Revisiting the Idea of Sanctuary Russia

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Over the past ten years, Western defence analysts have assumed that, in any hypothetical war, Russia would be substantially, if not entirely, a sanctuary from NATO operations and even attacks. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has challenged this assumption for two main reasons: it is implausible to defend one's country effectively without striking into the enemy's territory; and Ukraine has successfully struck and even invaded Russia without provoking nuclear escalation. Western hesitation toward hypothetical strikes on Russia is increasingly strained under these pressures, yet little dedicated analysis has emerged to evaluate the consequences of granting or denying Russia sanctuary. The article first explores the concept of sanctuary as such and the modern literature that implicitly or explicitly assumes Russia would be a sanctuary in case of war. Second, it discusses the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, Ukraine's campaign against Russia itself and, implicitly, Western hesitations about targeting Russia. Finally, it engages with the various military, strategic, and political considerations of extending or not extending sanctuary to Russia.

Keywords
Russia, Baltic, defence, strategy, sanctuary, limited war

Introduction

In the aftermath of the West's eventual recognition that it was once again engaged in great power competition against Russia, Western defence analysts have explicitly or implicitly regarded Russia as a plausible, if not probable, sanctuary in the event of war with NATO.

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This hypothesis has shaped most Western attempts to think through the strategic problems of Baltic defence and has gone substantially unchallenged for most of the intervening period. Such visions of sanctuary are a legacy of various influences, including Cold War-era intellectual legacies in the form of limited war theory, within which the concept of sanctuary was developed; a persistent concern with nuclear weapons; as well as contemporary political leadership which is rarely inclined to make drastic decisions in general, particularly concerning Russia.

The Baltic States present a stark contrast. They have rarely been politically hesitant about Russia. Their independent strategic thinking has not been shaped by theories of limited war or much influenced by ever present fears of nuclear escalation, but rather by their own geostrategic circumstances and national histories. Russia as a sanctuary does not—and never has—played a role in Baltic strategic thinking. Instead, if at all possible, Russia itself must be attacked in the event of Russian aggression. As Andrus Merilo, commander of the Estonian Defence Forces, noted during the May 2025 Lennart Meri Conference,

> This is not the new thing. This is Estonian thinking since 1936. Unfortunately, previous time we was [sic] not ready. We were unable to achieve the readiness because we were alone when actually the war started. Today we are not alone. So military concepts are clear. No one of us officers, it doesn't matter of the ranks, we have never passed the exam in military school if you will not combine the deep and close fight, you will just fail in exam. (Lennart Meri Conference, 37:23).

A clash of strategic outlooks between Baltic and many other Western strategists, both thinkers and practitioners, over Baltic defence has undoubtedly occurred, though usually behind closed doors. Neither side is necessarily wrong, in principle, about its various considerations involved in granting Russia at least some degree of sanctuary, but it remains worthwhile to explore the strategic dynamics that could emerge from granting or denying sanctuary.

Amid these differing outlooks, the war between Russia and Ukraine has repeatedly demonstrated both the significance and the limitations of granting or denying sanctuary to Russia. Ultimately, decisions regarding Russia are of paramount—albeit ideally hypothetical—importance and demand a reconsideration of the concept of sanctuary from the ground up. There is no scientific solution for defeating Russia

in war or addressing the potential problem of Russia as a nuclear-armed sanctuary. Any hypothetical exploration of strategy against Russia can serve only as a tool for informing potential future strategic judgments by highlighting salient issues and dynamics.

This article proceeds in three stages. First, it examines the concept of sanctuary as such and the modern literature that implicitly or explicitly treats Russia as a sanctuary in case of war. Second, it discusses the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, Ukraine's campaign against Russia itself, and, implicitly, Western reluctance to target Russia. Finally, it engages with the various military, strategic, and political considerations involved in extending or withholding sanctuary to Russia. The aim of this article is not to advocate a particular policy, but to try to anticipate plausible strategic dynamics that may arise from decisions about sanctuary, thereby better preparing policymakers and strategists to confront such choices if they emerge.

1. What is Sanctuary?

The concept of sanctuary originates in Cold War-era American limited war theory. It referred to granting an enemy a refuge from attack—most often from American strikes. Bernard Brodie, the American strategist, noted that "[a]s a result [of the Korean War experience], the concept of sanctuary has played an important part in speculations on limited war as well as in certain war games." Sanctuary was considered a fundamental element of limited war, without which war could not realistically be limited: "Limited war of necessity implies the existence of a great sanctuary area in the rear of each major contestant. Keeping the war limited may depend on not using that sanctuary area as a base for attacking the other with nuclear weapons" (Brodie, 1957, p. 329). Sanctuary was bestowed so that any regional war would remain limited instead of escalating into global, nuclear levels—more than the superpowers would be willing to bear. Limited war theory itself was rarely applied to direct superpower conflict, and often unsatisfactorily. As one author put it, crises such as Cuba or Berlin amounted to "limited exercises in general war rather than general exercises in limited war." (McClintock, 1967, p. 10; see also Halperin (1963) for a more positive assessment). As an example, China was treated as a sanctuary during the Korean War because American strategists believed that attacking China would expand the war

beyond what United States and United Nations forces could sustain at that time and might provoke direct Soviet intervention or wider Soviet aggression elsewhere. Essentially, sanctuary is a geographic area that a belligerent chooses not to attack due to fears of escalation or other negative consequences; its designation reflects specific political-strategic preferences in terms of military operational limitations.

