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



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.

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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.