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The NATO Wales Summit is Not Enough: A Case for a Pre-Emptive Counter-Insurgency Strategy in the Baltic States

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The 2014 NATO Wales Summit Declaration attempted to decisively deter Russian aggression and reiterate that hostility against NATO members would not be tolerated.[1] Regrettably, NATO provided solutions to the wrong problem. NATO must rapidly move beyond the Wales Summit Declaration in order to safeguard its members and deter Russia. Economic sanctions and the threat of conventional military power are insufficient to effectively

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safeguard NATO against future Russian hybrid threats.[2] Vladimir Putin could exploit the effectiveness of hybrid warfare, NATO's hesitation to employ conventional forces in conflicts that could escalate toward total war, and the resistance by individual NATO members to endorse the implementation of Article V. The most immediate threat of Russian aggression against NATO is found in the Baltic States. NATO must execute a pre-emptive counter-insurgency strategy in the Baltic States that denies the use of "Maskirovka" by eliminating the isolation of ethnic Russians in Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania.[3]

Understanding the Threat

The 2014 Ukrainian conflict provides three important lessons. First, the most deadly Russian threat remains a conventional attack against NATO, which could result in uncontrollable escalation toward total war. This most deadly threat remains unlikely given the questionable victory it could produce. The most likely Russian threat is not conventional warfare, but the execution of hybrid warfare as a way to achieve national interests while deliberately violating the sovereignty of another state.[4] Robin Niblett points out "that Russia's strategy in Ukraine presents an entirely new set of challenges, which cannot be deterred or confronted by troops, tanks and aircraft alone."[5]

Second, the moral justification for military action used by Putin must be highlighted. Putin justified Russian intervention in Ukraine as necessary to defend the rights of ethnic Russians who were socially and politically isolated within the Ukraine. John Herbst offers that "Moscow has promoted instability in neighboring countries as a means to exercise influence."[6] Herbst proposes the development of policies that make it clear that future attempts to use this tactic will be ineffective and therefore not worth pursuing, or "otherwise the Kremlin's exploitation of 'ethnic rights' and promotion of social disorder will create problems in countries beyond Ukraine, including among our Baltic allies."[7]

The third lesson is the execution of Russian brinksmanship. Russia's use of peace treaties in the Ukrainian conflict demonstrate Putin's calculated pursuit of objectives in which Russia accepts premeditated risks and skillfully de-escalates the situation before the consequences become unacceptable. This tactic of brinksmanship foreshadows the Russian pursuit of objectives that defy NATO while exploiting NATO's incremental response.

Through brinksmanship, Putin is attempting to manipulate NATO, daring it to reveal its "red lines." The "red lines" would be drawn gradually in response to a series of calculated Russian engagements designed not to achieve decisive effects but to coerce NATO into identifying its threshold. The establishment of NATO's "red lines" is acceptable to Putin because he recognizes that NATO's unwillingness to go to war, along with its reluctance to accept additional security responsibilities, will result in a threshold that is both limited and acceptable in relation to Russia's interests. Ultimately, the establishment of this present day "Iron Curtain" will allow Russia to confidently pursue objectives that fall just short of NATO's "red lines" while accepting the diplomatic and economic consequences.

Why the Baltic States Must Be First

NATO must recognize its vulnerability to Russia's hybrid warfare strategy, the use of the ethnic Russian pretext, and the application of brinksmanship. Within NATO, the Baltic States are the most vulnerable to Russian hybrid threats for several reasons. First, Russia perceives that it is isolated and surrounded by competitors or adversaries.[8] Russia has sought protection by surrounding itself with territorial buffer states.[9] The Ukrainian conflict is a testament of this strategy.[10] The Baltic States are of significant geo-strategic value to Russia due to their potential as buffers.[11] The physical border the Baltic States share with Russia distinguishes them from other NATO members who have greater geographic separation. Russian intervention in the Baltic States should be anticipated because of their geo-strategic

value. Russia will attempt to manipulate each country's government, advance pro-Russian policies, and extend a geographic buffer against NATO.[12] Not only would intervention in the Baltic States advance Russian objectives, but it would also reduce the isolation of Kaliningrad.[13]

