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Military Signaling & Geopolitical Instability: A Critical Geopolitics View of the NATO-Russia Exercise Dynamic in the Baltic Sea

CEERES Master's Thesis

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January 2022

Kraków, Poland

Field of Study: European Studies

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of:

Magister (mgr) of European Studies (specialty: Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies), Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland

International Master's (IntM) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: University of Glasgow, UK

Master of Arts in Social Sciences (MA) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: University of Tartu, Estonia

Word count: 25, 520 (including tables in the text, excluding abstract, acknowledgments, table of contents, footnote, appendices and bibliography).

bibliography

Author's declaration: I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this thesis have been referenced.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

/Signature/

Acknowledgements

I want to express my gratitude to my main supervisor, Dr. Viacheslav Morozov, for pushing me to rethink my ideas, challenging me when I clearly did not know what I was talking about, always replying to my emails, and being amazingly supportive despite my antics. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Olya Olikier and Dr. Alexander Sergunin who made several key observations about my research design. Specifically, I extend my gratitude to Dr. Olikier for serving as my mentor and believing in my potential as an analyst. Like a true master of deterrence and compellence, your hybrid warfare tactics that included withholding our paper, almost placing a sign near my bed in Brussels about finishing my thesis, and nearly writing me a song about my thesis really did the job. I am also thankful to my boss, Dr. Chris Miller, was also incredibly supportive during this period.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents and Danila Dunenkov for always serving as my inspiration.

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze how military signaling can impact geopolitical instability. I explore this issue through a case study of the NATO-Russia military exercise dynamic in the Baltic Sea region using a critical geopolitics perspective. Currently, NATO-Russia relations find themselves in grave decline for NATO members and Russia possess inherently different viewpoints about the European security order. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea and its actions in eastern Ukraine among other events, NATO members and Russia ramped up their military activity in the Baltic Sea under the guise of deterrence. This study finds that instead of contributing to regional stability, the NATO-Russia military exercise dynamic can be considered a factor of geopolitical instability in the region. Essentially, NATO finds itself in a conundrum where it must assure its most vulnerable members even though geography is not on its side, therefore it must reassure its allies, rehearse interoperability, and deter Russia. NATO's balancing act affects how Russia perceives its exercises. In contrast, Russia does not see NATO's military exercises as a deterrent but as provocations and at times responds with low level provocations of its own.

Key words: Russia-NATO, Military Exercises, Deterrence, Reassurance

Abstrakt

Celem tego badania jest analiza, w jaki sposób sygnalizacja wojskowa może wpływać na niestabilność geopolityczną. Zbadam tę kwestię poprzez studium przypadku dynamiki ćwiczeń wojskowych NATO-Rosja w regionie Morza Bałtyckiego z krytycznej perspektywy geopolitycznej. Obecnie stosunki NATO-Rosja znajdują się w poważnym upadku dla członków NATO, a Rosja ma z natury różne poglądy na temat europejskiego porządku bezpieczeństwa. Po aneksji Krymu przez Rosję i jej działaniach na wschodzie Ukrainy, między innymi, członkowie NATO i Rosja pod przykrywką odstraszania zintensyfikowali swoją aktywność wojskową na Morzu Bałtyckim. Badanie to wskazuje, że zamiast przyczyniać się do stabilności w regionie, dynamika ćwiczeń wojskowych NATO-Rosja może być uważana za czynnik niestabilności geopolitycznej w regionie. Zasadniczo NATO znajduje się w zagadce, w której musi zapewnić swoich najbardziej narażonych członków, mimo że geografia nie jest po jego stronie, dlatego musi uspokoić swoich sojuszników, ćwiczyć interoperacyjność i odstraszac Rosję. Równoważenie NATO wpływa na to, jak Rosja postrzega swoje ćwiczenia. W przeciwieństwie do tego Rosja nie postrzega ćwiczeń wojskowych NATO jako środka odstraszającego, ale jako prowokację i czasami odpowiada własnymi prowokacjami na niskim poziomie.

Abbreviations

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Association

EFP – Enhanced Forward Presence

OSCE - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

SFC – Substantial Forces Pledge

STRATEX – Russian Annual Strategic Military Exercise

CFE- Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty

ACFE – Adapted Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty

PPF - Partnership for Peace

NORDEFECO - The Nordic Defense Cooperation

CEECs - Central Eastern European Countries

CSBMs – Confidence and Security Building Measures

ERI - European Reassurance Initiative

NFIUS - NATO Force Integration Units

USEUCOM - United States European Command

REFORGER- Enter Return of Forces to Germany

MoD- Ministry of Defense

CRBN- Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear

Introduction

Military signaling is known as an important tool for states to reassure allies and contribute towards deterrence and geopolitical stability. This dissertation, on the contrary, explores how messages conveyed by military exercises contribute to geopolitical instability. I acknowledge that a large quantity of studies about military exercises exist, yet these studies mainly center around the deterrent value of the exercises. While deterrence also plays a large role in this paper, the interplay between military signaling and geopolitical instability allows this study to focus on the role of reassurance and how it impacts the geopolitical ambiance in a set region.

Specifically, I scrutinize the effects of the NATO-Russia exercise dynamic in the Baltic Sea region. I acknowledge that a quantity of studies about the NATO-Russia military exercise dynamic exist. Yet these studies mainly employ neorealist lens. In contrast, I use a different framework to examine the phenomenon. Critical geopolitics is a theory mainly used to conduct discourse analysis. In my study, I use critical geopolitics theory to assess the rhetoric and force posture exemplified by NATO members and Russia, and how both actors interact with each other. The exercise dynamic is examined between both actors, as a two-way phenomenon, by focusing on the language used when describing their force postures.

I assert that military exercises can be a discursive tool when weighting again the possibility of instability in the region. Typically, exercises are described as contributions to stability and security in the region. In this study, I focus on military exercises as geopolitical messages. Military exercises are imbued with powerful geopolitical messages meant to show how capabilities enhance regional stability.¹ Ultimately, the messages within military activity support a nation's foreign policy and security policy.²

Russia's actions in Ukraine severely affected the threat perceptions of NATO members, especially Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. In consequence, both NATO members and Russia adopted deterrence strategies in the Baltic Sea region. I argue that what is happening in the Baltic Sea is not deterrence as usual for the reality of the subject is far more complex. An abundance of serious academic literature highlights the difficulty NATO members would have when it comes to defending its most vulnerable members in the case Russia decided to invade

¹ Clem, 2018

² Ibid

the Baltic states.³ Thus, the notion that NATO can credibly deter Russia based on regional deployments in the region is questionable, yet NATO must reassure its allies that it will come to their aid in case of an attack. In essence, the act of deterrence in the Baltic Sea is strenuous.

I chose the Baltic Sea region as my main case study to explore the dilemma between military signaling and geopolitical stability because the region is the main contact line between Russia and NATO with bordering states that are former soviet republics who are NATO members. Specifically, Russia and NATO have conducted their largest military exercises since the fall of the USSR in the sample years.⁴ Both parties have also participated in brinkmanship during these drills. NATO maintains that Russia uses military exercises to disguise its aggressive actions as evidenced in Ukraine and Georgia.⁵ In 2016, NATO initiated its Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) which is composed of four rotational multinational battalion-sized battle groups in Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and Latvia with the support of the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Germany. The declarative goal of NATO's EFP is to deter Russia and reassure fellow members that NATO will fulfill its article 5 obligations in case of Russian aggression. Both players hold fixed positions. NATO claims Russia's practices in the region range from low scale provocations to exploitation of the established thresholds for hazardous military activity.⁶ Inversely, Russia claims it is sufficiently transparent and that NATO must change its neo-containment policy towards the Russian Federation.

To conduct my analysis, I examine a set of military exercises from mainly 2014-2020 from both Russia and NATO. My research is centered on exercises that were held in a consistent series of exercises to gather a more accurate comparison of the difference and similarities in the declarative policies and force postures in the exercise dynamic. The study poses the following research question: How does the exercise dynamic impact geopolitical stability in the region? To achieve this, I employ a set of indicators. I analyze the geopolitical message behind the exercises, scrutinize the reaction of the other party to the exercise, and put them into political context.

Overall, this dissertation begins by laying out realist concepts in the literature typically applied to examine the force postures of actors in the international relations system. I make use

³ Clem, 2017 & Kofman, 2016 & Bodner, 2015 & Shlapak and Johnson, 2016

⁴ Clem, 2018

⁵ NATO, 2017

⁶ Jankowski, 2019

of these concepts by arguing that there are vital social processes behind them, as argued by constructivists. Hence, I acknowledge the limitations of neorealism, and set the stage to discuss what critical geopolitics entails and the existing literature on the theory and its application to the Euro-Atlantic region and Eurasia. Next, I explain the methodology and indicators I used to perform the analysis along with the sample, and how I selected the material. Afterwards, I discuss the exercises in series, and by comparing the force posture and the language used to describe the exercises (declaration) via press releases and the force structure of the exercise, I assess the geopolitical message behind the exercise. Following this, I note the reaction of the other side which can be via force posture or declaration. Lastly, I look at the force posture, and determine if the drills represent an increase in force posture and how the drill was perceived to determine instability. The last chapter of this study is a conclusion. In conclusion, I argue that military exercises (specifically the exercise dynamic between Russia and NATO) have significantly impacted the Baltic Sea region's geopolitical stability.

1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

In this section, I introduce several concepts relevant to assess the NATO-Russia exercise dynamic. I begin by introducing realist concepts and how constructivists view these concepts. The purpose of the discussion is to lay down the foundation to explain my main theoretical framework, critical geopolitics. Afterwards, I provide a thorough literature review about an important concept in my study, military signaling. Lastly, I discuss critical geopolitics, what it entails, its intricacies, and its previous uses in the literature.

