



*RUSSIA FOREIGN POLICY PAPERS*

# NATO IN THE BALTICS: Deterring Phantom Threats?

ROBERT E. HAMILTON



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

© 2018 by the Foreign Policy Research Institute

COVER: *Deployment of Raytheon Standard Missile-3 (Source: NATO)*

July 2018



# FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

---

## MISSION

The Foreign Policy Research Institute is dedicated to bringing the insights of scholarship to bear on the foreign policy and national security challenges facing the United States. It seeks to educate the public, teach teachers, train students, and offer ideas to advance U.S. national interests based on a nonpartisan, geopolitical perspective that illuminates contemporary international affairs through the lens of history, geography, and culture.

**EDUCATING THE AMERICAN PUBLIC:** FPRI was founded on the premise that an informed and educated citizenry is paramount for the U.S. to conduct a coherent foreign policy. Today, we live in a world of unprecedented complexity and ever-changing threats, and as we make decisions regarding the nation's foreign policy, the stakes could not be higher. FPRI offers insights to help the public understand this volatile world by publishing research, hosting conferences, and holding dozens of public events and lectures each year.

**PREPARING TEACHERS:** Unique among think tanks, FPRI offers professional development for high school teachers through its Madeleine and W.W. Keen Butcher History Institute, a series of intensive weekend-long conferences on selected topics in U.S. and world history and international relations. These nationally known programs equip educators to bring lessons of a new richness to students across the nation.

**TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION:** At FPRI, we are proud to have played a role in providing students – whether in high school, college, or graduate school – with a start in the fields of international relations, policy analysis, and public service. Summer interns – and interns throughout the year – gain experience in research, editing, writing, public speaking, and critical thinking.

**OFFERING IDEAS:** We count among our ranks over 120 affiliated scholars located throughout the nation and the world. They are open-minded, ruthlessly honest, and proudly independent. In the past year, they have appeared in well over 100 different media venues- locally, nationally and internationally.



# NATO IN THE BALTICS: Deterring Phantom Threats?

By: Robert E. Hamilton

**U.S. Army Colonel (retired) Robert E. Hamilton** is a Black Sea Fellow in the Eurasia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. His current assignment is as a professor in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College. He has served as a strategic war planner and country desk officer at U.S. Central Command, as the Chief of Regional Engagement for Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan, as the Chief of the Office of Defense Cooperation at the U.S. Embassy in Georgia, and as the Deputy Chief of the Security Assistance Office at the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan. Colonel Hamilton was a U.S. Army War College fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., where he authored several articles on the war between Russia and Georgia and the security situation in the former Soviet Union. Colonel Hamilton holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Virginia.

*The views expressed in the article are the author's own and do not reflect the policy or position of the U.S. Army War College, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.*

## Executive Summary

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is right to focus on the security of the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, its most exposed members. However, the idea that deterring Russia in the Baltics requires the deployment of significant additional NATO forces there is misguided. First, Russia will perceive additional NATO forces in the region as presenting an offensive threat and is likely to respond by increasing its own level of forces in western Russia. In this dynamic, known as the security dilemma, an actor's attempts to increase its own security by strengthening its military capabilities are seen as threatening to an adversary, and a spiral of arms racing often ensues, making war more likely. Next, in deploying additional forces to the Baltics, NATO would be attempting to deter Russia from doing something there is no indication it plans to do. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has tread lightly in the Baltics, perceiving them as part of Europe, and therefore subject to a different set of geopolitical rules than places like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Rather than attempting to equalize the military balance in the Baltics, NATO should take a page from its Cold War playbook. It should station enough forces there to leave no doubt of its resolve to defend them, but not enough to pose an offensive threat to Russia. Additional forces should be stationed where they can reinforce the Baltics in a crisis, and NATO should periodically exercise this reinforcement. In this way, NATO can defend its most exposed members without raising the risk of inadvertent war with Russia.

## Wargames in the Baltics

By now, the story is depressingly familiar to anyone who follows the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO): a series of wargames run by RAND and other organizations over the last several years concluded unambiguously that “as presently postured, NATO cannot successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, whenever it decides to, Russia has the military capability to overrun Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in a matter of days. Such a scenario would present NATO with a dilemma: accept a Russian *fait accompli* or escalate to general war, with the looming threat of that war ending in a nuclear exchange.

