



Hybrid Warfare, Deterrence in the Baltics and Escalation Dominance

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Introduction

This Scientific Letter provides a brief overview of the concepts of hybrid warfare, deterrence and escalation dominance as they relate to the Canadian deployment to Latvia as part of the larger NATO Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in the Baltic States. It draws on work previously done by the author¹ and includes material produced for Canadian participants in the strategic wargame “TRIVE II” held in the United Kingdom on 27 April 2017.² However, recent planning efforts at the Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) have underscored the requirement for further analysis of the concept of hybrid warfare. In particular, the development of an Operational Estimate for the European theatre demonstrated the need to re-examine and clarify the concept of hybrid warfare in light of the continued conceptual confusion in the usage of this term. This conceptual misunderstanding militates against designing appropriate campaign and operational plans in response to Russian operational behaviour and actions. Therefore, in support of ongoing CJOC campaign and operational planning, the following analysis seeks to provide greater conceptual clarity about hybrid warfare as manifested in specific Russian operational approaches, assessing it against the effort to deter Russian aggression in the Baltic region and NATO’s requirement to manage escalation. As the analysis below makes clear, the primary challenge facing NATO and EFP nations is crafting an effective deterrent to the broad range of strategic, operational and tactical activities that fall under the rubric of Russian hybrid warfare while successfully managing the risk of escalation, which has the potential to lead to a more direct, conventional armed conflict in the Baltic States.

¹ Over the past four years, the author co-wrote a series of classified studies on deterrence with a fellow strategic analyst, Paul Dickson. These studies cover conventional, nuclear and cyber deterrence.

² Canadian participation at TRIVE II from CJOC included the author, COS Operations and CJOC J2. There were also participants from the Strategic Joint Staff, ADM Policy and the Canadian Delegation to Brussels. To aid preparations for TRIVE II, the author produced a paper entitled “Extended Conventional Deterrence, ‘Grey Zone’ Challenges and Escalation.” A modified Canadian version of the TRIVE II Wargame was subsequently held in Ottawa on 9 June 2017. Both of these wargames were classified and cannot be discussed in detail here. There are, nevertheless, classified reports of these games, which can be made available upon request.



What is Hybrid Warfare?

Much of the Cold War literature on conventional deterrence dealt with the objective of deterring a large-scale conventional military attack by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies in Europe. While these writings still remain applicable today, it is necessary to think about deterrence in the face of the current Russian operational approach as applied in Ukraine and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, sometimes called hybrid or grey zone warfare. The terms hybrid warfare, new generation warfare and grey zone are often used interchangeably to describe the Russian operational approach towards the post-Soviet states or former Soviet republics.³ Part of the conceptual confusion stems from the fact that there is no standard, commonly-accepted definition of hybrid warfare.⁴ Prior to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, most of the literature on hybrid warfare focused on the 'asymmetrical' tactics of non-state or proxy actors facing state adversaries, most commonly associated with ostensibly hybrid actors like Hezbollah in its confrontation with Israel. Following the Russian intervention in Ukraine, the concept became linked, whether deliberately or unintentionally, with long-standing activities associated with the strategic behaviour and operational practices of the Soviet Union and later Russia such as political warfare, active measures and reflexive control.⁵ Recent additions to this mixture include the exploitation of cyberspace and the electromagnetic spectrum as well as the concerted attempts to shape and control narratives on global affairs and events through the use of strategic communications and the manipulation of social media. The concept of hybrid warfare as applied to Russia has indeed become very expansive and perhaps a little unhelpful. As one commentator has opined, "The term hybrid warfare became so broad by the 2010s as to lose the sharpness that would have made it valuable."⁶

The problem with identifying a precise or even an accepted definition of hybrid warfare is that any definition must acknowledge that: "All wars in the past have contained elements of 'hybridity'."⁷ If hybridity is not a new occurrence or feature of modern conflicts, then what utility does the term hybrid

³ In addition to the Baltic States, these countries are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. To a large degree, the Kremlin regards this post-Soviet area as its privileged space where these countries are expected to accept limits on their sovereign independence and harmonize their economic and political behaviour in line with Russian interests.