1.1 Anarchy and Constructivism

Military exercises are typically associated with realist literature. My study draws from a constructivist approach but does not discard realist concepts. I part from the assumption that these concepts are viable in the system of international relations, but their existence is due to a socializing process. While anarchy, and self-help as powerful forces in the international relations system., self-help and power politics derive from processes rather than systematic anarchy.⁷ Traditional neorealism focuses little on what shapes anarchy. As a matter of fact, neorealists assume the contents of the international relations system, the identities, and interests of states and that is precisely why a constructivist approach fits my study. Thus, “anarchy is what you make of it.” While states vie for their own security and increase their security increments, only to be matched by others; states respond to each other in their own ways with their previous interactions in mind.⁸ That is, states are not presented with a security dilemma from the get-go. A security dilemma is best described as “a situation where the actions taken by a state to increase its own security cause reactions from other states, which leads to a decrease rather than an increase in the state’s security.”⁹ As previously discussed, the system of international relations is described by realists as anarchic. States acquire guarantees for their own security, but since no state can be sure that the other state’s posturing is of defensive nature, they assume the increments in other states’ security is of offensive nature.¹⁰ In response, states mirror each other’s security increments, and this results

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Snyder, 1984

⁹ Wivel, 2011, P.3

¹⁰ Snyder, 1997

in a vicious escalatory cycle “along with the costs incurred by states in having acquired and having to maintain their power.”¹¹

Regardless, the security dilemma arises from not only interactions, but the identities and roles produced through the interaction.¹² Neorealism poses that states pursue power; yet constructivists propose that once a state behaves aggressively, other states who feel threatened by this state must either behave aggressively (mirror) or they will suffer consequences (degradation or possibly disappearance).¹³ Individual anarchy allows one state to force another state to give meaning to its security.¹⁴ In collective anarchy, how states respond to an aggressive state will be based on how states identify with each other and interact with each other.¹⁵ Say one state attacks another state, naturally, the behavior of other states apart from the attacker state and defender state towards the attacker state will be altered after perceiving the previous interactions the attacker state had.¹⁶ Collective action is much more difficult when the identities and interests of states have evolved into rationalist conceptions; but rational conceptions do exist in the constructivist way of thinking.¹⁷ In general, neorealist assumptions focus on why states react to threats and dismiss how the way states interact is based on a history of interactions; this is what I explore with constructivism.¹⁸ Hence, while states may be egoists as neorealists pose, their interests are subjective. States can also identify with each other, and a competitive dynamic can be replaced with a cooperative one. However, cooperative, or competitive behavior influence states deeply.¹⁹

In conclusion, although I make use of realist concepts, I propose that military exercises can be examined as a way of reproducing geopolitical knowledge. In essence, constructivist explanations can use and complexify realist concepts by scrutinizing what is behind power dynamics.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Wendt, 1992, P. 391-425

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

4.2 Military Signaling and Exercises

States constantly send signals to one another. Geopolitical messages are a part of signaling, therefore, I must define signaling to continue. However, I am taking the concept of military signaling as the geopolitical message itself, mainly, the exercises. Prior to this, I discuss signaling from a broad concept to the specific parameters of the study.

As Thomas Schelling, one of the main developers of signaling theory, states in *Arms and Influence*: “war is always a bargaining process, one in which threats and proposals, counterproposals and counterthreats, offers and assurances, concessions and demonstrations, take the form of actions rather than words, or actions accompanied by words. It is in the wars that we have come to call “limited wars” that the bargaining appears most vividly and is conducted most consciously.”²⁰ Schelling theorized that in a restrained war, there is a form of collaboration between adversaries considering the possibility of mutually assured destruction posed by the acquisition of nuclear weapons by states.²¹ During this bargaining process, states send credible signals, states draw on credibility and their reputations, and incur costs.²² Signaling can be best described as “the purposive and strategic revealing of information about intent, resolve, and/or capabilities by an actor A to alter the decisions of another actor B to improve the chances that an outcome desired by A is reached when the desired outcomes of A and B are dissimilar.”²³ Essentially, signaling is about messaging between actors, once a state sends a signal, the receptor state must interpret a message from the signal.²⁴ If the receptor fails to receive the message, then no signal occurred. Misinterpretation follows when the sender and the recipient disagree on the message sent.²⁵ The interpretation of the signal in this case relies on threat perceptions. As Wendt argues, the process of signaling, perceiving, interpreting, and reacting is a social act.²⁶ States gather data about each other through their interactions.²⁷ Through these, states acquire roles and interests. Incrementing or decreasing force structure is a signal, but the signal was not only gathered through a process of socialization and the cycle of sending signals and receiving them is itself a social

²⁰ Schelling, 1966, P.143-144,

²¹ Ibid

²² Sechser, 2018, P.318-349

²³ Gartzke et al, 2017, P.7

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Wendt, 1992 P.391-425

²⁷ Ibid

process.²⁸ Nonetheless, the expectations states have about each other also play a large role throughout this social dynamic.

In my study, I rely on the third generation of scholarship on military signaling for it deals with the perception and misinterpretation of signals. Sending a military signal and choosing to engage is a geopolitical statement, and a socializing process all by itself. Third wave scholarship focuses on the subjectivity of signaling, and the consequences and dynamics that lead to the misinterpretation of signals.²⁹ Signaling can be a bilateral foreign policy decision or a multilateral one. Bilateral signaling occurs when an actor sends a message to a specific receptor while multilateral signaling involves numerous sender and receptors.³⁰ Traditionally, bilateral and multilateral signaling serve different purposes and send different messages depending on how foreign policy issues are classified.³¹ Nonetheless, signaling literature gives us the tools to explore a state's force posture.

The first two generations of scholarship on signaling do not suit my analysis because they are mainly based on economic modeling. Meanwhile, recent work on signaling attempts to complicate the subject matter and expands on the original mechanisms established by the classic literature. Regardless, the first two generations of scholarship about signaling establish several principles. The first generation of scholarship on strategic signaling defined deterrence and compellence as tools of coercive diplomacy.³² Costs lie within signaling. The two main categories of costs from the first-generation scholarship on the subject are, sinking costs and tying hands. Sinking costs refers to when the signaler incurs costs which are “sunk and unrecoverable.”³³ On the other hand, tying hands refers to signals which are costly in the future if the signaler abandons the endeavor, but otherwise, the signal is without cost.³⁴ Meanwhile, the second generation of scholarship about signaling focuses on the effectivity of signals, and the introduction of domestic politics and signaling in secret into the equation.³⁵

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Gartzke et al, 2017

³¹ Ibid

³² Schelling

³³ Gartzke et al, 2017

³⁴ Queck, 2020

Also see: Fearon, 1997

³⁵ Gartzke et al, 2017

The second wave of scholarship looks at entrapment, extended deterrence, and questions the empirical features of classical work on the subject matter.

In my study, I explore how a form of military signaling, namely, military exercises, serve as geopolitical messages. The most studied form of signaling has been conflict signaling in terms of strategic realism, yet little attention has been paid to military exercises, which are part of the military means states possess to send signals to other states. Military exercises can be defined as “ranging from the training of small numbers of soldiers for joint action to large-scale, multi-force events that are conducted on a state or even an alliance-wide level; they may be staff rides for officers or can include the dimension of top government decision-making.”³⁶ Within the literature, exercises can serve numerous political-military purposes: these can be to (1) reassure allies and the domestic public, (2) serve as practice of defence reform and standardization or as part of an effort to interoperate with other armed forces, (3) serve as tools of diplomacy, (4) serve to disguise offensive operations, and (5) project power and deter an adversary.³⁷

I propose that military exercises should be seen as part of a larger geopolitical discourse. In general, war and conflict invoke an emotional response when discussed, and these emotional responses help legitimize popular narratives concerning geopolitics.³⁸ One of the factors that distinguish this study is the focus on the military exercises in these fixed spaces. This is an important component of the NATO-Russia exercise dynamic and how it is perceived. For instance, General Ben Hodges, the former Commanding General of United States Army Europe recently called the Black Sea “the literal and philosophical frontier between liberal democracy and autocracy.”³⁹ Statements like these suggest that the signaling (exercises) is tied to the specific discourses of states.

On top of this, I explore the risk that comes with military exercises becoming a part of broader geopolitical discourse. Military exercises as broader geopolitical discourse comes with risks because actors could fall into righteous self-fulfilling prophecies.⁴⁰ After all, the perceptions of states are often at least partially linked to their own perceptions of self-

³⁶ NDC, P.11

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Dalby, 2010

³⁹ Hodges, 2021

⁴⁰ Clem, 2018

weaknesses relative to the other side along with scenarios that border on *fait accompli*, a scenario that is considered *de-facto* without considering the political motivations and feasibility of the situation.⁴¹ Military exercises focus on hypothetical scenarios with a focus on readiness and reinforcing possible military vulnerabilities. This may lead to the securitization of an object, and deep preoccupation of potential vulnerabilities. Said fixation may bring about the prescription of military countermeasures as if they were an almighty cure.⁴² My work suggests that moving the exercises closer to the contact lines between Russia and NATO significantly affects geopolitical stability in a negative way. In this work, instability refers to militarization or perceiving a space is becoming militarized. First and foremost, the typical model for a military exercise supposes that showing or executing a certain capability will contribute to regional stability.⁴³ What better way to examine exercises that may influence geopolitical instability than with a tool meant to defuse geopolitical representation? Geopolitical logic shapes policy prescriptions, therefore, critical geopolitics inherently builds a bridge between the different rationalities, interests, and policy prescriptions produced by different narratives.⁴⁴

I assess the impact of the military exercise dynamic on geopolitical stability. Stability itself is often linked to deterrence when it comes to military exercises, and this is relevant to my study because for deterrence and stability are often thought of desired strategic outcomes.⁴⁵ Mazaar's definition of deterrence is "the practice of discouraging or restraining someone—in world politics, usually a nation-state—from taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack. It involves an effort to stop or prevent an action, as opposed to the closely related but distinct concept of "compellence," which is an effort to force an actor to do something."⁴⁶ According to the traditional literature, deterrence aims to prevent aggression and war. Mazaar proposes that two alternatives to deterrence exist.⁴⁷ One is deterrence by denial. This is a strategy that seeks to deter an action by an adversary through making the adversary believe that its action will not be successful.⁴⁸ Essentially, deterrence by denial is fueled by both the intent and capability to defend by increasing the cost of an invasion to a

⁴¹ Olikier, 2016 P.21

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Clem, 2018

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Clem, 2018

⁴⁶ Mazaar, 2018 P.2

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

catastrophic level.⁴⁹ This is usually measured through the military balance (troops on the ground) between actors, yet it does not only have to include this. The second way to deter is deterrence by punishment.⁵⁰ The basis of deterrence by punishment is threats about penalties.⁵¹ In this case, the commitment to defense does not raise the cost, but the threat of a terrible punishment does⁵². Overall, denial strategies are more reliable than punishment according to the literature, for placing military capabilities is often clear to the aggressor, while punishment strategies feature escalatory possibilities that may hinder an actor from punishing an adversary.⁵³

Regardless, it is important to acknowledge that Russia possesses its own conception of deterrence.⁵⁴ The Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) definition of deterrence or *sderzhivanye strategicheskoe* is far more encompassing than the western conception of the subject.⁵⁵ For instance, strategic deterrence is not just about preventing aggression but also keeping one's opponent from applying coercive pressure.⁵⁶ Conceptually, Russia employs a complex deterrence and escalation management system based on forceful, and non-coercive measures to take during peace and war.⁵⁷ Said non-coercive, and forceful measures are a wide range of actions that Russia can choose to take to carry out strategic deterrence.ⁱ

Oppositely, the most appropriate way to label NATO's force posture is extended deterrence. This term mainly applies to the U.S. and its allies (NATO). While deterrence focuses on restraining an attack on your own territory, extended deterrence is about restraining an attack on a third country or your allies.⁵⁸ Extended deterrence is complex because it involves a degree of reassurance and interoperability. Reassurance was a common discursive purpose of military exercises in the Cold War for the Allies. Reassurance usually resonates with joint military exercises where allies use military exercises to assert credibility to ally commitments and "to demonstrate political and military resolve to their common

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Charap 2020 & Fink, 2017

⁵⁵ This term is applied to both the conventional and nuclear domains.

⁵⁶ Russia's Ministry of Defense, "Strategic Deterrence."