The ground forces used in the wargames approximated those available to the two sides: 22 maneuver battalions for Russia to 12 for NATO. Further tilting the balance in Russia’s favor was the fact that many of the NATO forces were lightly armored and lacked mobility. The result of the wargames, the RAND report concludes, was “a disaster for NATO,” with Russian forces reaching Baltic capitals in 36 to 60 hours.<sup>2</sup> Much of the analysis of how NATO should respond to this problem focuses on the amount of additional military capability it should deploy to the Baltics. RAND’s analysis concludes that “a force of about seven brigades, including three heavy armored brigades—adequately supported by airpower, land-based fires, and other enablers on the ground and ready to fight at the onset of hostilities”<sup>3</sup> might be an adequate deterrent.

There are two problems with the idea of projecting significant additional NATO combat power to the Baltics. First, Russia is likely to see the deployment of seven NATO brigades

to the Baltics as presenting an offensive military threat to itself. In response to the perceived threat, it would deploy more of its own forces. In this environment of mutual mistrust and military escalation, known in political science literature as the “security dilemma,” the risk of inadvertent war grows significantly. So, deploying significant NATO forces to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia might make war more, not less, likely.

Next, there is no indication that Russia plans to attack the Baltics. Quantitative analyses that focus on the imbalance in force ratios in the Baltics ignore the fact that—even putting NATO’s Article 5 commitment aside—Russia plays by a different set of rules there than it does in other former Soviet republics. Therefore, it is a mistake to assume that Russia’s interventions in Georgia and Ukraine tell us anything meaningful about the likelihood of a similar intervention in the Baltics.

Instead of deploying significant combat power into the Baltics, NATO should posture its forces so that they can access the region given adequate warning. Forces stationed in the Baltics should be sufficient to signal to Russia that an invasion means war with NATO, while not presenting an offensive military threat to Russia itself.

## The Security Dilemma, Miscalculation, and War

The potential for war is not and never was a math problem. Attempts to reduce it to that by fixating on force ratios can make war more likely, not less. NATO’s focus on redressing the imbalance in force ratios in the Baltics is understandable from the perspective of a military planner, but makes less sense if approached from a broader political-military perspective. Military planners often argue that they must focus on a potential adversary’s capabilities, not his intentions, since the former are fixed in the short term while the latter may be unknowable or subject to rapid change. This focus on material capabilities

---

1 David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank,” RAND Corporation, 2016. Internet resource at: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1253.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html), accessed May 22, 2018.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.



*Soldiers from the British Army's Royal Welsh regiment stand in front of their Warrior armoured fighting vehicle near a base in Tapa, Estonia. These troops from part of the NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the East of the Alliance. (Source: NATO)*

leads military planners to insist that a certain ratio of friendly to adversary forces is required to deter aggression.

This type of thinking assumes that friendly force deployments designed to address an unfavorable force ratio will not destabilize the situation because an adversary will understand that they are for the purposes of deterrence and defense, not aggression and offense. In other words, it assumes that an adversary will know and trust an actor's intentions, even though the theory claims that adversaries' intentions are unknowable and subject to rapid change. Of course, adversaries often perceive U.S. deployments as threatening and increase their own forces in response. This action leads to a spiral of arms-racing in an environment of increasing mistrust, making inadvertent war more likely. Russia's suspicious worldview makes such a spiral even a possibility. As Olga Oliker of the Center for Strategic and International Studies observes, Russia's definition of its own minimal security requirements is considerably more expansive than is normal for a 21<sup>st</sup> century

European state; this expansive definition will make Russia difficult to reassure and easy to escalate with.

Instead of trying to achieve favorable force ratios in the Baltics, NATO should take a page from its Cold War playbook and focus on deploying enough force to signal credibly its resolve to defend them, but not so much as to activate the security dilemma. Instead of positioning forces in the Baltics, NATO should position them where they can rapidly reach that region and then routinely exercise their emergency deployment there. This strategy successfully preserved the peace in Europe for some four decades against the Warsaw Pact.

