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The Denied *War*

The Russian *Grey-Zone* Aggression against Europe and Its Unfolding Trajectory

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Executive Summary

This study reveals the true logic and further trajectory of Russian sub-threshold hostilities against the EU/NATO nations in Europe. It shows that Russia sets no clear boundary between peace and war; instead, it pursues a continuum of hostility that begins with covert subversion and peaks in kinetic armed operations. The report notes *a qualitative shift in its hybrid campaign* against Europe since 2023 from "noise" to purposeful operational preparation of the environment in 2025 that includes jamming GPS signals, infiltrating sabotage cells, damaging pipelines, severing power cables, and deploying unmanned aerial systems to map and potentially attack strategic facilities. It stresses that Western analyses often misinterpret hybrid warfare as a discrete tactic; Russian doctrine treats it as the shaping phase of total war, designed to erode political will and prepare the battlefield for conventional forces.

Beyond highlighting escalation patterns, the analysis identifies two primary contingencies for open armed conflict: a "*Suwałki Gambit*" aimed at seizing the narrow corridor between Kaliningrad and Belarus to isolate the Baltic states, and a *full-scale regional war* involving simultaneous assaults across land, air, maritime, cyber and space domains to impose full control over the Baltic region. *Secondary options* such as seizure of Gotland/Saaremaa, Arctic escalation or ground offensives in Finland or Norway are also considered with the low probability benchmarks provided.

A critical portion of the report dissects the *operational pathway of a full-scale aggression*. It shows that Moscow's preferred method would combine pre-prepared widespread sabotage, massed combined drone and missile strikes, electromagnetic suppression and dispersed drone kill teams and infiltration groups to establish kill zones on the tactical level, anchoring small territorial gains with a death grip, and forcing NATO into bloody counter-attacks. The report goes further by *evaluating force balances in the five operational domains*, in both quantitative and qualitative dimensions.

The conclusion warns that Russia's threat stems less from sheer numbers than from thoroughly calculated and perfectly mastered methodology. By integrating political subversion with cognitive influence, cheap unmanned systems with massed deep-strike weapons, a high tolerance for its own casualties and "salami-slicing" tactics on the ground, Moscow aims to circumvent NATO's conventional strengths and exploit weaknesses in the most optimal way. The SSC team urges to abandon complacent assumptions of immediate unified response by NATO, invest in modern drone-powered capabilities and infrastructure protection, and recognize that a failure to deter even limited territorial grabs could unravel the Alliance's credibility for good.

Introduction

Russia is currently engaged in a sustained hybrid warfare campaign against NATO nations in Europe. While these sub-threshold activities may appear structurally stable to the untrained eye, in fact, in the last few years they have been undergoing significant quantitative escalation and qualitative evolution. The operational pattern has shifted markedly from its initial focus on information warfare, political subversion, and isolated cyber attacks or assassinations, towards the sophisticated integration of information, cyber and cyber-physical attacks, electronic warfare, the progressive recruitment of sabotage assets, and direct action against critical infrastructure on European soil. By 2025, one can also observe the emergence of a distinct new element: the violation of sovereign airspace by combat manned and unmanned aircraft, along with increasing presence of unidentified unmanned aerial systems over the strategic infrastructure of European countries.

While these activities remain technically sub-threshold, their intensity may suggest a calculated strategy of brinkmanship. Applying the analogy of thermal dynamics, maintaining a conflict state just below the boiling point inevitably risks a transition of phase; continuing to toggle aggression at the very edge of the threshold increases the probability of an inadvertent or forced crossing of the "*point of no return*" — triggering a kinetic military response. The critical intelligence question remains whether this escalation is a systemic *bug*, or a deliberate design *feature*. Specifically, does the Kremlin intend to maintain a persistent hybrid campaign with no genuine desire for conventional engagement? Or, it can be a deliberate strategy to force an Article 5 decision point, gambling that NATO will fail to respond effectively, thereby permanently discrediting the Alliance's deterrence posture.

To address this question, it becomes critical to deconstruct the underlying logic of the Russian approach to warfare. This requires extending beyond the Kremlin's immediate hybrid actions to the realities of Russian military philosophy, military strategy, and tactical fighting doctrine. Given that the primary geostrategic vectors of the potential Russian aggression have been exhaustively explored in open sources thus far, this research will mainly focus on subject-specific military projections. By synthesizing existing Russian doctrine with the doctrinal and material transformations acquired through recent combat experience, it is possible to see likely courses of action and sequencing on the European battlefield. It is exactly what this study offers: a perspective on offensive scenarios and operational pathways, grounded in the specific operational proclivities and evolved military capabilities of Russia.

The "Russian Way" in the 21st Century's Warfare

> **Important Note**
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> This document employs the term *Hybrid Warfare* as understood by the Russian military doctrine. It does not merely refer to a general label for grey-zone hostile activities, but signifies a **very distinct escalation tier**. In this context, *Hybrid Warfare* involves limited, deniable military force synchronized with the extensive non-military pressures (political, economic, informational, humanitarian, cyber) exploiting and amplifying internal destabilization. This approach implies that the target is already viewed as a military adversary, establishing a de facto state of war, even if not formally declared.
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> In contrast, *Subthreshold Activities* refer to earlier, lower-visibility efforts intentionally kept below the threshold of overt conventional attacks and below the triggers for defense response. These operations are aimed at degrading governance, cohesion, readiness, and situational awareness prior to the actual *Hybrid Warfare* stage, creating favorable conditions for a future kinetic phase. Related terms in this analytical framework include *grey-zone operations* or *below-threshold acts, covert* or *deniable operations* (actions obscured through attribution management), *political warfare or subversion* (persistent influence, deception, and perception management across all phases).

Since 2013, in the Russian military theory the concept of "*hybrid warfare*" is not a distinct category of conflict but an integral, indivisible component of the total war spectrum. It is imperative to recognize that the Russian General Staff does not view hybrid operations as merely a diplomatic or political tool; rather, the employment of these vectors signifies that the target has been designated a military adversary and that a state of war effectively exists. As General Valery Gerasimov has explicitly postulated[1], in the Russian doctrine, in a modern armed conflict – as "*undeclared and following no established template*" – the Russian operational design prioritizes the initial broad application of non-kinetic lines of effort – political, economic, and informational warfare leveraged against an internal destabilization potential – augmented by covert military actions and Special Operations Forces (SOF). Crucially, **these sub-threshold activities function[2] as shaping operations that precede the kinetic phase**. Overt conventional force is typically employed for a decisive moment in the conflict continuum, often introduced under the pretext of "peacekeeping" or "crisis management" to secure final objectives.

This sequential methodology is not theoretical; since its emergence and comprehensive conceptualization in 2013, it has been almost immediately operationally validated in *Georgia* (2008) and *Ukraine* (2014, 2022), where hybrid shaping operations created the conditions for conventional maneuver.

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1   https://bit.ly/4rwP5yc

2   https://bit.ly/3ME9bYa

At the same time, these hybrid instruments are not discarded once conventional forces cross the border; rather, they maintain operational continuity, evolving to support the kinetic effort. Even during high-intensity conventional combat, they remain active – targeting the adversary's deep rear to disrupt logistics, eroding domestic political cohesion, and aggressively manipulating international perception. In the Russian operational art, the hybrid and the conventional are hence inextricably interwoven, creating a seamless, unified "full-spectrum" lethality that persists from the first subversive act until the final strategic objective is achieved.

Consequently, current activities require precise categorization. While the global hybrid campaign against the Western coalition serves as a supporting line of effort to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the specific intensification and qualitative shift of hybrid measures focused on the Baltic region bear the distinct signature of operational preparation of the environment (OPE) by Russia. This probably suggests that **the recent near-threshold activities may be not merely harassment, but a deliberate preparatory phase for the regional conventional aggression, mirroring the established Russian template for invasion.**

Reference Note 1. Russian Hybrid Warfare Case Studies.

The evolution of Russian hybrid methodology is best characterized through a comparative analysis of three distinct operational theaters, illustrating the trajectory from shaping operations to conventional engagement.

Georgia – 2008	This campaign demonstrated a classic, long-lead operational preparation of the environment (OPE). Years prior to the invasion, Moscow executed sustained political and information support for separatist entities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A critical mechanism was mass *"passportization"* – the systematic conferral of Russian citizenship to the local populace – to manufacture a legal pretext for intervention under the guise of citizen protection. Simultaneously, domestic propaganda conditioned the Russian population with anti-Georgian sentiment. The subsequent kinetic phase – a five-day high-intensity offensive launched in August 2008 – featured an early application of multi-domain operations, synchronizing armor and artillery maneuver with targeted cyber-attacks and information dominance.
Ukraine – 2014	This scenario necessitated a compressed hybrid timeline following the Revolution of Dignity. The annexation of Crimea was executed via the rapid deployment of unmarked special forces (*"little green men"*), maintaining plausible deniability while seizing key terrain without overt bloodshed. In the Donbas, the Kremlin operationalized local proxy forces supported by Russian financing, advanced weaponry, military advisors, and "volunteers" to seize administrative centers and conduct pseudo-legal referendums. This irregular warfare campaign was shielded by a strategic information operation characterizing the Kyiv government as a "*fascist junta*" to delegitimize resistance, coupled with diplomatic obstructionism at the UN Security Council. Notably, combat operations were conducted while formally denying the presence of Russian regular forces.

Ukraine – 2022	The 2022 invasion represents the culmination of a continuous, eight-year hybrid campaign that effectively bridged the 2014 local aggression with full-scale war. Beyond maintaining existing destabilization vectors, this period was defined by hyper-intensive psychological operations targeting the Russian domestic cognitive domain, systematically distorting the perception of Ukraine and elevating societal hatred to a flashpoint. Strategic deception was employed to vehemently deny invasion intentions up until "*H-Hour*". Operationally, the preparatory phase involved escalated cyber-offensives against Ukrainian state governance, financial sectors, and energy grids, alongside the weaponization of energy exports to coerce Western stakeholders. In this instance, the hybrid architecture was explicitly engineered to shape the battlefield for a massive conventional offensive.
NATO – 202...?	"*Never let the future disturb you. You will meet it, if you have to, with the same weapons of reason which today arm you against the present*" – Marcus Aurelius, the Emperor of Rome.