⁵⁷ For more information, See the writings of Anya Fink, Sam Scharap, Dmitry Stefanovich, Olga Oliker, Michael Kofman, and others.

⁵⁸ Mazaar, 2018 P.1-10

adversaries; in other words, preparing jointly for war makes going to war together a real option.”⁵⁹ Extended deterrence is usually achieved through interoperability. Interoperability refers to the ability of the Allies to act in unison coherently to achieve its tactical, operational, and strategic objectives.⁶⁰

NATO’s article 5, the principle of collective defense and commits members to shielding each other, is considered the main example of extended deterrence in the literature.⁶¹ However, article 5 does not demand an automatic response for NATO member states are required to act if they deem it necessarily; but they are not obliged to do so.⁶² Hence, the U.S., the Alliance member that possesses the strongest military capability, is constantly balancing declarative statements and its military capabilities.⁶³

1.3 Critical Geopolitics

Now, I will discuss critical geopolitics and its innerworkings. Critical geopolitics is the theoretical backbone of this study. From a more conceptual viewpoint, critical geopolitics manifests itself through various levels according to Omelicheva. The first level is categorized as the formal level where intellectuals and academic institutions construct and reproduce geopolitical thought.⁶⁴ The second level is the practical level where discourse is reproduced through statecraft, policy, and the discourse surrounding these actions.⁶⁵ The last level of reproduction is popular culture and mass media.⁶⁶ A critical geopolitics perspective explores the politics of states as a “a social, cultural, discursive, and political practice of ‘construction of ontological claims.’”⁶⁷ In other words, actors in the international stage construct their own truths about international relations.⁶⁸ Critical geopolitics focuses on the changing geopolitical conceptions of foreign policy actors and challenges simplifications in conventional

⁵⁹ NDC, 2018, P.295

⁶⁰ “Interoperability: Connecting NATO Forces,” 2020

⁶¹ Mazaar, 2018, P.1-10

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Omelicheva, 2016, P.711

⁶⁸ Ibid, P.712

geopolitical discourse.⁶⁹ In its essence, critical geopolitics targets the subjectivity behind geopolitical thinking and binaries within narratives.⁷⁰

Originally, critical geopolitics emerged as a tool to deconstruct the discourse, spatial symbolism, political rationality, and normative concerns surrounding the Cold War.⁷¹ In the 1990s, academics explored the binaries set up by the Cold War. The first discussions of critical geopolitics focused on “a deconstruction of traditional geopolitical thought.”⁷² Like critical theory, critical geopolitics focuses on the exclusion of groups, individuals, and systems. Critical geopolitics aims to deconstruct “hegemonic knowledge production” and other forms of geopolitics imbued with power.⁷³ Borrowing from the established literature, this study will focus on the second level of discourse. However, I narrow down the object of study to the geopolitical messages imbued within military exercises.

In framing the empirical analysis, my study draws from several components of thick geopolitics to examine the role of military exercises (individual drills) from 2014-2020.⁷⁴ In 2017, Toal published a book examining the contestation between Russia and the West calling for a thicker analysis of geopolitics. This concept can be seen as an element of critical geopolitics. Nonetheless, in comparison to critical geopolitics, thick geopolitics mainly calls for a broad analysis of geopolitical reality.⁷⁵ Thick geopolitics focuses on geopolitical networks, forces, engagements, and interactions “that configure places and states.”⁷⁶ Critical geopolitics encompasses all the elements that thick geopolitics tackles yet focuses on the spatial conceptions that separates enemies from friends through geopolitical divisions.⁷⁷ In a way, thick geopolitics lie within critical geopolitics. That is not to say that localities and spatial relationships do not matter when it comes to a thick geopolitical analysis. Essentially, both frameworks deal with deconstructing hegemonic discourse, but it is not completely about analyzing descriptions but policy itself as well. In general, critical geopolitical analysis

⁶⁹ Omelicheva, 2012 & Toal, 2008

⁷⁰ Toal, 2013

⁷¹ Ciută & Klinke, 2010

⁷² Bachmann & Sami, 2020

⁷³ Omelicheva, 2012

⁷⁴ Clem, 2018

⁷⁵ Bachman & Toal, 2019 p.145

⁷⁶ Clem, 2018

⁷⁷ Bachmann & Sami, 2020

relies on three conceptual foundations according to Toal.⁷⁸ The first is the geopolitical field which is the socio-spatial conceptions of the space. The second conceptual foundation is geopolitical culture, which relies on spatial identities and the perception of an actor.⁷⁹ At its core, a state's regard for its role, what it has to offer the world and the debate surrounding it, an actor's perception.⁸⁰ Lastly, the geopolitical condition is the last conceptual foundation regards how structures like militaries, transportation, and communication infrastructure transform become sources of the geopolitical experience and its understanding.⁸¹

Geopolitical messages through military signaling have not been an object of analysis for critical geopolitics, perhaps because it requires linking spatial conceptions and those of military signaling. My study is an attempt to do so, which defines its main conceptual contribution. In doing this, it builds on previous studies applying Critical Geopolitics to the Eurasia region. One of the main attempts to apply critical geopolitics theory to the Eurasia region is Omelicheva's article on Moscow's policy towards Iran. In 2012, she argued that Moscow's policy towards Iran should be analyzed through its own code of "geopolitics" rather than pre-determined lens.⁸² A year later, Toal published a study exploring the Critical Geopolitics within the narratives surrounding the 2008 August War in Georgia and South Ossetia.⁸³ He argued that both Russia and Georgia issued geopolitical storylines of the events that transpired during the 2008 August War citing emotive analogies.⁸⁴ Toal's main point was that Georgia was unable to disconnect itself from its geographical and geopolitical reality, and how good relations between Georgia and Russia are necessary for Georgia's future prosperity due to the shared history and geopolitical realities between the countries.⁸⁵ Toal has also published numerous short pieces about Russia and NATO's geopolitical antagonism through rhetoric and geopolitics in general.

In another study in 2017, Omelicheva proposed that Russia's behavior in the international arena may possess realist conceptions and economic imperialism yet remains

⁷⁸ Bachman & Toal, 2019 P.145

⁷⁹ Ibid P.145-147

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Bachmann & Sami, 2020

⁸³ Toal, 2013

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid

rooted in its own identity, subjectivity, and its geopolitics code.⁸⁶ Another article published by Andrew Foxall explores Russia as a case of Critical Geopolitics was published in 2019 and explored the EU's role within Russia's discourse and the dynamics of the relationship.⁸⁷ He argues that the EU's role within Russia's geopolitical discourse coincides with Russia's geopolitical orientation. In 2016, a study about Russia's construction of geopolitical spaces in its foreign policy discourse prior to or after Ukraine notes how NATO enlargement is a key element as to how Russia's discourse regarding Eurasia and the Euro-Atlantic has evolved.⁸⁸ Svarin argues that throughout the years, Russia went from seeking integration in the euro-Atlantic space as a part of its identity to being an outsider and seeking to entirely reshape the geopolitical logic within the space.⁸⁹ According to him, the Ukrainian crisis only solidified Russia's exclusion in this space.⁹⁰

NATO's discursive practices have also been assessed from a critical geopolitics' perspective yet in a limited manner. In 2014, Rogulis discussed NATO and Russia's geopolitical discourse about the crises in Afghanistan, Libya, and Kosovo, and how the narratives regarding these events shaped NATO-Russia relations.⁹¹ Toal also considers the West's geopolitical practices in a discussion while discussing how Russia behaves towards the post-soviet space in his latest book, "The Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus." Regardless, the center of Toal's discussion in the book is Russia. Furthermore, NATO has been widely cited as a case study from a critical perspective and in the vein of geopolitics.⁹²

For the most part, geopolitical constructions in Russia's discourse are a common object of study using the critical geopolitics framework. Yet, exploring NATO's geopolitical message using the critical geopolitics framework is not common in the literature. Nonetheless, due to its collective principles, NATO's policies are shaped by a hegemonic discourse. Some may argue that it is reductionist to examine NATO as an actor rather than the individual member states due to the fact NATO's armed forces as the forces of each

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Foxall, 2019

⁸⁸ Svarin, 2016

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Rogulis, 2014, P.1-90

⁹² Ponomareva and Frolov, 2019 P.32-56

individual member state and the fact each NATO member regards NATO membership differently (Turkey and Hungary).⁹³ Even so, analyses of the geopolitical constructions within NATO's policies are prominent within the literature. For instance, Benke's book from 2013, scrutinizes how NATO constructed several geo-cultural spaces and what caused these spaces to be categorized as adversarial towards the West. He argues that NATO's Cold War spatial construction is not relevant or effective in this new era of security threats.⁹⁴ In 2018, Hjelmevoll argued how Russia and NATO's relationship has suffered because of the discourse of both parties towards NATO enlargement.⁹⁵ In the case of NATO or any actor with its own interests and identity, discourse is akin to communicating the world view of the elites and expressing self-interests.⁹⁶ Discourse can also be used as a tool to justify the policies and status of an actor.⁹⁷

Deterrence and reassurance are strategic terms; yet they can also be used to assist the legitimization of a geopolitics narrative. Overall, geopolitical constructions are ever present in the varying manifestations of a state's security policy.

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Benke, 2013

⁹⁵ Hjelmevoll, 2018, P.63

⁹⁶ Svarin, 2016

⁹⁷ Ibid

2. Methodology & Data

This section of my study covers the methodological framework, operationalization, information on data, and justify the methodological choices made.

2.1 Research Questions

The overall aim of the study is to investigate whether military exercises contribute to geopolitical instability. Critical geopolitics is a framework traditionally used to examine an actor's discursive practices and how a state ascribes geopolitical narratives. In this study, I focus on the second level of critical geopolitics; how discourse expands into statecraft and how it is reproduced through the actions of states (military exercises). This allows me to consider both the language and force posture during the military exercises of states and how they choose to respond to them. Naturally, the questions that emerged were:

1. Can the NATO-Russia military exercise dynamic be seen as a factor of geopolitical instability?
2. How does the exercise dynamic impact geopolitical stability in the region?

2.2 Operationalization and Object of Study

There are a set of specific objects of study that are important to this paper. They are listed below.

- a. Geopolitical Messages: I evaluate geopolitical exercises by looking at the following indicators based on an essay about exercises and geopolitical instability by Ralph Clem.⁹⁸ I mainly look at the description of the exercise in relation to the geographical location and the desired outcome of the exercise. Hence, I look at the language used to legitimize the exercise and the goals of the exercise to infer. What kind of language do I specifically consider? Mentions of geopolitical or regional stability/security, deterrence, reassurance, force readiness, and interoperability. I mainly want to scrutinize what the declarative policies link to

⁹⁸ See Section 2.3

regional stability or security by looking at the common themes within the exercises.

On a more practical level as to how a geopolitical message can be executed as an exercise, I consider the status of the exercise; meaning if the exercise took place, was postponed, or cancelled. Afterwards, I look at the force posture and the geographical location of posturing. Meaning, I look at the number of personnel involved in the exercise, the nations involved in the exercise, the equipment used in the exercise. Oliker defines force posture as “the mix of forces a state deploys; its operational doctrine for its forces; and its declaratory policy.”⁹⁹ In a sense, the exercises are also being seen as competing narratives through the critical geopolitics framework; this does not cancel out the realist security concerns.

