

Research Article

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Should Russian Military Leaders Opt for Tactical Escalation in the Baltic States and Kaliningrad?¹

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Abstract: Russia once again pushes its way to emerge as a major power in the international order after losing this status in the modern ‘time of troubles’ in the 1990s. Its political and military strategic leaders demonstrated willingness to employ all instruments of power as means of escalation to achieve this goal. Meanwhile, tactical military commanders are the ones in direct control of military escalation means and therefore their motivations, agility and rationality are also important factor in the Russian escalation processes towards the West. This research will look at these processes through lenses of game and decision-making theories.

Keywords: Baltic; Russia; Escalation.

1 Introduction

In 2014, right after the annexation of Crimea, President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin in his address to the State Duma expressed his and many Russian political and military leaders’ feelings about centuries-long unfounded non-acceptance and containment of Russia. Then he delivered a kind of warning to the West that Russia might ‘snap back hard’ if compressed over the threshold limit (Presidential Executive Office, 2014). Putin demonstrated his resolve already before snatching Crimea when Moscow tricked Georgia into the war through the provoked escalation in South Ossetia (Kofman, 2018). Since then, the Kremlin increasingly employs confrontation policy towards the West in diplomatic, economic, information, cyber and military domains. In merely 300 years, Russia, for the third time, pushes its way to emerge as a major power in the international order after losing its status in the modern ‘time of troubles’ in the 1990s (Ziegler, 2009). It is widely recognised that the likely way of confrontation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) would be kept under the threshold of conventional conflict, assuming Russia’s inferiority in waging protracted war (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020 p. 29). At the same time, ‘hard power’ is the most proficient component of Russia’s power toolbox, and it already demonstrated a willingness to use this instrument. Consequently, Russia started to exhibit its containment’s dislike by engaging in military escalation and de-escalation interaction in near abroad where Moscow was failing to exercise the influence by other means. The escalation strategy is assumed as a practice to achieve political objectives in a relatively short timeline through military intimidation or coercion of an opponent.

Multiple advantageous factors make the Baltic States and Kaliningrad region as an ideal competition territory where Russia can inflict damage to NATO at low cost and reshape regional and even global security settings. The creation of new military formations, large exercises close to the Baltic States and military activities in neutral air and maritime space are often perceived as Russian tactical or strategic escalation towards the West. ‘Iskander’ missile deployment to Kaliningrad, intensified exercises and some bullying activities appeared on news headlines in the last decade. Likely, Russian higher military command orchestrated their development and military exercises in the Western strategic direction while recognising escalatory perception of these actions. The current power balance in and around the Baltic States is already at Russia’s advantage that can be used as a leverage in case of possible conflict in the High North or as

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a pressure and deception tool in the range of hybrid activities in the Baltic States. Much has been written about Russian political and military elites' motivations for the escalation game and its likelihood in the foreseeable future. Moscow might be committed to further securitisation in the Baltic region as a rational method of tactical escalation (Veebel, 2019) and opt for strategic de-escalation to prioritise other geographic direction.

Meanwhile, much criticism is addressed to the adequacy of the Western and the Baltic States' response. Indistinctive portrayals of Russian military activities as climbing a tactical escalation ladder lead to self-deterred West and linear reactions. The view from the perspective of Russian tactical commanders can support efficient deterrence options and help predict the odds of a tactical escalation. What would be the motivations for local tactical military leaders to wage an escalation today? They are held responsible for their troops' training and promoting the combat readiness that serves as means for strategic level mind games between Russia and the West. They are pawns in these games with their own perceptions and motivations. This paper will argue that despite possible strategic intentions, the Russian militaries are not likely instigators of a tactical escalation in the Baltic States and Kaliningrad because of favourable threat and power balance perception and improved military culture of the senior officers' corps.

