

Detering Russian Aggression in the Baltic States

What it Takes to Win

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CT-467

Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces on March 1, 2017.



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Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

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Testimony of David A. Shlapak¹
The RAND Corporation²

Before the Committee on Armed Services
Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces
United States House of Representatives

March 1, 2017

Put most plainly, the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) confront three related challenges in deterring Russian aggression in the Baltics (and, more generally, wherever NATO territory may be threatened). Solving all three of these is vital to achieving core American objectives in Europe, which have been consistent and strong, through Republican administrations and Democratic, liberal and conservative, since 1945: ensure peace and stability, support democratic and market forces, and prevent the use of armed force to coerce the free people of Europe or to alter established borders. In this context, “winning” means putting in place the wherewithal to effectively deter any Russian adventurism aimed at NATO member states by being prepared to deny Moscow its objectives without escalating to the first use of nuclear weapons.

It is critical to note that “victory” here does not mean fighting a war with Russia and winning; that would be a strategic failure of historic dimensions. It means preventing conflict through a combination of strength and engagement not terribly unlike—in concept, if not scale—that which ultimately brought the Cold War to a conclusion with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

These conditions do not exist today. RAND has conducted a series of war games—more than 20, over a period now approaching three years—that have demonstrated that NATO’s current posture is woefully inadequate to resist a Russian attack on the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. We had participants from throughout the U.S. defense and intelligence

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author’s alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

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communities at these war games, as well as our NATO allies. In no case have they been able to keep Russian forces from the Estonian capital of Tallinn or the Latvian capital of Riga for more than 60 hours; in some cases, NATO's defeat has been written into history in a day and a half. Such an outcome would leave the United States and NATO with no good options, Russia potentially re-established as the dominant strategic actor in Central Europe, NATO collapsed, and the trans-Atlantic security bond in tatters. It would make a failure of nearly 75 years of bipartisan American efforts to sustain the security of Europe, which Democrats and Republicans alike, since Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, have understood to be vital to the safety and prosperity of the United States.

The first step towards winning eventually is not losing right now, which would be NATO's current fate. So, NATO needs to be able to *stay in the game*. The minimum requirement for deterrence by denial along NATO's frontier with Russia is not to offer Moscow a vision of an easy strategic victory—the chance to register a *fait accompli* against minimal resistance. While on any given day, the Russian leadership may not be tempted to seize even such tempting low-hanging fruit, the challenge NATO confronts is not successfully to deter on an average day; it is to deter on the one day out of a thousand, or 5,000, when Moscow, for whatever reason, sees the prospect of a crushing win over its most dangerous adversary as an attractive prospect.

The requirements for this are nontrivial, but hardly overwhelming. RAND analysis indicates that a force of about seven brigades, including, importantly three armor-heavy brigades—armor brigade combat teams (ABCTs), in U.S. Army parlance—in addition to the national defense forces of the Baltic states, and properly supported with fires, fixed- and rotary-wing aviation, engineering, logistics, and other enablers, and with adequate headquarters capacity for planning and command can prevent the *fait accompli*.³ To be very specific, this force—present and ready to fight at the outset of hostilities—can, if properly employed, enforce an operational pause on a Russian ground force of up to 40–50 battalion tactical groups (BTGs), while retaining sufficiently large lodgments outside Tallinn and Riga to protect them from the bulk of Russian artillery.

Our assessment is that this force could sustain itself on the defensive against the Russian offensive for up to 28 days. This leads to the second of the three challenges NATO faces: *winning the game*. While deterrence is greatly enhanced by the ability to deny Russia a quick win, ultimately the seven-brigade force appears inadequate to hold out indefinitely against the much larger and heavier Russian order of battle, let alone counterattack to evict them from NATO territory.⁴ Accomplishing this requires a substantial additional increment of force.

