Analysing indicators of Russian aggression in the Baltic states

Ahead of Russian military exercises in September, with the Russia-Belarus relationship deteriorating and with ambiguities in the US commitment to NATO, Baltic states are anxious about Moscow's intentions. Jane's analyses the indicators that could signal Russia's readiness to intervene in these countries.

Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008 opened an assertive new phase in its foreign and security policy. The Baltic states - Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania - became concerned about the potential for a Russian invasion to seize territory, destabilising them and NATO. On 1 December 2016, the Associated Press reported Lithuania's then minister of defence Juozas Olekas as saying that capabilities and readiness were "the only way to stop Russian aggression in the region", as his ministry released a manual for civilians on survival skills and Russian materiel recognition.

As in Ukraine and Georgia, any Russian intervention would probably be justified on the basis of Moscow's right to protect either ethnic Russians or Russian citizens who are threatened by "repressive" state policies. Russian president Vladimir Putin has repeatedly invoked this right as a justification for invading Ukraine, such as during an address on 18 March 2014, and Russian media frequently allege that the Baltic states discriminate against Russians.

Eastern flank (BingMaps 2017, Microsoft; date accessed: 29 March 2017/Mauricio Beltrán)
There are multiple options for Putin to execute an intervention policy, not all of which involve the regular Russian army. In Ukraine and Georgia, various indicators presaged forthcoming Russian invasions. Those indicators, along with subsequent Russian activities since 2014, suggest possible alternatives as to how such a Baltic invasion could materialise.

A range of military and non-military indicators might be triggered sequentially, although their almost simultaneous occurrence would be more likely. Non-military indicators would be the earliest visible signs of an impending crisis, followed by increasingly overt military moves. All of these indicators - in keeping with Russian doctrine and policy of claiming a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space - would comprise moves that could furnish a pretext for intervention, such as the use of paramilitaries to launch a coup and exploiting the chaos to seize power. Notably, on 22 February 2017, Russia denied that it had been involved in a failed coup attempt in Montenegro in October 2016 that resulted in the detention of Serbian agents and paramilitaries.

This scenario has become more probable across Eastern Europe because Moscow has openly moved to create mercenary or paramilitary units to serve in unspecified theatres. These could be sent to Belarus, the Baltic states, Ukraine, or elsewhere, and instructed to pose as locals, or else serve as sleeper cells for just such a contingency, according to Willi Neumann and Steffen Dobbert, writing in Die Zeit on 6 February. Furthermore, BBC Monitoring reported on 3 February 2017 that members of Russia's 400,000-strong National Guard were also available to serve abroad.

There are therefore several hundred thousand troops available for such operations, who could be used to maintain plausible deniability that Russia was not invading a foreign country, a claim Moscow has adhered to throughout the Ukraine operations and that appears to be something of a trademark of its form of hybrid warfare.

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The first Sukhoi Su-30SM fighter aircraft to join the Russian Navy's Baltic Fleet arrives at the Chernyakhovsk air base on 13 December 2016. Since late 2013, there has been an increase in VHF/UHF transmissions from Russian aviation assets in the Kaliningrad region. (PA) 1699279

Non-military indicators

This analysis does not attempt to ascribe a likelihood to a future Russian invasion of the Baltics, but rather lays out a series of indicators that would probably be triggered on the pathway towards a worst-case scenario of invasion. It also suggests where those indicators may already have been partially tripped.

Any invasion would come after a prolonged period of mounting diplomatic tensions between Russia and the targeted state or states. Moscow would seek to control that tension for its own purposes and to manage the situation so that it could call off military plans at little or no cost if they became too risky because of NATO's reaction or if political success had obviated the need for military action.

However, that pressure would always be visible in the background, as an essential element of hybrid or new-generation warfare is to use all of the elements of power to inflict constant psychological pressure upon targets. That tension is itself an indicator of impending crisis, as this kind of psychological warfare aims to inhibit the adversary's capacity for rapid, effective, and rational decision-making, while preserving Russian tactical and strategic flexibility.

Moreover, this pressure would continue throughout the entire crisis. With growing tension, there would be increasingly menacing but unspecific threats from Russian leaders and diplomats, interspersed with specific predictors of future Russian actions, such as warfare. Since 2008, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states have all at various times experienced some combination of boycotts of key exports, energy shut-offs, cyber-attacks against socioeconomic targets, and threats such as the creation of border zones to restrict trade.

