

Russia Faces Hard Strategic Reality in the Reconfigured Baltic/Northern European Theatre

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Abstract

The long war in Ukraine has brought a drastic geopolitical reconfiguration of the Baltic theatre and a deep shift in the military balance between Russia and NATO. Russia has effectively lost its position of power and the capacity to threaten its neighbors with projections of military power, and while for many Western policy planners these changes appear unnatural and transitional, in Moscow they are perceived as both unacceptable and irreversible.

Already in the first phase of its invasion into Ukraine, the Russian high command found it necessary to redeploy the most combat-capable units, including the Air Assault Division and the Marine Brigade, to the key offensive operations, while the Baltic Fleet dispatched its amphibious capabilities to the Black Sea. In the ongoing phase of defensive battles, these units are fully engaged in countering the Ukrainian counter-offensive, so that “Fortress Kaliningrad” is left without most of its garrison. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has undercut Russian strategic planning, in which the Baltic and the Arctic theatres were separate directions under different commands, and particular goals in exploiting military superiority, which is currently lost. Russia has gained unrestricted military access to Belarus, but the shortage of forces limits the usefulness of this alliance, while the deployment of non-strategic nuclear warheads and the setting of a camp for the Wagner group (even if disarmed) amount to a very troublesome combination.

Whatever the scope of the outcome of the war, Russia will not be able to rebuild a position of military superiority in the Baltic theatre or even to set an approximate balance of forces with NATO, which is implementing a new plan to strengthen its posture in this reconfigured direction. Moscow might rely on “deterrence by punishment”, assuming that many Western urban centers are within the reach of its *Kalibr* and *Iskander* missiles, but it may also opt for greater reliance on nuclear weapons, which can be deployed to Kaliningrad. These measures cannot alter the strategic reality of Russia’s irreducible vulnerability, so a new post-Putin leadership, whatever its composition, might find it necessary to moderate or abandon completely the track of militarized confrontation with the West and to seek opportunities for restoring cooperative patterns, for which the Baltic region is the most promising interface.

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Introduction

Every analysis of the impacts and consequences of the Russia-Ukraine war takes the risk of being overtaken by its fast transformation, which proceeds even when the combat operations appear to be deadlocked. The strategic assessments prepared for the NATO Vilnius summit on July 11-12, 2023, for that matter, did take into proper account the limited success of the Ukrainian offensive that had started a month earlier; however, they could not evaluate the distortions in the Russian chain of command exposed by the Wagner mutiny on June 23-24. The prospect of a breakdown of Russian defenses and a meltdown of the high command now needs a more thorough investigation. The indecision and panic in Moscow caused by the mutiny suggest that the prospect of a breakdown of the Russian leadership needs a more serious investigation than what appeared sufficient in mid-summer. Similarly, the persistent discontent among the “fighting generals” with the incompetence in the top brass points to a need to re-evaluate the possibility of a meltdown of the high command under the pressure of the Ukrainian offensive. Therefore, the criticism of the proceedings in Vilnius as too cautious and as not taking into serious account the impacts on the European security system of a probable Russian defeat now appears to be more justified. The summit still marks an important achievement in strengthening NATO unity and resolve, not least because three Defense and Deterrence plans—for the Arctic theater; the central region, including the Baltic theatre; and the southern flank, including the Black Sea theater—were approved.¹

The nature and intensity of challenges in various parts of NATO’s multi-domain interface with Russia has indeed changed drastically, and typically it is the Black Sea theatre, where commercial shipping is affected by naval warfare, that gets most attention. The most profound changes in the complex balances of military forces and political powers are taking place, however, in the Baltic theatre, which is completely reconfigured through Finland’s and Sweden’s (as yet incomplete) accession to NATO. New perspectives on the security

1. On the significance of these plans, see Heather A. Conley, “The NATO Vilnius Summit: What Constitutes Success?” *GMF Insight*, July 10, 2023, available at: www.gmfus.org. An argument on NATO’s failure to understand the nature of changes in European security is made in K. Volker, “Ukraine Is Doing Nato’s Job for It”, *Financial Times*, July 15, 2023, available at: www.ft.com.

posture of these two states and on their contributions to the total defense and deterrence capabilities of the re-energized Atlantic alliance are elaborated in an upsurged production of new in-depth research; Russian perspectives on these transformations remain, in contrast, muddled and obscure.²

Official Russian discourse on the issue of NATO enlargement has remained—since the “ultimatum” demanding a reversal of this process issued in December 2021—rigidly negative, but at the same time, there are notable attempts to downplay the significance of Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to the Alliance. In Russian academia, experts keep publishing balanced opinions on the security transformations in northern Europe, but it is uncertain whether there is any political demand for this expertise.³ What is certain is that, in the evolving Russian strategic culture, NATO is defined as stronger than at any point in the last thirty years not as a defensive but as an aggressive alliance, which constitutes a direct military threat to Russia. The inescapable conclusion from this reinforced proposition is that the intensity of conventional military threat, as well as variegated and upgraded “hybrid” threats, on the extended north-western front has increased considerably, while the capabilities for countering such threats have dwindled. In military-strategic terms, there can be no denial of the gravity of this unfavorable shift in security posture, but there is also no possibility of breaking this negative trend. This contradiction between risk assessments and resource allocation will drive the transformation of Russian strategic planning in the final phase of the Ukraine war and, probably, beyond.

