
RESEARCH ARTICLE

David vs. Goliath: Kaliningrad Oblast as Russia's A2/AD 'Bubble'

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The former Soviet military bastion, Russia's westernmost region, the Kaliningrad Oblast, has again re-gained its military strength. The process of re-militarization that was initiated after 2009, resulted in transformation of the area into Russia's Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) zone. In the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis (started in the late 2013) and growing alienation between Moscow and its Western partners, the oblast has stepped onto a qualitatively new level of militarization. At the same time, following changing nature of warfare, aside from military-related steps, the Russian side has heavily invested in non-military aspects as well. The analysis yields three policy implications. First, Russia's understanding of the A2/AD concept is different from the Western reading, and Kaliningrad exemplifies this supposition. Second, Russia will continue using Kaliningrad as a part of its growing reliance on asymmetry. Third, underestimation of Russia's resolve and/or Kaliningrad capabilities will have largely negative conclusions for the Baltic Sea region and countries that comprise it.

Keywords: Kaliningrad Oblast; Baltic Sea region; A2/AD bubble

Introduction

Following the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis in late 2013, the Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia's westernmost region, which is physically detached from the mainland, has for the second time in its post-1945 history been transformed into Russia's militarised outpost in Europe. On the surface, Russian actions resembled steps taken by the Soviet Union after de facto acquisition of the oblast. Nevertheless, the current situation does differ from the antecedent interim in three main ways. First, Kaliningrad is now construed as a tool of defensive (and, under certain circumstances, counter-offensive) operations. Second, Moscow has expanded the ways in which the oblast could be used, adding a non-military component to the military part. Third, having forfeited its former positions on the Baltic (economically, militarily and territorially), Moscow has shifted towards the principle of asymmetry with Kaliningrad allocated an instrumental role.

The goal of this research article, which draws extensively on a broad range of secondary data in the original languages, is to analyse the case study of Kaliningrad as Russia's most advanced A2/AD 'bubble' through the lens of Russia's strategic and long-lasting interests in the Baltic Sea region and altering nature and forms of confrontation with the West. Accordingly, I focus on the following: the strategic importance of Kaliningrad Oblast to the Russian side through the lens of 'asymmetric response' strategy; Russia's theoretical discourse on A2/AD and related notions; the current military capabilities of Kaliningrad and potential areas of accretion of its military potential; and certain non-military aspects ascribed to the oblast.

History as an Inalienable Trait of Russian Foreign Policy: The Place and Role of Kaliningrad

Historically, the Russian state was threatened from three directions: the east, the south and the northwest. From the battle of the Kalka River (1223) towards the last quarter of the 16th century (the conquest of the Khanate of Siber), the eastern flank (the so-called Great Steppe) occupied paramount importance. Having encountered militarily less developed China, the Russian side had effectively reached its expansionist limit

by 1689, when the Treaty of Nerchinsk was signed, which led to this theatre losing much of its former importance.

The southern flank would not cease to bring serious trouble until the end of the 18th century when Russia managed to crush the resistance of the Crimean Khanate (1783). Coinciding with the ebbing of the Ottoman Empire (the so-called 'Sick Man of Europe'), Russia's gains in the region ultimately enabled it to become the dominant Black Sea power. This however did not result in the resolution of major strategic objectives: Military superiority alone was not enough, as long as the 'straits issue' (Bosporus and Dardanelles) was not resolved in Russia's favour. Unable to control access to the Mediterranean Sea, Russia remained blocked in the Black Sea basin. This issue, long the central pillar of the Romanov's foreign policy, did not lose its pertinence after 1917, as it was picked up by the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin after the Second World War, who complained bitterly that Turkey, supported by England does not allow free passage to the Soviet navy (Remeslo 2015). The situation became even more complicated after the emergence of NATO (1949), a self-proclaimed defensive alliance whose main task, in the eyes of the Soviet political leadership, was the military protection of Turkey and the curtailing of Soviet interests in the Black Sea region. Important as these two directions were, a third theatre, the northwestern flank, was arguably of even greater importance, since its value was not merely measured in military strategic or geopolitical terms.

In this third strategic dimension, developments took a rather different trajectory: Having encountered technologically superior adversaries, Russia's initial attempts to achieve success suffered a sound collapse. The Livonian War (1558–1583) was not only a military disaster, it also proved to be an economic drain and a path towards the dynastical crisis that ushered in the so-called 'Time of Troubles' (1598–1618) and near collapse of Russian statehood. Derailment of its initial plans did not discourage Russia, though. New attempts were made in the early 18th century and were inseparable from the personality of Russian tsar Peter the Great for whom the Baltic Sea region was not solely a venue of potential territorial gains, but also a channel of modernisation and an opportunity to become a full-fledged member of the European balance of power (Gouzevitch 2013). The ultimate defeat of Sweden in 1721 allowed the Russian Empire to make a decisive thrust towards the accomplishment of its strategic objective: to become an integral part of the European balance of powers.

In the meantime, Russian control over vast territories stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea (which became possible after three consecutive partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1772–1795) became a mixed blessing. Broadening opportunities presented serious challenges related to the necessity of military protection of this huge landmass stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Carpathian Mountains ('The geopolitics of Russia 2012). In effect, this area (part of the Northern European Plain) would be used as the main invasion route in 1812 (Napoleon's Grande Armée) and 1941 (Nazi Germany and its allies) as well as in scopes of major military battles during the First World War. The necessity to maintain permanent control over this area as a means to halt potential attackers led Russian leaders to heavily invest in maintaining military superiority (in terms of troops and intelligence network) and, at the same time, wield control over two strategically important points: the Pontic littoral and the eastern part of the Baltic Sea. The latter could to some extent be secured by Kronstadt, yet after the emergence of Germany in 1871 and its rapid military maturing (accompanied by growing penetration in the Baltic Sea region), Russia's positions on the Baltic were seriously jeopardised, turning the region into an arena of intense competition/rivalry between Saint Petersburg and Berlin, which was only mitigated in 1907 with the Gubastov-von Jagow pact (Kulinchenko 2017).