This paper will not advocate Russia's behaviour in the international arena but will assess the rationale to opt for a tactical escalation from the perspective of Russian military commanders currently serving in the vicinity of the Baltic States. The international relations and escalation processes are analysed through neither realism nor constructivism theories. The distribution of power and geographic conditions in the region, Russia's and its agents' identities and interests are considered as far as it influences planning assumptions and behaviour of mid-level military leaders (Gold et al., 2017). Instead, those actors' interactions and escalation process will be examined through game and decision-making theories discussed in the first section of the paper. The tactical escalation in this research is assumed in the form of a tactical arms race, military confrontations and provocative actions that can deteriorate into a local or regional conflict. Aforementioned theories support the definition of variables to study the motivations of tactical-level commanders. As for any armed forces, Russian military developments are built around their threat assessment, operational requirements and capability gaps. The rationale behind the further arms race is assessed in the second section of the paper by analysing the threat perception through the lens the way Russia's operational and tactical leadership could see it. The third section evaluates the rationale of tactical military commanders to escalate through confrontation and provocations beyond given authorities and procedures. This evaluation is based on the research into potential motivations and agility of selected Russian commanders. The paper concludes with a summary of assessments and recommendations for the focus actions of NATO and the Baltic States.

2 Is Escalation a Rational Game?

The evolution of international relations and lowered thresholds for 'all-out' wars after the world wars of the 20th century brought the subject of escalation into the play (Davis et al., 1984 p. 3). The escalation can be described as a bargaining process to settle disputes that can end either in reconciliation or confrontation over the desired prize (Carlson, 1995 p. 515). States use their tools of power to climb the escalation ladder and increase the stakes of the conflict, thus influencing the opponent's decisions in one's favour (Davis et al., 1984 p. 4). The military escalation can take the form of an arms race, power demonstration, conflict and confrontation driven by the fears and motivations of involved decision-makers. The level of escalation is connected with opposing sides' understandings about the environment and willingness to tolerate imposed costs (Carlson, 1995 p. 530). Consequently, this process comprises both rational and irrational decisions based on belligerents' goals, strategies and resources. The same logic is observed in two-person competitive games that can explain strategies and rationale behind decisions. Lisa Carlson proposes the incomplete information game model to explain players' strategies with certain cost tolerance type and concludes that with an increase of disparity in cost tolerances, the weaker actor is likely to cease escalation at the certain levels (1995 p. 530). Meanwhile, Viljar Veebel uses the non-cooperative game model called 'dollar auction' to comprehend Russia's and NATO behaviour in the context of the escalation in the Baltic States and explain possible 'irrational and costly choices' if sides engage in sequential escalatory moves to compensate already committed resources (Veebel, 2019 pp. 186–188). The recent announcement of defence minister Sergei Shoigu about the formation of 20 new military units in the Western Military district in response to increased NATO activities near Russia's West borders demonstrate

that Russian strategic level decision making is informed by game theory calculus (Interfax, 2021). These examples illustrate dynamics between state actors in the arms race or securitisation type of the escalation with either deterrence or coercion objective. In such interstate stand-offs, threat perception and objectives are two essential factors for rational decision making.

However, proposed game models do not help to explain escalation in tactical level face-offs like a militarised crisis, force demonstration and provocation, which take the form of non-consequent engagements between the various players with different bargaining motives. Moreover, in this research, tactical escalation is assumed as individuality driven and not subject to nations' decision-making mechanisms. Although game theory provides mathematical models of conflict between rational decision-makers with objectives to maximise their expected payoffs (Myerson, 1991 pp. 1–2), tactical escalation can also be founded in irrational decisions. In such circumstances, confrontations are more analogous to two-person mixed-motive games where 'players' preferences among the outcomes are neither identical, [...] nor diametrically opposed' (Colman, 1998 p. 100). The intention to escalate can be on one side only while the other player pursues a cooperation strategy. Therefore, mixed motives are more than a mathematical phenomenon involving psychological aspects such as doubts, mistrust and risks. Andrew Colman compares the gains of Adolf Hitler in international politics with wins in an archetypal 2×2 game called 'Chicken' that involves some level of irrationality and madness (1998 p. 114). This game has been used to describe multiple escalations in international relations with the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962, which is the most known example (Snyder, 1971 pp. 91–93). The game involves two James Dean prototype decision-makers best described as two drivers speeding towards each other on the highway with two options – keep straight and win or die; or steer off and be 'chicken' or compromise (Colman, 1998 pp. 111–112). The uniqueness of this game is taking decisions simultaneously and the absence of a dominant strategy to win regardless of an opponent's choice (Stone, 2001 p. 218). As the game considers information about actors' past behaviour (Myerson, 1991 p. 324), it will require some level of irrationality if one wants to influence the opponent's decisions and win this brinkmanship.