2. Examples of this research are M. Pesu & T. Markku, “Finland as a NATO Ally”, *FIIA Foreign Policy Paper*, December 2022, available at: www.fiia.fi; K. K. Elgin & A. Lanoszka, “Sweden, Finland, and the Meaning of Alliance Membership”, *Texas National Security Review*, Spring 2023, available at: <https://tnsr.org>.

3. Examples of this research are S. Andreev, “Puti razošlis’: kak Šveciâ i Finlandiâ v NATO vstupali” [Tracks have diverted: How Sweden and Finland joined NATO], *Russian International Affairs Council*, April 7, 2023, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>; N. Plevako, “Bezopasnost’ Švecii i NATO: Doroga s prepâtstviâmi” [Sweden’s security and NATO: a road with obstacles], *Scientific and Analytical Herald of the Institute of Europe RAS*, 1/2023, available at: <http://vestnikieran.instituteofeurope.ru>.

Strategic Baggage of the Past Decade

The Baltic frontier has historically been a major avenue of interactions between Russia and the West, and various entries into this rich track record, describing conquests and restorations of sovereignty, are usefully incorporated into the present-day political discourses in Helsinki and Stockholm, Riga and Warsaw, and in particular in Moscow, where history is crudely utilized for political purposes. What is relevant for this analysis is the profound reassessment of strategic significance of the Baltic theatre both in the West and in Moscow determined by the first phase of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in spring 2014.

Western Half-Measures against Acute Concerns

Russia's triumphant annexation of Crimea following the swift deployment of special forces (gaining fame as "green men") shocked Western military planners and focused their concerns on the suddenly apparent vulnerabilities in the Baltic theatre. A Crimea-type special operation targeting Narva was recognized as a possible trigger for a larger conflict, and General Richard Shirreff, who retired from the position of NATO's Deputy Allied Commander Europe in March 2014, produced a convincing account for this scenario, up to the point of nuclear escalation.⁴ Analysts took a closer look at the Russian *Zapad*-2013 strategic exercise held in September 2013 and found a fully prepared plan for a massive offensive operation aiming at the so-called "Suwalki gap" in Lithuania and Poland, which separates the Kaliningrad region from Belarus.⁵ A team of RAND

4. R. Shirreff, *War with Russia*, London: Coronet, 2016. For a sharp review, see A. Monaghan, "2017: War with Russia. An Urgent Warning from Senior Military Commander", *Changing Character of War Centre*, June 10, 2016, available at: <https://www.ccw.ox.ac.uk>.

5. See L. Zdanavicius & M. Czekaj (eds), "Russia's Zapad 2013 Military Exercise", Washington DC: Jamestown Foundation, December 2015, available at: <https://jamestown.org>. An updated view on the Suwalki choke point is J.R. Deni, "NATO Must Prepare to Defend Its Weakest Point—the Suwalki Corridor", *Foreign Policy*, March 3, 2022, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

researchers staged a series of wargaming exercises and concluded that the Russian forces would reach Tallinn and Riga in sixty hours, even if NATO HQ registered proper warnings about the troop concentration.⁶ Sweden, which at that time had not begun to entertain a proposition for joining NATO, re-evaluated the alarm from the Russian air exercise in April 2013, when an attack on Stockholm was simulated, and found it necessary to return a military garrison to Gotland, which presented an attractive target for a Russian amphibious operation, which could have been launched from Kaliningrad just 350 km away.⁷

Effective political pressure from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania made it impossible for NATO to ignore these threat assessments. The first response was to strengthen the Baltic Air Policing mission, so that, in May 2014, six additional US Air Force F-15C fighters arrived at the Siauliai air base in Lithuania, and two more airbases—Amari in Estonia and Malbork in Poland—began receiving rotating squadrons from NATO allies.⁸ The 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw approved the decision to deploy four multinational battalion battle groups, which became operational in summer 2017 and were officially described as a “defensive and proportionate deterrent force”.⁹ This force signified only symbolic commitment to defend territories that were perceived as indefensible (the RAND experts recommended deployment of seven brigades). The NATO Readiness Initiative, envisaging building a force of 30 battalions and 30 squadrons within thirty days of the start of a crisis, remained an exercise in wishful strategic thinking.

Russian Strategic Priorities and Limitations

It can now be argued with reasonable confidence that a large-scale offensive operation in the Baltic theatre was never a feature of Russian political ambitions and strategic intentions in the second half of the 2010s. The aggression against Ukraine, paused but certainly

6. D. Shlapak & M. Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank”, *RAND Research Report*, 2016, available at: <https://www.rand.org>.