The collapse of the Romanov Empire in 1917 and the subsequent Russian civil war resulted in the forfeiture of a major part of Russia's possessions in the eastern part of the Baltic Sea, which by no means meant Soviet final withdrawal from the theatre proven by the Soviet-Polish war (1919–1920). The Soviet ideology (with the 'beseeched fortress' concept) deemed encirclement of the nascent Soviet state to be one of the key objectives of the 'capitalist world', naturally marking Poland (with growing territorial claims) and the three Baltic countries as part of an 'anti-Russian sanitary cordon' deliberately established by the West (this issue has been particularly visible in Russia's post-2014 anti-Western propaganda with respect to Kaliningrad Oblast). Yet, enmeshment in a civil war (1917–1923) and the reassembling of 'national outskirts' (*natsionalnyje okraini*) seriously postponed the Soviet comeback in the Baltic Sea region. At this juncture, the about-turn was related to two main factors. The first factor was the pivot of Soviet foreign policy from the 'world revolution' to 'building socialism in one country' thesis. The second factor was the outbreak of the Second World War, which had a direct effect on the fates of the states comprising the Baltic Sea region. The issue of Soviet control over strategically important parts of the Baltic Sea reappeared in December 1941, when during his talk with Anthony Eden in Moscow Stalin unequivocally stated that Russia needs non-freezing

ports on the Baltic Sea (Rzheshhevskii 1994), putting a solid claim for parts of East Prussia (Konigsberg, in particular) as a means to destroy the 'sanitary cordon' and ensure the Soviet superiority in its north-western flank. At the Yalta conference (1945), Stalin went even further, underscoring the necessity of Soviet control over Poland as a question of life and death ('Yaltinskaya konferentsia' 2017). Thus, Stalin (whose *idée fixe* was to reach the boundaries and overcome the territorial gains of the Russian tsars) effectively continued the regional policy initiated by Ivan the Terrible and finalised by Nicolas the First, namely the restoration of Russian natural boundaries in the West (Shyrokorad 2018).

With the acquisition of Konigsberg/Kaliningrad as a result of the East Prussian Offensive (13 January–25 April 1945) and imposition of control over Poland and parts of Germany, the Soviet Union seemed to have gained full military control over the entire Baltic Sea region and even (arguably) managed to fortify its positions in comparison with the pre-1917 period. This image, however, was challenged by three factors. First, the Soviet Union had to face a multinational force (NATO) with economically and militarily strong leadership in the form of the US. Second, the lack of control over the Danish straits reduced the Soviet Union to being militarily superior in the region, yet unable to capitalise on this to the fullest possible extent, resembling to some extent the Soviet dilemma to the south. Third, after 1955, the Baltic region became a part of the NATO-Warsaw Pact 'frontier', which after the development of military air power and missile technologies made 'the Baltic Sea linked to the strategic entity consisting of the Kola Peninsula and northern Norway' (Ministry of Defence 2001), thereby compelling the Soviet Union to allocate additional resources to fortification of its north-western flank stretching from the Kola Peninsula to the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

At this juncture, it is interesting to note that the end of the Second World War resulted in an about-turn in the Kremlin's stance on Kaliningrad: The oblast, whose acquisition constituted one of the key pillars of Stalin's geopolitical aspirations concerning the Baltic, became 'Stalin's unfavourite child' (Kostyashov 2009). The tendency persisted well after the death of Stalin in 1953, covering the whole reign of Nikita Khrushchev (until 1964) and coming to an end only with the advent of the new lap of conservatism under Leonid Brezhnev. Apparently, the Soviets remained uncertain about the fate of Kaliningrad and did consider potential bargains in case of international crises.

From a military-strategic perspective, in spite of heavy militarisation (the actual number of military personnel deployed in 1945–1991 still remains a matter of debate), Kaliningrad was not viewed by Soviet military strategists as a self-sufficient offensive unit positioned against NATO. Rather, one could argue that throughout the Cold War the three Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and the oblast were viewed as a single unit, which was stipulated by integrated system of command, control, communications and intelligence (C3I). In Soviet military thinking, Kaliningrad and the three Baltic countries were allocated the role of a 'springboard' for potential military operations both on land (for operations in Central Europe) and sea (with capture of the Danish straits, which was secured by capabilities of local amphibious forces and mine countermeasures force that were the largest among the four Soviet fleets). These plans were subjected to some practical testing in 1981 during the largest regional strategic military exercises in Soviet military history under the code name Zapad-81 (4–12 September 1981) ('Zapad-81' 2017).

In spite of tremendous military might concentrated in the region (primarily from the side of the Warsaw Pact) and the ultra-conservative Brezhnev Doctrine (1968), the Baltic Sea basin escaped the pessimistic scenario and did not become a zone of open confrontation between two blocks. Apparently, the established balance of powers (in Soviet favour) played the key role, convincing Moscow that its defensive positions were strong enough to avoid a surprise attack by an adverse party (the so-called 'complex of June 22'). Paradoxically, it was the collapse of the Soviet Union – followed by the outbreak of war in Yugoslavia, NATO's eastward 'expansion' and severe criticism of Russian policies in Chechnya and North Caucasus – that destroyed the pre-1991 status quo that turned the Baltic Sea region into an arena of East-West confrontation. To the great bewilderment of many domestic and foreign observers, the region rapidly evolved into an area of tacit and later open geopolitical power play between Russia and NATO, with Kaliningrad becoming the centrepiece of brewing conflict (Sukhankin 2016a). Having lost much of its presence in the area (which drew an apparent parallel with the post-1917 Soviet state), Russia did not come to terms with this reality. The factor that made the post-Cold War situation profoundly different (and to some extent beneficial for Russia) was the Russian possession of the Kaliningrad Oblast. The area, which was erroneously believed to subsequently become the Baltic Hong Kong and/or a 'bridge of cooperation' between Europe and Russia (Sukhankin 2017c), failed to do so because of the Kremlin's rejection of the European experience in terms of neo-regionalism and apparent fear of losing the oblast to 'foreign irredentism' (Vypolzov 2016). These factors were profoundly amplified by the economic and military weakness of post-1991 Russia. A combination

of various factors led to severe economic troubles and neglect from the side of Moscow, turning the oblast into a 'double periphery' and Russia's 'backwater region' (Sukhankin 2014).