Notwithstanding an assumption that Moscow often directs tactical escalation, various arguments can motivate Russian military leaders to engage at will in 'Chicken' type interactions. However, once engaged, their behaviour will depend on rationality and agility in the decision making. As the game theory can be assumed as a 'logical fulfilment' of the decision theory (Myerson, 1991 p. 5), one should look into the decision-making aspects of people involved in the 'Chicken' games where choices are made almost instantly, and outcomes might be deadly. Also, tactical escalation in interstate military affairs is closely tied with high stakes and uncertain outcomes. The naturalistic decision-making theory describes strategies used in such an environment and is often applied by decision-makers in situations of limited time and information (Klein, 1998 pp. 4–6). Naturalistic decision making is based on perceptions created from peoples' experiences by 'matching plan to the situation' rather than weighting multiple options (Shortland, et al., 2018 p. 755). Thus, decisions are made on recognition of the situation and acceptable course of action and its evaluation through imagination. These processes are defined as the recognition primed decision making and mental simulation that helps to act reasonably based on experience-informed decisions (Klein, 1998 pp. 24–28, 74). According to Gary Klein's study of different decision-makers, the recognition primed decision strategy is likely to be applied in situations with larger time pressure, dynamic conditions, ambiguous objectives and experienced decision-makers (1998 p. 95). Meanwhile, the rational and hyper-rational choice theories explain players' behaviour through the lens of individual motivations to increase their own benefit and to impose loss or deny a benefit to an opponent (Askari, et al., 2019 p. 2). The rational choice strategy is a rather comparative method in evaluating options and more likely to be used in resolving conflicts and other complex situations and when higher authorities exercise direct control over subordinate decisions (Klein, 1998 p. 96).

According to examined decision theories, both the 'entire military career's and current position's' experience appears to be the essential positive criterion for calculating the subject's potential behaviour and rationality in imaginable conflict situations in the Baltic region. Where more experience is present, more likely rational and procedures-based decisions could be expected to maximise own payoffs while avoiding destructive outcomes. Meanwhile, choice theories reveal examples of rational and hyper-rational behaviour such as ambitions and jealousy, which are negative behavioural evaluation criteria. Based on these conclusions, several variables have been selected for the methodology used in the third section of this paper to confirm or deny the probability of tactical escalation from Russian military commanders.

3 NATO at the Doorstep!

Mutual counteraccusations Russia and NATO on military escalation and interpretations of the opponent's actions as well as inactions contributed to the deterioration of international relations and perhaps even led to Russian opportunism in Ukraine in 2014. This antagonism can have a cultural explanation (Blachford, 2020) or is rooted in history, but a threat perception is an essential factor motivating decisions and actions of the militaries. The collapse of the Soviet Union has left Russia with dramatically damaged conventional military forces in the 1990s and only nuclear weapons to serve as a deterrence tool to ensure state security (Ven Bruusgaard, 2016 p. 9). While at the dusk of the Cold War, the Soviet troops in Eastern Germany alone had five armies with 19 divisions (Zaloga, 1989 p. 13), at the beginning of the 2000s, Russia had only four divisions and five brigades in the Western direction against more than 40 divisions on the NATO side (Forss, 2010 p. 59). Such disbalance and Russia's security concepts of that time unveil a 'Barbarossa complex' within military minds with reasonable fears about inferiority during the initial stages of the war against NATO's conventional military superiority (Cimbala, 2013). The demonstration of the United States precision airstrike capacity in the Operation Desert Storm and Balkan Wars and the expansion of the global missile defence shield incapacitated Russian nuclear deterrence and reinforced the military thought behind the development of the conventional military might (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020 p. 8). Moreover, in the aftermath of NATO expansion in 2004 and Arab Spring in 2011, Moscow realised that it could not keep influence in the near-abroad and must address regime survival threats with nuclear deterrence alone. Consequently, the sentiment of containment and betrayal by the West on the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act (Deni, 2017) and the increase of resources led Moscow to shift towards strategic deterrence by strengthening its conventional forces, non-nuclear strike and non-military capabilities in the early 2010s (Ven Bruusgaard, 2016 p. 9), taking into account also the lessons learnt from Chechnya and Georgia wars. While many politicians and academia see this as Moscow's escalation towards the West, such a disadvantageous situation would have been a top priority for any military commander, particularly when political leadership intends to gain the world power status.

