

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Suwalki Gap, Kaliningrad and Russia's Baltic Ambitions

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Current study is motivated by the special role of the Kaliningrad region for both Russia and the NATO Alliance. The aim of the study is to discuss how likely is the conflict in the Suwalki gap; which factors either hinder or support the escalation of the tensions between Russia and the Alliance in the region; and how far the potential conflict could go should it break out in the future. Both the NATO Alliance and Russia have different advantages and disadvantages with respect to any future escalation in the Suwalki corridor and the Kaliningrad region. The main weakness of NATO is its reliance on public opinion, which limits its ability to counter Russian escalation. Conceptually, at least, the Alliance has much deeper pockets, although it is an entirely different matter whether the superiority of resources could be realized in practice. Russia enjoys a public affairs advantage in that it has few requirements to justify its military actions, which may allow it to outlast NATO in a conventional-force brinkmanship scenario despite having many fewer resources.

Keywords: Russia; Kaliningrad; Suwalki; A2AD

Introduction

Recent events in Ukraine, the Zapad 2017 exercise and Russia's geopolitical ambitions have revealed Russia's intentions to destabilise the current security environment in the former Soviet bloc area. Furthermore, Russia's decision to withdraw from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in 2015 and its constant mobilisation of national military forces close to NATO's eastern flank give cause for growing concern among military and civilian authorities in the Western countries. Among other worrying matters, the Baltic countries feel especially threatened by the possibility that Russia could isolate the Baltic region from its Western allies.

The possible isolation of the Baltic region is linked to the so-called Suwalki Gap and the geostrategic location of the Kaliningrad region. The Kaliningrad region has historically belonged to East Prussia, but it was annexed by the Soviet Union after World War II and operates now as a federal subject of the Russian Federation, although it is completely separated from the Russian mainland (see Sukhankin, this volume, for more). The Suwalki Gap or Corridor – an about 110–115 kilometres wide land border between Lithuania and Poland – connects Kaliningrad with Belarus, Russia's long-standing ally in the region. In fact, all the land access connections between Russia and Kaliningrad pass through the Suwalki Gap, and Russian citizens have a visa waiver arrangement for passing through the area.

The current study is motivated by the special role of the Kaliningrad region for both Russia and the NATO alliance. The aim of the study is to discuss how likely a conflict in the Suwalki Gap is, which factors either hinder or support an escalation of tensions between Russia and the alliance in the region, and how far the potential conflict could go should it break out in the future.

The article provides first a detailed descriptive overview of the Suwalki Gap. It then considers the strategic logic behind possible conflict escalation in the region by weighing the factors that either hinder or support the outburst of conflict between Russia and the alliance in Kaliningrad and the Suwalki Gap. The final part of the article will focus on suggestions in terms of NATO responses to Russia's Baltic ambitions.

The Suwalki Gap: A Descriptive Overview

In the academic community, the Kaliningrad region and the Suwalki Gap as a research topic have been covered by many authors, especially in the early 2000s before the EU's eastern enlargement. Recently, some think tanks and researchers have produced reports and studies on the vulnerability of the region in terms of leaving the Baltic countries in military isolation. Just to name a few, Sirutavičius and Stanytė-Toločkienė (2002) focus on Russia's main strategies for Kaliningrad, and the 2016 RAND Corporation report (see Shlapak & Johnson 2016) discusses the practical role of the Kaliningrad region in putting pressure on the Baltic countries. Various authors have contributed to the book *The Kaliningrad challenge: Options and recommendations* (Birkenbach & Wellmann 2003), which covers security-related issues, economic and social aspects, identity-building in the region, possibilities for cooperation and more, and Ivanauskas, Keršanskas and Kasčiūnas (2017) analyse the role of the Kaliningrad region in Russia's relations with Lithuania, the EU and the NATO alliance in terms of both 'hard' and 'soft' security, and so on. The current study contributes to the academic literature by providing a more general understanding of the theoretical logic behind the potential outbreak of conflict in the Suwalki Corridor, on the one hand, and of a more complex approach to avoiding further escalation of the conflict in the Suwalki Corridor, on the other hand.

