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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization: Dubious Political Will to Defend Baltic Allies

Major Zachary Morris, USA

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Dubious Political Will to Defend Baltic Allies**

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The Institute of Land Warfare
ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY

AN INSTITUTE OF LAND WARFARE PAPER

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization: Dubious Political Will to Defend Baltic Allies

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Preface

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) remains the most powerful military alliance in the world—and arguably in history. However, the greatest danger to it comes from within. Questionable allied political will and cohesion threatens the survival of NATO as a credible political and defense organization.

Political will remains an understudied, underdefined and ambiguous concept, especially in connection with conflict studies. NATO's political will is the extent of support among key decisionmakers for particular solutions to particular problems—necessary to overcome costs and risks—and for commitment to sustain efforts over time. Thus, NATO's political will to defend Baltic allies is the support among alliance leaders to employ force against a Russian threat and sustain the costs and risks of those actions over time. Based on this definition, this paper will examine several necessary and sufficient conditions for political will. Political will requires: support from a sufficient group of decisionmakers; a common understanding of the threat; a commonly-perceived, potentially-effective solution; and commitment to sustain those actions.

This paper argues that NATO's political will to defend Baltic allies against Russian aggression appears dubious. First, NATO probably lacks sufficient key leaders supporting the use of force to defend Baltic allies, based on declining champions, increasing potential veto players and variable domestic influences. Second, NATO's common understanding of the Russian threat to the Baltics is questionable because of diverging alliance threats and missions, differing perceptions of Russian actions and domestic factors influencing allies. Third, allies' commonly-perceived, potentially-effective solution has demonstrated both positive and negative signs, such as: declining capabilities, unwillingness to solve preventable problems and positive alliance adaptation and learning. Some implications of this analysis are that NATO's political will is extremely vulnerable and that Russia is actively attacking allied will. Addressing vulnerabilities, protecting political will and strengthening it for the future foundation of NATO should become a critical alliance function. If NATO matters to each ally, so should allied political will.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization: Dubious Political Will to Defend Baltic Allies

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) remains the most powerful military alliance in the world—and arguably in history. However, the greatest danger comes from within. Questionable allied political will threatens the survival of NATO as a credible political and defense organization. In 2014, Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine shook many assumptions about European security, forcing transatlantic policymakers, scholars and military leaders to reassess NATO’s security. The Baltic allies—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (see Figure 1)—are the members most exposed, threatened and difficult to defend from potential Russian aggression. Hence, most studies focus on this region. However, these studies predominantly focus on strategy and capabilities; few assess allied political will to defend Baltic allies.¹ This study attempts to fill that academic void by assessing NATO’s political will to defend its Baltic allies.

Fundamentally, war is a contest of wills.² Thus, political will remains the bedrock for the use of all forms of power, especially in war. An alliance unable or unwilling to act has no power.³ Even infinite capabilities, without the will to act, are worthless. Researchers at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations wrote, “it is the presence or absence of political will that determines, more than anything, whether signals of potential conflict will be responded to and, if so, adequately and in time.”⁴ However, determining the strength of will present remains inherently difficult and “can only be gauged approximately.”⁵ Previous scholars recognized that political will remains a complex, multifaceted concept comprising many sub-concepts.⁶ Linn Hammergren argued that political will is “the slipperiest concept in the policy lexicon” and said, “it is the *sina qua non* of policy success which is never defined except by its absence.”⁷ NATO’s political will plays a vital role in the success or failure of the alliance, but remains an ambiguous concept.

This paper argues, based on defined components of political will, that NATO’s political will to defend Baltic allies against Russian aggression appears dubious. The first section defines political will and the three components representing necessary and sufficient conditions for it to exist. The second section argues that NATO lacks sufficient allied leaders supporting

Figure 1
NATO Membership⁸



1949 Belgium Canada Denmark France Iceland Italy Luxembourg Netherlands Norway Portugal United Kingdom United States	1952 Greece Turkey	1955 Germany	1982 Spain	1999 Czech Republic Hungary Poland	2004 Bulgaria Estonia Latvia Lithuania Romania Slovakia Slovenia	2009 Albania Croatia	2017 Montenegro
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the use of force to defend Baltic allies, based on declining champions, increasing potential veto players and variable domestic influences. The third section explains NATO's efforts to develop a common understanding of the threat and examines challenges centered on diverging threats and missions, differing perceptions of Russian actions and domestic factors influencing allies. The fourth section assesses the availability of a commonly-perceived and potentially-effective solution and argues that NATO has demonstrated both positive and negative signs, such as: declining capabilities; an unwillingness to solve preventable problems; and positive alliance adaptation and learning. The fifth section concludes the analysis. Finally, the last section explains the larger implications of this study.

Defining Political Will

Political will remains an understudied, underdefined and ambiguous concept, especially in connection with conflict studies.⁹ It is inherently difficult to measure for several reasons. First, it involves intent and motivation, both innately intangible phenomena.¹⁰ Second, both individuals and collectives exhibit political will; aggregating collective will introduces more complexity.¹¹ Third, people or collectives may express political will through language, but can only manifest it through action.¹² Because of these complexities, many early scholars only analyzed political will *ex post facto*. However, some recent scholars have defined it as "the commitment of actors to undertake actions to achieve a set of objectives . . . and to sustain

the costs of those actions over time.”¹³ In *Defining Political Will*, Post et al. continued to build on previous scholars and defined political will as “the extent of committed support among key decisionmakers for a particular policy solution to a particular problem.”¹⁴ Post’s analysis best incorporates the central themes of many other authors including: sufficient support from critical actors, a common understanding of the problem, the potential capacity or capability to act effectively and commitment. This study modifies the work of these authors to understand NATO’s political will to defend its Baltic allies.

NATO’s political will is the extent of support among key decisionmakers for a particular solution to a particular problem—necessary to overcome costs and risks—and commitment to sustain the effort over time.¹⁵ Thus, NATO’s political will to defend the Baltic Region is the support among alliance leaders to employ force against a Russian threat and to sustain the costs and risks of those actions over time. This definition highlights several necessary and sufficient conditions for political will. It requires: support from a sufficient set of decisionmakers; a common understanding of the problem or threat; a commonly-perceived, potentially-effective solution and; commitment to sustain those actions over time.¹⁶

This research focuses on the first three components of political will and excludes an examination of commitment. Excluding commitment facilitates a focused analysis on the initial allied decision to employ force to defend the Baltic allies; commitment plays a less prominent role in the initial decision to employ force.

Political will displays dynamic properties and varies over time, solutions and geographic locations.¹⁷ Clearly, the context for a particular decision and numerous environmental factors impact allied political will. However, only some environmental factors are examined here. Some examples of environmental factors that impact the degree of political will available include: government decisionmaking format and structure; social, political and economic strength and stability; extent and nature of the threat or problem; vested interests within member nations; intergovernmental relations; and social, historical and strategic cultures among member nations.¹⁸ Thus, this study only provides an approximation of allied political will currently available. Understanding its components provides the foundation for this analysis, beginning with sufficient key decisionmakers supporting the use of force.

The first component of political will is sufficient key decisionmakers supporting the use of force to defend Baltic allies.¹⁹ For NATO, this requires that allied members agree—absent vetoes—on a consensus decision to employ force. The designation of “decisionmakers” limits consideration to leaders, generally heads of state for allied members, capable of approving, implementing and enforcing alliance decisions.²⁰ Given the North Atlantic Council consensus decisionmaking format, explained below, a critical task involves understanding which leaders would likely support or block the use of force to defend Baltic allies.²¹ Assessing support from key leaders involves the examination of three critical areas: champions, veto players and domestic political influences.

The successful application of political will, particularly for an action based on international consensus, often requires numerous powerful champions advocating for a particular action. Champions are vital because solidifying a decision and action requires active diplomacy and consensus building. Champions use influence to build and sustain political will for a particular action through efforts to foster a common understanding of the problem and to discover an appropriate solution for it. Numerous champions—such as Harry Truman, George Marshall, Dean Acheson, William Clayton, Author Vandenberg, Richard Bissell, Paul Hoffman, W. Averell

Harriman, Ernest Bevin and Georges Bidault—built the political will to break the U.S. out of isolationism and implement The Marshall Plan.²² Additionally, on both sides of the Atlantic, many of these same champions created NATO itself.²³ Without great champions, few significant international efforts succeed. Thus, the presence or absence of influential champions for a particular alliance cause can indicate political will.

