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The New Russian Chill in the Baltic

MARK KRAMER

In late February and March 2014, shortly after the violent overthrow of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, Russian President Vladimir Putin sent troops to occupy the Crimean Peninsula, which had long been part of Ukraine. Putin’s subsequent annexation of Crimea sparked a bitter confrontation with Western governments and stoked deep anxiety in Central and Eastern Europe about the potential for Russian military encroachments elsewhere. Nowhere has this anxiety been more acute than in Poland and the three Baltic countries—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—where fears have steadily mounted as Russia has helped to fuel a civil war in eastern Ukraine while undertaking a series of military provocations in the Baltic region.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were forcibly annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 and remained an involuntary part of it until 1991, when they were finally able to regain their independence. Their relations with post-Soviet Russia have often been tense, even though Russian troops were withdrawn on schedule from Baltic territory by 1994. As a deterrent against possible threats from Russia, all three Baltic countries pressed hard to gain membership in NATO, a status that would entitle them to protection from the United States and other alliance members. Initially, the NATO governments were skeptical about bringing in the Baltic states, but in November 2002 the allied leaders invited Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to join. The three were formally admitted into the alliance in 2004.

Poland, for its part, had joined NATO several years earlier. After Communist rule came to an end in Poland in 1989, a broad consensus emerged among Polish elites and the public that membership in NATO would be crucial for the

country’s long-term security vis-à-vis Russia and other potential threats. In the early 1990s, leaders in Washington and other NATO capitals were wary of adding new members to an alliance that already included 16 countries. Over time, however, NATO shifted in favor of enlargement, and in 1997 the member states agreed to invite Poland and two other former Warsaw Pact countries (Hungary and the Czech Republic) to join. The three formally gained membership in 1999.

The subsequent entry of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania into NATO brought most of the Baltic region under the alliance’s auspices. The only exceptions have been Finland and Sweden, both of which have chosen thus far to remain outside military alliances, as they have since 1945. However, one of the by-products of the Russia-Ukraine confrontation and the recent spate of Russian military provocations in northern Europe has been a surge of public discussion in both Finland and Sweden about the need for closer links with NATO and even possible membership in the alliance—a step that once would have been unthinkable.

PRIOR MISGIVINGS

Well before the conflict between Russia and Ukraine erupted in 2014, concerns had arisen in the Baltic region about Russia’s intentions. The August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, which saw the Russian Army quickly overwhelm and defeat the much smaller Georgian military and then carve off two sizable parts of Georgia’s territory (the self-declared independent republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia), stirred doubts in the Baltic countries and Poland about the willingness of the United States and other key NATO members to defend them against Russian military pressure or intervention. Even though Georgia was not a NATO member and thus had not received any guarantee of allied protection, the televised imag-

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es of Russian forces sweeping across Georgian territory and overrunning Georgian military positions came as a jolt to both elites and the wider public in the Baltic countries. Their misgivings were reinforced by the conspicuous maneuvers undertaken by Russian ground forces along the Russian-Estonian border in late 2008 and by the provocative nature of Russia's "Zapad 2009" military exercises with Belarus in September 2009, which involved simulations of rapid offensive operations against NATO.

To allay misgivings in the Baltic countries, NATO leaders in December 2009 authorized the preparation of contingency plans for the reinforcement and defense of the whole Baltic region against an unspecified enemy. Contingency planning known as Eagle Guardian already existed for the defense of Poland, but until 2009 neither the United States nor Germany had wanted to produce additional blueprints to defend the Baltic states, for fear that such an effort would damage relations with Russia if it became publicly known. Polish officials initially expressed concern that the decision to include the Baltic countries would dilute Eagle Guardian, but they were eventually willing to embrace the expanded contingency plan, provided that Poland was treated separately and that US bilateral military support would increase.

The new plan designated a minimum of nine NATO divisions—from the United States, Britain, Germany, and Poland—for combat operations to repulse an attack against Poland or the Baltic countries. US and German policy makers tried to keep the revised contingency planning secret, but some details began leaking to the press in early 2010. Soon thereafter, the unauthorized release of thousands of classified US State Department documents on the WikiLeaks website, including many items pertaining to Eagle Guardian and the concerns that led to its expansion, revealed the alliance's planning for all to see.