The aim of Russia's well-targeted actions in the region is to delegitimise the NATO alliance and, furthermore, to challenge the current international security order and replace it with a new one, where Russia has significantly greater authority and influence. In a nutshell, Russia is ready to systematically and gradually – as much as the country's budget will allow – increase tensions in the areas near Russia's mainland with historical and symbolic value to maintain and increase internal support. Internally, Russian expansionism is framed as an appropriate response to the supposedly imperialist actions of NATO and the US.

From Russia's perspective, both Kaliningrad and the Suwalki Corridor constitute favourable places where Russia's ability to mobilise in time of peace and to escalate the conflict is greater than that of the NATO alliance. The country has at most three armies available in the Western Military District. Furthermore, Russia also has a clear advantage in mobilising up to another 20 brigades in time of peace as well as in benefitting from greater territorial depth and more alternatives in terms of logistical routes than the NATO forces in the Baltic countries and close to Suwalki. Since Russia could move military resources more easily and more extensively in this region compared to the NATO alliance, it is reasonable to assume that escalation of the conflict would most likely be favourable to Russia, insofar as direct conventional conflict is out of the question.

For the NATO alliance, all scenarios, from increasing regional security to actual conventional mobilisation, are marked by serious complications. Additional deployments in the region under the auspices of increasing security would be both costly and institutionally complicated. For example, the former commander of the US Army in Europe and retired Lieutenant General in the US Army Ben Hodges has suggested many reasons (Hodges 2018) why Poland's recent offer to establish a permanent US military presence in Poland (Zemla & Turecki 2018) would undermine the cohesion of the NATO alliance. Furthermore, in real terms this step would not even contribute to the regional conventional balance, which would actually need another 18 brigades instead of merely a single brigade. Should the alliance still decide for the latter, it would allow Russia to both maintain its moral 'upper hand' in the region and justify its additional deployments, based on the argument that NATO is both aggressive and offensive.

Economic conditions clearly set significant restrictions on Russia in terms of choosing between escalation and de-escalation of the conflict. The size of the Russian economy (its nominal GDP in 2017 was USD 1.72 billion) is smaller than that of Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy (respectively, USD 4.21 billion, USD 2.94 billion, USD 2.93 billion and USD 2.18 billion in 2017) and basically on the same level as Spain (USD 1.51 billion in 2017) (IMF 2018). Limited economic resources have forced Russia to prioritise, as not enough resources are available for 'half-hard' initiatives. Under these circumstances, Russia clearly pursues a highly concentrated security and defence policy, without any possibility of hesitation, morality or questionable efficiency. However, limited resources play a central role in Russia's coercive bargaining, as assets may end before motivation (Altman 2018: 58–60).

For both parties to the potential confrontation, Russia and the NATO alliance, the 'costs' of conflict in the Suwalki Gap and Kaliningrad are first and foremost determined by geographical and ethnic factors. The most extensive study covering the geographical aspect is conducted by Elak and Šliwa (2016), who argue that the terrain of the Suwalki Corridor supports particularly defensive operations. The potential 'costs' associated with geographical factors would most likely be significant for both parties, because specific capabilities and tactics will be needed to conduct military operations, and at the same time, the outcome of the operations will be unpredictable. However, what should worry the alliance is that, due to geographical characteristics, it would be difficult to regain control over the Suwalki Gap if the area is lost.

As far as the ethnic factor in the Suwalki Corridor is concerned, at first sight Russia seems to have a disadvantage. Elak and Šliwa (2016) point out that the population in the Suwalki Corridor mainly comprises Polish nationals (about 2 million people), whereas the ethnic minorities in the region are Ukrainians (65,000) and Lithuanians (about 25,000). There are only 11,000 Russians living in the Suwalki Corridor. Thus, there is no significant Russian-minded community living in the Suwalki Corridor that could be used by Russia in a similar way as during the annexation of Crimea, allowing Russia to diminish the 'costs' of the aggression. However, it has been argued that a potential Russian influence still exists in Suwalki, referring to Russia's attempts to attract Polish citizens to take part in militarised tournaments and other events, for example the International Paintball Tournament 'Road to Victory' which in various years has also involved participants from Poland. Also some Lithuanian radicals, most likely supported by Russia, have raised claims in social media that Lithuania should regain the Suwalki Corridor from Poland (Grigas 2016).