We currently estimate that an additional nine to 14 maneuver brigades—again, properly supported by fires and other enablers—would need to be prepared to counterattack to restore

³ See David A Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*, Santa Monica: RAND, RR-1253-A, 2016. A U.S. Army ABCT consists of over 4,500 soldiers and includes about 90 tanks, 90 infantry fighting vehicles, and several hundred other tracked and wheeled vehicles.

⁴ As the discussion should make clear, the seven-brigade force cannot conduct a forward defense of the Baltic states; significant amounts of territory would likely be lost to the initial Russian offensive. We have not conducted any analysis of the size of the force needed to hold the line far forward.

lines of communication from Poland towards Riga, reinforce defense, and eventually conduct a counteroffensive to drive the Russians back behind their prewar borders.⁵ Further analysis is needed on this issue; while the general nature and scale of the required force is clear, its generation—most European NATO armies are ill-prepared to contribute significant heavy forces on short notice—deployment, and sustainment need examination.

Both staying in and winning the game—which are about putting in place the pieces of an *unambiguously credible conventional deterrent posture*—require more than combat troops. Today, NATO’s defense infrastructure—the array of headquarters, bases, other facilities, lines of communications, transportation assets and legal arrangement to facilitate the deployment and sustainment of forces—is woefully inadequate to support a warfighting posture east of the Oder River. U.S. support operations remain localized in southwestern Germany, more than 1,000 miles from the likely combat front east of Riga; attempting to support multibrigade operations from that distance would be a logistical impossibility. The United States and especially its European allies need to make careful, focused, but likely extensive investment in revamping and revitalizing NATO’s ability to receive, move, and support large combat formations along its eastern boundary, and especially in all three Baltic states.

Substantial work is still needed to determine precisely what needs to be done and how to prioritize this work. However, RAND’s wargaming suggests that NATO needs to be able to rapidly mobilize, deploy, fight, and sustain up to 21 maneuver brigades, organized probably in two or three corps, in a full-scale conflict with Russia in the Baltics. Given current plans and capabilities, the U.S. Army might be expected to supply up to 12 of those brigades:

- up to three ABCTs stationed in the Baltics—the “stay in the game” force.⁶
- three more ABCTs drawn from secure brigade-sized prepositioning sites
- up to six additional armored, infantry (IBCT), or Stryker brigade combat teams.

The Army should also anticipate potentially being called upon to deploy and support three or four fires brigades—at least one permanently stationed in the region and another in prepositioning—and two or three combat aviation brigades.

Because NATO’s command and control structure relies on consensus decisionmaking by the alliance’s political leadership, the United States may also be obligated to provide at least one Corps headquarters to perform prewar planning and warfighting command, at least in the initial stages of any fast-moving conflict.

⁵ See Tim Bonds, *Limiting Regret: Building the Army We Will Need*, Santa Monica: RAND, CT-437, 2015. NATO’s air forces would also likely require reinforcement to make up for losses during this time frame. However, the most crippling problem confronting NATO’s airpower after the first few days of conflict would be shortfalls in the most modern and effective weapons and munitions.

⁶ Currently, the three eFP battlegroups spread across Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania could, in aggregate and with proper training and exercising, fill one of the three heavy brigade requirements for the “stay in the game” deterrent. However, as currently conceived, each will be tightly integrated with the national defense forces of the host country, and there are no plans to ever treat them as an integrated combat force. Hence, we do not count them against the requirement for three heavy brigade for the initial deterrent force; initial wargaming of the “post-Warsaw Summit” NATO posture suggests that this is appropriate.

Critical to all of this will be NATO's approach to exercising and training. All of the investment in soldiers and equipment, railroad cars and planning, will be of little use if the alliance doesn't realistically exercise its plans and capabilities. The successful deployment of the first "heel-to-toe" U.S. rotational ABCT in January 2017 was a sign of how far the U.S. Army, both at home and in Europe, has come in a very short time—such an exercise could hardly have been imagined a few years ago. However, all involved recognize that the long-planned movement of a single brigade is hardly a full test of the scale and complexity of the activity that would be necessary to respond to a full-blown crisis in the region. And unfortunately, the threat exists today—the United States and its allies must "spin up" to confront it with some degree of urgency. A robust and increasingly realistic schedule of deployment and warfighting exercises, combined with aggressive home station and predeployment training, is absolutely necessary.

