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Russian Hybrid Threats to the Baltic States

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How Russia has defined its strategic interests threatens Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. It excels in the use of a range of instruments to put pressure on the Baltic States and interfere in their internal affairs. Russia is also ready to take risky action, thus complicating NATO defence planning, which must be based on a wide spectrum of threats on the Eastern Flank. However, three general scenarios can be distinguished that should point the way for the Allies, especially in strengthening the non-military elements of their security system.

Russian Interests in the Baltic Region. Russia's policy towards the Baltic States is part of a wider strategy towards NATO and the EU, the essence of which is based on breaking political cohesion in both organizations. Russia's overriding goal is to regain political and economic dominance over its neighbours, some of which were either in the USSR itself or part of the Warsaw Pact. In the Baltic region, Russia is striving to maintain its conventional military advantage over the Eastern Flank countries and prevent Finland and Sweden from joining NATO. Russia also declares it will strongly defend the rights of the Russian minority in these countries, which are around 25% of the Estonian and Latvian populations. Russia's economic interests include access to Baltic oil and commodity transit routes (respectively, 40% and 50% of Russian exports), especially the Nord Stream gas pipeline.

Russia's Instruments and Methods. Regardless of the presence of NATO in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, Russia can apply hybrid warfare methods to these countries. In the Russian approach, these are a combination of military and non-military means. These first are based on coordinated activities of Russian special services under so-called "active measures", which at a later stage can be synchronized with military resources (including the use of armed forces). The scope of "active measures" includes: classic espionage, cyber-intelligence, cyberattacks, corruption and blackmail, disinformation, and propaganda. In the case of the Baltic States, these measures are used primarily to build up a negative attitude among national minorities to the state authorities. There is huge potential for destabilizing effects from organizations and associations supported by the Russian Agency for Cooperation, which is active in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Although the Russian-speaking populations in these countries are economically stable, Russia seems to be counting on the manipulation of their attitudes through Russian-language television, press, and websites. The effects of these methods were seen in the riots in Tallinn and accompanying cyberattacks on Estonia's administration, physical, and economic infrastructure in 2007. Regardless of the great destructive potential of cyberspace activities, Russia currently focuses on media disinformation in the Baltic States. To conduct this, it mainly uses social media, for example, false reports about an alleged rape of a Lithuanian teenager by German Bundeswehr soldiers or accidents with civilians involving NATO vehicles, or even about a supposed nuclear bomb "lost" by a U.S. B-52 bomber over Lithuania.

Russia also has strengthened the military component of its form of hybrid warfare. In the Western Military District, apart from three brigades of Special Purpose Forces (Spetsnaz), there are three divisions of Airborne Forces (VDV), and the 336th Marine Infantry Brigade in Kaliningrad. Their level of training, high proportion of professional soldiers, and experience go beyond amphibious operations or tactical raids and allow them to conduct unconventional operations. These elite Russian units might even be more effective

in hybrid warfare scenarios than as conscript Spetsnaz. The presence of these units in the Western Military District, along with the show of force during snap exercises, air incidents over the Baltic Sea, and nuclear threats towards NATO, all confirm the thinking in the Russian military about offensive conflict scenarios in the region.

Spectrum of Hybrid Warfare Scenarios. The main problem with an assessment of the scale of the actual threat from Russia is because “active measures” can be used independently or as part of a fluent transition to military steps. Moreover, decisions about force escalation against the Baltic States might be taken by a narrow circle around Vladimir Putin or by the president himself. Putin’s career in the KGB and his known tactical opportunism increase the risk of miscalculation, followed by improvised—even irrational—steps by Russia against its neighbours. That means that the situation is unpredictable and a conflict might surprise, for example, something NATO might not be ready for or is expecting some other behaviour from Russia.

These factors result in an almost infinite number of potential surprise crises or conflicts, complicating NATO’s early warning system for decision-makers and contingency planning. But even in this complex context it is possible for NATO to consider three background scenarios. In the first, Russian “active measures” might be a test before hybrid warfare scenarios are employed (e.g., covert use of Spetsnaz or airborne units), but with an immediate reaction from the U.S. and NATO, these might not escalate to the use of Russian regular armed forces. The second envisions that Russia has moved from “active measures” to hybrid warfare and a quick conventional campaign aimed at occupying part or all the territory of the Baltic States. In the third, Russia might combine intentional provocations, like the “Zapad” (West) manoeuvres and a series of snap exercises in an early and short stage of conventional aggression with airborne and armoured troops. These could be accompanied by high risk Russian nuclear escalation threats as well as military operations against Finland and Sweden as an additional front in any war over the Baltic States. In all the scenarios, it is equally possible that Russia would use the territory and armed forces of Belarus, which risks quick escalation with Poland and NATO.

Implications. The forward presence of NATO forces on the Eastern Flank strengthens deterrence of Russia and complicates the country’s ideas for provocations in the region. Nevertheless, the authoritarian and opportunistic Russian government might encourage or facilitate risky political-military decisions without respect for all the strategic consequences. The number of “active measures” already employed by Russia and its hybrid warfare options make it almost impossible to foresee every conflict scenario involving the Baltic States, much less prepare multiple contingency plans. Consequently, this raises the challenge to NATO defence planning, which takes into account hybrid threats but requires the implementation of strategic and operational plans to involve its member states. Enhancement of the Eastern Flank states’ resiliency might be easier with deeper analyses, additional intelligence monitoring, and better early warning capabilities while also strengthening the border guard, police, and other civilian services of the Baltic States, who might be the first responders to Russian hybrid threats even before NATO can react under Articles 4 and 5 of the Washington Treaty. Improved coordination between NATO and EU is also needed as are strengthened cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, countering disinformation, and joint simulations for civilian and military decision-makers. Especially important is the cooperation between the EU and NATO within the Helsinki European Centre for Excellence in Countering Hybrid Threats, launched this year. The latest and visible examples of Russian “active measures” towards NATO forces in the Baltic States are also demanding more intensive strategic communications for local communities, countering disinformation, as well as counter-intelligence protection for troops participating in the Allied mission. In this context, it is necessary for NATO to move from a reactive approach (countering Russian disinformation) to active promotion of a message about the positive role of the Alliance in the region.