Notably, on 1 February 2017, Russia resurrected a border zone with Belarus in the latest sign of its declining relations with Minsk. This move was prompted by Belarus's introduction of visa-free travel for citizens of 80 countries, giving Moscow a credible pretext for its action. Moreover, Russia and Belarus formally remain allies.

Concurrently, the Russian media would increase the number and intensity of defamatory attacks on the Baltic states' domestic and foreign policies and especially those alleged policies that consign local Russians to living under an "apartheid-like" regime. In Belarus, media would attack the supposedly anti-Russian economic and political policies of the "repressive" administration of President Alexander Lukashenka. By late February, this was already happening.

Media attacks, along with Russian (or pro-Russian, as in the Montenegro coup attempt) military and non-military sleeper cells in these countries would give the signal for activating demonstrations and generating signs of unrest to provoke governments into heavy-handed and even possibly violent reprisals against the Russian and indigenous population.
Indicators of possible Russian military interference in Belarus or the Baltic states, April 2017 (IHS Markit)

A coup could be another branch of a crisis sequence and could be correlated with military moves, although this would be highly unlikely in the Baltic states and unlikely in Belarus. If these demonstrations betokened genuine popular unrest, they could furnish a pretext for Russian demands for repression and intervention, as occurred during the Ukrainian revolution in 2013-14.

Once incidents of violence against Russians were manufactured, or if governmental authority collapsed, those phenomena would become the basis for media calls for enhanced political unrest and pressure on domestic regimes, derogatory articles in the West about the Baltic states, and more specific diplomatic statements from Russian officials about Moscow’s right to protect its "compatriots" or even citizens abroad by force.

Meanwhile, Russian threats would become more specific and correlate overtly with military moves. These activities, along with those undertaken by Russian agents in key business and government sectors, would aim to create a domestic gridlock in which the government could no longer rule effectively and where its legitimacy would come under attack at home and abroad.

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**Military indicators**
Soldiers take part in the NATO military exercise Iron Sword 2016 at a training range in Pabrade, Lithuania, on 2 December 2016. Russia has deployed and exercised forces around the Baltic region that are optimised for speed and striking power, meaning that the first days of any potential conflict would be crucial. (PA)

Russian military planning would be premised on the need to achieve both strategic and tactical surprise, which is essential to all operations, while deception measures would be intended to inhibit a coherent response. Indeed, every Russian operational plan must have a deception component, aiming to impede effective Western intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).

Some indicators of possible military preparations were already in place by late February. In mid-2015, Russia announced that in November 2014 it had re-established the 1st Tank Army (1st TA; also known as the 1st Guards Tank Army) with forward elements near Smolensk, probably the 144th Guards Motorised Division (144th MD; also known as the 144th Motorised Rifle Division) in Yelnya. When finally re-established, the 1st TA will be organised around three divisions and three manoeuvre brigades, making it a powerful and offensive strike force. However, research by Jane's in 2016 suggests that Yelnya is not yet likely to be structurally capable of hosting the 144th MD, if it is indeed part of the 1st TA.

The 1st TA's assets will theoretically include approximately 700 tanks, 1,300 other armoured vehicles, 500 tubes of artillery and multiple rocket launchers, and a dense, mobile radar air-defence umbrella. It will also be an early recipient of the new Armata T-14 main battle tank (MBT). However, despite being scheduled to be ready by spring 2017 and field-tested in the upcoming Zapad 2017 exercise in western Belarus in September, doubts remain about its readiness and manning.

Several factors suggest that the 1st TA is still in its formative stages. The creation of new divisions has depleted the officer corps, and the 1st TA is not exempt: new kit has only arrived recently.
(such as howitzers in March 2016, the beginning of deliveries of T-72B3 MBTs in February 2017, and the Tor-M2U surface-to-air missile [SAM] units entering service in July 2016); and overall, leaving aside the 144th MD, the 1st TA appears set to have only limited manoeuvre capability in the form of one tank division and a tank brigade. Jane's therefore assesses that a combination of financial, manpower, and infrastructure issues is probably affecting the 1st TA's readiness level.

