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[Scenarios] **NATO and the Russian Threat: The Case of the Baltic States**

EXPLAINER - NOVEMBER 2025



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In this study, we sought to examine how Russian threats are putting both transatlantic and European solidarity to the test. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union—which stipulate our commitments to common defense—could be invoked if the growing number of Russian provocations along Europe’s borders were to escalate into an open conflict. The question is: Are we willing to die for Narva?

Six months ago, a Russian attack on a NATO member was considered a plausible scenario within a three-to-five-year horizon. However, recent developments confirm the need to address this question in a more operational and political manner. A twofold uncertainty has emerged: first, regarding the nature of the United States’ commitment to Europe—now far removed from the Cold War security paradigm. Second, concerning the unity of Europe’s position, which depends on both public opinion and its decision-making processes.

To inform this debate, we have chosen to focus on an illustrative scenario: a Russian provocation in the Baltic states. This allows us to highlight not only Europe’s dilemma but also Russia’s strategic quandary. An overly aggressive attack could draw Moscow into an escalation for which it is not yet fully prepared, while one that is too timid and swiftly contained would cost Russia in terms of credibility and momentum.

Indeed, as von Moltke reminds us, “No plan survives first contact with the enemy.” But before reaching that point, is it not essential to imagine the diplomatic steps that could dissuade Russia from testing our allied resolve? If we limit ourselves to reactive thinking, we leave to Moscow the choice of weapons, place, and timing. This forward-looking analysis, led by Michel Duclos and informed by his numerous interviews across EU Member States and near the front line, reminds us that it is urgent to think differently—and to reinvest in strategy.

Marie-Pierre de Baillencourt,
Institut Montaigne's Managing Director

Many authoritative voices in Europe and France warn of the risk of a “confrontation” with Russia in the coming years.

This note examines various scenarios for Western responses to a potential Russian attack, working from the hypothesis that it would target the Baltic states—a symbolically significant target given their status as members of both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. Russia’s objective in such a scenario would be to test the strength of these organizations’ common defense mechanisms (it should be noted that Article 5 of the NATO Treaty does not stipulate an automatic commitment but instead leaves Member States free to assess the situation and determine the nature of their contribution to a collective response) and potentially to demonstrate their ineffectiveness.

To this end, we have chosen to highlight the possibility that Russia could effectively test Euro-Atlantic resolve and to describe the possible steps in such a process. The attack would begin with a phase of hybrid warfare aimed at disrupting the Baltic states’ defense capabilities. The Baltic states’ European allies would also be targeted, albeit to a lesser extent, with the objective of weakening their willingness to act. This initial phase could conclude with territorial gains and targeted missile attacks against the Baltic states. At each stage of the crisis, the allies’ response could be hampered by fear of escalation, while Moscow could alternate between nuclear threats and false peace offers. Several scenarios are then envisaged:

Scenario 1 Full implementation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.	Sub-scenario 1/A: Russia halts its aggression, the Baltic states come out weathered, and NATO emerges shaken but strengthened.
	Sub-scenario 1/B: Russia responds by attacking other European territories, and war breaks out in Europe.
Scenario 2 The United States (and some European states) refuse to activate Article 5.	Sub-scenario 2/A: NATO fails, collective security is not upheld, and the Baltic states are abandoned.
	Sub-scenario 2/B: A coalition of willing European states continues the fight.
Scenario 3 The North Atlantic Council makes an equivocal decision, and the United States provides limited assistance to the Baltic states. The Europeans bear the brunt of the war.	

These scenarios are intended to be illustrative and are not predictive in nature. By anticipating Russia's attempts to undermine Western solidarity, they aim to open a debate that will strengthen our strategic position and expand the range of options available to us at a time when the prospect of war has returned to our consciousness and demands to be addressed.

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He is the author of *La Longue Nuit Syrienne* (2019) and *La France dans le bouleversement du monde* (2021) published by Éditions de l'Observatoire, as well as *Diplomatie française* (éditions Alpha, 2024) and has supervised two books, *Le Monde des Nouveaux Autoritaires* (2019) and *Guerre en Ukraine et nouvel ordre du monde* (2023), co-published by Institut Montaigne and Editions de l'Observatoire.

A word of explanation is due to our readers at the outset of this report. In presenting attack scenarios against the Baltic countries, we aim to illustrate possible developments not just in this part of Europe but also across the Continent as a whole. Although some analysts believe that Russian armed aggression is more likely in Central Asia, Moldova, or a Balkan country, the value of these “Baltic scenarios” lies in the fact that they involve an attack against states that are members of both NATO and the European Union. It is hoped that these scenarios—or rather this “scenario tree”—will invite reflection on fundamental questions regarding the defense effort required of Europeans under current circumstances.

Moreover, our study suggests that there would be no assault against the Baltic states without coordinated action by Russia—at a minimum in the form of a “hybrid war” against Europe—if only to intimidate or deter NATO and EU decision-makers. The latest events reinforce this observation: On September 19, three Russian military aircraft violated Estonian airspace (intercepted after 12 minutes by Italian NATO aircraft)¹. In the month prior, Poland, Romania, Sweden and Norway’s airspaces had also seen drone incursions—with several other countries now joining the list.² Going back a few weeks earlier, it turns out that Russian fighter jets had already violated Estonian airspace three or four times since the beginning of 2025, and that there were three similar incidents in Norway during the same period.³

¹ Nicolas Barotte, “« IncurSION dangereuse », soutien de l’Europe, démenti de Moscou... Ce qu’il faut retenir de l’intrusion d’avions russes en Estonie” [*Dangerous incursion, European show of support, Moscow denies... key takeaways from Russian combat aircraft breach of Estonian airspace*], *Le Figaro*, September 20, 2025, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/l-estonie-denonce-une-violation-sans-precedent-de-son-espace-aerien-par-trois-avions-de-combat-russes-20250919>.

² Elsa Conesa, “L’Allemagne et la Belgique touchées à leur tour par des survols de drones suspects” [*Germany and Belgium now targeted by suspected drone overflights*], *Le Monde*, October 3, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/10/03/l-alle-magne-et-la-belgique-touchees-a-leur-tour-par-des-survol-s-de-drones-suspects_6644243_3210.html.

In this context, the possibility that a phase of hybrid warfare might trigger a vertical or even horizontal escalation, whether planned or accidental, cannot be ruled out. These elements constitute the scenario tree put forward in this note, and the ultimate question examined is that of NATO's cohesion in the event of a major crisis.

What timeframe are we looking at, and in the scenarios we envisage, what would be the underlying drivers of a Russian act of aggression? We believe that the 2028–2030 period represents a particularly dangerous horizon for the following reasons:

- 2028 will be Donald Trump's last year in office. At that point, he will either be a lame duck or have plunged his country into a constitutional crisis (if, for example, he decides to run for re-election, in complete violation of the US Constitution).
- 2029 is the year when Russia plans to hold its next Zapad exercise,⁴ which is likely to be similar to the exercise that preceded the invasion of Ukraine.
- 2030 is the year that has been estimated as the target date for the completion of Russia's military modernization (see p. 24).

³ *Libération*, "A Copenhague et Oslo, les aéroports fermés plusieurs heures après des survols lundi de drones non identifiés" [Copenhagen and Oslo Airports shut down for hours following Monday's unidentified drone flights], September 23, 2025, https://www.liberation.fr/international/europe/a-copenhague-et-oslo-les-aeroports-fermes-plusieurs-heures-apres-des-survols-lundi-de-drones-non-identifies-20250923_AFWYCSWU6JFXVNLVWFPU7NTEGY/.

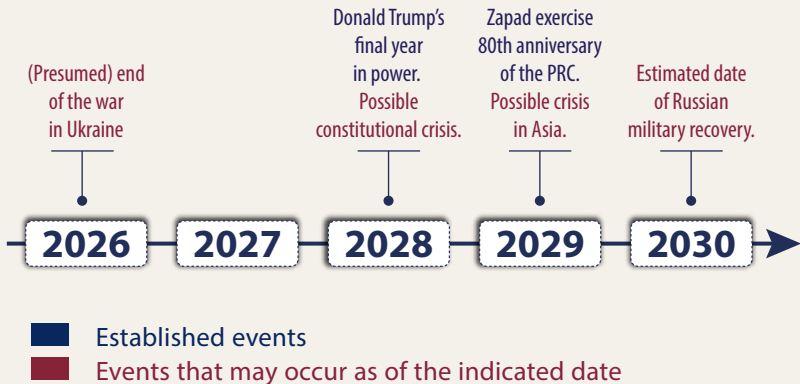
⁴ The Zapad exercises are large-scale military exercises that have been organized by Russia every four years since the Soviet era. Zapad means "West" in Russian. The exercise aims in particular to demonstrate Russian power to its adversaries.

