Russian Hostile Action Against Estonia: Military Options

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Key Points

• Russia’s past aggression toward states along its periphery calls into question what action it might take against Estonia.

• This report considers three possible scenarios for military intervention against Estonia in decreasing order of scale: a full-scale military offensive, a limited “land grab,” and an ongoing campaign of subversion with no intent to take or hold territory.

• Continuing prioritization of military and civil resilience for Estonia is both prudent and a sound investment of local and NATO resources.

The Western view of nations bordering Russia as independent sovereign states with the right to determine their own foreign policy conflicts with Russia’s view that it must maintain a sphere of influence, including controlling the foreign policy orientation of its neighbors to ensure its own national security. Russia views armed conflict as one of the most likely ways to resolve this contradiction. After Russia’s military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, alarming scenarios for Moscow launching aggression of one form or another in states along Russia’s western periphery are now commonplace.

This analysis presents three possible scenarios for military intervention against Estonia in decreasing order of scale: a full-scale military offensive, a limited “land grab,” and finally, an ongoing campaign of subversion with no intent to take or hold territory.

The scenarios described in this chapter are unlikely in the short term. Yet none of them can be completely ruled out—Russia’s opaque decision-making process, its habitual misunderstanding of the rest of the world, and its inclination to see military adventurism as a reliable means of resolving foreign policy challenges mean that Estonia must be prepared for the worst.

Preparing for Conflict

The question of whether Russia may launch a military intervention against Estonia is not one of capabilities, which in Russia’s case are more than adequate. Instead, it is of the risk-benefit calculation for Moscow. This calculation, in turn, is to a decisive degree shaped by Moscow’s perception of the domestic and international security context in which Estonia finds itself, as well as Russia’s assessment of its own military strength in the region.

For almost a decade, Russia has been engaged in a defense reorganization and rearmament program of unprecedented depth and cost. For Russia’s Baltic neighbors, forces available locally and immediately to Russia to conduct operations across the whole spectrum of military activities vastly outmatch friendly forces present in the region.

Estonia maintains two ground forces brigades: the 1st Infantry Brigade constituting the defense
forces’ main maneuver unit, currently equipped with CV90 infantry fighting vehicles; and the 2nd Infantry Brigade, based on motorized light infantry mounted on Patria Sisu armored personnel carriers. These brigades are supported by territorial defense units provided by the volunteer Estonian Defense League (Kaitseliit). But the armed forces are limited in capacity to conduct high-intensity warfare since economic constraints, combined with pressure from NATO in the previous decade to provide deployable units for use in expeditionary operations such as in Afghanistan, led Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania toward armed forces primarily centered on light infantry capability.

Estonia has also devoted considerable attention to fostering resilience to what NATO terms “hybrid” campaigning and hostile operations below the threshold of overt conventional attack. These measures are aimed at making it harder for Russia to prosecute “hybrid threats” by closing the societal seams and vulnerabilities that Russian indirect action would seek to exploit. This includes developing good governance and introducing strategic regional policies to reduce disaffection in economically less well-developed regions, including and especially those with significant ethnic Russian presence where Russia could stoke nationalist resentment. Early awareness is a priority, including tracking the sources of finance for political parties and organized crime groups. The capabilities and resources of internal security forces have been boosted, including border security, customs, migration control to prevent infiltration, and the judiciary capacity to deal with large numbers of detained individuals in case of mass disorder.

More recently, the Ministry of the Interior has substantially increased the number of specially trained police quick-reaction units with heavier weapons, analogous to US SWAT teams. Other measures aim at increasing societal resilience to malicious propaganda—also known as “fake news”—and ensuring that the government’s messages reach all sectors of the community, including those whose first language is not Estonian. Finally, effective counterintelligence has been prioritized, including counter-subversion.
NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence

In addition to Estonia’s own efforts to make itself a hard target, Russia’s risk assessment is also shaped by the arrival of foreign troops under NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) program.