Moreover, from the perspective of Russian military science, the prevailing European discourse regarding "*hybrid warfare*" suffers from a lack of doctrinal precision. Western analysts frequently conflate the term with the entire spectrum of subversive activities; however, Russian military thought – specifically the framework formalized[3] by military academicians such as the former secretary of Russia's Security council Andrey Kokoshin, and employed by its General Staff – enforces a strict taxonomy of escalation. Within this hierarchy, "*hybrid warfare*" already represents a specific, advanced tier of hostilities (Stage 4), distinct from lower-level interference. Mere information operations, economic coercion, propaganda, and internal political subversion do not, in isolation, constitute hybrid warfare under this doctrine. Rather, **the defining characteristic of the hybrid phase is the limited application of conventional military force** – primarily via SOF and private military companies (PMCs) – synchronized with broad-spectrum non-military pressure.

Consequently, recent incidents in Europe involving direct acts of sabotage against critical infrastructure, airspace violations by combat aircraft, the proliferation of unidentified UAVs, and the infiltration of additional sabotage elements **may signify that the threshold has been crossed**. Previous political meddling was merely a prelude; **current kinetic probing confirms the transition to active hybrid warfare**.

This distinction reveals *a fundamental shift in Russian strategic intent*. While political subversion (propaganda, elite capture) having been the key trend of Russian sub-threshold activities in Europe for many years **was a long-term investment strategy designed for control and influence** – analogous to maintaining a cooperative paradigm to "*milk the cow*" — the current surge in quasi-military activities (cyber-physical attacks, electronic warfare jamming, underwater threats, and aerial incursions) indicates **a shift to an antagonistic, destructive paradigm. This is no longer about influencing governance but about rapid**

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3 https://istina.msu.ru/publications/article/180100931/

destabilization, demoralization, and provocation. The "boiling frog" metaphor[4] by RUSI is apt; while the West focuses on the political temperature, it risks overlooking the rapid heating of the military environment.

Surprisingly, Russia is quite straightforward about this change. It was explicitly codified in the Russian Federation's updated 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, which asserts[5] that the "*collective West*" has unleashed a "*hybrid war of a new type*" against Russia. This high-level declaration serves a dual function for a researcher: first, it is a formal admission that Moscow considers itself in a state of war with NATO and the EU; second, adhering to the Soviet tradition of "*mirror imaging*", **it reveals Russia's own operational algorithm by projecting its actions onto the adversary**. Within the mentioned Gerasimov's doctrine of "*next generation warfare*", active conventional hostilities by regular forces are designed to occur only after a prolonged phase of covert aggression has successfully degraded the target state's governance and defense capabilities. General Gerasimov has famously quantified[6] this approach, positing a 4:1 ratio of non-military to military measures in modern conflict.

Therefore, the prevalent Western countermeasures recommended[7] by RUSI – such as promoting transparency, supporting a free press, and bolstering political opposition – are dangerously insufficient. **The Russian strategy is not reliant on waiting for organic destabilization; it is an active engineering effort to force the target nation to a boiling point – a** *"point of no return"* **– before the target can politically mobilize for defense.** This intent is further corroborated by the accelerated tempo of Russian military-industrial production and military build-up, only a fraction of which is designated for the Ukrainian operational theater.

The hybrid campaign is hence not a substitute for war for Russia, but the shaping phase of an inevitable conventional engagement, aimed at breaking the target's will and capacity to resist before the first tank crosses the border.

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4   https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/frog-pot-turning-around-russias-hybrid-war

5   https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/3021

6   https://news.zerkalo.io/world/30296.html

7   https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/frog-pot-turning-around-russias-hybrid-war

Current Sub-Threshold Activities and Trends

Moving from doctrinal theory to the operational reality "on the ground" *(as the Russian dictator loves to say)*, a distinct correlation emerges between the Russian General Staff's theoretical models and recent events and current trends. During the four years of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the Kremlin's grey-zone hostilities against Europe became a comprehensive enterprise designed to undermine cohesion and sovereignty of EU and NATO nations through a synchronized fusion of kinetic and non-kinetic vectors: cyber warfare, information-psychological operations (PSYOP), economic coercion, political subversion, direct action by intelligence networks, and sabotage.

Over the course of the war, Moscow has radically intensified the character of subthreshold activities approaching them to hybrid aggression. A statistical increase in incidents is verifiable via the Sagaydachnyi Security Center's online tracker[8] – and is quite expected given European support for Ukraine. **But there is also a qualitative shift in these operations indicating a more sinister strategic intent.**

Since 2022 and roughly till mid-2023, Russian efforts have focused on the cyber, cognitive and political domains. Operations included false-flag cyberattacks, the activation[9] of espionage networks, financing[10] of pro-Russian political entities, weaponization of energy supplies (gas blackmail in 2022), and sophisticated information campaigns like "Doppelgänger"[11]. While there were also kinetic-adjacent actions such as DDoS attacks[12] paralyzing hospitals in the Netherlands, Germany, and the UK, or the installation[13] of surveillance devices on rail lines and arson attacks[14] on warehouses in Poland destined for Ukraine – they were all aligned with the logic of severing aid to Ukraine.

By late 2023 though, a second, parallel track has emerged that resembles state-sponsored terrorism and direct preparation for the armed stage of conflict. Its early manifestations are attacks[15] on critical dual-use infrastructure in the Baltic and Nordic regions, including arsons in the border areas, the damaging of the Balticconnector gas pipeline (October 2023) and the severing of the Estlink-2 power cable by a Russian "shadow fleet" tanker (December 2024). Both incidents demonstrated a capability and willingness to attack strategic subsea assets under the guise of maritime accidents.

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8   https://sahasec.org/tracker/

9   https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-arrests-foreign-intelligence-employee-suspected-spying-russia-2022-12-22/

10 https://jamestown.org/program/poland-on-the-frontlines-against-russias-shadow-war

11 https://www.cybercom.mil/Media/News/Article/3895345/russian-disinformation-campaign-doppelgnger-unmasked-a-web-of-deception/

12 https://www.euronews.com/2023/02/01/european-hospitals-targeted-by-pro-russian-hackers

13 reuters.com/world/europe/poland-breaks-up-spy-network-says-defence-minister-2023-03-16

14 https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-hybrid-war-against-europe-continues-to-escalate/

15 reuters.com/business/energy/russian-hybrid-warfare-could-leave-europes-energy-consumers-cold-2025-10-13

In 2025, Europe has witnessed[16] a surge in airspace violations, starting with the September 2025 groups Shahed-type drone raid on Poland and the coordinated incursion of MiG-31 interceptors into Estonian airspace, and ending with already *"run-of-the-mill"* unidentified unmanned aerial systems in over the oil platforms and strategic sites of European countries. Crucially, intelligence suggests many of these UAVs are launched from Russian "shadow fleet" and "civilian" vessels (actually, intelligence trawlers) operating near European coasts, thus complicating early warning.

This proliferation may serve a dual purpose. While the immediate effect is psychological pressure and the testing of NATO air defense reaction times, the primary military objective is operational preparation of the environment[17]. The modern Russian UAVs are assets perfectly suited and capable for mapping European strategic defense infrastructure (where they are regularly spotted[18]), command and control nodes, and dual-use logistics elements. This data collection is not for general intelligence; it is specific targeting data required for the initial phase of Gerasimov's "next-gen warfare". In the event of open conflict, this reconnaissance will facilitate immediate precision strikes to neutralize NATO's command & control, AEW&C[19], and deep-strike capabilities in the first instance (just as it was implemented for Ukraine in 2022).

Using drones may be considered a turning point in Russian sub-threshold activities against Europe. As the ultimate hybrid tool, unmanned systems have become the ideal instrument for this phase due to both technical opportunities they provide and the attribution challenge. A drone without markings loitering over a capital city or a nuclear power plant induces panic and paralyzes operations without providing a formal casus belli for Article 5 activation. While these platforms currently operate in a reconnaissance capacity, the threat landscape is evolving. One cannot rule out the future employment of loitering munitions or weaponized drones for kinetic sabotage, which Moscow will inevitably attempt to frame as "technological accidents" or "*anonymous terrorist acts*".

Reference Note 2. **The structural and qualitative evolution of Russian sub-threshold activities and hybrid warfare operations against European states in 2022-2025**

The operational tempo has shifted from low-impact "noise" and harassment to coordinated campaigns aiming for physical degradation and the compromise of critical security architecture. The current phase involves a transition from probing actions to active operational preparation of the environment, targeting logistics, telecommunications, and subsea infrastructure and presumably collecting ISR data.

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16 https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russian-hybrid-warfare-could-leave-europes-energy-consum-ers-cold-2025-10-13/

17 This is the expert opinion of the SSC research team.

18 https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/10/09/8002051/

19 Airborne Early Warning and Control.

Domain	Development	
	2022	**2025**
General Landscape	Dominance of low-risk, reversible instruments such as cyber-attacks and air/sea provocations for reaction testing. Mainly nuisance-level events, such as DDoS attacks with the intent of psychological pressure rather than functional degradation.	Incidents now directly compromise critical functions and physical safety. The focus has shifted to the tangible disruption of aviation, telecommunications, and logistics processes. Establishment of an active sabotage nexus involving recruited proxies and intelligence networks.
Electro-magnetic Spectrum Ops	GNSS (Global Navigation Satellite System) interference appeared as isolated, early-warning signals. Incidents were localized, such as GPS anomalies affecting aviation near the Finnish eastern border in March 2022	Escalation: EW has evolved into a persistent, scalable area-denial tool. Finland reports a massive surge in interference (approx. 2,800 incidents in 2024 vs. 200 in 2023), necessitating the transition of 14 airports to backup radio-navigation systems. Poland has attributed persistent GPS destabilization over the Baltic Sea directly to Russian assets, Latvia reported a 55% increase in airspace GNSS interference in Q1 2025 alone (290 confirmed cases)
Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS)	Drone incursions were sporadic, point-specific, and linked to sensitive events (e.g., UAS activity over a no-fly zone during nuclear fuel transport in Lappeenranta, Finland, in November 2022.	Operations exhibit centralized coordination, ISR intents, multi- vector approaches, and high-level tradecraft. E.g. the incursions over Danish airbases (Autumn 2025) involved "highly capable" operators utilizing Beyond Line of Sight (BLOS) flight paths and GNSS-jamming resistance. Surveillance of the Nammo defense-industrial facility in Finland and the deliberate disruption of the glideslope at Riga International Airport (January 2025) indicate a shift toward testing defense response times and identifying vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure protection.
Maritime Domain (including Subsea)	Naval hybrid activity focused on "gray zone" presence and ISR.	The operational focus shifted to the physical destruction of subsea critical infrastructure, utilizing the "shadow fleet" for plausible deniability. Indicators: confirmed damage to the Sweden-Lithuania cable (November 2024); the severing of the Finland-Estonia connection via "anchor dragging" by a shadow fleet vessel (December 2024); and "external influence" damaging the Latvia-Sweden link (January 2025).