7. D. Cenciotti, “Russia Simulated an Aerial Night Attack on Sweden”, *Business Insider*, April 23, 2013, available at www.businessinsider.com; N. Granholm, “Did a Top Secret Threat Assessment Prompt Sweden to Deploy Troops to the Baltic Island of Gotland?”, *RUSI Commentary*, September 28, 2016, available at <https://rusi.org/>.

8. R. S. Clem, “Geopolitics and Planning for High-end Fight: NATO and the Baltic Region”, *Air & Space Power Journal*, Spring 2016, available at: www.airuniversity.af.edu.

9. See “NATO Battlegroups in Baltic Nations and Poland Fully Operational”, *NATO News*, August 28, 2017, available at: www.nato.int. On the shortcomings of this plan, see J. Campbell, “Why NATO Should Adopt a Tactical Readiness Initiative”, *War on the Rocks*, July 13, 2020, available at: <https://warontherocks.com>.

not terminated by the Minsk agreements in February 2015, necessarily remained the top priority in military planning and build-up, which included extensive efforts at rebuilding military infrastructure in Crimea and deploying new units and capabilities to this “fortress”, which was supposed to dominate the Black Sea theatre. The military intervention in Syria, launched in September 2015—just half a year after the cessation of high-intensity hostilities in Donbas—demanded plenty of political attention and high-volume air- and sea-lift for sustaining limited power-projection. Syria became an important testing ground for new long-range strike capabilities, including the sea-launched *Kalibr* missiles, but most of the lessons that the Russian army sought to learn there were not applicable to waging large-scale war in Europe.¹⁰

A pronounced priority in the Russian military build-up was set on the Arctic, which was perceived as a separate strategic direction, different from the Baltic theatre not only in geographic terms (accentuated by the growing attention to the Northern Sea Route) but also in the heavy concentration of nuclear assets on the Kola Peninsula. This distinction was formalized with the creation in December 2014 of a new Joint Strategic Command on the basis of the Northern Fleet, which from January 2021 has also attained the status of a military district.¹¹ This elevation of a fleet command in both strategic and administrative terms was unique in Russian military tradition, and justified by massive investments in shipbuilding and in construction of new air and naval bases in the High North.¹²

In contrast, the Baltic theatre received much less political attention, and the Baltic Fleet, despite performing a key role in the naval parades (a new ritual decreed by President Putin in 2017), received only a few missile corvettes to add to its reduced order of battle.¹³ Objections against such neglect were swiftly suppressed when Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu abruptly dismissed the Commander and the Chief of the Naval Staff of the Baltic Fleet.¹⁴ One strategic vulnerability in this theatre that the Russian high command

10. M. Clark, “The Russian Military’s Lessons Learned in Syria”, *ISW Report*, January 2021, available at: www.understandingwar.org.

11. J. Kjellen, “The Russian Northern Fleet and (Re) Militarization of the Arctic”, *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 2022, available at: <https://arcticreview.no>.

12. K. Zysk, “Russia’s Military Build-up in the Arctic: to What End?” *CNA Report*, September 2020, available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil>.

13. J. Kjellen, “The Russian Baltic Fleet – Organization and Role Within the Armed Forces in 2020”, *FOI Report*, February 2021, available at: www.foi.se.

14. A. Rezchikov, “Why Were the Top Brass of Russia’s Baltic Fleet Dismissed?” *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, July 4, 2016, available at: www.rbth.com.

deemed necessary to address was the Kaliningrad enclave, so the reconstituted 11th Army Corps received new units and equipment, and modernization of infrastructure, including the storage of nuclear munitions, was undertaken. Western analysts debated whether this attempt at building “Fortress Kaliningrad” amounted to gaining the “Anti-Access/Area-Denial” (A2/AD) capabilities granting Russia effective control over the airspace and sea lines of communication in the central part of the Baltic Sea, but the lack of modern technologies granting interoperability of various assets was rather clear.¹⁵

Russian military exercises were carefully watched by Western analysts eager to check their assessments. The *Ocean Shield-2019* exercise led by the Baltic Fleet and staged mostly in the Norwegian Sea revealed crucial limits in its capability to interact with the Northern Fleet.¹⁶ Much attention was focused on the strategic *Zapad-2021* exercise, which was supposed to reveal the true scope of Russian military designs in the Baltic theatre.¹⁷ In fact, while the exercise went in parallel with the deployment of several groupings on the borders of Ukraine, its rather limited scenario confirmed that Russia was not planning to engage with a technically superior adversary and not prepared to sustain operations in a protracted war.

15. These debates are reflected in M. Jonsson & R. Dalsjo, “Beyond Bursting Bubbles—Understanding the Full Spectrum of the Russian A2/AD Threat and Identifying Strategies for Counteraction”, *FOI Report*, July 2020, available at: www.foi.se.

16. A. Staalsen, “30 Russian naval vessels stage show of force near coast of Norway”, *Barents Observer*, August 15, 2019, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

17. M. Kofman, “Zapad—2021: What to Expect from Russia’s Strategic Military Exercise”, *War on the Rocks*, September 8, 2021, available at: <https://warontherocks.com>.

