

# FACT SHEET

## Does Vladimir Putin Pose a Threat to the Baltic States and the Rest of NATO?

Compiled by Joel C. Rosenberg  
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***“If I wanted, in two days I could have Russian troops not only in Kiev, but also in Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw, and Bucharest.”***

—Russian President Vladimir Putin, spoken to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, September 2014 (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#))

### **Russia Is Greatest Threat to U.S., Says Joint Chiefs Chairman Nominee, Gen. Joseph Dunford**

—*Washington Post*, July 9, 2015

#### **What Are Putin and the Russian Government Saying?**

- **Vladimir Putin Says All Big Russian Businesses Should Be Ready for War Production** (*Independent*, November 22, 2017)
- **Putin Says ‘Nobody Would Survive’ U.S.–Russia ‘Hot War’** (RFE/RL, June 7, 2017)
- **Putin Threat of Nuclear Showdown over Baltics** (*The Times* of London, April 2, 2015)
- **Putin Threatens Nuclear War: Russian Leader Will Take Any Necessary Step to Drive NATO out of Baltics and Defend Crimea** (U.K. *Daily Mail*, April 2, 2015)
- **Russia Examines 1991 Recognition of Baltic Independence** (BBC, June 30, 2015)
- **Russia: The Baltic States Were Created Illegally** (Real Clear World, July 1, 2015)
- **Putin Explores Legal Loopholes to Take Back the Baltic Nations** (*Newsweek*, July 16, 2015)
- **Vladimir Putin ‘Wants to Regain Finland’ for Russia, Adviser Says** (*Independent*, March 30, 2014)
  - After annexing Crimea and with troops massed on the border of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin will not stop trying to expand Russia until he has “conquered” Belarus, the Baltic States, and Finland, one of his closest former advisers has said.
  - According to Andrey Illarionov, President Putin’s chief economic adviser from 2000 to 2005, Putin seeks to create “historical justice” with a return to the days of the last Tsar, Nicholas II, and the Soviet Union under Stalin.

- Speaking to the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, Illarionov warned that Russia will argue that the granting of independence to Finland in 1917 was an act of “treason against national interests.”
- “Putin’s view is that he protects what belongs to him and his predecessors,” Illarionov said. “Parts of Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic States, and Finland are states where Putin claims to have ownership.”

### **What Is the Russian Military Doing Near the Baltic States?**

- **[Russia Rehearsed War Against NATO, Capture of Baltics During Zapad](#)** (ERR, Estonian Public Broadcasting, December 20, 2017)
  - Russia’s large-scale military exercise Zapad, held in September together with Belarus, was neither an “anti-terror exercise” nor “purely defensive,” but rather a dry run for a full-scale conventional war against NATO in Europe.
  - The drill rehearsed the capture of the Baltic States and Belarus as well as a “shock campaign” against Western European NATO member states such as Germany and the Netherlands, but also against Poland, Norway, and the non-aligned states of Sweden and Finland.
  - Kremlin forces rehearsed capturing NATO’s “region of vulnerability, according to the Russian view,” namely the three Baltic States.
- **[Putin’s Zapad 2017 Simulated a War against NATO—Intelligence Sources Reveal: In Russia’s large-scale September exercise, the capture of the Baltic States, bombings of Germany and other NATO members, as well as attacks on neutral countries, were rehearsed](#)** (*Bild*, December 19, 2017)
- **[Vast Exercise Demonstrated Russia’s Growing Military Prowess](#)** (*New York Times*, October 1, 2017)
  - A recent major exercise by the Russian military revealed significant strides in its ability to conduct the sort of complex, large-scale operations, using drones and other new technology, that would be part of any all-out war with the United States in Europe, according to American and allied officials.
  - Preliminary Pentagon and NATO assessments of the exercise, one of the largest of its kind since the end of the Cold War, are classified and will take months to complete. But Western officials said the military maneuvers, known as Zapad, Russian for “west,” far exceeded in scope and scale what Moscow had said it would conduct, and tracked more closely to what American intelligence officials suspected would unfold, based on Russian troop buildups in August.
  - The Defense Intelligence Agency summed up the exercise this way in an e-mail to the *New York Times*: “Russia’s forces are becoming more mobile, more balanced, and capable of conducting the full range of modern warfare.”
  - Going into the exercise, American and Baltic military officers had expressed fear that the maneuvers could be used as a pretext to increase

Russia's military presence in Belarus, a central European nation that borders three critical NATO allies: Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.