As any advanced military organisation, Russia's armed forces frame their operational and development thinking around available resources and intelligence assessments about threat scenarios. The Russian military threat perception is made by the General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) and very likely predicts substantial threats from the Western direction where NATO presumably can mobilise forces to menace Russia's security (Forss, 2010 p. 59). This assumption is based on the current edition of the Russian Military Doctrine that, for the first time, explicitly states the NATO expansion and force build-up as the top military risk (Security Council of the Russian Federation, 2014). NATO's plea to its member states for increased defence spending amplifies Russian threat perceptions about a direct confrontation with the Alliance (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020 p. 32). However, even Russian military experts in their analysis of the doctrine do not reveal NATO intentions to attack into the Russian mainland, and military threats are identified as 'false liberal revolutions' and arming up in the post-Soviet sphere of influence (Zvezda, 2014). It is doubtful that even the most risk-averse military planners in Russia genuinely believe in the 'NATO first' conventional incursion. However, as followers of the Prussian military philosophy (Petraitis, 2019 p. 100), they are very likely to possess such threat plans. One should look at the Russian military development and activities to assess Russia's military professionals' views on their fears.

The Baltic States' accession to NATO has raised the strategic importance of the otherwise relatively insignificant Kaliningrad region for military planners on both sides (Veebel, et al., 2019 pp. 111–112). Apart from being the historic liability, Kaliningrad offered an operational advantage as a flank guard in the Russian Western theatre of war (Westerlund, 2017). From Russia's perspective, it was also its vulnerability due to neglected combat effectiveness and forward exposure to potential NATO counteroffensive that would give them leverage over further actions of Russians (Frühling, et al., 2016 pp. 107–108). Only after 2016, when this military outpost started the transition into an irritating 'dread fort' on the Alliance's northern shoulder (Kofman, 2021). While only one new regimental level manoeuvre formation was established (11th Tank Regiment in 2019), the bastion has received many new and modernised kits – air defence and strike missiles, tactical aircraft and tanks (Kofman, 2021). Still, looking at the current force structure (Muzyka, 2020 pp. 42–51), exercise patterns (Petraitis, 2018 pp. 238–264) and intelligence activities, the likely mission for forces in Kaliningrad would be to defend the perimeter, conduct indirect strikes and limited offensive in Suwalki gap and deny adversary reinforcement routes in-depth thus providing a flank guard for all-out war in Western or Northern direction or covering force in a local war in the Baltic States. It is unlikely that Russian military planners take it for granted that in

case of war, NATO forces will not cross into Kaliningrad territory and will commit suicide in the ‘Kaliningrad corridor’ as predicted by the RAND report (Shlapak, et al., 2016 p. 4).

In contrast, Russian military development on the Baltic States’ Eastern borders was mediocre. Apart from the establishment of the 15th Army Aviation Brigade in Ostrov in 2013 (Army Technology News, 2014) and the reinforcement of the 76th Air Assault Division with the third regiment in 2018 (Batashvili, 2019 p. 9) and one tank battalion in 2019 (TASS News, 2019), there was no significant increase in combat capabilities. The 6th Combined Arms Army (CAA) that adjoins Estonia and Latvia is the least capable among three armies in the Western Military District (Muzyka, 2020 p. 19) and would require reinforcements if tasked with an offensive towards the Baltic States while also defending Saint Petersburg. Moreover, as Konrad Muzyka claims, this could also be explained by Russia’s unwillingness to provoke NATO to deploy forward more troops (Muzyka, 2020 p. 19). After all, by 2020, Russia’s Western Military District has achieved five times manpower superiority over the Baltic States’ regular forces. Only one-third of the land power is positioned close to the Baltic States (author’s own calculation). This force balance demonstrates that Russian military priority currently lies in Ukraine, where terrain and anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) gaps open the Southern corridor towards Moscow as Ukraine deepens its integration with the West. Moreover, it should be noted that many modernisation and reorganisation decisions, such as fielding ‘Iskander’ missiles and implementation of divisional structures, predate the decline in Russian and NATO relations after 2014 (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020 pp. 68–77), therefore often rhetoric from both sides about escalation is only part of information warfare.

