



Are the Baltics Really Undefendable?

Sandor Fabian

This article proposes that ‘professional irregular’ forces would provide the Baltics with the best defence against Russian aggression.

The recent fear of a potential Russian [intervention](#) in Belarus re-opened the debate on whether the Baltic states could be [defended](#) if Russia decides to attack them. Although the consensus after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was that they could not be, some recent developments prompt a re-examination – but from a different angle.

In 2016, the RAND Corporation [conducted](#) a series of wargames to explore the shape and likely outcome of a Russian invasion of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. The results were unambiguous and suggested that given the Baltic states’ military capabilities and NATO’s posture at the time, Russian forces could overrun the Baltic states within 36 to 60 hours. Such a swift defeat would leave NATO with unpalatable choices including: a bloody counteroffensive; a nuclear response; or the acceptance of Russian rule over the Baltics.

To avoid such a situation, the study recommended that seven allied brigades – including three heavy brigades – with appropriate air support and other enablers should be deployed to permanent bases in the Baltics. The report argued that such force would be sufficient to deter Russian aggression and in case of an invasion it could delay the Russian advance long enough to enable the arrival of enough NATO forces to defeat them. These suggestions have never materialised. Although NATO has deployed a multinational battalion battle group to each Baltic state and Poland as part of its [Enhanced Forward Presence](#), boosted the readiness of the [NATO Response Force](#) and the US has unilaterally [forward deployed](#) some heavy forces into the region, these

efforts are not even close to matching the proposed force package. There are no signs that this situation will change in the future, meaning that the Baltic states are still in the same situation as the RAND study found them four years ago – their conventional militaries destroyed in less than three days and NATO struggling to choose from three unthinkable options.

The Baltic states seem to have realised that despite their NATO membership they will not be defended conventionally in case of a Russian invasion, and have started to develop their individual defence concepts to address the challenge unilaterally. Besides significantly [increasing](#) their defence budgets, the three Baltic states have developed a unique approach to defence. Using historical examples from their past conflicts with Russia and expert advice from the [US Special Operations Command Europe](#) and the NATO Special Operations Headquarters, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia all seem to have found their answers to the Russian challenge in the concept of ‘total defence’.

This concept is based on the combination of conventional military activities and civilian resilience and resistance during foreign invasion. The total defence approach requires strong physical and psychological foundations and seeks to institutionalise resilience and collaboration across the whole of society. Recognising the fact that their conventional military formations will be destroyed in less than three days if Russia chooses to invade, the total defence concept puts the burden of resistance on ‘citizen soldiers’. The core of the idea is that resistance forces would be able to inflict significant

damage on Russian formations, lines of communications and logistic hubs which would severely disrupt the invader’s operational plans, delay its advancement and increase the overall cost of the invasion. These factors would enable the Baltic states to avoid total national collapse and allow time and space for NATO reinforcements to arrive and defeat the Russian forces.

Every village, town and city must be prepared during peace time so they can easily be turned into ‘Stalingrads’ during conflict

The presence of allied forces in the region and the introduction of ‘total defence’ have significantly changed the strategic landscape from when the RAND wargames were conducted. These changes require fresh analysis to determine how they might change the shape and outcome of a Russian invasion. New wargames with updated concepts can help the leadership of the Baltic states to identify potential shortcomings in their resistance-based approach. These new findings could also inform NATO commanders about the utility of the currently deployed forces and could provide additional information about how to best support the Baltic states’ total defence strategy to successfully deter or defeat a Russian invasion.

However, including NATO forces and the total defence strategy in the wargames would still not assess all available defence options. ‘Professional



irregular' forces should also be included in the wargaming. While this [concept](#) is similar to total defence, there is a significant difference. While the total defence strategy includes major roles and responsibilities for conventional military formations, the professional irregular defence force concept calls for the complete abolition of conventional defence frameworks in small states. Additionally, while recognising the value of citizen soldiers as force multipliers during resistance operations, the concept calls for the creation of a professional national military structure that is specifically designed, organised, trained and equipped to fight irregular wars against the conventional military formations of larger countries.