At the time of writing, the eFP presence at the Tapa military base in north-central Estonia consists of a British light infantry battalion, small detachments of armor and other supporting elements, and a company of French marines. Training for the eFP battalions in the Baltic nations includes close interaction with local defense and internal security forces and US helicopter support while also operating with chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear protective equipment and practicing decontamination. These units’ presence makes it impossible for Russia to mount a substantive military offensive against Estonia without immediately involving other NATO allies. Furthermore, Estonia’s hosting of troops from both the UK and France, NATO’s only non-US members with nuclear capability, reduces the leverage that Russia would enjoy by threatening to use its nuclear arsenal to coerce or “de-escalate.”

By clearly demonstrating NATO’s stake in Estonia’s defense, eFP provides a substantial deterrent effect with a minimal physical presence, in particular avoiding any deployment of new forces that could be interpreted by Russia as threatening.

NATO Reinforcements

NATO’s ability to deliver follow-on forces to the target country either before or at the early stages of hostilities will likely be a key element of Russian planning. NATO faces institutional, geographical, political, and other challenges in each of the three key areas of speed of recognition, speed of decision, and speed of assembly in response to a crisis—and Russia can significantly hamper all three of these crucial phases. As part of Russia’s continuing rapid development of its military capability, advanced anti-access and area denial (A2AD) systems continue to be fielded and upgraded. As a result, delivery of NATO reinforcements by air or even sea would be a potentially hazardous operation, and using air bases and airports in Estonia would be questionable in the event of hostilities.

Russian planners are also aware that even in the best-case scenario in which NATO quickly decides to deliver reinforcements and does so unopposed, the small number of units at readiness available to any NATO ally other than the United States is a crucial limiting factor.

According to a 2017 study, “Beyond rushing initial units of light infantry into theater… [the UK, France, and Germany] would have a hard time generating armored forces quickly and sustaining their forces. A single armored brigade each appears to represent a maximum sustainable effort.” In the event of large-scale hostilities with Russia, this kind of scale of NATO reinforcements would be of little practical impact, even if they could be successfully delivered to Estonia. They would not be able to cover more than a fraction of the area needed to be defended and would risk arriving without the air defense, artillery, and logistic and combat service support required for effective warfighting.

NATO estimates that it would take 90 days to build up NATO forces to parity with Russia, even when that parity is expressed only in numerical terms. When considering this, it should be recalled that Russia’s operation against Crimea was effectively complete in under 90 hours. Consequently, the scenarios listed below assume that the forces available to Estonia in the event of an armed clash with Russia would be limited to those already present in the country.

Scenarios

This is not an exhaustive list of the options available to Russia, and elements of each of these scenarios can be combined in different patterns to provide a wide range of offensive plans for Russia. Some elements are common to all: Even an all-out offensive should be expected to include the “hybrid” aspect, in that “Russian sleeper cells would also act to paralyze critical socio-political systems and infrastructure to highlight the domestic breakdown of authority.” Furthermore, each of the scenarios would involve preparing the battlefield in the form of Moscow simultaneously readying kinetic, informational, and political operations: at first covertly and later more visibly, but never enough to remove doubt that overt aggression was imminent and to prompt significant preemptive responses by NATO.
Scenario I: The “Tallinn Offensive.” While an unrestrained military onslaught bringing the full capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces to bear on one or more Baltic States is unlikely, it would be unwise to discount the possibility altogether.

A study Rand released in early 2016 concluded that “the longest it [would take] Russian forces to reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga is 60 hours,” even with an assumption of pre-deployment of limited NATO forces into the area.12 Yet from the Estonian point of view, a major limitation of the Rand study was that it assumed a conventional attack only across the strip of border near Narva, rather than the thrust from the south assumed in other analyses. Russian officers continue to study campaigns from the Second World War in detail and consider their lessons relevant today.12 It can be assumed that these campaigns include the Battle of Tartu and the subsequent Tallinn Offensive Operation in September 1944, including moves through Võru County across the border from Pskov in Russia and from Latvian territory.13 Given that the three Baltic nations must in effect be considered a single theater of military operations, one cannot assume that a Russian assault on Estonia would only be delivered across the Russian-Estonian border.

Dealing with Estonia’s eFP battalion, even if not reinforced by other NATO units, would in fact be a crucial part of Russian planning.

Russia’s airborne assault forces, the Vozdushno-desantnye voyska, have been training for contingencies, including seizing infrastructure such as defended air bases and airports to insert airborne forces, so as to be in a position to end the conflict before Estonia’s Western allies could organize a meaningful reaction. As such they could also play a key role in any steps to prevent effective use of the eFP battalion.