Russian Forces' Ongoing Depletion and Degradation

As the war progresses into the second half of its second year, only very preliminary assessments can be made of the long-term damage done to the Russian armed forces and the attempts at rebuilding their combat capabilities. As for the Russian self-evaluations, the official discourse on the “special military operation” going as planned and the troops inflicting heavy losses on NATO-trained and -equipped Ukrainian brigades effectively prevents any critical examination of setbacks. It is clear, nevertheless, that Russia’s strategic posture on the Baltic theater has deteriorated drastically under the impact of the long war and that Moscow is unable to execute any urgent measures to protect against new vulnerabilities.¹⁸

Redeployments to the War Zone

The grouping of conventional forces that used to grant Russia a range of offensive options on the Baltic theatre was decimated at the start of the war and, in the course of it, has been reduced to a set of barely functional headquarters and skeleton units. The fate of the 76th Pskov Guards Air Assault Division, one of the best units of the Russian Airborne Forces, is typical in this regard. It spearheaded the march from Belarus to Kyiv and partook in the botched air assault on Hostomel Airport.¹⁹ Its field headquarters was located in Bucha; a number of soldiers were directly implicated in executing civilians, while soon after the division commander was replaced.²⁰ After the retreat from Kyiv, it took part in the attacks on Popasna, before being redeployed to the Kherson region, where its headquarters was hit by

18. Useful assessments of the current status of the Russian army are: J. Watling & N. Reynolds, “Meatgrinder: Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine”, *RUSI Report*, May 19, 2023, available at: <https://rusi.org>; M. Enquist et al., “Russia’s War Against Ukraine and the West: The First Year”, *FOI Report*, June 20, 2023, available at: <https://www.foi.se>.

19. S. Mitzer & J. Oliemans, “Destination Disaster: Russia’s Failure at Hostomel Airport”, *Oryx*, April 13, 2022, available at: www.oryxspioenkop.com.

20. E. Fomina, “Eight Pskov Paratroopers in Bucha”, *Important Stories*, June 27, 2022, available at: <https://istories.media>.

Ukrainian artillery at Chornobaivka.²¹ After the withdrawal from the defensive battles to the west of the River Dnipro, it supported the Wagner group attacks on Bakhmut, and as of mid-2023 it was holding defenses to the south of this desolate city, while the 106th Guards Airborne Division was fighting to the north of it and its commander General Seliverstov was fired for objecting to the use of elite units as cannon fodder.²²

The fate of the 18th Guards Motor Rifle Division, upgraded from brigade level in December 2020 to constitute a core of the newly formed 11th Army Corps in the Kaliningrad region, is not any better. It is not known how many of its heavy weapons were lost in various engagements, but their loss has added nothing to its dubious glory.²³ What can now be established with confidence is that the strategic goal of turning Kaliningrad into a heavily militarized “bastion” that could dominate the central part of the Baltic region has effectively been cancelled, bringing to an end often acrimonious debates in the West.²⁴ Successful hits by Ukrainian missiles and naval drones on the military infrastructure in Crimea have proved that Russian forces cannot ensure effective interoperability between different surface-to-air and coastal defense weapon systems, which is necessary for making the A2/AD strategic design functional.

As for the Baltic Fleet, its combat order was seriously reduced by the transfer of three of its four large landing ships (*Ropucha* class) to the Black Sea in early 2022, with elements of the 336th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade on board. The planned amphibious operation flanking the land offensive toward Mykolaiv never happened, and the rest of the brigade arrived to partake in the storming of Mariupol.²⁵ It suffered casualties, including two deputy commanders, but still fared better than the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet that was devastated when attempting an attack on Vuhledar.²⁶ The plans for adding new missile-carrying ships to the Baltic Fleet have been curtailed, and the construction of a new series of *Derzky* stealth

21. D. Brennan, “Elite Russian Units Take up to 40 Percent Casualties in Ukraine”, *Newsweek*, December 3, 2022, available at: www.newsweek.com.

22. E. Cook, “Russia ‘Fires’ Another Commander As Part of Ongoing Purge”, *Newsweek*, July 16, 2023, available at: www.newsweek.com.

23. D. Axe, “12,000 Russian Troops Were Supposed to Defend Kaliningrad. Then They Went to Ukraine to Die”, *Forbes*, October 12, 2022, available at: www.forbes.com.

24. T. Galen Carpenter, “Is NATO Provoking the Russian Military Build-up in Kaliningrad?”, *CATO Institute Commentary*, December 14, 2020, available at: www.cato.org.

25. C. Kasapoglu & S. Ozkarasahin, “Are Russian Marines Preparing to Seize Odessa from Ukraine?”, *National Interest*, February 11, 2022, available at: <https://nationalinterest.org>.