Veto players are any allied members or leaders who, based on their assessment of the situation, would potentially block the consensus decision to use force.²⁴ Veto players represent the most dangerous obstacle to allied political will and decisionmaking. The decision to employ force represents a significant change from the status quo and would increase costs and risks for each ally. NATO's consensus decisionmaking format, together with democratic member governments, allows for a substantial number of potential veto players who can block the alliance use of force. Understanding potential veto players and their motivations yields important insights into the probable will of the alliance necessary to employ force in defending the Baltics.

Domestic politics influence key decisionmakers in variable ways, for better or worse. The two most important ways this can happen are either by consolidating support for a particular action or by dividing and weakening that support. Consolidated support occurs when limited political divisions, especially among political parties, exist within the state on that particular action.²⁵ Congealing support strengthens leaders' actions or limits their options if they hope to avoid using force. However, divided political and popular support could reduce the probability that leaders will support the use of force. Political divisions weaken leaders' authority and power and increase political risk. Divisions—in leadership, political parties and popular opinion—become even more prominent when one or more party could use the situation for increased political power in a pending election. Thus, domestic politics can influence national and allied leaders' decisions to employ force in defense of an allied state.

The second component of political will is a common understanding of the problem or threat. Without this, consensus on an action by alliance leaders remains unlikely because different perspectives and priorities suggest fundamentally different solutions.²⁶ For example, allies viewing Russian actions as inherently defensive may stress de-escalation and integration; allies viewing Russian actions as aggressive may emphasize deterrence and strength. Further, how allies frame threats, risks, costs, benefits and reference points critically influences which actions are taken.²⁷ Potential indicators include: diverging threats and missions across NATO; perceptions of Russia which could influence views during a crisis; and domestic indicators such as economic and security interests in Russia and the Baltics.

Diverging threats and missions across NATO in peacetime may not create problems; it could even lead to compatible strategies and mutual support.²⁸ However, during wartime, differing threats and priorities are often disastrous.²⁹ Threats often become divisive during a conflict or crisis, straining alliance cohesion and political will. During World War I, the Central Powers alliance fractured in part due to each major power facing different primary threats.³⁰ The principle threat to Austria–Hungary came from the East while Germany remained focused on the Western Front.³¹ The difference in source and level of threat profoundly affected the Central Powers' cohesion and will to fight.³² Conflict heightens the nature of the threat, risks and costs; making actors more aware of the threats to their nation's interests and increasing the desire to avoid undesirable political efforts.³³ Thus, in peacetime, understanding NATO's threats, missions, interests and actions related to Baltic allies and Russia are important indicators of potential divisions which will occur under stress.

The nature of the crisis or conflict can radically alter the level of political will present—or required—for allied use of force. For example, a clear shock created by an overt attack such as Pearl Harbor can radically increase the political will present in a state or alliance to fight.³⁴ However, other actions could reduce it, or increase the amount required to act. Baltic allies' culpability in instigating the crisis or conflict would likely dramatically reduce allied political will to defend the region. The speed of a crisis or conflict could also overwhelm NATO's decisionmaking process. Finally, ambiguity or clarity of Russian threats and differing costs or risks facing allies could divide alliance will to act. Indicators for this component center on allied perceptions of Russian actions and threats because we cannot know the nature of a crisis or conflict before it occurs. Members' perceptions of Russian actions now, as inherently aggressive or defensive in nature, could illuminate probable views in a future crisis. More cohesive perceptions indicate higher political will, and less cohesive views likely represent lower allied political will and increased difficulty achieving consensus.

Domestic factors contribute to allies' threat perceptions in numerous ways, influencing a nation's decision to employ force. Disparate economic and energy vulnerabilities or Russian leverage and ties could alter allied perceptions on the use of force and decrease the probability that members would act decisively in a crisis or conflict. Limited interests in the Baltic allies domestically could further fray allied support. Ambiguous or clear threats against allied populations due to nuclear weapons or strategic bombing could radically change the cost, risk and threat calculation for allies. Finally, other threats and priorities—such as the migrant crisis or terrorism—might diminish allies' support for a costly and dangerous conflict against Russia to defend distant Baltic allies. Absent a common understanding of the problem, little hope exists of agreeing on a potentially-effective solution, which leads us to the next piece of the puzzle.

The third component of political will is a commonly-perceived, potentially-effective solution available for leaders. This implies that a sufficient number of decisionmakers support the same general policy to address the threat; however, all alliance leaders do not necessarily have to agree on the details of the solution prior to implementation—but rather they must simply agree on the means and ends.³⁵ A potentially-effective solution requires that allied leaders develop capabilities, prevent short-term problems likely to occur during their implementation and adapt to develop long-term solutions for the environment.³⁶ These indicators represent allied political will to develop potentially-effective solutions, and poor performance could undermine the possible use of force.

One indirect measure of a commonly-perceived solution includes investment to develop capabilities and equality of participation across the alliance. The development or degradation of military tools prior to a crisis or conflict reflects the potential willingness of allies to employ those means. NATO is unlikely to employ force without appropriate military capabilities. Unequal investment and participation creates imbalances across the alliance, and they could indicate differing priorities or disagreement about potential solutions. Unequal participation also alters the risks and costs for some members in a conflict, potentially creating significant political tension during a crisis. Participation and active preparation of capabilities thus provides an indirect measure of alliance consensus on available solutions.

The second indirect measure analyzes NATO's ability and willingness to address problems preventively. The focus for this indicator centers on relatively near-term correctable solutions, which inhibit the use of force in the Baltics. Some examples include: freedom of movement, interoperability and communications challenges. Effectively solving preventable problems is

critical for the efficient employment of allied force. Thus, inability or unwillingness to address preventable problems remains an indicator for consensus on potential solutions and political will.

The final indicator for a potential solution is active alliance learning and adaptation to prepare for potential challenges. NATO demonstrates political will when alliance leaders “establish a process for tracking progress and actively manage implementation and adaptation to emerging circumstances.”³⁷ Because no solution or preparation is ever perfect, active learning and adaptation indicates a higher probability that political leaders will perceive a solution as potentially-effective. Adaptation and learning implies enduring solutions—such as NATO capability and infrastructure development—hence indicating stronger political will. Thus, learning and adaptation focused on the current and future environment, training, creating necessary capabilities and institutions and feasible corrections are all indicators of will. Developing a commonly-perceived and effective solution is the final component of political will.

In summary, no direct measures of political will exist. Thus, we must look to indirect measures. The necessary and sufficient conditions argued here—sufficient support from key leaders, common understanding of the threat, a commonly-perceived, potentially-effective solution—provide one framework. Domestic support, backed by the presence or absence of champions and veto players, represents key leader support. Common understanding of the threat reflects in diverging threats and missions, domestic influences and perceptions of Russian actions and domestic influences. Indicators of a commonly-perceived solution include: investment in capabilities and participation across NATO; willingness to address problems preventatively; and allied adaptation and learning. This framework provides an indirect approximation for NATO’s political will. However, leaders must remember that political will remains highly-dynamic and is subject to the environment and enemy actions. The dynamic and fluid nature of political will contains continuous properties that require a sufficient threshold to achieve a binary outcome.³⁸ Thus, leaders can think of political will as a thermostat which must achieve or sustain a specific temperature for success. Understanding the current level of political will for each component—beginning with sufficient key decisionmakers’ support of the use of force—remains a vital first step to understanding allied will to defend the Baltic region.

Component One: Sufficient Key Decisionmakers Support the Use of Force in the Baltics

To fully comprehend this first component, it is important to note three things: NATO’s consensus-based decisions require strong champions and an absence of veto players; allied champions are declining in number while the number of potential veto players is increasing; and domestic political constraints increase U.S. will but simultaneously decrease many European leaders’ political will to employ force defending Baltic allies. Based on this component, allied political will faces many challenges defending the Baltic region. Understanding the role of champions and veto players requires first examining the alliance mutual defense clause and consensus-based decisionmaking format.

Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty—the mutual defense clause—is the bedrock of the alliance.³⁹ Article V states “that an armed attack against one or more” allied members “shall be considered an attack against them all” and allies will “assist the party or parties so attacked by taking forthwith . . . such action as it [each member] deems necessary, including the use of armed force.”⁴⁰ Thus, Article V requires that if allies are attacked, all members consult and agree on the appropriate response and provide assistance as the alliance “deems necessary.” Allied assistance may include the use of force, but does not demand the use of force. Using the democratic process

of each government, allies must make the choice individually. They could invoke Article V and not employ force but instead provide financial and military assistance, sanction the aggressor—or do nothing at all. However, Article V creates an expectation that the alliance will defend allies in a conflict against an aggressor. Thus, the use of force under Article V remains the *sine qua non* for NATO to function as the deterrent and security guarantee of the alliance.⁴¹

Article IX of the North Atlantic Treaty established the North Atlantic Council (NAC), which serves as the principle political decisionmaking body within NATO.⁴² “Policies decided in the NAC are the expression of the collective will of all 28 member countries of the Alliance,” and consensus “decisions are made on the basis of unanimity and common accord.”⁴³ Thus, any alliance decision to invoke Article V and employ force requires a unanimous decision by all allies. However, due to the size of the alliance and the democratic structure of member governments, decisions are often slow; the NAC would likely struggle in an ambiguous or dynamic crisis. Further, the consensus-based decision format requires significant champions and creates numerous potential veto players who could block an alliance decision to either invoke Article V or employ force. The size and structure of the NAC hinders the rapid application of force in a crisis or conflict and potentially requires considerable political will for allied action. NATO’s use of force has usually worked historically because numerous champions and leaders have existed.

NATO has had several consistent champions for the use of force in most operations, though some are diminishing. The United States has been the predominant leader for the use of force, often supported by the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Poland and other allies, depending on the situation. Most allies usually look to the United States for decisions and leadership regarding the use of force.⁴⁴ For example, in Bosnia, Serbian aggression was a challenge that European allies could have handled alone.⁴⁵ However, the principle of consensus in NATO failed as Europe unsuccessfully assumed the leadership role that America had temporarily abdicated.⁴⁶ In fact, it was almost three years before active U.S. leadership and participation resulted in effective allied action, leading to the Dayton Peace Accord in December 1995.⁴⁷ If the United States transitions to a “lead-from-behind” model, similar to Operation Unified Protector in Libya—in other words, to a more isolationist stance—European states must assume more of the leadership roles in the future. The United Kingdom and France appear to be the best candidates for European leaders in the use of force in the future.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, Germany appears unwilling to accept a leadership role in international military operations or the use of force.⁴⁹

Currently, NATO may lack critical champions for the use of force to defend the Baltic region. For example, the United States and France may diminish as champions in the future. First, the Trump administration’s position vacillates regarding NATO’s continued relevance and in the realm of international relations, ranging from predominantly isolationist to engaged.⁵⁰ Further, the Trump administration has expressed ambivalence about defending Baltic allies from Russian aggression, depending on “if they [Baltic allies] fulfill their obligations to us.”⁵¹ Second, French leadership for the use of force against Russia may diminish due to the rise of Marine Le Pen’s National Front party. Le Pen has supported closer ties to Russia and blasted NATO for meddling in Eastern Europe, arguing that NATO only serves “Washington’s objectives.”⁵² Le Pen’s National Front has also borrowed extensively from Russian banks, leading to charges that Russia is funding the far-right party.⁵³ Le Pen and the National Front received 33.9 percent of the presidential vote and eight parliamentary seats during elections last summer.⁵⁴ This performance continues the National Front’s improvement in every election since Le Pen assumed leadership in 2011, doubling the party’s success since 2002.⁵⁵ While French President Emmanuel Macron’s election is certainly a positive sign for the European Union (EU) and

NATO, he has faced internal challenges and political support issues even though support for him has improved in recent months.⁵⁶ For example, General Pierre de Villiers, the French army's chief of staff, resigned in July after a public dispute with President Macron over military budget cuts.⁵⁷ The internal challenges fueling the National Front's success are not going away, and continued support for Le Pen could pull other leaders closer to Russia in an attempt to gain support, much like her views on immigration have pulled other leaders toward the extreme right.⁵⁸ Germany and the U.K. are also potentially declining as champions for a variety of reasons. Thus, across the board, strong support from NATO's champions is possibly decreasing, threatening NATO's ability to generate political will.

Combined with less-invested champions, increasing potential veto players are a threat to NATO's Baltic allies. Additionally, Russia's ties with Turkey's President Erdogan have warmed after recent tension. Both President Putin and Erdogan have met repeatedly about the Syrian crisis and the Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline project. Turkish Stream would allow Russia to restrict gas supplies to Baltic allies without disrupting sales farther west in Italy, France and Germany.⁵⁹ These aligned economic and security interests, combined with negative public opinion of NATO—76 percent of Turks have an unfavorable or neutral view of NATO⁶⁰—reduce the likelihood of Turkey supporting the use of allied force in the Baltics. Several allies, including Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, have recently elected leaders with strong ties to the Kremlin.⁶¹ These leaders, such as Bulgarian President Radev, believe that they should focus more on economic and political ties with Moscow and are hesitant to employ deterrent measures against Russia.⁶² Further, the Italian, Dutch and Luxembourg prime ministers have adopted a more pro-Russian stance and have fought against maintaining sanctions on Russia.⁶³ Finally, Germany remains a “selective ally,” wary of military operations, favoring economic over military interests.⁶⁴ Germany could become a veto player because of public opinion, the strengthening nationalist Alternative for Germany party,⁶⁵ and a legacy of avoiding force—including abstaining during the UN Security Council vote on the Libya intervention.⁶⁶ These potential veto players have a cumulative effect as they can strengthen and embolden each other and so conversely increase the political will necessary to employ allied force. It is clear, then, that domestic politics in any of the NATO countries can noticeably influence allied will.

Domestic politics can have a direct influence on champions or veto players in several significant ways. For example, they can negatively influence leaders when political parties threaten to use diverging opinion to gain political power. Current events in France provide a clear illustration of weakening NATO solidarity. Marine Le Pen and popular opinion could easily pull other leaders towards a pro-Russia position.⁶⁷ Allies lacking broad multi-party and popular support for defending Baltic allies are vulnerable. Pro-Russia parties could leverage popular opinion against NATO actions to gain political power in the event of a crisis or conflict. Disparate opinion and political power could undermine NATO's consensus on the use of force. In 2015, a Pew Research Center poll of eight allies (see Figure 2) revealed that only the U.S. and Canada retained over 50 percent of popular support for defending an ally in a serious military conflict with Russia.⁶⁸ Based on this data, France, Germany, Italy and Turkey all have a popular majority opposed to defending an ally who is in conflict with Russia. An expanded poll of all allies would probably depict a similar ratio of members' populations for and against defending allies.⁶⁹ Granted, this data is over two years old, and polls are often incorrect, but these perceptions are noteworthy nonetheless. While perceptions can change quickly, especially depending on the nature of crises and leadership, it is important to bear in mind the disruptive effect that popular opinion can have on allied political will to use force.