- b. Response to the Geopolitical Message: The reactions from government officials and the media to military exercises demonstrate how an exercise influences national security discourse and how they are ascribed to geopolitical knowledge.¹⁰⁰ I part from the primacy of perception when it comes to geopolitical messaging. How do I measure a response to a message and how can I conclude that an exercise is responding to another exercise? This is a rather complex topic because a response also entails the perception of the sender’s drill, plus the discourse of the receiver of the message. While there are delimitations to this, I mainly take three elements into account when interpreting responses in the exercise dynamic. Firstly, I consider if one actor declared that its military drills are related to the actions of the other actor. Secondly, I look at if the drill takes place simultaneously to the sender’s drill or in a reasonably close time frame to the sender’s exercise. Thirdly, I look at where the drill takes place and if it takes place near the initial sender’s exercise.

Declarative responses are, of course, the easiest to interpret, regardless of if they are attached to a drill or not attached to a drill. Regardless, I acknowledge that

⁹⁹Oliker, 2016, P.11,

¹⁰⁰ Clem, 2018

there are limitations to assessing the messaging dynamic, but these three factors should give us an idea what the actions of actors suggest.

- c. Geopolitical Instability: I acknowledge that stability and instability are broad concepts. I use Clem's broad definition of instability which is more in line with militarization of a space.¹⁰¹ No consensus exists over a definition of geopolitical stability.¹⁰² Nonetheless, you can consider the incrementation or decrease of the force posture of both actors in the region; hence, instability increases if there is an incrementation of force posture from both sides.¹⁰³ From there, you can achieve a rough idea of the extent of what may be destabilizing. One would suppose that what alters the military status quo can be considered as destabilizing; thus, why an increase in drills in a sensitive location is destabilizing. Specific equipment and the rate of complex operations can also be considered destabilizing. For instance, Russia's deployment of the Iskander ballistic missiles into Kaliningrad permanently was destabilizing.¹⁰⁴ Just as the deal for Poland to acquire the Patriot missiles in 2018 prompted a very negative reaction from Russia.¹⁰⁵

Declaration plays a large role in this variable. Especially when they come to deterrence and reassurance because deterrence is directly linked to stability. Plus, these two concepts are linked to the perception of the receiver. Indicators about this refer to how the actions of one party is described by the other. Hence, recognition from the receiver comes into play. In military exercises, deterrence often serves as legitimizer of military action, but it can easily be delegitimized by the receiving party regardless of the reason. The main indicator will be if a state directly recognizes the other state's exercise as deterrence in their declaratory policy. If one party directly describes the other's exercise as "aggressive," "irresponsible," "risky," "threat," "exceeded the scope," "not transparent," "escalatory," "military build-up," or "assertive," then we can infer said party did not recognize deterrence. These markers serve as coding indicators.

¹⁰¹ See Section 2.3

¹⁰² Clem 2018

¹⁰³ Ibid

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

In conclusion, the variables above are the main objects of study, and I have spelled out the coding procedure. How does the NATO-Russia military exercise dynamic impact geopolitical instability in the region? I hypothesize that military exercises may be an effective tool in foreign policy, but they may lead to geopolitical instability instead of a deterrence reward. I also argue that military exercises can serve as a key indicator that may suggest instability using a framework that is not traditionally used to assess how and if language and force posture fit together.

2.3 Case Selection, Timeframe, and Data

In this section, I will discuss why I chose the Baltic Sea region as a case study, why I chose the timeframe in the analysis, and the details about my data.

My study builds on an essay published in 2018. In his essay, Clem argues that Russia and NATO are caught in a risky exercise dynamic that risks sending inadvertent messages that could spiral into brinkmanship.¹⁰⁶ To prove this, he uses thick geopolitics theory, a component of critical geopolitics theory.¹⁰⁷ His main indicators are the geopolitical messages within exercises and destabilizing capabilities from 2014-2018. However, his sample is very limited for he inductively chooses drills that take place in various locations and does not fully discuss them. On top of this, he mainly focuses on exercises that take place in non-NATO territory such as Georgia and Ukraine yet involve NATO members. Clem's essay also does not look at how and if another side responds to the exercise militarily nor does he specify nor justify what constitutes as a response to a military exercise. Another grave limitation in Clem's essay is that his data is drawn from solely English language sources. While Clem's essay is dated, I make use of his conceptual toolbox and his indicators to analyze geopolitical messages within military exercises.

I take inspiration from Clem's essay, but my work is much more comprehensive. I expand Clem's timeline and inductively look at the exercises from 2014 to 2020 although I do include Zapad 2013 for including Zapad 2013 will show a better understanding of the

¹⁰⁶ Clem, 2018

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

changes in NATO's response to Russia's force posture and declarative statements after its actions in Ukraine. Given the structure of the sample and other factors, the 2014–2020-time frame is most appropriate for this study. I did not include exercise beyond the period due to time constraints and the fact the proposal for this study was approved in 2020.

I contribute to the existing literature on military exercises in various ways. For instance, I use a framework, critical geopolitics, that is not traditionally used to link force posture and narrative. In terms of methodology, I develop my own set of indicators to assess a state's military response to an actor's geopolitical message, and with these indicators, I can argue that an exercise action-reaction dynamic occasionally takes place instead of assuming one actor's actions are linked to the state's actions. Another intellectual contribution to the literature of my study is that I examine Russian exercises that are not STRATEX (annual strategic exercises) at times in relation to NATO exercises. Surprisingly little analysis is available about Russia's exercises that are not STRATEX in English language.

Apart from this, my work focuses on the Baltic Sea region, mainly because it is a contact line between NATO member states who were part of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. While the region not entirely free from territorial disputes, the disputes are nowhere near the level of intensity in the Black Sea region. Due to the multiplicity in definitions for the Baltic Sea Region, this study defines the Baltic Sea region as these specific locations: the Baltic Sea, Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, Russia (Kaliningrad), Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Poland, and Germany (if the exercise takes place in conjunction with Poland and the three Baltic States). In limited instances, exercises in the Baltic Sea region may have components that link to other regions. For instance, Defender 2020 possessed a component in the Black Sea Region (Georgia) but most of the exercise took place in the Baltic region. However, I do not consider the components of the exercise that do not take place in the Baltic Sea because it is beyond the scope.

In terms of data, my sample is far more exhaustive than Clem's. In total, I analyze 21 military exercises, taking note if a snap exercise took place near the vicinity and declarative reactions to the exercise. However, I did not begin with 21 exercises (this number does not include the snap drills in the analysis section). I began with over 40 exercises (not including snap drills) from both sides according to open-source data. Despite this, the data collection process faced limitations. For instance, I could not find any information besides the

announcement of the exercises, this mainly applies to the smaller exercises in the original sample.

I do not have access to classified information; therefore, my data is the result of a thorough search of official statements and videos by NATO and Russia. I rely on primary and secondary source data. The data on the exercises is based on statements released in NATO's database, the national governments of NATO states (mainly their defense ministries) via press releases (i.e., declarative statements), and press articles covering the exercise. Most if not, all quotes I present in the analysis section are on the record comments by officials. Occasionally, I also considered the videos released by the press service. As for the Russian side, I mainly relied on press statements by the Russian Ministry of Defense, press releases from Tass which is Russia's main news agency known for breaking government news (the agency is also owned by the government of Russia), the news portal known as RIA Novosti which is also owned by the Russian government, and other news sites such as Red Star, Izvestiya, Sputnik, and others. I also consider academic articles and think tank reports about the exercises. This contributed to clearer picture of the military drills that took place.

My main search words were the name of the military exercises. Some articles and statements were in English while others were in Russian language. I speak Russian and I am comfortable translating Russian texts into English. I am also familiar with Russian culture. However, I acknowledge the possibility of human error, and that there might be data missing. After all, the data available from 2014-2020 is massive in terms of differing news reports about military exercises in the region, and there is a moment that one needs to stop reading.

In conclusion, I conducted a thorough review of existing sources about military exercises to gather my data. I not only built on the scholarly literature and the methodology used to assess my variables, but my work is a small contribution to the debate surrounding the NATO-Russia military exercise dynamic.

List of Exercises for analysis:

Exercise	Year	Scale	Location
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Zapad	2013	11,920 troops but number of personnel differs	Russia's Western Military District
Spring Storm	2014	6,000 troops	Estonia
Saber Strike	2014	4,500 troops	Three Baltic States
Anakonda	2014	12,500 troops	Poland
Allied Shield (BALTOPS 2015 and Saber Strike 2015)	2015	15,000 personnel for the different parts of the exercise in total	Baltic Sea Region
Anakonda	2016	31,000	Poland
BALTOPS	2016	5,800 troops	Baltic Sea
Saber Strike	2016	9,000 troops	Three Baltic States
Zapad	2017	12,700 but number of personnel differs.	Russia's Western Military District
BALTOPS	2017	5,800 troops	Baltic Sea and Poland
Saber Strike	2017	9,000 troops	Three Baltic States and Poland
Trident Juncture	2018	50,000	Norway, Baltic Sea, North Atlantic
BALTOPS	2018	More than 4700 personnel, 44 ships and submarines, and over 60 air assets.	Baltic Sea
Saber Strike	2018	Around 18,000 troops	Three Baltic States and Poland
Anakonda	2018	10,000	Poland
BALTOPS	2019	8,600	Baltic Sea and Poland

Defender	2020	Originally 20,000 troops. Changed to 6,000 troops	Baltic Sea (Germany, Poland, Baltic States and Georgia)
Ocean Shield	2019	10,000	Baltic Sea
Ocean Shield	2020	3,000 (Khmelevka polygon)	Baltic Sea
BALTOPS	2020	Around 3,000 personnel (around 30 ships and submarines, and 30 aircraft).	Baltic Sea

This information was taken from the portals of NATO and the Russian Ministry of Defense.

3. Context and History

This section mainly focuses on the political and historical development of the Baltic Sea region. The purpose of the section is to provide background information for the analysis.

3.1 NATO Enlargement

NATO enlargement (perhaps the expansion of NATO military infrastructure is more precise) is the main background issue in the tale of the NATO-Russia exercise dynamic. NATO enlargement is a complex issue, and its effects are thoroughly debated in the scholarship. Most of the security dilemma NATO-Russia scholarship focuses on the issue on NATO enlargement/expansion.¹⁰⁸ As NATO conducted an open-door policy since the nineties, the 2000s saw a resurgent Russia who regained its military might and economic stability to pursue its own foreign policy goals. The first state to fall under NATO expansion/enlargement in the nineties was technically Germany post-reunification, after all, eastern Germany fell under the NATO umbrella in 1990.¹⁰⁹ In the late 90s, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland were invited to join the Alliance and became members in 1999; this is considered the first wave of NATO enlargement.¹¹⁰ In this very year, NATO granted Slovenia, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Romania, and Bulgaria membership action plans. The second wave of enlargement would take place in 2004; this wave included Slovenia, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia.¹¹¹

Below, the issue of NATO enlargement is divided into several subsections. The first section, The First Wave of Enlargement, explores the motivations behind NATO expansion and the mechanisms that ruled how Russia and NATO would conduct relations following the disintegration of the USSR. The second section, The Second Wave of Enlargement, tells the story of the road of the Baltic states to becoming NATO members, their relations with Russia along with the security concerns behind the second wave of enlargement, and captures the rise of a more assertive Russia in the late 2000s. Lastly, the third section covers the consequences of the Russo-Georgian war and the war in Ukraine on the Baltic Sea region.

