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## Can Volunteer Forces Deter Great Power War? Evidence from the Baltics

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# **Can Volunteer Forces Deter Great Power War? Evidence from the Baltics**

## **Abstract**

Deterrence theory typically focuses on states' armed forces and other tools of coercion. However, what about the resolve, resilience, and willingness of ordinary civilians who voluntarily organize and arm themselves as reservist militias to defend their homeland? Can well-armed volunteers in smaller states deter larger powers? We examine the case of the Baltic States and Russia, one of the central fault lines of global politics. Questioning the commitment of NATO to their collective security, the governments of the Baltic States have begun to actively arm, organize, recruit, and train thousands of volunteer reservists to defend their homelands from an asymmetric attack, conventional or otherwise. Based on fieldwork in the region, we find that informal volunteer forces and formal civilian militias can influence the calculus of more powerful adversaries to produce a deterrent effect.

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## Introduction

This article starts from a central premise that may sound obvious: Small countries cannot compete militarily with larger powers.<sup>1</sup> The common maxim going back to the Melian Dialogue states, “the strong do what they can, [and] the weak suffer what they must.” Yet, is this truly the case? Going back to Roman times, smaller powers have armed their populations and trained them in the art of small wars to both defend their borders and deter attacks from larger powers. In the annals of asymmetric warfare there are ample cases of smaller militias militarily outlasting and even defeating their larger state counterparts: In Vietnam, Afghanistan, and throughout Latin America.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is not clear if these forces help deter. Can the presence of an armed populace, trained in small unit tactics, and ready to fight an asymmetric war in the event of an attack hold deterrent value? Put another way can a large volunteer force, even if it has no chance of defeating a more powerful military, increase the perceived costs enough to deter to stronger power from invading in the first place?

We examine the deterrent value of the Baltic States’ volunteers, which are reserve units of volunteers modeled after their Scandinavian counterparts.<sup>3</sup> The aim of these forces is to deter Russian aggression, or failing that, to make a Russian invasion or limited land grab, like Moscow’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, as expensive as possible and ultimately force Russia to walk away in defeat as it did in Afghanistan. In the event of an armed attack, these groups would adopt a total defense approach to homeland security, conduct harassing and spoiler attacks during an initial invasion and then transition into an insurgent force once the standing military has been defeated or dissolved back into the population.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, it took a whole of society approach to arm and equip thousands of ordinary citizens, training them in small-unit tactics, the handling of explosives, and carrying out acts of subversion or diversionary tactics.<sup>5</sup> Given the Baltics’ small size, this means working together, even as they prepare to fight alone.<sup>6</sup>

While experts have debated the deterrent effect of NATO’s Operation Atlantic Resolve and its Enhanced Forward Presence battalions that rotate to the Baltics and Poland, they pay less attention to the deterrent value of the Baltics’ volunteer battalions. This article aims to address this shortfall,

finding that Baltic volunteer forces do appear to have a deterrent effect on Russia.

This article proceeds as follows: First, we detail the logic of deterrence in the context of volunteer forces. We then provide a brief overview of the history of such volunteer brigades in the Baltics, discussing their application and assessing their deterrent effect, as well as Russian strategic options. We conclude with theoretical implications for contemporary military operations and future deterrence in asymmetric warfare.

## Deterrence Theory, Hybrid War, and Volunteers

The present situation in the Baltic region is motivated as much by historical animosity as it is by current geopolitical realities. A common belief is that Russia, as a country (at the time, the Soviet Union) that controlled them for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, poses an existential threat to their territory. The Baltics want to avoid the same mistakes they made after World War II, when, with the exception of small bands of armed partisans, they did not resist the Soviets, which led to their decades-long subjugation under Moscow's rule.<sup>7</sup> Baltic officials are also skeptical of the assurance value of NATO, given their status as a buffer between Russia and NATO. A popular phrase in the Baltics is, "If you're not behind the table, you're on the menu."<sup>8</sup>

Yet, the most likely threat to their security is not an armed invasion by Russian forces, whereby Moscow sends in a column of mechanized infantry across the border. The more likely threat is one of Russia employing indirect hybrid means to unsettle these countries' political regimes, stir up ethnic minorities, or redraw sovereign borders similar to what occurred in Crimea or in Ukraine's east.<sup>9</sup> While there is no agreed up definition for hybrid warfare, it entails a "tailored mix of conventional, irregular, terrorism and criminal means or activities in the operational battlespace" that is "aimed at achieving a political purpose."<sup>10</sup> Russia will look to deploy its soft power in addition to its hard power, a strategy sometimes referred to as new, or "next generation warfare."<sup>11</sup> This form of warfare, Adamsky notes, "presumes the use of force, but it is, primarily, a strategy of influence, not of brute force."<sup>12</sup>

Radin divides hybrid warfare into three actions: Nonviolent subversion, covert violent actions, and conventional warfare supported by subversion.<sup>13</sup> The first two of these would not trigger Article 5 of NATO by itself, thereby requiring a collective response from the alliance. They purposefully fall below the threshold of an act of war, informing Russia's future way of warfare."<sup>14</sup> This includes protecting the rights of its compatriots abroad, of which there are many throughout the Baltic States. The questions this article asks: Are volunteer forces an effective enough deterrent? If so, how and under what conditions?