Today, major powers are fielding technologically and numerically superior combined-arms militaries that small countries will never be able to compete with on the same terms. The only way for a small state to defeat larger adversaries is to implement a resistance strategy based on a professional irregular defence force. Small states should abandon conventional military structures, rank systems, tactics, techniques, procedures

and traditional military equipment. Instead, they must learn from the masters of modern irregular wars (for example, the Taliban, Hizbullah, the Islamic State) how to organise the force, how to use deception to their advantage, how to stockpile and pre-position explosives, shoulder-launched anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, how to utilise domestically produced unmanned and remote-controlled platforms to overwhelm conventional defences, how to weaponise commercially available robots and develop high-tech improvised explosive devices and how to exploit the large state's overreliance on emerging technologies.

Professional irregular defence forces will only have a chance for victory in urban areas so pre-conflict infrastructural preparation of the defending country is a key element of this strategy. Every village, town and city must be prepared during peace time so they can easily be turned into 'Stalingrads' during conflict to best support the irregular fighters while slowing the advancement of the invading forces and imposing unthinkable costs on the attackers. The strategy urges

small countries to stop trying to emulate the military culture, structure and doctrine of large countries and create their own way of fighting enabled by a purpose-built non-traditional professional military force.

The professional irregular defence force concept calls for the complete abolition of conventional defence frameworks in small states

The inclusion of the professional irregular defence force strategy in wargames can have several far-reaching implications. First, they could determine whether professional irregular forces have any utility for the Baltic states. This could lead the Baltic states to implement fundamental changes in their general defence structures. Second, with the structural changes required by the professional irregular force strategy and the abandonment of expensive weapon systems, the Baltic states might learn

that their current military budgets could support a much larger force than they currently have. This potential increase in size and the need for domestically produced weapons and military equipment as well as the development of the supporting infrastructure might have significant positive effects on the economy of the Baltic states. Third, it could fundamentally change the form of foreign military aid provided to the Baltic states. Given the conceptual focus on resistance operations in urban settings, the [foreign military aid](#) provided to the Baltic states should focus on weapons, equipment and military training courses that maximise the utility of these approaches. Fourth, the focus on resistance should also prompt changes in the training of those NATO forces (mostly special operations forces) that are designated to support and enable Baltic states' operations until the allied reinforcements arrive. The training of these units should not only focus on how to support conventional military operations but also on the conduct of small-unit urban operations while utilising non-standard equipment and enabling citizen soldiers (and professional irregular forces). Fifth, if the total defence or professional

irregular force concepts can demonstrate that small states can defeat a great power then they might quickly become attractive to other small states around the world who are also trying to find alternative solutions to combat the conventional military capabilities of a large, aggressive neighbour. Finally, the proliferation of unorthodox defence concepts could not only affect the small countries implementing them but could also lead to seismic changes in military alliances. Since the Baltic states still maintain their conventional military formations, the appearance of the total defence concepts did not prompt fundamental changes in NATO's defence planning and force generation processes. However, if the new wargames show that better results can be obtained through the professional irregular defence force concept, then the abandonment of traditional military frameworks and the appearance of new military formations will force NATO to revise its Cold War legacy assumptions, behaviour patterns and general processes. NATO might choose to abandon standardised approaches and create a new distributed concept where professional irregular forces from small states are supported

by the conventional military capabilities of larger members.

In 2016, a RAND report concluded that the Baltic states cannot be defended against a swift Russian occupation. Since then, the strategic landscape has changed significantly with the deployment of NATO forces and the implementation of the total defence concept. However, if the Baltic states want to consider all viable options for their defence, then new wargames must include the professional irregular force strategy. This could have implications not only for the defence of the Baltic states, but for small countries around the world and even for NATO itself.

Sandor Fabian is a former Hungarian special forces officer. He currently works as a NATO special operations forces subject matter expert and curriculum developer at LEIDOS, supporting the NATO Special Operations School. He holds a PhD in Security Studies and is the author of *Irregular Defense Forces: The Future Military Strategy For Small States*.

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