Thus the trajectory from 2022 to 2025 demonstrates a clear departure from opportunistic harassment. Russia has moved into a high-intensity *"pre-war"* phase, characterizing the operational environment through mapping, probing, and the physical degradation of NATO rear-area logistics and communication. The synchronization of sabotage, electronic warfare, and drone incursions suggests a deliberate strategy to start eroding Alliance resilience and/or prepare the battlespace for potential conventional escalation.

Scenarios and Vectors of Military Hostilities

Along with frequent misunderstanding of the place of grey-zone hostilities and hybrid warfare in the broader Russian military doctrine, **another important confusion of the West is about Russia's core strategic objective**. As with the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the goal is not the operational capture of specific towns like Chasiv Yar or Pokrovsk, or even four Ukraine's regions; **it is to inflict a politically and psychologically decisive defeat on NATO at the lowest possible cost**. A decisive victory over Ukraine could be this low-cost venture, but it looks virtually impossible as of 2025. The strategic objective remains unchanged, but with diminished resources, **Moscow will now be actively seeking a new point of maximum leverage – the weakest point in the alliance where a limited strike can produce a disproportionate political fracture**. This leads to the critical point: Putin sees that Europe is now (eventually) preparing for a confrontation. His strategic calculus is therefore analogous to that of Hitler towards the USSR in 1941 – **he has a powerful incentive to strike first, before Europe's rearmament is complete**.

The Baltic states represent the most vulnerable vector for Russian military aggression[20], as it is the theater where Russia is most likely to fulfill its *"quick-win"* craving for the biggest geopolitical gain with the least effort. This assumption narrows and specifies the capability assessment task from overview of the Russian threat to Europe in general to a focused analysis of the balance of forces and means on this specific axis.

Focusing on the Baltics brings the picture into sharper relief, as it moves from the abstract concept of a united Europe and its aggregate potential to an assessment of specific, deployed forces and assets, provisionally discounting direct immediate involvement of nations like Spain, Greece, Hungary, and other countries not threatened by Russia immediately and whose participation in a Baltic defense scenario is highly questionable.

The role of the United States also requires critical evaluation. Despite President Trump's statements about *("Yes, I will be")* defending the Baltics[21], U.S. intervention is not guaranteed. Trump's established policy already aims to reduce US commitments abroad. Also, the strategic imperative of Taiwan looms large; the US resources may not be sufficient to decisively engage in two major theaters at once.

> **Based on recent statements[22] attributed to the Trump administration and the U.S. DoD, the future of the Baltic Security Initiative (BSI) beyond 2026 appears highly uncertain. Specifically, the Pentagon has indicated that the BSI is not provided for in the draft budget for Fiscal Year 2026, meaning funding**

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20 Poland may also be considered a target, but likely only in the context of securing the Suwałki Gap as a transit corridor. The conquest of Poland as a whole is an unrealistic primary objective for Russia as of now.

21 As declared in September 2025 in an answer to a reporter's question.

22 https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-09-09/consequences-discontinuation-baltic-security-initiative-trump

is scheduled to cease or will not be requested. Existing BSI funds for training, equipment, and regional army support are only programmed through October 2026. Any continuation is contingent upon a new allocation of funds, which is doubtful given the stated U.S. strategic reprioritization toward the Indo-Pacific region. So, without significant Congressional intervention or a radical shift in foreign policy, the risk of a full or partial dismantlement of the BSI by 2027 is high.

Depending on Russia's capacity on *"H-Hour"* and its subjective assessment of its own strength versus that of its adversary, **several key scenarios and vectors of military (not hybrid) aggression are most frequently considered.**

1. Suwałki Gambit

A sudden Russian attempt to seize a limited, strategic zone – *most likely the 80-kilometer-wide Suwałki Gap* between Kaliningrad and Belarus – will pursue isolating the Baltic states from ground reinforcement by NATO allies. This would be a lightning offensive designed to create a fait accompli before NATO can mount a coherent response. While alternative options for such an operation are possible (e.g., Gotland, Narva region in Estonia), **they all possess a fundamental flaw** – leaving the Achilles' heel of the Kaliningrad exclave exposed to a Polish and Lithuanian blockade. Such a blockade would paralyze a good portion of Russia's subsequent strategic options by simplifying the occupation or effective isolation of Kaliningrad by Allies. Only the Suwałki option effectively eliminates this risk.

With any other scenario of conventional war, the Allies, given the political will, could effectively disrupt Russian strategic posture by rapidly seizing the Kaliningrad exclave. Then, even if Moscow made territorial gains in the Baltics, its ability to issue ultimatums would be contained. However, this course of action for NATO would be weighed against personnel losses and an elevated risk of nuclear escalation. A naval blockade is more plausible: Poland and Lithuania would close the land corridor to the exclave from Belarus, while the NATO fleet would interdict it from the sea. This would prevent the delivery of reinforcements and could compel the Russian garrison to surrender should its resources be depleted. This is the weakest spot which Russia is certainly considering and likely planning its operation around seizing Suwałki Gap in the first place.

2. Full-Scale Regional War in the Baltics

A comprehensive, multi-domain Russian assault on the Baltic states, conducted simultaneously across land, sea, air, cyberspace, and space, employs the full spectrum of new technologies (intense missile-drone attritional assaults, dispersed groups with drone swarms, massed EW, naval drone fleets, etc). On the ground, the offensive will concurrently target multiple operational fronts (as in Ukraine in 2022), advancing toward Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania from Belarus, with a focus on the Suwałki Corridor. This scenario would manifest an intent of demonstrative full-scale war between Russia and NATO, where Russia seeks not to limit itself but to paralyze the defense of the entire Baltic region.

Given Russia's historical predilection for scale over precision, the second scenario – a maximalist offensive – warrants serious scrutiny. Recalling the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow is indeed inclined to demonstrate a willingness to gamble *"all or nothing"*.

> **Rather than focusing forces to capture the entire Donbas region in 2022 – an objective that was arguably within reach and remains contested four years later – the Kremlin opted for a simultaneous, multi-axis advance on Kyiv, Kharkiv, Sumy, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia.**

This strategic culture suggests that Putin, potentially emboldened by recent grinding tactical gains in the Donbas and a misplaced belief in Russia's resurgent power, might again overestimate his capabilities relative to the magnitude of his objectives.

This assessment is reinforced by the Kremlin's persistent refusal to offer concessions, not only regarding Ukraine but also in its broader strategic ultimatum demanding[23] a rollback of NATO infrastructure to 1997 borders. Consequently, a full-scale invasion mirroring the initial phase of the Ukraine war – aimed at the rapid capitulation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – becomes a plausible contingency. The strategic logic would rely on a lightning strike to seize all three nations within days, presenting NATO with a *fait accompli* immediately backed by nuclear blackmail to paralyze any Alliance counter-offensive.

However, the operational execution of such an invasion **would likely diverge from the conventional armored thrusts** frequently modeled[24] by Western analysts. Having internalized the hard-won lessons of the Ukrainian theater, Russian commanders may eschew massive mechanized columns vulnerable to interdiction. Instead, a modern offensive would likely begin with hyper-intensive, synchronized cyberattacks and deep-strike missile and drone waves to degrade air defenses. This would be followed not merely by bypassing major defensive formations to seize capitals, but by the infiltration of dispersed, relatively small assault groups across multiple axes. These units would prioritize rapid entrenchment and the deployment of sensor arrays to establish "kill zones," enabling real-time reconnaissance and remote destruction of responding Allied forces *(the new operational algorithm of Russia will be discussed below in detail)*.

Certain material indicators support the preparation for such a big-scale high-intensity intrusion. Legislative changes[25] enabling continuous conscription, the aggressive ramp-up of defense industrial output, and the formation of new combined arms units *(including new divisions in the North-Western regions)* all point to the generation of resources required for a protracted, large-scale war. While it remains ambiguous whether these preparations are intended solely

23 https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/russia-rejects-seven-points-from-the-original-1765536165.html

24 https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/baltic-states-plan-mass-evacuations-case-russian-attack-2025-10-10/

25 https://evrimagaci.org/gpt/russia-moves-to-year-round-draft-amid-ukraine-war-514191

for the continuation of the campaign in Ukraine or for a broader escalation, **the capability is being systematically built**.

Hypothetical planning, such as scenarios outlined[26] by CEPA, envisions a three-day conquest of the Baltics involving a thrust through Narva to Tallinn and Paldiski, amphibious landings, and a concurrent drive from Belarus to Kaliningrad. This maximalist scenario would likely see a simultaneous, multi-axis offensive: a strike from the Pskov region into Estonia aiming directly for Tallinn, synchronized with a thrust from Belarus targeting Lithuania – specifically Vilnius and the Polish border – potentially involving allied Belarusian forces, though the probability level of their direct participation remains unclear. Furthermore, this would almost certainly be coordinated with active fire support from the Kaliningrad exclave itself – and maybe even a breakout attempt pushing eastward into western Lithuania toward the strategic port of Klaipėda, while massive waves of drone and missile attacks saturate key Allied airfields and C2 nodes to paralyze the initial response.

However, from the Ukrainian perspective it looks more realistic that bloody lessons learned in Ukraine would make the Russian General Staff adapt to a strategy of incrementalism, or *"salami slicing"*, mirroring their current attritional approach in the Donbas. In this variation, Moscow might exploit specific vulnerabilities rather than risking a general offensive.

> **An example of such a potential "slice" is the *"Dieveniškės Pocket"* (Dieveniškės Loop) in Lithuania, a protrusion connected to the mainland by a single paved road within a bottleneck only 2.6 kilometers wide. The region's dense afforestation and sparse population characterized by isolated homesteads provide ideal cover for the infiltration of small tactical groups. An operation here could involve blocking the sole access road and establishing *de facto* control via light infantry infiltration.**

3. Gotland / Saaremaa / Hiiumaa Seizure

Quite a low-probability scenario alone with high chances to become a part of a broader campaign depicted in the previous section, it involves a targeted **amphibious assault on the Swedish island of Gotland or the Estonian archipelago (Saaremaa, Hiiumaa)**. The operational intent here would be to establish dominance over the central Baltic littoral zone. Control of these islands would theoretically grant Russia significant operational-strategic leverage, allowing for the deployment of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) zones comprising anti-ship missiles, air defense systems, aerial and naval drones. This effectively closes the Baltic Sea to NATO naval reinforcements, isolating the Baltic states and creating a platform for diplomatic ultimatums. However, while strategically tempting, the tactical reality renders this vector highly unattractive as an independent campaign.

