

# Preempting Further Russian Aggression Against Europe

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## Introduction

The occupation and illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in eastern Ukraine indicate that Russia is both able and willing to use military force against neighboring nations. This should not come as a surprise considering Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008.

A few years earlier, nine of Russia's neighbors decided to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) after the end of the Cold War to secure their paths toward free and democratic societies. As a result, NATO enlargements in 1999 and 2004 saw Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria join the alliance. These European nations are now part of the collective defense system in which the United States remains the most powerful member.

The alliance has held thus far, but in recent years, Russian President Vladimir Putin has challenged the post-Cold War world order. NATO members that share borders with Russia and have large ethnic Russian populations are under severe political, military, and economic pressure from Moscow. Ukraine, which is not a member of NATO or the European Union (EU), has Russian forces on its soil and has struggled to maintain its sovereignty, having lost Crimea and large swaths of its Eastern mainland territory to Russian-backed separatist groups.

Without U.S. leadership in this region, Europe is not likely to have the strength or resolve to resist further Russian aggression. Though similar incursions

within NATO members' territory are considered less likely, if European powers continue their implicit approval of Russia's aggressive actions, Eastern NATO members fear that their own territorial integrity is at risk.

## Reassuring European Allies

When Russian forces occupied Crimea on February 27, 2014, NATO responded quickly by employing measures aimed at reassuring its easternmost member states. NATO strengthened its Baltic Air Policing mission, with the U.S. initially shifting some fighter and tanker aircraft from the United Kingdom to Lithuania to join aircraft already based there.<sup>1</sup> A month later, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) decided to strengthen NATO's collective defense and demonstrate the alliance's solidarity by deploying additional aircraft, ships, and land force units eastward, including to the Baltic Sea region. A week later, four mine countermeasure vessels and a naval auxiliary ship were deployed to the Baltic Sea.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of April, four companies of the U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade (based in Vicenza, Italy) were sent to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to join national defense forces in conducting exercises and shoring up security in the region.<sup>3</sup> NATO's Air Policing Mission also increased the number of aircraft involved and expanded geographically, with four Danish F-16s beginning patrols from Ämari Air Base in Estonia.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. contributed the majority of the assets to this effort.<sup>5</sup>

America's presence in Central and Eastern Europe has been maintained through Operation Atlantic Resolve, involving exercises and training on land, in the air, and at sea while sustaining a rotational presence across Europe.<sup>6</sup> As part of both the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and the 2015 Defense Appropriations Act, the European Reassurance Initiative provides \$1 billion in funding to enable the Department of Defense to continue its efforts to reassure NATO allies and bolster the security and capacity of partners in the region.<sup>7</sup> The units from the 173rd Airborne Brigade initially deployed to the Baltic States and Poland were eventually replaced with units from the 1st Cavalry Division and the 3rd Infantry Division.<sup>8</sup> The 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, also undertook the "Dragoon Ride," a 1,100-mile convoy of over 600 soldiers and 120 military vehicles across six European countries in March 2015. This exercise was an attempt to demonstrate solidarity among the allied nations and a chance for the U.S. military to interact with local populations.<sup>9</sup>

The NAC's March 2014 decision to bolster collective defense forces was intended to reassure Eastern European member states and demonstrate to Russia that the alliance was resolved to defend itself. The U.S. government likewise created the European Reassurance Initiative to show its commitment to upholding NATO members' security and territorial integrity.<sup>10</sup> These activities have been described as aiming "to offer reassurance to countries that are feeling nervous about President Vladimir Putin's intentions in the region."<sup>11</sup> The units that were sent to the Baltic States and Poland were therefore sent primarily to underscore solidarity among NATO members rather than to deter Russia by deploying significant combat units. Western decision-makers assumed that Russia would continue to be deterred solely by a capability-and-capacity comparison between the forces of Russia and the forces of NATO. The problem with this assumption is that the United States provides most of NATO's military capabilities and that few of them are in Europe.