The public disclosure of NATO's behind-the-scenes deliberations and revised Eagle Guardian plans in late 2010 and early 2011 spawned hyperbolic commentary in the Russian press and drew a harsh reaction from the Russian Foreign Ministry. High-ranking officials claimed to be "bewildered" and "dismayed" that NATO, after issuing countless "proclamations of friendship," would be treat-

ing Russia as "the same old enemy in the Cold War." The Russian ambassador to NATO, Dmitri Rogozin—a notorious hard-liner—denounced the "sinister manipulations and intrigues" of the allied governments and accused them of engaging in "warmongering," "odious discrimination," "hateful anti-Russian propaganda," and "flagrant hypocrisy."

The ensuing tensions, coming at an early stage of Barack Obama's presidency, tarnished his administration's much-ballyhooed "reset" of relations with Moscow and eroded NATO's credibility in its dealings with Russia, including its repeated statements that "NATO does not view Russia as a threat." Perhaps if Dmitri Medvedev had stayed on as Russian president (as the Obama administration expected), the damage from the disclosures would have abated relatively quickly and would not have hindered closer ties via the NATO-Russia Council. But with the return of Putin as president in 2012 and the Russian government's growing predilection for flamboyant anti-Western rhetoric and policies, the adverse impact of the revelations persisted.

Among other things, the Russian Army stepped up its military exercises, including simulations of attacks against the Baltic countries and Poland.

Russia's Zapad 2011 and Zapad 2013 exercises with Belarus, which were given wide publicity in the Russian and Belarusian media, featured simulated preventive nuclear strikes against Poland and large-scale thrusts toward the Baltic countries. In March 2012, Russian combat aircraft also began to conduct simulated attacks against military sites in Sweden. The Russian authorities' shift to a more belligerent posture throughout the Baltic region began when Medvedev was still president, and any prospect for a rapprochement between NATO and Russia disappeared after Putin returned to the presidency, lending an even sharper edge to the two sides' military rivalry vis-à-vis the Baltic countries and Poland.

NATO sought to offset Russian military activities in the region by carrying out major maneuvers of its own in 2012 and 2013, especially Exercise Steadfast Jazz in the Baltic countries and Poland in early November 2013, which included more than 1,000 mechanized infantry, 2,000 other troops, 3,000 command-and-control personnel, 40 combat aircraft, 2 submarines, and 15 surface vessels. All

Russian actions came perilously close to provoking a military confrontation or a collision with a passenger aircraft.

the NATO countries as well as Finland, Sweden, and Ukraine (then still headed by Yanukovych) took part in Steadfast Jazz, which was tied to plans for a NATO Response Force capable of deploying thousands of allied troops to “defend all member states” in the Baltic region against external attack at very short notice. Before the exercise began, Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov complained that it would mark a return to the “chill of the Cold War.” Although the results of Steadfast Jazz and other joint exercises helped to calm nerves among Baltic leaders, apprehension in the region about Russia’s intentions was mounting long before Putin authorized the annexation of Crimea or began fueling a civil war in eastern Ukraine.

GRAVE THREAT

No sooner had the Russian government embarked on the takeover of Crimea in late February and early March 2014 than senior officials in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania began warning about the “grave threat” to their own countries. At an emergency meeting of European Union leaders in Brussels in early March, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė warned that “Russia today is dangerous. . . . They are trying to rewrite the borders established after the Second World War in Europe.” The vice speaker of Lithuania’s parliament, Petras Auštrevičius, concurred: “Russia is presenting a clear threat, and, knowing the Russian leadership, there is a great risk they might not stop with Ukraine. There is a clear risk of an extension of [Russia’s military] activities.” Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves emphasized that “no one in [the Baltic] countries can safely assume that Russia’s predatory designs will end with the seizure of Crimea.”

Baltic leaders’ concerns about the prospect of Russian aggression intensified after Putin delivered a bellicose speech before the Russian parliament on March 18, 2014, announcing the annexation of Crimea and proclaiming a duty to protect ethnic Russian populations in other countries. Senior Baltic officials and military commanders urged the United States and other leading NATO countries to reaffirm and strengthen Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which stipulates that “an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack

against them all” and obliges every NATO country to take “such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force,” to repulse an attack against another NATO member state. The commander-in-chief of the Estonian Defense Forces, Major General Riho Terras, declared that although Estonia faced no immediate military threat, the events in Crimea demonstrated that the Russian Army has “a very credible capability” of “doing various things” elsewhere in Europe, especially in countries like Estonia with large ethnic Russian minorities. “It is very important,” Terras warned, “that we [the members of NATO] now seriously think about defense plans based on Article 5.”

