NATO reinforcements, each state bordering Russia requires three fundamental elements: early warning of Moscow's covert subversion of a targeted area that can be thwarted or contained; capable forces that can respond quickly to an assault on their territorial integrity; and adequate infrastructure and prepositioned equipment to allow for the speedy deployment of NATO troops.

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