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NATO'S DETERRENCE POSTURE IN THE BALTICS

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NATO's DETERRENCE POSTURE IN THE BALTICS

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NATO's DETERRENCE POSTURE IN THE BALTICS

The topic of this research paper is deterrence. More specifically, this paper will divulge into whether deterrence is a viable strategy for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against Russian aggression in the Baltic States. This research paper will prove that despite the relatively small size and disposition of NATO forces deployed in the Baltic States, a deterrence effect can be achieved to limit Russian aggression.

By way of methodology, this paper will examine and define the concept of deterrence, provide a brief background of NATO's deterrence strategy applied in the Baltic states to limit Russian aggression, and provide several convincing arguments that NATO's strategy of deterrence in the Baltic states will continue to be effective. The next section will define and examine the concept of deterrence and how NATO is currently employing this strategy in the Baltics.

Dr Kestutis Paulauskas, a defence scientist employed with NATO, writes in the *NATO Review* that "Deterrence is a relatively simple idea: one actor persuades another actor – a would-be aggressor – that an aggression would incur a cost, possibly in the form of unacceptable damage, which would far outweigh any potential gain, material or political."¹ Dr Paulauskas's definition of deterrence can be simply applied to the current situation in the Baltic States. The Russian Federation (the aggressor) in recent years have actively taken action to expand their influence in Eastern Europe. NATO, in reaction to the Russian Federations aggression, has been forced to adapt its strategy of securing its borders in Eastern Europe. NATO has closed ranks in an act of solidarity and positioned NATO forces along its borders in Eastern Europe and the

¹ Dr Kestutis Paulauskas. "On Deterrence." *NATO Review*. Last accessed 16 May 2021. (05 August 2016): <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/08/05/on-deterrence/index.html>

Baltics. To deter any incursion of Russian forces into the Baltics and Eastern Europe, NATO has reiterated to the Russian Federation that any aggression towards any NATO country will invoke an article 5 violation of the NATO charter.

Article 5 of the NATO charter states:

that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all ... if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.²

Article 5 of the NATO charter in essence is NATO's backbone for their deterrence strategy against the Russian Federation. NATO currently has thirty member countries and multiple international partnerships, which in theory, will unify if an Article 5 is invoked. This allied force will then take the necessary action (to include the use of force) to maintain the security of its borders and member states. As a result, the Russian Federation has adapted its approach to furthering its national interest by conducting 'grey zone' activities which are just below the threshold of what some consider to be on activities that could evoke an article 5.³

Michael Mazarr, an American political scientist, published an article by the *RAND Cooperation* which offers a different definition and types of deterrence of deterrence applied.

Deterrence is the practice of discouraging or restraining someone — in world politics, usually a nation-state—from taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack. It involves an effort to *stop* or prevent an action, as opposed to the closely related but distinct concept of “compellence,” which is an effort to *force* an actor to do something.⁴

² North Atlantic Treaty Organization. "North Atlantic Treaty. Article 5". Last updated 22 August 2012: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_89597.htm

³ Michael J. Mazarr. "Understanding Deterrence". *RAND Cooperation* Last accessed 16 May 2021. (2018) 2: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html>

⁴ *Ibid.*,

Mazarr's definition is relevant for NATO's dilemma in the Baltics. NATO has aligned its forces throughout the Baltics and Eastern Europe to limit further Russian aggression. Recent Russian aggression against Ukraine, by the annexation of Crimea in 2014, has led NATO and its allies to take action.

Mazarr describes different concepts of deterrence. "Deterrence by denial seeks to deter an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thus denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objective."⁵ In this case by deploying enhanced multinational forward battle groups (eFP BGs) in the Baltic States and Poland, NATO has reinforced its borders and denied Russia from entering the Baltics and Eastern Europe unopposed. That said, NATO's force ratios are likely not sufficient to halt a full-on incursion by an overwhelming Russian force, but this would constitute an article 5 violation of the NATO charter and warrant significant retaliatory action by NATO forces.