Terras’s comments were echoed a week later by Estonian Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas, who said that, in light of the annexation of Crimea and Russia’s conspicuous military activities in the Baltic region, it would be “extremely important for the alliance,” especially the United States, to deploy “boots on the ground” in the Baltic countries in order to “increase the NATO presence and defend all allies” against any possible encroachments. Only through a robust and lasting troop presence, he implied, could NATO counter “external threats” and ensure the “security and well-being” of alliance members. Lithuanian Defense Minister

No country would see much point in belonging to an alliance that refused to protect its members against external aggression.

Juozas Olekas expressed much the same view, arguing that the “very active” Russian troop movements in Kaliningrad Oblast (the Russian exclave on the Baltic Sea) along the border with Lithuania necessitated the deployment of “NATO ground forces in the [Baltic] region and visits from NATO navies” to deter “aggression from the East.” Terras’s predecessor as Estonia’s commander-in-chief, General Ants Laaneots, addressed the issue even more bluntly in an interview with the Estonian press a few weeks later: “Putin has brought sense back to European minds regarding military dangers. I am happy that NATO and above all the EU members [of the alliance] have woken up after twenty years of self-delusion in the field of security.”

These comments by Baltic officials were in line with broader public opinion in the Baltic countries and Poland. A survey in Poland in March 2014, as Russia’s takeover of Crimea was unfolding and Russian military forces in and around the Baltic Sea were engaging in unscheduled large-scale maneuvers, indicated that 59 percent of Polish

adults viewed Russia as a “threat to Poland’s security.” Surveys in Estonia and Lithuania in late March turned up even higher shares of respondents—74 percent of Estonians and 68 percent of Lithuanians—who saw Russia as the “greatest threat” to their countries and to the “whole of Europe.”

After a civil war erupted in eastern Ukraine in the late spring of 2014 with Russia’s active support of separatist rebels, anxiety in the Baltic countries and Poland steadily intensified. Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski warned in August 2014 that Putin “has moved beyond all civilized norms” and “thinks he’s facing a bunch of degenerate weaklings [in NATO]. He thinks we wouldn’t go to war to defend the Baltics. You know, maybe he’s right.” Sikorski was hardly alone in this view. Nearly every senior official in Poland and the Baltic countries expressed great unease. Political leaders and military commanders in the region increasingly warned that Putin was intent on undermining NATO’s resolve to protect their countries. The Latvian and Estonian governments noted with consternation that Russian diplomats had stepped up efforts to give Russian passports and higher pensions to ethnic Russians in Latvia and Estonia. They urged the United States and other NATO countries to take full account of the “overriding danger” posed by Russia and the “evident desire by Moscow authorities to reestablish domination over their former empire in Europe.”

SURGING PROVOCATIONS

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and sponsorship of an armed insurgency in eastern Ukraine were accompanied by a surge of Russian military provocations in and around the Baltic region. Some of these actions were targeted at the Baltic countries and Poland, whereas others were aimed at Sweden, Finland, and Norway. Although most of the incidents were little more than shows of strength and bravado, some proved highly dangerous. In a few cases, Russian actions came perilously close to provoking a military confrontation between Russia and one or more NATO countries or a collision with a passenger aircraft.

For more than a decade after the Soviet Union collapsed, Russian military forces engaged in relatively few exercises and kept a very low profile. Long training flights for Russian combat aircraft nearly ceased, and sea patrols by naval vessels and submarines were drastically curtailed. The situation began to change gradually in the early

2000s as Russia’s economy started to recover from the steep output decline that followed the disintegration of the Soviet economy. By 2006, Russian military forces had returned to higher levels of readiness and resumed activities beyond Russia’s borders, including lengthy training flights through international airspace. The extent of these activities was not quite as sizable as in the Soviet era, but on a gradually increasing number of occasions from 2006 through 2013 NATO fighter aircraft intercepted Russian military planes as they approached Polish and Baltic airspace. According to NATO’s Combined Air Operations Center in Üdem, Germany, allied aircraft scrambled to intercept Russian combat planes roughly 45 times a year in the Baltic region from 2011 to 2013.