⁴ The literature on hybrid warfare continues to grow. While hybrid warfare is often conceived as some combination of irregular and regular armed conflict—a characteristic applicable to most forms of warfare in the past—James Mattis and Frank Hoffman are often credited with originating the contemporary usage of the term with an article they co-authored in 2005. See J.N. Mattis and F. Hoffman, "Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars," *Proceedings* 131, 11, 1 (2005), pp. 31–32. Hoffman followed up this publication with several additional works on Hybrid Warfare over the next few years. For example, see Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Warfare* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007); idem, "Hybrid versus Compound War: The Janus Choice Defining Today's Multifaceted Conflict," *Armed Forces Journal* (October 2009); and idem, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly* 52, 1 (2009), pp. 34–39.

⁵ For a good discussion of the origins, evolution and expansion of the western concept of hybrid warfare, see Robert Johnson, "Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures: A Critique of the Literature," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, 1 (2018), pp. 141–163. Russian military thinkers not only followed recent western discussions about hybrid warfare but also developed their own concept (a literal translation is *Gibridnaya Voyna*) based on earlier Russian military writings. See Ofer Fridman, "Hybrid Warfare or Gibridnaya Voyna?" *The RUSI Journal* 162, 1 (Feb/Mar 2017), pp. 42–49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁷ *Ibid.* For examples of hybridity in warfare from antiquity to today, see the collection of essays in Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor (eds.), *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).



warfare have for understanding current crises and conflicts? It is perhaps best to think about hybrid warfare as a descriptor of Russian operations today, functioning as a broad characterization for a range of Russian tools and capabilities. As such, one must use the term cautiously and in the full knowledge that it often acts as a short hand for a whole host of Russian operational actions and the use of tools ranging from *inter alia* information operations, cyber exploitation and attacks, the use of proxies, economic pressure, political influence, clandestine measures and can include threats of conventional aggression and nuclear coercion. Analysts need to look past the label and foster a deeper understanding of Russian tactical, operational and strategic thinking and behaviour beyond a simple default categorization of hybrid warfare. As a recent study concludes, “Hybrid warfare is not defined by any technology or capability in any single domain, but offers a range of ‘ways and means’ to achieve an effect and therefore contribute to the operational and strategic objectives of an actor.”⁸

As a corollary to exercising caution in the use of the term, it is important to rethink the view of hybrid warfare as *exclusively* irregular and unconventional *solely* below the level of armed conflict. By closely examining Russian operational activities as witnessed in Ukraine, Georgia and other neighbouring countries, RAND analysts have challenged this view of hybrid warfare. Their work shows that Russian military thinking and doctrine cannot be easily characterized as “irregular” or even based on an iron-clad acceptance of the necessity of keeping all activity below the level of armed conflict.⁹ The Russian approach appears to blur the traditional binary delineation between the state of peace and that of war. This blurring of the sharp peace / wartime divide has led to a condition of persistent confrontation or conflict between Russia and its perceived adversaries. Persistent confrontation means that conflict is ever-present but changing in intensity, which fluctuates with the operational tools used, the targets of the operations and the objectives sought at any given time. It involves considerable risk of escalation and “may become more acute and intense or cross over into conventional combat operations” with little strategic warning.¹⁰ Another ‘hybrid’ characteristic that RAND work has identified from its analysis of Russian operational practice is the deliberate combination of unconventional, conventional and nuclear capabilities. “Hybrid warfare,” explains Andrew Radin, “can be understood as ‘hybrid’ in the sense that Russian activities involve a *combination* of different tactics; conventional forces may be used to shield, support, or defend irregular forces; Russia may use its nuclear forces to deter a response; or Russia’s security services and propaganda apparatus may seek to legitimize military action by conventional forces.”¹¹

It is this blurring of the state of peace and war as well as the combination of unconventional, conventional and nuclear capabilities that makes deterring potential Russian ‘hybrid’ aggression in the Baltics so perplexing and dangerous. The Alliance faces a three-fold deterrence challenge: NATO must not only work with the Baltic States to counter Russia’s unconventional toolset, it must deploy adequate military capabilities to act as a deterrent to a Russian conventional attack and the Alliance must also ensure that its

⁸ Johnson, “Hybrid War and its Countermeasures,” p. 157.