These factors must be correlated with two other pieces of information:

- By the timeline in question, it is unlikely that European military modernization efforts will have resulted in a radical enough shift in the balance of power capable of ensuring reliable deterrence against Russia. Conversely, there may be an incentive for the Kremlin to preempt this military buildup, particularly given Germany's planned investments in its military apparatus.
- This period will also mark the eightieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (in 2029). This raises the question of Xi Jinping's resolve to pursue forceful action against Taiwan by the end of this decade, using means ranging from an enhanced blockade to full military intervention.⁵ A major crisis in Asia would offer an opportunity for the Kremlin to exploit or might even lead to a request from Beijing to Moscow to create a "diversion" in Europe.

⁵ On this point, see Mathieu Duchâtel, *La politique taiwanaise de la Chine à l'horizon 2028* [China's Taiwan Policy: Strategic Outlook to 2028], Insight Note, Institut Montaigne, January 2024, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/publications/scenarios-la-politique-taiwanaise-de-la-chine-lhorizon-2028>; see also François Godement and Pierre Pinhas, *China 2035: The Chances of Success*, Insight Note, Institut Montaigne, January 2025, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/publications/scenarios-china-2035-chances-success>.

Figure #1 • Timeline for a possible Russian attack



In terms of the objectives behind a potential Russian attack, and in addition to the circumstantial reasons mentioned above, the following two key “war aims” could motivate a Russian attack:

1. Territorial seizure, following the precedents of Russian interventions in Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014). From Moscow’s perspective, such a seizure could serve either as a bargaining chip in broader negotiations or confer a decisive territorial advantage in territories that formerly belonged to the Russian (or Soviet) Empire. The Georgian and Ukrainian precedents may have convinced Moscow’s decision-makers that it is difficult for the “amputated” countries to regain stability.
2. Testing Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (see Box 1 below)—that is, attempting to demonstrate that the “coupling” between America and NATO Europe, the very foundation of the Atlantic Alliance, no longer functions. All it would take is for the US to appear “neutral” or to be leaning toward neutrality in a conflict between a European

Ally and Russia for transatlantic solidarity to be discredited, greatly weakening the security of all the European Allies. Notably, a territorial seizure would in this scenario manifest the “decoupling,” and that the two strategic objectives we have identified above could thus converge. Similarly, one cannot rule out scenarios in which an incident escalates into a major crisis or in which Russia’s hubris drives aggressive action.

One particularly important factor is the outcome of the war in Ukraine. The prevailing opinion is that the Russians will not risk getting involved in other conflicts as long as they are tangled up in the Ukrainian conflict. However, no one can predict when the war in Ukraine will end or what the outcome will be. These two unknowns will determine the Russian government’s capacity to turn its attention to other targets, the timing of any new confrontation, and the mindset of Russian decision-makers. On this last point, there is reason to fear that a Russia defeated in Ukraine might seek revenge or that a victorious Russia might feel emboldened to continue its offensive against Europe. An intermediate result could produce a mixture of these two possibilities.

Consistent with our other timing assumptions, we posit an end to the conflict in Ukraine over the course of 2026, anticipating exhaustion on both sides and the prolongation of a kind of “stalemate” despite a predictable escalation in the coming months, particularly in the use of drones, again on both sides. We must stress, however, that this is merely a working hypothesis. As our conclusion will make clear through successive comparison of scenarios with actual developments, we must maintain particular methodological skepticism regarding our timeline assumptions, even more so than other elements of our analysis.

Box 1: Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (1949): Perceptions and Realities

1/ Wording of Article 5⁶

"The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security."

2/ Scope of Article 5

Neither the "triggering of Article 5" nor the measures that may result from it are automatic. Faced with Europeans seeking to achieve the most robust of security guarantees from Washington, the Americans made sure during the treaty negotiations to retain the right to a certain degree of latitude in assessing the situation and determining the appropriate response.

⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Collective defence and Article 5," July 4, 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm.

a/ Triggering: In principle, it is up to the aggrieved state to call on the solidarity of its Allies following an attack. It may choose to respond to an assault on a national level or within the framework of an ad hoc coalition (or, in the case of a European state, within the framework of Article 42(7) of the Treaty of the European Union) or by calling on the solidarity of its Allies. Regardless of the fundamental political considerations outlined above, the Alliance's decision to invoke the collective security clause in Article 5 must logically follow a phase during which the nature of the attack is verified. In particular, it is necessary to ensure that the Allies are indeed dealing with aggressive intent and not an accidental attack.

In the context of the Cold War, any ambiguous situation seemed relatively easy to clarify. This is no longer the case in today's world. In particular, the broad spectrum of "hybrid attacks" opens up a sort of gray area, leaving open questions as to the nature of an attack, its intentionality, its severity, and the type of response it calls for. Until now, the established practice has been that the response to such attacks was a matter of national jurisdiction, which does not preclude coordination in identifying a threat and responding to it.

Following the overflight of its territory by Russian fighter jets on September 19, 2025, Estonia invoked Article 4 of the NATO Treaty, which states that "the Parties will consult whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence, or security of any of the Parties is threatened." Article 4 has been invoked nine times since the creation of the Alliance, but this was the first time for it to be invoked following a direct incursion by Russian forces into the airspace of a member of the Alliance. The use of Article 4 may be considered

a prerequisite for the use of Article 5, though its scope is much more limited, as it concerns only a consultation procedure. It should be noted that so far no use of Article 4 has led to the triggering of Article 5.

b/ Measures triggered by invoking Article 5: In the collective understanding that has largely dominated to date, invoking Article 5 is perceived as triggering full-scale war, an instinctive reflex evoking the motto “one for all and all for one.”

However, this perception in no way corresponds to the actual wording of the article or to the only case in which it has actually been applied. On the first point, it is worth recalling the wording of the treaty: “each [party to the treaty] [...] shall assist the party or parties thus attacked by taking immediately [...] such action as it deems necessary.” According to the text, the members of the Alliance therefore remain the judges of the “actions” they consider necessary to take. When President Trump recently stated that “there are numerous definitions of Article 5,”⁷ causing European leaders to shudder, he was not entirely wrong—in the sense that there may indeed be multiple interpretations of the appropriateness of invoking the collective security clause of the North Atlantic Treaty.

On the second point, Article 5 has only been invoked once, following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Moreover, it was not the “aggrieved party”—that is, the United States—that put forward the appeal but the Europeans, as a means of showing their solidarity. The “actions” decided upon by the Allies two

⁷ Anaëlle Jonah, “Article 5: Donald Trump Reopens Debate on NATO’s Mutual Defense Pledge,” *France 24*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250625-article-five-donald-trump-reopens-debate-nato-mutual-defence-pledge-usa>.

weeks later were Operation Eagle Assist, aimed at patrolling US airspace (from October 2001 to May 2002), and Operation Active Endeavour (2001–2016), involving the deployment of ships in the Mediterranean to monitor possible terrorist activities. In other words, these were limited operations.

3/ The dynamics of perception

Beyond the formal text, Article 5 has hitherto played a fundamental role in European stability for at least two reasons.

First, the creation of NATO led to the establishment of powerful integrated command structures (even though the national armies retained their independence) and the stationing of US bases and troops on European soil. This institutional framework gives rise to the perception that, in the event of aggression and the invocation of Article 5, NATO's response would be overwhelming. The fact that a United States officer serves as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) has reinforced the Alliance's deterrent credibility to date. Interestingly, it was the French who historically championed the need for a strong integrated military command—precisely to compensate for the relative weakness of the wording of Article 5—and proposed locating NATO headquarters in Paris.

The second reason pertains to Russian perceptions. Russia has thus far shown no doubts regarding how NATO would react in the event of an attack. The Russians have until now subscribed to the same “act of faith” as the Allies regarding Article 5. This stems essentially from the presence of significant US forces in Europe and, more generally, the unwavering US commitment to European security (it is worth recalling here the remark by a Russian strategist that “it is not NATO that we fear, it is the US bases in Europe”).

Today's challenge is therefore twofold: With the American commitment seeming less resolute and with hybrid warfare creating a "gray area" in terms of how attacks are characterized, what remains of the deterrent nature of Article 5 in Moscow's eyes? In the most recent series of Russian probes of Europe—incursions by fighter jets and drones, cyberattacks—it is tempting to see Moscow's desire to test the current validity of Article 5 on these two points and thus to "demystify" the foundation of the Atlantic Alliance.

Box 2: Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (consolidated version, as amended by the Treaty of Lisbon)

1/ Wording

"If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States. Commitments and cooperation in this area shall be consistent with commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which, for those States which are members of it, remains the foundation of their collective defence and the forum for its implementation."

2/ Scope

Compared to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the collective defense clause of the Lisbon Treaty is in a sense more stringent: it is automatically triggered by “armed aggression” on the territory of a Member State, and the resulting obligation is unconditional (“aid and assistance by all means”).