Second, Russians can justify the pretext of defending ethnic Russians in the Baltics. Latvia offers a clear model for concern. One third of the population in Latvia consists of ethnic Russians. Those ethnic Russians remain largely isolated from society and are "stuck" as non-citizens, unable to participate in the democratic political process, and are limited in the professional and economic opportunities they can enjoy.[14] The existence of an isolated ethnic Russian population presents an excuse for Russian intervention that is actually intended to pursue diplomatic or economic interests, rather than social interests, as demonstrated by the Ukrainian conflict.[15]

Articulating that an immediate, credible Russian threat exists against a current NATO member is likely to invoke skepticism and organizational resistance. Contrary assessments will be founded on the assumption that Russia would not deliberately challenge the sovereignty of individual NATO members given the collective security assurance provided by Article V and the corresponding unacceptable risk of total war. Nonetheless, there is evidence that Russia is willing to challenge the sovereignty of a NATO member. The 2007 cyber attacks against Estonia offer a warning that Russia is willing to accept calculated risks to pursue limited objectives, gambling that their actions will not trigger an Article V response. During the 2007 cyber attacks, Estonia invoked Article V. NATO did not respond despite Estonia's continued cries for a collective response. Individual NATO states debated the definition of war and whether a cyber attack truly constituted an act of warfare. NATO was unable to agree on the definition of war, and failed to formulate a unified response to this event.[16]

Article V contains a flaw that Russia will methodically exploit. Article V allows for interpretation, internal disagreement, and unwillingness to honor collective security obligations due to conflicting interpretations of what constitutes an armed attack, severity of the threat, and limits for the collective response. As Robin Niblett describes, "The answers to these questions will stand as a test of the alliance's commitment to the collective defense of its members."[17] The proposed threat and pursuit of limited Russian objectives that violate the sovereignty of the Baltic States is therefore neither extreme nor irrational. The threat is rational, calculated, and promising given Russia's anticipation of NATO's disjointed response. Putin will methodically advance Russian interests in defiance of NATO, exploit NATO's sluggish responses, and execute the mentioned Brinksmanship strategy.

Pre-Emptive Counter-Insurgency Solutions

NATO has the opportunity to seize the initiative. It does not have to wait for Russia. NATO must anticipate the Russian threat in the Baltic States by taking pre-emptive action to eliminate the sources of instability that could justify a Russian supported insurgency.[18] This strategy of deterrence through denial must concentrate on changing the isolation of ethnic Russians in Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia by focusing on national reconciliation while emphasizing national over ethnic allegiance. The strategy must be implemented in three steps. First, all reasonable measures to expedite national citizenship must be enacted. Second, steps must be taken to guarantee the ability of ethnic Russians to participate as citizens in the political, democratic process. This is vital since it reduces the justification for violence as a mechanism for political expression. Lastly, the socio-economic opportunities for ethnic Russians must be safeguarded ensuring that opportunities for prosperity exist for all citizens.

NATO should temporarily modify the 2% GDP spending target for each Baltic State. Rather than spending 2% on military capability, the Baltic States should balance their defense contribution between

military capability and pre-emptive counter-insurgency measures. Critics of this proposal might argue this creates a dangerous precedent for a selective system of contribution. However, the reality is the hybrid Russian threat is not proportional across NATO. Eastern members of NATO face a higher threat of Russian aggression. The greatest contribution Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia can make to NATO's collective defense is not the 2% GDP investment in military capability but rather the elimination of conditions that could encourage Russian hybrid warfare and a quandary that forces NATO to pick either all-out war against Russia or accept the collapse of the alliance as a result of individual member states unwillingness to honor Article V obligations.

Conclusion

NATO has the ability to seize the initiative and to anticipate Putin's strategy that seeks to exploit fissures within NATO to advance Russian objectives. NATO must execute a pre-emptive counter-insurgency strategy in the Baltic States that denies the use of "Maskirovka" by eliminating the isolation of ethnic Russians in Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. [19] In doing so, NATO will not only eliminate the root causes of a potential insurgency and the continued application of hybrid warfare but will also deny Russia the moral pretext for intervention and continued execution of their brinksmanship strategy.

