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Manoeuvre warfare in the Baltic: political imperatives and tactical conditions

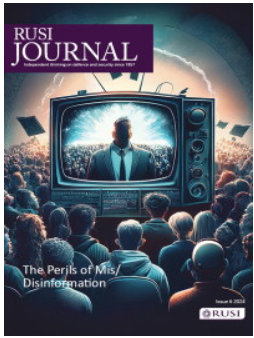
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Manoeuvre Warfare in the Baltic

Political Imperatives and Tactical Conditions

Lukas Milevski

NATO is facing a doctrinally contradictory defence posture in the Baltic States, as those countries are investing in a static defence line even while Western militaries adhere to manoeuvrist operational approaches. Lukas Milevski argues that political imperatives and tactical conditions make static defence more appropriate than manoeuvre warfare. Politically, NATO's policy of defending every inch and the Baltic experience of Russian occupation require forward defence. Second, the Russian border will always stop offensive manoeuvre. Tactically, the increasing difficulty of crossing the battlefield intact improves the chances of tactical defence and throws doubt upon the necessity of defensive operational manoeuvre.

Manoeuvre warfare has been a popular concept among Western armies for decades. It remains at the forefront of military thought. As recently as 2023, the then Chief of Staff of the British Field Army, Major General Colin Weir, asserted the need for a restoration of combat expertise in the Field Army: 'all built on the fundamentals of the manoeuvrist approach'.¹ Likewise, French Army Chief of Staff General Pierre Schill claimed in 2024 that the battlefield dominance of swarms of uncrewed aerial vehicles will pass and that a manoeuvre-oriented army will remain the appropriate choice.² Yet even as manoeuvre has retained its intellectual and cultural dominance in Western armies, defence concepts along part of NATO's eastern front are turning towards positional defences – as seen with the Baltic Defence Line, a new project between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to construct defensive positions on their borders with Russia and Belarus. For collective defence, there is now an inherent contradiction between how Western militaries would prefer to fight and how they might be called on to fight Russia.

Notwithstanding this contradiction, there is a good case to be made for a defence line and against the utility of a manoeuvre-dominant approach to Baltic defence. Political imperatives and apparent tactical conditions have made manoeuvre a less preferred operational style. This case is made in four sections: manoeuvre and its relationship to basic flaws of operational thinking; the Baltic Defence Line; Baltic political imperatives and the geopolitical inaptness of manoeuvre warfare; and the disparities between apparent battlefield realities and the underlying tactical assumptions of manoeuvre warfare.

What is Manoeuvre?

Since its inception after the First World War, modern thinking on manoeuvre warfare was split between British and continental schools.³ The latter focused on the destruction of the enemy in pseudo-Napoleonic style through decisive battle. The former, driven by John Frederick Charles

1. Colin Weir, 'How We Will Fight in 2026', *British Army Review* (No. 183, Summer 2023), p. 8.
2. Rudy Ruitenberg, 'Small Drones Will Soon Lose Combat Advantage, French Army Chief Says', *Defense News*, 19 June 2024.
3. Jacob Kipp, 'Two Views of Warsaw: The Russian Civil War and Soviet Operational Art, 1920-1932', in B J C McKercher and Michael A Hennessy (eds), *The Operational Art: Developments in the Theories of War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), p. 53.



View of the ancient Herman castle from the wall of the Ivangorod fortress. It is located on the Narva River along the Russian border with Estonia. Courtesy of Viktor Karasev / Alamy

Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart, has consistently seen manoeuvre as potentially decisive in warfare independent of battle actually being fought. Fuller recognised that battle was definitionally crucial to strategy, but in other writings he described his belief that manoeuvre could be decisive on its own, particularly when it occurred in the enemy's rear by striking at the enemy army's command and control: 'The brains of an army are its Staff – Army, Corps and Divisional Headquarters. Could they suddenly be removed from an extensive sector of the German front, the collapse of the personnel they control will be little more than a matter of hours'.⁴ These were extravagant expectations, and such extravagance has been characteristic of modern Western manoeuvre theory up to the present day.