26. D. Axe, “Buy Artillery or Buy Coffins: The Russian Marine Corps’ Dire Choice as Its Troops Die in Record Numbers”, *Forbes*, November 5, 2022, available at: www.forbes.com.

corvettes (Project 20386) has been discontinued.²⁷ There is less data on the redeployment of Russian airforce assets, but the pattern of aggressive intercepts and frequent infringement of Finland's and the three Baltic states' airspace has been discontinued and the air exercises have been performed with much caution.²⁸ Overall, the garrison of "Fortress Kaliningrad" has been deeply reduced and the capacity for securing the supply lines lost, but the Russian high command shows little concern about this acute strategic vulnerability.

Responding to NATO Enlargement

The proposition of NATO's eastward expansion constituting a grave threat to Russia's security is fundamental to Russian political discourse and strategic planning, so the decision of Finland and Sweden to apply for membership of the Atlantic Alliance signified a major increase of this threat. It also amounted to a major reconfiguration of the Baltic theatre to the detriment of Russia's capacity for countering the aggravated security challenges.²⁹ President Putin's response to this geostrategic setback was, nevertheless, uncharacteristically ambivalent; he warned about the consequences of that "mistake" but implied that only expansion of NATO military infrastructure into Finland and Sweden would constitute a threat to Russia.³⁰ Defense Minister Shoigu outlined a range of planned counter-measures, including the deployment of a new army corps in Karelia, but, given the sustained shortage of manpower and key weapon systems in the kinetic war with Ukraine, such plans can be relegated to the category of wishful strategic thinking.³¹ The HQ of the Leningrad military district may indeed be re-established by the end of 2023, but the newly promoted generals and their adjutants will have only skeleton units to command.

The accession of the two north European states to NATO has not only denied Russia the convenient strategic option of threatening the

27. The plans were outlined in D. Boltenkov, "Krepkaâ Baltika: počemu pohody rossijskikh korablej pugaût angličan" [Strong Baltic: Why the English are afraid of Russian ships' Voyages], *Izvestiya*, April 4, 2020, available at: <https://iz.ru>. On the shipbuilding setbacks, see T. Ozberk, "Russia Cancels Its Own LST Program: Project 20386 Corvettes", *Naval News*, July 7, 2023, available at: www.navalnews.com.

28. P. Felstead, "RAF Having Busy Time Intercepting Russians Over the Baltic", *European Security and Defense*, June 9, 2023, available at: <https://euro-sd.com>.

29. R. Nyberg, "Russian Collateral Damage: Finland's and Sweden's Accession to NATO", *Carnegie Politika*, October 6, 2022, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

30. M. Seddon & R. Milne, "Putin Signals Acceptance of Finland and Sweden Joining NATO", *Financial Times*, May 16, 2022, available at: www.ft.com.

31. V. Muhin, "NATO vyshlo na severnye granitsy Rossii" [NATO has arrived at the northern borders of Russia], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, April 4, 2023, available at: <https://www.ng.ru>.

Narva region of Estonia, which is now only 100 km away from allied territory, but has also undercut Russian assumptions of separation between the Arctic and the Baltic theatres.³² The position of power that Russia built on the Kola Peninsula served not only as a land base for the naval “bastion” in the Barents Sea, but also as insurance against any possible moves by NATO or Finland in the High North, in case tensions on the Baltic theatre escalated to a kinetic clash. Already during the first year of the war, that position of power was effectively dismantled, as the brigades subordinated to the Northern Fleet, including the newly raised Arctic Brigade based in Alakurtti just 50 km from the border with Finland, sent their best battalions to the front and took heavy casualties.³³

Every step in implementation of the NATO plan for upgrading the forward deployed battalion groups into brigades signifies a further shift in the balance of conventional forces, which Russia cannot compensate for. In fact, the General Staff currently faces the imperative of turning the temporary detachment of the most combat-capable elements of the divisions and brigades based in Kaliningrad, Pskov or Pechenga into a permanent deployment of these units, with their respective HQs, to the Ukraine war zone.³⁴ Numbers are set to get worse, but a larger problem is the new level of integration of NATO force posture in the Baltic theatre as the accession of Finland and Sweden produces a new depth and cohesion of the interface stretching from Kirkenes to Narva. This integration was on display in September 2023 as the *Northern Coasts* naval exercise led by Germany brought 30 combat ships to perform an amphibious operation on the Latvian coast.³⁵ In contrast with this enhanced connectivity, the Russian groupings remain disconnected not only because of the isolated position of the Kaliningrad region, but also because of poor connections with the forces on the Kola Peninsula, and the planned reconstruction of the Leningrad military district will not help much with overcoming this fragmentation.

32. L. Kayali, “The Baltic Sea is NATO’s Lake Now”, *Politico.eu*, July 13, 2023, available at: www.politico.eu.

33. A. Staalsen, “Russia’s Arctic Brigade in Alakurtti is Counting Its Many Dead”, *Barents Observer*, February 22, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

34. M. Cancian, S. Monaghan & D. Fata, “Strengthening Baltic Security: Next Steps For NATO”, *CSIS Report*, June 27, 2023, available at: www.csis.org.

35. K. Osborn, “Marine Corps Operates Wargames in Latvia-Baltic Sea Within Attack Range of Russia”, *Warrior Maven*, September 20, 2023, available at: <https://warriormaven.com/>.