⁹ Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics. Threats and Potential Responses* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2017); Todd C. Helms et al, *Russian Social Media Influence. Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2018); Christopher S. Chivvis, “Hybrid war: Russian contemporary political warfare,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist* 73, 5 (2017), pp. 316–321; and Christopher S. Chivvis, *Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare.” And What Can be done about It.* CT-469, Testimony presented to the House Armed Services Committee on March 22, 2017.

¹⁰ Chivvis, *Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare,”* p. 2.

¹¹ Radin, p. 5. Italics in the original. See also Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, “Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy,” *Proliferation Papers of the Institut Français des Relations Internationales* (November 2015), pp. 23–26.



nuclear posture is sufficiently adapted to deal with the modernization of Russian nuclear weapons and strategy. Much attention has been focused on countering Russia's unconventional methods and measures, but it can be argued that more effort needs to be made in deterring a Russian conventional attack. As one analyst explains, "The record of Russian actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine highlights how the use of irregular activities alone were largely unsuccessful, and shows that Russian success depended on employing superior conventional forces."¹² Certainly, Baltic decision-makers appear less worried about unconventional Russian activities and remain more concerned about the prospects of a conventional attack.¹³ Thus, it is important to look at the measures put in place for conventional deterrence to gauge whether NATO's current efforts are adequately addressing Baltic concerns about Russian conventional aggression.

Conventional Deterrence in the Baltics

Most writers on conventional deterrence insist on the importance of clarity in convincing the adversary of the credibility of defensive capability and the potential for retaliation or escalation in dealing with specific threats. While the destructive capability of nuclear weapons is well understood, estimates of the combat potential of conventional forces outside of actual combat remain more subjective.¹⁴ The point here is that, if the intention is to deter, an adversary must be aware of the military capabilities of its rival. The adversary must also have a clear idea of the circumstances in which that rival would use them. Therefore, the credibility of a threat not only derives from demonstrated capability and stated willingness to use it but it also rests on the subjective assessment of the adversary. In essence, does the potential foe believe that the threat of retaliation, escalation or defensive action is genuine and the associated capability exists to carry out the threat? If an adversary is not convinced of the reality of the cost-benefit calculus advanced by the strategy, it will likely fail.¹⁵

¹² Ibid, p. 7.

¹³ RadioFreeEurope / RadioLiberty (RFE/RL), "Trump Tells Baltic Leaders 'Nobody Tougher on Russia' Than Him," 3 April 2018, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/baltic-presidents-expected-ask-trump-bolster-defenses-against-russia-lithuania-latvia-estonia/29141389.html>; Emel Akan, "Baltic States Seek US Help against Russia Threat," *The Epoch Times*, 4 April 2018, at https://www.theepochtimes.com/baltic-states-seek-us-help-against-russia-threat_2484273.html; Alexander Smith, "Rezekne, Latvia, Frets About Trump NATO Stance, War With Russia," 20 March 2017, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/rezekne-latvia-frets-about-trump-nato-stance-war-russia-n733041>. Based on interviews conducted in the summer of 2015 with Estonian and Latvian officials, RAND also found widespread concern with the potential of Russian conventional aggression. See Radin, p. 1.

¹⁴ As Edward Luttwak points out: "The accuracy of such estimates is not merely uncertain but actually indeterminate, because that combat potential is measurable only in the reality of specific forms of warfare that may never happen." Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), p. 219.

¹⁵ John Mearsheimer's historical case studies of conventional deterrence provide a helpful framework for understanding the cost-risk analysis of aggressors. Cost, argues Mearsheimer, is directly linked to the probability of success as "the attacker's aim is not merely success but also rapid achievement of objectives on the battlefield." What is interesting in terms of the aggressor's calculations are defensive capability of the defender and the potential for the conflict to become prolonged. According to Mearsheimer, if the conflict promises to be more prolonged, even if ultimate success appears likely, an aggressor will likely be deterred because the protracted nature of the conflict will result in heavier costs. John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 24.