Deterrence is a strategy states employ to exert pressure to prevent an opponent from carrying out some action. By its definition, deterrence is force held in reserve.<sup>15</sup> Conventional deterrence theory focuses on several factors, from threat perceptions, to decision-cycles, to the intentions of one's adversaries.<sup>16</sup> It recognizes that a state must signal a perceived commitment to the opponent, and presupposes that an opponent possesses the political will to act or will resource the means to fight. Any discussion of deterrence is premised on the conventional power to hurt such that any offensive action will incur certain costs for the initiator.<sup>17</sup> "[W]hen there is mutual fear," as Thucydides noted, "men think twice before they make aggressions upon one another."<sup>18</sup>

In the context of the Baltics, however, the threat is one-sided and asymmetric. Russia can hurt them but not vice versa. The strategic logic of deterrence in this context is to deny the enemy battlefield success—to create the perception, that should Russia invade, the population will not sit back idly and watch, but instead they will take up arms in a long and bloody fight.<sup>19</sup> As some scholars note, this is how "big nations lose small wars."<sup>20</sup> An occupation would look more like Moscow's experience in Afghanistan in the 1980s than its experience with the Baltics during the Cold War.<sup>21</sup>

Drawing from recent fieldwork in the Baltic States and Ukraine, we cannot definitively conclude that the presence of volunteer brigades influences the calculus of larger opponents, but we can surmise the conditions under which they are wielded most effectively. Put simply, we argue that militia-type units are less effective when it comes to deterring indirect hybrid forms of warfare across other domains and may perversely even make

such uses of force more likely due to a substitution effect. In addition, while such reserve forces can signal resolve and thus deter a larger opponent from an attack, the stakes must be high and the forces sufficiently armed, sufficiently trained, and large enough to make the signal credible.<sup>22</sup> While deterrence is being reassessed in the context of other domains such as cyber and information operations, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the deterrent effect of volunteer self-defense forces and opponents' decisions to declare war or use force.

## Volunteer Reserves and Deterrence Theory

The literature tends to focus on deterrence as a behavioral alteration to avoid some future punishment.<sup>23</sup> Deterrence, Schelling noted, “rests today on the threat of pain and extinction, not just on the threat of military defeat.”<sup>24</sup> The central logic of holding a strategic reserve of volunteer forces is to provide states the ability to deny an enemy battlefield gains at the operational and tactical level. There are parallels to deterrence theory in cyber space, where the strategy is also one of denial and the domain perceived to be offense-dominant. “By chewing up the attacker’s resources and time,” Nye writes, “a potential target disrupts the cost-benefit model that creates an incentive for attack.”<sup>25</sup>

Effective deterrence relies broadly on three components: Capability, resolve, and signaling.<sup>26</sup> A state must possess some material capability, or “power to hurt.”<sup>27</sup> There is a cost with administering any capability, so the target as being willing to incur the cost of the action must view the deterring state.<sup>28</sup> Deterrence also depends on a country’s credibility to follow through on the threat to inflict harm on an opponent. An actor’s reputation for resolve determines its credibility.<sup>29</sup> Credibility is also a function of the stakes involved. For the Baltics, given their size, any invasion or land grab by a larger power would constitute an existential crisis.

A third component of effective deterrence is signaling. Deterrence is in the eye of the adversary. A credible threat must be communicated to and received by the intended target. Because deterrence is about manipulating another actor’s cost-benefit analysis and behavior, it requires that an opponent be sufficiently motivated not to take an action, kinetic or

otherwise, it otherwise would have, for fear of incurring casualties or fighting a sustained war.

With hybrid warfare, such cost-benefit calculations become more complicated. New domains are expanding traditional definitions of what constitutes a battlespace.<sup>30</sup> While the barriers of entry in this new space are lower, it remains unclear if smaller states hold comparative advantages and likewise whether states are capable of deterrence in this space.

Deterrence hinges on what types of attacks a state seeks to prevent. In the case of the Baltics, the aim is to prevent their countries from being carved up by military force, similar to Ukraine, yet they also seek to deter limited attacks, threats, land grabs, provocations, applications of Russian soft power, and other violations of their sovereignty. There are parallels to the literature on cyber deterrence, as Nye notes, insofar as the goal is not only to deter a “cyber Pearl Harbor” but also the countless attacks that occur daily from non-state or proxy actors.<sup>31</sup>

## How Weaker States Deter Ones That are More Powerful

Although a nation may be weaker militarily, it can still win because of an asymmetry when it comes to resolve. There are many recent examples of more powerful nations losing to weaker ones. The Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan in February 1989 after nine years of war. The United States left Vietnam in January 1973 after nearly a decade of war. Finally, the United States was on the verge of exiting Iraq in 2007 prior to President Bush committing to the surge. Andrew Mack argues that big nations lose small wars due to the asymmetry of the conflict, which favors the insurgent. Since its survival is at stake, it is a total war for the weaker state; thus, its resolve to continue fighting, no matter the costs, is extremely high. By contrast, for the invading nation, the war does not pose a direct, existential threat, so it is a much more limited conflict; if the costs are high enough, it may tire and leave. Cassidy points to the paradox of great power conflict with asymmetric actors and finds that stronger states lose because they embrace a “big war paradigm.”<sup>32</sup>