Dealing with Estonia’s eFP battalion, even if not reinforced by other NATO units, would in fact be a crucial part of Russian planning. Although Russia may be confident in its ability to manage a NATO response, it might wish to neutralize rather than confront the nonlocal units. Russia might believe that it could move fast enough to follow the example of Crimea and surround, blockade, and isolate NATO units before they move to their deployment areas, after which they could be invited to depart. If, on the other hand, Russia were willing to risk retaliation by NATO or was confident in its ability to withstand any retaliation, another option would be a concentrated missile strike against the foreign forces’ base in Tapa to destroy sufficient personnel and equipment and to neutralize them as a fighting force before hostilities properly begin.

Scenario II: A “Hamburg Grab.” A Russian military assault need not be directed at controlling the entire territory of Estonia to meet Moscow’s political objectives.

During the Cold War, the “Hamburg grab” referred to a contingency in which Warsaw Pact forces would conduct a limited offensive to take over a small portion of West German territory and then dig in and dare the US and its allies to respond. The fear at that time was that NATO members would not wish to escalate to nuclear war in a scenario short of an all-out Soviet bloc invasion and that Article 5 would be proved ineffective.14 In 2017, this scenario is alive and well and regularly applied to the notion of Russia making a limited incursion into one of the Baltic States.

In this scenario, Russia uses its “permanent readiness” units to cross the border into Estonia, potentially as a diversion from one of its regular “snap exercises.” Once in control of a relatively small area of Estonian territory, Russian forces would dig in and wait for a NATO response. Just as in the Cold War, the danger of this scenario lies in the possibility that NATO might choose not to respond rather than to go to full-scale war with Russia. As outlined by NATO’s former Allied Land Command Commander Gen. John Nicholson:

Such an attack would include the activation of their dense A2/AD network to isolate the area, prevent the introduction of reinforcements, and then threaten nuclear escalation to ‘freeze’ the conflict. This would then confront the Alliance with the dilemma of responding . . . a prospect the Russians hope would fracture Alliance cohesion and change the global security architecture in their favor.15
An operation of this kind could be mounted with a sufficient degree of surprise to severely constrain national and NATO responses. According to a Lithuanian assessment, Russia would be able “to conduct combat activities against the Baltic States with 24-48 hours’ notice.”

In the case of Estonia, the target region for this option is almost invariably designated as Narva and its predominantly Russian-speaking hinterland. Narva enjoys enduring popularity in foreign studies as a candidate for Russian intervention, despite persuasive arguments that these scenarios are oversimplified and disregard local realities.

Yet the country’s western archipelago also presents potential opportunities for Russia. Control of parts of the islands of Saaremaa and Hiiumaa could play a significant role in affecting freedom of navigation into and out of both the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Riga. Hostile A2AD assets delivered to the islands would further complicate the freedom of movement at sea and in the air of NATO, Finland, and Sweden, in addition to the obvious and immediate detriment to the defensive capability of Estonia itself. Here as elsewhere, it can be assumed that infiltration by Russian special forces could be carried out under the cover of normal maritime or commercial activity.

But the risk calculus of the “grab” scenario has also been transformed by the eFP battalion’s presence in Estonia, reducing its likelihood by making it far harder for Russia to be sure it would not be in immediate direct conflict with troops from other NATO states. Estonia has also been practicing rapid mobilization, aiming for capability in 12-24 hours. In addition, this is one of the few scenarios in which NATO’s ability to deploy limited additional forces before the onset of hostilities might in fact be of use, although this is in itself a high-risk strategy.

**Scenario III: An Ulster Option.** Moscow could achieve its objectives without directly occupying any part of Estonian territory. Instead, Russia could opt for creating and maintaining a simmering conflict, which would involve supplying and assisting insurrectionists to mount a low-level campaign of armed opposition to the government.

This kind of intervention would seek to undermine and delegitimize the government by taking advantage of too much or too little reaction. Overreaction would erode the government’s legitimacy both at home and abroad, as Russia, its information warfare network, and sympathetic media worldwide would inevitably portray the Estonian security forces as committing brutal atrocities. Under-reaction would leave a space for Russia to expand its activities and mount an even more direct challenge to Estonian statehood and law and order.