Yet its subsequent explicit application in the Vietnam War was controversial: "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. One major dilemma is pointed up by the question: If the enemy is already doing virtually all he can do against us, what kind of sanctuary does it make sense to grant him and why?" (Brodie, 1973, p. 67). It was not clear that designating certain key North Vietnamese cities such as the capital Hanoi or its main port Haiphong would have escalated or widened the war in quite the same was as attacking China would have fifteen years earlier. Indeed, in the last year of American involvement in the Vietnam War, both Hanoi and Haiphong were attacked directly without such consequences. The experience of the Vietnam War traumatised the US military and discredited not only limited war theory but also the sanctuary concept itself. As Robert Osgood, limited war theorist, lamented, "there has been a notable absence in the 1970s of new tactical or technical concerns of even of the revival or reappraisal of old strategic concerns with respect to limited-war strategy in the Third World. It is as though the trauma of Vietnam had suspended creative thought in this area." (Osgood, 1979, p. 67). A deeper problem with sanctuary, however, had already been described by Carl von Clausewitz two centuries earlier: "We are left with the conclusion that if the attacker sustains his efforts while his opponent does nothing to ward them off, the latter can do nothing to neutralise the danger that sooner or later an offensive thrust will succeed" (Clausewitz, 1984, p. 613). A military constrained by sanctuary is thus deprived of proactive options.

This lack of proactivity is reflected in contemporary literature on Baltic defence, which has largely remained focused on deterrence and total defence, with only limited consideration of deterrence failure and the strategic challenges of actual warfighting—apart from some pre-2022 analyses of countering Russia's anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities. As a result, the concept of sanctuary continues to shape defence analysis when envisioning conflict with nuclear-armed Russia. As RAND analysts David Shlapak and Michael Johnson suggested in

their 2016 report on a 2015 RAND war game simulating the defence of the Baltic States:

> On a tactical level, a counteroffensive campaign into the Baltics would likely entail the desire, and perhaps even the necessity, of striking targets, such as long-range surface-to-air defenses and surface-to-surface fires systems, in territory that even NATO would agree constitutes "Russia." Under Russian doctrine, it is unclear what kinds or magnitudes of conventional attacks into Russian territory might trigger a response in kind (or worse), but there would certainly be concern in Washington and other NATO capitals about possible escalatory implications. (Shlapak & Johnson, 2015, p. 7).

In this analysis, Shlapak and Johnson acknowledged that operational military needs in Baltic defence would encourage striking Russia, but political hesitation concerning the Russian response might well impede or even prohibit such strikes. That is, Russia's nuclear arsenal might instil such caution among policymakers that the notion of striking Russia would remain taboo—Russia could remain a sanctuary despite evident operational needs to strike over the border. Swiss researchers Martin Zapfe and Michael Carl Haas reached a similar conclusion. They argued that a NATO defence plan aimed at ensuring access to the Baltic States for incoming NATO reinforcements could not "afford to assume that Russian territory could be immune to attack following an act of military aggression against a NATO ally". Yet they immediately tempered this claim by considering "limiting the scope of conventional attacks, both geographically and functionally. In the Baltic scenario, this would mean restricting attacks to front line and operational interdiction targets, and limiting the depth of offensive operations to the minimum necessary for effective attrition of those targets" (Zapfe & Haas, 2016, pp. 38-39). Notably, their analysis envisioned only strikes against targets in Russia, without considering the possibility of a ground offensive onto Russian territory. Indeed, they suggest that "[a] ny semi-public war planning that focuses on threatening Kaliningrad as the basis for deterring Russia would grievously dilute the defensive purpose of NATO strategy" (Zapfe & Haas, 2016, p. 39). Like the RAND analysis, Zapfe and Haas thus recognised the gap between operational military requirements and political preferences.