Others argue that relative power does not predict relative interest. What matters, according to Arreguín-Toft, is the strategic interaction of the two opposing sides.<sup>33</sup> Both theories agree that time should favor the weaker side. Admittedly, these theories tend to explain losses in expeditionary

counterinsurgencies, but even if a conflict were to start as an interstate one between conventional forces, it becomes an intrastate conflict between insurgents and counterinsurgents after the initial victory. The United States experienced this situation in Iraq in 2003.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the higher stakes for the smaller power, however, can the presence of volunteer forces deter? There is some historical evidence of civilian defense units held in reserve used for deterrence purposes. Stephen Halbrook argues that it was Swiss determination to defend itself by raising an armed force of volunteers that maintained its armed neutrality during World War II, allowing it to ward off Germany's armies from invading.<sup>35</sup> Finland's reserve force of some 350,000 personnel, all focused on territorial defense, deterred a land invasion by the Soviets for half a century across their shared 1,200-kilometer border.<sup>36</sup>

More recently, Iran has adopted what policy analyst Michael Connell calls a "deterrence-based model of attrition warfare that raises an opponent's risks and costs, rather than reducing its own."<sup>37</sup> Learning from the United States' struggles in Iraq and Israel's struggles against Hezbollah in 2006, and realizing it has "little chance of winning a force-on-force conflict" with the United States, Tehran adopted a doctrine that "play[s] to Iran's strengths, including geography, strategic depth, and public willingness to accept casualties."<sup>38</sup> Its mosaic defense relies on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its paramilitary volunteer force, the Basij, to conduct an insurgency against any invader. In other words, the weaker nation need not convince the stronger power that it would win a war, all it must do is communicate that the war would be too costly in the long run, thus, deterring the stronger power from invading in the first place.<sup>39</sup>

## The Baltics Case Study

It is therefore reasonable to believe that the findings from this literature would apply to a Russian invasion of the Baltics. Even if Russian leaders are ignorant of this literature, it is difficult to imagine that they will forget their own experience in Afghanistan or the United States' recent experience in Iraq. Given their flat topography and lack of strategic depth, however, the Baltic States are especially vulnerable to a conventional land attack. Russian anti-aircraft missiles cover their airspace; they share a long and vulnerable border with Russia's ally, Belarus, to the southeast, and a



border with Kaliningrad, Russia's heavily armed exclave, to the west.<sup>40</sup> Recent provocations by Russian forces have occurred by land, sea, and air. Yet, a growing concern is that Russia will apply unconventional, or hybrid, means of warfare against the Baltic States: An oft-cited scenario is that Russian operatives will seek to stir up popular unrest among their Russian-speaking populations, as it has in Ukraine's Donbas. Another fear is a sophisticated cyberattack, like the one that crippled Estonia's government in 2007.

Hence, Baltic leaders agree on the need to be vigilant—security forces in Estonia and Latvia are trained to shoot Russian “little green men”—as well as arm a large reservist component of their population.<sup>41</sup> There is a long history of armed volunteerism in the region. During the waning years of World War I, eight regiments of roughly 30,000 Latvian volunteers and ex-soldiers, the so-called Latvian Riflemen, took up arms to expel their German occupiers and lent support to the Red Army.<sup>42</sup> These forces were not motivated by pro-Bolshevik or Marxist sympathies but by Latvian ethnic nationalism. What mattered was that the Bolsheviks promised them peace and not to annex the Baltics. The Riflemen fought admirably, even earning a spot as Lenin's Praetorian Guard, before the movement would later splinter between factions that were pro-Russian and anti-Russian. The bulk of the Riflemen returned home from Russia disillusioned by the Soviet experiment, feelings that would linger and define subsequent generations of Latvian patriotism.<sup>43</sup>

During and after World War II, the Forest Brothers were a band of some 20,000-plus Baltic partisans who waged a guerrilla war against the Soviet occupiers.<sup>44</sup> These militias took on a mythological quality in Estonian folklore. As resistance fighters, they would recede into the woods, and then engage in hit-and-run tactics against a stronger enemy. Tired from the fighting of World War II, and after government purges that sent thousands of capable fighters to gulags, ultimately the rest of the Baltic population lacked the capability and/or the resolve to mount any significant resistance to their Russian occupiers. Many citizens and elected officials in the Baltic States worry about a repeat of this era of occupation today. While most of the world believes that World War II ended in 1945, many Baltic citizens view the end of the war as 1991, when they finally won independence from the Soviet Union.<sup>45</sup>

A common refrain heard in the Baltics is, “We failed to fight them then, so we must be prepared to fight them now.” The spirit of this grassroots resistance, according to Baltic defense officials, aims to increase the population’s resilience, strengthening the people’s sense of civic duty, and presenting a united front across the Baltics. Put otherwise, to mobilize their populations, the Baltic States are investing in hardware (arms, training) and software (education, patriotism).

### Capabilities: Military Hardware

While members of NATO, the Baltic States fear that the organization might not come to their defense should Russia decide to invade.<sup>46</sup> Even though NATO has deployed four multinational battalions to the Baltic States and Poland as a tripwire to deter a limited Russian incursion, in a 2016 war-gaming exercise, RAND found that Russian forces could seize any of the three Baltic capitals within 36-60 hours.<sup>47</sup> Much like the 2014 operation in Crimea, locals fear any attack would be a *fait accompli*: Russia could occupy any of the Baltic States before NATO could reinforce.<sup>48</sup> As opposed to defending the sovereign territory of a nation, it would instead require an invasion to retake occupied territory, and it is far from clear that NATO would go to war with a nuclear-armed state to retake the territory.