Another issue is whether the population of Kaliningrad could be exploited by Russia to initiate conflict in the region by relying, for example, on a 'near neighbourhood' argument or through broad public support in this region. The majority of the population living in the Kaliningrad region are, of course, Russian citizens (about 95% of the total population or 896,000 individuals based on the survey from 2010) (Federal'naya sluzhba gosudarstvennoy statistiki 2012). At first glance, this aspect seems to speak in favour of Russia and to diminish the potential 'costs' of the conflict, for example costs related to information warfare, justifying and searching support for Russia's aggressive actions in the region.

Furthermore, despite some expectations in the international arena that there is a potential for an independent regional identity to be formulated in Kaliningrad region, recent developments reflect rather the opposite. Over the last 10–15 years, the share of people living in Kaliningrad and identifying themselves as 'citizens of Russia' has increased significantly: The share of respondents who considered themselves as 'citizens of Russia' as a first choice was 24.6% in 2001, 32.5% in 2004, 36% in 2011 and 41.4% in 2015 (Kojala & Keršanskas 2016).

However, two aspects could still work against Russia when exploiting the ethnic factor in a potential confrontation in the Kaliningrad region. First, previously the region has seriously challenged decisions of the Russian political elite. For example, massive protests against the politics of the Russian political elite took place in Kaliningrad in 2010, and Russia's ruling party, 'United Russia', received no seats in the local council elections in 2015 (Kojala & Keršanskas 2016). Second, although the share of ethnic minorities in the Kaliningrad region is marginal considering their share in the total population, due to its historical background the ethnic composition of the population in the Kaliningrad region is diversified, covering many groups of ethnic minorities (see **Figure 1**, which illustrates the biggest ethnic minorities in the Kaliningrad region). This means that it would be rather difficult for Russia to address and exploit the ethnic minorities in the Kaliningrad region as one single group in case of conflict.

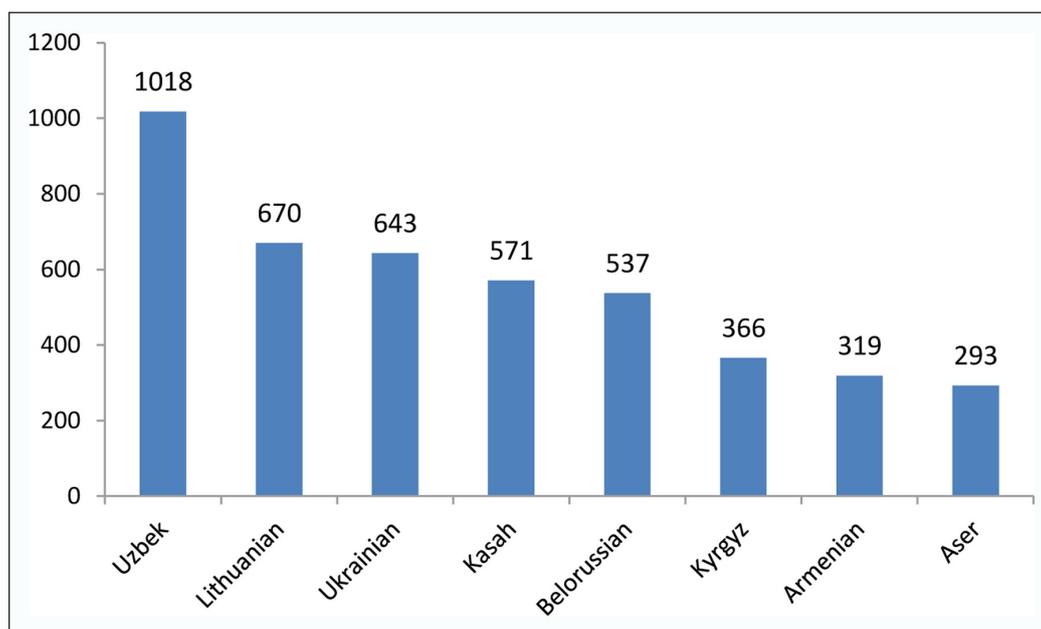


Figure 1: Biggest ethnic minorities in the Kaliningrad region (2010). Source: Federal'naya sluzhba gosudarstvennoy statistiki (2012).