All of this will cost money. As the new Administration, the Pentagon, and Congress contemplate increases in defense spending, the Army has the opportunity—and the obligation—to make resource allocation choices that result not just in a bigger Army, but a more capable one, better able to execute the Service's most vital missions to support the nation's most vital interests, one of which is surely deterring conflict with the only other power able to extinguish our way of life in a matter of minutes. This means among other things taking the opportunity to expand the number of ABCTs in the force. The currently planned number of 10 active heavy brigades (the nine current ones, plus another scheduled for conversion from an IBCT) is entirely inadequate to support requirements in Korea, the Middle East, and Europe. Indeed, Europe alone could demand six, a commitment that the planned force could likely not support and certainly could not sustain.

Finally, the third challenge is that the United States and its allies must sustain deterrence—through the demonstrated capacity to *stay in the game* and then *win it*—without behaving in such a way that they unnecessarily increase the likelihood of a catastrophic outcome—*blowing up the game*.

As discussed above, any potential crisis or conflict with Russia would lie deep in the proverbial shadow cast by nuclear weapons. A strong conventional deterrent helps manage these dangers: first, by decreasing the overall likelihood of a conflict erupting and, second, by reducing the pressure on the NATO side to contemplate immediate nuclear escalation to ward off rapid defeat. It may increase these dangers, however, by magnifying fears on the Russian side either of a NATO offensive threat or of the potential consequences to Moscow of being conventionally defeated should it fail to be deterred.

On the first score, the operational realities of the situation should serve to mitigate actual, if not rhetorical, Russian anxieties. Less than a handful of NATO brigades on Baltic territory, even backed by the alliance's ultimately superior air and sea power, do not represent a credible threat to the territory of the Russian Republic. The notion of NATO mounting an attack on Russia with three brigades is strategically, operationally, and tactically absurd—even assuming that the alliance would somehow reach agreement to undertake such a course.

The latter fear is more difficult to mitigate, since ultimately the prospect of precisely such a defeat is the basis of the deterrent NATO hopes to present. That said, it at least in part can be

managed by carefully communicating to Moscow NATO's intent, and backing those words with appropriate actions.

Thus, the alliance and the United States must continue to seek to maintain channels of communication with Russia at the political and military levels. Only if the two sides are talking—even about minor issues, such as managing incidents at sea or in the air—can they make progress towards allaying mutual suspicions, thereby rendering the mutual deterrence equation more stable and perhaps, ultimately, less necessary.

The idea of talking with the Russians while maintaining a posture of military strength is neither contradictory nor new. For years, it has been the foundation of U.S. policy towards its rising East Asian great power competitor, China, and it was the approach that characterized the last 20 years of the Cold War.

The United States and its allies consistently sought dialog with the Soviet Union across a wide range of grounds, from the narrowest questions of enhancing the safety of forces operating in close proximity to the broadest ones of human rights, while expending herculean efforts to maintain powerful military deterrents against the prospect of Soviet aggression.

To summarize: Today, NATO does not have in place an adequate conventional deterrent to Russian aggression against its most exposed member states, the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. A minimum deterrent—one that keeps NATO in the game for longer than two or three days—requires a force of about seven brigades, three of them armored, with appropriate support and sustainment. A more robust posture—one that can “win the game” by successfully defending for an extended period and, if necessary, eventually counterattacking to eject Russian forces—will require up to 12 additional brigades from the United States and its allies. NATO's efforts to rebuild its conventional deterrent posture must be combined with an ongoing attempt to establish productive dialogue with Moscow, to reduce the propensity for crisis and minimize the chances of blowing up the game.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today and stand ready to address your questions.