- [\*\*Russian Zapad Military Exercise in Belarus Raises Tension\*\*](#) (BBC, September 11, 2017)
  - Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has described Russia's buildup for the exercise as "preparations for an offensive war on a continental scale." Ukrainian border defenses, he said, are being bolstered.
  - He also pointed to the fact that in his view, Russia has form here, using the pretext of an exercise to mobilize and position forces to conduct offensive operations. President Poroshenko said he could not rule out the possibility that the drill "may be used as a smokescreen to create new Russian army assault groups to invade Ukrainian territory."
- [\*\*Putin Planning to Send 100,000 Troops to Baltic Borders for Drills?\*\*](#) (CBS, February 10, 2017)
  - Baltic nations are increasingly worried that Russian war games set for this autumn will see President Vladimir Putin send as many as 100,000 troops to Belarus's border with Lithuania and Poland—the very edge of the Kremlin's sphere of influence with eastern Europe.
  - U.S. Gen. Phillip Breedlove, former Supreme Commander for NATO, said the name for the exercise (the Russian word for "west") combined with the fact that he's heard it could involve at least 100,000 troops—possibly twice that many—is "a bit alarming."
  - "Nations have a right to exercise," Breedlove said on Thursday. "Nations do not have a right, I think, to exercise irresponsibly on other borders and in configurations that represent offensive capability."
- [\*\*NATO's Intercepts of Russian Aircraft Increased in 2017 from 2016\*\*](#) (*The Baltic Times*, January 6, 2018)
  - NATO fighter jets guarding the Baltic skies last year conducted more intercepts of Russian military aircraft flying close to the borders of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia than they did in 2016.
  - According to figures provided to BNS by the Lithuanian Defense Ministry, NATO's jets last year intercepted around 130 Russian aircraft flying over the Baltic Sea.
- [\*\*Russia Steps Up Baltic Incursions as U.S. Increases Air Policing\*\*](#) (*Jane's Defence Weekly*, August 8, 2017)
- [\*\*NATO: Russian Aircraft Intercepted 110 Times above Baltic in 2016\*\*](#) (*Newsweek*, January 4, 2017)
  - Russian military aircraft near the Baltic Sea were intercepted by NATO jets 110 times in 2016, 160 in 2015, and 140 in 2014.
  - This greatly exceeds the number of aerial encounters above the Baltic Sea before Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014; in 2013, NATO jets intercepted Russian aircraft 43 times.
- [\*\*Russian Warplanes Keep Buzzing the Baltics. Here's How NATO Scrambles\*\*](#) (*Washington Post*, November 6, 2016)
  - Alexander Vershbow, a veteran U.S. diplomat and former deputy secretary-general of NATO, told the *Washington Post* that the situation is as unstable as he had seen since he began his career in the late 1970s.

During the late years of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin held to predictable rules of behavior, but now it does not, Vershbow said.

- If a Russian plane violates NATO airspace (which has happened five times in Estonia this year), the situation could quickly escalate. The alliance's rules of engagement are to try to communicate via radio. If that produces no response, pilots display their planes' weaponry, and then they try to push the aircraft out of NATO territory. A pilot also could fire a warning flare, but any decision to actually fire on the plane would be left to higher-ups at NATO.

### **What Has Been the Trump Administration's Response to Russia's Threat to NATO?**

- [Trump Says U.S. "Very Protective" of Baltic Region](#) (Reuters, August 28, 2017)
- [Mike Pence Reassures Baltic States over Russia "Threat"](#) (BBC, July 31, 2017)
- [Trump Commits United States to Defending NATO Nations](#) (*New York Times*, June 9, 2017)
  - President Trump on Friday reaffirmed the longstanding United States commitment to come to the defense of any NATO members that are attacked, more than two weeks after his refusal to do so during a trip to Europe stirred resentment among America's traditional allies.
  - "I'm committing the United States to Article 5," Trump said during a news conference with President Klaus Iohannis of Romania in the White House Rose Garden. "And certainly we are there to protect, and that's one of the reasons that I want people to make sure we have a very, very strong force by paying the kind of money necessary to have that force. But yes, absolutely, I'd be committed to Article 5."
- [Trump's Pentagon Choice Says U.S. Needs to Be Ready to Confront Russia](#) (Reuters, January 12, 2017)
- [Baltic States Fearful of Trump's NATO Views](#) (BBC, November 21, 2016)
- [Trump Would Not Leap to Defend Baltic States from Russian Attack: NYT](#) (CNBC, July 21, 2016)
- [Donald Trump Says NATO Is "Obsolete"](#) (*New York Times*, April 2, 2016)