Airbus Defence and Space imagery showing the garrison for the 144th Guards Motorised Division near Yelnya, Russia, which probably forms part of the reconstituted 1st Tank Army. (CNES 2017, Distribution Airbus DS/2017 IHS Markit)

Also in 2016, Moscow announced the creation of a new division in the Southern Military District, adjacent to Ukraine, and a new motorised rifle unit near Rostov-on-Don. The creation of these 'armies' and 'divisions' was part of a broader development during 2015-16 that appears to herald a return to the Soviet concept of large units and mass mobilisation, as the creation of divisions can only be sustained if reserve forces are created as skeleton units of divisions before actual mobilisation, as occurred in the Soviet era.

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A Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft system during a training exercise by Russia's Baltic Fleet's air-defence units in Kaliningrad on 7 February 2017. In early 2016, military analysts estimated that Russian armoured units could conquer the Baltic countries' capital cities in just 36 to 60 hours. (PA)

Russia has also ordered more than 4,000 rail flat cars for deployment of heavy equipment into Belarus, whereas only 200 were used in Zapad 2013. This would theoretically be sufficient to transport all the heavy vehicles of the 1st TA as well as a substantial amount of ammunition, and would amount to the most powerful concentration of offensive weaponry in Eastern Europe since the end of the Cold War. However, Jane's remains sceptical about the realisation of a full procurement of 4,000 flat cars, and even if these numbers were deployed, then only some elements of the 1st TA could be forward deployed.

Given past instances of exercises being co-ordinated to inhibit a NATO response and to intimidate targets during the run-up to crises and wars - as in Georgia and Ukraine - Zapad 2017 or other exercises could offer opportunities for surprise interventions or invasions. These could also use one or more of various paramilitary units along with regular units or special forces.

On 7 February 2017, Putin ordered the Russian Air Force and air-defence forces into top readiness for a snap exercise, moving them to predesignated field positions, and also ordered another snap exercise of forces in the Western Military District (adjacent to Belarus and the Baltic states), including motorised rifle units, artillery, missile units, anti-aircraft missile brigades, command-and-control brigades, logistics formations, an army aviation brigade, and the Leningrad Naval Base. The military recruitment offices of St Petersburg, the Republic of Karelia, and Pskov and Novgorod regions were also put on alert.

Accordingly, a complete suite of forces has now been mobilised, and rolling exercises will probably continue through to September if not afterwards. Meanwhile, the Tula-based 106th Guards
Airborne Division - well-placed for seizing key points in an intervention or invasion scenario - will participate in the exercises in western Belarus in April.

In Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, exercises moved seamlessly into interventions. However, as recounted to Jane's in July 2015 by General Ben Hodges, Commander of US Army Forces Europe, such exercises had caught Western forces by surprise.

Airbus Defence and Space imagery showing an S-400 battery, one of four located in Kaliningrad, deployed near Yantarny. The S-400 battery displaced an S-300PS battery. The 92N6 target engagement radar (TER) and 96L6 target acquisition radar (TAR) are mounted atop 40V6MR mast assemblies.

The 2008-12 defence reforms that overhauled force structures and the command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4I) aspects of the military were also accompanied by other reforms to the defence industry, the purpose of which was to provide hi-tech weaponry. This arguably goes beyond Western assessments that overlooked the military rationale behind the overall economic and administrative reforms of 2001-03. Rearmament was not a second stage in reform but a third, and culminating stage, for the period through to 2020 and of long-held strategic plans.
Particularly after 2014, this mobilisation process has accelerated to become more visible. Indeed, in the Kavkaz 2016 exercises, Russia again mobilised more than 100,000 troops, and also the civil administration (including banks to pay soldiers in the field, and hospitals to establish field units during the exercises). This may be one of the most telling indicators of Moscow's commitment to mobilise the entire state structure for a large war in which state survival is at risk.

According to Isabelle Facon, a Russia specialist and senior research fellow at France's Foundation for Strategic Research, this mobilisation also involved the participation of law enforcement agencies in military drills and snap exercises with the regular army. Facon argued that the quality of Russian forces had been substantially augmented due to a rigorous training regimen and that they had developed a formidable capability, a capacity for surprise, and could move rapidly to deployment if necessary.

These deployments and exercises are therefore faits accomplis that could lead to operations against Belarus or the Baltic states. Simultaneously, if Russia moved to invade the Baltics, it would probably also attempt to seize the Swedish island of Gotland because of its strategic position in the Baltic Sea, placing S-300 or S-400 systems on the island to improve its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capability in the region. Recognising this growing threat, Sweden in September 2016 redeployed a permanent troop presence to Gotland following years of demilitarisation.