Figure 2

Pew Research Center Spring 2015 Global Attitudes Survey⁷⁰

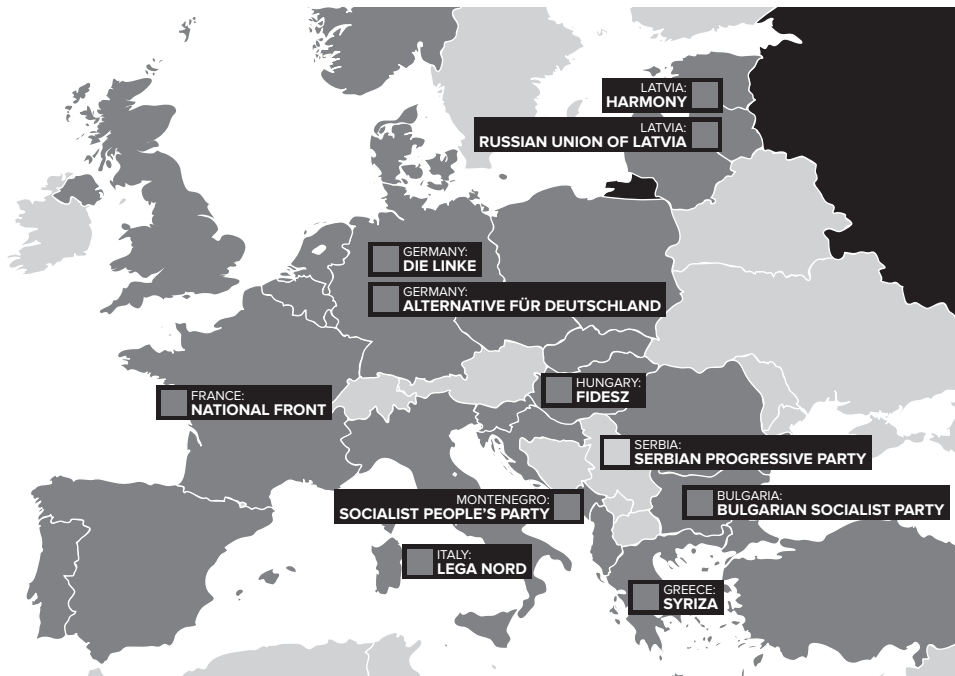
Q52. If Russia got into a serious military conflict with one of its neighboring countries that is our NATO ally, do you think (survey country) should or should not use military force to defend that country?

	Yes, should use military force	No, should not use military force	Don't know/Refused	Total
United States	56	37	7	100
Canada	53	36	11	100
France	47	53	0	100
Germany	38	58	4	100
Italy	40	51	9	100
Poland	48	34	17	100
Spain	48	47	5	100
United Kingdom	49	37	14	100
Turkey	29	47	23	100

Another issue related to diverging domestic political unity includes the strengthening of extreme right and left political parties across NATO. These parties often question NATO, are pro-Russian, support isolationist ideologies and are opposed to the EU and immigration (see Figure 3 for some examples).⁷¹ In the Netherlands, right-wing Geert Wilders was defeated in the March elections; however, his *Partij voor de Vrijheid* party still came in second with 20 seats—five more seats than they had previously held.⁷² Other parties are similarly gaining

Figure 3

Russia's European Party Relationships⁷³



ground or winning leadership outright; this is happening in France, Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and several other allied nations. Internal disunity could expose allied fissures and reduce NATO's political will to defend the Baltic allies against Russia.

On the positive side, consolidated domestic pressure can constrain options and force leaders to defend Baltic allies. The United States provides the best example of this phenomenon. Although the Trump administration has expressed questionable support for NATO and Baltic allies, the administration would face significant challenges overcoming domestic constraints; the U.S. government retains broad bipartisan consensus that a return to isolationism would be self-destructive.⁷⁴ Further, Congress easily passed the 2017 European Reassurance Initiative for \$3.4 billion, demonstrating sustained bipartisan support for NATO and recognition that Russia is a threat.⁷⁵ Significant members of the Trump administration's cabinet also support NATO and view Russia as a threat. Secretary of Defense Mattis stated during confirmation hearings that Russia "is trying to break the North Atlantic Alliance" and we must work "with our allies to defend ourselves."⁷⁶ Many senior leaders have served in multiple positions across Europe and NATO.⁷⁷ These government and military ties between the United States and European allies make abandoning an ally in distress extremely unlikely. Further, according to the 2015 Pew Research Center poll, 56 percent of the U.S. population supports defending NATO allies.⁷⁸ In a 2016 poll, U.S. public opinion of NATO improved to 77 percent, further strengthening bipartisan support.⁷⁹ Thus, breaking ties in an alliance with deep U.S. commitments seems unlikely, even if part of the Trump administration is in favor of it.

In conclusion, NATO likely lacks sufficient key leaders who support the use of force to defend the Baltics. While the United States would probably defend NATO allies, President Trump's personal stance and ability to serve as an effective champion are questionable. The potential decline of European champions also inhibits political will and consensus decision-making. Further, the rise of numerous potential veto players creates greater obstacles for allied consensus and political will. Finally, current domestic influences, while positive in some areas, are generally negatively affecting leaders around Europe. Combined, these factors make it difficult to achieve NATO consensus or the political will necessary to employ force defending the Baltic region. NATO's political will is further stressed by component two, discussed below.

Component Two: Common Understanding of the Russian Threat

NATO displays some concerning problems establishing a common understanding of the threat to Baltic allies. First, NATO has three core missions and three different primary threats to address. Each geographic region and member prioritizes these missions and threats differently, which could quickly lead to trouble in a conflict. However, the alliance has made some improvements aligning missions, threats and resources since 2014. Second, predicting alliance perceptions in a future crisis is impossible. However, analyzing current alliance perceptions of Russian behavior portrays some divergence, which could indicate future issues. Finally, domestic political incentives, based on economic and energy interests, are already challenging European unity. Divisive domestic interests could inhibit allied political will in the future, especially in the event of a conflict. All of these factors indicate difficulties achieving a common understanding of the threat in the Baltic region. Without consensus on the threat, agreeing on a solution or achieving sufficient political will to act remains doubtful.

NATO faces significant challenges due to diverging threats, missions and geographic priorities across the alliance. In the 2010 Strategic Concept, NATO emphasized three primary

missions: collective defense, crisis management and cooperative security.⁸⁰ Numerous threats and priorities arise from three missions, 29 allies and broad geographic interests. The Warsaw Communiqué emphasized the three largest threats facing NATO: the Islamic State (ISIS) and terrorism; Russia’s destabilizing actions and policies; and instability across the Middle East and North Africa.⁸¹ These reflect some of the geographic priorities across the alliance. Eastern allies—including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland—are predominantly concerned with Russia. However, many key allies are more concerned about ISIS and the Middle East than Russia, as depicted in Figure 4. Further, the Warsaw Communiqué ignores other potential challenges indirectly related to NATO, such as the migrant crisis currently distressing many allies.⁸² Thus, NATO currently has three primary threats, and each state prioritizes them differently based on geographic region and national interests.

Figure 4

Allies’ Population View of ISIL, Russian and Iranian Threat (Spring 2015)⁸³

	Please tell me how concerned you are, if at all, about:					
	ISIL		Russia		Iran	
	Very Concerned	Somewhat Concerned	Very Concerned	Somewhat Concerned	Very Concerned	Somewhat Concerned
United States	68	21	43	38	62	23
Canada	58	27	35	42	43	29
France	71	17	41	38	43	34
Germany	70	21	40	41	39	32
Italy	69	23	27	45	44	35
Poland	29	43	44	41	26	40
Spain	77	16	39	37	52	26
United Kingdom	66	21	41	39	41	29
Turkey	33	29	19	32	22	29

While NATO faces diverse threats, members have improved aligning perceptions since 2014—especially related to Russian actions. The Wales Declaration marked the beginning of recent alliance efforts to portray a united front against Russian challenges.⁸⁴ At Wales, in 2014, allies approved the NATO Readiness Action Plan (RAP).⁸⁵ Within the RAP, NATO implemented Eastern European assurance measures including increasing ground, naval and air policing in the Baltics and development of a NATO Response Force (NRF) and Very High-Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). Further, the alliance agreed on some “adaptation measures” including: an enhanced exercise regime; improving NATO command structures and building Headquarters Multinational Corps Northeast; and studying measures to counter Russian hybrid warfare threats. In 2016, the Warsaw Communiqué depicted greater unity and hardening of the alliance against Russia by increasing the use of deterrence terminology—thirty-seven uses compared to just thirteen in the Wales Declaration.⁸⁶ This change in language indicated a shift from assuring allies to deterring Russia. Allies at the Communiqué also declared the VJTF and NRF operational and agreed to establish an Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Poland, beginning in early 2017.⁸⁷ Finally, since 2014, the EU—including 22 NATO allies—has sanctioned Russia due to aggression in Ukraine, though resolve is declining.⁸⁸ Thus, there have been some positive trends in NATO’s threat perception, consensus and

preparation since 2014. While NATO has improved threat perception somewhat since 2014, many allies disagree about Russia’s underlying motivations and intent.