From a military-strategic perspective, it should be noted that the combination of the CEF Treaty and Russia's economic hardships resulted in Kaliningrad losing much of its pre-1991 military potential. Nevertheless, this did not transpire into full demilitarisation of the oblast. In 1997, the Kaliningrad Defensive Area (KOR) was established, while in 1999 the oblast co-hosted the first post-Soviet military-strategic exercises under the code name Zapad-99 – an event of crucial importance and magnitude (Kipp 2001). Within the same period, the oblast was actively used for populist purposes in order to gather public support under the anti-Western/patriotic slogans (such as was seen during Boris Yeltsin's second presidential campaign). After all, in the light of economic troubles, visible territorial losses and military feebleness, Kaliningrad presented perhaps one of very few (if not the only) venues via which Moscow could still exert certain amounts of pressure on (and thus feel itself on par with) the West.

In spite of increasing regional tensions, the partnership-style type of rhetoric would last for some time. From 1999 to 2001, both President Vladimir Putin and a range of European leaders routinely referred to the oblast as a 'pilot region' (Yaroshenko 2014), a model that had a very different connotation in Russian and Western readings. First of all, Moscow had no intention of fully demilitarising the oblast, and the few steps taken in this direction were a sign of economic weakness, not changing policy towards its westernmost region. On the other hand, an essential role was played by the local military, clearly loathing the possible alteration of the role and status of Kaliningrad and its own position in it. From 2002 to 2004, the rhetoric in Russian military circles changed dramatically: Cooperation-style parlance gave way to a much more aggressive tone. For example, in 2002, reflecting on nuclear weapons in the oblast, the commander of the Baltic Sea Fleet (BSF), Admiral Vladimir Valuev, noted that within the range of Russian conventional weaponry are numerous nuclear power plants and more than 130 chemical combines. This is more than enough to cool down any potential aggressor. And in 2004, he stated that the Kaliningrad Defensive Area has sufficient resources for incurring profound damage on any potential aggressor (Ryabushev 2008). This also coincided with internal trends (changing self-perceptions due to economic successes, and Russia's continuing argument for a multipolar world architecture that was dismantling the US-dominated unipolar world) and external developments (the US incursion of Iraq, growing ties between Moscow and Berlin, NATO's eastward expansion, tumultuous events in the former Soviet republics that came to be known as 'colour revolutions') that had a profound effect on Russia's behaviour in the Baltic Sea region and beyond. These trends had a direct path-changing effect on the trajectory of the Kaliningrad Oblast's development, which led to Moscow further tightening its grip on economic and political sides of local public life and new trends in terms of military-strategic perception of the oblast by Russian military strategists.

In 2006–2009, in spite of declared decreases in military forces (from 25,000 to 11,600) (Yegorov 1999; Verkhoturov 2014), the Russian side de facto continued remilitarisation of the area by first 'suspending' its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and initiating the blackmail of Europe with the possible deployment of the Iskander-M complexes (Povolotskiy 2014). The lack of unity in NATO and the EU, which was vividly demonstrated in 2003 over the war in Iraq and in terms of tightening ties between Russia and major EU players in the domains of the economy and business, convinced Moscow that Russia should continue using divide-and-rule-type of policies to undermine unity within Euro-Atlantic structures. At this juncture, Kaliningrad (as a part of Russia physically located within the EU) acquired a qualitatively new role. In contrast to the 1990s, when the oblast was seen as a burden (Sukhankin 2016b), by 2010, Russian ruling elites came to appreciate both the military and non-military potential of the oblast. As of the former, from 2006 to 2009, Russia conducted a series of tactical (and one strategic) military exercises under the code name Zapad-2009, which were painted in clear anti-NATO colours and contained elements of offensive operations (Mikhaylov 2009), causing alarm among Russia's western neighbours. Similarly, within the same interim Moscow intensified threats to deploy Iskander-M complexes (Sukhankin 2017f), increasing uneasiness among the neighbouring states, profoundly amplified after the Russian-Georgian conflict. At the same time, the Kremlin attempted to use the oblast as a means to deepen the rift between the three Baltic countries and Poland, on the one hand, and so-called 'old Europe' (France and Germany), on the other (New Kaliningrad), which was particularly visible during the 750th anniversary of Kaliningrad/Konigsberg that commenced in 2005 ('750-letie Kaliningrada' 2005).

As demonstrated in the above-presented segment, by 2013 (which was marked by a dramatic plummet of Russia-Western relations), the role of Kaliningrad, in terms of (non)military employment in a potential confrontation with the West, had reached new heights, thus establishing a steady foundation for transforming this militarising bastion into Russia's most advanced A2/AD 'bubble'.

Russia's Interpretation of the A2/AD Concept and Its Applicability to Kaliningrad

Russia's practical steps aimed at the militarisation of Kaliningrad Oblast are inseparable from three concepts comprising the cornerstone of Russian post-2010 military-strategic thinking:

- Hybrid warfare (*gibridnaja vojna*).
- Asymmetric measures (*asimmetrichnije meri*).
- New generation warfare (*wonjna novogo pokolenija*) and network-centric warfare (*setecentricheskaya vojna*).