This pattern changed dramatically in 2014, as tensions mounted over Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Russian military activities of all sorts in northern Europe, especially harassing NATO countries and Sweden, precipitously increased. Russian warships intruded into Baltic countries’ territorial waters, including one occasion when Russian vessels engaged in live-firing exercises that severely disrupted civilian shipping throughout the region. Russian fighter and bomber aircraft repeatedly buzzed warships and other naval vessels from NATO countries and Sweden in the Baltic and North Seas, carried out simulated attacks against NATO countries and Sweden (as well as a simulated volley of air-launched cruise missile targeting North America), intruded into NATO countries’ airspace, and undertook armed missions against US and Swedish reconnaissance aircraft, forcing them to take evasive maneuvers.

NATO fighter aircraft in the region were scrambled to intercept Russian planes more than 130 times in 2014, roughly triple the number of interceptions in 2013. On many occasions, NATO fighters intercepted formations of Russian bombers and tanker aircraft as they approached or entered Baltic and Norwegian airspace. After the largest such incident, in late October 2014, NATO’s Allied Operations Command reported that “the bomber and tanker aircraft from Russia did not file flight plans or maintain radio contact with civilian air traffic control authorities and they were not using onboard transponders. This poses a potential risk to civil aviation as civilian air traffic control cannot detect these aircraft or ensure there is no interference with civilian air traffic.”

The quantity and provocative nature of Russian aerial incursions over northern Europe in 2014

marked a sharp departure from the pattern of earlier years. A report published in late 2014 by the European Leadership Network (a London-based think tank) highlighted the magnitude of the difference in the Baltic region from January to September 2014, when “the NATO Air Policing Mission conducted 68 ‘hot’ identification and interdiction missions along the Lithuanian border alone, and Latvia recorded more than 150 incidents of Russian planes approaching its airspace.” Also, “Estonia recorded 6 violations of its airspace in 2014, as compared to 7 violations overall for the entire period between 2006 and 2013.” This pattern continued in late 2014 and 2015, far exceeding the number of incidents since the height of the Cold War.

RECKLESS ENDANGERMENT

Of particular concern to Polish and Baltic leaders were the seemingly deliberate efforts by Russian military forces to provoke armed clashes or to endanger civilian passenger aircraft. Provocations directed against NATO countries, Sweden, and Finland occurred throughout 2014 and early 2015 but were particularly frequent in the aftermath of the controversy surrounding the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 by Russian-backed insurgents in eastern Ukraine. In early September 2014, two days after Obama traveled to Estonia and pledged strong support to the three Baltic countries, Russian state security forces kidnapped at gunpoint an Estonian Internal Security Service officer, Eston Kohver, from a border post on Estonian territory and spirited him to Moscow. As of February 2015, Kohver was still being held without trial in Moscow’s notorious Lefortovo Prison on charges of espionage.

The same month Kohver was abducted, Russian strategic nuclear bombers carried out simulated cruise missile attacks against North America; Russian fighters buzzed a Canadian frigate in the Black Sea while Russian naval forces engaged in maneuvers nearby; Russian medium-range bombers intruded into Swedish airspace to test the reactions of air defense forces; and Russian warships seized a Lithuanian fishing vessel in international waters of the Barents Sea and brought it to Murmansk in defiance of the Lithuanian government’s protests. The next month, Russian military

forces not only kept up their aerial incursions in the Baltic region (including a mission against Swedish surveillance aircraft that was deemed “unusually provocative”) but also dispatched submarines on a prolonged series of intrusions into Swedish territorial waters, causing sharp bilateral tensions and nearly provoking an armed confrontation at sea. The Swedish navy received authorization to use force if necessary to bring the submarines to the surface, but a 10-day search for the intruders proved unsuccessful.