Other analysts have also recognised the problems of sanctuary and examined its implications for military strategy for Baltic defence

(Milevski, 2020). Richard Hooker envisioned a quite pessimistic scenario of a future Russian invasion of the Baltic States which, despite consideration of the use of Western air power to degrade Russian air defences in Kaliningrad, ultimately ended with a refusal to engage in operations to liberate NATO member states from Russian occupation. Sanctuary itself did not figure in his hypothetical scenario; instead, hesitation to confront Russia at all—driven by nuclear fears—overshadowed concerns about sanctuary (Hooker, 2020). Even after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, sanctuary-influenced thinking persisted. As Cancian and Monaghan observed, "many NATO nations would be unwilling to risk nuclear war by striking the Russian homeland, even with conventional weapons" (2023, p. 36). Ukraine's invasion of Kursk in August 2024 obliged certain authors to inelegantly adapt their analyses to this new reality, awkwardly explaining in urgent last-minute article revisions why Ukraine's incursion into Kursk oblast did not cross a red line, whereas a NATO operation in Pskov or Leningrad oblast might still do so (Milevski, 2024, pp. 82-83).

The Russian exclave of Kaliningrad has been a partial exception to this automatic assumption by analysts of Russian sanctuary for two reasons: its geographical separation from the rest of Russia allows it to be treated as a separate problem, a tendency reinforced by its critical geostrategic location and A2AD capabilities. In 2016, Western analysts addressing the threat posed by Russian area denial in the Baltic Sea region from Kaliningrad suggested that "[f]or NATO, this means that the best way of dealing with the Russian A2/AD threat in the Baltic would be to isolate Kaliningrad as soon as possible in wartime, and to threaten an invasion of the territory to deter Russia from conducting military operations from the enclave in the first place" (Frühling & Lasconjarias, 2016, pp. 107-108). Such statements reflected an unwillingness to actually consider invading or even striking targets in Kaliningrad oblast if possible at all, although they did subsequently emphasise that "[i]n its public and private communication with Russia, NATO should make clear that, whatever restrictions might be put on NATO ground operations into Russia's mainland, it would consider an invasion of Kaliningrad a legitimate and non-escalatory response to Russian use of the territory to interfere with NATO's lines of communication" (Frühling & Lasconjarias, 2016, p. 110). Yet this was still envisioned as communication for a preferred deterrent effect. In the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it was still

suggested that "an attack on Kaliningrad would also be an attack on Russian sovereign territory and would likely trigger a nuclear strike against NATO", partly due to the plausible—but unconfirmed — storage of non-strategic nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad (Dirubbio, 2022, p. 87). The author's suggestions for dealing with Kaliningrad emphasised special operations and long-range, often drone, strikes (Dirubbio, 2022, pp. 91-93). Compared to the main part of Russia, Kaliningrad has been treated as a somewhat special case, where NATO has or might plausibly have greater operational leeway, even if the territory has largely still been regarded as a sanctuary.

Academic and think tank analyses that address Baltic defence in operational, rather than purely deterrence, terms —though limited in scope—have demonstrated a historical bias over the past decade toward treating Russia as essentially a sanctuary in any European conflict. However, the experience of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has called this bias into question and made it increasingly uncomfortable. In response to this third-party experience of the war, the literature has begun evolving and adapting, albeit slowly and usually with a focus on Kaliningrad rather than Russia as a whole.

2. Ukraine's Challenge to Russian Sanctuary

For most of the period from 2014 to 2025, the question of sanctuary has only been a hypothetical element of a hypothetical NATO–Russia war scenario. Since 24 February 2022, however, it has assumed policy prominence in NATO capitals, Kyiv, and, likely, Moscow. Throughout the full-scale invasion, Ukraine has consistently pushed the boundaries of sanctuary and challenged Western notions of prudence. As a result of this persistent Ukrainian challenge, Western policies have also slowly changed over the course of the war (as of this article's revision in August 2025).

Ukraine challenged the idea of Russian sanctuary as early as the second day of the full-scale invasion, when it launched tactical ballistic missiles overnight at Millerovo airfield in Rostov Oblast (Cochran, 2025). In the following months, Ukraine carried out additional small cross-border attacks, including a daring night-time helicopter raid on a fuel depot near Belgorod on 1 April 2022 (CBS News, 2022). Ukraine also begun using drones to strike Russian territory in 2022, with the highest-profile early attack targeting the Kremlin in May 2023, though

Ukraine denied that the Kremlin was the intended target (Vernon & Spender, 2023). Ukraine inaugurated an assassination campaign in Russia with a first strike on 20 August 2022 on Darya Dugin, the daughter of the prominent Russian imperialist, geopolitical theorist, Aleksandr Dugin (Sands, 2022). It supported several raids by Russian rebel forces into Russia itself (Vasilyeva, 2023). Finally, from January 2024, Ukraine began semi-regular strikes on key economic and logistical targets, particularly those related to the oil industry and ammunition storage (Harding & Sauer, 2024).