Another factor that undermines NATO's credibility has been its member states' continued failure to make defense a priority. For example:

- Despite the political commitments made at the NATO Wales Summit in September 2014 to halt any decline in defense expenditure, six out of

the 14 states examined by the European Leadership Network in early 2015 will cut defense expenditure.<sup>12</sup>

- The U.S. Army is reducing the number of assets and personnel permanently assigned to its only European-based Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB), adopting instead "continuous rotational" deployments. The 12th CAB in Germany will lose 24 Boeing AH-64 Apaches; 30 Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawks (plus nine HH-60 medical evacuation platforms); three Boeing CH-47 Chinook helicopters; and the Bell OH-58D Kiowa Warrior scout fleet, which is being divested from the U.S. Army. In addition to these aircraft reductions, the 12th CAB will lose 1,900 personnel.<sup>13</sup> This step likely undermines the effectiveness of Operation Atlantic Resolve.
- The so-called Minsk II agreement among Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany in early 2015 has indirectly legitimated Russia's aggression against Ukraine and removed the occupation of Crimea from the European community's agenda. Statements made by European politicians during the Minsk negotiations betrayed a belief that a deal—even one likely to be repeatedly violated—was so vital that its deleterious impact on deterrence was an acceptable price to pay. According to German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen, the delivery of weapons to the government in Kyiv would not help to end the conflict.<sup>14</sup> Thus, while Russia has deployed its forces to Crimea and eastern Ukraine and is also sending weapons, supplies, and contractors to their proxies, the West still hesitates to deliver lethal weapons to the democratically elected government in Kyiv.

### Russia One Step Ahead of the West

Russia has repeatedly surprised European nations by launching unannounced "snap exercises." The term "snap exercises" (sometimes called "snap inspections") refers to major military exercises ordered with little or no notice.<sup>15</sup> The Russian military has claimed that the purpose of such exercises is to test the readiness of its forces, but observers have argued that they are meant to impress the West with Russia's military strength. In 2014 and 2015, Russia raised concerns among its neighbors by conducting a series of "snap exercises" of a magnitude not previously seen.

- An exercise on December 5–10, 2014, focused on the units in Kaliningrad oblast and involved 9,000 servicemen, 250 tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs), over 100 artillery units, 55 warships and the Iskander ballistic missile system.<sup>16</sup> According to one expert, it is believed to have included practice for a surprise attack against a Baltic Sea nation with a brigade-size airborne unit from the Russian 76th Guards Air Assault Division from Pskov, near the Estonian border.<sup>17</sup> The exercise also included sorties by nuclear-capable Tu-95 Bear strategic bombers and Tu-22M Backfire long-range bombers.
- On February 16, 2015, Russia’s Defense Ministry started a “snap inspection” of its paratrooper units in western Russia.<sup>18</sup> In the Pskov region, close to the Estonian border, an exercise involved some 2,000 troops and 500 units of military equipment.<sup>19</sup>
- In March 2015, without previous warning, Russia conducted a five-day exercise involving 45,000 troops, 3,000 vehicles, 110 aircraft, 15 submarines, and 40 surface vessels.<sup>20</sup> The Russian Northern Fleet was brought to full combat readiness.<sup>21</sup>

The early warning capabilities of NATO member states including the United States have not been successful in forecasting these exercises and operations. General Philip Breedlove, Commander, U.S. European Command (EUCOM), and Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2015 that:

Russian military operations over the past year, in Ukraine and in the region more broadly, have underscored that there are critical gaps in our collection and analysis. Some Russian military exercises have caught us by surprise, and our textured feel for Russian involvement on the ground in Ukraine has been quite limited.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, Commander, U.S. Army in Europe (USAREUR), was impressed by the speed with which Russia can move 30,000 troops and 1,000 tanks.<sup>23</sup>

