

STRATEGIC ESTIMATE OF THE BALTIC REGION

1. BACKGROUND/DISCUSSION.

a. Introduction

Kaliningrad, a strategically significant Russian exclave located on the Baltic Sea between NATO members Poland and Lithuania, serves as a vital military outpost for Russia. The region has seen significant militarization, including the deployment of advanced anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities such as Iskander SSM and Bastion anti-ship missile systems. These enhancements bolster the Baltic Fleet, enabling Russia to conduct large-scale military exercises that simulate conflicts with NATO, escalating regional tensions and posing a growing threat to Euro-Atlantic security. Kaliningrad's strategic position allows Russia to effectively project power across the Baltic Sea, continuously fueling regional tensions and making it a focal point of NATO's security strategy.

b. Strategic Direction

The U.S. aims to deter Russian aggression, strengthen NATO alliances, and promote regional economic independence from Russia. Central to these efforts is the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), which enhances U.S. deterrence posture by increasing rotational presence of U.S. forces, improving training and interoperability among NATO allies, and upgrading infrastructure to support military operations. Additionally, the Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (E-PINE) fosters cooperation with Nordic and Baltic states, supported by substantial U.S. Congressional funding through the Baltic Security Initiative. The U.S. is committed to developing and deploying additional military capabilities and sustaining a robust presence in Europe to support NATO's collective defense and regional stability.

c. Strategic Environment

The Baltic region's strategic environment involves interactions among NATO members (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland), and historically neutral countries like Sweden and Finland, which are considering NATO membership for increased security. Russia and Belarus, through their military presence and alignment with the CSTO, pose significant challenges to NATO's security framework. Ongoing tensions emphasize the need for robust security and diplomatic engagement, with advanced military assets in Kaliningrad presenting significant threats to nearby NATO states.

d. Strategic and Operational Challenges

NATO faces substantial challenges around Kaliningrad due to the significant Russian military buildup and sophisticated A2/AD capabilities. Kaliningrad's strategic position complicates NATO's defense strategies by effectively controlling Baltic airspace and maritime approaches. Operationally, NATO struggles with rapid response and reinforcement capabilities, hindered by geographical challenges such as the Suwalki Gap and inadequate

infrastructure for sustained U.S. military operations. The region is also a hotspot for cyber and hybrid warfare, necessitating robust defenses against a range of Russian threats.

e. Potential Opportunities

Option 1: E-PINE

D - promotes democratic values and regional cooperation, supported by the OSCE's role in enhancing military transparency and strengthening civil society.

I - influence regional states support for Baltic sovereignty, and strategic communication.

M - Increased FMS and FMT to enhance local security forces and maritime/border security.

E – Infrastructure investment stimulates reduces dependence on Russian energy

Option 2: Permanent US presence

D- economic sanctions counteract destabilizing activities in the region.

I- Public diplomacy to support Baltic states' sovereignty and democratic processes.

M- Permanent DIV in Poland. CAB in the Baltic States

E- Sanctions aimed at undermining the financial foundations of its foreign policies.

Option 3: Increase Rotational Force Deployments

D- Promotes diplomatic show strong support for peace and sovereignty

I- Enhanced intelligence gathering for early warning

M- Activates a DIV HQ with additional supporting units in Poland, increases the presence of Armored Brigade Combat Teams, and escalates the tempo of military exercises to boost NATO's readiness and interoperability.

E- Drives foreign direct investment into infrastructure essential for reducing energy dependence on Russia, leveraging American business expertise and international financial support to bolster economic independence and security for the Baltic region

f. Assessment of Risks & Mitigation

The main risks come from Russian assertiveness and their use of hybrid warfare tactics, as well as the possibility that NATO might be hesitant to respond to smaller threats. It is important to negotiate risk reduction procedures with Russia and maintain consistent diplomatic and economic pressure to prevent aggressive behaviors. Increasing awareness and support for early threat identification can help lower the risk assessment. Strengthening informational resilience within vulnerable communities and improving allied intelligence and defense responses are essential for protecting the Baltic states against a wide range of Russian threats, ultimately enhancing regional security and stability.

2. **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.**

a. Recommendation.

Increase rotational force deployments to establish a credible multinational force capable of deterring Russian aggression and enhancing NATO's rapid response capabilities.

b. Validity assessment.

Increasing rotational force deployments in the Baltic region align effectively with NATO's infrastructure. This approach includes activating a Division Headquarters in Poland and regularly rotating Armored Brigade Combat Teams. It leverages existing facilities and avoids the complexities of establishing permanent bases. The flexibility of this strategy allows for

dynamic adjustments in force deployment, ensuring optimal utilization of military assets without becoming predictable or fixed. Politically, this option is more acceptable than permanent bases, especially in regions sensitive to provoking Russian aggression or where there is domestic opposition to foreign military installations.

The suitability of increasing rotational deployments aligns well with NATO's strategic objectives of deterrence and defense, maintaining a capable and ready force near potential hotspots without the escalation associated with permanent troop presence. Continuous rotation of forces ensures ongoing readiness and adaptability, supporting NATO's rapid response capabilities in a complex geopolitical climate. This rotational approach offers a balanced, sustainable strategy, enhancing regional security and stability while minimizing the risks associated with permanent basing in the Baltic region.

c. Justification.

The recommendation increases military presence and provides a robust miit offers a balanced approach to maintaining robust military deterrence while ensuring strategic flexibility and political acceptability. This strategy allows NATO to respond dynamically to evolving security challenges without the long-term commitments and potential provocations associated with permanent bases. Unlike fixed basing, rotational deployments mitigate political resistance from host countries and avoid escalating regional tensions. In contrast to options that focus primarily on diplomatic or economic measures, increasing rotational deployments provides immediate, visible deterrence, effectively supporting NATO's core objectives of defense and deterrence while promoting stability in the region.

d. Risks and mitigation.

One significant risk associated with increasing rotational force deployments in the Baltic region is the potential for Russia to misinterpret the enhanced NATO presence, which might view it as a threat, leading to increased regional tensions. To mitigate this risk, NATO should maintain transparent communication channels with Russia to clarify the defensive nature of the deployments. Additionally, robust diplomatic engagement with regional partners and continuous public diplomacy efforts are essential to emphasize these deployments' stability and security goals. Implementing comprehensive strategic communication plans can help manage perceptions and prevent escalation, ensuring that the increased presence serves its intended purpose of deterrence without provoking aggressive responses.

e. Conclusion. Increasing rotational force deployments is the most effective strategy to address the dynamic security challenges in the Baltic region, offering a sustainable approach that balances deterrence with diplomatic and operational prudence.

End Notes

Department of the Army, CGSC, Blackboard, "C299," Strategic Estimate Baltic Sea Region Slides,

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July 31, 2024, https://cgsc.blackboard.com/ultra/courses/_14539_1/cl/outline