Notably, nearly all of these strikes into Russia, thereby violating its assumed sanctuary, relied almost entirely on Ukrainian-made equipment, including missiles, drones, and vehicles. One exception was the 2023 raid by Russian rebels into Belgorod oblast, in which they reportedly used—and lost—a small number of Western-provided vehicles (Oryx, 2023). This prompted an investigation by the United States into the use of Western-provided vehicles in the raid, as well as a reaffirmation of American policy prohibiting the use of Western weapons inside Russian territory (Crawford, 2024). This demonstrates the importance of Russian sanctuary for *Western* policy-makers, even as the Ukrainians challenged this taboo. Even when providing weapons, the West did not permit their use beyond Ukraine's legally defined borders. This specific restriction, however, permitted Ukraine to use Anglo-French Storm Shadow/SCALP missiles against targets in Crimea and other occupied territories, but not beyond. Furthermore, the United States supplied no intelligence for strikes inside Russian territory; one US official observed that "[o]ur message to the Russians was, 'This war should be fought inside Ukraine'" (Entous, 2025). The principle of maintaining Russia as a sanctuary to avoid undesired escalation remained dominant in Western capitals materially supporting Ukraine, even as Ukraine consistently challenged the constraints of this restrained approach to fighting Russia.

A second notable feature of the Ukrainian assaults on Russian sanctuary described above is that they have generally been pinpricks. A strike on an airfield here, a fuel depot there, a raid into Russia now or then, each of these hardly posed any real threat to Russia and remained low-level and fleeting enough that even Russia could largely afford to ignore and avoid responding in any ostentatiously public way—the high-profile 2023 strike on the Kremlin being the clearest exception to this pattern.

The year 2024 witnessed substantial change in terms of both of

these points. In particular, Ukraine launched a coordinated campaign against Russian oil industrial and ammunition-logistical targets. While these strikes pinpricks, they were considerably heavier than the small-scale attacks which occurred over the previous two years.

With respect to the Western position, Russia launched a new invasion of Kharkiv oblast from Belgorod in spring 2024, which caused a momentary crisis in Ukrainian defences until forces could be redeployed to contain the threat. Some Ukrainians, however, expressed frustration with their Western allies due to restrictions on using Western weapon systems to strike across the border, particularly longer-range weapon systems such as ATACMS missiles, though the issue was not limited to these capabilities. As one Ukrainian described, "We saw their military sitting one or two kilometres from the border inside Russia, and there was nothing we could do about that" (Fornusek, 2024). The incident prompted supporting countries to clarify their positions. The United Kingdom, for example, confirmed that "Ukraine has that right" to strike inside Russian territory using British weapons (Goncharova, 2024). Under the pressures of the war in its third year, Western resistance to direct strikes on Russian territory began to weaken. Yet even as late as 15 May 2024, after Britain and France had authorized the use of Storm Shadow/SCALP missiles against targets inside Russia, American Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, said that "[w]e have not encouraged or enabled strikes outside of Ukraine, but ultimately Ukraine needs to make decisions for itself on how it conducts this war", demonstrating continued American hesitation over striking into Russia and an implicit preference to continue treating Russia as a sanctuary, largely over escalation fears (Cooper et al., 2024). Indirectly reflecting such Western concerns, in late August 2024 President Volodymyr Zelenskyy highlighted Ukraine's domestically-developed long-range rocket drone Palianytsia and other systems as a means allowing Ukraine to bypass Western hesitation and slow decision-making over striking Russia: "Our new weapons solutions, particularly the Palianytsia missile, are a real way we can act while some of our partners, unfortunately, are slowing down with their decisions" (Tyshchenko, 2024).

A significant moment for Western policies occurred in August 2024, when Ukraine invaded Kursk oblast, surprising not merely the Russians but its own allies as well. "For the Americans, the incursion's unfolding was a significant breach of trust. It wasn't just that the Ukrainians had again kept them in the dark; they had secretly crossed

a mutually agreed-upon line". A senior American official described the American perception of the incursion bluntly: "It wasn't almost blackmail, it *was* blackmail" (Entous, 2025). The Americans were forced not only to permit widespread use of their weapon systems in Russia but also actively support the incursion with intelligence; failure to do so could have endangered the Ukrainian forces involved in a manner that could have easily led to disaster and reflected poorly on American policy.

Yet beyond rhetoric, Russia's reaction to this first invasion of its territory since 1941 was surprisingly limited. Although the initial Ukrainian advances had largely been halted by the fourth day of the invasion and the situation began stabilizing, Russia achieved this result with units consisting of "military conscripts and irregular forces, as opposed to the battle-hardened soldiers fighting in Ukraine" (Barker, 2024). By comparison, within mere days of the start of Ukraine's 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive, the Russians were already rushing reinforcements to the Kharkiv front from most other sections of the front and from Russia itself (Koshiw & Walker, 2022). Given that one of the early stated objectives of the invasion was to draw Russian forces away from critical sectors of the front, notably around Pokrovsk and Kurakhove, yet the offensive failed to accomplish this particular goal, as no such a transfer of forces occurred (Frontelligence Insight, 2025).