Thus, so far, Russia’s force build-up and exercising in the Baltic States vicinity can be understood as reasonable risk management by developing and evaluating military capabilities against presumable threats. Moreover, from a tactical advantage’s perspective, there is little rationale for Russia’s military to further arms race in Kaliningrad and the Baltic States as the current force posture on opposing sides serves both Russia’s strategic and operational objectives. While the 6th CAA could seem neglected, new combat regiments West of Veliky Novgorod would ignite NATO to the next level of arms race where Russia could lose in terms of both costs and advantages. As it stands now, Russian militaries can preclude that they will seize the initiative in the Baltic States and gain both strategic leverage and operational flank security against NATO counteraction in case of apocalyptic contingencies.

4 Little Men’s Grand Game

Meanwhile, it is plausible that Russian field commanders are imposed with ‘right’ threat perception and political guidelines, thus cultivating further ‘Barbarossa complex’ in the minds of forward-deployed troops. Such circumstance motivates them to ensure combat effectiveness and demonstrate their readiness to defend the fatherland. Along with various other motivations, this can drive excessive and provocative actions against an assumed adversary. Although Russian tactical commanders are not leading players in the arms race games, but they are often behind the decisions about malicious military activities observed in the vicinity of the Baltic States – unannounced alert exercises and deployments close to borders, air space violations, live firing exercises in the Exclusive Economic Zones of other states and confrontational shadowing of Allied forces. All of these examples are often portrayed as escalatory actions (Hurt, 2020). Indeed, Russian military exercises increased in both quantity and quality. However, it can be explained as means to evaluate achievements of the modernisation and reforms (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020 p. 29). The majority of tactical exercises follow the path of yearly training cycles and can be easily correlated with new structures or capabilities implemented, while also with preparations for strategic level exercises that are also strictly observing four-year cycles since the late 90s. Moreover, training activities in new localities, aggressive approaches to Alliance borders and forces are often motivated by military rationale – the practice of needed procedures or intelligence gathering. However, it can also have rivalry or confrontational arguments – challenge adversary intelligence, spoil exercises and compete for recognition.

As a result of Russia’s military reforms, approved field commanders are more and more given control over combat forces and authority in decision making, while the General Staff has lesser operational control (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020 p. 147). It is implemented with advancements in the quality of military education and modern technologies. The Russian military command philosophy steers towards ‘mission command’ principles with centralised intent emphasised at formation-levels (regiments and higher) enabled with detailed planning and

an overarching command and control system (Petraitis, 2019 p. 100). While maintaining its cultural and traditional distinction, the Russian military decision loops have improved efficiency and speed to maintain a competitive advantage in network-based operational environments (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020 p. 145). Both military traditions and mission command values are crammed into graduates of the General Staff Academy, where only prudently selected top brass officers are admitted to transform them into trusted agents to their future superiors. Along with improved service conditions and social benefits for senior officers, their education and experience increasingly evolve a military culture close to Prussian military culture with loyal and competent officers' corps (Petraitis, 2020 p. 243). However, the personalities and abilities of field commanders can also have an impact on decisions and actions.

While according to the naturalistic decision-making strategy, military commanders would focus on workable but not ideal solutions in situations of confrontation, they will have to weigh also political, legal and ethical implications (Shortland, et al., 2018 p. 756). Thus, tactical commanders face a risk to either fail their mission or provoking unwanted international tension. The most exposed components of the military to this dilemma are aviation, naval, missile and high readiness units from whom higher commands expect decisive action against presumably hostile intents. However, the study of selected current and recent commanding officers from mentioned services and arms located in Kaliningrad and Pskov regions indicates that currently there is little likelihood of Russian tactical leadership opting for an escalation based on personal motivations other than threat awareness and standard procedures. The survey was looking to assess the rationality of selected individuals based on quantitative and binary variables that were available to the author (see Table 1).