Having entered the vocabulary of Russian military strategists and experts before 2010, these notions have acquired qualitatively new meanings under the influence of the 'Arab Spring' (2010–2011) and the Ukrainian crisis (started in 2013). The image of public protests rapidly turning into anti-governmental movements under the influence of new media, followed by the emergence of the armed opposition attempting to overthrow legitimate (from Moscow's point of view) political regimes, was seen by the Russian side as interconnected, coordinated from abroad in a sequence of actions that aimed to rehearse a model of regime change in Russia. This mode of action was defined in Russian as 'hybrid warfare' (thoroughly investigated by Hoffman 2007), viewed as integrated use of military and non-military measures, where the former prepares a firm foundation for the latter. The 'colour revolutions' are seen as part of the 'hybrid warfare' strategy exercised by the West (primarily the US) against Russia, where non-military actions (the intensification of information pressure evolving into information warfare and cyberattacks accompanied by economic sanctions and international isolation) are inseparable from military actions (the use of irregular [para]military groups such as guerrillas/partisans, mercenaries and Private Military Companies [PMCs] operating from so-called 'grey zones' located in strategically vital and, at the same time, least protected parts of the Russian frontier (Bartosh 2018c)). This combination led Russian military thinkers to assume that in future conflicts Russian armed forces would have to face a technologically advanced foe(s) striving to implement principles of NCW (*setecentricheskaja wonja*) techniques (Makarenko 2017), based on reliance on its air and naval superiority and operating with small task forces covertly deployed both in the Russian rear and vital areas as well as acting against Russia through non-military measures.

Incidentally, such prominent Russian/Soviet thinkers and practitioners as Chief of the General Staff of the USSR (1977–1984) Nikolay Ogarkov (Chimarov 2016) (whose theoretical elaborations on Control and Command [C2] were tested during the Zapad-81 military strategic exercises), Evgeny Messner (1891–1974) and Alexander Svechin (1878–1938) (who defined warfare was a combination of economic, financial, and cultural compounds (Zakharov 2010), whereas 'victory' constituted the full annihilation of the foe both on the battlefield and the destruction of its economic sector and the collapse of political and social systems) had in effect extensively reflected on the key principles of such new types of warfare/military conflict. Also, the role of information as a pivotal element of new types of military confrontation, where Russian writers extensively referred to the experience of the northern Caucasus, Gulf, Yugoslav (especially, its second stage) and Libyan wars, has been rethought. Those conflicts not only displayed superiority of Western military technology, but also pointed to the fact that previously established patterns of military conflict (from the initial period to the final phase) required comprehensive and thorough revision. This is particularly visible in works by Igor Panarin, who conducted an extensive study on information warfare and its pertinence to hybrid warfare – two pieces of the bigger picture (Panarin 2000; Vasilenko 2009). Finally, the role of electronic warfare (EW) as a pivotal aspect of contemporary and future conflicts has found its reflection in the writing of Russian military thinkers.

Those reflections triggered an intense debate among Russian military scientists on how future wars will be fought and how Russian armed forces should act under changing conditions of warfare. Reflecting on the so-called 'Arab Spring', Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia Valery Gerasimov highlighted that this is 'the way the future wars will be waged' (Gerasimov 2013). Incidentally, in his subsequent analysis Gerasimov claimed that 'the application of asymmetric measures and ways of waging "hybrid" wars allows one to deprive the opposing party of sovereignty without actual seizure of the territory' (Gerasimov 2016a). The Russian academic community also accepted this formula, to some extent blurring the difference between the three notions. For instance, Pavel Tsygankov stated that asymmetric or irregular warfare becomes "hybrid", when the centre of gravity shifts toward information space with the employment of new technologies (Tsygankov 2015: 20). Subsequent works of Gerasimov refined previously established postulates and by emphasising the 'Blitzkrieg of the 21st century' concept (which was in many ways stimulated by

the Prompt Global Strike [PGS] concept (Gerasimov 2016b)) identified the main areas of concern of Russian military strategists that by and large reiterate key points outlined in retired US Air Force Colonel John A. Warden III's (1995) 'Five Rings' theory.

First, Russian analysts are certain that it is the West that is determined to use 'hybrid measures' against Russia in order to dismantle the existing political regime and undermine Russia's global position. Therefore, in order to effectively withstand this challenge, Russia had to simultaneously improve both its military and non-military capabilities – as a means to avoid Yugoslav, Syrian or Libyan scenarios – where the latter should take clear precedence. Second, Russia does recognise its conventional inferiority in comparison with NATO. Coupled with the lack of resources (economic and human), Russia cannot, akin to its historical predecessor, fortify and maintain a militarised counter-containment cordon against the West stretching from the Kola Peninsula to the Black Sea, meaning that Moscow cannot build its strategy extensively relying on symmetric forms of response. This brings forth the issue of asymmetry. This principle (first entertained by Russian military thinking in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars (Deriglazova 2008)) was subsequently developed in works of the former Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the USSR General Makhmut Gareev (Thornton 2017) and the Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff Colonel General Andrey Kartapolov, who linked the effectiveness of 'asymmetric measures' with accurate identification of the enemy's weak spots (Thornton 2017) as a key towards securing military objectives with limited application of military measures. On the other hand, the principle of technological asymmetry is clearly seen in works of the editor-in-chief of the Arsenal Otechestva military magazine, Viktor Murakhovsky ('Nevidimyy zaslon' 2017).