Liddell Hart argued along similar but distinct lines. His argument differed in two ways. First, whereas Fuller focused on mobility, Liddell Hart never settled on what the indirect approach really meant:

[it] may take varied forms ... For the strategy of indirect approach is inclusive of, but wider than, the *manoeuvre sur les derrières* ... But analysis of the psychological factors has made it clear that there is an underlying relationship between many strategic operations which have no outward resemblance to a manoeuvre against the enemy's rear.⁵

Contrary to Fuller, here Liddell Hart separates manoeuvre from physical mobility. He also sought to make battle entirely obsolete and did not even formally acknowledge its pertinence. Liddell Hart repeatedly highlighted the link between helplessness and hopelessness: '[h]elplessness induces hopelessness, and history attests that loss of hope, not loss of lives, is what decides the issue of war' and 'the true aim in war is the mind of the hostile rulers, not the bodies of their troops; that the balance between victory and defeat turns on mental impressions and only indirectly on physical blows'.⁶ Liddell Hart's theory became wildly influential, partially due to the attractiveness of his theories and partly due to his sage-like position fostering a

4. John Frederick Charles Fuller, *The Conduct of War 1789-1961: A Study of the Impact of the French, Industrial, and Russian Revolutions on War and its Conduct* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 243. For a definition of strategy which refers to battle, see John Frederick Charles Fuller, *Lectures on F.S.R. II* (London: Sifton Praed & Co, 1931), p. 1.
5. Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd edition (New York, NY: Meridian, 1991), p. 6.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 187, 204.

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new transatlantic generation of military and strategic thinkers who came of age in the 1970s.

The resulting swathe of theoretical manoeuvre literature was strongly opinionated and logically flawed rather than well substantiated. Nonetheless, it has become so culturally dominant as to be almost unquestionable. John Boyd and, particularly, William Lind asserted that the point of manoeuvre was disorder rather than destruction and simply assumed that it would work as intended.⁷ When confronted with evidence that the presumed masters of manoeuvre, the Wehrmacht generals, did not think of manoeuvre as bloodlessly as they did, Boyd and Lind could not bring themselves to alter their theories.⁸ Richard Simpkin wished away the significance of enemy forces with hardly any comment: '[a] force which has been bypassed and turned becomes irrelevant to the further development of the operation: what happens to it subsequently is a tactical matter for the holding force'.⁹ Robert Leonhard often relied on dubious metaphors: 'Like fire ants without their queen, the tanks are irrelevant. The division commander will consider himself beaten, and the contest of wills will end'.¹⁰ In their manual, MCDP 1: Warfighting, US Marine Corps philosophised that manoeuvre – the avoidance of 'surfaces' and exploitation of 'gaps' – would somehow lead to the systemic incapacitation of the enemy.¹¹ Much of the classical manoeuvre-warfare literature consists of dubious, often sweeping, claims supported by ignoring problematic considerations such as enemy agency, rather than hard-nosed, substantiated analysis.

In contemporary Western military theoretical imagination, manoeuvre is often ideationally associated with, rather than independent of, the intellectually controversial operational level of war. This association stems from the conceptual

birth of the operational level, when influential authors such as Edward Luttwak stated that the more attrition was present in a campaign, the less operational the campaign was; it was manoeuvre that truly characterised the operational level.¹² Decades later, John Kiszely implicitly reaffirmed the attractiveness of this conceptually combined theoretical perspective.¹³ The true theoretical home of manoeuvre became the operational level, and two problematic concepts joined together at the hip.

An appreciation of the importance of geography, at least as the space in which manoeuvre occurs, flows from the equation of manoeuvre warfare and the operational level.¹⁴ Often, this was expressed as an overriding concern with physical terrain specifically, rather than geography more broadly. Simpkin, for example, dedicated more space to explaining key physical characteristics of terrain as an enabler of or impediment to manoeuvre than to enemy responses to manoeuvre.¹⁵ Crucially the arguable equivalence between the operational level and manoeuvre warfare implies that criticisms of the operational also apply to manoeuvre. The most pertinent criticism in a Baltic defence context is that the operational level – and thus also manoeuvre warfare – is not just policy-free but apolitical, a realm purely for military practitioners.¹⁶ The genesis of the Baltic Defence Line challenges the assumptions and popularity of manoeuvre warfare at the operational level.