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26 https://cepa.org/article/code-red-how-russia-conquers-the-baltics/

As demonstrated by every coastal and island engagement in the Russo-Ukrainian War (most notably *Snake Island*), **isolating and degrading an exposed garrison is a matter of time**. Without a secure, diversified, and redundant logistical bridge – which Russia cannot guarantee in the contested waters of the central Baltic – any force deployed to Gotland would be vulnerable to blockade and systematic destruction. Therefore, while this vector may materialize as a supporting axis within a broader regional war, it lacks viability as a standalone operation. The *"what next?"* question remains unanswered; unlike a continental bridgehead, an isolated island garrison offers no strategic depth and can be *"picked off"* at NATO's leisure.

4. Arctic Escalation

Regarding the Arctic theater, specifically the targeting of the **Svalbard (Spitsbergen) archipelago**, the probability of aggression bifurcates based on the broader strategic context – just as with the Gotland scenario. As an isolated *"limited invasion"* vector, this scenario is among the least probable; however, in the event of a full-scale regional war focused on the Baltic states, a concurrent offensive toward Svalbard becomes a near-certainty, following the classical strategic logic of a secondary theater.

Regarding *an isolated Arctic scenario* as a regional assault detached from any larger war effort, the *net assessment* shows that despite local operational advantages for Russia, hostilities in this region as a self-sustained Arctic campaign faces severe structural liabilities. While the Russian strategic air force and Northern Fleet maintains a quantitative edge in deepstrike and subsurface assets, the qualitative balance of power is not sufficient to provide a decisive overwhelming edge. Should the Nordic nations demonstrate at least a minimum of resolve and coordinated resistance, this campaign would rapidly devolve into a logistical quagmire.

Even if Russian forces successfully seized the archipelago in the initial hours, sustaining a garrison there creates an indefensible liability. The integration of Norwegian and Finnish F-35 fleets creates a formidable tactical air threat, and Norway's P-8 Poseidon squadrons represent the capability tuned specifically for anti-submarine warfare in the region. Unlike a continental front, an isolated island outpost cannot be reinforced if sea lines of communication are contested. Therefore, an occupation force would face the prospect of being systematically degraded via remote precision fires from the mainland, forcing Russia to constantly "retake" the territory or watch its garrison wither. Unlike the Donbas, the Arctic theater does not allow Russia to leverage its asymmetric advantages: massed infantry assaults with high casualty tolerance are logistically impossible, and the utility of small-scale tactical drones is severely limited by harsh weather conditions. Furthermore, the geography of bases (Evenes, Rovaniemi, Luleå) favors the defenders.

Consequently, while Russia can seize Svalbard, holding it against a determined Nordic counter-offensive would require an *"all or nothing"* commitment that could gradually deplete the Northern Fleet. Moreover, this operation

carries a significant strategic risk: it invites NATO to retaliate by sealing off the Kaliningrad exclave, using the de-occupation of Svalbard as a bargaining chip for lifting the blockade.

Therefore an isolated campaign for the Arctic offers Russia a poor return on investment. While the Kremlin covets the region's natural resources, these assets cannot be immediately converted into liquidity to sustain a war economy. At the same time, Putin's current strategic window is defined by a desire to capitalize on the momentum of his mobilized war machine to achieve rapid, global geopolitical shifts – primarily the political collapse of NATO and the effective subordination of the Baltic states as a part of Russian "traditional sphere of influence". An isolated Arctic adventure does not achieve any of these primary goals and, crucially, fails to resolve the critical vulnerability of the Kaliningrad exclave which Allies could blockade as an asymmetric measure to make Russia severely pay for the Arctic aggression.

However, *as a parallel track to a Baltic offensive*, the Arctic becomes essential. In the case of full-scale war in the Baltics and with a land corridor to Kaliningrad secured, Moscow will initiate this theater to make an additional stronghold against NATO forces in the North. The Russian military objective here would be to transform Svalbard into a forward operating base, rapidly deploying air defense systems, radar arrays, anti-ship missiles and air/naval drone homepoints. This would extend Russia's A2/AD bubble between Greenland and Norway to interdict NATO reinforcements moving across the North Atlantic. And even if a permanent occupation proves untenable, Russian hostilities here would be used to force NATO to divert critical naval and air resources away from the primary Baltic front, utilizing the Arctic for strategic distraction and attrition.

Military planning, evidenced by scenarios rehearsed during *"Zapad"* exercises[27] in Fall 2025, suggests a *coup de main* operation. Under the guise of naval drills, a Northern Fleet amphibious group could launch a surprise landing on Svalbard. To ensure the success of this insertion, Russia would likely conduct massive, synchronized combined missile and long-range drone strikes against Norwegian port infrastructure and airfields. The goal of air raids would be twofold: physically degrading Oslo's and allied ability to mount an immediate counter-response and psychologically paralyzing the population. Russia possesses a structural advantage for this initial phase, centered on the Kola Peninsula bastion. Its strategic aviation (Tu-95, Tu-160, Tu-22M) can launch long-range cruise missiles from the safety of far behind the Barents Sea, while its submarine fleet – the most potent component of the Russian Navy – can operate under the protective umbrella of surface assets to contest the underwater domain.

Russia's unique force architecture in the High North makes such a campaign quite affordable as a secondary effort in a larger war. Unlike the terrestrial units required for Ukraine or the Baltics, the Arctic theater utilizes distinct, non-transferable assets centered on the underwater domain and specialized Arctic

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27 https://www.arctictoday.com/cruise-missiles-over-franz-josef-land/

divisions which are largely unsuitable or non-critical for the mechanized grind on the other fronts.

Furthermore, within a broader context of a large-scale war with NATO, even a temporary seizure of Svalbard serves a distinct diplomatic function for Russia: the creation of a high-value *"bargaining chip"*. Occupying the archipelago, or, more probably, taking it under fire control, provides Moscow with geopolitical currency to trade during negotiations – potentially offering to de-occupy Svalbard in exchange for reciprocal concessions somewhere else.

Therefore, the most dangerous scenario is not a committed invasion from day one, but an opportunistic "*probe*" parallel to the Baltic offensive. Mirroring the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow may launch a limited strike to test Allied resolve in this operational direction. If Norway/NATO shows hesitation or weakness, Russia will seize the archipelago as a "free prize", presenting *a fait accompli*. However, if Russians encounter any resistance, they are likely to make it a low-intensity secondary theater of remote warfare, with the primary axis remaining in the Baltics.

5. Multidomain Offensive against Finland and Norway

Finally, the least probable scenario – bordering on the fantastic – envisages a direct land offensive in Northern Norway (*Finnmark*) or Finland (*Lapland/ Karelia*). In theory, such an operation would see Russian ground forces pushing from Murmansk into Finnmark, or from Petrozavodsk toward Joensuu and Rovaniemi (*Finland*). The ostensible strategic rationale would be defensive-of-fensive: establishing a buffer zone to protect the critical nuclear submarine bastions on the Kola Peninsula and securing dominance over the Barents Sea.

While open-source intelligence confirms[28] ongoing military construction near the Finnish border – including the formation of new divisions and an army corps in Karelia – these developments may be interpreted primarily as defensive posturing. This buildup is designed to secure Russia's vulnerable northern flank and rear areas in case its main combat power is committed elsewhere, rather than to generate the combat power necessary for a territorial conquest. The forces allocated are insufficient for the seizure and holding of hostile and very difficult terrain against trained, numerous and potentially motivated defenders.

Specifically regarding Finland, a ground offensive appears practically suicidal. Historical precedence aside, Finland currently possesses one of the most capable and combat-ready land armies in Europe, boasting a 280,000-strong active force, massive reserves, and over 1,500 artillery systems. Even with newly acquired drone-powered capabilities (*good enough for remote warfare*), any Russian attempt to penetrate the Finnish interior by its Army units on land would likely result in a logistical and tactical catastrophe of a higher order than even the initial stages of the Ukraine invasion in 2022. Consequently, while analysts include this vector for the sake of comprehensive modeling, it remains highly unlikely[29]. In

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28 https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/russia-baltics-security

29 This is the expert opinion of the SSC research team.

the event of a broader conflict in the Baltics, Russian pressure on these nations would almost certainly be limited to remote kinetic effects (sustained missile and drone strikes) with small-scale disturbing ground activities at the border at most – rather than a futile large-scale ground invasion.

■■■

Thus, excluding the primary vectors of the Suwalki Corridor, other operational scenarios, while statistically less probable and virtually untenable as self-sufficient, standalone campaigns, cannot be entirely discounted. In the event of a full-scale regional war in the Baltics, they would likely materialize not as independent objectives, but as integral, supporting components of a wider strategic design.

Full-Scale Aggression Operational Pathway

The study considers the first scenario (the Suwałki gambit) most probable. As previously discussed, Russia is far from its peak condition, and its economic problems are intensifying toward a point of no return. At the same time, Putin's regime cannot give up the attack on NATO due to equally compelling domestic socio-political factors vital to its self-preservation.

This is why Russia has recently intensified its **hybrid warfare campaign**, in Europe at large, but in the Baltic region particularly – a clear preparatory sign, as Russian military doctrine deeply integrates the sabotage of critical national infrastructure into its war concept. It is also currently **reallocating its economic priorities to maximize military endurance**[30]. Therefore, **the Suwałki option is optimal for achieving a rapid, decisive effect**. Moreover, it is ideal in that, should it succeed and expose NATO's weakness, nothing would prevent Russia from escalating and expanding the operation to *Option 2*: taking control of the entire Baltic region.

With this scenario in view, for proper analysis of the power balance between NATO's Northeastern Forward Presence and Russia *(+Belarus)* in the Baltics, it is essential to understand how *Russia will fight* in this specific theater, as its operational methodology is critical. The transition from a "cold" hybrid war to a "hot" conventional phase will consist of **four primary components**.

Phase 1. Hybrid Culmination

Before kinetic operations openly commence, the region would likely experience a sustained and escalating campaign of hybrid warfare having reached its apogee, with a set of fore activities specifically designed to desensitize the target and Allies. This buildup would aim to make the crisis feel trivial or routine until the moment of transition, at which point the intensity would spike dramatically to create a psychological "*everything is collapsing*" sensation. This might *(but would not necessarily do)* culminate in attempts to neutralize Allied satellite systems, coupled with widespread cyber, cyberphysical and direct sabotage of critical infrastructure in the future operational theater. Russian intelligence services would activate *"sleeping cells"* to conduct covert operations, simultaneously blowing up power substations, optical fiber backbones, subsea cables and railway junctions to cause blackouts, communication collapse and chaos. Port facilities would be targeted specifically to hinder the arrival of NATO reinforcements.