In practice, however, its scope is considerably more circumscribed for at least two reasons. The wording of the article itself reminds us that Member States that have adopted a neutrality policy remain bound by it and that NATO Member States continue to give priority to their obligations within that organization. Second, the defense capabilities developed by the EU (including a military headquarters) as part of its “European Security and Defense Policy” (ESDP)⁸ at the end of the 1990s are configured for crisis management operations of a limited character, not for collective defense in the proper sense.

This does not mean, however, that the EU has no role to play in defense. A significant shift has taken place in this regard since the second decade of the 2000s. Initially, this involved a reduction in investment in crisis management operations (such as Operation Concordia in Macedonia in 2003 or Operation Artemis in Congo, also in 2003). Subsequently—driven particularly by the war in Ukraine—the focus has shifted toward other missions that are in some respects more fundamental to “European defense”: the rise of the European Defense Agency, the creation of a European Defense Fund (September 2016), initiatives to facilitate joint arms purchases between Europeans, delivery of

⁸ This became the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon and is an integral part of the European Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

weapons to Ukraine subsidized by the European Peace Facility, created in 2021 within the Commission of a Directorate-General for Defense Industry and Space, etc. In short, it is mainly in the capacity-building dimension of defense policy (and its financing mechanisms) that EU Member States are currently directing their defense efforts.

1 Contextual elements: European Security and the Baltic Strategic Equation

The scenarios we present are set against the backdrop of the current European security configuration on the one hand and the specific strategic equation for the Baltic countries on the other.

1.1. A DANGEROUSLY WEAKENED EUROPEAN SECURITY

The issue of European security is primarily characterized by the combination of two factors:

- a/ The confirmation of a Russian threat that is likely to worsen in the coming years (with the war economy in Russia and the military buildup), despite intrinsic weaknesses.⁹
- b/ New uncertainty regarding the level of US commitment.

It was expected that the US National Strategic Review, originally slated for publication in the fall of 2025, would provide more precise data, but it has been postponed to an unspecified later date. However, everything suggests that we are seeing a fundamental trend—American retrenchment, the pivot to the Indo-Pacific, and cultural distancing from Europe—that extends beyond the Trump administration's policies and is leading the United States to scale back its NATO commitments. More critically, the fundamental question now concerns Washington's political determination to stand alongside Europeans in the face of aggression.

⁹ Michel Duclos and Camille Le Mitouard, *La Russie, une puissance crépusculaire?* [Russia: A Fading Power?], Insight Note, Institut Montaigne, March 2024., <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/publications/scenarios-la-russie-une-puissance-crepusculaire>.

When it comes to the Russian threat, we face something of a paradox: The Russian armed forces are experiencing constant attrition in Ukraine, particularly in terms of human losses; the war is costing Russia heavily, including in economic and social terms; and yet assessments by several specialist agencies and think tanks predict a rapid regeneration of Russian forces at the end of the war: within approximately two years according to the Danish intelligence services,¹⁰ two to three years according to the Norwegian Chief of Defense Staff (CDS),¹¹ and five years according to the British CDS.¹² Other analyses by SIPRI¹³ and Oxford Analytica¹⁴ have even concluded that the Russian armed forces will be growing in strength by 2030.

A 2030 horizon was also mentioned by President Emmanuel Macron in his televised address on March 5,¹⁵ stating that by this date, Russia “still plans to increase its army, with 300,000 additional soldiers, 3,000 tanks, and 300 more fighter jets.” President Putin has indeed set his country the goal of having a force of 1.5 million men by 2030. He has put Russia on a war footing and militarized its society, both of which are intended as long-term measures.

¹⁰ Danish Defence Intelligence Service, *Intelligence Outlook 2024: An Intelligence-Based Assessment of the External Conditions for Danish National Security and Interests*, December 2024, <https://www.fe-ddis.dk/globalassets/fe/dokumenter/2024/intelligenceoutlook.pdf>.

¹¹ Ott Umelas, “Norway Chief of Defense Eirik Kristoffersen Sees Short Window to Boost NATO,” *Bloomberg*, June 3, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-06-03/norway-chief-of-defense-eirik-kristoffersen-sees-short-window-to-boost-nato>.

¹² Ellie Cook, “Putin Needs ‘5 Years’ To Refill Russian Army As Casualties Reach 550K: UK,” *Newsweek*, October 14, 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-casualties-ukraine-five-years-reconstitute-army-admiral-sir-tony-radakin-1928858>.

¹³ Julian Cooper, “Preparing for a Fourth Year of War: Military Spending in Russia’s Budget for 2025,” *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security* no. 2025/04, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2025/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/preparing-fourth-year-war-military-spending-russias-budget-2025>.

¹⁴ Oxford Analytica, “Russia Will Rebuild Its Military by 2030,” *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, May 19, <https://www.oxan.com/insights/russia-will-rebuild-its-military-by-2030/>.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Macron, “Conflict in Ukraine and European Defense” (speech, Paris, March 5, 2025), transcript, *Vie Publique*, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/297608-emmanuel-macron-05032025-conflict-en-ukraine-europe-de-la-defense>.

In his press conference on July 11, General Burkhard, in one of his last appearances as Chief of the French Armed Forces, made the same assessment:¹⁶ “Despite the incredible losses it is suffering, Russia will continue to rearm.” “At this rate,” it will have “established [...] a force that will pose a real threat to our borders, on Europe’s eastern flank, by 2030.” General Burkhard noted in the same speech: “In today’s Russian army, I see no capabilities lacking, from electronic warfare jamming capabilities to ground-to-air defense systems and to artillery systems.” As for Russia’s nuclear arsenal, “it is supported by a robust, tested doctrine and chain of command.”

Building on this dual assessment—Russian threat and American uncertainty—three other contextual factors emerge.

The first is the lack of uniformity in the approach of various European countries to the current challenges of European security. As always, perceptions vary from one country to another depending on the proximity of the threat. However, in many European countries, there is a certain level of confusion within public opinion, influenced by trends such as populism, political polarization, and reluctance to embrace transformative decisions, particularly regarding defense spending. In an unprecedented phenomenon, a kind of convergence is taking place between the “civilizational wing” of Trumpism (see Vice President J. D. Vance’s speech at the Munich Conference in February 2025),¹⁷ which has provided ideological support to European far-right movements, and Russia’s propaganda, disinformation campaigns, and interference operations.

¹⁶ Armée française – Opérations militaires, “Déclaration du chef d’état-major des armées” [Statement by the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces] (press conference, Paris), YouTube video, 54:33, July 11, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1A-Hvj5uTg>.

¹⁷ Le Monde. (2025, 21 février). Behind the words of JD Vance’s historic Munich speech, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2025/02/21/behind-the-words-of-jd-vance-s-historic-munich-speech_6738424_23.html.

Some intelligence experts contend that Russia's most serious threats—setting aside its cyber capabilities—involve operations like orchestrated migrant surges at borders or interference in electoral processes. Here too, we are caught up in current events (the elections in Moldova and the Czech Republic). This type of intervention has the potential to profoundly destabilize democratic societies and even cast doubt on the legitimacy of those in power. With regard to France, debates have acknowledged that it displays some of the polarization and confusion discussed earlier. What is nevertheless striking is that recent years have witnessed broad parliamentary consensus around the importance of increasing defense spending (with the military budget scheduled to double between 2017 and 2030, later accelerated by President Macron to the 2017 to 2027 period). The critical question remains whether this consensus—in parliament and across the country—will survive escalating to substantially higher defense commitments, in particular, the commitment to dedicate 3.5 percent of GDP to defense spending made at the NATO summit in July 2025.¹⁸

The second contextual factor is that Europe appears ill-prepared to face this dual challenge of the Russian threat and uncertainty regarding US security commitments. According to a 2024 RAND Corporation report,¹⁹ a Russian attack on a European NATO member would theoretically trigger reinforcement of the 100,000 US troops already deployed in Europe with a further 200,000 US military personnel, primarily armored units configured for operations in eastern Europe. If the Europeans were forced to provide such a force themselves, they could not muster equivalent numbers;²⁰ more fundamentally, they

¹⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Defence Expenditures and NATO's 5% Commitment," https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49198.htm.

¹⁹ RAND Corporation, *Commission on the National Defense Strategy, 2025*, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/misc/MSA3057-4/RAND_MSA3057-4.pdf.

²⁰ Cooper, *Preparing for a Fourth Year of War*. Military spending in Russia's budget for 2025 [SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security]. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2025/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/preparing-fourth-year-war-military-spending-russias-budget-2025>.

would need to assemble forces from multiple countries under ad hoc command structures. They would also need to compensate for the absence of a number of critical pieces of equipment that only the United States has at its disposal in the European theater, as we shall see below.