NATO was never able to match Warsaw Pact forces in Europe. Indeed, for most of the Cold War, its force ratios were worse than the 22 battalions to 12 battalions disadvantage that the recent wargames found so disastrous. For example, in 1975, the Warsaw Pact had some 58 divisions stationed in Europe, facing only 27 NATO divisions. And Warsaw Pact



*President Vladimir Putin and the Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov at Luzhsky range during Zapad 2017. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)*

divisions packed significantly more heavy armor, with some 19,000 main battle tanks to some 6,000 for NATO.<sup>4</sup> In West Berlin, a NATO force of three brigades (equivalent to one division) was surrounded by 24 Soviet and East German divisions on the soil of the German Democratic Republic.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than attempt to achieve mathematical equivalence with the Warsaw Pact in Europe, NATO rehearsed the rapid deployment of forces there from North America and continually signaled its unwavering resolve to defend its members. Exercises like the annual REFORGER (“Return of Forces to Germany”) served the dual purpose of rehearsing a plan for the rapid reinforcement of NATO forces in Europe while signaling the Alliance’s resolve. And NATO’s steadfast refusal to be pushed out of West Berlin by Soviet and East German threats and provocations—most visibly demonstrated in the 1947 Berlin Airlift—

contributed to deterrence as well.

A similar strategy now—a deterrent force in the Baltics, potent reinforcements stationed close to the region, annual rehearsals of their deployment, and regular expressions of resolve in both word and deed—is the best way to preserve the strategic balance in Europe. This strategy would reassure NATO’s Baltic members and deter Russia without giving Russia any reason to believe that NATO has aggressive intentions against it. After all, though the RAND report notes that the distance from the Estonian-Russian border to Tallinn, Estonia is only 200 kilometers, it fails to note that the distance from the same border to St. Petersburg is less than 160km. Given this, RAND’s conclusion that the “military geography favors Russia” looks far less certain.

### **The Baltics through Russian Eyes**

Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia and current intervention in Ukraine do not necessarily portend an increased threat to the Baltics. One

<sup>4</sup> “NATO and Warsaw Pact Force Comparisons,” NATO, internet resource at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/declassified\\_138256.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/declassified_138256.htm), accessed June 19, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

obvious difference is the fact that the Baltics are NATO members and therefore covered by an Article 5 commitment. But perhaps even more important is the fact that Russia sees the Baltics differently than it sees Georgia and Ukraine. Put simply, in the Russian mind, the Baltics are part of Europe, while Ukraine and Georgia are part of what Russia sees as its “near abroad” or the “Russian world.” Russia plays by one set of geopolitical rules in Europe and by a different set of rules in the “Russian world.”

There is ample evidence for how these different Russian perceptions of the two regions shape Russian behavior in each. As far back as the early 1990s, when Russia was intervening in both Georgia and Moldova to enable separatist wars, it scrupulously avoided doing anything that might escalate the brewing separatist crisis in Estonia. Unlike in Georgia and Moldova, the Russian Army did not transfer military equipment to ethnic Russian separatist groups in Estonia. After the Estonian government declared invalid the 1993 vote of Russian speakers in eastern Estonia for sovereignty, Russia neither unleashed armed groups of factory workers nor sent in volunteer fighters from Russia—things it had done in Georgia and Moldova.

Russia’s cautious behavior was not an indication that Russia was satisfied with Estonia’s treatment of the Russian speakers there. On the contrary, the Russian government found both the outcome of the sovereignty referendum and the status of Estonia’s Russian speakers highly unsatisfactory. Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev wrote an editorial after the referendum crisis, in which he urged the West to “heed a Russian cry of despair in Estonia,” characterized Estonian treatment of ethnic Russians as “policies reminiscent of ethnic cleansing,” and warned that “Russia cannot be indifferent to the fate of ethnic Russians in Estonia.”<sup>6</sup> Despite Russia’s evident dissatisfaction with the situation in Estonia,

it withdrew its military forces as promised in 1994.