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30 Financing has been cut for approximately one-third of all state programs, with reductions affecting healthcare, rural development, aviation, energy, and even the "development" of annexed territories. In 2026, at least 18 out of 51 state programs will receive less funding, saving the budget over 200 billion rubles. In contrast, funding for the electronic and radio-electronic industry has increased 4.4-fold, from 42.6 to 186.5 billion rubles. This budgetary realignment clearly illustrates Russia's priorities.

Phase 2. Air Offensive, Deep and Medium Strike[31]

A comprehensive air and ground-based missile and drone campaign would be conducted in parallel and in the immediate aftermath of the sabotage stage, targeting critical infrastructure, C2 centers, aircraft and warships at home bases, logistical nodes etc, deep within enemy territory. Following these long-range fires, Russia would also employ medium-range assets, including loitering munitions, fixed-wing "kamikaze" UAVs, "motherships" and relay assets (including both aerial and ground-based local navigation fields) for FPV strike drones – both aerial and naval. The objective is to degrade logistics and infrastructure in the operational depth (including the seashore), denying the defender any ability to maneuver.

Within this component, **an important strategic objective for Russia would probably be the pre-emptive neutralization of allied strategic airpower** on **the ground** before it can be brought to bear. Intelligence gathering for this purpose is already actively underway. However, *two issues remain uncertain in this regard*. *First*, despite huge and rapidly accumulated deepstrike assets and a thin European airshield, it remains unclear whether this effort would succeed, as NATO intelligence, physical protections, deception and dispersal measures remain critical factors. Second, even if it fails, will allied strategic aviation provide the decisive advantage currently assumed in Western doctrine? The recent Israeli operations in Iran, based on a hybrid approach combining massed UAS, special operations, and traditional airpower, cast uncertainty with regard to standalone aircraft dominance, as the implications ambiguously support or challenge its efficacy depending on the observer's viewpoint. It is a dark horse.

Phase 3. Kill Zone and Tactical Airspace Dominance

As military science dictates preparing for the worst, let's assume a Western response, even one leveraging the full might of airborne early warning and control, strategic fighter aircraft and naval battle groups, **would not significantly disrupt Russia's plans or derail its offensive**. This is due to Russia's waging new type of war and its high casualty tolerance, as well as the highly dispersed nature of battle formations and military assets[32].

The next step would be establishment of a comprehensive 40+km engagement area impenetrable for rival's electronic assets, through the massed deployment of UAS groups, and layered ground air defenses, aimed at achieving total control of the tactical airspace, suppressing adversary's artillery, drone capabilities, and key strongholds. This also involves the deployment of advanced EMSO[33] and EW capabilities to suppress all defender communications and networked systems while strictly enforcing safe electromagnetic corridors for Russian forces.

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31 Along with anti-satellite warfare in the space domain, but Russian real capabilities in this domain remain unclear.

32 Unless the West had already developed and nuanced a pre-emptive plan akin to Israel's "Rising Lion" operation in Iran, with special operations forces pre-positioned near every air defense system in Kaliningrad and every drone operator hub and logistics center targeted by deep strikes from the outset. *Hardly*.

33 Electromagnetic Spectrum Operations

This phase will likely see the deployment of highly professional dispersed *'Rubikon'-type* crews of unmanned systems operators and infrastructure, working on frequency-hopping adaptive radios and EW-immune fiber optics. Their role is to target logistics and command centers in the near-rear and suppress strongholds in the first line of defense *(if there would be any).*

Phase 4. Dispersed Ground Anchoring Maneuver

Only after the first three conditions are met will ground units, and small-size legions of tactical microgroups be committed to seize and hold territory.

These small tactical groups – potentially pre-positioned or infiltrated under civil disguise – will operate under the cover of FPV drones and loitering munitions with autonomous terminal-stage execution, to conduct clearing operations and consolidate gains. Certainly, should the target prove wholly unprepared by this phase, Russian forces may afford to advance more rapidly along key routes in their ambitious *'Kyiv in three days'* style; however, the primary doctrine would most likely rely on methodical creeping, which they have mastered in Ukraine.

Upon seizing territory, a comprehensive EW, C-UAS, and physically fortified defense bubble will be established to suppress all adversary electronic activity in the area and paralyze sustained counter-attacks.

This final pillar – consolidating and holding territory – is not optional for Russia. Russian planners understand clearly that in a purely standoff, long-range exchange of strikes, the West's technological superiority paired with already real economic pressures would likely eventually prevail.

Therefore, their strategy comprises "must-have" breaking through defensive lines and immediately transitioning the conflict to the tactical and operational-tactical levels. Once positions are taken on NATO land, dislodging Russian forces would be an exceptionally long and bloody endeavor. It is here, in close-quarters ground combat, that Russia believes the West lacks the requisite capabilities, mass, and political will to eject an entrenched force in protracted bloody standoff at which russians excel, thereby neutralizing NATO's standoff advantage.

With the first land cluster taken, Russia would probably immediately seek to impose a protracted war characterized by a high casualty rate, to exploit the low tolerance for human losses in modern European societies. This strategy is designed to enable **a war of attrition** – *Putin's favored approach.*

Fig. 1. "Suwaki Gambit" and Russian Anticipated Strategy

Within this framework, it is clear that comparative analysis should not focus on the raw numbers of mechanized brigades or most of legacy assets in the three operational domains. Instead, priority is given to deep strike capabilities, precision-guided munitions at the operational and tactical levels, long-range artillery, air and missile defense, counter-UAS capabilities, SIGINT/ELINT and EW.

Overarching these are the critical domains of C2, ISR and ISTAR, which also have significant nuances in this new warfare paradigm, as well as a resilient, adaptive logistics system, especially radically transforming on the last mile.

From the perspective of real combat capabilities in a modern ground war, within the framework of a multi-domain support and security environment, the forces balance is as follows *(a high-level snapshot)*.

Important Note

This assessment is based on the current situation and projections that follow from it. By 2027, **the balance could shift further, and not in the partners' favor.** The tempo and dynamics of Russian military buildup are superior in key assets such as strategic and tactical-level unmanned systems in three domains, precision-guided missiles and loitering munitions, EW assets. This also applies to manpower – both in mass (continuous all-year conscription is being restored[34]) and in skilled personnel (programs have been launched to train 250,000 to

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34 On September 24, the Russian State Duma passed the first reading of a bill enabling military conscription measures to be conducted year-round (instead of 2 times a year).

450,000 children and adolescents as UxS engineers and operators). Furthermore, a frozen conflict or armistice in Ukraine could allow Russia to redeploy not just reinforcements to another theatre, but **a good hundred of thousands of combat-hardened killer veterans with expert knowledge of the new type of warfare.**

Land Domain

Russian 'Forward Presence'

In the *Kaliningrad exclave*, the core force is the **11th Army Corps (AC) of the Baltic Fleet** comprising 10 motorized rifle battalions, 6 armoured battalions, 336th Separate Marines Brigade (HQ Baltiysk) and coastal defense and support units. Key among these are the 244th Artillery Brigade, equipped with "Uragan" and "Smerch" MLRS (with ranges of 70-90 km, a crucial detail as this capability remains valid beyond a 30-km kill zone where most other artillery systems are neutralized), and the 152nd Missile Brigade, operating "Iskander-M" tactical ballistic missiles. The total personnel strength in the exclave is approximately 10,000-12,000.

Within the newly re-established *Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts*, Russia has arrayed the 6th Combined Arms Army (HQ St. Petersburg), the 20th Guards Army (HQ Voronezh/Mulino), the 1st Guards Tank Army (HQ the Moscow region), as newly formed the 25th Army and the 44th Army Corps in Karelia. The Kremlin has also announced the reconstitution of the 26th Army Corps in the Leningrad Oblast.

It should be noted that most of these formations, including those from Kaliningrad, were actively engaged in Ukraine since 2022, having suffered heavy losses. However, this is a problem less for Russia than for NATO allies on the northeastern flank. The bulk of these losses have been among the lower ranks *("cannon fodder")* which the Russian military machine has proven adept at replenishing. Conversely, **the command staff at the strategic and operational levels have gained extensive experience in modern warfare**, significantly enhancing their competencies.

Belarus' military represents a "black swan" factor. Their participation, which would be highly probable in a Suwałki Gap scenario, at least for logistics and support functions, may substantively strengthen the Russian position. In case of direct combat engagement, the arsenal of Belarus is not modern (while development of next-gen MilTech is on) but quantitatively solid, including over 1,200 T-72B tanks, with approximately 500 in active service, 1,200 armored fighting vehicles (BMP-1/2, BTR-70/80) and over 1,000 artillery systems. That is not the primary problem of Baltics/Poland over-saturated with modern anti-tank weapons; this is where they still can do a job in case Belarus tries to wage legacy warfare with "armoured fists" maneuvers. The most professional and really perilous component to consider is the 4,000-6,000 strong Special Operations Forces.

NATO Forward Presence

Cumulatively, the three Baltic states possess fewer than 30,000 peacetime active-duty personnel in their ground forces *(not including allied contingents)*. They can draw upon a substantially larger reserve and territorial defense force, but bringing them into combat readiness takes time. In terms of units, this effectively amounts to four regular mechanized brigades and several light infantry and reserve brigades. Their existing and planned artillery systems (PzH-2000, K9 "Thunder", Archer) have maximum ranges about 30 km, or 40 km with enhanced projectiles. They have few tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, which is not a critical vulnerability in modern warfare. However, they possess a large quantity of short-range anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), boasting a highly saturated ATGM capability with thousands of Javelin, NLAW, and Carl Gustaf systems. These will be of limited utility in the new paradigm of warfare if Russia keeps it (but indispensable should the Russian military give in their deep love for large-scale armored surges even if counter-productive).

> Interesting enough, according to Russia's revealed plans for scaling up its tank production between 2026 and 2036, **the most intensive period of this surge is slated for 2027-2029**, with a production peak of 428 new tanks in 2028 alone.

To address this, the Baltic states are actively constructing the **Baltic Defence Line**. While necessary, the value of static fortifications is significantly devalued in modern conflict, as drone warfare demands active, maneuver-based defense with key roles played by UAV-powered tactical situational awareness, counter-battery and counter-drone capabilities, and EW, not merely physical defenses.

