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Scenarios for Baltic Defence: What to Prepare Against**

This article considers Baltic defence strategically, focusing on three scenarios of Russian aggression against the Baltic states: 1) an ambiguous invasion, what the West would call a hybrid war; 2) a hasty invasion by Russian formations already in and around the Baltic region; and 3) a prepared invasion by more substantial Russian forces brought within striking distance of the Baltic states from other parts of Russia. The ultimate question for each is: does this particular scenario present Russia with a viable strategy, a convincing theory of success? Each scenario is explored through the perspectives of military practice or tactics, then politics, and then synthesized through a strategic perspective. The article argues that neither the ambiguous invasion nor the hasty invasion scenarios provide convincing theories of success for Russia, whereas the prepared invasion does provide a compelling theory of victory.

Introduction

The Russian invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea in early 2014, together with its implausibly deniable involvement in the Donbas war, galvanized NATO. Russian actions, especially the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, convinced most of NATO and particularly western Europe that Russia posed a danger. It stimulated the Baltic states, which had always been wary of Russia but which had nonetheless allowed their defence budgets to be cut down substantially after the financial crisis of 2008, to reinvest significantly in defence. In September 2014, NATO members as an alliance committed to achieving 2% of GDP for defence, although beyond the Baltic states this commitment has been politically difficult to fulfil for many European members of NATO.

Yet concomitant with Baltic – and other – defence spending is a need to think seriously about the nature and character of the danger(s). Clausewitz's statement that “[t]he first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish [...] the kind

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of war on which they are embarking” is a key tenet of defence planning.¹ However, there is relatively little empirical evidence on which to base one’s plans, especially for so complex a phenomenon as war. “Because there are so many dimensions to strategy, not least the adversarial, the anticipation of future strategic history cannot be other than an exercise in theory.”² Thus, defence planning needs to be directed by strategically reasonable imagination, which in turn is directed by strategic theory but also anchored by historical experience as well as the real, physical world.

For the aggressor, that same Clausewitzian judgement is equally vital. An aggressor would feel safe in acting only if they were confident of establishing some degree of control over the character of the interaction, meaning that they anticipate that their strategy will be effective at controlling, advantageously to themselves, the character of any ensuing war and its pattern of military operations.³ This is also a key consideration for the defence planner attempting to judge potential scenarios: is the hypothetical enemy likely to achieve a useful amount of control with certain ways and means? And what does that mean for defence?

This article proposes a consideration of three potential scenarios for Baltic defence which are structured and underpinned by strategic theory. The structuring aspect is particularly vital: because strategy exists between and to connect military practice as tactics and operations to politics and political consequences, it necessarily represents the last logical step in analysis. First tactics must be explored, then politics and only then can strategy, as the connection between the two, be considered. The three scenarios are 1) an ambiguous invasion, what the West would call a hybrid war; 2) a hasty invasion by Russian formations already in and around the Baltic region; and 3) a prepared invasion by more substantial Russian forces brought within striking distance of the Baltic states from other parts of Russia. The ultimate question for each is: *does this particular scenario present Russia with a viable strategy, a convincing theory of success?* These are all scenarios that go beyond subversion alone which, although important, is not a strictly defence issue. As such, they all assume that Russia has for whatever reason decided to impose through force some degree of political control over the Baltic states. Whether that takes the form of outright annexation or the creation of breakaway regions, it involves changing existing political borders.

¹ Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds., trans. (Princeton: Princeton UP 1984), 88.

² Colin S. Gray. *Strategy and Politics*. (London: Routledge 2016), 61.

³ Joseph C. Wylie. *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1989), 74, 76-77.

