



LITTLE GREEN MEN IN THE BALTIC STATES ARE AN ARTICLE 5 EVENT

By Lukas Milevski



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The ongoing debate about whether or not Russia's little green men and so-called hybrid warfare are sufficient to invoke NATO's Article 5 has caused much concern in the Baltic States about how the rest of NATO would respond to such an invocation. Analysts identify hybrid warfare by its blend of non-military instruments of state power, such as media penetration or ownership and economic sanctions, with semi-ambiguous use of military power. The term 'little green men' stems from Russia's annexation of Crimea, during which unidentified but clearly professional soldiers masquerading as local self-defense militia became a focal point for international media. NATO's Article 5 is the alliance's collective defense clause, stipulating that an attack upon one is an attack upon all. Little green men are—or at least, should be—an Article 5 concern. Two related but distinct tacks support this point: politically, the utility of little green men has already culminated, while strategically, they constitute an unambiguous armed attack.

Politically, little green men are effectively a one-shot strategy. They rely on the political ambiguity over their identity and allegiance to stay a response, particularly an armed response, until the situation on the ground moves irreversibly in their favor. This is what occurred in Crimea. As the crisis went on, everyone knew that the little green men were Russian soldiers but the situation afforded just enough ambiguity to allow the West to assume a wait-and-see political posture as if their true identity had not been confirmed. Putin himself did admit afterward that they were in fact Russian forces. Ukraine of course learned from its mistake of inaction in Crimea and responded to the Russian presence in the Donbas, a response which forced similarly ambiguous Russian escalation of support to its proxies. Now that Russia is heavily involved in Syria—[allegedly](#) also including more “hybrid warfare”—the Donbas enclaves are feeling the pinch of reduced Russian support.

Little green men have proven themselves in Ukraine to be just another form of Russian military power. Where the little green men have succeeded, the Russian state apparatus has followed. Where they have not succeeded, they remain, if not politically deniable, then at least politically disposable.

The ambiguity of the little green men is calculated to increase the political difficulty of a second, or third, party response. In every case, however, political ambiguity worked best when political interest, political will, and/or media attention were lacking. In Crimea, both Ukraine and the West lacked sufficient political interest and will for a strong response, although media attention abounded. In the Donbas, Ukraine found the interest and will to fight, and persisted in doing so even as international media attention waned. In Syria, should the allegations of Russian hybrid warfare prove to be true, none of these three factors exists—the West does not have the interest, will, or attention span to respond to an independent Russian role in the Syrian civil war.

These same conditions would not be replicated if little green men should appear in the countries many have speculated may be next—the Baltic States. The Balts have learned from Crimea and Donbas, and understand the appropriate response to a hypothetical appearance of little green men. As Minister of Defense, current President Raimonds Vējonis stated bluntly several times on the record that if little green men appear in Latvia, military force will be employed: “we will shoot them.”

Nor would the Baltic States be a media backwater should serious Russian-themed trouble occur. The topic would force itself onto the world's—and especially NATO's—immediate political agenda. An invocation would oblige NATO to confront the reality that the little green men directly represent Russian military and state power and that a NATO constituent country is under direct military attack. Ultimately NATO remains an alliance committed to the mutual defense of its member states. If Article 5 is not upheld, the alliance loses not only its credibility, but also its desirability. On 1-2 December 2015 in Brussels NATO recognized as much by adopting a policy which allows invocation of Article 5 not just in response to overt invasion, but also in case of hybrid warfare, as one choice among others (such as Article 4, consultation) open to member countries.

Invocation of Article 5 is inevitable in such an eventuality, but is it an appropriate response to little green men? It is. [Strategically](#), little green men are straightforward, as is all landpower. They took control of events in Crimea. They isolated the Ukrainian army and prevented other Ukrainian state institutions from functioning. This enabled local Crimean accomplices “legitimately” to separate from Ukraine and join Russia. Such a separation may be attempted without violence, as in Crimea, or with violence, as in Donbas. Whether or not violence ensues depends largely on the reaction of the invaded state, albeit influenced by other factors such as Russian media penetration and military tactics.

The prior and longstanding prevalence of Russian media in Ukraine's greater information sphere played a large role in determining the level of violence required to achieve the goal of separation and annexation. Russia's media penetration was arguably decisive in Crimea, where in any case the majority population was already approximately pro-Russian. Sevastopol in particular had never ceased to be an outpost of the Soviet Union and considered NATO “the enemy” even into the 1990s and early 2000s—evidence that the population may have been particularly receptive to Russia's information domination. A similar media advantage, however, did not achieve the same results in the Donbas.

Russian tactics also played a major role in determining whether or not violence erupted. In Crimea, the Russians combined a strategic offensive, the invasion of Crimea, with a tactical defensive of encircling but not attacking Ukrainian army bases, which forced the Ukrainians ultimately to make the politically significant choice either to surrender or to attack. They surrendered. In the Donbas, the little green men crossed the border in considerable strength only after the fighting had already started, which prolonged the bloodshed.

Whether or not violence was actually required, even in Crimea its threat never vanished. The introduction of military force was the capstone among Russian instruments of pressure and suasion which sealed the annexation of Crimea. As long as military force was present on the ground, annexation would have occurred even without the information domination of the previous decade, although the campaign could have become violent. Yet without that military force, all the media penetration in the world would not have changed the borders of Ukraine. It was the little green men, Russian military power, which altered the borders of Ukraine—not control over information, oil and gas, or any other Russian non-military instrument.

If a policy-maker wishes to prevent an opposing military force from achieving a goal, whether it be the conquest of Mariupol to create a land bridge between Russia and Crimea along the coast of the Sea of Azov or a hypothetical annexation of Narva or Latgale, only military force will do. No instrument of statecraft other than reciprocal military power can successfully stymie the use of force.

It is politically unavoidable that Article 5 will be invoked if little green men appear in any of the Baltic States. Invocation is also a strategically appropriate response—as the only possibly successful reaction to little green men is a military response.

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