The **Polish Armed Forces** are the largest in the region, with 175,000 active personnel in 2025 (planning to grow to 300,000) and four active mechanized/tank divisions. However, their full-scale intervention in a conflict that does not directly involve Polish territory *(if the scenario gets a track other than Suwałki)* **is as much an unknown variable as Belarus's participation on the side of Russia**. While possible, even probable, it is not a certainty and depends on the overall NATO posture. In the case of engagement, **Poland could be the key ground factor for the allies**, capable of rapidly deploying several brigades to the Baltics within the first 48-72 hours of a war. While most of the advanced equipment it is procuring (M1A1 Abrams tanks, Korean K2 Black Panthers, Krab and K9 howitzers, HIMARS) will have low to zero effectiveness in a 2027 war against an adversary like Russia, **Poland has committed to developing drone-based mission-level and tactical capabilities**, becoming a leading (in absolute numbers) producer and importer of UAVs in the EU.

The Scandinavian countries, lacking a land border with the Baltics, can only assist in the air and maritime domains. While this would be very helpful in a total, protracted war of attrition styled after World War II, it is less decisive in Russia's likely scenario: a rapid seizure of a specific region within a Baltic country or the occupation of Lithuanian and Polish territory to link up with the Kaliningrad

exclave, followed by consolidating a position from which they cannot be dislodged. In this case, Scandinavian assistance would primarily be limited to intelligence and deep-strike support.

All three Baltic nations are actively improving their infrastructure (training grounds, bases) to receive allied forces, indicating a heavy reliance on broader Alliance support rather than their own capabilities. Then, regarding the Alliance, the *"first-aid"* forces that can be reliably counted upon are **four multinational enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups**, in each Baltic state and in Poland.

Latvia	A Canadian-led battlegroup, expanding to over 3,500 personnel with a full, permanent presence by 2026.
Lithuania	A German-led battlegroup of roughly 1,600 personnel (a German eFP battalion), and the U.S. two battalion – sized rotated forces. Germany is building its permanent armored brigade in Lithuania, planned to reach 5,000 by 2027, integrating the existing eFP formation.
Estonia	A British-led multinational battalion group of roughly 800-1,000 personnel (depending on rotation). Challenger 2 tanks have been a key component, Warrior IFVs have featured historically, with Ajax expected in coming years. The UK plans to reinforce Estonia up to brigade level if required, with a brigade held at high readiness.
Poland	A rotational US Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT) of 3,500 personnel, concentrated in western Poland (Orzysz) but with elements operating near the Suwałki Gap. Also present in Poland are rotational U.S. heavy forces and enablers, including the forward command post of the U.S. Army V Corps (Forward) and special operations units.

The American component is clearly vital. However, judging by recent statements from President Trump's administration (specifically, on the cancellation or suspension of the Baltic Security Initiative funding[35]), it is highly uncertain whether it will remain in the Baltics by 2027.

Therefore, in terms of raw aggregate numbers of personnel and conventional capabilities on the ground, the allies currently have a slight potential advantage over Russia in the region – in 1.5-2 times roughly. This assessment is highly tentative, as the current ratio assumes Russia (and NATO) will deploy regional forces solely, which is far from certain. By 2027, the situation could differ significantly. But this matters only if assuming the war will be fought by linear formations and armored vehicles, **which it will not**. In the domains of deep and medium-range precision strike and small drones – supported by the up-to-date ISTAR, SIGINT, and EW architecture – the numerical and qualitative advantage would belong to Russia, assuming the current rates of capability development on both sides are maintained *(see previous chapter)*.

Consequently, when assessing **personnel**, the critical metric at the tactical and operational levels is not **the number of soldiers, but the number of trained**

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35 A US initiative for military support to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

crews for reconnaissance, strike, and logistics UAVs/UGVs, as well as reconnaissance- strike complexes that integrate long-range artillery, loitering munitions, and missile systems with UAVs and space ISR, as well as counter-drone defense units. While precise figures are unavailable, the basic calculation is simple: Russia potentially possesses hundreds of such trained battle-hardened crews, while the allies – currently – *have them not.*

To further narrow down the focus, as noted, speed is a critical factor to consider in calculating parts' potential military gains and losses in the region. In the reality of the new warfare, Russia will not *(and does not need to, nor can it)* commit large forces and actively advance deep into NATO territory with armored groups, breaking into operational space and capturing massive territories in the style of a World War II blitzkrieg. Its optimal plan is probably **to sever a small, but strategically vital piece of territory**, dig into it so deeply that dislodging would be a long and unacceptably costly process for NATO, and then issue ultimatums while waging a remote war of sabotage, deep air strikes, and cognitive warfare.

> **This is most advantageous tactics for Russia as NATO's Achilles' heel lies precisely in the fact that by losing even one part of one geographically small member country, and failing to reclaim it quickly and/or without significant losses, the Alliance would lose and get into deep crisis, or even collapse as a whole, demonstrating its complete inability to fulfill the very purpose for which it exists.**

Therefore, it is far **more important to consider the first-line maneuver forces rather than the total forces** in the region. In that case, the balance is:

Russian 'Forward Presence'

Approximately **8–10** brigade/regiment equivalents in the first echelon against the Baltics: the 18th Motorized Rifle Division (3 regiments), the 76th Guards Air Assault Division (Pskov, 2 regiments), elements of the 6th Army (25th and 138th Motorized Rifle Brigades), and parts of the 11th Army Corps (336th Naval Infantry Brigade, 7th Motorized Rifle Regiment). Additionally, Russia's advantage in heavy artillery must be noted, which the Kremlin will undoubtedly use. While the partners could effectively block the use of guided aerial bombs from Russian aviation with their more powerful, modern air forces, preventing them from approaching, Russian artillery regiments equipped with MLRS (35+ Smerch/Uragan) and their own integrated reconnaissance and FPV drone crews, as well as Iskander-M long-range tactical missile system are being rapidly restocked and aggregated (a 500 km range that allows it to cover any target in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and a part in Poland, Germany, and Sweden). This allows Russia to increase its fire density with a mass of gun barrels, in addition to cruise missiles and drones.

NATO Forward Presence

Less than **7** mechanised brigades (4 national + 3 allied eFP battlegroups, with the one in Latvia now brigade-sized, a reinforced group in Lithuania, and the BG in Estonia). With the participation of Poland, this could increase to **12** brigades

(from its 4 divisions). The allies' forward presence battle groups also possess assets (long-range GLSDB, ATACMS missiles) and network-centric targeting intelligence that would enable them to effectively strike Russian artillery batteries. At the tactical level, the technological superiority of NATO's numerically smaller artillery, traditionally its strong suit, will be limited – projectiles like the Excalibur and GMLRS do not function at full efficiency under dense Russian EW. A critical factor is ammunition expenditure, which could reach 5,000–10,000 shells per day on each side. Given the current production rates, Russia has a higher ceiling before it begins to feel shell hunger due to logistics and depot depletion.

> **Still, counting the sheer number of combined-arms units and personnel is not relevant. In Warfare 5.0, concentrating forces is not just ineffective but counterproductive. The more troops, no matter poorly or well-trained, are deployed within the killzone, the more catastrophic the consequences for that army, as they simply become "meat for drones." The allies would be overwhelmed by the processes and costs of their evacuation, treatment, burial, and compensation to families.**

Overall, the land domain on the operational and tactical levels will be most essential at the third phase of Russian assault – *consolidation*. The Baltic terrain presents a problem for Russia in the form of natural and man-made obstacles (which are being actively constructed) and the potential mass use of minefields, especially in narrow breakthrough corridors (Suwałki Gap, approaches to Riga and Narva). These "mine lakes" could theoretically slow a Russian offensive and provide precious time for the allies. However, as Ukrainian experience has shown, the more prominent a fortification is, the more easily it is identified, making it an easier target for the enemy. Even the most fortified strongpoint can be destroyed by concentrated artillery (missile) fire and cannot withstand hits from modern thermobaric munitions. And with infiltration and accumulation tactics based on ultra-small tactical groups, not just "mine lakes" but even "mine oceans" will not stop Russians from moving into and consolidating in remotely cleared / devastated defense lines.

Air Domain

In the air, NATO's forward presence forces will hold an undeniable operational advantage in terms of quality and technological sophistication. The aviation regiments of Russia's 6th Leningrad Air and Air Defense Army and the Baltic Fleet are equipped with Su-24M/MR reconnaissance aircraft, Su-27/30/30SM/35S fighters, and Su-24 bombers, as well as Mi-24/35 attack helicopters. As a whole, these cannot compare to the modern fighter groups of NATO, particularly those with F-35s and Gripens, supported by AWACS. Collectively, the air forces of Norway, Sweden, and Finland represent a highly capable regional tactical aviation force of 4+ and 5th generation assets. NATO holds superiority in both early detection range (due to powerful airborne and ground-based radar networks) and engagement range (AIM-120D, METEOR missiles). Russian aviation has no 5th generation aircraft.

Moreover, in addition to the 15-20 fighters constantly present in Baltic airspace since 2024 as part of the Baltic Air Policing mission, NATO can rapidly redeploy up to six fighter squadrons (60–80 aircraft) to the region. Consequently, it is likely that Russian tactical aviation will not even be allowed to approach the operational area.

However, this technological edge is countered by sheer mass and a distinct strategic dimension. While the Nordic nations field elite tactical fleets, they lack organic assets for strategic aerial projection. In contrast, Russia commands a large mass of combat air force of a separate strategic dimension – comprising long-range aviation and tanker support – that allows it to project power and conduct strikes at vast distances. This includes approximately 47 Tu-95s, 15 Tu-160s, and 57 Tu-22M bombers, whereas the forward-presence nations possess zero equivalent platforms. The strategic bombers are able to launch cruise missiles like the Kh-55 and Kh-101 from deep within Russian territory, maintaining a capacity **for a simultaneous salvo of 50-60 missiles** immune to immediate tactical interception.

Air defense will play a decisive role, given the importance of combined air and surface-to-surface missile (SSM) and drone strikes in the remote attritional strategies of Warfare 5.0. But **in this subdomain the balance of forces has an inverse ratio favouring Russia**.

Kaliningrad and the Leningrad Oblast are densely saturated with powerful long-range systems: S-300V4 and S-400 "Triumf" SAMs (with ranges up to 250 km and ballistic missile intercept capabilities) with at least two battalions (in Gvardeysk), and S-300PM/PS, as well as medium-range "Buk-M2/M3" systems. To protect ground troops, air defense divisions are armed with S-300V4 or S-300VM "Antey-2500," Tor-M2, and Pantsir-S1 systems. Moreover, Russia possesses the most developed counter-drone capability to date, integrating specialized engineering units, powerful SIGINT/EW, mobile fire groups, and tactical-level kinetic intercept systems (including drone-counter-drone). Russia has also created an air defense "umbrella" over the Baltics: radar fields from the Baltic to Belarus overlap, complicating low-altitude operations for NATO aircraft.