What is the Baltic Defence Line?¹⁷

The Baltic Defence Line was announced by the three Baltic states in mid-January 2024, a defence project to fortify their borders with Russia and Belarus. Initial details have been scarce, but the combined

7. William S Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), p. 6.
8. Stephen Robinson, *The Blind Strategist: John Boyd and the American Art of War* (Dunedin: Exisle Publishing, 2021), chapter 8.
9. Richard E Simpkin, *Race to the Swift: Thoughts on Twenty-First Century Warfare* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1985), p. 139.
10. Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1994), p. 110.
11. US Marine Corps, 'MCDP 1: Warfighting', June 1997, p. 37.
12. Edward N Luttwak, 'The Operational Level of War', *International Security* (Vol. 5, No. 3, Winter 1980–81), p. 63.
13. See also John Kiszely, 'Thinking about the Operational Level', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 150, No. 6, 2005), pp. 39–40; John Kiszely, 'The Meaning of Manoeuvre', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 143, No. 6, 1998), pp. 36–40.
14. See for example Nathan W Toronto, 'Does Operational Art Exist? Space, Time, and a Theory of Operational Art', *Journal of Military Operations* (Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter 2014), pp. 4–7.
15. Simpkin, *Race to the Swift*, pp. 57–74.
16. Hew Strachan, 'Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War', *Survival* (Vol. 52, No. 5, 2010), p. 160.
17. This section draws liberally from Lukas Milevski, 'The Baltic Defense Line', *Baltic Bulletin*, FPRI, 2 February 2024.

project appears substantial. Estonia alone intends to build about 600 bunkers, each to be capable of holding a platoon of 10 soldiers within a 35 m² space, as well as with supporting points and trenches. Non-permanent defensive fixtures such as mines, barbed wire and dragon's teeth are to be held in reserve nearby, to be deployed only at the last minute.¹⁸

Estonia's borders are the shortest of the three Baltic states. Lake Peipus and Lake Pihkva, whose shores seem unlikely to receive much fortification, as well as the Narva River cover much of its borders. To achieve a similar density of bunkers as Estonia, Latvia would need to build 1,796 bunkers per km and Lithuania 4,439. For Latvia and Lithuania, whose borders lack natural obstacles, any defensive line will not be consistently dense along the entire front. Rather, it will likely be concentrated on the comparatively few border crossing points, many of which comprise either – and sometimes both – highways and railways. Defensive lines are not built merely linearly but also in depth, and it is currently unclear how deep the Baltic Defence Line will be, and whether it will meet standard Western military expectations of 10–50 km of depth.¹⁹

Inherent to the defensive line is the notion that any defence of the Baltic states against a Russian invasion, at the very least in its initial stages, is intended to be operationally – albeit not tactically – static. That is to say, rather than operational manoeuvre, the focus of the initial defensive effort would be operationally attritional. Manoeuvre warfare and the Baltic Defence Line thus represent two classically opposed conceptions of how best to wage warfare. Manoeuvre warfare has laid deep roots in Western military and even popular culture, and so the instinctive response to the Baltic Defence Line may be fundamentally to question its wisdom and implicitly, if not explicitly, to reaffirm the superiority of manoeuvre.²⁰

Yet there are good reasons not to adopt such a reflexive reaction, and good arguments why a defence line is arguably more appropriate than manoeuvre warfare specifically for the defence of the Baltic states. These reasons stem from the usually implicit attitudes that underpin thinking on manoeuvre warfare: first, that manoeuvre is, like

all Western operational thinking, substantially if not wholly – and inappropriately – apolitical; and second, that tactical conditions make manoeuvre warfare both a possibility and a necessity. The hypothetical prospect of conducting manoeuvre warfare for Baltic defence is neither politically nor necessarily tactically sound. The next two sections will explain why, first by addressing the politics and then the tactics.