Cold War deterrence encompassed both the threat of retaliation (punishment) and denial.¹⁶ The first dimension relied upon the resilience to absorb a first strike and still threaten a catastrophic response while the second one sought to deny a perceived or anticipated benefit. Each sought to shape an opponent's risk analysis in a distinct, but integrated manner. In conventional deterrence, the capabilities required to inflict an unacceptable cost are not as easily defined or communicated. Deterrence by denial rests on the perceived ability to prevent attackers from gaining their objectives, convincing adversaries that an attack cannot succeed and they will not achieve their goals. Any defensive system can have a latent deterrent effect, in that it represents some level of defensive obstacle to the realization of operational objectives. But a more deliberate approach to denial requires deployed defensive capabilities as well as communication of intent and a concept of how these capabilities will be specifically used against potential aggressors to defeat or slow their attacks.¹⁷

EFP is best thought of as a form of extended conventional deterrence. The distinction here between a binary and an extended deterrence relationship is important and affects the resources applied and strategic communication strategy used to support them. In a binary adversarial relationship, the objective of deterrence for Actor A is to threaten the use of military power to punish in retaliation for action taken by Actor B against Actor A or, through defensive means, deny any perceived benefit that Actor B might seek to attain by attacking Actor A. Under extended deterrence, the adversarial relationship changes in that Actor A now seeks to deter Actor B from attacking a protégé (Actor C). In the specific case of EFP, NATO is seeking to deter Russia from attacking the Baltic States. Under this extended deterrence construct, NATO EFP states have to communicate and convince the Kremlin that NATO's commitment to the Baltic States is sufficiently robust that Russia's leadership cannot doubt that aggression against them will automatically escalate or inevitably lead to hostilities with NATO as a whole. Extended deterrence thus involves a slightly different approach to signalling than a more direct, binary adversarial relationship.¹⁸

As the literature makes clear, the local military situation is paramount.¹⁹ A conventional deterrence posture must be tailored to reflect the local conventional military situation in that part of Europe, including the geography of the region and the military capabilities of the actors involved. The emphasis must be on conventional force structures and their demonstrated effects as well as the specific military situations in which they will be used. If the goal is to deter major conventional aggression, one must then demonstrate the ability to employ local, tailored forces, which communicate (through statements, exercises and posture) an understanding of the adversary's aims, the ability to prevent even a limited and

¹⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981); and idem, "The First Two Generations of Nuclear Strategists," in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 735–778; and Keith B. Payne, "Understanding Deterrence," in idem, ed., *Understanding Deterrence* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 3–38.

¹⁷ Edward Rhodes, "Conventional Deterrence," *Comparative Strategy* 19, 3 (2000), pp. 226–234; and John Stone, "Conventional Deterrence and Credibility," *Contemporary Security Policy* 33, 1 (2012), pp. 108–23.

¹⁸ On the nature of extended deterrence, see Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, "What makes Deterrence Work: Cases from 1900–1980," *World Politics* 36, 4 (July 1984), pp. 496–526.

¹⁹ Russia has clear advantages based on force availability and distance. The highest density of Russia's most-capable ground and air forces is in its Western Military District (MD), though currently the strongest concentration is adjacent to Ukraine and Belarus. This district borders Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and Russian forces are able to mass forces rapidly using internal rail and road networks. Scott Boston, Michael Johnson, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Yvonne K. Crane, *Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe. Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018), p. 6.



quick strike, retaining sufficient capability to ensure the conflict will escalate beyond the adversary's risk tolerance or ability to achieve its aims.