The corresponding capability among NATO forces in the region is in a worse state. Before 2022, there were almost no modern large-scale systems at all (only two NASAMS batteries in Lithuania). The systems that have been actively procured since then will only be arriving over the next few years. In 2024, NATO adopted the Rotational Air and Missile Defence model – a continuous rotation of allied air defense batteries in the Baltics, analogous to the air policing mission. There are also ship-based missile defense systems, but they are of limited effectiveness against the Iskanders in Kaliningrad. The US and especially European NATO allies could significantly reinforce and rapidly deploy additional Patriot batteries to the region (within 48-72 hours), but the question is whether they would choose to do so.

Even if this deployment occurs, in an era of combined, massive missile-drone-decoy attacks involving 500-1000 targets per wave, **the overall IAMD capability will be insufficient**. Their ability to intercept (or jam) hundreds of low-flying drones and cruise missiles, further hampered by economic unsustainability and a weak EW component, will be limited. A high proportion of attacking assets will hence reach their targets, aiming to paralyze C2, logistics, and life-support infrastructure of the target of aggression in the first 24-48 hours (before reinforcements can be moved from Germany or Poland). The lasers and microwave cannons that the partners are currently developing will take "*millions of years*" to evolve to scalable deployment.

Overall, the aerial battlespace over the Baltics would reflect a fundamental schism in modern warfare doctrine. NATO will decisively win the conventional air-to-air contest, leveraging technological and network superiority to neutralize Russia's tactical aviation. However, this mastery of the conventional centralized "*Matrix*" would no longer provide sufficient SEAD/DEAD due to the emergence of a decentralized, tactical-edge "*Terminator*" reality. Russia's updated fighting doctrine leverages both poles of this duality by aiming dominance in deepstrike and IAMD capabilities to shield its key assets, while simultaneously launching massive, combined cross-domain sUxS[36] from its decentralized tactical edge. NATO's current regional posture is qualitatively and quantitatively incapable of defending *(as well as offend)* within such a new architecture.

Maritime Domain

Russian naval forces are **quantitatively inferior** to the combined NATO navies in the Baltic Sea. However, **they are qualitatively dangerous** due to their emerging sUSV/UUV[37] warfare capacity and "Kalibr" cruise missiles on their corvettes and small missile ships, and are capable of creating drone-missile "umbrellas" over operationally critical areas of the Baltic Sea.

> Is it a coincidence that **Russia has established both its key centers for naval drone development close to Baltics, not Ukraine:** the Kingisepp Machine-Building Plant near St. Petersburg (a serial production hub for sUSV), and the 'Ushkuyanik' R&D center in Veliky Novgorod, (R&D of USV/UUV and their fleet integration)?

The ships of the Baltic Fleet can strike targets deep within Europe while remaining in protected areas of the Baltic Sea. Furthermore, by 2027, ships carrying "Zircon" hypersonic anti-ship missiles could also appear in the Baltic. Russia's coastal missile systems also play a crucial role: a "Bastion" coastal defense missile battalion (P-800 "Oniks," range ~300 km against sea targets) and a "Bal" battalion (Kh-35, range 120 km) are deployed in Kaliningrad. This allows Russia to control a significant portion of the Baltic Sea from the shore – for example, with the "Oniks," **it can hold at-risk shipping lanes from Gdansk to the island of Gotland**. In the event of war, without neutralizing the "Bastion"

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36 Small drones in the air, sea and on the land.

37 Small unmanned surface vessels and unmanned underwater vessels.

systems and the air defenses in Kaliningrad, the approach of NATO ships to the Lithuanian or Latvian coast would be extremely risky even excluding the factor of drone-powered ASW[38].

For maritime **logistics**, which plays a key role for Baltics, things are not very good. The transportation of NATO troops by sea to the Baltics is complicated by narrow straits. Large amphibious warfare ships (LHD/LHA/LPD/LPH/LSD types) from the US, UK, and France are unlikely to risk entering the Baltic Sea due to the threat of anti-ship missiles, kamikaze swarms and mines. Therefore, reinforcements by sea would likely arrive on civilian cargo ships, escorted by minesweepers, or by air.

To maximally complicate the partners' logistics, in the first phase of a conflict, Russia's Baltic Fleet is likely to attempt conducting small-scale sabotage and landing operations (for example, seizing the island of Saaremaa in Estonia or, more ambitiously, Gotland in Sweden). While this would not achieve long-term dominance, it would be sufficient for Russia's deploying a network of sabotage groups and other asymmetric assets at sea (crews of UUVs and mesh-relay UAVs operators, 'waiting' autonomous USV/UAVs) to attack allied naval assets, port and maritime (including underwater) infrastructure, and for extensive mine-laying.

Russia adores mine warfare. It possesses both contact and modern non-contact mines aplenty, which can be deployed from ships, submarines, naval drones and UAVs. For the NATO partners, keeping the ports of Klaipėda, Riga, Tallinn, and Gdansk open will require round-the-clock minesweeping of fairways, which in turn will be hunted like a prized game by Russian naval and air drones.

For Russia, maritime transport to Kaliningrad is almost not an option. Therefore, they will likely try to concentrate forces there before the start of aggression under the guise of exercises (e.g., "Ocean Shield"), and then rely mainly on the land bridge from the Leningrad and Pskov districts and Belarus. Here, the Russian army heavily relies on railway supply. The entire Western Military District is crisscrossed with railways that converge on key hubs: St Petersburg–Pskov–Minsk–Vilnius–Kaliningrad (most tracks dating back to the USSR). This is an Achilles' heel that the allies can strike if the conflict drags on. For the rapid transfer of troops, Russia has army bases and depots both on its own territory and in Belarus. Transit time: a train from the Moscow region to the Lithuanian border takes about 2 days.

The transfer time for NATO reserve troops from Germany or Poland is approximately the same by road and rail; from the US, it would be about two weeks by sea (with partial forward deployment via airlift during 5-7 days). However, the availability of such brigades and the political will to move them is an open question. It is also important to consider the capability of both sides to detect and destroy concentrations of equipment and personnel on the way, before their full combat deployment, using space/airborne ISR, missile and strike drone assets, as well as to disrupt logistical routes. This also refers to the "last mile" (which is

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38 Anti-surface warfare

now exceeding 20 miles). Russia has a highly practiced capability to completely block near-rear logistics using ISR and FPV kamikaze drone groups, such as the "Rubicon".

Cyber/Electromagnetic Domain

Russia possesses powerful cyber offense capabilities, realized through hacker groups de-facto controlled by the FSB, SVR, and GRU (APT28, APT29, Sandworm etc), while the Baltic countries are known for their well-developed cybersecurity and cyber defense capabilities. In contrast, Russia's cyber defense is not as strong as its aggressive component, and there is a lack of data to assess the cyber offensive component of the Baltic states and Poland.

Russia is already increasing (and will continue) its cyber attacks on the Baltics (along with other European states) as part of its hybrid warfare. At the start of an invasion, it would likely employ massive cyber offense against the critical infrastructure of the Baltics and Poland, following the Ukrainian scenario: power outages, sabotage of railway systems (to hinder troop movements), and attacks on banks and media to paralyze (or significantly destabilize) governance and social stability. However, this activity will spread far beyond the region. As cyberspace is a country without borders, it is precisely the domain where Russia could potentially most undermine and disrupt NATO's collective capacity to support the target of aggression. This will therefore extend across all of Europe.

NATO is likely to do the same against Russia using powerful cyber-offensives of allies such as the US or UK. However, this will be less critical for Moscow, as the level of digitalization and networking of its C2, civil-military cooperation, and battle management is much lower: one can't hack what doesn't exist.

Electronic warfare, which is super-important in Warfare 5.0, is one of the Russian army's key edges. In the Baltic region, Russia maintains a network of EW centers equipped with both stationary and mobile systems. These include "Murmansk-BN" (disrupting high-frequency communications up to a 3,000 km radius); "Samarkand" (jamming C2 frequencies); and "Pole-21" (suppressing GPS/GNSS signals). Assets in Kaliningrad are capable of jamming GPS navigation over hundreds of kilometers. Furthermore, the Western Military District operates dedicated EW brigades equipped with powerful systems such as the "Krasukha-4" (jamming radars and AWACS aircraft), "Krasukha-2," "Moskva-1" (ECM[39] against air defense systems), and "Leer-3" (jamming cellular communications using drones).

In the initial phase of hostilities, Russia is likely to launch a large-scale electronic attack across all domains. This would involve jamming GPS throughout the Baltic states, attempting to disrupt NATO military radio networks, and blinding air defense radars with interference. Partner assessments estimate a potential

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39 Electronic Counter-Measures.

50-70% degradation of CIS (communication) and PNT[40] (navigation) capabilities within zones of powerful EW, though combat experience from Ukraine suggests this may be an underestimation. In tactically significant operational areas in Ukraine, degradation rates under heavy EW have reached 90-100% being sustained for many hours.

Crucially, Russian forces are also saturated with tactical "trench-level" EW systems designed to completely inhibit enemy UAS operations while enabling their own drone activities. This tactical capability is a significant advantage not currently matched by partner nations. While Baltic countries possess a limited number of EW systems like the "Bukovel" and "EDM4S," their quantity is insufficient to establish a counter-drone defense of adequate density.

NATO is actively preparing for this threat by implementing adaptive nulling antennas, inertial navigation systems, and alternative signals (e.g., Galileo), as well as fostering startup projects in PNT. Training for communications personnel in GPS-denied environments is also underway. However, the timeline for achieving a comprehensive and scalable capability remains uncertain, and these countermeasures have not been validated in combat.

Space Domain

NATO maintains a decisive advantage in Space-based ISR and SATCOM capabilities. Any preparatory actions by Russia, such as troop concentrations or the movement of missile batteries, would almost certainly be detected in advance by satellite and airborne intelligence. This significantly reduces the potential for a surprise attack. Simultaneously, assets like Starlink provide high-quality digital communication in contested areas. At the same time, as the war in Ukraine proved, Russia can continue to prosecute its war aims even with these capabilities deployed against it. Russia also has its sovereign (not state-of-the-art but still present) satellite capabilities for reconnaissance and communication, and can enhance them substantially given plans to expand a network of small LEO satellites ("Sfera" program) and pseudosatellites relays *(if implemented)*. What is more perilous for Allies is Russian ASAT[41] developments, including nuclear assets (Cosmos-2553) capable of causing indiscriminate damage to all satellites in LEO.