Equally disturbing was the apparent willingness—indeed eagerness—of the Russian authorities to deploy military forces in ways that endangered civilian air traffic in northern Europe. The most egregious incident of this sort occurred in March 2014, when a Russian reconnaissance plane that was not transmitting its position nearly collided with an SAS passenger airliner carrying 132 people. A fatal collision was avoided only because of the alertness and skillful reaction of the SAS pilots. Other such incidents occurred in

the spring and early summer. Even after the MH17 incident in July 2014 drew opprobrium from around the world, Russian military aircraft continued to pose dangers to civilian airliners. The frequency and audacity of the incidents left no doubt

that they were deliberate.

By the end of 2014, it had become clear that, as the European Leadership Network report stated, the “Russian armed forces and security agencies seem to have been authorized and encouraged to act in a much more aggressive way toward NATO countries, Sweden, and Finland.” Against a backdrop of large-scale Russian military exercises and force redeployments in the Baltic region and elsewhere in 2014 and early 2015, the long series of Russian military provocations has raised troubling questions about Moscow’s intentions.

BOOTS ON THE GROUND?

The surge of tensions over Ukraine and Russian military provocations in the Baltic region spurred officials from Poland and the three Baltic countries to push for a strong show of resolve by NATO and a concrete reaffirmation of Article 5. The US government moved relatively quickly to allay some of these concerns, announcing in March 2014 that it would send six F-15C fighters and two KC-135

Apprehension in the region about Russia’s intentions was mounting long before Putin authorized the annexation of Crimea.

tanker aircraft to the headquarters of NATO's Baltic Air Policing Mission at the Šiauliai air base in Lithuania, joining the four F-15Cs that had been on patrol since the mission was established in 2004 when the Baltic countries (which lack their own combat aircraft) entered the alliance. The United States also deployed twelve F-15s and F-16s to Poland to assist air defense operations there and augmented the US naval presence in the Baltic Sea. Subsequently, Denmark, France, and Britain sent additional fighter planes to Šiauliai to expand the air policing mission further and relieve some of the aircraft already on patrol. NATO also expanded its surveillance of the Baltic region with extra flights of allied Airborne Warning and Control Systems planes, which provided broad coverage around the clock.

These incremental increases of NATO's military presence in the Baltic region, and a decision by alliance foreign ministers in April 2014 to "suspend all practical civilian and military cooperation between NATO and Russia," were welcomed by the Baltic and Polish governments, but they urged the United States and other large NATO countries to go further with defense preparations. Officials in Warsaw, Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius sought the permanent stationing of allied ground and air forces on Polish and Baltic territory. Estonian Prime Minister Rõivas's plea for "boots on the ground" was echoed by other leaders in the region, who hoped that their requests would be endorsed by the NATO governments at a summit meeting in Wales on September 4-5, 2014. For years, such a step had been precluded by the NATO-Russia Founding Act, signed by Russian and NATO leaders at a Paris summit in May 1997. To mitigate Moscow's aversion to the enlargement of NATO, the Founding Act established conditions for the deployment of allied troops on the territory of newly admitted member states:

NATO reiterates that in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defense and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces. Accordingly, it will have to rely on adequate infrastructure commensurate with the above tasks. In this context, reinforcement may take place, when necessary, in the event of defense against a threat of aggression.

In accordance with this provision, the United States and other allied countries had always

eschewed any prolonged deployment of "substantial" military forces on the territory of new NATO members in the Baltic region.

In the lead-up to the Wales summit, the Polish and Baltic governments argued that international circumstances had fundamentally changed since 1997 and that NATO should no longer be bound by anything in the Founding Act. Referring to the clause stating that NATO and Russia no longer regarded each other as enemies, General Terras of Estonia contended in May 2014 that the whole document had become obsolete: "Russia sees NATO as a threat, and therefore NATO should not view Russia as a friendly, cooperative country. That is very clear. The threat assessment of NATO needs to fit the current realistic circumstances." Terras returned to this theme a few months later, just before the Wales summit:

No one now believes that friendly relations between NATO and Moscow can be reestablished. Russia today regards NATO as an enemy, and this must facilitate changes [in NATO's force posture]. Some changes have already taken place, and the NATO summit must give out a clear message to the allies and to Russia that NATO is the world's most powerful military organization and is willing to do everything to protect its member states, including increasing its presence in areas bordering Russia.

Terras and other senior military and political officials in the Baltic region also argued that in light of Russia's actions in Ukraine and elsewhere, NATO should move ahead as expeditiously as possible with concrete military preparations for "defense against a threat of aggression," as stipulated in the Founding Act.

