



Does Lithuania Want To Start A War With Russia?

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Doug Bandow
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So Lithuania, with an army of just 8,850 active-duty personnel and 5,650 reservists, is now enforcing a blockade of sorts against Russia through Kaliningrad. The latter was seized from Germany at the end of World War II and ended up separated from the rest of Russia after the Baltic States seceded from the Soviet Union. Vilnius is forbidding transport of coal, metals, electronics, and other E.U.-sanctioned products to Kaliningrad, whose governor said that roughly half of the territory's typical imports were on the ban list. Lithuanian officials claimed to be only "following orders," as it were, from a higher authority: "We just implement the sanctions, which were imposed on European Union level, and this has nothing to do with the bilateral relations between Russia and Lithuania," announced Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda. In NATO the smallest members tend to be the most aggressive. It's probably because they know they wouldn't be called on to fight any wars they caused. They simply are too small to make a difference.

So Lithuania, with an army of just 8,850 active-duty personnel and 5,650 reservists, is now enforcing a blockade of sorts against Russia through Kaliningrad. The latter was seized from Germany at the end of World War II and ended up separated from the rest of Russia after the Baltic States seceded from the Soviet Union. Vilnius is forbidding transport of coal, metals, electronics, and other E.U.-sanctioned products to Kaliningrad, whose governor said that roughly half of the territory's typical imports were on the ban list. Lithuanian officials claimed to be only "following orders," as it were, from a higher authority: "We just implement the sanctions, which were imposed on European Union level, and this has nothing to do with the bilateral relations between Russia and Lithuania," announced Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda. It seems strange for Lithuania to be waving a red cape at the Russian bear. The Baltic states have spent years wailing about their vulnerability to Russian attack, demanding that NATO and the U.S. do more for them. In fact, some Lithuanian officials have a sense of preemptive martyrdom. For instance, Laurynas Kasciunas, who handles national-security issues in Lithuania's Siemas, or parliament, asserted: "We are in a sense a modern-day West Berlin." That reflects a highly inflated sense of international importance—Berlin was a Cold War flashpoint because the U.S. and Soviet Union

were sparring over the future of Germany, a once and future dominant continental power. Lithuania's role? Not so much.

In fact, absent provocation, why would Russia attack any of the Baltics? What benefits would it expect to gain from overrunning three small nations, which lack the historical significance attributed to Ukraine? Especially considering they already are in NATO and an invasion likely would trigger full-scale war. Moreover, Moscow's difficulties in Ukraine suggest that the Baltic states might not be the easy prey once assumed, though Russia has doubtless learned from its mistakes and likely would seek a decisive result.

Still, giving the Putin government cause for war is foolish. Alliance officials acknowledge that, given current deployments, the three states likely would be overrun before meaningful assistance arrived. The Rand Corporation reported:

As currently postured, NATO cannot successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members. Across multiple games using a wide range of expert participants in and out of uniform playing both sides, the longest it has taken Russian forces to reach the outskirts of the Estonian and/or Latvian capitals of Tallinn and Riga, respectively, is 60 hours. Such a rapid defeat would leave NATO with a limited number of options, all bad: a bloody counteroffensive, fraught with escalatory risk, to liberate the Baltics; to escalate itself, as it threatened to do to avert defeat during the Cold War; or to concede at least temporary defeat, with uncertain but predictably disastrous consequences for the Alliance and, not incidentally, the people of the Baltics.

With its military deeply engaged in Ukraine, the Putin government is unlikely to open a new front, either by blasting through Latvia and then Lithuania, or using Belarus as a base to seize the 40-mile Suwalki Gap to link up with Kaliningrad. Absent full-scale mobilization, Moscow seems to lack the necessary troops. Still, most Western observers were surprised by Russia's attack on Ukraine, and many believed that Moscow lacked sufficient forces for its ongoing offensive operations in the Donbas. More surprises could be in the offing.

At the very least, threats from Moscow are sure to increase. Kaliningrad already is heavily armed. Moscow recently ran military exercises that included a simulated missile attack on Estonia. Over the weekend Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and announced the transfer of nuclear-capable Iskander-M missiles to Minsk. A Baltic war is an option no one should want to see exercised.

So why is Lithuania consciously raising tensions?

Perhaps Lithuania hopes to push NATO, meaning America, into a direct military confrontation with Russia. The timing is convenient, with the latest alliance summit occurring in Madrid this week. Some in Vilnius have advocated war. In March, the Siemas unanimously passed a resolution urging the imposition of a "no-fly" zone over Ukraine, which would entail an air war over Ukraine and require strikes against air defenses in Russia. Conveniently, only the U.S. could mount such an operation.