Yet the incursion demonstrated Russia's strategic depth, particularly relative to Ukraine's comparatively limited resources allocated to the operation. Although there was considerable public speculation about whether Ukraine could threaten or even capture the Kursk nuclear power plant—and the Russians, preparing for the worst, dug some fortifications around it—in actual operational practice the Ukrainians never approached it or any other major point of geopolitical interest. The Ukrainians failed even to take tactical points which would have been critical for their subsequent defence of the occupied territory, such as the town of Korenevo. The Ukrainians lacked the military resources to clear the Russians out of the area south of the Seym River, even when that area was temporarily cut off from all Russian reinforcements. Ukraine's Kursk incursion proved to be a political embarrassment for the Kremlin—as well as an opportunity to bring North Korean forces into the war—but it was too far from any significant military or geopolitical objectives and too thinly resourced to pose any significant threat to Russia or its war effort. Unfortunately, the significance of the Kursk incursion on Western policies regarding

the use of Western munitions in strikes against Russia has been limited. Since Donald Trump's second accession to the White House in January 2025, the United States has again increasingly limited Ukraine's ability to strike Russia using any Western weapons—not only American systems, all of which depend on American targeting data (Ward et al., 2025).

3. Revisiting Russian Sanctuary on the Baltic Front

The essential source of explicitly or implicitly designating Russia a sanctuary is obvious: Russia's nuclear arsenal. A desperate Russia is one which may come to believe that its only path forward lies in at least threatening, and potentially using, nuclear weapons, with the catastrophic consequences such a course would entail. Late in 2024, Putin signed a revised nuclear doctrine which essentially lowered the threshold for Russia's use of nuclear weapons.

> The Russian Federation reserves the right to employ nuclear weapons in response to the employment of nuclear and (or) other types of weapons of mass destruction against itself and (or) its allies, as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) the Republic of Belarus as participants in the Union State with the employment of conventional weapons, which creates a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation , 2024)

Russian nuclear weapons are a fundamental reality that exists independently of any designation of sanctuary. Moreover, the perceptions guiding potential use of the Russian nuclear weapons are not those of NATO commanders in the field or Western politicians at home, but those of the Kremlin itself. The actual Russian willingness to use nuclear weapons remains unknown to Western generals and decision-makers; this is an uncertainty which is ever present in nuclear decision-making by everyone who has such an arsenal. It nonetheless appears quite imprudent to test declared Russian thresholds *rashly*. Such rashness is a matter of basic human judgment rather than purely technical military or narrowly political calculation, though both inevitably shape assessments of whether a course of action is reckless or prudent. Differentiating between prudence and imprudence requires consideration of plausible wartime dynamics, yet it will always remain

a fundamentally individual judgment.

The problems of such judgment may be magnified in Russia's case. Russia's military thinkers have developed a relatively elaborate system of escalation management focused on inflicting disproportionate damage against the enemy— potentially including leadership and population targets—through iterative use of conventional forces, non-strategic nuclear weapons, or even a demonstrative strategic nuclear strike (Kofman, Fink, & Edmonds, 2020). Yet the efficacy of escalation management, even if accepted by Russian political leadership, can only be diluted by wild and irresponsible nuclear sabre-rattling by Dmitry Medvedev and other Russian politicians, as well as Russia's near-nightly terror bombing of Ukrainian civilian targets. From the receiving side, there is virtually no reliable way to distinguish between standard Russian terror bombing and an explicit attempt at escalation management—they look the same and Russian political statements which may theoretically clarify Russian intentions would have minimal innate credibility because of their track record of hyperbole and outright dishonesty.

Yet this does not require granting Russia sanctuary. To designate Russia, implicitly or explicitly, as a sanctuary is not only for the West to be deterred, but for it to *self*-deter, or to decide to restrain itself—to its own plausible military and strategic detriment—from the outset, without even first testing the Russians. Yet it may be more strategically and politically irresponsible to self-deter than to push the Russians and make them work to achieve deterrence in wartime. What must be done is to think through the hypothetical military, strategic, and political dynamics of granting versus withholding sanctuary in an as-yet (and hopefully eternally) hypothetical war. Two main concerns will be considered within these hypothetical dynamics: reaching deep into Russia with long-range fires such as missiles and perhaps drones; and ground operations against, and potentially within, Russia.