Rearranged Military Ties with Belarus

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has also led to a significant deterioration in the security situation of Belarus, which has lost essential features of its sovereignty and become a party to the war, even without partaking in the invasion with its armed forces. This transformation has important consequences for the Baltic theatre, illustrated by President Alexander Lukashenko's loud discourse on protecting the borders of the Union State from the threat of NATO attack.³⁶ While this exaggerated rhetoric gives him a useful reason for refusing Russian demands regarding sending the three combat-capable brigades of the Belarusian army into the kinetic war, it also raises tensions along the borders with Poland and Lithuania to a dangerous level.³⁷

Russian and Belarusian armed forces have exercised interoperability regularly, including at the *Zapad-2021* exercises, but currently it is primarily the Russian Aerospace Forces that use airbases in Belarus for performing combat missions toward Ukraine, while the ground forces keep consuming large volumes of ammunition from the Belarussian arsenals.³⁸ Lukashenko follows the course of battles in Ukraine with much concern, assuming that Putin would have no ready forces to dispatch to Belarus should public unrest, which both dictators are inclined to see as a "hybrid" operation by NATO, explode again, as in summer 2020.³⁹ The cancellation of the *Zapad-2023* strategic exercise, confirmed by Shoigu a fortnight prior to the scheduled start in September 2023, confirmed this lack of capacity.⁴⁰ Lukashenko's worries translate into a desire to provide a base for Russian nuclear warheads, which are perceived as a security guarantee against any NATO encroachments. Putin granted consent to this persistent invitation, confident that

36. G. Ioffe, "The NATO Summit, Western Sanctions and Belarus' Capacity to Act Independently", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 19, 2023, available at: <https://jamestown.org>.

37. A. Shraibman, "Self-fulfilling Prophecy: Could Lukashenko Accidentally Manifest an Attack on Belarus?" *Carnegie Politika*, July 18, 2023, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

38. "131,535 Tons of Ammunition Were Transported by Rail From Belarus to Russia", *Railway Supply*, June 10, 2023, available at: <https://www.railway.supply/>.

39. K. Glod & J. Judah, "In the Darkness: Lukashenko Digs in", *FPRI Article*, June 26, 2023, available at: www.fpri.org.

40. V. Muhin, "Ucheniya Zapad-2023 zamenili manevrami ODBK" [Zapad-2023 exercises are replaced by CSTO maneuvers], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, August 29, 2023, available at: <https://www.ng.ru/>.

control over the storage facility would remain firmly in Russian hands, even if the Belarusian dictator entertains different ideas.⁴¹

What added a new complication to Belarus's security posture was the arrival of several thousand mercenaries after the failed Wagner Group mutiny on June 23-24, 2023. Lacking organization and heavy weapons, they did not constitute a force capable of launching a new invasion into Ukraine or attacking neighboring NATO member states, but they could have staged dangerous provocations on the borders.⁴² Poland, while worried, is perfectly capable of dealing with this threat, but from Moscow's perspective, expelling this maverick gang to a camp just 25 km away from the Asipovichy base, where the nuclear warheads are supposed to be stored, could not possibly be a sound strategic idea.⁴³ During August 2023, the Wagner base was effectively shut down.⁴⁴ The new quality of Russia's political domination over Belarus resulting from its long war in Ukraine does not necessarily produce a new strength of military alliance, as Moscow's capacity for propping up the fundamentally unstable Lukashenko regime has diminished, while the reluctance in the Belarus army to partake in mismanaged confrontation has increased.

41. D. Taratorin, "Lukashenko hochet mira, no gotovitsya k yadenoi voine" [Lukashenko wants peace, but prepares for nuclear war], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, July 2, 2023, available at: www.ng.ru.

42. E. Braw, "Wagner's Barbarians at the Gates", *CEPA Europe's Edge*, July 5, 2023, available at: <https://cepa.org>.

43. H. Kristensen & M. Korda, "Russian Nuclear Weapons Deployment Plans in Belarus", Federation of American Scientists, June 30, 2023, available at: <https://fas.org>.

44. RFE/RL Belarus Service, "Satellite Images Show Wagner Camp in Belarus Being Dismantled", August 24, 2023, available at: www.rferl.org.

The Repercussions to Come

The full scope of Russia's defeat in the disastrous war and the impact of political crisis this defeat is certain to generate are beyond even approximate evaluations. However, some non-apocalyptic foresights are necessary for various practical political and strategic purposes. It is clear that the huge investments in modernizing the Russian military machine have been wasted and that the degraded economic base will not be able to support investments of similar scale for many years to come.⁴⁵ The question about Moscow's ability to rebuild its military might continue, nevertheless, to occupy many Western analytical minds.⁴⁶ It is in the Baltic theatre, which will continue to serve as a key strategic interface between Russia and NATO, that this question is particularly loaded.