Political Imperatives Against Manoeuvre

Two political imperatives militate against a manoeuvre orientation for Baltic defence. The first is NATO policy to defend every inch of NATO territory and what this means in the Baltic political context. The second is the political reality of the Russian border.

First, NATO has slowly built up its Baltic defence posture since 2014: from no Alliance ground-force presence; to battalion; and, since 2023, brigade-sized battlegroups. The 2023 Vilnius Summit communiqué asserted that '[w]e reaffirm our iron-clad commitment to defend each other and every inch of Allied territory at all times', a pledge reiterated at least two further times before the end of the document.²¹ Taken literally, this political stance already fits poorly with a manoeuvrist operational approach as it demands avoiding enemy strength and attacking enemy vulnerability. In a defensive context, this requires giving up territory to allow the enemy to show vulnerabilities that can be exploited with a counterstrike. In the apolitical, purely professional logic of the operational level, this makes complete sense and still enables the military to fulfil the political mandate to defend every inch. So what is the problem?

The Baltic context is not politically permissive for such apolitical manoeuvrist thinking. Among the post-Cold War members of NATO, the historical experience of the Baltic states with Russia stands out even among countries such as Poland or Finland, which had also suffered some short-term occupation, territorial losses, and atrocity at the hands of the

18. ERR News, 'Estonia to Build 600 Bunkers along Russian Border', 19 January 2024, <<https://news.err.ee/1609227386/estonia-to-build-600-bunkers-along-russian-border>>, accessed 5 September 2024.
19. Charles L Crow, *Tactical and Operational Depth* (Fort Leavenworth: US Army Command and General Staff College 1986).
20. The author can anecdotally observe from his own experience answering interview questions from various media about the Baltic defence line that interviewers held the belief that positional defences have been less rational in warfare and queried whether this state of affairs has changed.
21. NATO, 'Vilnius Summit Communiqué', Press Release (2023) 001, 11 July 2023, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm>, accessed 23 May 2024.

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Soviet Union. The Baltic states are the only NATO members that the Soviet Union truly occupied for decades, and they were subject not just to atrocity and displacement of locals, but also deliberate colonisation policies and Russification (Lithuania was fortunate to suffer much less Russification than Latvia and Estonia) from 1939.

A strategic culture emerged in the renascent Baltic states after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This culture emphasised ‘never again’ in response to this traumatic history: never again will the Baltic states go down without a fight, and certainly not to the Russians.²² This is true not just at the national level but even of surrendering individual communities to advancing Russian troops. This Baltic cultural value is only reaffirmed by Russian war crimes in Ukraine since 2022 in places such as Bucha and Izyum. As Estonian Prime Minister Kallas told the *Financial Times* in June 2022, expressing her discontent with existing NATO war plans, ‘[i]f you compare the sizes of Ukraine and the Baltic countries, it would mean the complete destruction of countries and our culture’.²³ The early summer 2024 Russian offensive back into Kharkiv province, particularly at Vovchansk, only reconfirms the wisdom of the Baltic perspective. The Russians (at time of writing) only hold part of the town of Vovchansk, but reports – and images from UAV reconnaissance – soon emerged of new Russian atrocities against civilians.²⁴

At this point, the character of manoeuvre warfare – as apolitical, and oriented towards terrain rather than geography (let alone geopolitics) – makes it ill-suited as an operational style for Baltic defence. The human (and ultimately political) consequences of giving up land to avoid surfaces and exploit gaps are simply not considered; civilians hardly appear in manoeuvre thinking and the political imperative to defend one’s own civilians is absent. Moreover, by being apolitical, manoeuvre warfare fundamentally assumes that the enemy respects international law.

That is, even if civilians are temporarily given up, this is not a problem.

The Russian army has demonstrated that it does not respect international law. It is, sadly, very accomplished at committing a staggering amount of atrocity in a short period of time, as events in Vovchansk demonstrate once more. As such, the practice of manoeuvre warfare in defence of the Baltic states may lead directly to Baltic civilians being abused and even executed by Russians in temporary occupation of their towns and homes. This is obviously politically unacceptable, especially for the Baltic states and their ‘never again’ standpoint, and by extension for the Alliance as a whole. A defensive line along the border is a perfectly rational political response to the prospect of mass Russian atrocities.