Finally, it must be noted that none of these contingencies seem likely. Russia has passed up various ostensible opportunities to attack the Baltic states in the past few years. Nonetheless, it cannot be said with certainty that they will not happen. Thus, as Bernard Brodie rightly argued in an early Cold War context on thinking about nuclear war, “[s]o long as there is a finite chance of war, we have to be interested in outcomes; and although practically all outcomes would be bad, some would be much worse than others.”⁴

1. Scenario 1: Ambiguous Invasion

Ambiguous invasion is the scenario upon which most Western commentators have fixated, often erroneously labelled hybrid warfare although a more analytically useful frame is ambiguous invasion. Unlike hybrid and its synonyms, ambiguous invasion identifies the heart of the matter. The West’s fixation with the ambiguous invasion scenario was especially prevalent in the immediate aftermath of Crimea and the Donbas, and resulted in questionable works such as the British Broadcasting Company’s 2016 production *World War Three: Inside the War Room*, which played through a hypothetical ambiguous invasion of Latgale, accompanied by much handwringing about the Russian minorities in Latvia and Estonia as security vulnerabilities. More recently, a Washington think tank overview of the Russian land forces’ order of battle concluded with recommendations which emphasized the ambiguous scenario as the most plausible contingency.⁵

1.1. The Tactics of Ambiguous Invasion

The West has received a strong first impression of ambiguous invasion, primarily because it occurred in Crimea, an ideal theatre of operations for such an invasion: the Ukrainian government was in disarray; its military presence in the region was composed primarily of technicians and mechanics rather than frontline troops; the local population was substantially pro-Russia and there were willing agents among the local political and criminal classes who were eager to serve Moscow; the local police and Ukrainian Security Ser-

⁴ Bernard Brodie. “The Anatomy of Deterrence”, *World Politics* 11(2) (January 1959), 178.

⁵ Catherine Harris and Frederick W. Kagan. *Russia’s Military Posture: Ground Forces Order of Battle*. (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War 2018), 17.

vice were thoroughly subverted by Russians; and Russia could easily insert its special forces into Crimea through Russia's already pre-existing military presence.⁶ These conditions by and large simply do not exist in the Baltic states.

Russians and other Baltic Russian speakers know that life is better in the independent Baltic states than in Russia. They also tend to distinguish themselves from Russians in Russia, in part due to the natural dynamics of diaspora. A cultural distinction has already emerged, with Baltic Russians often still holding on to Russian high culture, which is largely being lost in Russia itself. This results in a natural sense of difference and a feeling not just of separation but even of superiority at times, leading to a bifurcation of Russia as an idea: "one a political entity, the other a historical, cultural, and symbolic entity ..."⁷ The Baltic Russians are culturally distinct, often with little interest in assimilating into native Estonian or Latvian cultures but also holding little interest in Russia's political designs.

Additionally, the Baltic states recognize the danger of ambiguous invasion and have identified the appropriate solution. As Raimonds Vējonis, ex-President of Latvia and Minister of Defence during and after Crimea, stated: if little green men appear in Latvia, they will be shot. In principle, the appropriate response is that simple.⁸ Unlike Ukraine and the West in February 2014, the Baltic states will not be surprised, and they will be able to present a fairly strong case to NATO that an ambiguous invasion is exactly that – an invasion, even if superficially ambiguous. Moreover, given that the Baltic militaries use Western equipment and weapons, it will not be possible for Russia to arm "rebels" heavily while simultaneously pretending that they are just local actors pillaging local armouries. Given this significantly more adverse context for ambiguous invasion, what tactical advantage might an influx of little green men achieve in the Baltic?

The main tactical advantage which an ambiguous invasion might generate would be tactical confusion, especially among the NATO multinational battalions in each of the Baltic states. One of the main advantages of Russia's two ambiguous invasions of Ukraine was that the West, particularly Western media, had for a long time been unable to distinguish between real and imported "local" actors. This may be a weakness of the multinational battalions

⁶ Mark Galeotti. "Hybrid War' and 'Little Green Men': How it Works and How it Doesn't". In Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa (eds) *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*. (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing 2015), 159-160.

⁷ Ammon Cheskin. "Exploring Russian-Speaking Identity from Below: The Case of Latvia", *Journal of Baltic Studies* 44(3) (2013), 296.