This survey was conducted based on information available about research subjects in open sources – Russian Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces websites, local municipality webpages, news portals and Russian military journals and periodicals. The search discovered some information about service experience, military education and military awards, and also provided certain understanding of individual's personality from discovered interviews, notable service actions and misconducts. It should be recognised that Russian Armed Forces lately have made large effort of scrutinising the public information on their personnel and its activities in social networks. Still, the collected information is likely reliable, although assessments on ambitions and agility can be limited in their credibility as there were no interviews or direct observations conducted with research subjects.

The research delivered variables that were assigned positive and negative values and were interpreted into experience and ambitions or personal motivations what combined with separate agility assessment, formulated a person's rationality in decision making.

All assessed officers have experienced shameful days of Russian armed forces in the 1990s and subsequent resurrection in the 2010s, therefore, it can be assumed that there is some level of trust against state and military establishment. Only two subjects were related to publicly known investigations for their inappropriate actions in service. Both subjects are making part of officers not likely for promotion and those who serve in the same location for more than three years. A systematic personnel rotation policy can be observed as one-half of the commanders have assumed their duties in the last three years. The short tour of duty does not create individual bonds with the assumed adversary on the other side of the border. However, on the contrary, a lack of experience in the current position can negatively affect situation grasp and the subsequent decisions. Nevertheless, 60% of subjects have positive experience assessment that would predict rational decision making in confrontational situations by avoiding further escalation steps over delegated authority and prescribed procedures. Experienced and educated commanders are likely to recognise that once engaged, they might not have control over the further escalation and, unless it is not in higher intentions, they will put all Western front in an unfavourable position. There are only less than half of tactical commanders with the General Staff education; however, two-thirds of the other half are evaluated as potential candidates and promotable cadres. This evidence works against advantageous actions that can spoil a bright future. The survey results suggest that only 30% of subjects might act in a deliberate or hasty escalatory way motivated by personal ambitions or grievances. Besides, based on these facts and information about subjects' past actions and public statements, the agility assessment was conducted and used as a negative criterion in rational decision making. As the result of this analysis, 50% of research subjects were recognised with probable negative agility. Overall, there is no evidence of the dominant willingness of tactical commanders to escalate and engage in the 'Chicken' game on their own will. The divisional and higher-level leaders are generally assumed to be rational decision-makers; however, regimental and lower-level units might be sources of risk due to possible misperception of threat and opportunities to satisfy own ambitions.

Table 1: Research subjects and variables (based on open sources).

Variable Individual	Service experience (years)	General staff education (Yes/No, years)	Combat experience (Yes/No)	Attachment to locality (Y/N; years)	Agility assessment	Promotion ambitions	Command over high readiness assets
11th Army Corps MG Andrey Ruzinsky	32	Yes, 2011	Yes (Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh)	No; 0	Yes	Yes	No
11th Tank Regiment Col Stanislav Akamov	~25	No	Yes (Chechnya)	Yes; 7	No	Yes	No
336th Naval Infantry Brigade Col Andrey Lazutkin	~30	No	Yes, (Chechnya, Syria)	Yes; 6	Yes	No	Yes
76th Air Assault Division MG Sergei Chubarikin	~23	Yes, 2018	No info	No; 0	No	Yes	Yes
104th Air Assault Regiment Col Aleksandr Shipov	~21	No	Yes	No; 1	Yes	Yes	Yes
234th Air Assault Regiment Ltc Artyom Gorodilov	~20	No	No info	No; 4	No	Yes	Yes
6th CAA LTG Yershov Vladislav	~28	Yes, 2012	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
25th Motor Rifle Brigade Col Andrey Arhipov	~25	No	No	No	No	No	No
15th Composite Aviation Division Col Denis Kulsha	~25	No	No info	No	Yes	No	Yes
2nd Specnaz Brigade Col Konstantin Bushuev	~30	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
15th Army Aviation Brigade Col Igor Kroon	~28	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

CAA, combined arms army.

Table 2: Research summary (*source:* authors own).