The fragmentation of defense industrial capacity across several European states—and the competition this creates—constitute an evident structural weakness. Yet, there is undeniable evidence of significantly heightened awareness of the necessity for European strategic renewal. “We are all French now,” is a phrase heard often from officials in Germany, the UK, and other countries. Numerous think tanks are proposing different programs to correct Europe’s weaknesses.²¹ Particularly noteworthy for France is the series by Nicolas Baverez and Bernard Cazeneuve published by Institut Montaigne, which offers clear-eyed analysis of what must be done.²²

The final factor to keep in mind is Vladimir Putin’s *modus operandi*. Over his quarter century in power, the Russian leader has shown a growing propensity to resort to force—in Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine in 2014 and in Syria and Ukraine in 2022, not to mention Wagner Group operations in Africa and the Middle East. He has a heightened sense of tactical opportunities (“He never passes up the opportunity to seize an opening,” as one of his aides confided to the author of this note). This is a crucial point at a time when the United States’ commitment to Europe is waning. Moreover, Putin—who is obsessed with history—has

²¹ Camille Grand, “Defending Europe with Less America,” policy brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, July 3, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/defending-europe-with-less-america/>; Sidharth Kaushal and Juliana Suess, *The Impact of a Taiwan Strait Crisis on European Defence* (Whitehall Report, Royal United Services Institute, November 20, 2024), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/whitehall-reports/impact-taiwan-strait-crisis-european-defence>; Ben Barry et al., *Defending Europe Without the United States: Costs and Consequences*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2025/05/defending-europe-without-the-united-states-costs-and-consequences/>.

²² Nicolas Baverez and Bernard Cazeneuve, *Rearmer la France* [Rearming France], series, Institut Montaigne, 2025, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/series/rearmer-la-france>.

undergone a kind of radicalization in revisionism since 2021–2022,²³ probably sensing the opportunity offered by the rise of noninterventionism in the United States and the rapid growth of Chinese power. Accelerating the de-Westernization of the world is a powerful driving force behind Vladimir Putin’s policy, as is undoing Russia’s loss of influence in eastern Europe following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

It is sometimes suggested that Russia will eventually want to reduce its dependence on China. This is indeed possible. However, everything suggests that this will not be the case as long as Putin—the driving force behind the Moscow–Beijing rapprochement in recent years—remains in power in the Kremlin. More troublingly, Russian leaders apparently view the domination of Europe or the vassalization of part of Europe as a necessary counterbalance to Russia’s increased dependence on China. What is more striking, however, is the vitriol and contempt these leaders direct toward Europeans, who are treated at best as “warmongers” obstructing a settlement of the Ukrainian conflict.

1.2. THE STRATEGIC EQUATION OF THE BALTIC STATES

To be clear, we use the hypothesis of a Russian attack on the Baltic states for purely illustrative purposes. To borrow theatrical parlance: “the scene could just as well unfold elsewhere.” This is not to say, however, that the security of these countries does not present specific potential vulnerabilities or that the Kremlin may perceive them as such. For years, Russia has subjected the Baltic states to particularly strong hybrid warfare measures, ranging from the displacement of buoys to air incursions in violation of territorial rules and all kinds of other actions. In recent years, Moscow’s discourse delegitimizing the sovereignty of the Baltic

²³ Duclos and Le Mitouard, *La Russie, une puissance crépusculaire ?* <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/publications/scenarios-la-russie-une-puissance-crepusculaire>.

states has been growing. One example is Sergei Lavrov's preface to a Russian book on Lithuania that wholly denies the existence of the Baltic peoples.

In the West, various studies have focused attention on two possible points of application for a Russian attack in the Baltic region (see Appendix 2):

- a/ In the first case, it would be Narva, an Estonian city on the Russian border with a largely Russian-speaking population. The scenario imagined by Carlo Masala in his highly successful popular book *If Russia Wins: A Scenario*,²⁴ is based on the capture of Narva by Russian special forces.
- b/ In the second case, it would be the Suwałki Corridor, a strip of land between Belarus and Kaliningrad where Russia has a right of passage and whose closure would block the only land access point between Poland and Lithuania, i.e., the only land crossing between the Baltic states and their NATO Allies. A political fiction article authored by Benoit d'Abboville and Antoine Bouvier, published in the journal *Commentaire*, envisages a crisis around Suwałki (mainly from a nuclear deterrence perspective).²⁵

To inform our analysis, we propose a much broader range of potential crisis "entry points," as we believe it would be simplistic to limit the risks to just two specific situations (See Appendix 2). It also seems to us that a broader view better accounts for three potential vulnerabilities of the Baltic states.

²⁴ Masala, C. (2025). *If Russia Wins* (O. Ebel & R. Ahmedzai Kemp, Trans.). Atlantic Books. (Original work published 2025), <https://atlantic-books.co.uk/book/if-russia-wins/>.

²⁵ Benoit d'Abboville and Arnaud Bouvier, "Le corridor de Suwałki" [*The Suwałki Corridor*], *Commentaire*, no. 191 (Fall 2025), <https://www.commentaire.fr/le-corridor-de-suwalki/>.

The most obvious of these vulnerabilities relates to the Baltic countries' weak autonomous defense capacity, given their small populations of around 6 million (Estonia, 1.33 million; Latvia, 1.90 million; Lithuania, 2.79 million) and their limited resources, even though their defense budgets are close to 5 percent of their GDP. This weak defense capacity is particularly striking in the domain of air defense. To compensate for this capability deficit—and the lack of strategic depth—the Baltic states must be able to rely on NATO and the presence of NATO partner troops on their soil that can serve as a “tripwire” in the event of an attack on their sovereignty (See Appendix 1).

Box 3: Presence of Baltic and Allied Forces in the Baltic States

Estonia

- Active forces: 4,300
- Reservists: 12,000
- NATO battlegroup in Tapa, led by the United Kingdom
- Contributors: France

Latvia

- Active forces: 6,600
- Reservists: 11,200
- Military service reintroduced in 2023
- NATO Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Ādaži, led by Canada
- Contributors: Albania, Iceland, Italy, Spain, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden

Lithuania

- Active forces: 23,000
- Reservists: 14,000
- eFP in Rukla, led by Germany
- Contributors: Belgium, Luxembourg, Norway, Netherlands, Czech Republic

A second potential vulnerability relates to geography—what is commonly referred to as a lack of strategic depth. It is important to take a nuanced view of this issue, as it cannot be reduced to the small size of the countries concerned. By way of comparison, the smallest of the Baltic countries, Estonia, is larger than Denmark or the Netherlands. What constitutes a lack of strategic depth is the combination of a small population, limited territorial space, and immediate proximity to Russia and Belarus, which creates a sense of geographic vulnerability and relative isolation from the rest of Europe (see the Suwałki problem mentioned above). This real geographical disadvantage of the Baltic countries has been somewhat mitigated since Finland and Sweden joined NATO, as the Baltic Sea now clearly falls under the naval and air dominance of NATO Allies.

The significant impact that the entry of these two particularly “robust” defense players into NATO will have over the coming years—both in terms of NATO’s capabilities and the strategic debate within the Alliance—has yet to be fully appreciated.

The fact remains that in the event of a “Russian breakthrough,” part of the national territory of the countries concerned could be conquered over a relatively short period, and the lost ground could be very difficult to regain. This often leads the security experts we consulted in these countries to adopt a dual attitude: confidence in their countries’ defense capabilities to deal with relatively limited attacks (ability to

contain hybrid attacks, solid preparation for a “little green men” scenario) but also insistence on the need, in the event of an “enemy breakthrough,” to respond very quickly with escalation.

Finally, the issue of Russian-speaking minorities (referred to as “Russian minorities” in Moscow) constitutes a third potential vulnerability. As we shall see in the box below, it is undoubtedly wrong today to consider that the 24 percent of Russian speakers in Estonia or the 35 percent in Latvia constitute a “major problem” or a “threat to national cohesion”—but there is no doubt that pockets of discontent could be enough for the Russian services to stir up protests and create destabilizing incidents. It is not the presence of Russian speakers that constitutes a potential vulnerability for these countries but rather the way in which they could be exploited by Russia’s leaders.

Box 4: The Issue of the Russian-speaking Minorities

In Estonia, the overall figure of 24 percent of Russian speakers in the population covers a variety of situations: Russian citizens (6 percent), Belarusians, people from other former Soviet republics, Estonians whose mother tongue is Russian, and “gray passport” holders (stateless persons, who comprise 12 percent of the population). There are two notable areas with a high concentration of Russian speakers: the capital, Tallinn (38,000 Russian citizens), and the city of Narva, on the border with Russia, where 95 percent of the population is Russian speaking (and watches Russian television channels, despite the official ban). Since 2007, Estonian has been the only language of instruction, and it is therefore likely that the number of Russian speakers who do not also speak Estonian will decline.

A certain frustration among at least some Russian speakers in Estonia has been evident recently, particularly since measures to dismantle Soviet symbols were launched in 2022. However, the large demonstrations following the removal of the “Bronze Soldier” in Tallinn in 2007 (as well as the incidents of 2022, following the removal of the “Narva Tank”) did not result in any casualties. Similarly, it seems that among the populations in question, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, attachment to the Russian language, and even to Russia, has gone hand in hand with increased loyalty to Estonia, with many expressing a desire to “stay in this country.”