Even ahead of non-military moves, it is likely that Moscow will intensify its pressure on Minsk to allow increased deployments of Russian troops, to tighten integrated C4ISR links between Russian and Belarusian forces, and also to permit military base access or control for Russian
ground, air, or air-defence forces. This would threaten Belarus and the Baltic states, as well as Poland, Ukraine, and Central Europe.

Exercises would also probably include amphibious landings, airborne and heliborne assault, and more conventional activities. Enhanced electronic warfare (EW) - known in Russia as radio-electronic warfare (REW) - would also form a part of such exercises, as well as the deployment of submarines into the North Atlantic. These could take up positions astride allied lines of communications and underwater cable traffic - deployments that have already prompted NATO concern.

Each of these regular and snap exercises would accelerate the operational tempo of the Russian army, building on previous iterations, and would also probably include visible nuclear components to inhibit any NATO response and to enhance readiness to use those weapons, as is standard Russian doctrine and practice. Escalation dominance - which subsumes escalating to nuclear force in order to force NATO to de-escalate within certain broad parameters - may inform Russian strategy, at least according to some Western governments and analysts.

However, it would be more accurate to suggest that the strategy is really an attempt to control escalation throughout all the phases of a crisis. This formulation contains room for the idea that, if necessary during a war, Moscow might strike first with nuclear weapons - probably sea-based tactical nuclear weapons - to force a de-escalation in NATO attacks. Russian writers do not accept that Moscow's strategy is 'escalate to de-escalate', and Moscow's behaviour suggests a broader ambition to control escalation dynamics throughout all phases of a crisis.
Outlook

Russia has deployed and exercised key forces around the Baltic region that are optimised for speed and striking power, including airborne troops, air assault, naval infantry, special forces, air, and air-defence units with accompanying C4ISR capabilities. It has created formidable 'air and naval defence bubbles' against NATO air, sea, and ground forces.

Russian forces are already in or near the Baltic, and could be quickly mobilised or transitioned from exercises alongside forces in and around Kaliningrad. Alongside the St Petersburg area, Kaliningrad hosts the Baltic Fleet, S-300 and S-400 air defences that are difficult to target without sizable ground forces, and - most dangerously - the nuclear-capable Iskander SS-26 that can target the entire Baltic littoral from Germany to Lithuania. Similar systems in the Western Military District can target Estonia and Latvia. Such forces would probably prevail - at least initially - over NATO.

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THE VIEW FROM THE BALTSICS

The annexation of Crimea, Russia's probably permanent deployment of nuclear-capable Iskander missiles in its Kaliningrad exclave, and mixed messages from Washington are rattling nerves in the Baltic states, which have long been vulnerable to powerful neighbours. As tensions with Russia remain high, German-led NATO troops held their first exercise in Lithuania on 9 March after arriving at the Rukla military base, the first of four battalions to be stationed in the Baltic region, with the others led by Canada, the UK, and the US, the latter in northeastern Poland. It is an unprecedented deployment of NATO soldiers and military hardware in the only former Soviet republics to become NATO and EU members, which will invite a further response from Russian president Vladimir Putin. "Russia is escalating the situation by constantly demonstrating its military posture in the region," Latvian minister of defence Raimonds Bergmanis told Jane's in early March. "Either [through] the deployment of Iskander ballistic missile systems in Kaliningrad or large-scale snap exercises involving special operations forces and airborne forces - we have been observing all these activities for the past several years. But the intensity and scope of these activities has dramatically increased and most likely will continue to evolve. It is a long-term challenge that NATO is facing." NATO has made it clear that the Baltic Sea region will be defended, introducing 'Assurance Measures' at its 2014 Wales Summit and an Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in the Baltic and Black Sea regions at its 2016 Warsaw Summit. EFP forces will be combat-ready and capable of active involvement, and the German-led battalion in Lithuania will be joined by high-readiness multinational units scheduled to arrive in Poland in March, Estonia in April, and Latvia in June. Overall, the four battlegroups will include troops from 17 NATO members. This force will "enrich deterrence, improve interoperability with each of the Baltic countries' national home defence forces, and provide additional capabilities to ensure the successful reinforcement of the enhanced NATO Response Force in case of crisis", Bergmanis told Jane's. "Our sole interest in the situation is deterrence. We are devoting all of our efforts both nationally and within NATO to exclude any kind of miscalculation. Allied troops on our soil are of utmost importance as a prerequisite for that." The Baltic states believe that there could be a spike in tensions around Zapad 2017, the Russian-Belarusian military exercises due to take place just over the border in September. "We expect increased Russian military activity before and during the exercise in our region, which may lead to some intentional or unintentional incidents," Lithuanian minister of defence Raimundas Karoblis told Jane's, also in early March. He also alluded to disinformation campaigns. "As much as we can judge from the previous Zapad-type exercises, Russia is likely to test its military plans against NATO as the main adversary. We will be ready to react to any such events, and we will pay great attention to strategic communication in reacting to Russia's rhetoric and information operations.