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The second political imperative, equally strong in inhibiting the free application of manoeuvre warfare, is the likely inviolability of the Russian border to armed incursions – except perhaps in the hottest and most limited tactical pursuit. Russia is a nuclear-armed state and NATO would inevitably – and rightly – be reluctant about crossing its borders. In 2016, Western defence analysts were concerned that any strike over Russia’s borders might call down nuclear retaliation.²⁵ Ukraine’s drone strike

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22. Kristine Atmante, Riina Kaljurand and Tomas Jermalavičius, ‘Strategic Cultures of the Baltic States: The Impact of Russia’s New Wars’, in Katalin Miklóssy and Hanna Smith (eds), *Strategic Culture in Russia’s Neighborhood: Change and Continuity in an In-Between Space* (New York, NY and London: Lexington Books, 2019), p. 53.
 23. Richard Milne, ‘Estonia’s PM Says Country Would Be “Wiped from Map” under Existing Nato Plans’, *Financial Times*, 22 June 2022.
 24. *United24 Media*, ‘Russian Forces Abduct and Execute Ukrainian Civilians in Vovchansk Amid Evacuations’, 16 May 2024, <<https://united24media.com/latest-news/russian-forces-abduct-and-execute-ukrainian-civilians-in-vovchansk-amid-evacuations-366/>>, accessed 23 May 2024; Yana Sliemzina, ‘Police: Russian Troops Hold up to 40 Civilians Captive, “Use Them as Human Shield” in Vovchansk, Kharkiv Oblast’, *Gwara Media*, 17 May 2024, <<https://gwaramedia.com/en/police-russian-troops-hold-up-to-40-civilians-captive-in-vovchansk-kharkiv-oblast-use-them-as-human-shield/>>, accessed 23 May 2024.
 25. David A Shlapak and Michael W Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), p. 7.

campaign against targets, including economic targets such as oil refineries, deep in Russia strongly suggests that such fears were overblown. NATO would likely be able to strike operationally relevant targets in Russia without drawing a nuclear response. Indeed, a sustainable positional defence requires fires into the enemy rear and deep, as the May 2024 controversy over the West's unwillingness to allow Ukraine to strike with Western weapons at Russian troop concentrations across the border during Russia's early summer Kharkiv offensive, resulting in Ukrainian defence initially suffering in the region, have demonstrated.²⁶

Nonetheless, NATO shooting across the border and NATO crossing the border are quite different, and Russia would react differently to each case. Ukraine's August 2024 invasion of Kursk oblast casts some doubt on the inviolability of the Russian border, but this case differs in crucial ways from NATO hypothetically crossing the border in Baltic defence. Notably, Ukraine is not NATO. At time of writing, Ukraine has yet to reach Lgov, let alone Kursk; the Ukrainian incursion has had trouble developing after its first week, which may not be the case for any hypothetical NATO operation on Russian soil. Kursk is also a long way from Moscow and St Petersburg, whereas the Baltic States are not – especially from St Petersburg. The geopolitical contexts differ too much to assume complacently that Russia would react in a similar manner to a NATO incursion. Ultimately, the critical factor would be Western political will to run the risk, and the West has been quite risk-averse so far during the full-scale warfare between Russia and Ukraine. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that Russian territory would play the role of a partial sanctuary for Russian forces. Cold War-era theorists such as Bernard Brodie recognised the problem sanctuaries posed to military operations: 'The principle of sanctuary is a vital one in the whole concept of limited war. Nevertheless, it is too easy to gloss over the heavy military disadvantage that may result from applying it as we did in Korea and even more so in Vietnam'.²⁷