Competing directly against the Russians is a daunting task. Russia’s military expenditure is over 35 times the military expenditure of all three Baltic States combined, as shown in table 1. Thus, even doubling the percent of GDP allocated to military expenditures would have only a minor effect on this disparity in military capability. Moreover, with a combined population of about 6.2 million, the Baltic States are miniscule compared to Russia. Their ability to project power is also limited, given that their combined armed forces comprise just 22,000 troops (not including reservists), 450 artillery pieces, no tanks, and virtually no air force.<sup>49</sup> By comparison, Russia boasts some 845,000 troops, with 15,000 tanks, 27,000 armored fighting vehicles, 6,000 artillery pieces, 3,000 aircraft, and 973 helicopters.<sup>50</sup>

**Table 1: 2017 Military Expenditures**

Country/ Alliance	GDP (\$Millions)	Military Expenditure (Millions \$)	Military Expenditure %GDP	Military Expenditure as % RU
NATO	\$38,195,890	\$900,319	2.3%	1,357%
United States	\$19,390,604	\$609,758	3.1%	919%
Russia	\$1,577,524	\$66,335	4.3%	N/A
Lithuania	\$47,168	\$811	1.7%	1.22%
Latvia	\$30,264	\$513	1.7%	0.77%
Estonia	\$25,291	\$536	3.1%	0.81%

Source: Data comes from The World Bank and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.<sup>51</sup>

Weaker states must demonstrate the capability to either inflict considerable harm against Russia to effectively deter or be willing to fight a sustained insurgency. Table 1 helps illustrate the motivation for the Baltic States' entry into NATO. Without significant outside support, it would be extremely difficult, and likely impossible, for any of Russia's eastern neighbors to defeat Russia in a conventional fight.

### Strategies for Weaker Powers

So how can smaller nations hope to deter a larger adversary? For Baltic officials, NATO remains inherently unreliable because any member's security is dependent on other members coming to its defense. Beyond collective action issues, there are deep philosophical and political divisions among members over defense priorities. The Baltics must therefore hedge, investing in both an external and internal balancing strategies. However, a large-standing military is expensive to maintain. By one estimate, the average cost (direct and indirect) of a NATO soldier is \$300,000.<sup>52</sup> While this estimate may be high, even at a cost of \$150,000 per soldier, a battalion of 500 soldiers would cost \$75 million, or over ten percent of the military budget of any Baltic State. Thus, significant growth to a large standing Army is not feasible.

### Scenarios

Baltic officials put forth three scenarios of a conventional ground invasion by Russia: First, Russian forces could drive into one of their capitals, utilizing speed, stealth, and surprise to seize territory before NATO can

respond. Second, Russia might seek to use conventional or proxy forces to seize a city like Narva (a city along the Estonia-Russia border heavily populated with Russians). Third, Russia may look to its military to create land bridge linking Belarus to Kaliningrad across the strategically critical Suwalki Gap.<sup>53</sup>

Russia's recent military investments only exacerbate Baltic concerns. In October 2018, satellite imagery showed Russian forces upgrading four of their military installations in Kaliningrad, an exclave 300 miles west of Russia's mainland.<sup>54</sup> Earlier in the year, aerial images indicated that the Russians were modernizing a nuclear storage bunker there as well. They showed the construction of 40 new bunkers, which would boost the military storage capacity at Moscow's second largest Baltic Sea port.

Satellites have also shown advanced upgrades of Chernyakhovsk (in Kaliningrad), which houses Russia's 152<sup>nd</sup> Missile Brigade. A U.S. defense official told CNN it was "the biggest move we've seen" when it comes to Russian militarization of the Baltic region. Establishing a land bridge, replete with modern weaponry (anti-ship missiles, radar systems, surface-to-air missiles) there would help Russia establish "anti-access/area-denial" (A2/AD) capabilities, reducing NATO's ability to maneuver.<sup>55</sup> James Stavridis, a retired U.S. Navy admiral, notes that Kaliningrad "functions as a sort of forward operating base behind NATO's front lines."

Russia's use of hybrid warfare is perhaps the most likely type of force and most difficult to deter.<sup>56</sup> This could include instigating a separatist revolt, sending "little green men into Narva," or in Latgale, the eastern region of Latvia, organizing acts of sabotage, carrying out cyberattacks, engaging in disinformation campaigns targeting Russian speakers in the region, or a combination of any of these.<sup>57</sup> The attraction of this type of attack is it provides Russia with plausible deniability, is cost-effective, and presumably would not trigger NATO's Article 5.

## The Baltic Response

To deter the scenarios outlined above, the Baltic States are civilian volunteers are being recruited, trained, and armed to defend their homelands in the event of a Russian attack like Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea. As discussed, deterrence is difficult to prove because it requires

on circumstantial evidence and the absence of some event or behavior. To determine its effectiveness, the threat of future pain or costs must be credible, and that the target changed its behavior because of such calculus, and that absent the specified act of deterrence, an attack would have occurred. One way to measure that is to examine how an opponent structures and trains its forces—if the presence of volunteers is altering one’s military strategy, a target will presumably rehearse for such conditions. Second, deterrence could have difficult-to-detect substitution effects. That is, effective deterrence may not lead to war’s absence but may introduce alternative forms of warfare.