In Latvia, 35 percent of the population is Russian-speaking, including a proportion of Ukrainians, who are strongly anti-Russian. Riga, the capital, and Latgale, an economically disadvantaged region, have roughly equal populations of Russian and Latvian speakers. Here, Russian has been excluded from official use for longer than in Estonia, yet in Riga, one only has to walk around the city to see that in shops and cafés, people switch seamlessly from Russian to Latvian. Other signs—the number of mixed marriages, the recruitment into the “National Guard” (a kind of militia that doubles as the official army)—also point to a blurring of the divide. Generational change is likely to strengthen this trend.

That said, the conditions undoubtedly exist for Russia to exploit and even provoke incidents that would allow it to argue that Russian-speaking minorities are being “persecuted.” Can it be said that the Baltic question is not as “identity-laden” for Russia as Ukraine, if one accepts that premise? Historically, this seems to have been the case, even though Riga, for example, was the third-largest city in the Tsarist Empire in the nineteenth century. However, the current rhetoric of the Russian leaders and various indications suggest that, here too, the tide has turned in Moscow in favor of rewriting history.

2 Possible stages of a war

Note to the reader: The following sections describe situations that could occur and are intellectually plausible, but they are not intended to be predictions or self-fulfilling prophecies. They are presented for analytical purposes. We have written them using the indicative to make them easier to follow, but readers are invited to consider them in the conditional mood.

2.1. HYBRID WARFARE IS SET IN MOTION

At the outset of the conflict, the Kremlin faces a strategic dilemma between the following options:

- a/ A low-scale attack aimed at a limited territorial seizure reduces the risk of a strong NATO response, but in the case of the Baltic states, as noted above, it would be more likely met with determined resistance from the targeted population, potentially causing the operation to fail. The Baltic states also have competent intelligence services, making an “out of the blue” operation unlikely.
- b/ Conversely, a full-scale attack would risk a unified response from the Atlantic Alliance, as triggering Article 5 would then be perceived as inevitable. Preparations for a large-scale attack would unavoidably involve deployments quickly detected by NATO’s observation capabilities (unless one assumes a repeat of the errors of judgment made during the invasion of Ukraine, an assumption specialists regard as highly risky).

To resolve this dilemma through an indirect approach, Russia could resort to a multi-phase plan:

a. An initial phase of hybrid attacks destabilizes public opinion and official services

- Various “anti-terrorist exercises” (particularly in Kaliningrad) allow Russia to mobilize discreetly.
- Russia publicly accuses the Baltic states of harboring “Ukrainian extremists” preparing terrorist acts.
- Pro-Russian unrest develops in eastern Latvia, and tensions arise in the Narva area; a few attacks attributed to pro-Russian elements by some and to “anti-Russian terrorists” by others heighten tensions.
- Moscow orchestrates a disinformation campaign about alleged “ethnic cleansing” in Russian-speaking areas of Estonia and Latvia; denouncing the supposed lack of security.
- Alternatively, or in parallel with the above developments, incidents occur in the Suwałki corridor: Russian trains are allegedly obstructed by Ukrainian or Baltic “terrorists” (possibly “with the support of the Baltic governments”).
- In this context, large-scale cyberattacks hit certain critical infrastructure (IT, railways, energy, healthcare, finance).
- On the Western side, certain services detect characteristic “weak signals” (troop rotations, increased activity by Russian forces in the region). They argue that the situation is reminiscent, in a minor way, of the circumstances surrounding the attack on Ukraine in 2022: mobilization disguised as exercises, increased activity, disinformation campaigns, etc. They are also alarmed by the profound disruption caused by cyberattacks.

Concern emerges in discussions among European officials. The alarms raised by the Baltic governments are echoed by some of the other capitals, but no EU body is able to come up with a common line of

action. Within NATO, a “cautious” interpretation prevails, driven by the following factors:

- The level of Russian aggression can be interpreted as effectively increasing but not yet to the point of constituting a clear break with previous periods of comparable tension.
- The attention of Washington’s leaders is focused on a crisis developing around Taiwan (or by other preoccupations such as a round of strikes against Iran or urban tensions within the United States itself).
- Finally, it is considered more appropriate to engage in dialogue with Moscow so as not to risk escalation (a special envoy appointed by NATO and the EU is received unceremoniously in Moscow). The Baltic states are advised to respond locally using their own resources, even though NATO forces stationed in the three countries have been put on alert and offers of support for counter-hybrid-warfare efforts are extended to the Baltic governments.

b. A phase of lightning attacks to occupy strategic points is launched (N+6 to 8 days)

Suddenly, within the space of 48 hours:

- **Narva falls into the hands of Russian special forces:** The Estonians had indeed been prepared to deal with such a situation for some time. They had not, however, anticipated the level of disorganization of their command systems resulting from the Russian action in the first phase described above;
- Russian paratroopers intervene in Daugavpils, the capital of Latgale in Latvia (See Appendix 2), to rescue supposed “Russian-speaking insurgents”; Russian commandos land at certain points along the coast despite Western domination of the Baltic Sea; both groups are either neutralized or at least strongly opposed by local forces.

- Eventually, Russian special forces neutralize command posts and other key infrastructure in the three countries, contributing to the disorganization of the Baltic states' response.
- The Suwałki corridor is partially occupied by Russian forces coming from both Kaliningrad and Belarus, without being completely closed to traffic between Poland and Lithuania; the Russians argue that this is solely to protect their convoys, which have been the target of too many attacks in recent weeks.
- Sabotage, and even targeted attacks, take place in parallel in various NATO countries, affecting certain capabilities that could be mobilized for the defense of the Baltic states; leading the governments affected to focus on the risk of escalation for themselves.

In none of these operations are NATO allied forces stationed in the Baltic countries affected; many media outlets in the West, as in the Global South, emphasize this point. However, on the orders of SACEUR, French, British, German, and other NATO forces on the ground respond and deploy; troops are requested for an initial reinforcement within 24 to 48 hours, through the deployment of the Rapid Reaction Force. In Narva, the area infiltrated by Russia is immediately surrounded by French and British forces.

During these 48 hours, the North Atlantic Council meets almost continuously; in addition to the on-site responses mentioned above, NATO's SACEUR takes precautionary measures in the maritime domain (putting NATO ships in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea on alert) and NATO aircraft fly over the area in a deterrent maneuver—without, however, at this stage receiving orders to fire. The main measure adopted by NATO is to authorize its military commands to begin the force generation process,²⁶ enabling a response should the crisis escalate.

²⁶ *In the military field, force generation refers to the process by which Allies, and even other contributors, provide the personnel and equipment required for a given operation. See North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Troop Contributions," April 3, 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/ru/natohq/topics_50316.htm?selectedLocale=en.*

The question of invoking Article 5 is, of course, on the table. At the same time, Washington has initiated a series of contacts with Moscow that is holding the United States back from taking measures that could precipitate events or even trigger an escalation. The American message within NATO is: "We are not saying no, but let us explore the possibility that this is a misunderstanding that can still be cleared up with Moscow." In his first interview with the American president, Mr. Putin argues that he had to act to protect the interests and lives of Russian speakers and to try to eliminate terrorist bases. He took great care not to target NATO contingents, despite the extraordinary difficulty of the exercise posed by the intertwining of Baltic forces with contingents from other NATO Allies. He warns against "aggressive measures" taken by NATO, such as those concerning the process for generating mobilizable forces.

President Putin stresses that invoking Article 5 would force him to activate a genuine plan of attack against the Baltic states, whereas a peaceful solution in the interests of all could still be reached through discussion. He does not, however, deny the gravity of the situation ("caused by the persecution of Russian speakers and the welcome shown to dangerous terrorists"). He calls on his American counterpart to encourage an attitude of "restraint" among his European counterparts, who are "always ready to push for war." He argues that German rearmament alone, given the country's history on this matter, is perceived in Russia as a major threat ("how can Germany's neighbors not understand this danger?").

**c. A parallel phase of nuclear blackmail unfolds,
fuelling the political and diplomatic crisis**

- In Kaliningrad, tactical nuclear exercises are conducted; reports leak about Russian tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Belarus being put on alert.
- Russian analysts advocate a rapid resort to the use of this type of weaponry if Russia's demands are not met. These demands become

increasingly specific: annexation by Russia of certain areas (known as “Russian-speaking”) and a right of oversight over Baltic governments accused of fostering anti-Russian terrorism.

- In some European countries—including Germany—general anxiety becomes a major factor; in France and the United Kingdom, questions are raised about the appropriateness of “extended deterrence” on behalf of the Baltic states. In both countries, for some media outlets, this issue takes precedence over the hybrid and territorial attacks suffered by the Baltic states.

Against this backdrop, Russian propaganda is rolled out worldwide, including through UN Security Council meetings, where Russia adopts the following narrative: “Once again, NATO is seeking to attack Russia, which must defend itself by all means necessary. Russia does not want escalation but is prepared to accept it if necessary, including through the use of nuclear weapons.”