Yet the primary Russian advantage for hostilities like those that are probable in Baltics in 2027-2028 lies not in the space domain but in the nature, sheer density and decentralized distribution of its tactical assets. This includes a massive disparity in FPV drones, mid-range loitering munitions, autonomous kamikaze drones, and tactical-level counter-UAS capabilities. The robotization of ground warfare and logistics is another area where Russia holds a significant lead. The quantitative gap in drone-powered and EW capabilities is colossal compared to partner nations, who are only now beginning to design and scale these elements into a fully-fledged facility. This disparity is of key strategic importance.

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40 Positioning, Navigation, and Timing

41 Antisatellite weapons

Even setting aside more nuanced factors that would invariably have an impact (such as NATO's coalition command structure, necessitating synchronization and longer decision-making chains, or the open question of whether Moscow will declare full mobilization), the analysis provided is sufficient **to conclude reasonably**: Russia certainly lacks capabilities to wage a full-scale conventional war against the NATO bloc with clear objectives *(whether legitimate or not)*, such as the seizure and permanent annexation of all Baltic states. But **Russia certainly possesses an abundant capability** to "bite" NATO in the manner of a rabid dog; that is, **to inflict several ragged, bloody wounds on the forward edge of NATO's northeastern flank**, leaving inside teeth particles and poison. The goal would be to ensure the wound continues to bleed and cause pain, leaving Europe unable to effectively respond. This would humiliate, destabilize, and force the Alliance into a highly disadvantageous position for prosecuting a further conflict. Subsequently, like a spider that has injected digestive venom, Russia could observe in a controlled manner while intensifying efforts to internally destabilize the collective West.

When Putin states he is at war with the 'collective West', this is accurate. It is his strategic objective, and he will likely not abandon an attempt to realize it in the 2027-28 timeframe. But this will not be an "all-or-nothing," conventional war. It will be a war waged in an environment where the Kremlin has little to lose, and where NATO, *as President Donald Trump is fond of saying*, '**has no good cards to play**'.

Conclusion

Hopefully, the analysis presented in this study provided some evidence that Russia does not view conflict with NATO as a binary state of war or peace, but rather as a continuous spectrum of hostilities designed and developed in a concrete logic and with a certain progression sequence. In the Russian strategic framework, *"hybrid warfare"* is not merely an auxiliary tool but a foundational, multi-level offensive that operates effectively during peacetime, eroding the adversary's cohesion from within, shaping the operational environment long before kinetic engagement begins. The relationship between hybrid and conventional actions in Russian strategy is best understood as a linear progression: from covert preparation to catastrophic culmination.

While this research has focused on Russian operational methodologies they could employ against NATO, **the fundamental question of the motive** of the dictator in Moscow to attack NATO remains critical to Allied nations. To understand the "*why*", one must look beyond geopolitics to the nature of political regimes. As historical precedent suggests, totalitarian and rigid authoritarian regimes prioritize domestic stability above all else. For the Kremlin, the external environment is primarily a resource – a stage upon which the regime manufactures artifacts of legitimacy to perpetuate its own survival. External aggression is, therefore, an internal necessity, transforming the Euro-Atlantic security architecture into a hostage of Russia's domestic preservation.

Another critical issue to address when summing up speculations on the potential Russian attack is **the quality of anticipated Western response**. The NATO doctrine and current strategic assessments basically rely on the assumption of a unified, immediate, and overwhelming Allied response. The prevailing narrative suggests that any aggression in the Baltics would trigger Article 5, resulting in total mobilization of Allied capabilities and immediate retaliatory strikes against targets in Belarus, Kaliningrad, and the Black Sea Fleet.

However, with NATO as a political organization in the first place, the dualism of political willingness and military capability makes such a reaction a variable rather than a constant. The operational models detailed herein – specifically new "drone warfare" capabilities of Russia, its overwhelming deepstrike assets potent for the paralyzing effects of pre-emptive infrastructure degradation, as well as its masterly use of the *"boiling frog"* approach of gradual escalation in peacetime and *"salami slicing"* tactics on the battlefield – all is designed specifically to effectively exploit the weaknesses of NATO while nullifying its strengths. By the time a political consensus for a *"total response"* is reached in Brussels or Washington, the strategic reality on the ground may have already been irreversibly altered.

Furthermore, even assuming a robust Western military response materializes, its efficacy is not guaranteed. The conventional wisdom often cites Russia's potential use of nuclear blackmail as the primary deterrent to NATO intervention. However, this analysis suggests a more complex reality. The true danger lies

not necessarily in nuclear escalation, but in the **Point of No Return**. Once the mechanisms of massed drone warfare, infrastructure sabotage, and deep-strike campaigns are activated, the conflict enters an escalatory track that becomes self-sustaining and potentially irreversible.

In conclusion, the threat posed by Russia is not simply one of military mass, but of methodology. By integrating cheap, scalable unmanned technologies with a high tolerance for casualties and a strategy of societal subversion, Russia aims to bypass any Alliance's capability of deterring such aggression regardless of the numbers and quality of its legacy operational procedures and platforms.

NATO hence needs to stop having a dream in which it woke up, to wake up indeed, and to start preparing and its defence. In all seriousness. Now. The Ukrainian Wall is a wall made with living bodies of human beings – and its robustness has its own shelf life.

Addendum. "How I would Attack NATO if I were Putin"

A Bedtime Story. Based on Visionary Counseling of Ukrainian SOF[42] Veterans

Prologue

Forget the movies. There are no marching columns, no declaration of war broadcast on CNN, no grand chessboard maneuvers of tank divisions rolling across the border at dawn. That is the war of the world having existed before 2022. In the post-2022 world, a war does not begin with a bang; it begins with a silence you don't even notice.

I wouldn't fight NATO's strengths. I wouldn't challenge the F-35s in the sky or the Abrams on the ground. I would kill them before they ever woke up. This is not a war of soldiers; it is a war of ghosts.

▶ Phase I. Ghostly Entrapment

My offensive actually started months before you noticed the first blow. Not with generals and soldiers, but with tourists, truck drivers, and "migrant families" renting cheap apartments near Ramstein, Lakenheath, and Aviano. They brought nothing illegal across the border – just commercial components.

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42 Special Operations Forces

One night, while Europe slept, small teams infiltrated the effective engagement areas within the perimeter of key NATO airbases. They didn't need to breach the fences. They simply rented a farmhouse 3 kilometers away.

In the tall grass of a roadside ditch, they planted four compact beacons. No GPS needed. These beacons created a localized, encrypted navigation field – a private, invisible web. A base station, the size of a cigarette pack, was hooked up to a Starlink Mini or a burner phone on a local LTE network. It sat silent, waiting for a signal from a server in Moscow.

▶ Phase II. The Night of Long Knives (Drone Edition)

On H-Hour, at 03:00 AM, the command is sent. The secondary operators – low-level mercenaries who don't even know who they work for – walk into a destined area and open boxes they are said to discover there. These guys are not for operating the drones; they just release them. Suddenly, the sky hums. Not with one drone, but hundreds. Hundreds of not drones – swarms.

The Eyes... The AWACS and Global Hawks sitting on the tarmac are soft, fat targets. Their basing is known. One $1000 drone with a shaped charge hits the radar dome. Blindness.

The Stomach... The KC-135 Stratotankers. Massive flying gas stations. One hit, and the fireball lights up the night for miles. No fuel means the fighters don't get to the sky.

The Teeth... The F-35s. Even in their hardened shelters, they aren't safe. The first drone blows a hole in the hangar door; the second flies through the smoke and detonates on the fuselage. A fifth-generation fighter is turned into scrap metal by a toy you can assemble with COTS bought on Amazon.

By 03:15 AM, NATO's air superiority is not contested – it is deleted. And nobody has officially crossed a border.

▶ Phase III. The Grey Zone – Sowing Chaos and Panic

This is my favourite – I am a demon, after all.

And the chaos begins. The entrapment was precise; Phase II is blunt force trauma.

Since then, every day, 500 to 700 cheap "Shahed"-type loitering munitions flood the European airspace along with hundreds of decoys. I have them aplenty, as NATO states did not notice all the time that only a fraction of long-range drone production had been utilized in Ukraine. And they are no longer slow, loud, and stupid – on the contrary, sophisticated during the last years of continuous battle testing and engineering effort, they now turn more lethally effective than ballistic and cruise missiles, capable of decomposing any target with microscopic precision. But even in the case they were stupid – this almost doesn't matter to me. That's the point. NATO air defense batteries deplete their million-dollar interceptors shooting at flying lawnmowers.

Do you think it is the end? No – just the beginning. Once the Patriots and SAMP-Ts are dry, the Iskanders and Kinzhals launch. They don't hit tanks – no need for that; they hit the remaining command nodes and critical infrastructure to inflict my favourites. Panic. Chaos.

Simultaneously, hundreds of my "sleeping cells" don't sleep. They work hard. The lights go out. Subsea cables are cut. Sabotage groups blow up power sub-stations and fiber-optic backbones.

▶ Urban Nightlife

Imagine a mid-sized European town. A few remote FPV and multirotary bomber kill-teams, sitting in Moscow and Pskov, isolate it. They hit the transformers – darkness. They hit the cell towers – silence. Then, they stream the panic. They drop mines on the evacuation routes. When the police or relief columns arrive, they are ambushed by drones piloted from a basement three thousand miles away.

Humanitarian catastrophe. Looting. Riots. A society terrified of the dark, demanding peace at any cost.

▶ Phase IV. The Coup de Grâce

Only now, weeks later, do the tanks roll. I am surprised (but who am I fooling – I am not), as they don't face a unified NATO front. They face a blinded, deafened, and demoralized enemy whose air force is burning on the tarmac and whose population is freezing in the dark. The naval bases? Blocked by sea drones hitting ships in their berths. The logistics? Paralysed by sabotaged railways.

The Moral of the Story

The "Gate to Hell" isn't a nuclear launch button. It is a cardboard box full of drone parts, delivered by DHL to a sleepy suburb near a military base. The West prepares for a boxing match, training for a frontal assault. But I am not a boxer, as you know. I am a virus. And by the time the patient realizes they are sick, it will already be terminal.

Authors' Disclaimer

This is not a prediction but a warning. The technology exists. The operators are likely already in place. The only thing missing is the order from the resident evil in Moscow.

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