The prospect of reaching deep into Russia with long-range fires is a Russian nightmare. One of Russia's greatest strategic fears z is the dreaded MRAU, the *massirovany raketno-aviatsionny udar* or massed air/missile strike. This concern, rooted in the Luftwaffe's superiority and effectiveness during Operation Barbarossa in 1941, was sustained by superior Western air power during the Cold War, and brought to new heights by the dazzling tactical effectiveness of Western, especially US, air forces in the post-Cold War decades (Kofman et al., 2021, pp. 56-57). This overlaps with Russia's belief, to some degree shared in the West, that

conventional missiles have become so precise that they can now pose a threat once reserved for nuclear weapons: "[conventional] weapons used *en masse* against Russia's critically vital objects—presumably those relevant to the economy, population, or political control—would likely trigger NSNW escalation and/or nuclear retaliation" (Kofman, Fink, & Edmonds, 2020, pp. 52-53). Indeed, this fear is reflected in Russia's nuclear doctrine; one of the conditions specifically listed as constituting a trigger for nuclear use is "receipt of reliable data on the massive launch (take-off) of air and space attack means (strategic and tactical aircraft, cruise missiles, unmanned, hypersonic and other aerial vehicles) and their crossing of the state border of the Russian Federation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation). How many missiles qualify as a "massive" strike is unclear, but Russian sources have sometimes claimed that the Ukrainians have launched well over one hundred and even approaching two hundred drones into Russia in a single night. If such attacks are not deemed massive by Russia, it is only because Russian air defence remained just capable enough to fend off most of Ukraine's attacks. Ukraine's surprise attack on the Russian long-range, heavy bomber fleet on 1 June, probably the worst surprise attack suffered by the Russian Air Force since Operation Barbarossa in 1941, has prompted claims that about a third of the Russian heavy bomber force has been hit (Bandouil, 2025). At time of writing in early June 2025, such optimistic figures remain unconfirmed, but the confirmed losses to the Russian bomber fleet are nonetheless significant. The Kremlin, apparently embarrassed by the scale of the strike, has scarcely acknowledged it publicly and may feel constrained from responding openly (Cole, 2025).

Nonetheless, Ukraine's experience of attacking Russia by air has loosened the intellectual straitjacket that has long constrained discussions of a hypothetical war with Russia. The Baltic States have been taking advantage of this by advocating the denial of sanctuary to Russia from deep strikes. General Merilo forcefully made the case against sanctuary—not using that word—at the Lennart Meri Conference.

> We cannot afford that the fight will be done in Estonian territory. That means that we are losing. So the deep area is in Russia. There's nothing to say about if somebody thinks that we will create buffer zone and Estonians will be killed to provide you the targets in NATO's territory. That's the wrong approach. The

> deep area is in the Russia and targets are well known and we have readiness if needed to do so. (Lennart Meri Conference: 36:52)

The pressures of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have gradually pushed most Western policy-makers in a similar direction, at least with regard to Ukraine itself. After the start of Russia's 2024 Kharkiv offensive, it was permitted to fire into Russia in a limited fashion. Soon after Ukraine's incursion into Kursk, Western munitions were permitted to be used in Kursk oblast. By late May 2025, a number of Western countries–including the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany–had finally raised all range restrictions on the Ukrainian use of Western missiles (AP News, 2025). This slow progress reflects the continued erosion of Western hesitation in the face of the requirements of real warfare. In July 2024, France, Germany, Italy, and Poland launched the European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA) project to develop a European long-range missile, with Britain and Sweden joining that October (Ruitenberg, 2025). The British and Germans appear to be developing a similar, bilateral long-range missile project (British Ministry of Defence, 2025). Although all these capabilities will take time to materialise, they reflect a change of thinking among various Western countries about the hypothetical strategic desirability of hitting Russia in considerable depth as may become necessary.

Turning to NATO ground operations, the military strategic disadvantage for Baltic defence incurred by designating Russia a sanctuary is clear. If the Russians push into the Baltic States, any successful NATO counterattack would likely be halted by political demand at the border. Denying permission to enter Russian territory consigns NATO forces to operational and strategic passivity once Baltic territory is liberated and national borders with Russia and Belarus are reached. Permission to conduct raids might be granted in exceptional cases where disproportionate military effects may be achieved quickly and at shallow depth before a likely withdrawal back to the border. Otherwise, defending forces would probably simply be stationed along the border in readiness to fight at times and places of Russian choosing, a problem identical to the Ukrainian border defence challenge in its own on-going war with Russia. Offence-oriented Western militaries would be culturally ill-equipped to engage in such limited operations—but such a passive position is problematic regardless of military culture. Such a passive position would be only partly alleviated by creating effective defensive lines, even if the

current tactical balance on the battlefield is weighted in favour of the defence (Hammes, 2021). The fundamental problem remains: Russian forces are available for destruction substantially at times and places of their own choosing, particularly if Russia is able to contest use of the air by NATO air power.

This situation would be somewhat altered if strikes into Russia were permitted. Militarily speaking, the example of Russia's 2024 Kharkiv offensive demonstrates that if a strict defensive posture were to be maintained at the border, the defenders *would need* to be allowed to reach into Russia with fires at least sufficient to disrupt Russian concentrations and preparations for new offensives. Prohibiting such strikes would enable the Russians to organise, amass supplies, and concentrate in preparation for new attacks, and would sabotage the effectiveness of one's own defensive posture—as Merilo asserts.