If Russia truly did act as a sanctuary, the military disadvantage is clear: NATO forces would be unable to cross the border. Yet what does this mean for the hypothetical conduct of manoeuvre warfare in

the Baltic? The border will always remain a surface politically, no matter how many gaps there may be militarily. The border will always stop offensive NATO manoeuvre. As a result, the border will always dampen the psychological effects of manoeuvre warfare presumed by its advocates. Russian hope will not be lost when a sanctuary nearly, if not totally, inviolate to offensive land operations is at one's back. Disorganisation of Russian formations has little effect when, behind the border, there is a safe space in which to reorganise with a certain level of impunity. The Baltic does not provide a geostrategic context in which the Western understanding of manoeuvre warfare makes strategic sense; it is implausible for manoeuvre warfare to achieve the effects manoeuvre theorists have repeatedly and abstractly promised. Any defeat for the Russian army in the Baltic states will be no more than a setback, after which the Russians will be able to regroup and try again, virtually at their own leisure.

In sum, the politics of any Russian invasion of the Baltic states inevitably results in positional border defence.

To reiterate, the border is likely to stop NATO manoeuvre. As a consequence, any successful NATO counteroffensive against a Russian incursion will always end at the border. Any subsequent repeated Russian offensive will also always begin at the border. Between Russian offensives, NATO would be 'on the permanent defensive at the Baltic borders with Russia holding the initiative to attack when and where it wants', much as Ukraine is currently experiencing.²⁸ Like it or not, any NATO conduct of successful manoeuvre warfare inevitably ends with border defence because NATO forces will not have the political permission to go beyond.

In sum, the politics of any Russian invasion of the Baltic states inevitably results in positional border defence. Not only do Russian violations of international law make manoeuvre warfare politically untenable within the Alliance except as a last resort, the Russian border will always halt operational momentum and force any manoeuvre

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26. Martin Fornusek, 'Ukraine Asks US to Lift Ban on Using American Arms to Strike at Russian Territory', *Kyiv Independent*, 15 May 2024, <<https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-asks-us-to-lift-ban-on-using-american-arms-to-strike-russian-territory/>>, accessed 20 May 2024.
 27. Bernard Brodie, *War & Politics* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1973), p. 67.
 28. Lukas Milevski, 'Sanctuary, Honor, and War Termination: Considerations for Strategy in Baltic Defense', *Orbis* (Vol. 64, No. 1, Winter 2020), p. 157.

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to transition to defence. Yet this is not necessarily a disaster, as such an operational orientation may be favoured by current tactical conditions.

Tactical Conditions Impeding Manoeuvre

The fundamental challenge of the First World War was crossing the battlefield intact and solving it contributed to the original development of Soviet operational thinking as well as Fuller's and Liddell Hart's writings on armoured warfare and manoeuvre. Since then, Western militaries have taken this ability to cross the battlefield for granted and it has become an unspoken assumption in modern manoeuvre theory. This remains one of the major flaws of manoeuvre theory, albeit increasingly recognised by organisations such as the US Army Training and Doctrine Command.²⁹

However, in late 2021, right before the renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine, a wave of manoeuvre-sceptical thinking emerged. Amos C Fox criticises the intellectual paucity of manoeuvre-warfare theory and reflects on how modern technology and a new era of limited, urban-centric warfare will impede manoeuvre on the ground.³⁰ Franz-Stefan Gady questions the Boydian defeat mechanisms underpinning US notions of manoeuvre.³¹ Crucially, T X Hammes foresees an emerging era in which the tactical defence will dominate. He suggests that this new era will be due to the overlap of the rise of AI and increasing surveillance capabilities, as attacking forces will be detected and engaged with long-range fires before they can even reach the intended battlefield, let alone cross it.³² Many of the technological details of his prophecies have not (yet) come to pass, but the war in Ukraine has demonstrated that the sheer saturation of UAVs provides such a level of awareness of both the tactical battlefield and the operational space that hiding from enemy eyes is implausible. Soon after detection, fire arrives, whether in the form of

artillery, kamikaze UAVs or loitering munitions. Reaching the battlefield intact, let alone crossing it, has become a challenge for both Ukrainian and Russian formations. Subsequent analysis of Ukraine's military-strategic options reflects the new scepticism of manoeuvre, largely interpreting it as secondary to the more important, preceding and enabling attritional phase of operations.³³

Subsequent analysis of Ukraine's military-strategic options reflects the new scepticism of manoeuvre, largely interpreting it as secondary to the more important, preceding and enabling attritional phase of operations.