Mazarr further states that "deterrence by denial should not be equated with military balances alone. Deterrence by punishment, on the other hand, threatens severe penalties, such as nuclear escalation or severe economic sanctions, if an attack occurs."⁶ Mazarr further explains that these punishments are not only relevant to the local conflict but are instituted on the world stage by imposing trade and financial sanctions.⁷

According to the Congressional Research Service, "the US has imposed sanctions on Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine, election interference, other malicious cyber activities, human rights abuses, use of a chemical weapon, weapons proliferation, illicit trade

⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁶ *Ibid.*,

⁷ *Ibid.*,

with North Korea, and support to Syria and Venezuela"⁸ These types of economic sanctions not only weaken the Russian economy but provide a deterrence effect so that for them to further engage in such activities will warrant punishment.

Mazarr's article also explains another type of deterrence, direct versus extended, which is relevant in the ongoing situation in the Baltic States. "Direct deterrence consists of efforts by a state to prevent attacks on its own territory."⁹ In the case of the Baltic States, this would mean a direct deterrence of their borders. "Extended deterrence involves discouraging attacks on third parties, such as allies or partners."¹⁰ NATO's presence in the Baltics is an example of extended deterrence as NATO forces are postured to prevent any further Russian aggression on their members. NATO has a difficult task to balance as it is required to use all the deterrence measures mentioned above. The next section will provide examples of how NATO's deterrence strategy has proved successful on operations throughout its borders.

The United States (US), NATO's most powerful nation, has employed deterrence strategies successfully in the past. Darrell Driver's article *Deterrence in Eastern Europe in Theory and Practice* provides several examples of how the US used deterrence with success. Driver explains that there must be a distinction from general and immediate deterrence. "

"Immediate deterrence, concerns the relationship between opposing states where at least one side is seriously considering an attack while the other is mounting a threat of retaliation in order to

⁸ Congressional Research Services. "US Sanctions on Russia: An Overview". (Last updated March 23, 2020): <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10779.pdf>

⁹ Michael J. Mazarr. "Understanding Deterrence". *RAND Cooperation* .Last accessed 16 May 2021. (2018) 3: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*,

prevent it.”¹¹ This then becomes more a strategy of conflict management where one side attempts to discourage the other from hostilities.¹²

In contrast, general deterrence has "two opponents who maintain armed forces to regulate their relationship even though neither is anywhere near mounting an attack.”¹³ The US and the Former Soviet Union are prime examples of the US's general deterrence strategy during the Cold War. Despite the odd rise in tensions between the two superpowers, like the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, general deterrence was used with success over time throughout the Cold War.¹⁴ General deterrence is an effective method for the long-drawn-out conflicts which we are currently experiencing between NATO and Russia in Eastern Europe as “general deterrence is practiced in order to avoid having to practice immediate deterrence.”¹⁵

Another example provided by Driver is deterrence by denial and punishment.¹⁶ Driver states that "punishment is different from deterrence by denial, which seeks to demonstrate a credible ability to prevent the adversary from achieving desired objectives in the first place." Like Mazarr's definition, Driver states that punishment is "requires one to convince an adversary that any aggression, initially successful or not, will be met with a response that is unacceptably costly.”¹⁷ Again, the US Cold War strategy used these concepts with success. The US Secretary of State from that era explained the difference between the two concepts in Driver's article as:

We mean that the only deterrent to the imposition of Russian will in Western Europe is the belief that from the outset of any such attempt American power would be employed

¹¹ Darrell Driver. "Deterrence in Eastern Europe in Theory and Practice". *Connections*. (Winter-Spring 2019, Vol. 18, No.1-2):12.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26948846.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fbasic_search_gsv2%252Ftest&refreqid=excelsior%3A288590f9b10b6d268e7d3e447c37ad04