Understanding how various allies might perceive Russian actions in a future crisis may depend on their perception of Russian behavior now. Multiple NATO allies are currently debating the intentions of Russia, degree of Russian responsibility for European instability and how best to address the threat. For example, many key allied populations view Russia as a military threat to one degree or another, as depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5

NATO Views of Russian Threat (Spring 2015)⁸⁹

Q27. In your opinion, how much of a military threat, if at all, is Russia to its neighboring countries, aside from Ukraine? A major threat, a minor threat or not a threat?

	Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	Don't know/ Refused	Total
United States	59	33	4	4	100
Canada	44	42	8	7	100
France	51	40	8	0	100
Germany	38	48	13	1	100
Italy	44	34	15	7	100
Poland	70	19	4	6	100
Spain	49	38	10	4	100
United Kingdom	53	36	7	4	100
Ukraine	47	34	13	6	100
Turkey	33	29	14	24	100

Figure 6

Perception of Responsibility for Ukrainian Conflict (Spring 2015)⁹⁰

Q27. Who is most to blame for the violence in eastern Ukraine? Pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, the Ukrainian government, Russia, or Western countries, such as those in Europe and the U.S.?

	Pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine	Ukrainian government	Russia	Western countries, such as those in Europe and the U.S.
United States	15	13	42	5
Canada	18	5	37	7
France	30	14	44	9
Germany	25	9	29	12
Italy	22	7	29	6
Poland	15	8	57	9
Spain	15	9	37	8
United Kingdom	17	7	40	7
Russia	4	26	2	50
Ukraine	9	8	45	6
Turkey	14	21	15	12

However, allies disagree somewhat on the extent of Russian responsibility. Notably, in the Ukrainian conflict, the German, Italian and Turkish populations ascribe significantly lower responsibility to Russia for the crisis than other allies, as shown in Figure 6.

Further, many allies disagree on the appropriate response. While many allies support providing some financial assistance to Ukraine, influential allied populations—including France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom—are opposed to providing Ukraine military assistance.⁹¹

Much of the debate revolves around whether to deter or placate and integrate Russia to address regional instability. States viewing Russian actions as aggressive and destabilizing often advocate increased defense spending and improving deterrent capabilities related to Russia. Allied members generally advocating this perspective are the United States, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the United Kingdom. These states often view Russian actions as purely aggressive and argue that the alliance should adopt a powerful deterrent position. Thus, in a future Baltic crisis, these allies would probably perceive Russia as the aggressor and support decisive actions and deterrence.

States favoring integration and cooperation with Russia argue for decreasing tension and sanctions and increasing economic and institutional integration. One notable example includes the German President Steinmeier, who, as Foreign Minister in 2016, argued that NATO actions amounted to “saber-rattling and warmongering.”⁹² Further, several states have advocated reducing sanctions and increasing economic and political cooperation. Some of these states include portions of German and French leadership, Italy, Turkey, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Slovakia. These allies are less prone to automatically perceive Russia as the aggressor in a future crisis and are unlikely to accept quick actions or strong deterrence as the solution to a crisis.

These divergent perceptions of Russian actions challenge NATO’s ability to create cohesion and consensus rapidly. Without unity as to the root causes of the problem affecting eastern alliance security, the probability of a unified response or solution diminishes considerably. Further, domestic factors, such as economic and energy ties, may reduce allied will to confront Russia in a conflict or crisis.

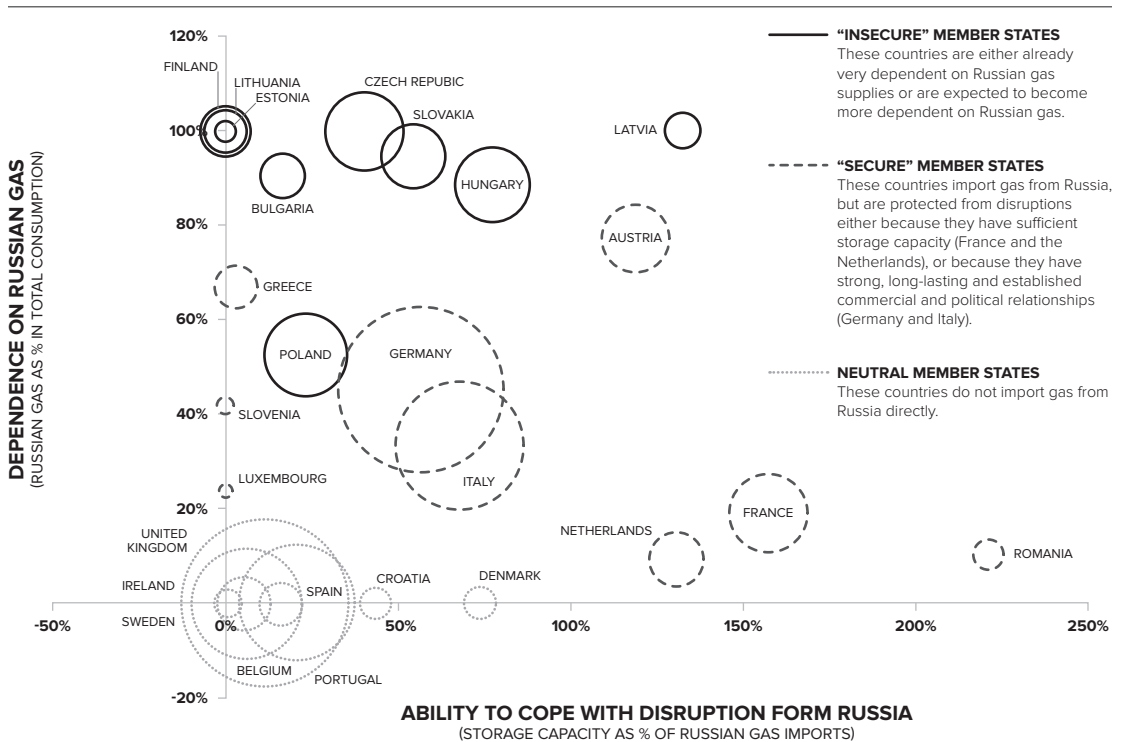
More than one named (VOL)	All of the above (VOL)	None of the above (VOL)	Don't know/refused	Total
0	1	1	22	100
2	2	0	29	100
0	1	0	2	100
3	5	0	17	100
7	4	1	23	100
5	5	0	8	100
3	5	1	21	100
2	2	1	24	100
8	4	0	4	100
16	12	0	3	100
2	2	3	31	100

Domestic motivations—such as economic, energy and other security interests—can limit allied will to confront Russia. Many allies advocating for reduced sanctions and improved integration with Russia have strong motivations for increased cooperation, including economic and counterterrorism concerns. For example, Turkey and Russia have aligned economic interests in building the natural gas pipeline known as the Turkish Stream.⁹³ Further, Russia and Turkey have some common counterterrorism interests in Syria.

Although the overall impact of economic ties with Russia and sanctions due to the conflict in Ukraine are somewhat limited, certain sectors and countries are more significantly affected.⁹⁴ Russia ranks as the EU’s third largest trading partner, with total trade estimated at €285 billion in 2014.⁹⁵ Due to tension with NATO and EU sanctions, Russia imposed countersanctions in August 2014. These countersanctions affected the EU the most because 73 percent of the banned imports originated in the EU.⁹⁶ The economic impact of these sanctions and countersanctions are complex, because the steep drop in oil prices and the ruble’s declining value also affects trade revenue.⁹⁷ Impacts across the EU were estimated in 2015 to include the loss of 2.2 million jobs.⁹⁸ Countries that are geographically closer and more integrated with Russia—such as Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—suffered a higher proportion of the negative effects.⁹⁹ However, some Western European allies suffered significant economic losses. In 2014, French transportation equipment exports fell 12 percent, and Italian equipment exports plummeted 42 percent.¹⁰⁰ Further, Western allies face considerable banking risk if Russian companies default due to large holdings of Russian debt. France is the most exposed in terms of outstanding loans to Russia, followed by Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom.¹⁰¹ Thus, many allies have strong economic incentives to maintain non-confrontational relations with Russia.