The war thus far has produced three manoeuvre campaigns: Russia's initial invasion, which was largely a bust; Ukraine's highly successful Kharkiv offensive in September 2022; and Ukraine's incursion into Kursk, which has seemingly had little strategic effect. All three required an unprepared enemy. Against a ready adversary, Ukraine's summer 2023 offensive failed and Russia's perhaps pyrrhically successful offensives at Bakhmut and Avdiivka merely demonstrate the difficulty of crossing the battlefield intact enough to eventually achieve operational progress. Indeed, one of the key reasons given for Avdiivka's eventual fall is the sudden ammunition starvation that Ukraine experienced as a result of Europe's inability to produce enough shells and US domestic politics disrupting its supply of military aid – in other words, even though they were almost always seen, the eventual Russian advances into and past Avdiivka did not suffer the fire – and the losses – they otherwise would have suffered.³⁴

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29. US Army, Training and Doctrine Command, 'The Operational Environment 2024–2034: Large-Scale Combat Operations', TRADOC G2, July 2024.
 30. Amos C Fox, 'Manoeuvre is Dead? Understanding the Conditions and Components of Warfighting', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 166, No. 6/7, 2021), pp. 10–18.
 31. Franz-Stefan Gady, 'Manoeuvre Versus Attrition in US Military Operations', *Survival* (Vol. 63, No. 4, 2021), pp. 131–48.
 32. T X Hammes, 'The Tactical Defense Becomes Dominant Again', *Joint Force Quarterly* (No. 103, 4th Quarter 2021), p. 11.
 33. Franz-Stefan Gady and Michael Kofman, 'Ukraine's Strategy of Attrition', *Survival* (Vol. 65, No. 2, 2023), pp. 7–22; Franz-Stefan Gady and Michael Kofman, 'Making Attrition Work: A Viable Theory of Victory for Ukraine', *Survival* (Vol. 66, No. 1, 2024), pp. 7–24.
 34. Jack Watling, 'The Peril of Ukraine's Ammo Shortage', *Time*, 19 February 2024.

As during the First World War, albeit for different reasons, the battlefield is once again difficult to cross. This throws some doubt on the viability of offensive manoeuvre. Yet on defence, such tactical conditions raise a related but distinct question about the desirability of defensive manoeuvre warfare. If Russian offensive manoeuvre is not operationally viable because Russian forces cannot overcome the tactical challenge of crossing the battlefield intact, then NATO defensive manoeuvre is not operationally desirable because Russian forces can be stopped from crossing the battlefield intact. At best, defending forces would need to resort only to tactical elasticity within the depth of the defensive belt, if it has the requisite depth, to avoid concentrations of Russian artillery fire or to draw in and outflank already-attributed Russian spearheads, ideally away from inhabited locations. But this would not be manoeuvre in operational depth, behind a penetrated defence line.

Such analysis is perhaps optimistic and makes three key assumptions about NATO's military readiness, air power and the plausible balance of forces. Readiness is crucial in the context of Baltic defence, particularly considering hypothetical invasion scenarios. *'Military readiness pertains to the relation between available time and needed capability'*.³⁵ Will there be enough time for NATO forces to become operationally ready – that is, manned, equipped, supplied, and positioned – before Russia invades? Western analysis has predominantly focused on the arguably unrealistic 'bogeyman' of a Russian fait accompli: some sort of decisive strike with already-standing, limited forces.³⁶ In such a scenario, NATO would truly lack time to become ready; even forces already in the Baltic would likely be out of position. Yet, in picking a fight with NATO, a limited-invasion scenario does not make strategic sense for Russia; the only reasonable hypothetical (if any hypothetical Russian invasion of NATO is considered to be at all reasonable) is a well-prepared, fully resourced invasion.³⁷ This would require a Russian military build-up which NATO would detect at least weeks in advance and would give NATO member states the opportunity