Reversal of Fortunes in Conventional Deterrence

The reconfiguration of the Baltic theatre is so drastic and the shifts in balances of military power are so fundamental that, for policy-planners in Helsinki or Warsaw, they appear temporary and even unnatural—and even more so in Moscow. Concerns about possible Russian counter-measures necessitated by Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO are serious, but to a large degree as misplaced as Shoigu's plans for deploying an army corps in Karelia are unlikely to come true.⁴⁷ Even in the less probable of possible futures, with combat operations "frozen" in approximately the same trenches as currently (which means that Western commitments to support Ukraine for as long as necessary for liberating its territory are unfulfilled), Russia will need to maintain in this pivotal multi-domain theatre several military groupings of such strength that rebuilding its positions of power in the Baltic and Arctic theatres would be quite impossible. In every other scenario, including full withdrawal from all

45. C. Woody, "How Putin spent 20 years rebuilding Russia's military 'and then just simply destroyed it' in Ukraine, according to an expert who watched it happen", *Business Insider*, April 25, 2023, available at: www.businessinsider.com.

46. R. Gramer & Jack Detsch, "Russia is Already Looking Beyond Ukraine", *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2023, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

47. N. & H. Hautalla, "Russia Won't Sit Idly By After Finland and Sweden Join NATO", *War on the Rocks*, March 30, 2023, available at: <https://warontherocks.com>.

occupied Ukrainian territories, the scope of damage inflicted to the Russia armed forces is greater, but the imperative for protecting the south-western direction against the technologically superior Ukrainian army is strong.

One of the few parameters of Russia's force structure in the Baltic theatre that can be established with reasonable certainty is the combat order of the Baltic fleet, to which no major surface combatants or diesel submarines can possibly be added.⁴⁸ The amphibious capabilities will be severely curtailed, even if two ageing *Ropucha*-class landing ships (the third, *Minsk*, was hit by the missile strike on September 13), return from the combat deployment in the Black Sea, because a rehabilitation of the Marine Brigade would be hampered by the shortage of "elite" manpower.⁴⁹ The main strength of the Baltic Fleet will be new missile corvettes of the *Karakurt* (Project 22800) and *Buyan-M* (Project 21631) classes carrying long-range *Kalibr* and anti-ship *Onix* missiles. These ships will be divided between the Kronstadt and Baltiisk naval bases, both vulnerable to hostile action and far separated from each another.

The irreducible vulnerability of the isolated Kaliningrad region will be a major problem for Russian strategic planning in the Baltic theatre.⁵⁰ Russian forces have gained experience in defensive operations holding the so-called "Surovikin line"; nevertheless, the lesson from the mid- and long-distance Ukrainian strikes is that no amount of missile defense systems can turn Kaliningrad into a defensible "fortress".⁵¹ The only way Russia could discourage NATO from executing a full blockade and swift occupation of Kaliningrad is to increase the capability for punishing or preventative missile strikes on major urban centers, including Helsinki and Warsaw. As NATO moves toward a strategy of denying Russia any opportunity for conducting an offensive operation aimed at any of the Baltic states, Moscow is compelled to move in the opposite direction—toward "deterrence by punishment".⁵² The credibility of this posture is boosted by the conclusions in the West drawn from the execution of

48. A. Timohin, "Novye korabli v post-sanktsionnuyu eru. Chto my smozhem stroit posle SVO?" [New ships in the post-sanctions era. What can we build after SMO?], *Voennoe obozrenie*, January 4, 2023, available at: <https://topwar.ru>.

49. N. Childs, "Ukraine darkens Russia's naval prospects in the Black Sea", *Military Balance Blog*, IISS, September 29, 2023, available at: www.iiiss.org.

50. S. Wills, "Kaliningrad: Impregnable Fortress or 'Russian Alamo'?", *CNA In-Depth*, May 15, 2023, available at: www.cna.org.

51. M. Rian, "The State of the Ukraine Campaign", *Futura Doctrina*, June 23, 2023, available at: <https://mickryan.substack.com>.

52. Z. Hill, "Blocking the Bear: NATO Forward Defense of the Baltic", *CEPA Europe's Edge*, July 11, 2023, available at: <https://cepa.org>.

indiscriminate missile and drone strikes on Kyiv, Odesa and many other Ukrainian cities, and the indifference in Russian society regarding this cruelty.

Greater Reliance on Nuclear Deterrence

Plain strategic logic dictates that weakness of conventional forces necessitates greater reliance on nuclear capabilities, and the Baltic theatre may see applications of this logic. In recent Russian strategic thinking, the Arctic theatre, commanded by the Northern Fleet, was heavily nuclearized, but the Baltic theatre was essentially nuclear-free. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has rendered this division irrelevant, and deployment of some non-strategic nuclear weapons to the Baltic theatre can be seen by the General Staff as useful, Kaliningrad being the most obvious destination. The nuclear storage facility near the Chkalovsk airbase was renovated in 2018, and the 152nd Guards Rocket Brigade was rearmed with *Iskander-M* tactical missiles the same year, but, despite the claim of Lithuanian Defense Minister Arvydas Anusauskas, there is no hard data on deployment of nuclear warheads.⁵³