¹⁰⁸ Radchenko, 2020 & Veebel, 2019 & Lopata, 2018

¹⁰⁹ "Enlargement," 2020

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Ibid

a. The First Wave of Enlargement

The motivations to enlarge/expand the alliance are widely debated. In an article, Itzkowitz-Shiffrinson argues that NATO expansion was driven by a variety of factors including lobbyist from eastern European states and policymakers. While expansion did not occur during Bush's presidency in the early nineties, officials were embracing the idea of NATO expansionism before the Clinton era.¹¹² American foreign policy officials were concerned about a new security mechanism in Western Europe that could restrain U.S. hegemonic power and that material "advantages" would not be enough to support US dominance in the region¹¹³. Marten argues that the Clinton administration on behalf of constructivist principles, since Clinton believed that democracies did not go to war with each other; NATO enlargement was a socialization process for the CEECs (Central and Eastern European Countries). Meanwhile the first wave of CEECs signaled their interest in becoming part of the Alliance in the 1990s.¹¹⁴ By 1991, Moscow recognized that the first wave CEECs planned to join NATO as a goal.¹¹⁵ Regardless, enlargement was not talked about because the US and Europe prioritized getting the Soviet military out of the CEECs and they did not want to affect those negotiations. Why the CEECs sought NATO membership is long debated. From a realist viewpoint, the CEECs saw NATO membership to enhance to guarantee security in fear of losing their autonomy if Russia regain its strength again.¹¹⁶ From a constructivist viewpoint, the CEECs saw NATO membership as a club of prosperous western democracies who they identified with.¹¹⁷ Russia on the other hand, was not exactly excited about the first wave of NATO enlargement. While Russian president Boris Yeltsin made announcements acknowledging the first wave of NATO enlargement and feigning support, Radchenko argues that officials in Moscow were shocked about the announcement.¹¹⁸ However, during this time, the idea that Russia was to join NATO and become America's partner in European security affairs was still alive and well. In other words, during this period, Russia and its European neighbors found it beneficial to collaborate on soft security

¹¹² Horovitz et al, 2020

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Marten, 2017 P.6

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Schimmelfenig, 2003 P.39

¹¹⁷ Schimmelfenig, 2003, P.69-100

¹¹⁸ Radchenko, 2020

and social issues.¹¹⁹ For instance, Kaliningrad was included in EU initiatives that involved support and cooperation such as the Northern Dimension Initiative. Russia's Baltic fleet also participated in NATO's BALTOPS military exercises in 1997 as a partner in NATO's partnership for peace program.¹²⁰

The disintegration of the Soviet Union brought a new set of changes in the NATO-Russia relationship. The NATO-Russia relationship became regulated by a series of mechanisms that need to be discussed because these measures are still in place when it comes to military action. At its base, this body of work examines the dynamics surrounding a disagreement about the European security order. Following the disintegration of the USSR, NATO and Russia signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act. The Act would provide a set of guidelines on how NATO and Russia would conduct their relationship. It cemented the creation of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council which predates the NATO-Russia Council, a forum where NATO and Russia would consult and dialogue about security issues in Europe.¹²¹ The Act also established several venues which Russia and NATO could cooperate on.¹²² More importantly, NATO agreed not to station nuclear weapons in the territory of its new members and asserted the substantial forces pledge; meaning that NATO would carry out collective defense by focusing on interoperability instead of permanently stationing substantial combat forces although what constitutes substantial combat forces was never defined.¹²³

The Substantial Combat Forces Pledge (SCF) was made amidst the negotiations of the NATO-Russia Founding Act.¹²⁴ This is important because Russia has continued to seek guarantees about what constitutes as SCF.¹²⁵ Overall, we must keep in mind that these mechanisms were designed in the middle of discussions regarding the adaptation of the Armed Conventional Forces in Europe (ACFE), an updated version of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) which was signed at the end of the Cold War. The CFE Treaty proposed specific limits on equipment and weaponry. The SCF pledge was an attempt on NATO's side to show that they were not taking advantage of Russia's diminished status

¹¹⁹ Oldberg, P.7, 2018

¹²⁰ Oldberg, 2009

¹²¹ "Summary: Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation....,"2008

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Ibid

¹²⁴ Alberque, 2016 P.1-16

¹²⁵ Ibid

following the end of the Cold War.¹²⁶ Here, were the beginnings to a new relationship between NATO and Russia, and a special relationship that would follow institutionalization.¹²⁷ During ACFE negotiations, Russia and NATO agreed on a specific yet non-binding resolution regarding SCF; an implication that SCF meant up to one brigade exceeding 42 days in each of the three new NATO members (Czechia, Hungary, and Poland.)¹²⁸

During the 90s, Russia and other European states also negotiated other security building mechanisms. The point of briefly describing these mechanisms is to bring to light what is behind these declarative geopolitical concerns regarding military exercises. As a matter of fact, Russia, and the Baltic States along with Finland agreed to numerous bilateral confidence and security building measures regarding inspection, base visitation, and verification.¹²⁹ As of this day, the Vienna Document, an agreement that stipulates how to carry out information exchanges and verification regarding military activity, which was adapted in 2011, is the main confidence and security building measure in Europe.¹³⁰ Essentially, the Vienna Document requires the participating states to notify each other about military activity, regulates inspections via the OSCE and provides for information exchanges.¹³¹ What is relevant to this study is that the Vienna Document only covers ground forces.

According to the Vienna Document, military exercises that involve above 9,000 troops are required to be announced in written form 42 days in advance.¹³² A military exercise consisting of over 13,000 troops requires observation, just as any one engaging over 300 battle tanks or 500 armored combat vehicles or 250 self-propelled or towered artillery pieces, mortars or multiple rocket launchers (100 mm caliber and above).¹³³ If there is an amphibious landing or parachute assault, the activity is subject to observation if the troop number equals or exceeds 3,500.¹³⁴ These details are important because Russia is often

¹²⁶ Ibid

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ Lachowski, 2001

¹³⁰ "Ensuring Military...", OSCE

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Graef, 2020

¹³³ Vienna Document, 1990, P.28

¹³⁴ Ibid

accused by NATO members of dividing its large snap exercises into smaller exercises with thousands of troops for its exercises not to be subject for observation.¹³⁵

In relevance of the Baltic Sea region, Sweden and Finland never became NATO members and did not seek to become part of the Alliance in the nineties. During the Cold War, Finland's neutral status allowed it to prevent the country from being entirely separated from the West and avoided that the country became subservient to the USSR.¹³⁶ After the end of the Cold War, Finland, and Sweden both adopted a neutrality policy. In contrast to Finland, Sweden was at peace for over 100 years.¹³⁷ After the fall of the USSR, Sweden and Finland became members of NATO's Partnership for Peace Program (PfP) in 1994 along with Russia and the Baltic states. Since the nineties, Sweden and Finland developed small capable militaries, became involved in the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy framework and other regional security frameworks such as NORDEFECO.¹³⁸ Both countries also currently have a close partnership with NATO particularly in the Baltic Sea region; they share crisis management preparations, exercises, and exchange information based on common values and goals.¹³⁹

b. The Second Wave of NATO Enlargement

By the second wave of enlargement, the ambiance was slightly different. The Baltic Road to NATO was never guaranteed. Given the status of Finland and Sweden, there was an expectation that the Baltic states would follow a similar path and become neutral. After becoming part of NATO's PfP, the Baltics built a close relationship with NATO. However, NATO members (maybe besides Germany) had numerous doubts about absorbing the Baltics into the Alliance.¹⁴⁰ Their main concern was, of course, their relationship with Russia. Estonia and Latvia mainly possessed a significant percentage of ethnic Russian minorities in their countries.¹⁴¹ The OSCE was concerned about discrimination toward these minorities. Estonia and Latvia also held border disputes with Russia.¹⁴² Plus, the Baltics maintained that

¹³⁵ Graef, 2018

¹³⁶ Michel, 2011, P.3

¹³⁷ Ibid, P. 1-10

¹³⁸ Ibid P.4

¹³⁹ "Secretary General: NATO, Finland and Sweden..." 2021

¹⁴⁰ Kasekamp, 2020

¹⁴¹ Ibid

¹⁴² Ibid

they were never willing participant republics in the USSR, and that they had been under occupation by soviet authorities. The motivation of the Baltics to join NATO was like the other CEECs. Historically, the Baltics, namely Latvia and Estonia had been occupied by different European forces including Russia and Germany, therefore, they saw NATO to guarantee their security. From a constructivist perspective, they had always felt closer to Europe.¹⁴³ Russia's reaction to the second wave of NATO enlargement was not terrible, for NATO enlargement was not seen as the main issue; the concern was NATO military infrastructure in the Baltic states. In 2002, Putin did state that Baltic ascension was not a large issue for Russia but getting them to sign the Conventional Forces of Europe Treaty was.¹⁴⁴ After all, many the confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) in the 90s with the Baltic states were linked to achieving a Europe wide ratification of ACFE (Adapted Conventional of Europe Treaty). Most of the measures were focused on Kaliningrad, Russia's exclave in the Baltic Sea. For example, Russia and Lithuania agreed to host one additional evaluation visit in both Lithuania and the Kaliningrad oblast within the framework of the Vienna Document. Russia and Finland also agreed on bilateral naval base visits in which representatives of the Baltic fleet would visit the Finnish bases in Upinniemi or Pansio. In return, Finnish representatives would visit Russia's naval visit in Kronstadt or Kaliningrad.¹⁴⁵ⁱⁱ

By the second wave of enlargement, ACFE ratification still had not been achieved.¹⁴⁶ Interestingly, the Baltic States never signed ACFE much to Russia's dismay. During this time, Russia still had not withdrawn its troops from Moldova and Georgia. This was a problem because it had committed to doing so in 1999.¹⁴⁷ Because of this, Alliance also delayed ACFE ratification, linking compliance and the treaty to Russia's Istanbul Commitments. Non-ratification of ACFE in the Baltic states was a deal-breaker for Russia.¹⁴⁸ For example, Russia's Minister of Defense, Sergey Ivanov, remarked that new NATO bases in Romania and Bulgaria were acceptable, yet new bases in Poland and the Baltics were a non-starter to Russia.¹⁴⁹ Russian officials also repeatedly expressed their discontent about the

¹⁴³ Ibid

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Socor, 2004

¹⁴⁸ Alberque, 2016, P.13

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

lack of legally binding arms control regimes covering the Baltic states.¹⁵⁰ Thus, Russia sought a new definition of what constituted substantial combat forces and sought action on the issue.¹⁵¹ Afterwards, Russia suspended its CFE obligations (equipment and troop limitations) in 2007.

