

The Relationship Between Russia & the Baltics

Russian Interests in the Baltics

To the Russian government, the Baltic States fall within Russia's so-called "near abroad" and therefore are seen by Moscow as less than fully sovereign. That said, there is a difference in Russian perceptions of the Baltic States and other former Soviet republics. There are three main areas of concern for Russia in the region:

- Russia sees increased U.S. and NATO presence in the region as a potential threat.
- Russia seeks to maintain a stable status quo in political and economic relations, preserving important trade ties.
- The Baltic States have a significant number of Russian speakers, which Russian officials have talked of the need to protect.

Russia's Capabilities

While Baltic states have steadily undergone military modernization since Russia's invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, **Russian forces would be sufficient in a conventional invasion of the Baltic states with NATO likely unable to defend the entirety of the region.** Russia has invested significantly in its Western military district, aimed primarily at deterring NATO forces and targeting Ukraine, though not directly threatening Baltic states. **In addition to Russia's hard military capabilities, it views the Baltic States as fair game for its "hybrid" conflict with the West,** utilizing its formidable cyber and disinformation capabilities against them.

Examples of Russian aggression in Estonia include:

- 2007: Russia attacked Estonian civilian and government cyber systems, shutting down banks and government institutions.
- 2015: Russian intelligence operatives kidnapped an Estonian intelligence officer and brought him back to Moscow.
- 2021: The Estonian consul in St. Petersburg was detained by Russia for receiving classified documents.



The Likelihood of Conflict

Although the likelihood of conflict between Russia and the Baltic States is low, it is still possible. **There is a risk of accidental conflict and unintended escalation primarily because of the proximity of forces and the increased militarization of the region.** Tensions have remained heightened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 while Russian jets continue to engage in unsafe maneuvers near NATO ships and jets, **Russian large-scale military exercises leave cause for concern,** and Russia currently lacks robust diplomatic channels with the Baltic States.



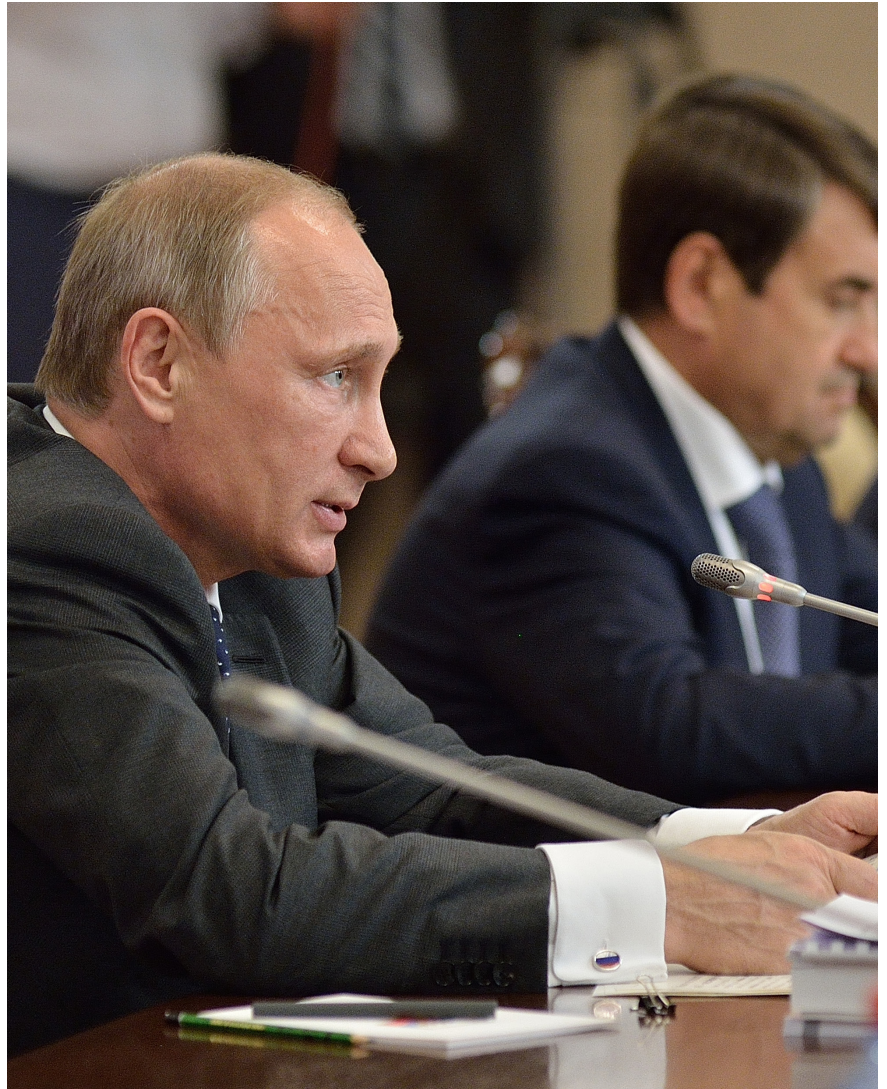
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Points for Policymakers

Understanding the concerns of the Baltic States, **the United States and NATO should demonstrate clear resolve and action, providing the maximum possible positive signal to our allies with the minimum possible provocation.**

Some positive steps would include:

- Continuing to fund the European Reassurance Initiative
- Restoring direct military-to-military dialogue with Russia focused on the Baltic region
- Engaging in broader dialogue with Russia on strategic stability and “rules of the road”
- Supporting Russian language media projects in the Baltic States to combat disinformation



Go Deeper! More Resources



Kennan Institute

[Kennan Cable No. 57: Rethinking U.S. Policy for Russia – and for Russia’s Neighborhood](#)



Kennan Institute

[The Russia File: NATO Deterrence and the Russian Specter in the Baltics](#)



Wilson Center

[‘U.S. Policy Toward the Baltic States’: Matthew Rojansky Testifies Before House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee](#)



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[Wilson Center NOW: Is There a Common Baltic Cultural Identity?](#)