NATO planners must estimate, to the best of their abilities, the range of possible Russian aggression, including what a major conventional attack would look like against a single Baltic state (one or all), what Russian forces would be involved, direction of attack, routes/axes of advance and how rapidly they could achieve their objectives. It must also consider what Russian forces could do to prevent NATO forces from operating in the littoral region of the Baltic Sea or over a NATO member nation's airspace. In sum, NATO must have forces prepared and positioned for defensive operations to inflict sufficient damage (destruction of equipment, casualties or threats to regime survival) that would cause Russian leaders to avoid contemplating aggression in the first place. In the event that deterrence fails, NATO must have in place a plan to force the cessation of Russian military operations because the cost of continuing the attack would simply be too high. The consequences of a failure to deter are significant. Once deterrence has failed, NATO would face the difficult choice of accepting Russia's *a fait accompli* or, alternatively, embarking on the monumental task of retaking the Baltic States by driving Russian forces out.²⁰

Researchers have looked at why deterrence succeeds in certain cases and why it fails in other situations. The analysis shows that the mere existence of a formal military alliance (such as the Article 5 guarantee) between a defender (NATO as a whole) and a protégé (Baltic State) has very little deterrence effect. In fact, as the work done by Huth and Russett demonstrates, "An attacker may threaten a protégé that is formally allied to the defender, fully realizing that the risks are very high precisely because of the formal alliance relationship. In such a situation, the potential attacker has made a firm decision to force the opponent to back down or to go to war."²¹ In other words, if Russian leaders see an opportunity to weaken or undermine the cohesion of the Alliance through escalation in the Baltic States, then the mere existence of Article 5 is not a sufficient deterrent. Given the vulnerability of the Baltic States, it is important to understand the escalation dynamics associated with potential Russian adventurism.

Escalation Dominance

Escalation has been defined as "an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants."²² It can be deliberate, inadvertent or accidental. *Deliberate* escalation occurs when a participant intentionally takes action that "it knows will cross one or more of an opponent's escalation thresholds." *Inadvertent* escalation happens "when one belligerent deliberately undertakes an action that it does not consider escalatory, but the action is perceived as such by an opponent." Finally, "*accidental* escalation is unanticipated, but instead of being an unexpected result of deliberate action, it is the consequence of events that were not intended in the first place. Such events might be the results of pure accidents, such as sinking a ship belonging to a neutral state due to misidentification, or bombing the wrong target due to a navigation error or outdated map."

In the current EFP context, NATO planners must understand that, like the Cold War, crisis situations with Russia will certainly involve the risk of escalation, including the potential of nuclear coercion and

²⁰ See the RAND studies, based on a series of wargames, on defending the Baltic States against a conventional Russian incursion, David Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank. Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016); and Boston et al, Op. cit.

²¹ Huth and Russett, "What makes Deterrence Work," pp. 496–526.

²² See Forrest E. Morgan, *Dancing with the Bear. Managing Escalation in a Conflict with Russia*. Proliferation Papers of the Institut Français des Relations Internationales (Winter 2012), pp. 19–26. The rest of this paragraph comes from Morgan.



brinkmanship. As a result, NATO will need to develop an approach to escalation management that avoids inadvertent escalation and miscalculation. Escalatory ladders were a component of the deterrence systems established during the Cold War, functions of both the desire to limit and manage the conflicts but also of the need to determine what constituted unacceptable behaviour and warranted aggression. Today, “escalation management” is seen as a more appropriate concept compared to the more mechanistic, largely one dimensional (vertical) escalation ladders espoused by Schelling, Kahn and others during the Cold War.²³ Escalation does not necessarily occur in discrete steps, understood identically by both sides in a conflict, but rather is subject to the inherent uncertainty in crises and war. As Forrest Morgan asks, “With so much uncertainty even regarding what one’s own forces are doing, how much more difficult would it be to accurately determine at what ‘rung’ an opponent is attempting to scale its efforts, especially once some number of nuclear detonations have occurred?” Managing escalation, argues Morgan, is about understanding the escalation “pressures” in given situations, ensuring one’s objectives are commensurate to the stakes involved and assessing the balance of interests between contesting parties.