### *Estonia*

Estonia espouses a total defense approach that emphasizes readiness and resilience, encompassing all elements of society, government, and private sector.<sup>58</sup> A state of fewer than 1.5 million inhabitants, many of them well educated and tech-savvy, Estonia is remarkably advanced in its cyber-deterrence capabilities.<sup>59</sup> Yet, Estonia remains arguably vulnerable to Russian information operations, despite its Russian speakers being better integrated than those in Latvia. Even still, Estonia has taken measures to reduce Russian influence. In September 2015, it launched ETV+, its first state-sponsored all-Russian language TV channel.<sup>60</sup>

Estonia’s standing army numbers only 6,400, half of whom are professional soldiers and the other half conscripts, but a 26,000-strong Estonian Defense League (EDL) and 60,000 reservists reinforce it.<sup>61</sup> At the heart of the EDL’s military focus is this question of expeditionary versus territorial defense.<sup>62</sup> With an annual budget of \$40 million, the League sponsors 24-hour competitions that test skills, such as constructing improvised explosive devices to employ against an occupying Army. The Defense League encourages its members to stockpile weapons at home as a further deterrent.<sup>63</sup>

Every village in this ex-Soviet country with a population of 1.3 million fields active EDL members, who participate in a minimum of 48 hours of drill practice annually. They are trained in explosives, to carry out mobilization and readiness exercises, learn the arts of subversion and diversionary acts, and schooled on how to respond to little green men, in the event of a cross-border incursion.<sup>64</sup> Citizens are also encouraged to

horde canned goods, warm clothes, and boots, should there be a long occupation.<sup>65</sup>

### *Lithuania*

Lithuania has codified its philosophy of civil resistance to mobilize its people to take up arms after an attack, emphasizing counter-propaganda via its use of offensive means to deter Russian information operations, and credibly signaling its willingness to fight.<sup>66</sup> It recently sought to bolster its territorial defense by reintroducing conscription. The idea is to both deter Russian aggression and provide an early defense effort until NATO can come to Lithuania's rescue. After Russia's military buildup in Kaliningrad in 2016-2017, Lithuania also announced it would build an 80-mile border fence.<sup>67</sup>

Lithuania has taken a slightly different approach from Estonia, one inspired more by Scandinavia. A National Defense Volunteer Force of 4,900, consisting of 4,200 "high-readiness part-time volunteer reserve soldiers" and 700 professional soldiers, and an 8,000-strong Riflemen's Union, supports its regular army, which totals 8,100 soldiers.<sup>68</sup> Volunteer forces have also supported their Ukrainian counterparts fighting Russian forces in the Donbas.<sup>69</sup> Lithuanian citizens view World War II as ending in 1991, when the Soviet occupation ended.<sup>70</sup> Lithuania's constitution stipulates that each citizen has the right to resist foreign invasion by force.

To reinforce this concept, Lithuania has published three manuals for its citizenry. The first, *How to Act in Extreme Situations or Instance of War*, was published in 2014 soon after Russia annexed Crimea. It provides instructions on how to conduct civil disobedience against an occupying enemy. In 2015, it published *Prepare to Survive Emergencies and War: A cheerful Take on Serious Recommendations*.<sup>71</sup> In 2016, it published a 75-page manual, *Prepare to Survive Emergencies and War*, to instruct citizens what to do if invaded, providing detailed images of Russian equipment (for intelligence purposes), as well as instructions for administering first aid and surviving in the wild. The government posted the manual online and distributed 30,000 copies in schools and libraries.<sup>72</sup>

## *Latvia*

Latvia aims to make its population more resilient by training in small unit tactics, building stronger patriotism and the will of the people, and seeking greater mobility of forces to deny the enemy freedom of maneuver.

Latvia's standing army totals 5,500 with a national guard organized geographically to defend the land where they normally live, providing it an extra "home field advantage."<sup>73</sup> These forces still only number 8,000, so they offer a much lower deterrent value than the 86,000 reservists and Defense Leaguers in Estonia or Lithuania's entire population. Latvia has also augmented its offensive capabilities—Special Forces and airborne units—to deter Russian aggression.<sup>74</sup>

A key component of Russian military efforts in Latvia is deception, which involve sophisticated information operations (IO) to sow distrust among locals, which includes hundreds of thousands of native Russian speakers, who watch Russian television. The Russian narrative emphasizes that Latvia is a failed state, fascism is on the rise, the state is suppressing Russian speakers here, Riga has no foreign policy independent of NATO's or the EU's, and that Latvia will become a target of NATO. To counter Russian disinformation, as well as to boost Latvian civic nationalism, all the public schools will only use the Latvian language, a strategy that could backfire if it alienates its Russian speakers.<sup>75</sup>

## Is Deterrence Working?

Again, it is impossible to determine conclusively if volunteer forces are working to deter. For these forces to deter, they must be powerful enough, possess the necessary resolve, and the signal is credible.<sup>76</sup> Yet, one measure of effectiveness is to see if the Baltic's investment in militias has caused Moscow to change its behavior. We noted previously that the simple absence of war is insufficient proof of deterrence. Rather it requires evidence of Russian leaders changing their rational cost-benefit analysis, force posture, or doctrine. In addition to evidence supporting a change, we further note evidence of a substitution effect: Namely, that Russia may choose to employ indirect or hybrid means in lieu of conventional tactics.