On the political level, NATO member states have employed a reactive approach vis-à-vis Russia. This is best reflected in the Readiness Action Plan approved by allied leaders at NATO’s Wales Summit

in September 2014. In addition to the previously cited assurance measures, the plan includes adaptation measures aimed at raising readiness, enhancing responsiveness by increasing the size of the NATO Response Force (NRF), and creating a brigade-size Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), as well as conducting more exercises.<sup>24</sup> The importance of the Readiness Action Plan should not be underestimated, but it also should not be overemphasized. The details of the classified plan were subject to a lengthy drafting process and should therefore be seen as a compromise between the member states that share a border with Russia and other members that, at least at the time, had more difficulty appreciating the extent of the Russian threat.

One of the assumptions upon which the Readiness Action Plan relies is the ability of NATO’s North Atlantic Council to forecast Russian military action, take necessary decisions, and actually deploy the VJTF *before* Russia uses its Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the Baltic Sea region, primarily in Kaliningrad.<sup>25</sup> This is a complicated task for several reasons:

1. *The reluctance among Western decision-makers to consider the use of military force.* Western political leaders have repeatedly demonstrated that they consider an escalation of a tense situation to be something negative *per se*, even if the aim of such escalation would be to change the behavior of an aggressor. Numerous examples were seen in 2014 when the heads of state of the United States, Germany, and France were eager to warn against any steps that would escalate the situation in eastern Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> Among the other excuses often used to justify Western passivity is the need to maintain a constructive dialogue with Russia through shuttle diplomacy.<sup>27</sup> Would the same political leaders really instruct their ambassadors in NATO to deploy the VJTF before a military conflict and thus risk escalating the situation?
2. *Russia’s A2/AD capabilities.* If Russia’s behavior does in fact rise to a level that would trigger NATO deployment of the VJTF, Russia would not likely refrain from using its A2/AD capabilities. Russia continues to invest in programs that increasingly can limit or deny NATO forces access to some of the alliance’s easternmost member states. There should be little illusion that Russia’s leaders will cease these programs.

**3. *The small size of the VJTF.*** The VJTF, a brigade-size unit, would be useful in a scenario in which Russia would deploy only a fraction of its forces against a NATO member state, similar to the hybrid war scenario demonstrated in Ukraine before August 2014. In the case of a large-scale scenario involving units that have been tested through unannounced “snap exercises,” only the entire 30,000-strong NATO Response Force would offer the required size.

Thus, NATO’s Readiness Action Plan is too focused on response and contemplates only symbolic effort to preempt Russian aggression against NATO member states. The reassurance measures implemented by the U.S. and other NATO members work only up to a certain point. If Russia is not deterred, then the Kremlin might be tempted to use military force against one of the Baltic States to prove that Article 5 of the Washington Treaty will not be invoked.

### **What Next?**

One might be tempted to conclude that if Western leaders continue to cut defense spending and more U.S. forces are withdrawn from Europe while Russia’s modernization program is advancing, then the comparative strength of Russia’s military vis-à-vis NATO in Europe will inevitably increase. If Western decision-makers aim to de-escalate a potential conflict, then the right thing to do from Russia’s viewpoint would be to escalate by using military force whenever the gains would exceed the cost of doing so. In the short term, even if NATO responded militarily, the alliance could muster only a small number of forces in Europe. Additional U.S. forces would need to be transported to Europe from the United States, similar to what was planned in the event of a Soviet attack on Europe during the Cold War.

In the 1980s, however, around a quarter of a million U.S. troops were stationed in West Germany, ready to take the first Soviet blow. Today, there are 150 troops in each of the Baltic States plus Poland. The current U.S. force posture in Europe reflects the environment after the attacks of September 11, 2001, when Russia was seen as a partner, not as a potential adversary. Operation Atlantic Resolve has no strategic impact on Russia’s behavior.

Through its incursions into Georgia and Ukraine, Russia has demonstrated that it considers the use of military force to be an acceptable method for

achieving its strategic goals. Experts believe that a military conflict between Russia and NATO members could occur in two different ways.