### **What Is the State of the Military in the Baltics & Poland?**

- [Baltics, Fearing Russia, to Triple Military Spending by 2018](#) (Reuters, October 20, 2016)
- **Estonia**
  - Population: [1.25 million](#)
  - Spent [2.2%](#) of GDP on defense budget in 2017
  - Some [7,150](#) active-duty military forces
  - Some [10,000](#) reserve military forces
- **Latvia**
  - Population: [1.95 million](#)
  - Will spend [2%](#) of GDP on defense budget in 2018

- Some **5,350** active-duty military forces
- Some **11,000** reserve military forces
- **Lithuania**
  - Population: **2.8 million**
  - Will spend **2%** of GDP on defense budget in 2018
  - Some **11,000** combined active-duty and reserve military forces
- **Poland**
  - Population: **38.5 million**
  - Will spend **2%** of GDP on defense budget in 2018
  - **105,000** active-duty military forces
  - **24,000** reserve military forces

### **How Has NATO Responded to Russia’s Threat to the Baltics?**

- NATO has modestly increased the number of military forces operating in the three Baltic States as well as in Poland, an operation they call “Enhanced Forward Presence.” The following are **excerpts from an official NATO statement**:
  - As part of NATO’s strengthened deterrence and defense posture, allies agreed at the 2016 summit in Warsaw to enhance NATO’s military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance.
  - NATO’s enhanced forward presence is defensive, proportionate, and in line with international commitments. It represents a significant commitment by Allies and is a tangible reminder that an attack on one is an attack on all.
  - Fully deployed in June 2017, NATO’s enhanced forward presence comprises multinational forces provided by framework nations and other contributing allies on a voluntary, fully sustainable, and rotational basis.
  - They are based on four rotational battalion-size battlegroups that operate in concert with national home defense forces and are present at all times in the host countries.
  - Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States are the framework nations for the robust multinational presence in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland respectively. Other allies [have] confirmed contributions to these forces.
- **EFP forces currently stationed in the Baltic States and Poland**
  - NATO EFP forces in Estonia (battlegroup led by the U.K.) – 1,106
  - NATO EFP forces in Latvia (battlegroup led by Canada) – 1,140
  - NATO EFP forces in Lithuania (battlegroup led by Germany) – 1,181
  - NATO EFP forces in Poland (battlegroup led by the U.S.) – 1,335
  - Total: 4,762 troops
  - ([NATO Fact Sheet](#), November 2017)
- **What If Russia Invaded the Baltics—and Donald Trump Was President? A Former NATO General Imagines a Frightening Scenario.**  
(*The Atlantic*, July 27, 2016)
- **Russia Is Top U.S. National Security Threat: U.S. Gen. Dunford**  
(Reuters, July 9, 2015)

- Russia presents the greatest threat to U.S. national security and its behavior is “nothing short of alarming,” Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford told lawmakers on Thursday as they weighed his nomination to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
- “My assessment today, Senator, is that Russia presents the greatest threat to our national security,” said Dunford, the Marine Corps commandant, who is expected to swiftly win Senate confirmation to become the top U.S. military officer.
- Relations between Moscow and the West have plunged to a post–Cold War low since Russia’s intervention in Ukraine upended assumptions about the security of NATO’s eastern flank.
- “If you want to talk about a nation that could pose an existential threat to the United States, I’d have to point to Russia. And if you look at their behavior, it’s nothing short of alarming,” Dunford said.
- **[Russian Expansionism May Pose Existential Threat, Says NATO General](#)** (*The Guardian*, February 20, 2015)
  - Russian expansionist ambitions could quickly become “an obvious existential threat to our whole being,” the most senior British military officer in NATO has said in a strongly worded speech.
  - General Sir Adrian Bradshaw, appointed last year as NATO’s deputy commander of forces in Europe, said the alliance needed to develop both fast-reacting conventional forces and capacities to counter Russian efforts at coercion and propaganda, as seen in Ukraine.
- **After sharp criticism by President Trump for most NATO countries not keeping their commitment to spend at least 2% of their GDP on defense, European defense budgets are suddenly going up significantly.**
  - **[Trump Effect? Europe’s Defense Spending to Rise Faster in 2017](#)** (Reuters, June 28, 2017)
    - Europe and Canada will raise defense spending at the fastest pace for three years in 2017, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on Wednesday, partly aimed at showing the United States they are committed to shouldering more costs.
    - U.S. President Donald Trump has made more expenditure his priority for NATO, using his first alliance meeting in May to scold European leaders about spending, which is at historical lows and does not meet NATO’s target of 2 percent of GDP.
    - This year’s 4.3 percent increase represents the fastest growth since more than a decade of cuts ended in 2014. Spending growth was 1.8 percent in 2015 and 3.3 percent last year, although it was unclear how near that takes members to the target.
    - Stoltenberg said the higher spending by Europe and Canada, around \$280 billion this year, was NATO’s way of showing Washington that the United States had reliable allies.
  - **[NATO Allies Boost Defense Spending in the Wake of Trump Criticism](#)** (*Washington Post*, June 28, 2017)