Any conventional deterrent tailored to a specific actor must be especially cognizant of an actor’s perception of the stakes involved in any confrontation and the actor’s willingness to escalate a situation because of a perceived ability to dominate the escalatory relationship with an opponent. Canada and its allies need to understand Russian strategic calculations, especially given the existence of a greater Russian willingness to escalate a crisis because of a real or perceived lack of NATO resolve. Russian military exercises, including those that simulate a conflict with NATO, routinely involve an element of escalation, with some of the exercise scenarios culminating in strategic strikes with both conventional and nuclear munitions.²⁴ NATO’s current EFP approach must be evaluated against Russian thinking about escalation dominance and the ability to end emerging conflicts on terms favourable to Russian interest.

NATO has gradually adapted its force posture and adopted forward presence in the Baltic States and Poland to act as a “trigger” for an Alliance response to Russian aggression. In principle, the purpose of the trigger is to signal to an aggressor that a local conflict cannot be kept local and that, in the case of the Baltic States, substantial American and allied forces will flow into theatre after an initial Russian attack, thus escalating the conflict beyond what an aggressor may desire. This “triggering” concept is sometimes referred to as a “trip wire” force. In assessing this idea, one has to look at its size and composition. Is the forward presence commitment actually sufficient to act as a trigger? Or put another way, would it result, if activated, in “sufficient” casualties among EFP participants that would guarantee a military response or retaliation from NATO? Research appears to suggest that the size of the trigger is critical from a deterrence point of view. Game theory analysis indicates that the more “severe” the trigger, the greater deterrence value, severity being a function of the political and social value of the trigger as well as its actual combat capability.²⁵

²³ Herman Kahn, *On Escalation* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1965). For a trenchant criticism of Kahn’s theory of the “escalation ladder” see Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 216–19.

²⁴ One of the arguments for the Russian pursuit of new precision-strike conventional weapons is that it would strengthen Russian deterrence and the ability to dominate escalation. McDermott and Bukkvoll further point out that Russian military exercises have repeatedly rehearsed “escalation control dominance against a high-technology opponent.” Roger N. McDermott and Tor Bukkvoll, Tools of Future Wars – Russia is Entering the Precision-Strike Regime,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31, 2 (2018), p. 192. See also Stephen J. Cimbala and Roger N. McDermott, “Putin and the Nuclear Dimension to Russian Strategy,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29, 4 (2016), pp. 535–55.

²⁵ Prajit K. Dutta, *Strategies and Games: Theories and Practice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 235.



The current trigger mechanism favoured by NATO, defined by size of commitment and type of forces, leaves room to interpret how Alliance member states would react in the event of the threshold being crossed, and this may weaken its deterrent effect. One thing seems certain, convincing Russian decision-makers that the trigger is genuine will require an explicit signalling of intention based on a series of exercises and war-games designed to demonstrate that NATO has the capability and will to respond with the rapid deployment of forces into theatre, including overcoming obstacles presented by Russian anti-access, area denial defences.²⁶ It would seem that the trigger, as currently conceived, needs to be enhanced further if the objective is to eliminate or reduce the potential of Russian miscalculation or under estimation of NATO willingness and intention to respond and carry out its plans once the trigger has been pulled.

Conclusion

It should not be assumed, and the above analysis has not suggested, that Russian conventional aggression against the Baltic States is inevitable; it may even appear at present to be a remote possibility. That said, it is quite possible for local crises to escalate to the point where Russian decision-makers judge that the stakes involved warrant the use of conventional forces, including potentially large formations comprised of multiple combined-arms brigades. This escalation could result from Russian calculations, accurate or otherwise, about the strength and credibility of the NATO trip wire force. As the above has argued, there is certainly no iron-clad barrier in Russian operational practice that would prevent a transition to conventional combat if the conditions called for it. In fact, the examples of Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate that Russian leaders are prepared to cross this threshold when the operational requirements demand a more robust intervention, even at the risk of removing any remaining doubt about the extent of Russian involvement in the conflict. Finally, the analysis suggests that NATO must consider further efforts to enhance conventional deterrence, including a more robust EFP posture that would affect Russian calculations and reduce the potential of miscalculation and escalation.

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²⁶ Russia has fielded very capable integrated air defences and long-range strike weapons that would complicate and possibly endanger NATO's deployment of air and sea power into the region.



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