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MONITORING RUSSIAN FORCES’ COMMUNICATIONS AHEAD OF ZAPAD 2017

Advances in radio technology and internet availability have simplified the identification of common methods of radio operations and call signs for military networks. In particular, the use of remote-controlled software-defined radios (SDRs) enables the operation of radios from a location other than where the SDR and antenna are established, using internet connections for control. SDRs with short-range VHF/UHF capabilities can be permanently positioned near locations of interest without an operator, with this type of monitoring now carried out by numerous amateurs following Russian radio traffic from forces in the Kaliningrad Oblast region. Since late 2013, there has been an increase in VHF/UHF transmissions from Russian aviation assets in the Kaliningrad region. Flights transiting from the St Petersburg region to Kaliningrad are normally escorted by Sukhoi Su-27 ‘Flanker’ fighter aircraft based at Chernyakhovsk, generally remaining in international airspace but intercepted by NATO Baltic Air Policing (BAP) aircraft because of the lack of radar transponder emissions. Radio amateurs monitoring these intercepts have noted an increase since the Russian annexation of Crimea. Numbers have decreased since 2014 to slightly more than 100 in 2016, but this was still double the pre-annexation number in 2013. In 2014, there were approximately 160 intercepts, although these numbers may have risen because NATO also increased its patrols of the area after 2013. Radio traffic levels associated with the Russian High Frequency (HF) strategic and ground forces networks have also risen because of a regional force increase that has led to the creation of at least three mechanised battalions of approximately 70 T-72B MBTs. The 152nd Missile Brigade, based at Chernyakhovsk, will probably receive SS-26 Iskander-M strategic missiles by mid-2018, which could threaten surrounding countries. Iskanders have previously been deployed to the region during exercises and then removed; the Zapad 2017 military exercise, likely to begin in September 2017, could provide a pretext for deployment and subsequent non-removal. The increase in radio traffic indicates an increase in numbers of troops and equipment, as well as an emphasis on training to meet the future regional protection requirements. Amateur interception of daily system check radio calls facilitates a greater understanding of the networks being created in the region and their interactions. The air-defence network has been upgraded from a mainly mobile radar network to a fixed surveillance radar system, albeit at the same sites used by the mobile network. Analysis of Google Earth imagery from 2007-14 shows the removal of 36D6 ‘TIN SHIELD’ radars and their replacement by unknown variants housed in dome structures for environmental protection and secrecy, although TIN SHIELD radars are still deployed to at least four other locations. There are 15 radar sites in Kaliningrad, 11 of which are early warning sites and the others are for battle management or SAM acquisition. 36D6 radars are normally early warning assets within the air-defence network, but can also be used as general purpose medium/high-altitude search radar. They are often mounted on 40V6M mast systems, including at Sovetsk in Kaliningrad Oblast. The domes - measuring approximately 35 m by 20 m - may contain primary radar systems with associated or integrated identification friend-or-foe (IFF) systems to interrogate transponders. At the main air-defence site, 12 km northeast of Baltiysk, only a small dome has been installed, yet two 1990s-era 55Zh6 ‘Tall Rack’ surveillance radars are still in place, as well as a 1L13 and a P-35/37. At a further site to the south of Kaliningrad, a large surveillance radar dome has been installed and a single 55Zh6 remains, as well as a P-12/18, a P-14, and a P-80. There are also two domes near Rybachy and one at Gvardeysk. Since 2007, Google Earth imagery shows that various radar systems have been situated at this location. This upgrade of radar coverage shows that Moscow is creating a more robust network to protect the oblast. A tested method of using HF continuous wave (CW/Morse Code) for early warning communications has also emanated from the region in recent months, although it is slightly different from the format used by the main air-defence network in Russia.

Analysis by Tony Roper

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