In the first scenario, it is possible that Russia could exploit Russian-speaking minorities living primarily in Estonia and Latvia by raising the level of dissatisfaction through disinformation and launch a so-called hybrid war. For years, the Kremlin has targeted the Russian speakers in the Baltic States with tailor-made propaganda. Political instability would weaken the national governments and eventually lead to a situation in which “local separatists” consisting of activists, criminals, and members of volunteer movements opposed what they would characterize as fascist regimes in Tallinn and Riga. If national law enforcement failed to reinstate constitutional order, national governments would turn to their NATO allies and ask that collective defense mechanisms be invoked. It would not be farfetched to believe that more than one member state would hesitate before agreeing to deploy its NATO forces to restore law and order.

Thus, the primary aim of military action against the West would not be to gain territory, but to demonstrate that NATO and the European Union are not able to protect their member states. If NATO member states did not invoke Article 5, the alliance would essentially cease to exist.

However, even though a similar Russian strategy was successful in eastern Ukraine, most people do not believe that it could easily be replicated in Estonia and Latvia, for several reasons.

*First*, Ukrainian authorities were infiltrated by Russian security and intelligence officials. The Ukrainian armed forces were not only severely mismanaged and underfunded; they were also deliberately weakened in order to remove a tool that would have provided the Ukrainian political leadership with more options to resist Russian aggression.

*Second*, the Baltic States have been able to transform themselves away from their Soviet past into modern democracies that are now part of the European Union and NATO. As a result, they are less vulnerable to Russian influence.

Another possible scenario is a Russian “snap exercise” unexpectedly turning into an attack on one or more of the Baltic States. To consolidate its gains, Russia would attempt to deny other NATO members access to the Baltic Sea, seal off the land corridor to the Baltic States, and possibly even use tactical nuclear weapons against Poland as was demonstrated in

a 2009 military exercise code named “Zapad-99.”<sup>28</sup> Regardless of whether NATO invoked Article 5 in this scenario, its members’ weakness could have emboldened Russia to take these actions.

The company-sized units of approximately 150 personnel each that have rotated through Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland since April 2014 do little to deter Russia. If Russia used military force, these units would have very limited capability to defend these NATO member nations and protect themselves.

One only has to study the example from Srebrenica, a little Bosnian city with a population of 15,000 that today is well-known because of the massacre that Bosnian Serb forces organized in 1994.<sup>29</sup> The city was protected by a Dutch battalion of 400 personnel under United Nations command, equipped with armored personnel carriers and TOW anti-tank missiles, and with access to close air support. Nevertheless, the unit proved unable to protect the city and the civilians. Members of the Dutch unit were taken hostage and stripped to their underwear. Bosnian Serb soldiers equipped themselves with uniforms and vehicles they had stolen from surrendering Dutch troops. The events that followed, with more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys being executed by Bosnian Serb forces, have come to mark the failure of the United Nations to prepare or react.<sup>30</sup> A similar development involving the relatively small forces that have been deployed as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve would have a devastating effect on the credibility of NATO and its member states.

Recapturing the territories of a NATO member state occupied by Russian forces would be costly and most likely would involve Kremlin threats to use nuclear weapons. In the worst possible case, Russia might actually use nuclear weapons to discourage allies from recapturing occupied territories. Therefore, the obvious solution would be to use proactive measures and discourage the Kremlin from attacking rather than being forced to react to a Russian attack. This could be achieved only through credible deterrence that included deploying substantial NATO forces in the Baltic States.