Russia’s behavior in Estonia and the other Baltic states is guided first and foremost by the perception that the region’s geopolitical affiliation is European or Western and not Eurasian. Scholar Anatol Lieven captured this phenomenon in his book, *The Baltic Revolution*. Lieven writes, “A large proportion of Baltic Russians have been prepared to acknowledge that the Balts have a superior civic culture, are cleaner, more orderly and harder working. They may qualify this by saying that Russian life is ‘friendlier’, or ‘more humane’, but this is the *exact* reverse of the usual colonizer: colonized self-images.”<sup>7</sup>

Political scientist Ted Hopf captured the difference between Russian perceptions of the Baltics and other post-Soviet states in a 2005 article, in which he argued that Russia intervened in Georgia in the early 1990s because of the victory of what he calls the “centrist” Russian foreign policy identity over its “liberal” and “conservative” competitors. Had the liberals won out, Hopf argues that no intervention at all would have taken place; had the conservatives prevailed, Hopf argues that Russia might have intervened in multiple places.<sup>8</sup> Hopf’s argument raises a question: why was intervention in Georgia and Moldova legitimate according to the centrist Russian foreign policy identity, while intervention in the Baltics was regarded by this same identity as off-limits? The answer lies in the European geopolitical affiliation of the Baltics in Russian eyes, which causes Russia to calibrate its behavior there in a way that it does not elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

### Russia through Baltic Russians’ Eyes

Some may argue that although an invasion of the Baltics is unlikely, more indirect Russian

6 Andrei V. Kozyrev, “Heed a Russian Cry of Despair in Estonia,” *The International Herald Tribune*, August 14, 1993.

7 Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 178. Emphasis in original.

8 Ted Hopf, “Identity, Legitimacy and the Use of Military Force: Russia’s Great Power Identities and Military Intervention in Abkhazia,” *Review of International Studies* vol. 31 (2005): p. 226.



attempts to destabilize them are ongoing, and that these efforts could provide a pretext for a Russian intervention justified on “humanitarian” grounds. The idea behind this concern is that Russia could mobilize the Russian-speaking populations in Estonia and Latvia<sup>9</sup> to violence and could then intervene to “protect” them if their governments cracked down. This scenario is certainly something the Baltic governments and their NATO allies should watch closely, but the threat of this scenario unfolding is less serious than often believed. First, the Russian-speaking populations are not restless; and second, the governments of the Baltics have done a commendable job of keeping them that way.

Estonia’s east perhaps best typifies the lack of restlessness among Baltic Russian-speaking populations. Narva, where unrest was focused in the early 1990s and the locus of the sovereignty movement that culminated in the 1993 referendum, now looks nothing like it did in those years. After years of ignoring Narva, the Estonian government is using central government funds to revitalize the city and surrounding region under the slogan “Narva is Next.” Piret Hartman, Estonia’s undersecretary for cultural diversity, notes,

“In the past we didn’t talk with Russian-speakers, but just told them what they have to do: that they have to learn Estonian, that they have to integrate.” Now, she says, the central government is changing its approach and realizing that it needs to be more open to Russian speakers.<sup>10</sup>

Estonia’s charm offensive in its east is good policy, but even absent such a move, a revolt of Russian speakers there is unlikely for two reasons. First, Estonia’s government has taken prudent steps to give Russian speakers a voice: even those who don’t qualify for Estonian citizenship can vote in local elections. Next, the proximity of the Russian town of Ivangorod, visible across the Narva River, gives residents of Estonia’s east a readily-available yardstick by which to measure their conditions against those of their counterparts across the border.

By nearly every measure, Narva residents fare better than their neighbors in Ivangorod. Narva has “modern hospitals, swimming pools, shopping malls, a new university and free Wi-Fi access across much of the town;” Ivangorod has none of these.<sup>11</sup> The average monthly salary in Narva is nearly twice as high as that in Ivangorod; the gap in pensions is higher still. For these reasons, while Russian speakers in Narva may watch Russian television and support the Vladimir Putin government’s muscular brand of nationalism, very few of them want to live in Russia.<sup>12</sup> Given this fact, a Russian attempt to stir up separatist passions among ethnic Russians in the Baltics—as Russia has done successfully among minority populations in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—is unlikely to be successful.

<sup>10</sup> “To Russians With Love: Estonia Gets Creative About Integrating Local Russian-Speakers,” *The Economist*, May 10, 2018. Internet resource at: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/05/10/estonia-gets-creative-about-integrating-local-russian-speakers>, accessed June 19, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Higgins, “Two Border Cities Share Russian History — and a Sharp European Divide,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2017. Internet resource at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/world/europe/narva-estonia-ivangorod-russia.html>, accessed June 19, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Lithuania’s Russian-speaking population is generally considered too small to pose a threat to its stability.