Next to geographic and ethnic factors, the level of economic development of the Kaliningrad region together with the region's economic outlook indicates that economically the Kaliningrad region is rather insignificant to Russia. Since 1996, the Kaliningrad region has enjoyed the privileges of a 'special economic zone' (SEZ),¹ which has allowed the region to trade tax-free and pay no duties to Russia. For this reason, in the early 2000s and before the economic crisis, the region showed the fastest annual growth numbers among Russia's regions (Palet 2014). In 2006, the SEZ was updated with the new federal law, giving enterprises the right to export goods manufactured on the basis of imported components to Russia without paying any duties or taxes until April 2016 and the right to export such products until 2031 (Mladin & Duarte Gomes 2013). These privileges have expired amid Western sanctions on Russia, and the end of the SEZ is expected to have a negative impact on at least 785 local companies that currently employ 24% of the local workforce (Sukhankin 2016). No official data on economic development at the regional level have been published yet.

Despite all the privileges the Kaliningrad region has gained, the federal subject has recently shown fluctuating growth numbers, and the region's nominal GDP represents less than 1% of Russia's total nominal GDP (see **Table 1**). The average wage in the Kaliningrad region is significantly below the Russian average wage (the region actually belongs to the three regions in the Severo-Zapadnyi Federal Okrug with the lowest average wage) and the share of the population living below the minimum subsistence level in the Kaliningrad region (% of total population in the region) is higher than in Russia overall (see also **Table 1**).

Therefore, the 'costs' of giving up the Kaliningrad region in economic terms with the hypothetical aim to avoid a conflict with the NATO alliance would be rather insignificant for Russia. The only economic reason why Russia could prefer to 'keep' the Kaliningrad region is that the Kaliningrad Sea Commercial Port is the only ice-free Russian port on the Baltic Sea as well as the largest regional port complex in terms of volume, technical support and services granted to the cargo owners (Mladin & Duarte Gomes 2013). Also major shipping and fishing industries are located in Kaliningrad.

To sum up, both geographical conditions in the Suwalki Corridor and the ethnic composition of both the Suwalki Gap and the Kaliningrad region make it difficult for Russia to achieve rapid dominance in the regional conflict, as seen in Ukraine some years ago. In economic terms, 'sacrifice' of the Kaliningrad region to the West to avoid escalation of the conflict could – rationally thinking – also be under consideration, assuming that the region's economic potential is insignificant to Russia. Furthermore, Russia has other options with regard to putting pressure on the Baltic countries or even isolating them that do not involve triggering expensive military conflict with an uncertain outcome. Russia's aggressive behaviour against Estonia in 2007 is a good illustration of its methods for putting pressure on the neighbouring countries. Namely, when Estonia in 2007 removed a memorial dedicated to Soviet soldiers, Russia responded aggressively, deploying a wide array of measures to damage Estonia. Russian politicians arrived in Estonia to 'rile things up', while Russian-language websites offered instructions on how to attack Estonian websites. In addition, Russia's Federation Council called on its government to cut off diplomatic relations with Estonia. The Estonian embassy in Moscow was blockaded by Kremlin-sponsored Russian youth movements. Russian officials called for boycotts against Estonian productions. Trade on the Russian-Estonian border ground to a halt, as truck traffic at the main bridge into Estonia was blocked and the delivery of oil, coal and petroleum products to Estonia was cut off. Cyberattacks were accompanied by psychological onslaught, and so on (Veebel 2015).

Overall, these arguments speak in favour of the idea that the outbreak of an expensive military conflict with uncertain outcomes in the Kaliningrad region and the Suwalki Corridor would actually not be in the rational interests of Russia, if seen at the regional theatre level and not to count assets already spent on fuelling the escalation. Basically the same applies to the NATO alliance, which also has to struggle with difficult geographical and logistical conditions should conflict break out in the Suwalki Gap.