### **The NATO–Russia Founding Act vs. the Washington Treaty**

The overall objective of NATO’s force posture should be to deter potential aggressors from attacking a member state. So far, however, leaders of some

NATO member states, primarily German Chancellor Angela Merkel, have ruled out a permanent NATO troop presence in Eastern Europe, referring to the NATO–Russia Founding Act, signed in May 1997.<sup>31</sup>

The first sentence of the Founding Act declares that NATO and Russia “will build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security.”<sup>32</sup> The Act provides many examples of language that were symptomatic of the political climate in the late 1990s but did not foresee the current reality, such as: “NATO reiterates that in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.” The document also committed that “Russia will exercise similar restraint in its conventional force deployments in Europe.”<sup>33</sup>

By using military force against Georgia and Ukraine, the Kremlin has clearly not followed the Founding Act. Russia’s aggressive behavior against the Transatlantic Community, involving threats to use nuclear weapons against Denmark and Sweden, large-scale “snap exercises,” and border violations, should bring this wishful thinking about Russia’s intentions to an end. Instead, it is time to focus on NATO’s core task: collective defense. NATO asserts that “[t]he principle of collective defence is at the very heart of NATO’s founding treaty.”<sup>34</sup> The organization describes this responsibility in Article 5 of that treaty:

The parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.<sup>35</sup>

NATO cannot falter on this primary responsibility, even under pressure from its large, adversarial neighbor to the East. Considerations or influence

from third parties cannot be more important than the security of NATO's member states. NATO officials reasserted this during their most recent debate about new membership. In the fall of 2014, former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated that no third party should have a de facto veto over enlargement policy and that "each country will continue to be judged on its merits."<sup>36</sup> Should a country like Georgia meet the benchmarks for NATO membership, Russian objections should not deny that country the opportunity to join. The same can be said for permanent basing in NATO's eastern member states, which Russia has sought to prevent.<sup>37</sup>

NATO's new Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states have contributed actively to alliance and coalition operations and by so doing have demonstrated their will to defend NATO's principles and collective security. Participating in hazardous operations inevitably involves sacrifices. According to available information, eight CEE countries have suffered losses in Afghanistan, totaling 94 killed in action as of April 22, 2015.<sup>38</sup> In Iraq, between 2004 and 2007, seven countries in the region suffered an additional 50 fatalities. Estonia suffered one of the highest per-capita casualty rates among all of the countries participating in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> These member states reasonably also expect to be supported by fellow NATO members when their security is under threat.

## Conclusion

Russia has demonstrated in Georgia and Ukraine that it is able and willing to use military force against neighboring nations. This should come as no surprise, but the West has employed a passive and reactive approach vis-à-vis Russia. Instead of deterring the Kremlin, NATO has placed more emphasis on reassuring the easternmost member states. Rather than preempting further Russian aggression by backing up deterrence with real military capabilities, the alliance has decided to spend much effort on boosting the NATO Response Force—in itself

a reactive rather than proactive force. Russia has proved that it is able to surprise the West with its large-scale unannounced "snap exercises," and NATO's reactive approach increases the risk that Russia will decide to mount additional challenges to the alliance.

American and European leaders have been reluctant to provide significant support to Ukraine in its war with Russia. Ukraine has become the main battleground for Russia's war against the West. Americans and Europeans may not want to acknowledge this conflict, but it is important that they stop signaling weakness that will further embolden Russia.

Shifting factors on the ground in Eastern Europe will continue to affect Moscow's calculus. NATO can influence Russia's continued push into Eastern Europe by exercising a few options that could go a long way toward deterring further expansion. For example:

- Providing Ukraine with lethal weapons to defend its own territory could push back the separatist movements, at least in the western part of that country, while also signaling that NATO members are taking an active stance against Russia.
- NATO could also establish more robust proactive deterrence measures, such as permanent bases or a greater commitment to preexisting security forces, in its Central and Eastern European member states.

It is unlikely that Russia will make an incursion into a NATO member's territory in the immediate future, either directly or through support of a separatist group. However, NATO's continued acceptance of Moscow's provocations will only further embolden Putin. Ultimately, it will be far easier to defend NATO territory than it will be to liberate it. Sending a strong message that the alliance is serious about territorial integrity will help to ensure that Russia never violates it.

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