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

in stopping it [denial], and, if necessary, would inflict on the Soviet Union injury which the Moscow regime would not wish to suffer [punishment].¹⁸

Driver's third example is related to direct and extended deterrence. The Cold War provides another example of how the US used both direct and extended deterrence. Like Mazarr's definition above, Driver states that "direct deterrence refers to the ability to dissuade an adversary from attacking one's homeland. Extended deterrence is measured by the ability to include other states under that same deterrent umbrella."¹⁹ A great deal of effort was making the Soviets believe that the US provided a creditable threat to respond if a US ally was attacked in Europe.²⁰ This was accomplished by strong rhetoric by the US presidents during the Cold War and by forward deploying troops into areas of Soviet aggression and by giving forward commanders the authority to respond to any potential attacks.²¹ By taking these steps, the US made it clear that any aggression by the Soviets on any US allies would warrant a response thereby by making extended deterrence effective.

This strategy is currently applied today in the Baltic States as NATO has forward deployed its eFP BGs in the Baltics, making it clear to the Russian Federation that any further aggression will deem a response from NATO. The next section will discuss and show how NATO's eFP Battle Groups currently deployed in the Baltics are effectively conducting deterrence against the Russian Federation.

In 2016, in the wake of the Warsaw Summit, NATO decided to establish its forward presence in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.²² NATO's intent was to "demonstrate Allies'

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*,

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² North Atlantic Treaty Organization. "Boosting NATO's presence in the east and southeast". Last updated 26. April 2021. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm

²³ *Ibid.*,

solidarity, determination, and ability to defend Alliance territory."²³ Information published on NATO's website states that these multinational BGs, led by the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, and the US, are robust combat ready forces.²⁴ These eFP BGs are a clear display of the strength of the transatlantic bond and reinforce that an attack on an Ally will be considered an attack on the entire Alliance.²⁵ This decision made by NATO after the Warsaw Summit to forward deploy troops into the Baltic region was a clear step to invoke its deterrence strategy.

Despite the modest size of the eFP BGs, the strategic placement of these BGs displays a deterrence by denial effect. Furthermore, since the Russian Federation is aware of NATO's Article 5 policy, any Russian aggression in the Baltics will warrant a response from the Alliance which provides the deterrence by punishment effect as well. Figure 1:1 from NATO's website provides the current laydown of NATO forces forward deployed in the Baltic region.

Figure 1:1 ENHANCED FORWARD PRESENCE - MAP



²⁴ *Ibid.*,

²⁵ *Ibid.*

The Riga Conference Papers 2019, published by the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, offers several articles on security, deterrence, and the transatlantic link with NATO. Toms Rostoks contributing article to the *Riga Conference Papers 2019* examines the NATO deterrence posture in the Baltics. Rostoks states that the deterrence posture is based on four elements. The first is the military capability of the three Baltic States themselves.²⁶ Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have ramped up their defence spending, reaching 2% of their GDP by 2018.²⁷ Rostoks states that "even though the Baltic states' militaries are small in comparison to the military capabilities of their potential adversary, they are not insignificant either."²⁸ Rostoks also adds that the resolve and willingness of small nations to defend their homeland is another factor that needs to be considered and should not be underestimated by the Russians.²⁹

Rostoks' second element is the presence of the eFP BGs. Rostoks states that "these BGs are relatively small and would not contribute much in terms of defence in case of full-scale mechanised warfare, but these deployments are visible signs of NATO solidarity."³⁰ Displaying NATO solidarity and resolve is key for effective deterrence for the eFP BGs deployed in the Baltics and Poland.

