

Analysts says Moscow lacks forces to seize and hold the Baltics

Opinion

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“One should not forget,” an Estonian defense analyst says, “that Lithuania’s border with Russia is only with East Prussia [that is, Russia’s Kaliningrad oblast]. Moscow would thus need the territory of Belarus for any such large operation. How prepared is the political leadership of Belarus to participate in such an adventure?”

By Paul Goble* for “Windows on Eurasia”: Yury Dolinsky, a Russian analyst who specializes on the Baltic countries, says that most residents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, however much they say they are worried about the Russian threat, believe that their membership in NATO will keep Moscow from invading or force Moscow to withdraw if it does invade to test the Western alliance. But Jaan Murumets, a senior Estonian military analyst who now works at Tallinn’s Center for Defense Studies, says that there is another reason why Russia will not invade it lacks the available forces to seize and then hold the territory of the three countries and control their borders (svpressa.rupoliticarticle119255). In remarks widely quoted in the Estonian and Russian media, Murumets said that a rapid Russian invasion and re-occupation of the Baltic countries “would be physically impossible.” Moscow would need “a minimum” of two divisions for each of these tasks, something it does not currently have available. Moreover, “one should not forget,” the Estonian defense analyst continues, “that Lithuania’s border with Russia is only with East Prussia [that is, Russia’s Kaliningrad oblast]. Moscow would thus need the territory of Belarus for any such large operation. How prepared is the political leadership of Belarus to participate in such an adventure?” Murumets concedes that “Estonia itself could not give a worthy response in the event of an invasion by the Russian Federation and that Russian forces are in a position to seize Tallinn, Paldiski and other key points, but not for long.” Russia lacks the troops to support such an occupation and Estonia has resources of its own. The Estonian analyst’s words appear to be a kind of refutation of the conclusion of Zbigniew Brzezinski who said not long ago that “One fine day, that is, literally in one day, Putin will simply seize Riga and Tallinn. Then we will say how horrible that is and how upset we are … But of course, we will not be able to do anything about it.” Murumets, in fact, is making another and more important point. Militarily, Russia is overextended given its campaign in Ukraine. But by suggesting that Moscow isn’t in a position to openly invade Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, he is in effect urging them and their Western supporters to focus on the other steps Moscow can take against them. Not long ago, the Estonian defense analyst suggested that Russia would be unlikely to invade. Instead, he argued, Moscow almost certainly would use an indirect or “soft” approach, one that subverted the existing order of one or more of the three but in a manner unlikely to lead NATO to invoke Article Five. The Baltic militaries and NATO forces are focused on how to prevent or repel a Russian invasion. What Murumets is insisting on is that Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians need to focus on all the domestic divisions Moscow has exploited and could be expected to exploit further in the future. If Russian tanks came over the borders of the Baltic countries, their militaries would certainly fight and

NATO might come in. But if Moscow uses television broadcasts, corruption, and the other features of Vladimir Putin's "hybrid war" to undermine them, neither the Baltic armies nor NATO are likely going to be in a position to respond. Consequently, while Murumets is almost certainly correct that Moscow won't invade Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, he is even more correct in suggesting that the three and their supporters in the West need to think about more than the use of military power to deter and repel Russian aggression. During World War II, US General George Patton observed that with tanks, fixed fortifications had ceased to be effective: mobile war allowed anyone who understood the situation to go around them. Now, it is time to recognize that military forces, however important they are, cannot be the only focus of defense an opponent like Putin will simply go around them.

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*The commentary above is from Paul Goble's "Windows on Eurasia" series and appears here with the author's permission. Contact Goble at: paul.goble@gmail.com.
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