Figure 7

European Dependence on Russian Gas Exports¹⁰²



Russia also retains significant leverage over many NATO allies related to energy dependence, as seen in Figure 7. The most significant to highlight are Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and possibly Greece, Italy and Germany. The Baltic allies and Poland have proven remarkably resilient to energy disputes. However, if Russia improves methods to distribute energy to other customers—such as through the Turkish Stream pipeline—Russia could effectively use energy denial as a weapon against Baltic allies. Energy dependence, combined with economic ties in other markets, could give Russia leverage in a crisis and diminish political will among vulnerable allies. Economic and energy fissures create conflicting interests and degrade consensus among the EU and NATO. Further, sustaining unanimous approval for EU sanctions among 29 governments is becoming more difficult, and the EU could remove sanctions in the future, reflecting diminishing political will in Europe.¹⁰³

In conclusion, ample evidence of diverging alliance missions, threats, interests, perceptions of Russia and domestic motivations exist. These fissures reduce the probability of unified alliance political will in the event of a crisis or conflict. Diverse missions and interests appear particularly vulnerable in the event of a conflict, though the alliance does show several positive trends in this regard. Differing perceptions of Russian actions, while they exist, are harder to predict in the event of a future crisis. The nature of the crisis, ambiguity, speed and allied culpability will all likely play a prominent role. Finally, domestic political incentives, based on economic and energy ties, are currently challenging European unity. Thus, while positive indicators certainly exist, causes for concern remain. Divergent understanding of the problem also creates tension in developing consensus on potential solutions.

Component Three: Commonly-Perceived, Potentially-Effective Solution Available

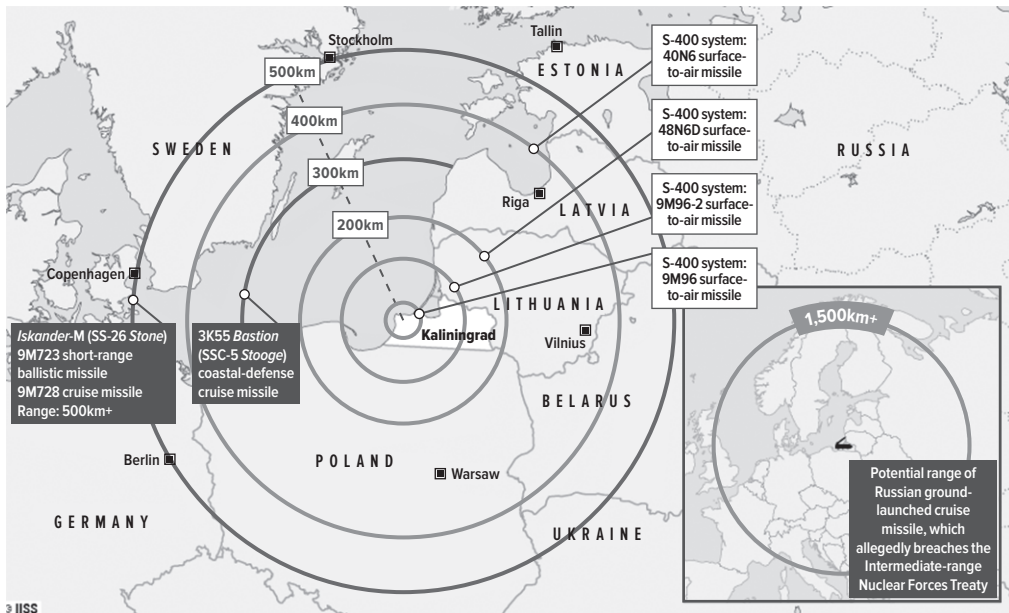
A commonly-perceived, potentially-effective solution is the strongest allied condition of political will examined in this study. NATO remains the most capable military alliance in the world; it has significant funds to invest if required to do so in a crisis or conflict. However, several negative indicators exist. First, declining capabilities, investment and unequal participation reduce NATO's relative advantage and probability of employing effective force. Second, the alliance faces some challenges addressing problems preventatively. Third, on the positive side, NATO has started actively adapting and learning to create long-term flexible solutions for political leaders to address the Russian threat. NATO's latent military and economic power show that this component of political will remains relatively strong, though some weaknesses are present.

Declining capabilities and unequal participation reflect some divisions in the alliance regarding the possible use of hard power. Any conflict between NATO and Russia, including limited operations in the Baltic region, would likely require high-intensity capable combat forces.¹⁰⁴ Even limited combat operations would display many characteristics resembling conventional conflict. Lieutenant General Hodges, former Commander, U.S. Army Europe, noted that Russian forces intercept communications, employ unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and rapidly reposition artillery and armor to engage Ukrainian units.¹⁰⁵ Further, Russia continues modernizing and reforming its military, particularly in the Western Military District, improving equipment and creating combined arms brigades, regiments and battalion tactical groups.¹⁰⁶ Finally, Russia's integrated sea, air and land missile defense—depicted in Figure 8—demonstrates that Moscow could disrupt NATO operations throughout the Baltic region, Poland and potentially farther west. A 2016 RAND report argued that NATO currently lacks the capabilities in Eastern Europe to defend the Baltic region.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, Russia's integrated defense

network will require deploying NATO forces to fight into the Baltic region in a heavily contested environment. Thus, to have a credible solution, NATO requires capable conventional forces, able to reposition quickly and fight in contested, high-intensity environments.

Figure 8

Kaliningrad, Russia Missile Defense Ranges¹⁰⁸



While Russia has emphasized regaining conventional capabilities, most NATO allies have allowed conventional capabilities to atrophy and decline. During the global war on terror, the United States pushed allies to develop more expeditionary forces, at the cost of larger heavy conventional forces. For example, allied tanks have declined in number from approximately 24,000 in 1991¹⁰⁹ to well below 10,000 today.¹¹⁰ Since 2009, NATO military endstrength has also declined by 438,000¹¹¹ and allied defense budgets have declined by \$137 billion¹¹²—from 3.29 percent to 2.43 percent of allied Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹¹³ At the Wales Summit, these concerns resulted in allies agreeing “to reverse the trend of declining defense budgets . . . and to further a more balanced sharing of costs and responsibilities.”¹¹⁴ Allies further agreed to spend 2 percent of their GDP on defense and “20% of their defense budgets on major equipment.”¹¹⁵ Allies failing these standards would aim to meet these guidelines before 2024. However, based on NATO’s calculations as depicted in Figure 9, only Estonia, Greece, Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States meet these standards. Further, rather than increasing, 11 allies’ budgets have decreased as a percentage of GDP since 2014. Declining investment in capabilities depicts a lack of political will by failing to invest in future security. These declining capabilities and the disparity of allies meeting commitments have created unequal participation across the alliance and resulted in tension among allies.

What does this unequal participation and the resulting tension look like in practical terms? The United States provides 72 percent of defense spending from NATO allies.¹¹⁶ Further, the United States dominates much of NATO’s capabilities, including: over 40 percent of allied military personnel;¹¹⁷ approximately 50 percent of the armored combat vehicles; and much higher