The Suwalki Gap and Kaliningrad: Russian and NATO Strategic Considerations

From a purely military perspective, the geostrategic location of the Kaliningrad region and the Suwalki Corridor is associated both with opportunities and challenges from Russia's perspective. On the one hand, it allows early warning and forward area air defence options in combination with units from the mainland, especially from the Western Military District. Furthermore, the Baltic Fleet with its headquarters in Kaliningrad possesses bases allowing control over the central Baltic Sea region and access to the Gulf of Finland, influencing not only the Baltic countries but also Finland and Sweden's security and freedom of manoeuvre. On the

¹ See Vinokurov (2004) for a more thorough discussion.

Table 1: Comparison of selected socio-economic indicators in the period 2010–2017: Russia versus the Kaliningrad region. Source: Federal'naya sluzhba gosudarstvennoy statistiki (2018).

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Nominal GDP (million RUB): <i>Russia total</i>	37,687,768	45,392,277	49,926,069	54,013,599	58,900,652	64,997,039
Nominal GDP (million RUB): <i>Kaliningrad region</i>	195,749.1	241,004.8	265,361.2	277,362.6	306,232.8	328,760
Share of Kaliningrad region in total nominal GDP of Russia (%)	0.52	0.53	0.53	0.51	0.52	0.51
Annual growth rate of nominal GDP: <i>Russia total</i> (%)		20.44	9.99	8.19	9.055	10.35
Annual growth rate of nominal GDP: <i>Kaliningrad region</i> (%)		23.12	10.11	4.52	10.41	7.36
Average monthly wage (RUB): <i>Russia total</i>				25,928.2	27,767	30,467
Average monthly wage (RUB): <i>Kaliningrad region</i>				20,641.8	23,117	25,875
Share of people living below the minimum subsistence level: <i>Russia total</i> (% of total population)		12.7	10.7	10.8	11.2	13.3
Share of people living below the minimum subsistence level: <i>Kaliningrad region</i> (% of total population in the region)		12.7	10.8	12.4	12.1	14.1

other hand, the location of Kaliningrad as a specific federal subject of the Russian Federation poses a serious problem for Russia itself, because due to cultural notions of 'national pride' Russia must be proactive and constantly expose its military capabilities in the Kaliningrad region, although in practical terms there is no need for that, as the NATO alliance is not threatening to take over Russia's enclave.

From the alliance's perspective, many military and civilian experts have pointed to the threat that because of the Kaliningrad region and the Suwalki Corridor the Baltic countries could remain isolated from the allies in case of a conflict. For example, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges has warned that 'Kaliningrad now has the ability to deny access of our [US] Navy or any NATO Navy to come to the Baltic Sea. From Kaliningrad Russia can stop entering in to the Baltic Sea, and there we have three NATO allies – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania' ('US General fears' 2015: para. 3). According to the 2016 RAND Corporation report, in case of hostilities,

NATO forces would have to transit the 'Kaliningrad corridor,' a 110- to 150-km-wide stretch of territory between the Russian enclave and Belarus that could be subject to long-range artillery and flank attacks from both sides and would require a commitment of (scarce) NATO forces to secure. (Shlapak & Johnson 2016: 4).

Chief of the Estonian Defence Forces General Riho Terras has stated that 'in the long term Russia's wish is to bring the Baltic Sea and the passages leading to it more and more under its control and to control it much like it does the Black Sea' (Cavegn 2016: para. 1). Also former Minister of Defence Hannes Hanso has pointed to the need 'to keep our eyes open in the air, on the water, and everywhere else' (Ibid.). Similar views have been shared by General Wesley Clark (retired), General Sir Richard Shirreff (retired), Minister of Defence of Estonia Jüri Luik (Clark, Luik, Ramms, & Shirreff 2016) and others. Furthermore, for many years now the analyses of international think tanks like the RAND Corporation (Shlapak & Johnson 2016), the Potomac Foundation, Chatham House and of regional research centres such as the Center for Security and Strategic Research (ICDS; see Praks 2015) have expressed concerns over the growing security threats posed by Russia.