## How Serious Is the Threat Russia Poses to the Baltic States?

- A RAND Corporation publication in January 2016 concluded NATO's Baltic States are so poorly defended that a lightning strike by Moscow could seize and control the capitals of both Estonia and Latvia in just 60 hours.
  - Russia's recent aggression against Ukraine has disrupted nearly a generation of relative peace and stability between Moscow and its Western neighbors and raised concerns about its larger intentions. From the perspective of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the threat to the three Baltic Republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania may be the most problematic.
  - In a series of wargames conducted between summer 2014 and spring 2015, the RAND Corporation examined the shape and probable outcome of a near-term Russian invasion of the Baltic States. The games' findings are unambiguous: As currently postured, NATO cannot successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members.
  - Across multiple games using a wide range of expert participants in and out of uniform playing both sides, the longest it has taken Russian forces to reach the outskirts of the Estonian and Latvian capitals of Tallinn and Riga, respectively, is 60 hours.
  - Such a rapid defeat would leave NATO with a limited number of options, all bad: a bloody counteroffensive, fraught with escalatory risk, to liberate the Baltics; to escalate itself, as it threatened to do to avert defeat during the Cold War; or to concede at least temporary defeat, with uncertain but predictably disastrous consequences for the alliance and, not incidentally, the people of the Baltics.

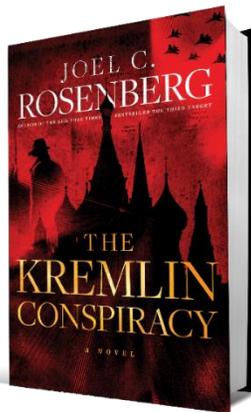
## What Force Levels Are Needed to Deter Russian Aggression?

- See [“Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics.”](#) a study by the RAND Corporation, published January 29, 2016. Excerpts:
  - A force of about seven brigades, including three heavy armored brigades—adequately supported by airpower, land-based firepower, and other enablers on the ground and ready to fight at the onset of hostilities—could suffice to prevent the rapid overrun of the Baltic states.
  - While not sufficient to mount a sustained defense of the region or to achieve NATO's ultimate end state of restoring its members' territorial integrity, such a posture would fundamentally change the strategic picture as seen from Moscow.
  - Instead of being able to confront NATO with a stunning coup de main that cornered it as described above, an attack on the Baltics would instead trigger a prolonged and serious war between Russia and a materially far wealthier and more powerful coalition, a war Moscow must fear it would be likely to lose.
  - Crafting this deterrent posture would not be inexpensive in absolute terms, with annual costs perhaps running on the order of \$2.7 billion. That is not a small number, but seen in the context of an alliance with an

aggregate gross domestic product in excess of \$35 trillion and combined yearly defense spending of more than \$1 trillion, it hardly appears unaffordable, especially in comparison with the potential costs of failing to defend NATO's most exposed and vulnerable allies—that is, of potentially inviting a devastating war, rather than deterring it.

### How Much Is Russia Spending on Military Buildup?

- Excerpts from [Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations](#) (U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017)
  - Since returning to power in 2012, Russian President Putin has sought to reassert Russia as a great power on the global stage and to restructure an international order that the Kremlin believes is tilted too heavily in favor of the United States at Russia's expense. Moscow seeks to promote a multi-polar world predicated on the principles of respect for state sovereignty and non-interference in other states' internal affairs, the primacy of the United Nations, and a careful balance of power preventing one state or group of states from dominating the international order.
  - To support these great power ambitions, Moscow has sought to build a robust military able to project power, add credibility to Russian diplomacy, and ensure that Russian interests can no longer be summarily dismissed without consequence.
  - Russian government spending on national defense has generally grown over the last decade and in 2016 reached a post-Soviet record.
  - In 2015, Russian defense spending reached a then-record \$52 billion (in 2017 dollars) and the defense burden was nearly 4 percent of GDP.
  - The 2016 budget, which was initially to decrease defense spending, was amended late in the year to increase defense spending to \$61 billion, a 4.5-percent defense burden on GDP. By contrast, in 2006 defense spending was \$27 billion, and the defense burden was 2.4 percent of GDP.



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