A non-negligible portion of the Global South sides with the Russian narrative, seeing immediate economic benefits or out of a sense of anti-colonialist revenge. Even on the European Continent, some peripheral countries warn of the risks of escalation. It is possible that in the meantime, a crisis in Asia worsens (or the campaign against Iran), drawing away the attention of the US authorities as a more urgent priority. In another conversation with his American counterpart, President Putin warns that he has no room for maneuver in the Baltic crisis and feels compelled by Russian public opinion to see it through to the end. However, he is prepared to freeze the crisis in this European theater and to facilitate de-escalation in Asia (or to assist with Iran). Signs also begin to emerge of a massive buildup of Russian armed forces in other parts of Europe, causing concern among allies such as Romania.

Overall, throughout these (long) first days of the crisis, the initial Russian dilemma (a limited attack vs. a large-scale attack) is followed by something of a “mirror” dilemma for the Western leaders: It is, of course,

imperative to react, but should they take the risk of escalation? This dilemma arises in a complex domestic political context, illustrated by two examples:

- The reaction of public opinion, including in business circles. Public pressure for a “cautious” approach (refusal to risk any escalation) would vary from one country to another depending on the geographical location of the countries concerned and the political leanings of the governments in power. The divide between eastern Europe and the Baltic states on the one hand, and western and southern Europe on the other, could persist but become less pronounced, depending on the following factors: the effects of the war in Ukraine, generational turnover, and an evolving debate driven by uncertainty about US commitment. The growth of the German military budget (from €86 billion in 2025 to €162 billion in 2029) could change such a key country’s attitude, resulting in greater public confidence in confronting Russia and business circles rallying behind a policy of resistance to Russia; the same phenomenon could also cause tensions in France.
- The economic impact of the crisis, for example in terms of energy. By the time in question, will Europe have reduced its dependence on Russian energy? It is unlikely. On the other hand, tensions are to be expected over the price of gas imported from countries linked to Russia, while the effect on oil prices (a globalized market) should be less significant, at least initially.

2.2. CROSSING THE THRESHOLD OF WAR: COUPLING AND DECOUPLING SCENARIOS

Let us recall the situation: NATO has decided on a number of precautionary measures while the Baltic countries resist Russian aggression despite the disorganization of part of their defenses and the loss of control of Narva (and possibly other parts of their territory).

Some Europeans also threaten to close the Baltic Sea to “ghost fleet” ships, flying flags of multiple countries but mainly transporting Russian oil. Leaders from the Baltic states and other European countries, as well as some American voices, call for attacks on St. Petersburg or Kaliningrad to punish clear violations of the Baltic states’ sovereignty. They also advocate cyberattacks to destabilize Russian power. In reality, Russia has already experienced incidents of this type since the beginning of the crisis, though their scale was considered limited.

The Russians seize on these various factors as a pretext to escalate the conflict dramatically. One morning, the world learns of the following developments:

- “To prevent NATO reinforcements,” Russia has closed the Suwałki corridor; an intense but indecisive artillery battle ensues. Moscow announces that it is prepared to accept a ceasefire if NATO refrains from sending reinforcements to the Baltic countries; this is the line that their ambassador presents to the United Nations Security Council.
- More seriously still, precision strikes from Russian missiles and cruise missiles hit command posts in the three Baltic countries as well as vital communication hubs. The first casualties among civilians and the national and allied armed forces are reported.
- The Russians take possession of several islands in the Baltic and, more unexpectedly, Spitsbergen (in the Arctic) or even the entire Svalbard archipelago (See Appendix 2). There, too, a few

civilian casualties are reported. Commentators wonder whether the Kremlin's decision-makers are seeking to limit NATO navies' maneuverability or to obtain bargaining chips (as in Carlo Masala's scenario)²⁷ in negotiations they claim to still want to have. They also put forward arguments of varying legal plausibility to justify the violation of the 1920 Treaty of Paris, which enshrined the non-militarization of the archipelago ("we have been denouncing NATO's creeping militarization for several years").

Under these circumstances, an emergency meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) is convened at the level of heads of state and government, with one fundamental question on the agenda—whether or not to invoke Article 5—and three implementation-related questions:

- a/** How to counter the closure of the Suwałki corridor?
- b/** How to leverage NATO's naval and air superiority to counter what increasingly appears to be a Russian operation aimed at controlling all three countries?
- c/** Should Russia's recent "decapitation strikes" not be met with deep strikes on Russian territory (either on the Russian mainland or in Kaliningrad—the latter option being favored by many strategists within the Alliance)?

It emerges that, overnight before the NATO meeting, there was a communication between the Kremlin and the White House. The Russian president threatens various escalatory measures, including those related to nuclear and space: "We can paralyze your sophisticated satellite system, on which your societies and military apparatus are now so dependent, with a few shots." He assures the US president that he is as ready to make peace with America as he is to use nuclear weapons, if necessary.

²⁷ Masala, *Ibid.*

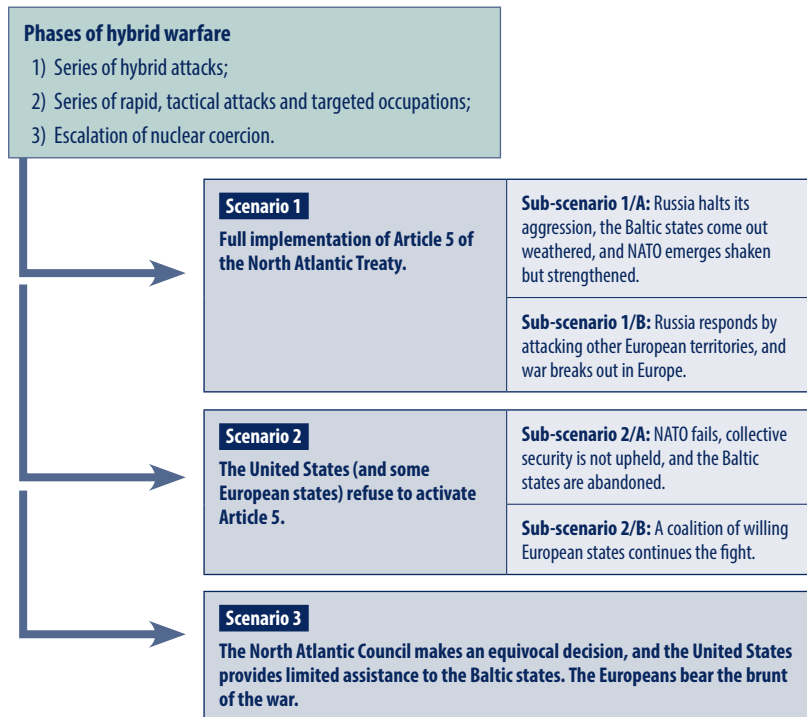
The North Atlantic Council (NAC) of heads of state or governments is to meet that same afternoon (European time, i.e., morning in Washington) by videoconference, using the Alliance's secure systems. The EU Council meets earlier that day in the morning and debates the implementation of Article 42 (7) of the TEU:²⁸ One-third of the Member States are in favor of intervention, one-third are opposed (southern Europe), and one-third believe it appropriate to wait for the NATO decision. The newspaper headline reads, "Politically, Russia has just won the first round." Alternative scenario: the Member States quickly agree to trigger Article 42(7)—taking into account the reservations of Hungary and other countries reluctant to take military action—without, however, deciding on any operational implementation.

Throughout this period, "pro-peace" demonstrations are held in some European countries and the media is very divided, while calls for a rational but firm decision grow louder from opinion leaders in the Scandinavian countries as well as in Berlin, Warsaw, and London. In many countries, governments are compelled to report to their parliaments on decisions or on the progress of discussions within the Alliance; votes are required in many cases, putting the overall coherence of NATO's action at risk. In France, a bitter debate takes place between supporters of a more traditional interpretation of the president's powers and those who demand parliamentary control that goes beyond mere debates and requires votes.

²⁸ *European Union, Treaty on European Union, Article 42, paragraph 7, Official Journal of the European Union (C 326, full extent), October 26, 2012, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12008M042>.*

From this point, three scenarios concerning the different possible decisions taken by the NAC of heads of state or government are conceivable:

Figure #2 • Scenarios for the response of the EU and NATO Allies to a Russian attack



First scenario: Full implementation of Article 5

Following agreement within the Alliance, a campaign of US missile strikes on Russian targets is launched, focusing on military sites in Kaliningrad, including those housing tactical nuclear weapons. This had been pressed for by the Finns, (more discreetly) the Germans, and echoed by some Scandinavian countries. Joint decisions are taken on two other points: the liberation of Suwałki and the order to bring allied air forces and navies into action. In the first case, implementation is immediate, while the second deployment requires a few weeks of organization. From there, two sub-scenarios are possible:

Scenario 1/A: The Russians stop, followed by a general sense of relief with the prospect of an agreement. But how long will it take? The Ukrainian and Israeli–Palestinian precedents suggest that “short wars” no longer exist. In any case, the Baltic states emerge from the ordeal in a weakened state, and the fate of Kaliningrad is likely at stake. It is conceivable that in Germany and neighboring countries, voices will be raised demanding that Kaliningrad be “de-Russified” pending its accession to Germany. Conversely, in the worst-case scenario, Russia would retain at least one territorial asset—Narva, for example, subject to a referendum in that city on joining Russia. In a sense, the Alliance emerges stronger—it has held firm—but also shaken: Public opinion questions the causes and consequences of the recent crisis and fears that an even more serious crisis may lie ahead. The economic consequences of the war may also have weakened the European economy as a whole.