Third, the Baltic Sea region is considered to be a venue where the West is planning to wage hybrid measures against Russia. Top-notch Russian military expert Igor Korotchenko has argued that the North Atlantic Alliance has embarked on creation of infrastructure on the territory of countries [the Baltic States and Poland] that could become a base for military attack against Russia ('Korotchenko dopustil' 2017). A similar message was conveyed by Frantz Klintsevych who argued that NATO has many serious plans in scopes of the so-called global strike concept ('Klintsevich zayavil' 2016), where the Baltic countries and Poland are acting as a basis for a potential attack against Russia. From the Russian perspective, a wide range of regional actions were interpreted as preparatory measures carried out with the support of the US and EU with the intention of undermining Russian interests. These actions include: deployment of the armed forces in the vicinity of Russian national borders, conduct of large scale military exercises, organization of special centres concerned with the preparation of militants as well as accretion of capabilities of forces of special operations [...] economic sanctions [...] cyber operations [...] Internet trolling for the purpose of manipulation with public consciousness [...] and information warfare (Bartosh 2016). Thus, the logic of prospective 'anti-Russian' military operations could be placed within a triad with the following pillars: managed chaos, hybrid warfare, colour revolutions (Nikolaychuk 2016), all tasked with dismantling the existing political regime. Ironically, then, while hybrid warfare is usually understood as an offensive tactic used by the West against Russia (Thomas 2016), Russia's perception is the opposite, with hybrid threats seen as the broad and comprehensive application of both military (primarily related to the PGS concept) and non-military (with information destined to play the key role) measures by the West against Russia. Works of prominent Russian military specialist Alexander Bartosh also extensively refer to the Baltic Sea region as a theatre of potential 'hybrid' confrontation between NATO and the Russian Federation (Bartosh 2018b).

Russian military thinkers have provided the following recommendations for how to effectively withstand hybrid/NCW actions: expand the theatre of conflict; extend the duration of conflict; be selective in terms of strikes; target the morale of both civilians and armed forces of the adversary; provoke the adversary into using disproportionately large forces, thereby stretching valuable resources; and activate information confrontations. As it is clearly seen, Russian military thinking avoids using the term A2/AD. Rather, it would be more accurate to state that, given growing concern over hybrid and net-centric forms of warfare, military thinkers tend to rely on the 'asymmetric response/measures' concept as a way to deal with external threats both within military and non-military domains. This primarily means that from a Russian perspective the following strategic dimensions are to be fortified: air, sea, land, space and the information space.

Undoubtedly, scarcity of resources does not allow the Russian side to pursue fortification of all these dimensions at the same pace. The clear superiority of Russian adversaries in some domains means that certain areas will inevitably be prioritised over others. In this regard, taking a closer look at practical steps implemented by the Russian side in Kaliningrad will demonstrate Russia's priorities and main areas of concern.

From Theory to Practice: Kaliningrad as Russia's A2/AD 'Bubble'

In military-related terms, vital experience obtained by the Russian side in the course of the Ukrainian crisis (unofficially) and especially the Syrian civil war (officially) has prioritised accretion of capabilities within the following areas:

- Conventional long-range strike capability.
- Counter-actions in terms of hybrid warfare.
- Development of asymmetric capabilities.

Taking into consideration the last two elements and the Russian inclination towards employment of non-linear types of confrontation (as the main medium against hybrid conflict), the following modes are highlighted by Russian military strategists (Bartosh 2018a):

- 1) Decisiveness, promptness and pre-emptive strikes (similar to Russian actions in Crimea and Syria).
- 2) Selectivity in military build-up via concentration of forces/resources in areas that could become main theatres of confrontation.
- 3) Permanency in ties between intelligence services, military-political structures and the armed forces of the Russian Federation.
- 4) Education and training as an effective antidote to hybrid threats.

The combination of the above-presented factors is fully reflected in Russia's practical steps in Kaliningrad after 2014. In contrast to other locations frequently discussed by foreign and domestic experts as actual/potential A2/AD zones (Crimea, the Kola Peninsula and certain localities in Syria), Kaliningrad wields a number of undisputable advantages. First, geographic location. Some observers have rightfully argued that Kaliningrad might become the first target of NATO strikes in case of military escalation (Abramov 2011). On the other hand, the oblast could be used both (counter)offensively, delivering a nuclear strike or breaching the Suwalki Gap, an area located between Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus (Hodges, Bugajski & Doran 2018; see also Veebel & Sliwa, this issue), and defensively, as a means to ward off (hinder or stop) a potential attacker. Second, Kaliningrad's capabilities could be used in four strategic areas (of course, with different degrees of success and operational scale) that comprise the A2/AD zone: land, sea, air, information/cyberspace. Third, particularities of the Baltic Sea (its relatively small size and very few navigable passageways) create a near-to-perfect spot for using sea mines (as one of the most effective means of anti-vessel warfare) as an area access component, thereby levelling down some of key advantages wielded by technologically superior powers. Incidentally, during the Second World War, the Soviet side successfully employed naval warfare, actively relying on this type of weaponry ('Podvodnaya voyna' 2017).

Steps that have been taken by Moscow after 2014 could be provisionally separated into two main blocks: military and non-military measures that do intersect on many occasions, though, which makes it rather onerous to make a clear distinction between two (part of the below-indicated text previously appeared in Sukhankin 2018c).

1. Military-related measures. Following the above-indicated priority areas stemming from Russia's experience in regional conflicts, the following subcategories could be indicated:

Advanced ballistic and cruise missile systems. Without any reservations, the key role belongs to the Iskander-M (NATO classification: SS-26 Stone) tactical ballistic missile complex with a striking range of at least 400 kilometres and equipped with both conventional and nuclear missiles. Virtually undetectable and capable of operating under challenging climatic conditions, this complex is considered to have unique qualities: The Russian sources have argued that this system does not have any analogues in the West (Sergeev 2018). The characteristics of this type of weaponry make one agree with a thesis presented by General Philip M. Breedlove (formerly, Commander, US European Command) about Russian A2/AD zones having offensive potential (Majumdar 2016b). It is also important to note that the Iskander-M complex – on numerous occasions employed by the Russian side as an element of information-psychological pressure against Western countries – is a powerful tool of non-military measures, which underscores Russian commitments to the use of the principle of asymmetry. If one considers assessments presented by Karatpolov, Gareev and other military strategists, the double-tire use of Iskanders fully complies with the strategy of first identification

of adversary's soft spots (in this regard, the fear of escalation of military confrontation and/or the sheer presence of nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad) and exploiting this weakness. After protracted speculations on the matter and temporary deployments in scopes of tactical military exercises ('Minoborony podtverdilo' 2016), the beginning of 2018 was marked by permanent deployment of Iskanders (corroborated by Colonel Anatoliy Gorodetskiy, a commander of the 152nd Missile Brigade based in Chernyakhovsk, Kaliningrad Oblast) ('V Minoborony' 2018) and subsequent demonstration on May 9 during a traditional military parade commemorating the 73th anniversary of the victory in the Second World War (Sukhankin 2018d).