⁸ See Lukas Milevski "The Strategic Response to Ambiguity", *Orbis* 63(3) (2019), 376-390.

as well. Such confusion would only be heightened if local Balts, on their own individual initiative, begin resisting an ambiguous invasion, whether violently or non-violently, given that the three Baltic countries are moving towards total defence, including reliance on civilian resistance. How effectively could a soldier from western or southern Europe or North America distinguish between an imported “rebel” and a local Balt resisting him in a tactical situation demanding an immediate response? Russia would make sure to capitalize politically and publicly on any mistake made by the multinational forces.

When taking the lead in suppressing an ambiguous invasion, the Baltic armed forces could be dislocated away from the approaches to major cities or critical transport arteries, of which a subsequent overt Russian invasion could take advantage – more on this point below. Yet missions such as those which unmarked Russian soldiers performed in Crimea would be much more difficult to accomplish in the Baltic. If seeking to occupy vital positions such as airports, road junctions, government buildings or if besieging military posts, Russian forces will have to come out into the open – become targets – and they will be shot.

Tactically, a successful ambiguous invasion requires fairly permissible in-theatre circumstances which generally do not exist in the Baltic states and whose effects against Baltic governments, militaries and populations which are broadly ready to fight back in and of themselves are not necessarily sufficient to achieve anything useful in the current security climate.

1.2. The Politics of Ambiguous Invasion

The main effects of surprise ambiguity occur at the political level by slowing down and/or confusing the decision-making of countries unready to make the types of decisions which ambiguous invasions require. Determined not to repeat the mistake of non-reaction which it made in Crimea, Ukraine was within reach of defeating the “separatists” in the Donbas until August 2014 when Russia dedicated many more resources to their effort there. Political surprise, even bewilderment, at Russia’s actions also characterized Western responses in early 2014. Uncertain about actual Russian intentions, the West let Russia control the course and pace of interaction with Ukraine in Crimea.

Now, the political situation is different; ambiguous invasion would not be the novelty it was in 2014. It is now possible to foretell the end result of ambiguous invasion since it has already occurred in Crimea. Due to this reasonable expectation, in principle it should not be able to happen again. Yet NATO

member politics are not necessarily straightforward. Contexts in which the politics of individual NATO countries push against defending alliance members could arise, such as if Russia successfully invaded the Baltic states and then were to threaten nuclear war should NATO respond. Political developments may occur in the future which weaken standing commitments either to collective defence or to confronting Russia. Moreover, an armed response to ambiguous invasion, although strategically appropriate, is likely to be politically controversial, which may inhibit NATO's response.

Given the unknowable political context of a hypothetical ambiguous invasion, it is difficult to anticipate what the political response might be within NATO. For the Baltic states, the response is clear: to return the hostility. That alone would probably be sufficient to halt an ambiguous invasion and to force a political choice upon Russia in turn: to abandon the endeavour or to escalate. In the Donbas Russia chose escalation, but the great benefit of deniable forces – however implausible – is that they allow their wielders the ability to withdraw without substantial, if any, loss of face.

What could Russia gain politically from an ambiguous invasion? Crimea and the Donbas point to two different results: outright annexation for the former and a breakaway region together with a simmering, frozen-yet-not-conflict for the latter, which in principle prevents Ukraine from ever joining NATO. NATO as an alliance would have political difficulty ignoring either result in the Baltic. The prospect of annexation of Baltic territory would be a direct affront to Article 5, NATO's self-defence clause. The prospect of a breakaway region and persistent conflict in a NATO country would be a similar challenge to basic NATO tenets.

1.3. The Strategy of Ambiguous Invasion

Does ambiguous invasion present Russia with the necessary and sufficient components for a strategy, a theory of success, for invading the Baltic states? The answer appears to be negative. In truly adversarial circumstances ambiguous warfare, at least as seen in Crimea and the Donbas, is unlikely to succeed tactically at a level of implausible ambiguity below the threshold for Article 5, unless NATO member politics truly go awry. The level of achievable control for Russia through ambiguous invasion would be too low.