There are also questions of Russian material capabilities and defense spending priorities. In absolute terms, Moscow is spending less on defense than in previous years.<sup>77</sup> The size of Russia's conventional military is barely one-fifth of what it was during the height of the Cold War, when it was half of government expenditures.<sup>78</sup> Yet Moscow has boosted its military modernization, updating its mechanized weaponry like the T-72 tank, all while paying off its defense sector debts (which have seen an 8 percent decline since 2016).<sup>79</sup> While unlikely such defense expenditures and modernization are directly in response to Baltic volunteer forces, there is evidence Russia feels less secure because of these forces and changing its behavior.

Consider how Russia trains its military. Russia's September 2017 Zapad exercises focused on a "conventional enemy," yet also featured defensive tactical anti-terrorist exercises designed to repel smaller lightly equipped and highly mobile units and "illegal armed groups" from the mythic country of Veshnoriya, from engaging in armed incursions and "penetrating" into Belarusian territory.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite collective action mechanisms put in place by NATO to deter Russian aggression, such as the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) mission, this article focused on indigenous efforts by the Baltic States to deter Russia from carrying out land grabs and other provocative actions, particularly through the development of volunteer forces.<sup>81</sup> We examined the conditions under which such forces can deter larger adversaries, and find that they must be well trained, possess the will to fight, and that the signal is credible and conveyed to a would-be aggressor. These forces are attractive to smaller powers. While the case highlights the dynamics by which a smaller power can deter a stronger adversary from a ground attack, however, an opponent may shift toward hybrid or indirect means of warfare, including cyber or information operations.

In sum, deterrence going forward will not only come from NATO's Article 5 or its EFP battalions. It will come from the popular will of thousands of volunteers to raise the cost of invasion and deny the enemy battlefield success, to avoid an unprovoked land grab like the 2014 annexation of Crimea from taking place in the Baltics. To that end, NATO should allow



the Baltic States to remodel their force structures to provide territorial defense and credible deterrence adequately. The aim of these armed volunteers is to deny the enemy the ability to operate freely, to create the expectation of a long and bloody fight, and to inflict maximum damage on an opponent whose willingness to fight may waver. Given the inherent complexities of proving deterrence, further research is recommended.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of this thesis, see Robert M. Cassidy, *Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=125>.

<sup>2</sup> Ariel I. Arham, "Origins and Persistence of State-Sponsored Militias: Path Dependent Processes in Third World Military Development," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no 4 (2011): 531-556, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.561103>.

<sup>3</sup> Piotr Szymański, "The Baltic States' Territorial Defense Forces in the face of Hybrid Threats," OSW Commentary, March 20, 2015, [https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary\\_165.pdf](https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_165.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Marta Kepe and Jan Osburg, "Total Defense: How the Baltic States are Integrating Citizenry into their Security Strategies," *Small Wars Journal* (December 18, 2018), <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/total-defense-how-the-baltic-states-are-integrating-citizenry-into-their-national-security->.

<sup>5</sup> Kepe and Osburg, "Total Defense."

<sup>6</sup> Kepe and Osburg, "Total Defense."

<sup>7</sup> Juozas Lukša, *Forest Brothers: The Account of an Anti-Soviet Lithuanian Freedom Fighter, 1944-1948* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> From an interview with a senior Estonian defense official in Tallinn, June 2018.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase "hybrid warfare" (*gibridnaya voina*) does not generally appear in Russian doctrine, except to refer to policies of the United States or NATO. Definitions of "hybrid" warfare vary. Frank Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly* no. 52 (2009): 34-36, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/jfqhoffman.pdf>; Andrew Radin, "Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses," (Santa Monica: RAND, 2017); Rod Thornton and Manos Karagiannis, "The Russian Threat to the Baltic States: The Problems of Shaping Local Defense Mechanisms," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29, no. 3, (2016): 331-351, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2016.1200359>.

<sup>10</sup> Russell Glenn, "Thoughts on Hybrid Conflict," *Small Wars Journal*, March 2, 2009, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/188-glenn.pdf>; Peter Mansoor, "Hybrid Warfare in History," in *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, ed. Williamson Murray and Peter Mansoor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> John Lloyd and Daria Litinova, "The Reality of Russian Soft Power," *The American Interest*, last modified March 21, 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/03/21/putins-soft-power/>.

Note hybrid warfare and new generation warfare are related but not the same thing. For an overview, see Ulrich Kuhn, "Preventing Escalation in the Baltics: A NATO Playbook," (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Dmitry Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy* (Paris: French Institute of International Relations: 2015), p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Radin, "Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics."

<sup>14</sup> On new generation warfare, see Lionel Beehner, Liam Collins, Steve Ferenzi, Robert Person, and Aaron Brantly, *Analyzing the Russian Way of War: Evidence from the 2008*

*Conflict with Georgia* (West Point, NY: Modern War Institute, 2018); Phillip Karber and Joshua Thibeault, "Russia's New Generation Warfare," AUSA.org, May 20, 2016, <https://www.ausa.org/articles/russia%E2%80%99s-new-generation-warfare>, accessed January 10, 2019; and Nicholas Fedyk, "Russian 'New Generation' Warfare: Theory, Practice, and Lessons for U.S. Strategists," *Small Wars Journal*, accessed January 10, 2019, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/russian-%E2%80%99Cnew-generation%E2%80%99D-warfare-theory-practice-and-lessons-for-us-strategists-0>.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey William Wright, "Deterrence through Reassurance: Russia in Eastern Europe," *Army War College Review* 3, no. 1 (2017): 1-10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11943>.