Rostoks' third element of NATO deterrence is its ability to deploy, resupply and reinforce rapidly.³¹ Rostoks states that since NATO is heavily invested in the Baltics, "the Alliance also needs to be able to project its military power in the Baltic region in the case of a potential

²⁶ Toms Rostoks. "Deterring Russia in the Baltics". *The Riga Conference 2019*. (Latvian Institute for International Affairs 2019) 74 : https://www.academia.edu/40592851/The_R%C4%ABga_Conference_Papers_2019_NATO_at_70_in_the_Baltic_Sea_Region?email_work_card=title

²⁷ *Ibid.*,

²⁸ *Ibid.*,

²⁹ *Ibid.*,

³⁰ *Ibid.*,

³¹ *Ibid.*,

conflict."³² The ability to keep the sea, air and land lines of communication open if a conflict broke out is a highly complex problem that the Alliance needs to solve. Russia is also keenly aware of this problem and do have formidable anti access/area denial capabilities. Rostoks claims that the Russia would look to create exclusion zones and would need to close the Suwalki gap (a 64-mile-wide land strip between Belarus and Russia's Kaliningrad region connecting Poland and Lithuania) which would prevent NATO from moving troops and equipment in an out of the Baltic states.³³

NATO analysts have studied this problem and do believe that Russia's ability to close the Suwalki gap and control the sea lines of communication would leave them overstretched and therefore their ability to effectively hold exclusion zones may be overstated.³⁴ This problem set has been the subject of recent exercises by both sides and effective countermeasures will be vital for NATO's deterrence posture.

The fourth element of NATO's deterrence posture in the Baltics is the combined military power of the Alliance.³⁵ Currently, Russia has the military advantage in the Baltic region as it could, within a relatively short time, invade and seize the Baltic States. That said, the key to NATO's deterrence posture and strategy is that although Russia may have achieved a quick victory, it will be short lived as NATO will show solidarity and will look to utilize the full military power of the Alliance to drive Russia out of the Baltics. Again, NATO solidarity will display deterrence by the threat of punishment. The next section will provide examples of effective deterrence without the further build-up of heavy BGs in the Baltic region.

³² *Ibid.*,

³³ *Ibid.*,

³⁴ *Ibid.*,

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Dr. Guillaume Lasconjarias, a Researcher at NATO Defense College, published an article called *Deterrence Through Resilience*. Resilience provides another method NATO member states can use to complement their current deterrence posture without further build-up of military forces along the borders of the Baltics. Dr. Lasconjarias defines resilience as "ability of the community, services, area or infrastructure to detect, prevent, and, if necessary, to withstand, handle and recover from disruptive challenges."³⁶ As the definition states, resilience is about the community or country's ability to respond effectively to challenges which in turn will enable their military to continue to function knowing essential services will still be available as required.

Dr. Lasconjarias outlined NATO's seven systems or capabilities that must be resilient in the event of a conflict. They are as follows: "Continuity of Government, Resilient Energy Supplies, Resilient Civil Communications Services, Resilient Food and Water Supplies, Ability to Deal with Large Scale Population Movements, Ability to Deal with Mass Casualties, and Resilient Civilian Transportation Systems."³⁷ As the list indicates, the burden falls on the country's civil servants and citizens to ensure that these capabilities remain intact during times of conflict. Resilience is not just about the maintenance of essential services during conflicts, it is also mindset. Dr. Lasconjarias states that "the psychological aspect is about the people adopting a change of mindset and the harnessing of a new defensive spirit."³⁸ This is particularly important when the population is subject to propaganda and various forms of subversion. The population must learn to recognize it and resist. By displaying resilience, this will enhance the

³⁶ Guillaume Lasconjarias. "Deterrence through Resilience NATO, the Nations and the Challenges of Being Prepared". *Eisenhower Paper NATO*. No. 7. (May 2017): 1.
https://www.academia.edu/34643642/Deterrence_through_Resilience_NATO_the_Nations_and_the_Challenges_of_Being_Prepared

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

deterrence effect by allowing the enemy to believe that the risk may not be worth the reward in the end.