If the tactics are unlikely to work politically, the politics are unlikely to enable the tactics to succeed as they did in Crimea or even to result in success or failure, as they did in the Donbas. There is no reasonable chance or even an

optimistic vision of success based specifically on ambiguous Russian invasion of the Baltic states. Every option leads to the danger of escalation and greater NATO involvement in the region – unless NATO member politics seriously worsen in relation to their commitment to collective defence or to the need to confront Russia when it offends good order.

Following escalation, a concomitant Russian decision would need to be made: withdraw, perhaps saving face with its domestic public because of the misguided adventure's supposed deniability, or escalate to an overt invasion. There does not appear to be any tactical, political or ultimately strategic space in the Baltic for ambiguous invasion alone to succeed; instead it seems to lead only to escalation or withdrawal. Ambiguous invasion cannot be a standalone strategy for Russia. Consequently the following two scenarios are both overt invasion, distinguished primarily by Russia's prior level of preparation.

2. Scenario 2: Hasty Invasion

A hasty Russian invasion of the Baltic states is one in which the initial invasion would be conducted only with formations within striking distance, along with the subsequent possibility or probability of further reinforcements from beyond the periphery of the Baltic region as necessary.

2.1. The Tactics of Hasty Invasion

Russia's Western Military District (WMD) has four ground forces manoeuvre formations, of which two are situated around the Baltic, one around Ukraine and one near Moscow. These are: 1) the 11th Army Corps in Kaliningrad with three manoeuvre brigades (one of which is naval infantry); 2) the 6th Combined Arms Army around St Petersburg with another two manoeuvre brigades; 3) the 1st Guards Tank Army near Moscow with three manoeuvre brigades organized in a division; and 4) the 20th Guards Combined Arms Army around Ukraine with six manoeuvre brigades organized in two divisions. The WMD also has three air assault divisions, of which one, the 76th Guards Air Assault (GAA) Division with three air assault regiments, is based at Pskov. Each of these four formations also has variable numbers of support brigades including artillery, missile, anti-aircraft missile, signals and logistics

brigades.⁹ Russia could hypothetically deploy five motorized manoeuvre brigades in relatively short order to the Baltic, together with four artillery or missile brigades and three air assault regiments.

In contrasting the Russian order of battle around the Baltic with that around Ukraine, some Western analysts have emphasized that “[t]he posture of the mechanized forces on the Baltic periphery, nevertheless, contrasts sharply with that of those deployed along the Ukrainian border and deserves serious consideration.”¹⁰ Unlike the Ukrainian front, where the Russian manoeuvre brigades are organized into divisions and whose basic task is to coordinate multiple brigades effectively, the Russians have not activated any divisional headquarters around the Baltic region. The only existing headquarters in the region, that of the 76th GAA Division, is unlikely to have the capability to coordinate a combined arms operation. The Russian deployments around Ukraine are considered indicative of what is required to launch a sudden invasion effectively, whereas those around the Baltic states are not.

Moreover, of these forces, it is generally considered that the three manoeuvre brigades and their supporting elements in Kaliningrad will be largely fixed in place and are probably unable to attack effectively into Lithuania. This is because Poland would be able to mobilize superior fighting power to threaten the rear or right flank of any Russian invasion of Lithuania from Kaliningrad, thereby both hobbling the effectiveness of any offensive and plausibly threatening Kaliningrad itself.

In the Baltic states, NATO’s local military strength has much improved since 2014. Each of the three countries is host to a multinational battalion, each well integrated into the local Baltic military organization. Each country is now able to deploy two or more brigades, with Lithuania even developing a divisional headquarters with American cooperation to better coordinate its three and a half brigades. Despite these impressive numbers – especially for such small countries – NATO in the Baltic region remains inferior in air defence, air support, armour and fire power generally.