Another important aspect related to mounting uneasiness over the Iskander-M complexes pertains to the mismatch between the officially declared (400 km) and potential strike distance: If equipped with cruise missiles (Type 9M729), it will be exponentially increased, enabling Russia to strike targets located much farther away than officially declared. In addition, in his latest comment, Deputy Director of KBM Valery Drobinoga has argued that Iskander-M complexes 'are now equipped with hypersonic missiles with a maximum speed of Mach 6 (approximately 7,350 km per hour)' (Sukhankin 2018d), and that a special type of missile that is to increase its military potential has been elaborated. If true, this might become a new factor of destabilisation in the Baltic Sea region, since the Russian side will try to capitalise on existing fear among the Europeans related to a heavily militarised, militarily capable Kaliningrad.

Anti-ship, aircraft and air defence systems. Given that the prime task of an A2/AD 'bubble' is preventing an adversary from entering the theatre and its prominent role of strategic aviation in the US military strategy, this domain should be allocated an instrumental role. Within this category some additional subdivisions should be introduced:

First, the combination of the K-300P Bastion-P (NATO classification: the SS-C-5 Stooage) and the 3K60 Bal (the SSC-6 Sennight) coastal defence missile systems should be viewed as an essential element of anti-ship protection, which could also be employed (as was demonstrated in Syria) against ground-based targets, though (Zvezda TVnews 2017). The Bastion-P is equipped with the P-800 Oniks (NATO classification: SS-N-26 'Strobile'), a supersonic anti-ship cruise missile with a maximum range of 300 kilometres (the actual range might be much greater (Mikhailov & Balbutov 2013)), yet potential implementation of the 3M22 Zircon/Tsirkon-S hypersonic (Mach 5-plus) anti-ship missile (tested by Russians in April 2017 (Sukhankin 2017d)) could broaden the offensive potential of Kaliningrad-based military forces.

Second, the Syrian campaign has demonstrated Russia's intention to jointly use (Sukhankin 2018a) the S-400 Triumf (NATO classification: SA-21 Growler), with a reported striking range of 400 kilometres (Sukhankin 2017b), and the Pantsir (NATO classification: SA-22 Greyhound) mobile short-to medium-range surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft artillery weapon system (and its various modifications), which is said to have demonstrated high operational potential in Syria (Majumdar 2016a). By 2019, the Russian side expects to further augment military capabilities of the Pantsir via the integration of a new type of missile and a modern detection system, which is to increase the length of detection to 75 kilometres (currently, 40 km) and destruction to 40 kilometres (presently, 20 km) ('OKR po kompleksu' 2017). Integrated use of these two systems may be seen as a 'defensive layer' of Russia's A2/AD capabilities, which could witness further strengthening after 2020, when the S-500 Prometey (NATO classification: 55R6M Triumfator-M) is to be integrated in the Russian armed forces (Azanov 2018).

Development of the EW capabilities. Since the outbreak of military hostilities in Ukraine, the Russian side has undertaken an impressive thrust in the direction of accretion of its potential in this domain (Sukhankin 2017j). At this juncture, the Donbass region should be seen as the testing ground, where the Russian side has employed various types of special equipment (some pieces are unique in type) for spoofing and jamming of radio signals, thereby hindering the communication capabilities of the Ukrainian armed forces (Sukhankin 2017e). Among the most notable pieces to have been spotted in use are such models as the RB-341B 'Leer-3' complex, the Orlan-10 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), the RB-301B 'Borisoglebsk-2' complex (radio intelligence and jamming of HF/UHF both terrestrial and aircraft radio channels), the R-934UM automated jamming station, the R-381T2 UHF radio monitoring station (R-381T 'Taran' complex) and 'Torn' radio intelligence complexes and the PSNR-8 Kredom-1 (1L120) portable ground reconnaissance station. Beyond any doubt, these mobile pieces could be deployed (in effect, some are already present) in Kaliningrad to additionally boost local EW capabilities. In fact, since 2011, Kaliningrad has had the Voronezh-DM radar (UHF) with a range of up to 10,000 kilometres, capable of simultaneously tracking 500 objects (Ptichkin

2012). Meanwhile, other means that could profoundly expand and fortify local EW capabilities should not be omitted. For example, the Monolit-B self-propelled coastal radar targeting system (that can be used as a supplement to the K300 Bastion-P system) that is reportedly capable of searching, detecting, tracking and classifying sea-surface targets (via active radar with a range of up to 250 km) as well as over-the-horizon detection, classification and determination of the coordinates of radiating radars (via passive radar detection and ranging with a reach of up to 450 km) ('Monolit – B' 2014).

Here it should be noted that Russia is allocating a special role to the development of EW capabilities. According to the editor-in-chief of Arsenal Otechestva, Victor Murakhvoskii, it is the key element of the 'asymmetric response' of the Russian side to its numerous and more economically powerful competitors. In effect, this means that a combination of air, naval and EW capabilities are to become the main fields, where Russia must develop and maintain its superiority (Kots 2017). On the other hand, as noted by Roger McDermott, one of the main pillars of expanding EW capabilities and the principle of asymmetry is

the adoption and integration of command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) in the Armed Forces, itself a reflection of the move away from platform-based operations to operating in a networked-informational environment. (McDermott 2018, para. 1).