Another area where NATO can achieve effective deterrence without the increasing troop numbers is through its information warfare campaign. The Russian Federation has been highly active with its disinformation campaign against the Baltic States. Aleksander Krol's article published by the *Warsaw Institute* claims that the Russian information warfare campaign "is a strategically planned onslaught of disinformation and propaganda designed to manipulate public opinion. In the long run, its aim is to capture the hearts and minds of the Baltic peoples."³⁹

Krol explains that the target audience of Russian subversion is mainly Russian-speaking minority communities.⁴⁰ Russia also seeks to not only target ethnic Russian-speaking citizens but also those of poor social status and income.⁴¹ The intent is for Russia "to appear to be the only hope for a chance to improve their own situations, which they themselves cannot change."⁴²

To deter the Russian information warfare campaign, the Baltic States need to continue to leverage their NATO allies' capabilities. This is vital in the cyber domain, social media, and mainstream media. NATO can provide help in the electronic warfare and cyber domains, but the Baltic States must do more to limit Russian propaganda spread via mainstream media. Krol states that "both the biggest influence and threat is television, which remains the most popular source of information in the region."⁴³ In 2005, the Russians created the Baltic Media Alliance, a television broadcasting company that is currently available in all three Baltic States.⁴⁴ "The company is officially registered in the UK and retransmits specially modified content produced

³⁹ Aleksander Kroks. "Russian Information Warfare in the Baltic States — Resources and Aims." *Warsaw Institute* (20 July 2017): <https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-information-warfare-baltic-states-resources-aims/>

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*,

⁴¹ *Ibid.*,

⁴² *Ibid.*,

⁴³ *Ibid.*,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*,

by Russian television."⁴⁵ The governments in the Baltic States need to limit or ban Russian based mainstream media. Nationalism needs to be to at the forefront of all Baltic media outlets to counter the Russian rhetoric. The Baltic States need to work tirelessly to further limit Russia's target audience. If they target the poor ethnic Russian speaking areas, the government must take steps to show the people that their situation can improve, and the Russian Federation is not a better alternative.

The last example of how NATO can provide effective deterrence without further build-up of heavy BGs is through air power. Lt Col Thomas McCabe's article in the *Air and Space Power Journal* states that from the Russian perspective "their experts believe that the side with aerospace superiority will have the initiative . . . and that ensuring superiority over the enemy in the aerospace field will be a necessary condition for achieving the objectives of the war."⁴⁶

Russia does has the initial advantage on the ground as it can quickly project enough land forces to seize the Baltics but they do fear NATO's aerospace capabilities. McCabe writes that the Russian experts realize that NATO will "try to establish air supremacy by neutralizing its air and space capability, especially its airfields, aircraft, and aerospace defenses."⁴⁷ McCabe also states that the air campaign would be comprehensive. "Instead of concentrating on one axis of attack ("strategic axis"), attacking weapons are expected to be spread over multiple axes."⁴⁸

The threat of NATO airpower can provide probably the greatest deterrent against the Russian Federation with out being parked within the Baltic States. Again, the threat of deterrence

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Lt Col Thomas R McCabe (Retired). "The Russian Perception of the NATO Aerospace Threat Could It Lead to Pre-emption?". *Air Space and Power Journal* (Fall 2016):65.
https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Volume-30_Issue-3/V-McCabe.pdf

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 67

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*,

by punishment by NATO airpower is currently effective and therefore the requirement to reinforce troops along the borders is not necessary for now.

To conclude, this research paper proved that despite the relatively small size and disposition of NATO forces deployed in the Baltic States, a deterrence effect can be achieved to limit Russian aggression. This essay examined the different concepts of deterrence and showed how NATO is using a combination of these concepts to effectively deter any further Russian aggression. Finally, this essay provided historical examples, as well as current examples (eFP BGs, resilience, and airpower) of how NATO's deterrence posture is successful. Moving forward, NATO will still need to utilize all available methods of deterrence and look to leverage all forms of innovation to prevent a large-scale conflict with the Russian Federation.

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