In the following years, Latvia and Estonia would seek to seal border treaties with Russia. Since both countries maintained that they were occupied by the USSR, and that Russia still occupied part of their territories; their territorial claims were based on pre-soviet grounds. Latvia claimed a part of the territory of Pskov and alleged it was part of Latvia before WWII. In 2007, Latvia dropped its claim and signed a border treaty with Moscow.¹⁵² Despite the advance with Latvia, Russia and Estonia's border dispute still has not been resolved. Estonia claimed for years that the borders of the Estonian state are the ones from 1920. According to the claim, then Russia is occupying 5% of Estonian territory.¹⁵³

In other words, disputes existed in the Baltic-Russo relationship, but two events significantly impacted this relationship, the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014. In 2008 at the Bucharest Summit, NATO announced that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become NATO members to Russia's dismay.¹⁵⁴ President Putin expressed discontent, yet Georgia and Ukraine were not offered membership action plans. The Russian Foreign Ministry commented that opening the door for Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO was a terrible mistake that did not take in account serious concerns for the European security order.¹⁵⁵ During August in that very year, the Russo-Georgian war ensued in which Moscow backed two self-proclaimed republics in what is considered Georgian territory, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. The Baltics supported Georgia diplomatically in 2008.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² "NATO, EU Welcome Latvia-Russia Border Treaty," 2007

¹⁵³ Vakinen, 2021

¹⁵⁴ "NATO Decision...," 2008

¹⁵⁵ Reuters, 2008

c. The Turbulent 2010s

Overall, as Russia's relationship with the West grew more antagonistic, Kaliningrad's grew more militarized. In terms of hard security, the 2010s marked Kaliningrad's return to the status of "military bastion." In 2011, the U.S. based patriot air defenses in Poland.¹⁵⁶ Russia deployed its S-400 Triumph air defense missiles with a range of 450 km in Kaliningrad in 2012.¹⁵⁷ On the other hand, Russia held another "Zapad" military exercise in 2013 with its Union partner, Belarus in which forces teamed up to "counter a terrorist attack from the sea."¹⁵⁸

Be that as it may, the main event that changed the situation in the euro-Atlantic region was Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support of two self-proclaimed territories in Ukraine's Donbas region. In 2014, Russia perceived its influence in Ukraine waning following the ousting of President Victor Yanukovich by West leaning forces.¹⁵⁹ As a result, Russia executed a covert operation and annexed the Crimean Peninsula. Nevertheless, the population of Crimea were highly sympathetic to Russia. Russia also issued a political-information campaign alleging that the Ukrainian government following Yanukovich's exit was illegitimate¹⁶⁰. Amidst the chaos, the Rada (Ukrainian parliament) voted to repeal the status of Russian language in the country.¹⁶¹ This allowed Russia to claim that Russian minorities were being oppressed.¹⁶² What then ensued was almost entirely different operation in the Donbas. Russia never annexed the Donbas, but Russia backed pro-Russian (anti-Ukrainian government) forces in the eastern regions of Luhansk and Donetsk; this was considered an operation to subvert the authority of the Ukrainian federal government.¹⁶³ As a result, Luhansk and Donetsk proclaimed themselves independent republics.

The Baltic and Poland states supported Ukraine on a diplomatic level. Nonetheless, the events in Ukraine significantly altered threat perceptions in Eastern Europe. For Latvia and Estonia particularly, these events hit too close to home. Ultimately, both nations still

¹⁵⁶ Sergunin, 2018, P.55,

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

¹⁵⁸ President of Russia 2013

¹⁵⁹ RAND, 2017, P.11-15

¹⁶⁰ Ibid

¹⁶¹ Ibid

¹⁶² Ibid

¹⁶³ Ibid

possessed a significant percent of ethnic Russian minorities in their territories. History also played a large role when it came to the threat perception of the three Baltic states. Following the events in Ukraine and Baltic (and Polish) worries, the US and NATO took steps in 2014 to reassure its allies of NATO's guarantees according to the Washington Treaty. NATO also initiated to beef up its conventional force posture in the name of deterrence.¹⁶⁴

Nonetheless, primacy was given to reassurance, for NATO perceived that NATO had lost the conventional capacity to deter Russia. The US approved the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) in 2014, a program meant to support the military activities of the US military and its transatlantic partners.¹⁶⁵ The program sponsored "training of forces, multinational military exercises and development of military equipment and capabilities." NATO also approved the NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs); these were six centers in Eastern Europe in the Baltic and Black Sea regions (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania).¹⁶⁶ Prior to 2014, the U.S. had less than 70,000 troops deployed in the European theatre (NATO countries). The U.S. had also "deactivated two U.S. Army heavy brigades (the 170th Infantry and 172nd Infantry in Germany) in 2012 and 2013" with the plan to replace these with a US based rotational battalion. In 2016, the allies decided at the Warsaw Summit that NATO would boost its military presence in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The allies agreed to place four multinational rotational battle groups in the Baltic States and Poland; a military presence forward by the name of Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP). In 2017, Congress symbolically changed of ERI's name to the European Deterrence Initiative "to reflect the changes in the international security environment, which the US Congress saw as requiring deterrence rather than reassurance."¹⁶⁷ Signaling that at least at a discursive level that NATO would try to build a credible force to deter Russia for NATO members have always feared that the Baltics were undefendable.

Russia did not take NATO's actions lightly. For instance, in 2014, Russia terminated the 2001 bilateral agreement with Lithuania that allowed for an annual information exchange on conventional armed forces stationed in Kaliningrad.¹⁶⁸ Russia's actions in Ukraine froze

¹⁶⁴ Shelvin-Coetzze, 2019

¹⁶⁵ Latici, 2018

¹⁶⁶ NATO SHAPE, 2016

¹⁶⁷ Latici, 2018 P.2

¹⁶⁸ Kryptis, 2014

all practical cooperation between Russia and NATO. The EU also imposed sanctions on Russia as a response to its actions in Ukraine. In 2016, Russia was determined to beef up Kaliningrad's strategic deterrence capability. Ultimately, Russia declared in its current Foreign Policy Concept, adopted in 2016, that it viewed NATO's expansion, its military build-up, and infrastructure near its borders "as a violation of the principle of equal and indivisible security and leading to the deepening of old dividing lines in Europe and to the emergence of new ones."¹⁶⁹ As a result of this newer threat perception, Kaliningrad received Oniks anti-cruise missiles.¹⁷⁰ Russia later deployed the Iskander ballistic missile system and nuclear capable Kalibr cruise missiles.¹⁷¹

NATO considered the deployment of these systems as destabilizing. The Iskander missiles possess dual capabilities and can reach a range of up to 500 kilometers.¹⁷² Strategically, in the event of a war, the forces in Kaliningrad would allow for forward air defense and attempt to disable NATO infrastructure.¹⁷³ In theory, the forces in Kaliningrad could deny NATO unrestricted use in the Baltic Sea; essentially deny. In other words, as the Russia-NATO relationship soured even more, Kaliningrad gained strategic importance yet also more strategic vulnerability. Above all, it is difficult to get reinforcements and logistical support to Kaliningrad because it is surrounded by NATO members.

As NATO-Russia relations soured, both parties began to fixate on their strategic vulnerabilities. NATO faces a similar story with the Suwalki Gap. Like Kaliningrad, the Suwalki Gap gained strategic vulnerability as NATO began to see Russia as a threat. The Suwalki Gap is considerably less studied than Kaliningrad. In general, the Suwalki Gap, also known as the Suwalki Corridor, is a strip which stretches to 100 kilometers in terms of width on the Polish-Lithuanian border to the side of the Polish city of Suwalki. The territory is located between Belarus and Kaliningrad and is the only land route between Poland and Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.¹⁷⁴ The Suwalki gap grew to be perceived as "the most vulnerable spot in the Alliance" for the Baltic states could be cut off from the rest of the

¹⁶⁹ President of Russia, 2016

¹⁷⁰ Westerlund, 2017 P.1

¹⁷¹ Schmidt-Felzmann, 2018, P.38

¹⁷² Atland and Kabanenko, 2020

¹⁷³ Westerlund, 2017, P.2

¹⁷⁴ RAND, 2020, P.37

alliance if Russia were to occupy the Suwalki area.¹⁷⁵ On one hand, analysts have also proposed that if Russia fails to seize the Suwalki Gap, it will lose its exclave, Kaliningrad, in a defined amount of time.¹⁷⁶

In consequence, Poland's geostrategic value to NATO's Eastern flank increased. For example, General Ben Hodges, the former commander of US Army Europe, once stated that Poland had become the center of strategic planning for the US Army. NATO even simulated defending the Suwalki corridor during war games in 2017.¹⁷⁷ On the other hand, the geostrategic location of Kaliningrad hinders NATO's ability to militarily support the Baltic states through the Suwalki Gap in the land, sea, and air domains.¹⁷⁸ Thus, Kaliningrad and the Suwalki Gap have become mutually complimentary locations of perceived vulnerability.

In conclusion, Russia and NATO possess distinct viewpoints when it comes to NATO military infrastructure. Forward military infrastructure in the Baltic Sea was perceived negatively by Russia yet Russia's actions in Ukraine significantly altered the threat perceptions of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. As a result, specific geographical locations in the Baltic Sea region gained newfound importance and vulnerability. All these developments contributed to the NATO-Russia military exercise dynamic that will be analyzed in the next section.

¹⁷⁵ Antczak & Śliwa, P.128, 2018

¹⁷⁶ Goble, 2020

¹⁷⁷ Sytas, 2017

¹⁷⁸ Ibid

4. Analysis

In this section, I will focus on analyzing the data according to the parameters established in the other sections and the political developments. To do this, I will first try to tackle the geopolitical message. I will then discuss the location, the exercise statement, and the posturing. Afterwards, I will consider the response to the exercise and what it may suggest being the effect on geopolitical stability. Lastly, I will compare the exercise with other iterations of the exercise. Overall, I chose to organize the chapter by analyzing Russia's exercises first and then NATO. This was mainly because the only exercise from the 2013 period is a Russian exercise. By separating Russia's exercises from NATO's exercises, it is also easier to see if the geopolitical message has changed throughout exercise iterations.