Yet denying sanctuary does not solve NATO's operational and strategic problems in Baltic defence, it merely changes them. Denying sanctuary may allow NATO forces to prevent Russian soldiers from violating the territory of the Baltic States by establishing buffer zones inside Russia. However, denying sanctuary does not necessarily solve the fundamental problem of how to compel Russia to accept defeat in war and agree to a peace that restores the status quo ante.

First, being allowed to conduct ground operations on Russian territory will not automatically make them more militarily decisive. If the politically important–but militarily arbitrary—border line is permeable to NATO ground operations, Russian ground forces would almost certainly suffer greater attrition and destruction. Yet modern armies have become increasingly resilient since the Napoleonic Wars, capable of absorbing losses and even outright destruction of entire subordinate units without necessarily breaking the whole military as a functioning organization (Epstein, 1994). In the on-going war in Ukraine, the Russian army appears both able and willing to sustain manpower losses at a rate of up to a brigade and a half per week, depending on casualty estimates—and has sustained such heavy losses for over a year at the time of writing (early June 2025). It is generally implausible to destroy an army of several hundreds of thousands over the course of a single, short, decisive operation except under extraordinarily favorable conditions. One example is Operation Desert Storm in 1991, during which coalition forces essentially shattered the bulk of the Iraqi Army in four days, though crucially not the comparatively elite Republican Guard, in their effort to liberate Kuwait. Yet the Iraqi Army in theatre

was substantially concentrated in Kuwait's small geographical space, likely outnumbered by the coalition forces, and composed mostly of poorly trained mobilised men and reservists, who had been under siege by unchallengeable Western air power for a month already prior to ground operations (Freedman & Karsh, 1993). Such a success benefitted from nearly every possible advantage, producing a military performance and outcome which do not necessarily translate nearly as well to a hypothetical Baltic theatre.

Second, permitting ground operations into Russia raises the question of how far they could go, both in terms of political permission and in terms of military prudence. Political permission must be considered in the context of Russia's nuclear doctrine. Another condition under which Russia would consider using nuclear weapons is "aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) the Republic of Belarus as participants in the Union State with the employment of conventional weapons, which creates a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation). Ukraine's Kursk incursion was no serious threat to Russian sovereignty or territorial integrity, as reflected in the Russian military response. The Russians may well consider a NATO ground offensive from the Baltic States a more credible threat to their sovereignty or territorial integrity. First, because Russia finds NATO's armed forces as far more militarily credible than those of Ukraine; NATO forces can simply be expected to be more dangerous to Russia. Second, the two most important Russian cities are closer to the Baltic States than to Ukraine. Moscow lies just under 600 kilometres from the Latvian border, St. Petersburg less than 200 kilometres from Narva, and Minsk less than 150 kilometres from the Lithuanian border. Threatening any of these three Russian and Belarusian cities seems almost certain to trigger Russian nuclear threats. Moreover, there is the particular complicating factor of Belarus' Astravets nuclear power plant, located extremely close to the border with Lithuania. The Russian track record with the Enerhodar Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine suggests that Russia is unlikely to shy away from threatening—or even striking–Astravets NPP if doing so may impede NATO operations in Belarus. The Baltic states may be willing to accept this risk, but perhaps other NATO allies may not.

Militarily, given Russia's vast geographical size, at some point all military operations have to stop anyway. Unless the enemy totally collapses first, all offensive operations either culminate or stop prior to that point—after which attacking forces move to the defensive, at

least temporarily, as they reorganize overstretched logistics, bring up reinforcements to replace losses, and so on. History suggests that Russia is unlikely to collapse politically as the result of a single offensive, even if that offensive is militarily all-but-triumphant; 1709, 1812, and 1941 all demonstrate such Russian resilience, regardless of its actual sources. In each invasion, similarly, the Swedes, French, and Germans, respectively, struggled to determine where to stop and regroup. As a result, each continued barrelling forward to its own doom at Poltava, Moscow, and Moscow again—and a year later further still at Stalingrad and the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. The basic problem of military geography has hardly changed, except with the added nuclear dimension and the possibility of pushing an armed force right over an invisible Russian nuclear threshold.