LIMITED MEASURES

Many officials in the United States and other NATO countries were sympathetic to the arguments of Polish and Baltic leaders, but the US government ultimately decided not to proceed with long-term deployments of "substantial" military forces in the Baltic region. US officials at the Wales summit did make an effort to address Baltic and Polish concerns, not least by joining with all the other NATO allies in vowing to uphold Article 5: "The Alliance poses no threat to any country. But should the security of any Ally be threatened we will act together and decisively, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty." The summit declaration made clear that this warning was meant for Russia.

In the military sphere, however, the summit mostly just endorsed and extended the relatively limited measures that had been adopted earlier in the year to expand the Baltic Air Policing Mission and to bolster Western naval forces in the Baltic Sea. Although the Wales summit participants welcomed the fact that more than 200 military exercises had been held in Europe in 2014, the reality was that few of these exercises were of any appreciable size. Moreover, although they endorsed the deployment of “ground troops in the eastern parts of the Alliance for training and exercises,” they made clear that these troops were stationed there solely “on a rotational basis,” not permanently. The allied leaders did adopt a Readiness Action Plan to enlarge the long-planned NATO Response Force (from 13,000 to 20,000 troops) and to put it on a higher state of readiness, with a “Spearhead Force” of up to several thousand troops and reinforcements that could be deployed to the Baltic region within a few days. Whether those projections will actually materialize in 2015 and 2016 remains to be seen, however. Even if the proposals are fully implemented, they fall well short of what the Baltic countries and Poland had been seeking.

In the months following the Wales summit, the NATO governments tried to fulfill several of the pledges they had adopted, most notably with the establishment of multinational command-and-control centers in the Baltic countries, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania, consisting of “personnel from Allies on a rotational basis” who are to “focus on planning and exercising collective defense.” At a February 2015 meeting in Brussels, NATO defense ministers pledged to increase the size of the Response Force to 30,000, including a Spearhead Force of 5,000. NATO military planners and individual governments took other concrete steps, including the upgrading of infrastructure and the repositioning of weaponry and support equipment, to enhance the alliance’s capacity to uphold Article 5 in the Baltic region.

Nevertheless, in the absence of large, permanent deployments of US and other NATO ground and air forces in the Baltic countries and Poland, doubts about the collective defense of the region are bound to persist. Terras highlighted this problem when he noted that although he himself did not doubt NATO’s willingness to carry out its defense commitments, “the real question is

whether Putin believes that Article 5 works.” He warned, “We should not give any option of miscalculation for President Putin.”

GLOOMY SCENARIOS

Russia’s actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and the risky nature of Russian military operations and exercises in and around the Baltic region in 2014 and 2015, have sparked acute unease in Poland and the Baltic countries. Although the available evidence does not indicate that the Russian authorities will attack a NATO member state, Putin does seem intent on undermining NATO by raising doubts about the credibility of Article 5. Despite the strong pledges of support offered at the Wales summit, some uncertainty remains about what would happen if Russia undertook a limited military probe against one or more of the Baltic states. Certain European members of NATO might hinder a timely response, but if that were to happen the United States and some other NATO member states would likely act outside the alliance’s command structure to defend the Baltic states, as envisaged in NATO’s contingency defense planning. They would undoubtedly try to avoid escalation to all-out war against Russia, not least because that would require the NATO countries to fight in a region in which they would be at a serious geographic disadvantage.

However, if the United States and its allies failed to uphold Article 5 in the Baltic region and refrained from intervening against Russian military forces, this would gravely damage the credibility of all of NATO’s defense commitments. No country would see much point in belonging to an alliance that refused to protect its members against external aggression. If Putin were foolhardy enough to risk all-out war by embarking on military action in the Baltic region, NATO would have no fully reliable or attractive military and diplomatic options. But the worst option of all would be to do nothing and allow Russian military expansion to proceed unchecked.

These gloomy scenarios seem improbable for now, but the very fact that they are being discussed seriously in NATO circles as well as in Warsaw and the Baltic capitals is a sign of how gravely Russia’s actions in Ukraine and elsewhere have affected the post–Cold War European security order. Peace and security in the Baltic region, which only a decade ago appeared more robust than ever, now seem all too precarious. ■