Up to now, both parties to the confrontation have definitely sent each other 'costly signals' in material terms. Russia has constantly observed NATO's attempts to enlarge, and, in the words of one commentator,

although Russia was not able to prevent NATO enlargement into Visegrad its leaders have informed the West with unmistakable clarity that they view the Baltic membership in NATO as 'red line' that should not be crossed and will consider any NATO expansion into that region as direct threat to Russia's vital national interests (Alafuzoff 2001: 141).

NATO has launched several initiatives such as the establishment of the Baltic Air Policing mission in 2004 to guard the airspace over the three nations, joint exercises, investments into the BALNET (Baltic Air Surveillance Network and Control System) and military exchanges. Russia has constantly criticised these initiatives. As a response, Russian armed forces have conducted large-scale snap exercises, violated airspace and conducted navy manoeuvres close to its exclusive economic zones to demonstrate its significant capabilities when it comes to facing NATO. The 'answers' were, for example, military exercises Zapad 2009, Zapad 2013 and Zapad 2017 in the Western Military District of Russia, which were basically interpreted by Western experts as a political manifesto against the presence of NATO in Eastern Europe. It is obvious that systematic military exercises in all the regular military districts of Russia² are the country's reaction to NATO's military exercises;³ for example, Zapad 2013 was a response to NATO's exercises Baltic Host 2013 and Steadfast Jazz 2013. The experts have labelled Russia's response to NATO's activities as an example of 'Kremlin's muscle flexing, designed to escalate concerns of NATO and especially Eastern Europe and the three Baltic States' (Šliwa 2013: 56). However, viewed objectively the process is rather mutual, where both sides try to deter the opponent with complex military exercises.

² For a comprehensive overview of the military operations conducted by Russia in 2008–2018 and their military dimension, see e.g. Johnson (2017).

³ E.g., an overview of the key NATO and allied multinational exercises in 2017 is available, see NATO. (2017, May). *Key NATO & allied exercises. Fact sheet*. Retrieved from https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_05/20170510_1705-factsheet_exercises_en.pdf.

The Suwalki Gap: Reflections on How to Avoid Escalation

To sum up, both the NATO alliance and Russia have different advantages and disadvantages with respect to a potential future escalation in the Suwalki Corridor and the Kaliningrad region. The main weakness of NATO is its reliance on public opinion, which limits its ability to counter Russian escalation. Conceptually, at least, the alliance has much deeper pockets, although it is an entirely different matter whether its superiority of resources could be realised in practice. Russia enjoys a public affairs advantage, in that it must meet few demands to justify its military actions, which may allow it to outlast NATO in a conventional force brinkmanship scenario despite having much fewer resources.

Unhappily and despite the apparent irrationality for all parties, the dynamics of the current relations between Russia and the NATO alliance clearly point towards escalation. Today, Russia is accusing the alliance of provocations and instability in the neighbourhood regions of Russia. To quote a recent statement by Vladimir Putin:

NATO is building up its military potential near our borders and attempts are being made to halt integration processes with Russia's participation, provoke new and stir up old conflicts in the post-Soviet space and in regions neighbouring on Russia, with all the ensuing consequences – military and political instability, the growth of smuggling and crime and acute humanitarian problems. ('Putin warns' 2018: para. 3).

In response, NATO stated that Russia is contributing to the increasingly unpredictable and unstable Euro-Atlantic security environment, and 'in response, NATO has taken defensive measures to protect and assure its members and will continue to do so as long as necessary' (NATO 2016: 19). The same applies to the alliance's response to the latest military exercises, Zapad 2017, when it was promised by the alliance to 'continue to be vigilant and ready to act if needed' (Johnson 2017: para. 23). The view has been expressed that the alliance has to stick to this approach, should Russia continue 'its military build-up in the Western Military District and its programme of provocative and destabilising exercise activities' (Johnson 2017: para. 23).