Thus, it would not be superfluous to mention a remark by the chief of the EW forces, Major General Yuri Lastochkin, who drew an implicit parallel between Russia's EW capabilities and the strengthening of its A2/AD potential (Tikhonov 2018).

In the final analysis, one could mention *restoration and expansion of naval potential* as part of Russia's A2/AD strategy pertaining to Kaliningrad Oblast. Incidentally, in 1999, the Baltic Sea Fleet (BSF), which had lost much of its pre-1991 potential, according to Russian sources, preserved part of its former potential (Valuev 1999). On top of that, the BSF became Russia's testing ground (the experiment was put to a halt, though) for first attempts of practical implementation of the territorial defence units (that would subsequently be tested only during the Zapad-2017 military strategic exercises (Sukhankin 2017i)). During the first decade of the 2000s, the BSF received various types of vessels, including Boikiy (May 2013) and Stoikiy (545) (Steregushchy-class corvette) (2014), which in accordance with the Russian sources makes the overall potential of the BSF two submarines and 56 surface ships ('Russia's Baltic fleet' 2017). Nevertheless, it is very difficult to ascertain the accurate number of vessels and thereby determine the actual potential of the BSF, even though the Russian side has emphasised that 'Nowadays, the Baltic Fleet can truly be called the most modern warship fleet' ('Most advanced warships' 2017, para. 3). Supplementary data on the matter available in Russian-language sources have drawn attention to the fact that the naval potential is primarily seen by the Russian side as a defensive aspect of the local A2/AD capabilities. This stems from the nature of military exercises carried out in the oblast, which primarily practise anti-submarine or anti-aviation operations ('Korabli Baltflota' 2017). This assumption however might be challenged by the presence of Kilo-class submarines (of which only one is said to be fully operational) and naval aviation ('V sostav Baltiyskogo' 2013) as well as landing operations carried out by Russian special task forces during military exercises.

Last, but not least, as stated above, Russia's A2/AD capabilities are inseparable from two concepts: the principle of asymmetry (discussed above) and 'territorial control'. The latter notion has been discussed on numerous occasions by Russian military strategists and emphasised by Gerasimov as one of the key lessons Russia should learn from regional conflicts on the Balkans and the Middle East (including the 2003 war). One of the main tools aimed to secure Russia's ability to control its rear in conditions of military conflict is the use of irregular forces in the form of 'territorial defence units' that could take various forms, ranging from Cossack units to various types of PMCs actively employed by the Russian side in Ukraine, Syria and Africa (Sukhankin 2018f). Kaliningrad Oblast occupies a special place: Its territorial proximity to the EU/NATO countries, experience of popular discontent with the government and lessons drawn by the Russian side from the 'Arab Spring' all urge the Russian side to elaborate measures aimed at protection of the rear territory. At this juncture, ideas put forth by the prominent Russian military expert and corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Missile and Artillery Sciences (RARAN) Konstantin Sivkov present an interesting and far-reaching set of measures that are now actively implemented in Kaliningrad. Sivkov proposed introducing Irregular Forces of Defence (IFD) tasked with operative functions on Russian territory and essentially taking the form of 'territorial defense units' which, among other functions, will be tasked with neutralising popular uprisings and fighting terrorist groups and illegal (para)military formations, including airborne forces (Sivkov 2017). In fact, primary data obtained by the author and the available secondary data together suggest that the local Cossacks have been actively engaged by the government in performing these functions (Sukhankin 2018g).

2. Non-military aspects. The "Arab Spring and the Ukrainian crisis have emphasised the non-military side (according to the Russian military planners, equally relevant at various stages of conflict) of contemporary warfare. As noted before, Russian military strategists perceive this element of warfare to be equal (and to some extent/under certain circumstances even superior) to the military part. It has been argued that the ability to deliver a decisive blow on the information battlefield is the component of victory in conflicts/warfare of the new type (Makarenko 2017). Studying the Yugoslav conflict, the Iraqi war and the 'Arab Spring', the Russian side came to the conclusion that the ability to withstand information onslaught and to conduct pre-emptive information operations is the most essential ingredient in the battle for the loyalty of the population and high level of morale on the battlefield and in the rear.

In Russian reading, information confrontation (*informatsionnoje protivoborstvo*) is distinct due to its perpetuity and is equally important in terms of preparatory (Giles 2016: 4), initial, advanced, final and post-conflict stages of escalation. Russia's view of this phenomenon is expressed in the Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2016) and other essential documents. Russian thought divides information confrontation into two essential elements:

Information-psychological warfare (levelled against the personnel of the armed forces and the population of the adversary). Its most distinctive trait is based on its 'permanent' nature, which means that it is conducted both during peace- and wartime.

Information technology warfare (tasked with affecting technical systems concerned with reception, collection, processing and transmission of information). It is usually implemented during the active stage of a war/armed conflict.

Russia's information-psychological (creation of an 'alternative reality' by distorting, corrupting and eliminating information through the use of both traditional information outlets and new media, such as popular social platforms) and cyber operations in Crimea (Darczewska 2014) and the Donbass region demonstrated high levels of both offensive and defensive potential in terms of information confrontation/warfare. As argued above, current Russian information operations share certain traits with the Soviet ones, where the important role belongs to the reflexive control techniques. This is clearly demonstrated in the example of Kaliningrad Oblast, where the above-mentioned technique should be seen as an integral part of asymmetric measures, where the Russian side is primarily concerned with 'identification of an adversary's weak spots' and implementation of 'actions aimed at capitalising on these weaknesses'.