<sup>17</sup> Adversaries possess a menu of strategic options from which to choose, with the status quo being one such option (albeit they are motivated to reduce the security dilemma, so the status quo is not their preferred outcome).

<sup>18</sup> Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), book IV, accessed February 9, 2019, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/thucydides/jowett/book4.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Sometimes called a "porcupine strategy" or "poison pill strategy," this strategy ensures that the Russians know that even if they believe they can easily overpower the Baltics' conventional military force, it will be too costly for them to maintain their gains. To that end, these volunteer units could carry an array of weaponry to include anti-tank weapons and MANPADS (man-portable air defense systems).

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (1975): 175-200, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009880>; Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson, "Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization* 63, no. 1 (2009): 67-106, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818309090031>; Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security* 26, no. 1 (2001): 93-128, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228801753212868>.

<sup>21</sup> Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> The adversary must also be a rational yet risk-averse actor.

<sup>23</sup> Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph S. Nye, "Deterrence and Dissuasion in Cyberspace," *International Security* 41, no. 3 (2017), 52, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00266](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00266).

<sup>26</sup> Adm. Harry Harris made this point in, "Address to the Lowy Institute for International Policy," PACOM.mil (December 14, 2016), <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/1029173/address-to-the-lowy-institute-for-international-policy/>, accessed January 9, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*.

<sup>28</sup> These could include the dollar cost associated with building or deploying reserve forces, the opportunity cost or economic impact from sanctions, or the political cost that comes from enacting policies, which negatively impact the population.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010) and Daryl G. Press, "Power, Reputation, and Assessments of Credibility During the Cuban Missile Crisis," in the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, 2001. Resolve is a fuzzy concept to measure, as it hinges on one's reputation and emphasizes the human, cultural, and qualitative elements of war; Ben Connable and Michael McNerney, "The Will to Fight and Fate of Nations," *War on the Rocks*, last modified December 20, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/12/the-will-to-fight-and-the-fate-of-nations/>. An example is the Iraqi Army after the pullout of US forces in 2014, when, despite its mismatched equipment, technologies, and combined arms, were routed by a small band of lightly armed Islamic State fighters who destroyed four of their divisions and seized one-third of the country.

- <sup>30</sup> King Mallory, *New Challenges in Cross Domain Deterrence* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2018).
- <sup>31</sup> Nye, “Deterrence.”
- <sup>32</sup> Robert M. Cassidy, “Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict,” (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, February 2003).
- <sup>33</sup> Arreguin-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars,” 99-100.
- <sup>34</sup> Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars,” 175-200.
- <sup>35</sup> Stephen Halbrook, *Target Switzerland: Swiss Armed Neutrality During World War II* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2003). This theory should be heavily doubted, however, given that militiamen armed mainly with bolt-action rifles and 50 rounds of ammunition might constitute an effective fighting force, much less a deterrent, in an age of mechanized war.
- <sup>36</sup> Phillip Petersen, ed., *Baltic Security Net Assessment* (Washington: The Potomac Foundation and Baltic Defense College, 2018).
- <sup>37</sup> Michael Connell, “Iran’s Military Doctrine,” United States Institute of Peace, n.d., accessed October 28, 2019, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-military-doctrine>.
- <sup>38</sup> Connell, “Iran’s Military Doctrine.”
- <sup>39</sup> Michael Peck, “Russia Could Invade the Baltics with 845,000 Troops (But What Happens Next?),” *National Interest*, January 2, 2018, [https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-could-invade-the-baltics-845000-troops-what-happens-23894?page=2&keepThis=true&TB\\_iframe=true&height=900&width=600&caption=Russia%20Could%20Invade%20the%20Baltics%20with%20845%20000%20Troops%20%28But%20What%20Happens%20Next%3F%29](https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-could-invade-the-baltics-845000-troops-what-happens-23894?page=2&keepThis=true&TB_iframe=true&height=900&width=600&caption=Russia%20Could%20Invade%20the%20Baltics%20with%20845%20000%20Troops%20%28But%20What%20Happens%20Next%3F%29).
- <sup>40</sup> “Lithuania” and “Estonia,” CIA World Factbook, February 5, 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lh.html> and <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lg.html>, both accessed February 10, 2019.
- <sup>41</sup> Radin, *Hybrid Warfare* and Alexander Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- <sup>42</sup> Geoffrey Swain, “The Disillusioning of the Revolution’s Praetorian Guard: The Latvian Riflemen, Summer-Autumn 1918,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 4 (1999): 667-686, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668139998840>.
- <sup>43</sup> Swain, “The Disillusioning of the Revolution’s Praetorian Guard.”
- <sup>44</sup> Lukša, *Forest Brothers*.
- <sup>45</sup> From interviews with Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian citizens and officials, June, 2018.
- <sup>46</sup> From interviews with Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian citizens and officials, June, 2018.
- <sup>47</sup> David A. Shalapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2016).
- <sup>48</sup> Dan Altman, “By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries,” *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2017): 881-891, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx049>.
- <sup>49</sup> Petersen, *Baltic Security Net Assessment*, 41.
- <sup>50</sup> Kris Osborn, “Could NATO Stop a Russian Invasion of the Baltics?” *The National Interest*, July 9, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/could-nato-stop-russian-invasion-baltics-25321>.
- <sup>51</sup> 2017 GDP data from The World Bank, “GDP Ranking,” <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/gdp-ranking>, accessed October 22, 2018. Military expenditure data is based on 2017 data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database,” <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/SIPRI-Milex-data-1949-2017.xlsx>, accessed October 18, 2018. The data for military expenditure as a percent of GDP also comes from SIPRI, so when military expenditure as a percentage of GDP is calculated from the previous two columns, it may not produce the same result shown on the table. Military expenditure as a percent of Russian military expenditure was calculated by the authors.