It seems that although both parties to the confrontation have sent each other 'costly signals', the current deterrence strategy is not working. Conducting more and more complex military exercises and increasing military capabilities in the Suwalki Corridor and the Kaliningrad region have not made the opponent more afraid; on the contrary, it has forced both sides to further mobilise their resources. This applies particularly to Russia who every time the alliance has made a move seems to be more and more motivated to proactively expose its military capabilities. In this sense, the constant increase in the number of military forces and capabilities in the Suwalki Corridor and the Kaliningrad region seems to be irrational, since it does not bring the expected results in terms of de-escalating potential military tensions in the area. Today, in military terms, the conventional imbalance in the Baltic region is 1:8 in favour of Russia, which means that in real terms 18 additional brigades are needed to initially equalise regional conventional capabilities. In this light, the situation is already relatively hopeless for the Western countries, meaning that NATO should deploy 18 brigades to attain a balance plus additional brigades to gain the initiative. However, there is neither enough logistics in the Baltic countries to achieve this, nor has the NATO alliance enough capabilities to do so, not to mention the lack of motivation to mobilise additional resources in time of peace.

As far as 'the more, the better' principle is concerned, in military circles the discussion of mutual deterrence has also focussed on anti-access/area denial capabilities (A2/AD), covering long-range capabilities both to prevent and degrade an advancing opponent's ability to enter an operational area and to limit the opponent's freedom of action within the operational area (see e.g. Williams 2017 as well as the other articles in this issue). It has been estimated that Russia owns a seemingly impressive array of long-range A2/AD systems that could interfere with NATO's activities and operations mostly in the Baltic Sea region, but also in the Black Sea, eastern Mediterranean and Barents Sea region. The threats stemming from Russia's multifaceted abilities have been stressed also by General Wesley Clark (retired), General Sir Richard Shirreff (retired) and Jüri Luik, Minister of Defence of Estonia, arguing that

Russia would be capable not just of sealing off the Baltic states in the 'bubble' that covers air, sea and land dimensions, but also of fiercely contesting other spaces of critical importance to military operations – in the electromagnetic spectrum, cyberspace, and even outer space (by using anti-satellite capabilities). (Clark et al. 2016: 12–13).

In addition, similar opinions are shared by General Sir Richard Barrons (retired), who argues that Russia could be ready for action within 48 hours and 'some land and control of airspace and territorial waters could be lost before NATO's 28 member states had even agreed how to respond' (Haynes 2016: para. 2 & 3). Likewise, in 2015, senior NATO officials, including General Philip Breedlove, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, and General Frank Gorenc, Commander Allied Air Command, have raised concerns over A2/AD in a European context (Barrie 2016). In this way, the NATO alliance clearly feels threatened by the reinforcement of the Kaliningrad Oblast as well as the occupation of the Crimean peninsula and the development in Arctic capabilities, all of which contribute to the enhancement of Russia's A2/AD shield. At the same time, there is no clear threat assessment of whether the activities in the Kaliningrad region and the Suwalki Corridor are in accordance with the idea of the A2/AD capabilities in the first place. So a likely scenario is that with all of its propaganda and informational disorientation Russia has managed to deter the alliance using the conceptual framework with which the Western countries are familiar. At least the current rhetoric of the members of the Western military community refers to the situation where Western military circles are busy with self-deterrence and not focussing on the more realistic threats in the Kaliningrad region, such as Russia's potential influence in Suwalki in the form of Russian attempts to attract Polish citizens to take part in militarised tournaments and other events or supporting Lithuanian radicals' claims that Lithuania should regain the Suwalki Corridor from Poland.

Unfortunately, military conflict between Russia and the NATO alliance cannot be fully excluded as a possibility in the near future. In principle, the alliance members may choose to push Russia to the last line of escalation or else force Russia either to surrender in economic terms or to get involved in an actual conflict. Although costly, these scenarios would almost certainly mean the end of Vladimir Putin's political regime. Alternatively, the NATO alliance could choose to ignore Russia's attempts to escalate the conflict around Kaliningrad and the Suwalki Corridor. Such de-strategising of the region may be reinforced by escalating conflict somewhere else, for example in Libya or the Arctic region. If the Western countries do not intend to go to the last line of escalation, there is no sense in deploying additional battalions to the Baltic/Kaliningrad region.

Another issue is, of course, whether in real terms the conflict breaks out in the Suwalki Corridor or somewhere else. In this light, a glance at the possible escalation of the conflict is fully justified. Elak and Šliwa (2016) have suggested that both the 'hybrid warfare' scenario and the use of minorities, similar to events in Ukraine, are unlikely in the Suwalki Corridor, because 'little green men' would be noticed early, should conflict break out.

