

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# "Anti-Access/Area Denial in the Baltic Sea Region"

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This special issue aims to foster new thinking into the Russian strategic and military challenge in the Baltic Sea region. The ultimate aim of this scholarship is not to promote offensive actions, such as the further expansion of NATO's sphere of influence or any interference in Russian internal affairs. Rather, the hope is that Russia and NATO will be able avoid further escalation of tensions that could lead to war.

**Keywords:** anti-access/area denial; international security; Baltic Sea; NATO; Russia

## Introduction

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent tensions between NATO and Russia have led many observers to liken the current geopolitical climate in Europe to that experienced during the Cold War. A few scholars have even designated this as a new Cold War (e.g. Cohen, 2018). While predicting the onset of any "Second Cold War" may prove as difficult for as did predicting the end of the first, the fact that Russia's relations with the United States and many European nations have deteriorated significantly over the past decade or more is undisputed. These heightened tensions have forced NATO to revert to its foundational purpose: deterring Russian military expansion in Eastern and Central Europe. NATO's reorientation to European defence means that the Alliance is again focusing on regions long absent from the geopolitical radar; foremost among these is the Baltic Sea. Once firmly in the Soviet sphere of influence, over the past twenty-five years the Baltic has been transformed into a NATO lake, with Alliance members and other friendly nations controlling the majority of the Baltic Sea's littoral areas. Although arguably one of the West's greatest political successes, the expansion of the NATO eastward into the Baltic region has produced strategic vulnerabilities for the Alliance. Nowhere are these vulnerabilities more apparent than in NATO's three Baltic members: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Led by the United States, NATO far outmatches Russia in global conventional military force; however, Moscow can severely limit NATO's ability to operate in the eastern Baltic through an interrelated set of strategies, tactics, and weapons systems categorized under the dual umbrella concepts of Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD). When coupled with confusion over the current administration in Washington's commitment to upholding Article 5 and the weakness of European militaries, the Russian threat to the Baltic Region appears all the more apparent.

This special issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* provides four different perspectives on security in the Baltic Sea region, with a particular focus on the perceived Russian A2/AD threat. While the authors examine a variety of different topics and using a number of different approaches, the papers broadly focus on the critical question of what does Russian A2/AD capabilities mean for Baltic security? The first two papers focus on the Janusian concepts of deterrence and coercion. In "NATO's response to Russian A2/AD in the Baltic States: Going beyond conventional?" Guillaume Lasconjarias argues that a counter-A2/AD strategy cannot be separated from broader discussions of deterrence. To this end, he presents a number of specific policy recommendations to help deter a Russian A2/AD challenge. For these policies to work, Lasconjarias argues, NATO needs larger, more agile, and more capable military forces. In "Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Coercion in the Baltic Region," Alexander Lanoszka focuses his examination on Russian coercive nuclear capabilities. He argues that while Russia's nuclear threat need to be taken seriously, many scholars and analysts in the West have exaggerated Moscow's ability to coerce adversaries with nuclear sabre-rattling. Despite its considerable tactical nuclear capabilities, Russia will likely prove unable to escape the abyss of mutually assured destruction (MAD), thus limiting its ability to present a credible offensive nuclear strategy.

In the next two papers, attention shifts from deterrence and coercion to the unique political geography of the Baltic region. In "David vs. Goliath: Kaliningrad Oblast as Russia's A2/AD 'Bubble,'" Sergey Sukhankin examines the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. Beginning with a history of the territory, Sukhankin provides a detailed evaluation of the oblast's strategic significance to Russia. He concludes that Moscow's principal goal in the militarization of Kaliningrad is to create the image of the oblast as an impregnable military bastion that forms the nucleus of any Baltic A2/AD strategy. According to Sukhankin, however, this is more bluster than reality, given Russia's military inferiority to NATO. By contrast, Viljar Veebel and Zdzislaw Sliwa take a much starker view of the Russian threat in their paper "Rational Escalation? Kaliningrad, the Suwalki Corridor and Russia's Baltic Strategy". The authors propose several plausible scenarios for Russian aggression in the border region between Poland and Lithuania (the "Suwalki Corridor"), and indicate why continued escalation would be irrational and counterproductive for all parties.

Taken together, this special issue aims to foster new thinking into the Russian strategic and military challenge in the Baltic Sea region. The ultimate aim of this scholarship is not to promote offensive actions, such as the further expansion of NATO's sphere of influence or any interference in Russian internal affairs. Rather, the hope is that Russia and NATO will be able avoid further escalation of tensions that could lead to war.

### Competing Interests

Edward R. Lucas is an assistant professor of military and strategic studies at the United States Air Force Academy. The views expressed in this paper are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense or that of the United States Government or any other of its agencies. Thomas Crosbie does not have any competing interests.

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