Figure 9

NATO Defense Spending as a Percentage of National GDP¹¹⁸

Based on 2010 prices

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016e
Share of real GDP (%)								
NATO Europe	1.69	1.64	1.55	1.53	1.50	1.46	1.44	1.47
Albania	1.52	1.56	1.53	1.49	1.41	1.35	1.16	1.11
Belgium	1.16	1.08	1.05	1.05	1.02	0.97	0.91	0.91
Bulgaria	1.74	1.64	1.32	1.34	1.46	1.32	1.26	1.30
Croatia	1.62	1.54	1.60	1.53	1.47	1.41	1.37	1.21
Czech Republic	1.52	1.29	1.07	1.05	1.03	0.95	1.04	1.01
Denmark	1.34	1.40	1.29	1.32	1.20	1.13	1.10	1.14
Estonia	1.80	1.70	1.68	1.90	1.91	1.96	2.09	2.18
France	2.02	1.96	1.87	1.87	1.86	1.83	1.80	1.79
Germany	1.39	1.35	1.28	1.31	1.22	1.19	1.18	1.20
Greece	3.08	2.64	2.38	2.29	2.21	2.21	2.38	2.36
Hungary	1.14	1.04	1.05	1.04	0.95	0.87	0.93	1.02
Italy	1.42	1.35	1.30	1.24	1.20	1.08	1.01	1.11
Latvia	1.21	1.06	1.02	0.88	0.93	0.94	1.04	1.46
Lithuania	1.07	0.88	0.79	0.76	0.76	0.88	1.14	1.49
Luxembourg	0.40	0.47	0.39	0.38	0.38	0.39	0.44	0.42
Netherlands	1.42	1.34	1.25	1.23	1.16	1.15	1.13	1.16
Norway	1.54	1.52	1.51	1.47	1.48	1.52	1.47	1.55
Poland	1.70	1.77	1.72	1.74	1.72	1.85	2.22	2.01
Portugal	1.53	1.49	1.49	1.41	1.44	1.31	1.32	1.38
Romania	1.33	1.24	1.28	1.22	1.28	1.35	1.45	1.41
Slovak Republic	1.52	1.27	1.09	1.09	0.98	0.99	1.13	1.12
Slovenia	1.59	1.61	1.30	1.17	1.06	0.98	0.94	1.02
Spain	1.13	1.03	0.94	1.04	0.93	0.92	0.93	0.90
Turkey	2.06	1.93	1.76	1.76	1.75	1.70	1.67	1.69
United Kingdom	2.46	2.48	2.41	2.18	2.29	2.19	2.08	2.17
North America	4.91	4.46	4.42	4.09	3.77	3.50	3.32	3.36
Canada	1.39	1.16	1.23	1.10	0.99	1.01	0.98	1.02
United States	5.29	4.81	4.77	4.42	4.08	3.78	3.58	3.61
NATO Total	3.29	3.04	2.98	2.82	2.65	2.50	2.40	2.43

percentages of advanced equipment, such as fighter aircraft and UAVs.¹¹⁹ Three allies—the United Kingdom, France and Germany—constitute 55 percent of European defense spending.¹²⁰ While budget disparity remains the simplest method of depicting unequal participation, unequal participation is also reflected in allies' capabilities and, to some degree, in their training exercise involvement.

In addition to creating tension among allies, unequal participation also demonstrates insufficient political will to commit resources—time, money and energy—for the common defense. The United States most often highlights allied disparity in contributions. In June 2011, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates challenged alliance members over unequal contributions and participation, arguing that the alliance had split into two tiers: members of the alliance “willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of alliance commitments, and those who enjoy the

benefits of NATO membership . . . but don't want to share the risks and costs."¹²¹ More recently, unequal participation has increased debate among some U.S. scholars about the need for NATO and overseas commitments.¹²² Further, in February, Secretary of Defense Mattis issued an ultimatum to allies about the changing politics in America. "I owe it to you all to give you clarity on the political reality in the United States and to state the fair demand from my country's people in concrete terms. . . . America will meet its responsibilities, but if your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to the alliance, each of your capitals needs to show its support for our common defense."¹²³ Thus, unequal participation creates fissures in NATO and potentially deprives solutions of some credibility, both of which can reduce political will.

The decline in allied conventional capabilities has created numerous preventable problems challenging allied use of force in the Baltic region. Freedom of movement (FOM) is a good example because it is critical in being able to rapidly reposition forces to the Baltics, especially in a contested environment. NATO suffers significant challenges related to FOM, including: insufficient rail cars to move one U.S. armored brigade in Europe; limited heavy equipment transports, further limited by regulations restricting weight per axel in the EU; incompatible fuel nozzles for vehicles, particularly armored combat vehicles; and multiple national and EU regulations complicating the rapid deployment of forces across borders.¹²⁴ These challenges are all relatively cheap to solve; however, they require political will and international effort to be fixed. Limited FOM restricts political options in the event of a crisis and diminishes the probability of employing force if repositioning forces requires significant time. In October 2016, Lieutenant General Hodges expected one U.S. brigade to need three weeks for movement to Poland after landing in Europe, but also stated a crisis in the Baltic region would probably only provide five to seven days notice.¹²⁵ A recent RAND study argued that the United Kingdom, France and Germany would possibly need a month or more to each deploy one armor brigade to the Baltics—and each state would struggle to sustain those forces.¹²⁶ These FOM challenges potentially inhibit many positive changes NATO has made, such as developing the VJTF, notionally capable of deploying anywhere in Europe within seven days. Inability or unwillingness to solve these challenges reflects the complicated nature of alliance consensus and potential lack of political will to create viable military solutions to defend Baltic allies.

Allied inability to preventatively solve some problems, such as the FOM example above, indicates a potential lack of consensus for an effective solution. NATO faces other challenges, including: limited enablers, such as bridging and engineer units; command and control limitations, such as different networks and lack of interoperable radio systems; and significant interoperability, infrastructure and logistical difficulties.¹²⁷ These preventable challenges and issues decrease the feasibility of employing force, or at least employing force quickly and effectively in a crisis. If political leadership perceives a military solution as ineffective, employing force becomes less likely. Thus, unwillingness or inability to address these concerns could complicate political decisions in the future.

While NATO faces numerous challenges to the employment of force in the Baltic region, alliance adaptation and learning reveals positive indicators. Since 2014, NATO has initiated several measures to adapt and create long-term solutions for current challenges, which depicts greater political will than short-term solutions. The NATO RAP, NRF and VJTF demonstrate an effort to adapt and prepare for the current and future environment.¹²⁸ NATO increased allied confidence and capability by testing and training the VJTF during three major allied exercises in 2016.¹²⁹ Further, the EFP, formalized at the Warsaw Summit, strengthens these initiatives. The EFP creates an allied tripwire in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. As depicted in

Figure 10, it includes rotational forces from 15 allies structured around framework nation battalions from the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and the United States. However, several notable allies are absent, including Turkey, Bulgaria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Greece. These programs create capabilities designed to give political leaders more flexible and viable options for using force in a crisis. NATO has also established several institutional organizations to better prepare for potential conflict in the Baltics. These institutions include: first, Centers of Excellence (COE), such as the Cyber Defense COE in Estonia and Strategic Communications COE in Latvia, to train and educate leaders and specialists;¹³⁰ second, improved command and control structures including NATO Force Integration Units in Baltic allies;¹³¹ and finally, quickly establishing Multinational Corps Northeast with territorial knowledge and responsibility for the Baltics. These examples provide strong evidence of NATO’s emphasis on creating viable options for political leaders should a crisis arise, thus demonstrating some degree of political will.

While the alliance depicts positive adaptation, some significant issues remain. NATO improvements could resemble Potemkin Villages, unable to actually execute effective multinational combined arms operations. The most significant problems remain FOM, interoperable equipment and communications, integrated command structures and logistical challenges. These can all inhibit the rapid and effective use of force and may limit options available to allied political leaders. Further, initiatives like the VJTF and NRF remain tightly controlled by the NAC. Deploying or even training the VJTF or NRF remains a political consensus decision that could prove difficult in a constrained timeframe with limited information. Rehearsing complex crisis political decisions within a constrained time and information environment remains one of the most significant shortcomings for the alliance. However, finding the time and resources for heads of state, defense ministers and military leadership to wargame potential political scenarios remains difficult. Thus, while the alliance portrays many positive signs, questions and issues clearly remain.

In short, a common perception of a potentially-effective solution appears the strongest condition in this analysis. NATO portends many positive signs of improvement. Positive signs are institutional change, establishing infrastructure, recognizing problems and developing flexible and credible solutions to address them. However, several negative indicators exist, centered on declining capabilities, unequal participation and limited willingness to address some preventable challenges. Declining capabilities, investment and unequal participation are some of the most frequently cited weaknesses of NATO—and these indicators are only a few of many. While these issues are indisputably problematic, NATO remains the most powerful military

Figure 10
EFP in Baltic Allies and Poland¹³²



alliance in the world, retaining significantly more capability than any potential competitor. Failing to address preventable challenges does inhibit the effective use of force; however, if the alliance decides to correct these issues, many of them would likely vanish relatively rapidly. Thus, the long term emphasis on institutional change and adaptation remain stronger indicators of future potential.