Variable	Results	Remarks
Quantitative variables		
Years in military service	Overall range from 20 years to 32 years of service 60% - until 25 years 40% - over 25 years	All subjects were assigned a positive value on experience
Years in the current unit	Overall range from 0 years to 7 years 60% - <3 years 40% - 3 and more years	Subjects with <3 years were assigned negative values on experience and ambitions
Years in current rank	Overall range from 0 years to 8 years 70% - <6 years 30% - 6 and more years	One subject (8 years in the same rank) was assigned a negative value on ambitions assessment
Binary variables (Yes/No)		
General staff academy education	40% - Yes 60% - No	Subjects with GS education were assigned positive values on experience and ambitions
Combat experience (Caucasus, Syria, Crimea)	70% - Yes 30% - No	Subjects with combat experience were assigned positive values on experience and ambitions
Likely promotable	50% - Yes 50% - No	Subjects that are not likely promotable were assigned a negative value on ambitions
Attachment to locality (>5 years)	40% - Yes 60% - No	Subjects committed to locality were assigned positive values on experience and ambitions

5 Conclusion

Russia's resentment at being contained is constantly visible from its foreign policy actions. Despite economic and pandemic restrictions, Moscow continues to employ the military might as a tool of influence where its strategic interests were slipping out of a grip. The securitisation implemented by the modernisation and exercising the power of the armed forces is one of Russia's methods to preserve its own interests (Veebel, 2019 p. 193). A favourable contestation area for Russia is the Baltic States and Kaliningrad region, where it can mobilise and employ various power tools, including 'hard power', at relatively low cost to misbalance the Western desirable security environment. In this region, Russia has threat-based and operationally justifiable arguments to position its main forces. Also, it has access to neutral maritime and air space over the Baltic Sea to conduct demonstrative and coercive actions. Much of these efforts result in regional or broader tensions as they are often used or perceived as escalation to support belligerents' objectives in the bargaining processes between the East and West.

NATO, including its Baltic members, frequently fails to understand the true intentions behind Russia's military activities in the region leading to an inappropriate and ineffective response. While we can agree that NATO deterrence attempts have mitigated concerns about the Russian aggression against the Baltic States (Rostoks, 2020 p. 21), Moscow still has a competitive advantage in the region from the military perspective. Kremlin has demonstrated its will to employ this advantage with military conflicts and intimidation in near abroad, like recent events close to eastern Ukrainian borders. However, available examples were most likely driven by decisions for strategic escalation options. Meanwhile, tactical activities, such as force posturing and modernisation of specific capabilities and exercises, are much based on threat assessment and operational requirements. Russia will continue to develop its conventional forces short of tactical escalation in the Western strategic direction unless military planners would identify dangers to their advantageous position in the region. Any further escalation will likely be provoked by the development or repositioning of Allied joint deep strike capabilities that would throw Russian A2/AD superiority of the throne. Up

to now, NATO responded with quite linear steps in the form of ‘more boots on the ground’, which have been counter-attended by Russian rhetoric but not raised any militarist’s eyebrow.

This research also showed little likelihood for Russia to opt for tactical escalation initiated by tactical level leadership. The modernisation of the Russian Armed Forces and operational experience have increased the level of military culture at least at the senior officer’s corps, thus contributing to increased rationality of decisions at this level. Unlike the Russian president, military commanders are subject to rotations that preclude creating personal bonds and motivations for the unsanctioned initiative. However, as Andrew Colman reveals about players’ motivations in game strategies – ‘nothing succeeds like success in the field of brinkmanship’ (1998 p. 113). One who enjoyed the dominance over a Chicken’s mind will grow in confidence and could exploit the risky strategy again. Therefore, the assessment of both strategic and tactical threshold to start a conflict should be regularly conducted in correlation with NATO and the Baltic States own deterrent actions. Meanwhile, Russia seeks some strategic de-escalation with an individual approach to certain European powers and mid-powers through economic bargaining, thus distracting the West from the created military supremacy around the Baltic States. NATO should not fall into the trap of the de-escalation game but invest in asymmetric multi-domain solutions to step into Russia’s comfort zone while compelling Russia to act as a welcome host.

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