Russian nuclear rhetoric and blackmail have reached such intensity from the beginning of the Ukraine war that the problem of restoring the US-Russia framework of strategic arms control and establishing new multilateral formats for non-strategic nuclear arms control will necessarily constitute a key part of the post-war European re-engagement with Russia.⁵⁴ Remarkably, there is also a strong pushback in Moscow's expert community against the irresponsible idea of bringing back the nuclear "fear factor" by delivering a nuclear strike on, for example, Poznan.⁵⁵ These sober arguments may find support not only among the risk-averse political elites but also among

53. H. Kristensen, "Russia Upgrades Nuclear Weapons Storage Site in Kaliningrad", Federation of American Scientists, June 18, 2018, available at: <https://fas.org>. "Defense Minister puzzled by Russia's talk on deployment of nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad", *Delfi.lt*, April 14, 2022, available at: <https://www.delfi.lt>. C. Davis, "US spy planes appear to be monitoring a Russian enclave in Europe, possibly looking for signs of nuclear weapons activity", *Business Insider*, September 28, 2022, available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com>.

54. C. Mills, "Russia's use of nuclear threats during the Ukraine conflict", *Research Briefing*, UK House of Commons Library, June 28, 2023, available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk>.

55. I. Timofeev, "A Preemptive Nuclear Strike? No!", *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 20, 2023, available at: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru>; A. Arbatov, K. Bogdanov & D. Stefanovich, "Yadernaya voyna – plohoe sredstvo resheniya problem" [Nuclear war is a bad means for solving problems], *Kommersant*, June 21, 2023, available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru>.

the top brass, perfectly aware that the Russian army in its present shape cannot possibly engage in combat operations on a nuclear battlefield. Yet, President Putin rejected resolutely and rudely the prospect of reducing Russia's nuclear arsenal, and, while such vulgarity may be a feature of his war-affected personal style of doing business, for every grouping of elites that might find a way to depose him, the proposition of giving up Russia's vast advantage in numbers of non-strategic nuclear warheads would appear singularly unattractive.⁵⁶ To alter this nuclear-centric, even nuclear-worshipping attitude, key European states might find it useful to return in the post-war environment to the question of security guarantees for Russia, though certainly very different in nature and substance from the deliberately exaggerated claims advanced by Putin in December 2021.

56. "Na Zapade ponyali frazu Putina 'hren im' o yadernom oruzhii, schitaet Peskov" [The West understands Putin's phrase 'screw them' about nuclear weapons, Peskov presumes"], *RIA-Novosti*, June 22, 2023, available at: <https://ria.ru>.

Conclusion

Historical examples of Russia implementing radical military reforms after lost wars (the Crimean war of 1853-1856 being the prime example) can hardly illuminate the trajectory of transformation after potential defeat in the disastrous “special military operation”. Besides the yet uncertain scope of this defeat, the problem is that the ongoing organizational and operational changes in the Russian armed forces, driven by the setbacks in the long war, can hardly provide useful directions for further reforms. While the Ukrainian army is moving forward with rearmament to modern weapon systems and reorganization for modern warfare, the Russian army is falling back to the Soviet patterns of a mass army equipped with armaments designed in the pre-information technologies era. The economic and demographic realities of Russia in the 2020s and the decades to come make these resource-consuming patterns unsustainable.

Strategic thinking in a defeat-internalizing Russia could focus on the experiences from the kinetic war and on possible new contestation with Ukraine; yet, it is in the Baltic theatre that Moscow will face the most demanding strategic dilemma. If the post-Putin leadership sticks to the habitual perceptions of NATO as an inherently hostile and allegedly aggressive alliance, it will have to concede that the threats to the Kaliningrad exclave, to the critical transport communications in Karelia toward the Kola Peninsula, and even to St Petersburg are fundamentally unmanageable. With the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, the Baltic theatre is reconfigured so profoundly to Russia’s disadvantage that no amount of effort could make “Fortress Kaliningrad” defensible. Even if a new US administration found it necessary to reduce the trans-Atlantic engagement, the plans currently approved by the north European states, as well as Poland, for increasing defense expenditures and proceeding with acquisitions of modern weapon systems are certain to leave Russia facing NATO dominance in the Baltic airspace and superiority in land power.

This strategic reality will prompt the new Russian leadership, of whatever composition and persuasion, to initiate a de-escalation of tensions in its Nordic-Baltic neighborhood in order to avoid a handicapped arms race. This prospect might appear far detached from the present-day discourse on the existential confrontation between the Russian “state civilization” and the decadent, disunited

and at the same time invariably hostile West. It is useful to reflect, nevertheless, that the military reforms implemented in Russia as recently as 2008-2012 were underpinned by the strategic assumption that a protracted conventional war in Europe was not an option. Russia cannot afford to proceed with militarized confrontation with the re-energized Atlantic Alliance, and its ability to recover from defeat in the war of Putin's choice depends directly on returning to cooperative formats—and first of all in the Baltic region, which will then no longer be perceived as a strategic theatre.



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