Although there have been several attempts to model what a Russian invasion of the Baltics would look like and how it would go, few differentiate between hasty and prepared invasion scenarios (the famous RAND report of 2016 seems to play out the prepared scenario, since the Russian side apparently draws on forces from the whole WMD). One recent modelling attempt tracks

⁹ Fredrik Westerlund and Johan Norberg. “The Fighting Power of Russia’s Armed Forces in 2016”. In Gudrun Persson (ed) *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2016*. (Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency 2016), 80–81; Harris and Kagan, *Russia’s Military Posture*, 18-20.

¹⁰ Harris and Kagan, *Russia’s Military Posture*, 11.

a number of force employment variables – including the width of attack frontage, velocity of assault, the exposure of deployed defensive forces and defensive depth, among others – on both sides across a handful of varying scenarios ranging from the historical situation in 2016 to a hypothetical 2020 scenario based on existing Russian and NATO plans. The conclusions were optimistic: with the right force employment posture, predicated on concealed positions and defence in depth, NATO forces already in the Baltic would be able either to slow down the Russians enough for reinforcements to arrive from NATO or to make a Russian rush towards the Baltic capitals unsustainably costly.¹¹

2.2. The Politics of Hasty Invasion

The politics of any overt invasion, whether hasty or well prepared, are clear: Russia would be the aggressor and would be directly affronting NATO's collective defence clause. Although the same alliance internal politics caveats apply as in the ambiguous invasion scenario, Russia would still be running a major risk. Thus, once it is willing to act in such an overt way, Russia is unlikely to settle for small gains in the Baltic states. Rather, Russia would undoubtedly seek complete territorial conquest to put itself into the most advantageous strategic position in the Baltic before NATO had a chance to act meaningfully to stop Russia. Nothing short of a potential major success would be worth the concomitant danger of the action.

2.3. The Strategy of Hasty Invasion

Does the prospect of hasty invasion provide the Russians with all the components required to build a convincing theory of success in a Baltic war? As with the ambiguous invasion scenario, the answer appears to be negative. Again, the plausible level of achievable control for Russia would likely be too low, with achievement of a useful level of control being a gamble rather than a relative certainty.

The Russian order of battle in the vicinity of the Baltic states seems inappropriate for a combined arms invasion. The ratio of forces is not overwhelmingly unbalanced as such, although Russia certainly has a vast advantage in artillery. Nonetheless, Russia lacks command arrangements in the region,

¹¹ Ben S. Wermeling, "Fighting Russia? Modeling the Baltic Scenarios", *Parameters* 48(2) (Summer 2018), 63–75.

with no currently existing nearby headquarters really capable of commanding and controlling a combined arms operation. If the modelling is to be believed, NATO already has sufficient forces in place, which if properly employed, should be able to limit the threat that a hasty invasion could generate.

In comparison with this relatively limited Russian capability, the prospective achievements required to justify the risk of overt war with NATO must be high. Probably only the complete conquest of the Baltic states would justify risking war with NATO, but – again, if the model is believable – with a hasty invasion Russia cannot necessarily generate the combat power required to do so.

3. Scenario 3: Prepared Invasion

The well-prepared invasion is the nightmare scenario for Baltic defence. The Department of Defence and RAND wargamed scenarios along these lines as early as 2015–16, although RAND may be criticized for ignoring Russia's ability to deploy forces quickly to a particular region from all over Russia.¹²

3.1. The Tactics of Prepared Invasion

The prepared invasion scenario is predicated on a longer period of Russian preparation to invade the Baltic states, although such preparatory activity is not necessarily going to be overtly for that particular purpose – instead, the purpose of preparatory activities would be ambiguous. The current Russian Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, is known to draw inspiration from Soviet strategic theorists, particularly interwar thinkers such as Alexander Svechin and particularly Georgii Isserson. Isserson is especially interesting in this regard as he believed that old traditions of declaring war had become obsolete. Instead, societal mobilization for war would be a permanent feature of a nation's and society's life. This includes the military, which was to be ready in advance with deployed forces constantly menacing the target. Yet threat is still distinct from real war. A prolonged threat sows doubt, and “while one side