Scenario 1/B: Russia absorbs the shock and responds in other European territories, possibly in Ukraine or more likely in Poland, Finland, or another target on NATO’s eastern flank. War breaks out in Europe, a high-intensity war such as that described in the central scenario of France’s 2025 National Strategic Review.²⁹ The largest and most

experienced ground force in Europe—the Ukrainian army—is immobilized by the continued pressure that Russia exerts on its borders. The United States openly admit that it is over-extended, given the events in Asia and the Arctic, and as a crisis unfolds in the Middle East (by 2029, the Iranians have rebuilt most of their enrichment capabilities and their missile arsenal).

In the event of a dual crisis in Europe and Asia, it is conceivable that at this stage of the confrontation, there would be indications of a (discreet) transfer of certain US capabilities from the European theatre to Asia: joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (JISR), strategic enablers, maritime support, air defense and ground-based missile defense capabilities, long-range precision strike capabilities, drones, and combat aircraft. Shortfalls would also be noted in available forces, support units, ammunition stocks, and special operations forces.³⁰

While it is agreed that a crisis in Asia would not, in principle, lead to the transfer of ground troops (infantry), which are ill-suited to the Asian theater, a crisis in the Middle East could have a significant impact on the availability of US troops in Europe.

At the societal level, while in **sub-scenario 1/A** (Russia retreats), publics rally behind governments that are broadly united, in **sub-scenario 1/B**, part of the public is likely to withdraw its support for their governments, and intense parliamentary debates complicate decision-making in certain capitals.

²⁹ General Secretariat for Defense and National Security, *Revue nationale stratégique 2025* [National Strategic Review 2025], <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/revue-nationale-strategique-2025>.

³⁰ Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Jim Townsend, Kate Johnston, and Greg Weaver, *Understanding Russia's Calculus on Opportunistic Aggression in Europe*, Center for a New American Security, August 2025, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/understanding-russias-calculus-on-opportunistic-aggression-in-europe>.

Second scenario: The United States—supported by a few European states—refuses to invoke Article 5

Reporting on his most recent conversation with President Putin, the US president puts forward the following arguments:

- There is still room for negotiation with Moscow.
- The West stands on the brink of a third World War, this time involving nuclear arsenals: The risk of annihilation is too great.
- The United States is simultaneously dealing with a much more difficult crisis in Asia, as well as another crisis in the Middle East.

At some point, the US–European divorce is pronounced: One can imagine the US president declaring “It’s up to the Europeans, not us, to deal with this matter.” In response to a question from a European leader, the president confirms that some US capabilities have been transferred to Asia. In the hours that follow, two pieces of information leak out:

- The White House seems to think that “in this matter, Russia is not entirely to blame: the Balts have been playing with fire.”
- The US president sends an emissary to Moscow to obtain what he considers most important, namely Russia’s abandonment of the positions it has just taken in the Arctic. The White House favors freedom of transit on this new strategic sea route. The Baltics are sacrificed for a cause considered more important in the eyes of Washington.

In this second scenario, two sub-scenarios are also possible:

Scenario 2/A: NATO as a whole acknowledges the political death blow it has suffered; the Europeans remain silent, and the Baltic states are more or less abandoned; each European country seeks bilateral reassurance from Washington; Paris, Berlin, and London still speak of a coalition, but with long-term objectives.

Scenario 2/B: A European “Coalition of the Willing” decides to continue the fight. An army corps command led by France and the United Kingdom is quickly set up (first in Paris, with the intention of moving to London after a year). At this stage, however, this coalition of volunteers has only limited means of striking deep into enemy territory. Its priority is to provide defense systems to the Baltic states and ensure a presence in the skies above the countries concerned. Concerns are chiefly expressed via diplomatic channels; many countries implement sanctions and issue condemnations, though their impact is limited.

In both cases, opinion is divided, but a feeling of depression prevails; markets react negatively to what appears to be a defeat for Europe, leading to a considerable reduction in its prestige and influence in the world.

Third scenario: An ambiguous NAC decision

The president of the United States does not contest the implementation of Article 5. The legal advisor to the US delegation to NATO distributes a non-paper on the precise meaning of this provision of the Alliance’s founding treaty. Article 5 requires all Allies to “assist” an Ally that is the subject of an attack. This does not preempt the extent of such assistance.

In this case, and given the circumstances, the United States does the following:

- Gives its agreement for SACEUR to use US air, naval, and ground forces in Europe.
- Does not, however, contemplate sending reinforcements given the crisis in Asia; they will endeavor, in close coordination with their Allies, to reduce some of their key capabilities in Europe.

- Opposes strikes on Russian territory due to what it considered an excessive risk of escalation. The decision to strike Kaliningrad, desired by some Europeans, is considered an option to be revisited at a later date.

As in the previous scenario, Washington gives priority to negotiations to restore Norway's sovereignty over Spitsbergen. A White House insider is quoted as saying, "We wouldn't be in this situation had the Europeans let us take control of Greenland." Although less clearly than in **scenario 2/B** above ("a Coalition of the Willing" continuing the fight), it is the European nations that bear the brunt of the war. However, reports begin to reach NATO headquarters and capitals of a concentration of Russian troops in eastern Europe in areas other than the Baltic region, causing concern in Poland and the Czech Republic, which in turn request reinforcements from their Allies.

It is in this scenario that divisions in public opinion and parliaments, exacerbated by information operations by Russia and China, are most difficult for governments to manage.

AN ASSESSMENT OF PROBABILITIES

As explained in the introduction regarding the initial assumptions underpinning the scenarios presented, the assumptions that inform their unfolding are just that: working scenarios intended to support analysis.

In practice, other factors—or only a subset of the selected ones—may come into play. For instance, a simultaneous crisis in Europe and Asia is not necessarily required for Washington to hesitate in engaging with Russia. Even without this combination, one cannot rule out the possibility that a form of “neutrality” may simply be the preferred reflex of the current US leaders or their successors. Similarly, Russia’s attacks on the Baltic states could be more concentrated (more selective geographically and in nature) than the scenarios in this note suggest or the seizure of territory outside the theater of war as a “bargaining chip” may not necessarily occur or may occur elsewhere than in Spitsbergen.

It is also plausible that Russian actions could experience a significant failure rate, as was the case in Ukraine. However, it seems to us that neither the variation in assumptions nor the aggressor’s failure rate calls into question the overall pattern we have developed.

Is it possible to evaluate the probability of a Russian attack? Let us consider the following proposal. The probability of a Russian attack on the Baltic states—and the scale of such an attack—depends on Moscow’s assessment of NATO’s response capacity, based on a series of contextual factors that we have mentioned: the degree of regeneration of Russian forces, the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine, the state of transatlantic relations and US engagement in Europe, the level of Europe’s military recovery, the political situation of a few key European capitals, and the state of crises outside Europe, particularly any possible Chinese threat to Taiwan.

Internal political factors within the Russian regime may also play a role, though we can conclude that the regime's current internal dynamics do not point toward an easing of tensions in Europe.

Thus, it would seem that the possibility of a large-scale attack within a relatively short period of a few years cannot be ruled out if all the markers mentioned appear. The conjunction of most of these indicators would make a large-scale attack likely; the presence of only some would encourage the Russians to exercise greater restraint, without ruling out—indeed, quite the contrary—one or more “test operations” to gauge the determination of the Allies.

HAS THE HYBRID WAR AGAINST EUROPE NOT ALREADY BEGUN?

It is, of course, disturbing to note that at least some of the range of hybrid attacks envisaged in this note already appear to be taking place at the time of writing in October 2025. There have been repeated incursions by combat aircraft into Norway and Estonia, drones flying over the territory of Poland, Romania, France, Germany, and Denmark, cyberattacks on various airports, including London, Berlin, and Brussels—but this list is certainly neither exclusive nor exhaustive.

Beyond the systematic aggressive behavior of the Russian military over many years, there is no consensus among the Allies on the degree of intentionality behind these attacks. Some may be the result of misguided maneuvers, while others may be sending targeted messages related to the ongoing conflict (Norway has become one of the largest suppliers of weapons to Kiev, Denmark is set to host a Ukrainian weapons production unit on its soil, incursions into Poland are fueling anti-Ukrainian sentiment among Polish public opinion, etc.). However, it seems unlikely that the current series of hybrid attacks is without strategic intent.