4.1 Russia: Readiness and Territorial Defense

a. *Zapad 2013 and Zapad 2017*

Before discussing the geopolitical message behind Zapad 2013, I will discuss where the exercise took place and general details about the exercise. Zapad is an annual strategic exercise that takes place in Russia's western military district. Zapad 2013 took place in the territories of Russia and Belarus. Officially, 9,400 Russian soldiers on Russian territory and 2,520 in Belarus took part of the exercises.¹⁷⁹ However, the numbers are widely debated. This is because Russia tends to compartmentalize its large-scale exercises and split single operational commands.¹⁸⁰ Thus, Russia is not required to notify other states about the scale of its exercises in accordance with the Vienna Document. Considerable civilian-military cooperation took place during the exercise, mainly regarding the use of transport routes and mobilization. The exercise was divided into two parts. First, both Lukashenka and Putin visited the Gozhsky test ground where the scenario of the exercise was a joint opposition to a terrorist adversary that sought to break into the Union state by land with the aim of destabilizing Belarus.¹⁸¹ Later on, they travelled to Kaliningrad (Khmelevka) where training

¹⁷⁹ President of Russia, 2013

¹⁸⁰ Graef, 2018

¹⁸¹ Ibid

focused on countering a terrorist attack from the sea.¹⁸² Equipment in the second phase of the exercise (Kaliningrad) included about 180 pieces of combat equipment (including 10 tanks, and 40 aircraft and 10 warships).¹⁸³

As usual, official statements by Russian officials about Zapad 2013 were general. However, there were some common themes that can help us frame the geopolitical message behind the drill. Common themes found in the press statements were related to military readiness and territorial defence, and operational compatibility within the Union State. This is congruent with the force posture and alludes to strategic deterrence, to take action to prevent aggression and coercive pressure from another state. For instance, this was the first iteration of Zapad that included training in both Belarus and Russia simultaneously. Thus, operational compatibility was largely the focus of the exercise, and Russia succeeded in complexifying its operations both Belarus and Kaliningrad.¹⁸⁴ The discourse centered on operational compatibility as the way towards territorial defense in case of destabilization via a foreign party. Unity was also evidenced by the fact President Putin and President Lukashenka met in Kaliningrad as troops practiced anti-terrorist operations.¹⁸⁵

However, some of the rhetoric did not support the force posture. While the scenario was not fighting a war, resident Putin particularly praised the level of interagency cooperation based on Russian Federation's Defence Plan in the Zapad exercise. He also noted that this level of interagency cooperation ensures the transition of peace to war time. This does not fit the scope of the exercise because the scenario was not officially how Russia would fight a war in its western front. If we focus solely on Zapad 2013 itself, numerous analysts pointed out that the capability shown during the exercise exceeded the scope of the scenario.¹⁸⁶ Observers also claimed about 70,000-90,000 troops participated in the exercise instead of what was reported, and about 20,000 of those troops were from Russia's Interior Troops who mainly focus on territorial defense.¹⁸⁷ As previously stated, Russia tends to divide its military exercises into several commands, allowing it to bypass Vienna Document regulations.¹⁸⁸ On

¹⁸² Ibid

¹⁸³ Ibid

¹⁸⁴ Ibid

¹⁸⁵ Ibid

¹⁸⁶ Zdanavicius & Czejak, 2015, P.57

¹⁸⁷ Norberg, 2018, P.63

¹⁸⁸ Graef, 2018

top of troop numbers, the troops playing the terrorists in the scenario conducted complex operations. The terrorists resisted despite multiple assaults by the Russian/Belarus side, and escaped into cities to secure a position, plus they also succeeded at conducting an amphibious landing in the Baltic Sea coast and simulated ship to shore fire from naval crafts.¹⁸⁹ This paints the picture of a strategic exercise rather than one focusing on anti-terrorist operations.

Another element that gives us insight into the geopolitical message is the fact a simultaneous drill took place as the Zapad exercise was being conducted. Russia reported a simultaneous naval military exercise by the Northern Fleet based in Kaliningrad. 2,500 servicemen participated in the exercise.¹⁹⁰ Press statement describe the equipment broadly. A statement reads that the equipment used included 30 ships, 50 pieces of equipment, about 20 aircraft, including helicopters, plus Russia's only aircraft carrier at that moment, the Admiral Kuznetsov.¹⁹¹ One could argue that Russia did explore a conventional-nuclear escalation of sorts during its simultaneous exercise to Zapad 2013 because a key goal of Russia's Northern Fleet is to maintain Russia's nuclear second-strike capability through its nuclear missile submarines. However, Russia chose to break down the Northern fleet's training into an individual exercise, and this was a moderately successful tactic to avoid extra tension between Russia and its Western neighbors.

Now, it is vital to discuss the level of proximity of the drills to the borders of NATO members. After all, the exercise was consciously convened in Gozhsky and Khmelevka near to the border of NATO member states. Within the secondary source literature, a paper by McDermot suggests that Minsk and Moscow closely follow NATO's military exercises near their borders.¹⁹² McDermot's findings along with the concern with territorial defense and the focus on securing the borders through forward defense supports the idea that Russia's geopolitical message was that Russia will resolutely defend the borders of the Union state and will continue to complexify its drills and incorporating the strategic position and armed forces of Belarus to achieve this goal.

Meanwhile, NATO member states such as the Baltics and Poland issued a competing narrative as a response to the exercise. In fact, they believed that the exercise was

¹⁸⁹ Blank, 2017

¹⁹⁰ Norberg, 2017, P.64

¹⁹¹ "Second stage of Zapad 2013 Russia-Belarus....,"2013

¹⁹² McDermott, 2013

destabilizing.¹⁹³ While this iteration of Zapad occurred prior to Russia's actions in Ukraine, the Russo-Georgian war ensued five years ago, and Russia used military exercises to cover its actions. The influence of how this shaped the perception of NATO members about Russia's military exercise is visceral through the remarks of governmental officials. President Thomas Hendrik Ilves of Estonia stated that Russia essentially rehearsed an invasion of the Baltic states.¹⁹⁴ The Defense Minister of Estonia Urmas Reinsalu supported this comment by stating that Russia was not transparent about its strategic goals and that the anti-terrorist scenario was escalated into a conventional conflict with the Alliance.¹⁹⁵ Latvian Defense Minister Artis Pabriks insisted that Russia's defense goals were not transparent. These concerns were also expressed by Lithuanian Defense Minister Juozas Olekas.¹⁹⁶

This very competing narrative was also espoused prior to Zapad 2017 taking place. Zapad 2017 was the first iteration of the exercise after the war in Ukraine. In fact, this time, NATO members were already interpreting Russia's geopolitical messages prior to Russia even sending the message and creating their own narrative about the exercise. By far the most important part about Zapad 2017 where the reactions before the exercise even began. In 2017, NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg commented in a press briefing regarding Russia's transparency during its annual military exercise Zapad 2017 how Russia had used exercises to disguise aggressive actions against neighbours in the Black Sea Region such as Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.¹⁹⁷ The competing narrative according to the statements of government officials was based on accusations about Russia being dishonest about the size of the exercise. This was also evidenced when western officials like Ursula Von Der Leyen, Germany's Minister of Defense, publicly stated that over 100,000 forces would participate in Zapad 2017.¹⁹⁸ General Ben Hodges, the Commander US Army Europe, also commented that NATO kept an eye on the military equipment brought in and removed from Belarus because allies were worried about Russia conducting a trojan horse scenario in Belarus.¹⁹⁹ Meaning that Russia would make incursions into Poland and the Baltics and disguise its actions through Zapad 2017 like the events in Ukraine. He also commented that the alliance would hold low level exercises that involved "a six-week deployment of three companies of 120

¹⁹³ Berzina, 67-68, 2015

¹⁹⁴ Ibid

¹⁹⁵ Ibid

¹⁹⁶ Ibid

¹⁹⁷ NATO, 2017

¹⁹⁸ "France, Germany...", 2017

¹⁹⁹ Shalal, 2017

paratroopers each to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania” while adhering to the rotational norm simultaneous to Russia’s exercise.²⁰⁰ The purpose of these low-level exercises was to reassure the allies while not provoking Russia.

Following the reactions of western officials, western assumptions about the exercise were found to be exaggerated despite legitimate concerns about Russia’s transparency. In fact, a Swedish military observer found the exercises to be normal military business and commented that Belarus/Russian officials provided accurate data about the exercise in accordance with the thresholds for ground troops and equipment established in the Vienna Document.²⁰¹ An estimated 46,000 troops participated in Zapad 2017, with less than half in the arctic/Baltic regions while others remained in the Central and Southern Military Districts.²⁰²

Unlike Zapad 2013, Russia declared that Zapad 2017 would be a large-scale strategic exercise. Russia notified that 12,700 servicemen would carry out Zapad 2017.²⁰³ 7,200 would be from Russia, 3,000 of these personnel would then carry out drills in Belarus alongside 5,500 Belarusian soldiers. Equipment would include 680 ground forces equipment, including about 250 tanks, 200 artillery pieces, 10 ships, and 70 aircraft (including helicopters and bombers). According to Russia’s Ministry of Defense, the exercise was divided into two phases. The first phase dealt with grouping regional forces and organizing command and control structures. This involved blocking enemy attacks and strategic planning in specific areas. Meanwhile, the second phase focused on ground forces in Belarus, western Russia, and the Baltic Sea, as well as on transitional maneuvers ranging from defense to offensive to expel the enemy. Russia also carried out numerous simultaneous exercises to Zapad 2017 like Zapad 2013. Those drills took place in Murmansk, Central Military District, and in the south of Russia. However, these exercises are beyond the scope of this paper.

To explore the meaning of the geopolitical message behind Zapad 2017. We must delve into the declarative statements. While Zapad 2013 was declared an entirely different exercise from Zapad 2017, the focus of the narrative was on military readiness, yet little focus was on the unity between Russian and Belarus soldiers. The strategic goal of the exercise was improving the operational level of combat operations including testing out a set

²⁰⁰ Ibid

²⁰¹ Simmons, 2018

²⁰² Kofman, 2017

²⁰³ Norberg, 2017, P.78

of weapon systems and new guidelines in written protocols when it comes to military planning based on the characteristics of the experience of contemporary military conflicts.²⁰⁴ Overall, this exercise tested command and control operations and communications. The scenario was declared as a strategic level confrontation even though the scenario was similar to Zapad 2013. According to the MoD, extremist groups managed an incursion into Kaliningrad and Belarus to carry out terrorist attacks.²⁰⁵ The goal of the terrorists was to destabilize the union state yet this time in comparison to Zapad 2013, the press statement mentioned that these terrorists were supported by outside forces. This detail complexified the exercise.²⁰⁶ As a result of this scenario, troops were to go through a range of tactical episodes that include deploying military units with the goal of isolating the extremists, engage in air defense and block air supplies of the extremists, conduct special operations to eliminate extremists and bring stability to the union state, and cut off naval escape routes via the Baltic fleet.²⁰⁷

The force posture in the Baltic Sea region matched the scenario. Operations were at a similar level to Zapad 2013. For instance, ground forces settled on regional positions, Luzhsky training ground (Leningrad region) and the Borisovsky training ground (Belarus) but training also took place in Pskov and other regions of both countries.²⁰⁸ A naval component was present where troops rehearsed shore to sea operations involving firing positions using the Bal antiship missile system at a sea target playing an enemy ship. Training also took place in Kaliningrad focused on logistics and transportation by moving military equipment and property with a time limit.²⁰⁹ Coastal troops of the Baltic fleet rehearsed a naval component that involved anti-aircraft missile firing, artillery, setting up mines, and antisubmarine training.²¹⁰ Thus, the level of complexity in the activities of the Russian military in Zapad 2017 fits a strategic exercise. The geographical focus was different because the exercise was not as forward to NATO's borders as Zapad 2013 seeing as most of the action took place in the Borisovsky training ground is in the Minsk Oblast and Luzksky is in the Leningrad region. This data suggests that Russia's geopolitical message was do not mess with us. We will go through large lengths to assure territorial defence of the Union state. The

²⁰⁴ “В рамках учения...,” 2017

²⁰⁵ “Zapad 2017...,” 2017

²⁰⁶ Ibid

²⁰⁷ Ibid

²⁰⁸ “В рамках учения...,” 2017

²⁰⁹ “Корабли и подразделения...,” 2017

²¹⁰ Ibid

message does not differ from Zapad 2013; however, the goal and structure of the Russian Armed Forces has not changed significantly if we compare 2017 to the previous years.²¹¹

During both exercises, Russia sought to establish coercive credibility by obfuscating the number of troops participating exercises. These methods fit Russia's conception of strategic deterrence which includes the transfer of troops and showing the highest military readiness.²¹² The West, on the other hand, fixated on the number of troops in Russia's annual strategic exercises because they doubt Russia's strategic intentions given its actions against Ukraine and Georgia regardless of war fighting capability. NATO members viewed Russia's exercise as destabilizing due to the fact Russia obfuscated details about their exercises. What is true is that Russia carried out a more complex exercise in 2017 alluding to an increase in force posture. This data fits the parameter of instability.