The Russian side has identified three main areas of concern that Europeans have developed in regard to Kaliningrad Oblast:

- Deployment of mobile, nuclear-capable (and virtually undetectable) Iskander-M complexes with a striking range covering virtually the entire Baltic Sea basin and arguably beyond.
- Covert military build-up on the territory of the oblast (via deployment of additional conventional forces), capable of making its military potential superior to its geographic neighbours.
- The Suwalki Gap, as a way of cutting the three Baltic countries and Poland off from their NATO allies, as well as covert operations (Grigas 2016).

Russia's attempts to capitalise on the above-indicated concerns in earnest became evident as early as 2007. It was reflected in a combination of the following techniques of information-psychological confrontation:

- The 'Iskander diplomacy' (Sukhankin 2016c) – threats, speculations and instances of temporary deployment of these complexes in the oblast.
- A combination of tactical (approximately 50 per year) and strategic military exercises under the code name Zapad (1999, 2009, 2013, 2017) purposefully conducted in the atmosphere of secrecy and opaqueness (Warsaw Institute 2017).
- Information warfare (specifically targeted against Poland and Lithuania) and incessant provocations (similar to the most outspoken one that commenced in December 2017 involving the Russian Embassy in Vilnius (Sukhankin 2017a)) aiming to destabilise the regional situation. This atmosphere of uneasiness urges the three Baltic countries and Poland to increasingly rely on NATO/US presence in the region to the growing dissatisfaction of anti-US forces within the EU, which leads to internal disputes and undermining of the spirit of cohesion within/between the EU and NATO.

A combination of actual military build-up in the oblast undertaken after 2014 and traditional opacity and informational parsimony of the Russian side has resulted in the fact that the West seems to be unable to

rightfully assess the military potential of the oblast with necessary precision. Undoubtedly, Russia's skilful use of informational deception (*maskirovka*) should be seen as the key component contributing to successful implementation of the 'asymmetric response' strategy. The example of Kaliningrad once again corroborated Gerasimov's thesis on non-military components taking precedence over military ones (Gerasimov 2013).

Concluding Remarks

Russia's non-linear strategy, comprised of integrated use of military and non-military actions employed during the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent debacle in the Ukrainian southeast, has alarmed Western policymakers, intellectuals and analysts, who logically ask about other potential areas where Russia might want to strike next. In this regard, the three Baltic countries (with considerable Russophone populations (Sukhankin 2017h)) and Poland (as a country facing Russia from the north and Belarus from the east) are frequently seen as theatres of Russia's possible future covert operations and potentially even military escalation. In this regard, Kaliningrad Oblast is frequently viewed as the most natural springboard from which a decisive thrust (or provocations aimed to test the resolve of NATO) could be launched. For natural reasons, these fears have been largely amplified after 2014, when the Ukrainian crisis evolved into hybrid warfare and the Russian side embarked on vigorous militarisation of Kaliningrad (Sukhankin 2017g).

Taking into consideration frequent unpredictability of the Russian side, there is still every reason to believe that Moscow does not plan to use Kaliningrad for offensive first strike blows against the Baltic countries and/or Poland. Given Russia's inferiority to NATO in terms of conventional capabilities and economic weakness, it does not seem plausible that the Kremlin might be interested in vertical conflict escalation. Furthermore, hybrid/non-linear actions undertaken by Moscow since 2008 point to the following trend: The Russian side is keen on using hard coercion towards non-NATO/EU members, whereas actions against members of the Euro-Atlantic alliance fall within the category of provocations.

On the basis of the available data and observation of Russia's actions in the Baltic Sea region, Kremlin's grand strategy regarding Kaliningrad seems to be built on an image of an impregnable military bastion that could be used for both offensive and defensive operations with the employment of both conventional and nuclear means of confrontation. Thus, the main goal of Moscow boils down to the creation of an image of the oblast that in effect profoundly exceeds its actual might and area(s) of employment. This however does not mean that the Kremlin is likely to discontinue the course of militarisation of the oblast and/or use its non-military potential in a power play with the West (Sukhankin 2018b): Russia intends to send a message to other players that Moscow does have enough capabilities to incur damage (in terms of human and material casualties) on a potential attacker and discourage him from launching any form of attack or provocation against Kaliningrad (Karaganov 2016) within a strike range of at least 400–450 kilometres and major operative areas (sea, land, air, cyber-/information space). The military dimension however is inseparable from a non-military component: By using techniques of information-psychological pressure (including Russia's discourse on indifference of many NATO members regarding the fate of Poland and the Baltic countries), Moscow pursues attempts to draw on historical parallels between the current situation and the legacy of the Second World War when Poland in spite of promised support was left alone to face Germany and the Soviet Union. Similarly, anxieties in Warsaw, Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius are boosted by analyses corroborating that NATO would simply be unable to repel a Russian conventional attack on the theatre, Russian troops being able to occupy the Baltic countries in the course of 36–60 hours (Shlapak & Johnson 2016) (a rather contestable point). As noted before, in planning future scenarios, Russian military strategists extensively rely on historical experience (distant as well as more proximate developments), which convinces the Russian side of multiple weaknesses of the EU and existing rifts in EU-NATO relations. Russia's ability to use the asymmetric potential of Kaliningrad (given its size, economic, human and conventional military capabilities) should be seen as an example of excellent tactical thinking on the part of Russian military thinkers and strategists. The powerful image of the oblast makes the West further enmeshed in a costly and resource-consuming containment policy, thereby catering to the interests of the Russian side.

In spite of its apparent short-term effectiveness, this Russian strategy has limitations. Russia's aggressive (and on many occasions reckless) behaviour and particularly its efforts to turn Kaliningrad into a 'regional scarecrow' (Sukhankin 2018e, para. 7) have intensified a discourse in Sweden and Finland on potential accession to NATO, which is part of Russia's deeply rooted fear of encirclement via the loss of control over its northern and southern flanks. All parties should take special note of the unintended consequences and profound misunderstandings that have plagued this relationship so far.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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