¹² Julia Ioffe. “Exclusive: The Pentagon is Preparing New War Plans for a Baltic Battle Against Russia”, *Foreign Policy*, 18 September 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/18/exclusive-the-pentagon-is-preparing-new-war-plans-for-a-baltic-battle-against-russia/>, accessed 15 July 2019; see also David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson. *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*. (Santa Monica: RAND 2016).

is in doubt, the other, having taken the firm decision to go to war, continues to build up [its forces] until, at last, on the border is deployed a huge, military force. After this, all that remains is to give the signal and war is immediately unleashed to the fullest extent.”¹³

Russian behaviour in and around Ukraine over the past several years is indicative of how this stance may look. As noted already, the 20th Guards Combined Arms Army has two divisions with six manoeuvre brigades deployed north and northeast of Ukraine, spread around Voronezh, Bryansk, Belgorod and Smolensk.

Turning to the Baltic, without excessive trouble Russia could clearly reinforce its forces in the region by drawing from the 20th Guards Combined Arms Army and the 1st Guards Tank Army near Moscow – all just from the WMD, let alone pulling forces from other military districts. However, if it were to do so it would probably need to also rationalize its command structure. Otherwise, as Western analysts have noted, at least one separate corps and three different armies would be active in the area of operations of the 6th Guards Combined Arms Army, besides also another one division under the command and control of the Air Assault Forces. This could be a potentially hopeless muddle.¹⁴

If the Russians were to brave that muddle or to make alternative command arrangements, they could potentially quite rapidly bring in these further forces not only from the WMD but also from other military districts. Russia has been conducting numerous snap exercises since 2014, which may involve tens of thousands of servicemen and thousands of vehicles and artillery pieces, with “[p]articipating units deployed on average 350 kilometres to their exercise areas ... presumably by both rail and road.” One group of units was even required to redeploy around 3,000 kilometres.¹⁵ It is conceivable that command and logistical arrangements might be made beforehand, with combat formations entering the theatre only at the last minute.

Although the Baltic militaries have expanded and strengthened since 2014 and are confident in now being able to put up some sort of fight, if Russia seriously mobilized its forces it seems unlikely that territorial defence would last long, except perhaps in the final cities, at the cost of those cities becoming ruins.

¹³ Isserson, quoted in Steven J. Main. “You Cannot Generate Ideas by Orders’: The Continuing Importance of Studying Soviet Military History – G. S. Isserson and Russia’s Current Geo-political Stance”, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29(1) (2016), 60.

¹⁴ Harris and Kagan, *Russia’s Military Posture*, 14.

¹⁵ Johan Norberg. “Training to Fight – Russia’s Major Military Exercises 2011–2014”, Swedish Defence Research Agency Report (December 2015), 24, 51.

3.2. The Politics of Prepared Invasion

The politics of prepared invasion are initially identical to those of hasty invasion: still an overt challenge to NATO's Article 5. The differences develop as Russian military operations continue and the Russians, in all likelihood, succeed militarily in pushing well into the Baltic states, if not completely overrunning them. At this point the primary fear is that Russia may threaten nuclear retaliation on some scale if NATO tries to break back into the Baltic states. Such a threat may or may not be credible, but it is unlikely that NATO decision makers will know whether it is or not. This would pose a major political dilemma for NATO: continue to act and to demonstrate the credibility of Article 5 and of the alliance as a whole, or to back down and avoid the prospect of nuclear attack.

3.3. The Strategy of Prepared Invasion

Finally, does the prospect of a prepared invasion provide Russia with the components of a theory of success in a Baltic war? The answer is largely affirmative. This scenario offers Russia the strongest possibility of controlling the pattern and development of mutually adversarial military operations in the Baltic states.

Tactically, Russia can in principle mobilize and deploy the military power necessary to overwhelm Baltic defences. The way it amasses the military assets to do so may vary, whether through a slow acclimatization of increasing military presence within striking distance of the border as Isserson anticipated, or through last-minute force delivery through "snap exercises". The greater challenge for Russia is likely to be rationalizing the command arrangements in the region so that they may effectively command and control a whole combined arms operation.