Under these circumstances, it would be fully rational to assume that both parties to the conflict could be ready to find a more or less satisfying peaceful solution instead of escalating the conflict. Until now, the opponents in the Suwalki Corridor have sent each other 'costly signals', but instead of communicating a willingness to stop fighting, the signals aimed to express determination to fight. As unexpected as it might seem, the fully rational solution in this light would be for both parties to find a common ground that is profitable for both sides. The NATO alliance will most likely be interested in neutralising Russia's aggressive regional ambitions and in stabilising the current security situation around the world without being directly involved in military conflicts. Whereas Russia's political elite is using constant tensions with its neighbouring countries and with the alliance to find broad public support at the domestic level, these same elites would most likely be interested in a solution that would help the country's government show the people of Russia that the country is accepted or even respected in the international political arena. Considering the waves of public protest against the corruption of Russia's political elite in recent years all over the country, the pressure on Russia's government 'to do something' becomes more and more intense, and the time frame for making decisions becomes more and more narrow.

In this sense, the common ground for both parties to the conflict lies in promoting mutual long-term strategic partnership. This would allow both Russia and NATO to achieve their aims without being involved in a direct military conflict. The keyword thus is 'long-term', referring to a well-designed and multifaceted strategy that includes mutually beneficial elements, but also restrictions and requirements which need to be followed for the long-term partnership to work. In principle, this is very similar to the 'carrot and stick' approach used by the EU.

It is obvious that today Russia will not take the initiative to find a common ground with the NATO alliance. This means that the 'carrot' must be something very special for Russia, something that would allow its elites to send a clear signal to their domestic audiences that Russian authority and influence are increasing regionally and globally. Developing such a concession is certainly going to be tricky. To succeed, NATO would need to allow Russia's political elite to step back in domestic anti-NATO rhetoric or even accept being domestically labelled the 'chicken', without losing broad public support. Second, the alliance's long-term solution needs

to be accepted by all allies of NATO, both big and small. However, this could be very difficult, assuming that the security concerns and the perceptions of the allies on security are very different.

It is clear that this type of solution is not going to be reached overnight, but it requires both the good will of the parties and a neutral platform for conducting strategic discussions. In the short term, what the alliance could do today is to change the overall balance of the conflict for Russia and to push the country to opt for a peaceful solution instead of conflict escalation. The first thing to do here is to also build strategic relations with Russia's allies. In the Kaliningrad region, this applies particularly to Belarus. With Zapad 2017 Russia proved its interests in maintaining its greater authority in its relationship with Belarus. It was also a message to the Western countries that Belarus is and will be in the area of influence of the Russian Federation. Most likely the 'carrots' of both Russia and Belarus are similar, based on the assumption that both political regimes are currently treated as pariahs in the international arena and are relying on public domestic support. Thus, building long-term strategic relations with Belarus could work as a test area for the NATO alliance.

Last, but not least, for the Western countries it is highly important to make an overall decision and to commit to this decision as fast as possible, since any subsequent changes later on would be very costly. So, if NATO is committed to go 'all in' in the Baltic region, it should decisively deploy to the area without paying attention to Moscow's complains. The more unexpected and disproportional the deployments of convincing A2AD capabilities and other resources are, the faster the game can reach its end. However, if NATO is not committed to go 'all in' with a strategic confrontation with Russia in the Suwalki Corridor and in Kaliningrad, there is no point in deploying additional assets in the region or paying any attention to Russia's rhetoric. On the contrary, the stakes should be lowered, possibly by creating tensions in other regions in the hope that this will make Russia think that it has missed something. Russia could be convinced that real strategic gains are to be found elsewhere, either in the Arctic region, in Libya or in Syria. Whatever the costs, NATO should prevent Russia from putting new bids on the table in the Baltic region, which would make leaving the game in the future even more complicated. The regional conflict, which at certain times has developed into a strategic confrontation, should be de-escalated to the regional level, where risks and rationality are calculated on the basis of the value of regional assets and not global confrontation.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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