Although Lithuania's prime minister criticized the idea, Nauseda called the measure "a good declaration," while expressing caution. Has Vilnius since grown impatient? Of course, sowing the wind risks reaping the whirlwind, so a more modest objective is possible. Vilnius might hope to spur a flurry of Russian threats, which would add pressure to the Baltic states' pleas for permanent U.S. force deployments. What better way to advance Nauseda's earlier proposal for a U.S. garrison, which he argued "would be the best boost to security and deterrence that NATO could provide not only to Lithuania but to the whole region"?

Indeed, in April Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also advocated establishing permanent bases in Eastern Europe. He suggested making U.S. forces rotational, but once facilities were established, a permanent presence would be the logical next step. Indeed, CNN reported that "the Pentagon recently announced replacement troops for those temporary rotations, signaling the increased U.S. presence will be maintained for some time to come," noting that "The Pentagon announced that approximately 10,500 US Army personnel would be deployed to Europe in the coming weeks and months to replace forces that are already there."

Others in Washington back this approach. For instance, last week the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon contended: "NATO should establish enough combat punch in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that it could credibly fight to protect these countries' territories in a future war against Russia, while awaiting reinforcement from points further west."

Why should the U.S. provide these troops? Moscow's attack on Ukraine caused the Europeans to announce that now, finally, after more than seven decades of cheap-riding on America, they would spend more on their own defense. *Once a freeloader, always a freeloader!* Apparently that is what even the Biden administration wants. The U.S. continues to do more for the Europeans so the Europeans don't have to. Since February, the Biden administration added 40,000 troops to Europe. Reported CNN: "The US is expected to keep 100,000 troops stationed in Europe for the foreseeable future.... The numbers could temporarily increase if NATO carries out more military exercises in the region, and the U.S. could add additional bases in Europe if the security environment changes, the officials added."

Which proved to be only too true. Yesterday, during the NATO summit, the Pentagon announced numerous "long-term commitments to bolster European security," including the installation of permanent forces in Poland, enhanced rotational units in the Baltics and Romania, and various personnel and materiel elsewhere around the continent. Moreover, the Defense Department stated that "All of these combat-credible forces and enablers are supported by significant investments in the long-term U.S. presence in Europe," adding that the Department of Defense "continues to execute \$3.8 billion in European Deterrence Initiative funding (with another \$4.2 billion requested in FY23) for rotational forces, exercises, infrastructure (construction of storage facilities, airfield upgrades, and training complexes) and prepositioned equipment."

That figure is for the U.S., which continues to hike its military outlays. In contrast, despite modest European expenditure increases after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas, most NATO members continue to lag badly in their military outlays. Last year, only one member state allocated a greater share of its GDP to the military than did America: Greece, which edged Washington by .02 percent, and focused its military efforts against fellow NATO member Turkey, not Russia. Overall, only seven European members hit the official 2 percent guideline.

Even that number is scandalously low for the Baltics and Poland, which have relentlessly lobbied for a greater American presence in their nations. Why would countries convinced that their independence was threatened spend only a couple cents out of every euro (or zloty) to protect themselves? Ukraine demonstrated the utility of a competent territorial defense. And anyone expecting someone else to come to their aid should exert their maximum effort at the start, not focus on political lobbying for increased subsidies from Uncle Sam.

Where does Europe stand on Lithuania's incendiary ploy? The European Union's foreign affairs "High Representative" Josep Borrell—someone with a great title but little useful to do—said he was "always worried about Russian retaliations," but defended Lithuania, explaining that "it is not guilty, it is not implementing national sanctions, it is not implementing their will."

However, behind the scenes, E.U. officials waffled nervously. Politico observed "a thinly veiled but pretty solid contradiction between Lithuania's statement, which claims the E.U.'s sanctions include a ban on transit of metals and therefore Lithuania must block such transit to Kaliningrad, and the Commission spokesman, who said Lithuania merely has to perform 'proportionate' checks 'while allowing free transit'." Indeed, an unnamed "senior official" told Politico that "certain Balts profited to ramp up the pressure."

No doubt they did. And in doing so, Vilnius knowingly and recklessly stoked the fire burning in Europe's East.

Ukraine has been wronged by Russian aggression. Americans rightly support Kiev's defense of its independence and sovereignty. But a more important U.S. interest is preventing the conflict from spreading and escalating. Even if no one really wants that—at its worst a full-scale conventional war among major industrialized states topped by nuclear exchanges—the longer the current fighting continues the greater the chance of hostilities spinning out of control.

Washington should privately deliver a clear and tough message to Vilnius and other capitals throughout Europe, especially in the East: Inciting Moscow to strike would relieve the U.S. of any obligation to defend them, even if they are NATO members. It is vital for America and the rest of Europe to keep the dogs of war leashed if at all possible.

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