- <sup>52</sup> From interview with senior U.S. DoD civilian comptroller on June 5, 2018. Another analyst, Jeff Ousley, finds that the Congressional Budget Office estimates that the average cost to maintain an active duty soldier will be \$170,000 for 2017; Jeff Ousley, “New Report Shows Military Personnel Costs Spiraling Out of Control,” Veterans United Network, August 12, 2015, [https://www.veteransunited.com/money/cbo-report-shows-military-personnel-costs-spiraling-out-of-control/?ss\\_rdcsweps=1](https://www.veteransunited.com/money/cbo-report-shows-military-personnel-costs-spiraling-out-of-control/?ss_rdcsweps=1).
- <sup>53</sup> Senior defense officials we spoke to in Vilnius and Riga said this was the least likely scenario.
- <sup>54</sup> Oren Liebermann, Frederik Pleitgen, and Vasco Cotovio, “New Satellite Images Suggest Military Buildup in Russia’s Strategic Baltic Enclave,” CNN, October 17, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/17/europe/russia-kaliningrad-military-buildup-intl/index.html>.
- <sup>55</sup> Liebermann, Pleitgen, and Cotovio, “New Satellite Images Suggest.”
- <sup>56</sup> Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A. Hunzeker, “Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe,” (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2018).
- <sup>57</sup> Andrew Kramer, “Russian General Pitches ‘Information’ Operations as a Form of War,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/world/europe/russia-hybrid-war-gerasimov.html>.
- <sup>58</sup> Szymański, “The Baltic States.”
- <sup>59</sup> Vincent Joubert, “Five Years after Estonia’s Cyber Attacks: Lessons Learned for NATO?,” NATO Research Paper No. 70, 2012, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10366>.
- <sup>60</sup> Kristian Nielsen and Heiko Pääbo, “How Russian Soft Power Fails in Estonia: Or Why the Russophone Minorities Remain Quiescent,” *Journal on Baltic Security* 1, no. 2 (2015): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jobs-2016-0023>
- <sup>61</sup> “Estonia – Army,” *Jane’s World Armies*, July 2, 2018.
- <sup>62</sup> Siddhartha Mahanta, “These Baltic Militias are Ready for War with Russia,” *The Atlantic*, November 26, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2017/11/baltic-anti-russian-militia/545465/>.
- <sup>63</sup> From interview with EDL official in Tallinn, Estonia, June 2018.
- <sup>64</sup> Reuters, “Wary of Russia, Estonian Volunteers Rush to Join Militia,” September 14, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/security-estonia/wary-of-russia-estonian-volunteers-rush-to-join-militia-idUSL5N11G2CR20150914>.
- <sup>65</sup> From interview with EDL official in Tallinn, Estonia in June 2018.
- <sup>66</sup> Kepe and Osburg, “Total Defense.”
- <sup>67</sup> Rick Noack, “Lithuania Fears a Russian Invasion. Now it Wants to Build a Border Fence,” *Washington Post*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/01/17/lithuania-fears-a-russian-invasion-now-it-wants-to-build-a-border-fence/>.
- <sup>68</sup> “Facts and Figures,” Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Lithuania, accessed October 28, 2019 [http://kam.lt/en/human\\_resource\\_policy\\_1062/facts\\_and\\_figures.html](http://kam.lt/en/human_resource_policy_1062/facts_and_figures.html). The core of its army is the Iron Wolf mechanized infantry brigade, consisting of a mix of light infantry and guerrillas trained in small unit tactics and territorial defense.
- <sup>69</sup> From interviews with defense officials in the Baltic States and Ukraine, June 2018.
- <sup>70</sup> From interviews with Lithuanian officials and senior Lithuanian military officers in Vilnius from June 1-2, 2018.
- <sup>71</sup> George East, “Ready for Russia: Lithuanians taught how to resist invasion,” *The Guardian*, December 5, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/05/ready-for-russia-lithuanians-taught-how-to-resist-invasion>.
- <sup>72</sup> Nic Robertson, Antonia Mortensen, Elizabeth Roberts, and Woj Treszczynski, “Lithuania Issues Manual on What to do if Russia Invades,” CNN.com, last modified October 28, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/28/europe/lithuania-war-manual/index.html>.
- <sup>73</sup> “Latvia – Army,” *Jane’s World Armies*, June 26, 2018.
- <sup>74</sup> From an interview with a Latvian defense official in Riga, June 2018.

<sup>75</sup> From an interview with a Latvian defense official in Riga, June 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Evidence we collected is from interviews with senior Baltic defense officials but future research would require more participant observation of these volunteer forces' training to measure their resolve and "will to fight."

<sup>77</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>, accessed January 5, 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Osborn, "Could NATO Stop a Russian Invasion?"

<sup>79</sup> Osborn, "Could NATO Stop a Russian Invasion?"

<sup>80</sup> Mathieu Boulègue, "Five Things to Know about the Zapad-2017 Military Exercise," Chatham House, September 25, 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/five-things-know-about-zapad-2017-military-exercise>.

<sup>81</sup> Kuhn, "Preventing Escalation in the Baltics."