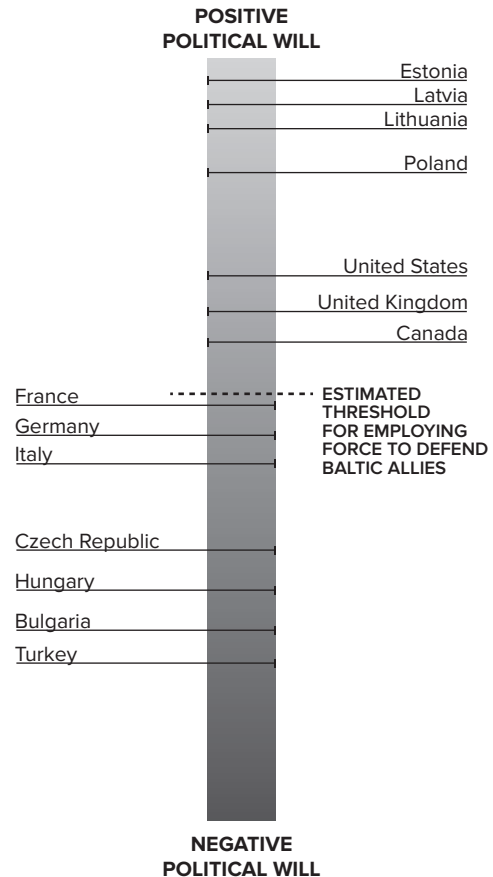
Conclusion: Dubious Political Will to Defend Baltic Allies

Based on the necessary and sufficient conditions of analysis used in this study, NATO’s political will to defend the Baltic allies appears dubious. Figure 11 provides an approximate illustration of this, representing the spectrum of available will. Most allies unrepresented on the chart would probably fall between Italy and Canada. While NATO does exhibit many positive signs, particularly related to some member states, significant negative indicators of political will do exist.

First, NATO probably lacks sufficient key leaders who support the use of force to defend the Baltics. The loss of the American president as a strong unifying leader and champion for the alliance is the most damaging sign in this regard. Even though the United States would honor commitments to defend allies, without a strong unifying champion cohesive allied action remains unlikely. The alliance may lose significantly more champions across Europe, further hindering NATO’s political will. Combined with the rise of numerous potential veto players and negative domestic political influences, achieving unified consensus and action appears unlikely. This component of political will is probably the weakest for NATO and the most threatened in the future.

Second, NATO displays evidence of diverging alliance missions, threats, interests, perceptions of Russia and domestic interests, all of which diminish common understanding of the threat. This creates exploitable fissures in NATO, reducing the probability of unified alliance political will in a conflict. NATO has somewhat improved aligning missions and priorities since 2014; however, any divergence of this sort is dangerous in a crisis or conflict. Perceptions of previous Russian actions are also split across NATO. These differing views impede achieving a quick consensus in a crisis or conflict. Finally, domestic interests, such as economic and energy ties to Russia, would likely inhibit some allies from employing force. Thus, while creating a common understanding of the threat has more positive indicators than the first component, significant vulnerabilities and weaknesses are present.

Figure 11
Depiction of Allies Political Will to Employ Force Defending the Baltics



Third, NATO retains significant strength in the third component—a potentially-effective solution—due to latent military and economic power. However, several negative indicators for this component exist. NATO capabilities and investment are declining. Further, unequal participation and investment creates political tension between allies. These fissures may erupt in the event of a costly and risky conflict. Addressing preventable problems for NATO’s use of force also remains a challenge. The good sign here is that NATO recognizes many of the problems, and, though moving slowly, does appear to be making some progress addressing them. Finally, NATO has actively begun adapting and learning to prepare for the future environment in many ways. Developing new unified capabilities, infrastructure, command organizations, reassurance initiatives and training programs are all positive indicators for the future. Thus, the final component demonstrates the most strength for NATO’s political will, though even that still exhibits some weaknesses.

One aspect that this study has failed to address is the intangible power of common values and the historical strength and unity built into an alliance approaching seven decades old. These concepts clearly hold significant power and form much of the glue which has held the transatlantic bond intact. However, developing measures, even indirect ones, for the intangible phenomena of common values and history remains impossible. Thus, assessing if these bonds are strong enough to withstand the pressure and weight of an existential crisis, which any conflict with Russia in the Baltics would become, remains unknown.

Based on the analysis in this study, NATO should address the potential issues related to allied political will. The transatlantic alliance is too important to risk letting NATO wither away from internal problems and fissures. To solidify the alliance, Europeans must demonstrate again that they are worthy of U.S. assistance and protection through active collaboration and partnership, and the United States needs to remember why European countries remain America’s strongest and most vital allies.¹³³ Addressing political will vulnerabilities, protecting will from adversaries’ attacks and creating more political will for the future foundation of NATO should become a critical alliance function. If NATO matters to each ally, so should allied political will.

Implications: Current Vulnerabilities and Protecting Alliance Political Will

Allied will has several significant vulnerabilities, and Russia is adeptly exploiting those vulnerabilities to weaken NATO. Further, there are several active measures that NATO can take to protect allied will in the present and grow more allied political will in the future. NATO’s success addressing and improving political will could determine the fate of the alliance and its success or failure in a future conflict.

NATO’s political will has several significant vulnerabilities. First, its decisionmaking structure is not designed for speed or war; rather, NATO’s structure is a political arrangement designed to enable consensus and unity. It builds in considerable political flexibility, which creates great strength once unity and consensus have been achieved. However, this structure is inherently vulnerable because of speed, ambiguity, conflicting interests and threats and domestic political concerns. Second, open democratic societies are appearing particularly vulnerable to adversary penetration, economic and political leverage and disinformation operations. Few good solutions exist to confront these vulnerabilities without turning allies’ open democratic societies into the closed negative societies that NATO was designed to resist. Further, as the Clausewitzian balance between the people, government and military shifts further toward the

people, adversaries can attack populations and political will without ever fighting through the military.¹³⁴

Russia appears particularly aware of the changing dynamics of conflict and allied vulnerabilities and is using multiple means to exploit and degrade NATO's will. Russia leverages current events, like the migrant crisis, to sow internal disorder and disunity in NATO allies. Further, Russia employs corruption and political financing to gain political influence; it currently funds and has political ties to numerous parties across Europe. Russia also uses economic and social influence programs to increase its own power and to degrade allied consensus. Tying these multiple means together with blended information operations allows Russia to influence elections and further erode allied political will.

Many actions that NATO could take would simultaneously protect allied political will in the present and build it for the future. First, the alliance needs to actively debate and address political will; ignoring political will facilitates subversive Russian actions. Second, NATO should conduct more political wargames and exercises to enable faster and smoother political decisions in the event of a crisis. These wargames could greatly improve leaders' communication, understanding of constraints and likely allied positions in an actual crisis. Third, NATO member governments should attempt to protect and harden societies more, by employing active information operations, improving education about the benefits of NATO membership and providing support for political parties not aligned with Russia. Finally, NATO should address the negative indicators from this study. One critical measure is improving allied interoperability. Unlike many current senior leaders, rising U.S. military leaders have limited experience in Europe with NATO allies. Active officer exchange programs could increase linguistic, regional and military knowledge, experience and interoperability. Overtime, these exchange programs would improve the ability to connect units and operate together in a crisis or conflict.

Many of these same measures, over time, could build more political will for the alliance. In the long term, the focus should be on developing educated and experienced leaders who recognize the value of NATO and are able to properly function in a complex allied political environment. Further, educating allied populations about the value of NATO and necessity for common defense remains important. Like the champions who implemented The Marshall Plan and built NATO, ensuring political will requires advocating for NATO and explaining its mission and achievements in plain and compelling language.¹³⁵

NATO's political will remains extremely vulnerable, and Russia is actively attacking it. The alliance should take steps now to protect political will and build more for the future. Allied elections in the next few years could be significant; they will likely indicate the strength or weakness of allied will. NATO's willingness to maintain the EFP and other measures taken since 2014 are also potentially important indicators of future allied will. Further, improving these programs—such as expanding VJTF capabilities or making the EFP a permanently deployed force—could reflect alliance strength. Finally, the selection for the next NATO Secretary General, in 2018, is a potentially important indicator. Selecting a strong leader who is able to act as a unifying champion in the face of Russian actions would be a good sign; selecting a weaker leader from an ally with questionable will would likely reflect diminishing allied political will. The next several years will likely portend the future of NATO's success and political will for years to come.

Endnotes

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