An early resort to lethal force would carry distinct advantages in preventing the escalation of an insurgency.

The analogy for this kind of intervention would be the armed conflict in Northern Ireland from 1969 onward. This conflict demonstrates starkly the asymmetry of effort involved. Armed opposition in relatively small numbers—estimated at 300 in Republican “active service units” and comparable numbers in opposing loyalist paramilitary groups—required deployment of up to 21,000 British servicemen over and above locally recruited military and security personnel. The conflict triggered repeated local political upheaval and absorbed a substantial proportion of the administrative and security capacity of the UK government over a period of decades.

A campaign of this kind could be maintained by Russia indefinitely with minimum effort. Infiltration and exfiltration of insurgents, weapons, and supplies would be possible along sparsely populated stretches of Estonia’s coastline, or indeed across the open border with fellow Schengen member Latvia. Russia has demonstrated in Ukraine that it is content with implausible deniability, and clear identification of the supplier has little practical effect on public opinion or national responses elsewhere. Furthermore, destabilizing Estonia would trigger and reinforce a range of Russian narratives, including the weakness and “degeneracy” of liberal democracies and the oppression of noncitizens in the Baltic States leaving armed insurrection as the only means of protest and of seeking their legitimate rights.

Estonian Chief of Defense Lt. Gen. Riho Terras has been famously quoted as stating that Estonia’s response to Russian-backed insurgents or infiltrators
would be to “shoot the first one to appear.”21 An early resort to lethal force would carry distinct advantages in preventing the escalation of an insurgency—or indeed in ensuring that it escalates in a manner that leaves no doubt that Estonia is in fact under external attack. Yet even with careful handling, it will inevitably appear to some NATO allies with a less acute perception of threat from Russia that Moscow’s accusations of fascist brutality and extrajudicial executions on the streets are entirely correct. The temptation to avoid confrontation with Moscow by maintaining the fiction that the insurgency was a domestic security matter for the Estonian government, or a “civil war,” would be strong.

For Moscow, this option represents a relatively low-cost and low-risk way of achieving a range of possible long-term strategic objectives, from simple destabilization of a neighbor to major reorientation of Estonian policy. In an extreme case, with societal resilience worn down by protracted conflict, an Estonian government could be induced to not only make substantial concessions of sovereignty up to and including a power-sharing arrangement—or a version of the Minsk agreements already imposed on Ukraine in its comparable conflict with Russia—but also potentially remove NATO assets from the country or even renegotiate Estonia’s status in NATO.

Donbas on the Gulf of Finland

A mixed, literally “hybrid,” option between the last two scenarios is also possible. The precedents of Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate how Russia sees the value in establishing “fake states” in destabilizing its neighbors. Promoting the idea of regional secession in the primarily Russian-speaking extreme northeast of Estonia—with or without local residents’ willing participation—would allow Moscow to promote the idea of a fictional equivalent to the Donetsk and Luhansk “People’s Republics” in Ukraine. In conjunction with an externally sponsored insurgency, the hypothetical wresting of control of a small area of Estonia away from the legitimate government would be consistent with Russian narratives as described above and would provide an ongoing source of instability and pressure on Estonia, NATO, and the EU.

Conclusion

With NATO’s eFP troop presence and its own ongoing efforts to foster resilience, Estonia is better protected against military interference than at any previous time in its post-Soviet history. And current political and military developments provide no obvious trigger for Russia to attempt such interference. But the risk of triggers that are not obvious remains.

Russia is a rational actor, but one that bases its rationality on a profoundly different understanding of the world. Information about the actions of Russia’s Western neighbors and their more distant allies is seen through the distorting lenses of Russia’s historical experience and current flawed assumptions about hostile foreign intent.22 This could lead to misguided assessments that not only a threat is imminent but also there is an opportunity to neutralize that threat at minimal risk. Russia may see an opening where there is none, misjudging the resolve of NATO or of Estonia itself. As such, continuing prioritization of both military and civil resilience for Estonia is both prudent and a sound investment of local and NATO resources.

About the Author

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Notes


20. The arrival in South Georgia in early April 1982 of Argentine marines among a party of scrap metal workers, the first move in what eventually became the Falklands War, provides a case study.