Politically, the scenario is in many ways identical to the hasty invasion, except that Russia is much more likely to succeed and therefore will be able to open up the possibility of nuclear blackmail, of threatening nuclear retaliation against any NATO counterattack into the Baltic region. Such a threat would be a politically decisive moment not just for the hypothetical Baltic war but even for NATO as an organization.

Final Considerations and Conclusion

Some final universal considerations are offered, usually relevant to every scenario but whose effects in diverse contexts may vary, followed by a brief conclusion.

First, another vital aspect of alliance internal politics is how receptive it would be to news of Russian aggression: would the alliance as a whole, or individual members thereof, believe the news or not? Would they be ready to respond or not? “Warning is a process comprising two components, one involving intelligence alerts and the other involving policy decisions and responses. Thus, the primary challenge should be defined as a warning-response problem, in which intelligence notification of an impending adversary action is a necessary first step but by no means an end in itself.”¹⁶ If NATO governments consistently do not believe that such scenarios are inherently possible – however unlikely – they will have a hard time believing that one may be occurring even as it is actually happening, and they will not be ready to react in any meaningful manner. One reason why the ambiguous scenario is the least likely scenario is because it gives NATO time to recognize that something really is happening and to begin reacting. The two overt invasions do not necessarily give that time. This time is for decision-making and not necessarily for intelligence gathering and analysis; there was “no shortage of pre-conflict indicators of more recent Russian operations in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria.”¹⁷ Judging intentions is the hard part, which Russian decision makers themselves may indeed not know until the very last minute.

Belarus is the greatest wild card in the context of Baltic defence. If Russia conducts any sort of serious operation, ambiguous or overt, against the Baltic states, what would Belarus do? Its relationship with Russia since 2014 has been complicated, as it has taken steps to secure itself against an ambiguous invasion and to try to carve out a more independent space for itself in international affairs, but still remains substantially in Moscow’s orbit. Belarus may, willingly or not, participate actively in any contingency, or it may allow Russia military access of some kind or another across its territory, or it may try to seek true neutrality – although Russia would certainly be unlikely to accept this last choice as it would limit Russian options.

¹⁶ Mark R. Cozad. *Strategic Warning on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Pitfalls, Prospects, and Limits*. (Santa Monica: RAND 2018), 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 26.

One must also consider Russian military capability as a whole. In 2016 it was estimated that “Russia is able to and may launch two simultaneous large operations.”¹⁸ Since 2015 Russia has already been conducting two simultaneous operations, in the Donbas and in Syria. Even if one counts Syria as perhaps half an operation at most, especially for the ground forces, Russia may not be able to generate and sustain the force required to wage a longer war in the Baltic states. This would not be a problem for Russia if it were capable of delivering a quick coup de main, but a prepared invasion is apparently not on the cards and the other scenarios appear unlikely to deliver that result.

If an armed conflict occurs between Russia and NATO in the Baltic states, this scenario analysis suggests that it would be an overt invasion, and probably prepared. Ambiguous invasion does not seem capable of achieving anything on its own and is likely to escalate to overt warfare anyway. A hasty invasion bears all the dangers of overt military action without necessarily a justificatory prospective level of success for Russia. This leaves only the third scenario as an apparently worthwhile option for Moscow, along with a possible avenue for ultimate victory through the threat of potential nuclear retaliation against any NATO counterattack. Finally, it must be emphasized that, in general, Russians think differently about strategy. Although it is possible and worthwhile to employ the general theory of strategy in strategic analysis, how specifically Russians think about particular strategic challenges in unique historical contexts is going to be both distinct and unknowable. They may surprise us – whether that surprise is significant or insignificant, for good or ill.

Russia without doubt has the capability to invade the Baltic states successfully. Whether or not they have the intent and determination to risk it is a different question, one which we are unlikely to know unless it actually happens. After all, the day before Russia invaded Crimea in February 2014, Crimea had not been invaded by Russia.

August 2019

¹⁸ Westerlund and Norberg, “The Fighting Power of Russia’s Armed Forces in 2016”, 92.