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[1] Alan Cowell, "NATO Plans More Visible Presence in Eastern Europe," 27 August 2014, http://nyti.ms/1mRyJsV
[2] Robin Niblett, "NATO Must Focus On The 'Hybrid Wars' Being Waged On The West", 17 July 2014, Financial Times, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3192c7a0-0cd2-11e4-bf1e-00144feabdc0.html
[3] "Maskirovka", a Russian term meaning "something masked", refers to Russia's hybrid warfare strategy, which is based on deceiving the enemy about ends, ways, and means; coercing the enemy to respond incorrectly; and exploiting the corresponding gaps that have been created through the strategy. A more detailed description and explanation of this term can be found in: Joergen Oerstroem Moeller, "Maskirovka: Russia's Masterful Use of Deception in Ukraine", 23 April 2014, The Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joergen-oerstroem-moeller/maskirovka-russias-master_b_5199545.html
[4] Robin Niblett, "NATO Must Focus On The 'Hybrid Wars' Being Waged On The West", 17 July 2014, Financial Times, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3192c7a0-0cd2-11e4-bf1e-00144feabdc0.html
[5] Robin Niblett, "NATO Must Focus On The 'Hybrid Wars' Being Waged On The West", 17 July 2014, Financial Times, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3192c7a0-0cd2-11e4-bf1e-00144feabdc0.html
[6] John E. Herbst, "US and Allies Should Take Three Steps Now to Prevent Putin's Moves Beyond Ukraine", 2 September 2014, Atlantic Council, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-and-allies-must-take-three-steps-to-prevent-putins-moves-beyond-ukraine
[7] John E. Herbst, "US and Allies Should Take Three Steps Now to Prevent Putin's Moves Beyond Ukraine", 2 September 2014, Atlantic Council, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-and-allies-must-take-three-steps-to-prevent-putins-moves-beyond-ukraine
[8] Thomas Graham, "The Sources of Russia's Insecurity", Survival, Vol 52 no. 1, pp. 55-74 The International Institute For Strategic Studies
[9] Thomas Graham, "The Sources of Russia's Insecurity", Survival, Vol. 52 no. 1 pp. 55-74 The International Institute For Strategic Studies
[10] Joergen Oerstroem Moeller, "Maskirovka: Russia's Masterful Use of Deception in Ukraine", 23 April 2014, The Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joergen-oerstroem-moeller/maskirovka-russias-master_b_5199545.html
[11] George Friedman, "Ukraine and the Little Cold War", 4 March 2014, SRATFOR Global Intelligence, http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/ukraine-and-little-cold-war#axzz3Ecdl5ZxN
[12] The pursuit of political influence and control should be distinguished from a quest for territorial annexation.

[13] Kaliningrad is a Russian exclave physically separated from Russia. Kaliningrad shares borders with Lithuania to its north and east, Poland to the south, and the Baltic Sea to its northwest. Latvia, Lithuania, and Belarus are located between Kaliningrad and the rest of the Russian territory.
[14] Alison Smale, "Latvia's Tensions With Russians at Home Persist in the Shadow of Ukraine Conflict", 23 August 2014, The New York Times, Europe, http://nyti.ms/1p2nqmW
[15] Joergen Oerstroem Moeller, "Maskirovka: Russia's Masterful Use of Deception in Ukraine", 23 April 2014, The Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joergen-oerstroem-moeller/maskirovka-russias-master_b_5199545.html
[16] Scheherazade Rehman, "Estonia's Lessons in Cyberwarfare", 14 January 2013, U.S. News & World Report, World Report
[17] Robin Niblett, "NATO Must Focus On The 'Hybrid Wars' Being Waged On The West", 17 July 2014, Financial Times, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3192c7a0-0cd2-11e4-bf1e-00144feabdc0.html
[18] The application of a pre-emptive counter-insurgency strategy is likely to draw scrutiny from those who believe that NATO should limit itself to purely conventional military solutions. This assumption must be challenged especially since it ignores NATO's hard lessons learned during "Resolute Support". NATO must embrace one of Afghanistan's most valuable lessons in that military problems often have non-military solutions.
[19] Joergen Oerstroem Moeller, "Maskirovka: Russia's Masterful Use of Deception in Ukraine", 23 April 2014, The Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joergen-oerstroem-moeller/maskirovka-russias-master_b_5199545.html