to mobilise and deploy forces – if the politicians keep their wits about them rather than abide by false fears of escalation. Readiness for Baltic defence is substantially contingent on political will.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has, since late 2023, been defined by the increasing effectiveness of the Russian air force, particularly its use of glide 'KAB' bombs in mass to pound and even pulverise Ukrainian positions along particular axes of advance – such as would also be present on the Baltic Defence Line. Yet the KAB reign of terror is contingent on the defender being unable to threaten, let alone shoot down, the platforms releasing the glide bombs, a circumstance quite unlikely against the fundamentally superior Western air forces. Glide bombs are probably much less of a threat against a Baltic Defence Line backed by modern Western airpower than against Ukraine.

On the hypothetical balance of forces, invasions are conducted predominantly by road and sustained by road and rail. These are critical factors which affect the forces that can be usefully amassed on either side of a Baltic front. Railways connect the Baltic states and Russia and Belarus in only nine places: two in Estonia; three in Latvia; and four in Lithuania. The number of cross-border highways is similar, but they do not always geographically correspond with the railways in a way that would enable major rail-based sustainment in depth along those particular axes.³⁸ Nonetheless, the Russians have been known to overload transport infrastructure in pursuit of a decisive blow: the battle of Kyiv in early 2022 is a case in point, as the Russians pushed approximately 10 brigades toward Kyiv and achieved a 12:1 force ratio against the Ukrainian defenders. Decisively, the Russian attack was blunted by its inability to maintain momentum due to command and logistical flaws – such as the infamous 50-km traffic jam along the Pryborsk–Ivaniv–Hostomel road – and the massed firepower of two Ukrainian artillery brigades.³⁹

For NATO, the forces immediately available for Baltic defence can now be measured in divisions rather than brigades or even battalions as they were a decade ago. Yet they are light divisions, currently substantially without the heavy firepower and

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35. Richard K Betts, *Military Readiness: Concepts, Choices, Consequences* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1995), p. 27. Emphasis in original.
 36. Michael Kofman, 'Getting the Fait Accompli Problem Right in U.S. Strategy', *War on the Rocks*, 3 November 2020.
 37. Lukas Milevski, 'Scenarios for Baltic Defense: What to Prepare Against', *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* (Vol. 17, No. 1, 2019), pp. 197–210.
 38. Lukas Milevski, 'Russian Logistics and Forward Urban Defense in the Baltic States', *Military Review* (November–December 2022), pp. 134–37.
 39. Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi et al., 'Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022', RUSI, November 2022, pp. 1–2.

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other division-level enablers that would be crucial to thwarting a massed Russian offensive. This is why Alliance military readiness and airpower are so important, the latter being crucial to isolate as much as possible the theatre of operations from Russian logistical support and reinforcing forces. The prospective balance of forces is variable and contingent on many factors.⁴⁰

Ultimately, a belief that NATO forces cannot prevent Russians from crossing the battlefield intact, for whatever reason, is perhaps an implicit reason for holding on to operational manoeuvre warfare in this apparent era of defensive domination. This seems to be either a problematic assumption about the application of theory for practice or reflects a problematic state of affairs in the battlefield firepower that Western militaries can generate.

Conclusion

The Baltic states are preparing a defensive line that pushes their own and NATO forces towards an operationally positional defence. This is likely to be considered heretical in dominant Western manoeuvre-oriented military thought.

However, there are fundamentally good political and considerable tactical reasons for a defence line over manoeuvre warfare. The surrender of civilians to Russia's atrocity-laced grasp implicit in defensive operational manoeuvre is politically unacceptable to the Baltic states. Moreover, the Russian border represents a red line that NATO ground forces are unlikely to cross, Ukraine's Kursk incursion notwithstanding. This means that any and every successful manoeuvre operation will always end along the same lines and those lines will always have to be defended. Finally, the tactical challenges of crossing the battlefield intact appear so difficult, judging from the war in Ukraine, that a defensive line seems tactically quite plausible. ■

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40. For a solid if now dated discussion, see R D Hooker, Jr, *How to Defend the Baltic States* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2019), pp. 2–3, 10–17, 27–32.