## Is Arms Control the Answer?

Conventional arms control is one way to stabilize the situation on NATO's eastern flank and to avoid the potential for arms racing and escalation. If Russia is likely to see an attempt by NATO to achieve deterrence through denial as threatening and to raise the level of its own forces in response, why not attempt to defuse the situation by reducing the number of forces in the region? Conventional arms control talks might focus on offensive weaponry such as tanks, artillery, attack helicopters, and strike aircraft. This would lower the offensive capability in the region from both sides while allowing each to retain a robust defensive deterrent force.

Although such an agreement is the surest way to reduce the chances of inadvertent escalation, it faces serious hurdles. First is the fact that the current conventional balance favors Russia, so it would have to make significantly greater reductions than NATO would. Ironically, the only way to incentivize Russia to consider such an agreement might be the deployment of additional NATO forces to the Baltics. The problem with this is that—for the reasons already discussed—it increases the chances of war in the short term.

Another obstacle to conventional arms control is the Russian perception that it imposes greater restrictions on Russia than it does on the U.S. In the years prior to pulling out of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty in 2007, Putin began calling it the “colonial treaty” because it prevented Russia from deploying its forces on parts of its own territory while imposing no such restrictions on the U.S. To deal with this Russian critique, any new attempt to limit the deployment of conventional forces would have to be undertaken between NATO and Russia, and not the U.S. and Russia bilaterally. This dynamic would greatly complicate the negotiations and the ratification of any treaty they produced.

Even if NATO can overcome these obstacles,

Russia still might not be amenable to considering conventional arms control along its border with NATO because, as Ulrich Kuehn notes, Russian and American interests on this issue are highly asymmetrical. Moscow sees its conventional superiority over NATO along the Alliance's eastern flank as a hedge against its inferiority to the U.S. in expeditionary and global strike capabilities.<sup>13</sup> In a sense, any conflict with NATO in this region would have existential implications for Russia. For the U.S., the interests at stake are important, but not existential. This lack of symmetry between the interests involved renders any agreement on conventional arms control unlikely.


## From Perceived Threats to Actual Threats

Despite the unfavorable balance of forces for NATO in the Baltics, a Russian invasion is unlikely. First, Russia plays by a different geopolitical rulebook there than it does in places like Ukraine and Georgia. So assuming that Russian interventions in those countries might presage a similar intervention in the Baltics is unwarranted. Next, Russian speakers in the Baltics—unlike the populations of Crimea, eastern Ukraine, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia—are generally content and harbor no desire to live in Russia. Given these facts, an attempt by NATO to redress the mathematical imbalance in the Baltics by deploying significant additional forces there is unnecessary. It is also unwise, as it could make Russia feel less secure, triggering a security dilemma and a spiral of arms-racing and instability.

Focusing on force ratios in the Baltics also ignores the serious damage to NATO that Russia is attempting to do in other areas: its attempts to destabilize the Balkans, where NATO and non-NATO members uneasily coexist; its military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, both of which NATO

<sup>13</sup> Ulrich Kuehn, “With *Zapad* Over, Is It Time For Conventional Arms Control in Europe?,” *War on the Rocks*, September 27, 2017, internet resource at <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/with-zapad-over-is-it-time-for-conventional-arms-control-in-europe/>, accessed June 27, 2018.



has promised to admit as members; and its attempts to undermine the social and political cohesion within NATO member-states through cyber-attacks, the spreading of disinformation, and other activities. These Russian moves are difficult to counter and have the potential to do long-term damage to NATO and to European security more generally. Rather than challenge NATO directly through an invasion of the Baltics, Russia chooses to undermine the Alliance's cohesion through indirect methods. This challenge cannot be met by additional force deployments, but requires a flexible and nuanced response using non-military as well as military instruments of power. 





FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Foreign Policy Research Institute is a non-partisan, non-profit 501 (c)(3) organization dedicated to bringing the insights of scholarship to bear on the foreign policy and national security challenges facing the United States. It seeks to educate the public, teach teachers, train students, and offer ideas to advance U.S. national interests based on a non-partisan, geopolitical perspective that illuminates contemporary international affairs through the lens of history, geography, and culture.

Foreign Policy Research Institute

1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610  
Philadelphia, PA 19102

215-732-3774 [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org)