What is the aim? Some hypotheses are again linked to the Ukrainian conflict; by imposing costs on Europeans, Russian maneuvers may aim to convince European public opinion that the risk of escalation is too high and ultimately make Europeans give up their support for Ukraine. The fact is that the current campaign targeting certain European countries coincides with a moment when Donald Trump is making no secret of his intention to transfer the burden of aid to Ukraine to the Europeans. In another, more somber interpretation, the Russians are aware of the slow progress they are making in Ukraine and realize that they have not obtained a blanket refusal from Donald Trump to help the Ukrainians. They would thus be preparing, in a reckless reflex, to expand the conflict in Europe beyond Ukraine's borders. Finally, without contradicting the previous interpretations, the Russian attacks correspond to an obvious desire to test the cohesion and response capacity of the Allies. Napoleon's formula, translated as "First you commit, then you see," certainly resonates strongly in Russia.

In this regard, it should be noted that Europeans appear determined to respond to Russian hybrid attacks, yet no clear course of action has emerged at this stage of their deliberations, either within NATO or within the EU. Let us draw a first lesson from this: The timing and nature of a Russian attack on a NATO or EU country in the coming years will also depend on the responses of the Allies to the multiple hybrid "tests" Moscow is currently conducting and on the unity of the European response to those tests.

AREAS FOR REFLECTION ON EUROPEAN DEFENSE

The scenario tree presented above raises countless questions, such as deterrence against "sub-military conflict" attacks, the latitude of NATO military authorities in the early hours to respond before a political decision is made, NATO's ability to meet such a strategic challenge if the United States is occupied elsewhere (Asia, the Middle East), and Russia's

ability to make Kaliningrad a sanctuary in the face of a Western response. It highlights the risks of horizontal and vertical escalation that would result from a failure of deterrence against a Russian attack in the Baltic states as well as in other areas of the European theater. More fundamentally, it raises three questions for action:

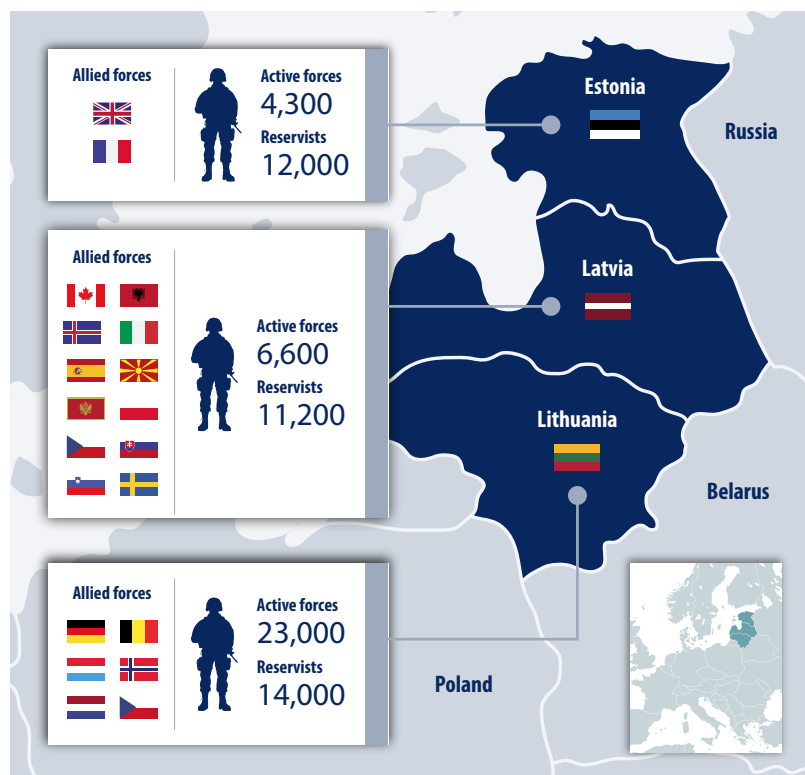
- How can we prepare for the full spectrum of “sub-military” attacks? Not only in terms of protection but also in terms of deterrence and resilience of populations and structures? Can cooperation on these issues be increased within Atlanticist and European forums? In the face of new and particularly lethal forms of warfare, notably drones, what priorities (capabilities for observing and identifying small flying objects, low-cost destruction capabilities, etc.) should be established?
- In scenarios 2 and 3 above, how can a coalition of European volunteers operate using existing command and planning structures (NATO or national), particularly with regard to the interoperability of weapons and communication systems? With or without US support (notably key enablers)? What would be the consequences for France, including with respect to its framework nation role and its nuclear deterrence posture?
- What capabilities do Europeans currently lack and, therefore, need to acquire, and how should roles be distributed? In economic and budgetary terms, how can the necessary war effort (in terms of manpower and equipment) be organized when public opinion still favors welfare state systems that prioritize social spending?

The scenarios outlined in this note highlight needs relating in particular to force mass and mobility, as well as to JISR (Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance)³¹ and deep strike capabilities. One

³¹ JISR: *Joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.*

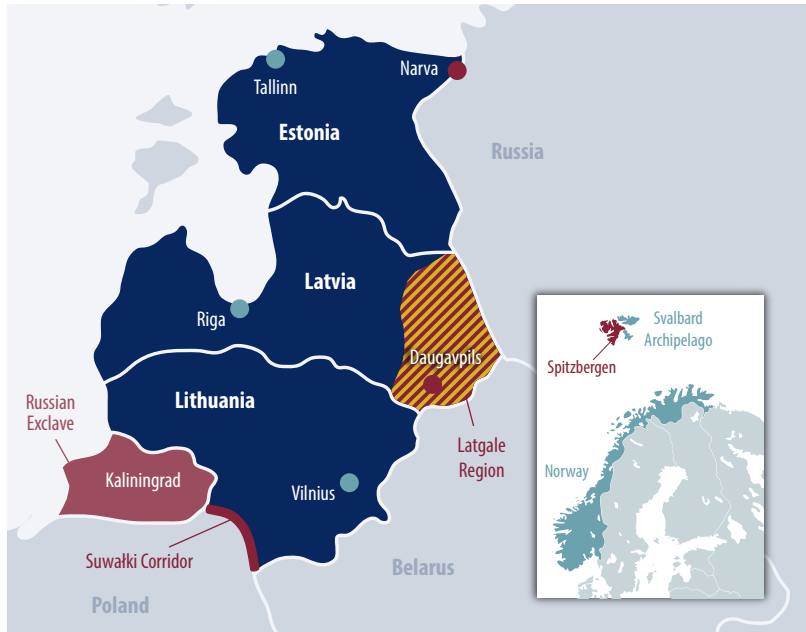
issue that should be addressed is the satellite dimension, to which only a few references are made in this note but whose strategic importance is increasing.

Appendix #1 • The Current Situation in the Baltic Countries: The Status of National and Allied Forces Present



 : Allied forces on Baltic countries' territory under NATO
Active forces: headcount of national armies of each Baltic State
Reservists: headcount of national reservists of each Baltic State

Appendix #2 • Map of Sensitive Geographical Areas in the Context of a Possible Russian Attack on the Baltic States



■ Sensitive areas, possible entry points for a Russian attack

Note to the reader:

This map in no way represents an actual or real-time situation at the time of writing in October 2025. It merely serves to illustrate the scenarios described above in this note, as well as the possible points of entry into Europe in the event of Russian attack, considered as a hypothetical scenario.

Acknowledgements

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*Institut Montaigne welcomes thoughts and ideas
on how to address these issues collectively
and put forward recommendations which serve
the public interest.*



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Consulting	France	Pelham Media	Willis Towers
Chubb	Inkarn	Pergamon	Watson France
CIS	Institut Mérieux	Polytane	Zurich
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The numerous drone incursions and violations of several European countries' airspace by Russia throughout 2025, accompanied by a series of cyberattacks, have raised fears of a growing Russian threat against European nations in the years to come—regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

This threat must be understood in a dual context: on the one hand, a potential intensification of Russian military pressure (with its war economy and build-up of military capacity) and on the other hand, a gradual disengagement by the United States from European security.

From this perspective, we hypothesize that in the coming years, Russia may seek to test the strength of NATO's Article 5 and the resilience of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture through an armed attack targeting the Baltic states—which are members of both NATO and the European Union.

We consider a scenario of progressive escalation in which Russia first employs hybrid tactics before resorting to conventional means. At this stage of the crisis, we identify three potential response trajectories from NATO and the EU, depending on whether Article 5 is invoked or not.

This note draws on a broad corpus of interviews conducted with politicians, high officials, and military officials from the Baltic states, as well as from both eastern and western Europe. It offers avenues for reflection to help guide Europe's choices on matters of defense and security.



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