This raises the hypothetical challenge prominent in Cold War-era American limited war theory: how to negotiate, probably tacitly, limitations in war in order to assuage the other side's concerns about the sanctity of their nuclear thresholds and, by extension, their vital interests. Over the years of the early Cold War, theorizing about limited war became increasingly elaborate. To draw an example from the American theorist Thomas Schelling,

> Even parallels of latitude—arbitrary lines on a map reflecting an ancient number system based on the days in a year, applied to spherical geometry and conventionalized in Western cartography—become boundaries in diplomatic negotiations and conspicuous stopping places in a war. They are merely lines on a map, but they are on everybody's map and, if an arbitrary line is needed, lines of latitude are available. (Schelling, 2008, pp. 132-133)

However, developing, assigning and attempting to communicate such geographical limitations–whether defined by lines of latitude, geographical features such as coastlines or rivers, or other markers—implicitly designates the area beyond as sanctuary. In this sense, sanctuary is an inescapable element of limiting warfare geographically. Brodie acknowledged this in 1973, writing that "[t]he principle of sanctuary is a vital one in the whole concept of limited war" (Brodie, 1973, p. 67). The difference is simply that, in a hypothetical war, not *all* of Russia is treated as a sanctuary, and the dividing line between sanctuary Russia and war-zone Russia would be far less clearly defined and accepted line than the current border.

Yet this may not be a problem exclusive to refusing automatic sanctuary. The West may have become accustomed to borders being lines accepted on everyone's map, but the Russian pretence to the annexation of large swathes of Ukraine demonstrates that this can no longer be assumed. This represents a Western concern that, in a hypothetical Baltic war, Russia may forcibly pretend to annex territory to expand the territory under their nuclear umbrella and thereby aggressively expand their sanctuary from attack (Hoffman, 2025).

Third, Russian territory, including regional population centres, may end up being occupied for shorter or longer periods of time. In this regard, Kaliningrad may be unique among Russian oblasts as, regardless of the implementation of any sanctuary policy toward mainland Russia, it appears increasingly unlikely that such a sanctuary would extend to Kaliningrad in the event of war. Indeed, Kaliningrad is no longer considered merely a threat target; for example, the Latvian chief of defence Kaspars Pudāns has explicitly stated that "if there is shooting, Kaliningrad will also fall" (LSM, 2025). *Fall* is the key word. Not merely be threatened, not merely be targeted, not merely be struck, but *will fall*. To fulfil defence plans, NATO forces would—or would be expected to—cross the border into Kaliningrad oblast, engage and destroy Russian forces, and occupy the city. This was subsequently confirmed by General Christopher Donahue, commander of US forces in Europe and Africa, as being an integral part of NATO's Baltic defence plan (Judson, 2025). Compared to the pre-war literature, this represents an apparent sea-change in NATO defence policy and military strategy.

Rhetorically inquiring, has NATO prepared an occupation policy for Kaliningrad to establish occupation authorities and ensure the necessary sustainment for the city to continue functioning, at least at a minimal level (that is, sustaining a flow of food so that the inhabitants do not starve)? Such responsibilities are an inherent consequence of invading and occupying foreign territory, whether for humanitarian or political purposes, as the United States learned during Operation Torch and the invasion of North Africa in 1942-43 (Buchanan, 2014, ch5). Even if NATO is prepared to do so for Kaliningrad due to its critical geographical location, is it prepared to do so for Pskov or other regional near-Baltic cities cut off from their normal inner Russian hinterlands by NATO ground operations and occupation? Such provision is likely to challenge NATO logistics and potentially inhibit military operations.

Conclusion

Strategy is put into practice through command performance (Gray, 2010, ch6). Command performance is premised on qualitative judgments for which there is no such thing as a scientific, let alone correct, answer—and especially not outside the highly specific context of the actual moment of practice itself (Paret & Moran, 1984). At best, arguments and especially conclusions can only be general, and sometimes imprecise, food for thought for practitioners to transform into plans and action if ever necessary.

Not pushing ground operations beyond Baltic borders, Kaliningrad excepted, should likely avoid any nuclear war, even notwithstanding Russian attempts to remind NATO that Kaliningrad is covered by Russia's nuclear shield (Stanton, 2025) and even if NATO conducts a deep strike campaign to minimise Russian military pressure on the borders. Yet this would come at the cost which General Merilo and others would prefer to avoid: increasing the suffering of Baltic populations, especially on or near the borders. Allowing ground operations in Russia itself, beyond the Kaliningrad exclave, may allow NATO to create buffer zones to mitigate the Russian threat to Baltic populations, albeit certainly not from long-range Russian drone or missile strikes. But this would reveal other military dilemmas and would not necessarily–or even likely– resolve NATO's fundamental strategic problem of how actually to coerce Russia to end the hypothetical war.

Ultimately, questions of sanctuary are questions of one's own freedom of action. Challenging the prospect of granting Russia meaningful sanctuary, let alone unconditional sanctuary, is to expand NATO's freedom of action in any hypothetical war against Russia involving the Baltic theatre. Yet more freedom of action is not necessarily equivalent to improved chances of strategic success, let alone to the actual achievement of such success. All the problems of actually coercing a nuclear-armed Russia into abandoning any particular aggressive adventure remain, being only somewhat altered by the disavowal of sanctuary.

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