To conclude, this subsection showed how Russia strengthened its force posture throughout the years when it comes to its annual strategic exercise in the West. I also presented the West's main viewpoint which is that Russia is not transparent enough about its exercises and that the West interprets Russia's geopolitical message before Russia sends the message. Lastly, I pointed out that the evidence suggests that the exercise contribute to a degree of geopolitical instability in the region.

b. Ocean Shield 2019 and 2020

In this section, I discuss the Ocean Shield drills and I argue that the main message from these drills is consistent with the Zapad drills. I also reiterate that Russia's drills trigger worries from its neighbours. Finally, I observe that the exercises evidence a more robust force posture on Russia's behalf, affecting the stability in the region. I included Ocean Shield because it is a Russian drill that incurs a series. These drills also usually take place in the fall right after the NATO summer exercises and while the first iteration of the drill took place during 2018 in the Mediterranean, the last iterations of the exercise have taken place in the Baltic Sea.

²¹¹ Norberg, 2017, P.75

²¹² Russia's Ministry of Defense, "Strategic Deterrence."

To assess the geopolitical message, I will first acknowledge a limitation and delve into the main themes in the press statements about Ocean Shield 2019. The main theme present in the exercise was military readiness. The MoD statements mainly focused on the operations that would be executed by Russia's Baltic fleet.²¹³ In terms of force posture, Ocean Shield 2019 was one of the largest exercises of the Russian Navy in years.²¹⁴ Ocean Shield 2019 took place from August 1-9. The exercise involved personnel from the Russian Navy and Aerospace Forces. The MoD declared that the exercise would involve 10, 634 troops.²¹⁵ The equipment consisted of 49 ships and combat boats, 20 support vessels, and 58 aircrafts.²¹⁶ Parts of the exercise took place in the Barents Sea, Norwegian Northern, Atlantic, and Mediterranean seas, but these are beyond the scope of this paper.²¹⁷ Therefore, I will focus on Russia's Baltic fleet and the use of Kaliningrad, since Russian navy groups mobilized to Kaliningrad during the exercise. Kaliningrad was also used as a source of logistical support, mobilization of ships, and counteroperations/counterstrikes. Overall, the strategic goal of the exercise of the exercise was to test the readiness of Russian forces to protect Russia's national interests and a defense scenario.

The declaration fit the force posture of the exercise. Ocean Shield 2019 was declared to be a large-scale exercise and Russia carried out a complex multiregional military operation. What mainly took place in the Baltic Sea were air-sea drills. Warships along with anti-submarine aircrafts conducted anti-submarine training.²¹⁸ Crews in the sea also simulated a search for an enemy submarine in a specific location.²¹⁹ They practiced tracking the enemy submarine and destroying it using radar and sonar equipment and tested anti-submarine weapons (from the warships).²²⁰ In the North Sea, Russian forces carried out missile drills at sea including training with the Kalibr weapon system.²²¹ Thus, we can infer that Russia's geopolitical message was to show military might in terms of territorial defense. The actions that the Russian military took during the exercise were also akin to the forceful measures to

²¹³ “Корабли Балтийского...,” 2019

²¹⁴ Kofman, 2020

²¹⁵ “В Балтийском море,” 2019

²¹⁶ Ibid

²¹⁷ Ibid

²¹⁸ “В рамках учения,” 2019

²¹⁹ Ibid

²²⁰ Ibid

²²¹ Ibid

be taken deter aggression and prevent threats, strategic deterrence. Ultimately, the Russian military was testing out hypothetical solutions for hypothetical situations.

The response of NATO members was mostly of low intensity. The Baltics and Poland were not vocal about this exercise. This may be because Polish, Swedish, and American reconnaissance aircrafts monitored the exercise. In fact, General Nikolai Emenov, Commander in Chief of the Russian Navy, mentioned that the exercise was extended for a week because of the weather and NATO's response to the exercise.²²² Nonetheless, Norway had an intense reaction to the exercise. Norwegian officials commented that the exercise was destabilizing and that they could not comprehend why the exercise took place far from Russia's western part and near Norway. Note that this reaction emphasized where the exercise took place and not if the exercise took place.²²³

Ocean Shield 2019 was a large expansion of the 2018 iteration of the exercise. After all, three times more forces were involved, and nuclear submarines had been included.²²⁴ Over 4,000 soldiers from the Baltic Fleet were involved in the exercise along with 20 warships.²²⁵ The exercise featured also featured missile drills.²²⁶ Thus, the exercise represents not only a force incrementation and a negative contribution to stability, but also heightened the quality of the level of military operations that took place in the previous iteration of the exercise.

Now I will move on to the 2020 iteration of Ocean Shield and examining these drills geopolitical message. Ocean Shield 2020 was smaller than Ocean Shield 2019, but it was statement that Russia chose to carry on the drill despite the coronavirus pandemic. The drill took place in August after the set of NATO summer military exercises and the exercise was expansive, ranging all the way to the Pacific, but that is beyond the scope. About 30 warships of numerous classes participated in the drills in the Baltic Sea.²²⁷ Over 3,000 marines participated in the drills, plus about 400 pieces of heavy equipment was used.²²⁸ The MoD

²²² McDermott, 2019

²²³ Steleesen, 2019

²²⁴ Over Twenty...,” 2029

²²⁵ Ibid

²²⁶ Ibid

²²⁷ “Russian Navy...,” 2020

²²⁸ “The Northeastern Dimension...,” 2020

press statements focused on the set of operations that the Russian military would execute to test the readiness of its armed forces and that the results of the exercise would be evaluated.²²⁹ This was the main theme in the press releases.

The force posture fit the drill. The emphasis on readiness and the significant deployment of troops are declared methods that Russia uses to achieve its own conception of deterrence. Like the previous iteration of the exercise, Ocean Shield 2020 was an air and sea drill. Drills featured “launches of attack and anti-aircraft missiles and artillery firing,” according to the MoD.²³⁰ They also practiced setting up electronic interference, elements of amphibious warfare with a marine sea landing in the Khmelevka polygon in Kaliningrad. More specifically, troops practiced repelling enemy air attacks, searching, and destroying submarines, and heavy artillery including anti-aircraft missile drills.²³¹ Thus, we can infer that Russia was messaging that despite the coronavirus pandemic, it was still able to carry out complex military operations comparable to pre-pandemic levels when it came to territorial defense and defending against a hypothetical opponent.

The response of NATO members was of a higher intensity than 2019. While NATO observed the exercises, NATO fighters flew to escort Russian planes across the neutral waters of the Baltic Sea among others.²³² This signals that NATO members were carefully monitoring the exercise with anxiety. The Swedish reaction to the exercise was intense, yet it did not only have to do with this Russian exercise in the Baltic Sea. I acknowledge that Sweden is not a NATO ally, but it is a close partner to NATO when it comes to military exercises in the region, therefore I am including its reaction. After the exercise, Sweden issued a statement that they would reinforce their defenses and improve military readiness because of the military activity in the Baltic Sea.²³³

The Swedish response can also be an indicator of the instability in the region. Ultimately, the Swedes admitted that they would beef up their posture due to the military activity in the region. This signals that they perceive that the strategic balance in the region is significantly altered for they must alter the force posture to achieve balance once again.

²²⁹ “Под руководством,” 2020

²³⁰ Ibid

²³¹ Ibid

²³² “Истребители,” 2020

²³³ Erdbrik and Kramer, 2020

In conclusion, the geopolitical messages behind Ocean Shield 2019 and 2020 are consistent. The scenarios for the drills are similar yet become more complex. The posturing shown in the exercises envisages Russia's conception of deterrence. Yet, NATO members and partners monitor the exercises with anxiety because they doubt Russia's strategic intentions. In this case, the NATO-Russia exercise dynamic proves itself to be an indicator of the instability in the region.

4.2 NATO's Exercises: Reassurance, Deterrence, and Geopolitical Stability

The next step of the analysis is to examine NATO's exercises. To do this, I will use the same indicators I used to analyze Russia's exercises. First, I will focus on interpreting the geopolitical message, then, I will focus on the response of the adversary (in this case Russia), and then I will comment on the drills impacts stability in the region.

Here, I will argue that Russia's geopolitical messages center on military readiness, yet NATO's centers on reassurance, deterrence, interoperability, and geopolitical stability. In accordance with the western deterrence literature, NATO member states possess an ambiguous deterrence strategy. One could argue that the focus in NATO's exercises on solidarity and unity is part of a deterrence by punishment strategy, yet NATO's military exercises are also displays of improved capability. In this section, it will become apparent that NATO members often rehearse an article 5 response against an adversary to signal deterrence by punishment. NATO's training often involves bolstering air capabilities and forward basing/deployments.

Concurrently, most of the existing literature argues that the Baltics are undefendable at the initial stages of war.²³⁴ Forward deployments and basing makes military assets vulnerable to Russia's military capabilities within Russia's western military district and perhaps Belarus, thus, airpower basing and pushing airpower capability in the exercises does not meaningfully contribute to conventional deterrence if a conflict emerges between NATO member states and Russia.²³⁵

²³⁴ Clem, 2017 & Kofman, 2016 & Bodner, 2015 & Shlapak and Johnson, 2016

²³⁵ Clem, 2017

Therefore, even if deterrence is a declared goal in NATO's exercises, reassurance can explain NATO's exercise expansion given the difficult fear that is deterrence on NATO's eastern flank. Overall, what can be seen through NATO's military exercises is a balancing act of simultaneous signals to different receivers. At times, NATO's balancing act affects how Russia comprehends NATO's geopolitical messages.

a. The Saber Strike Series and BALTOPS 2014

The Saber Strike series best shows chronologically how the Alliance expanded its force structure in the name of unity and solidarity. In total, I analyze five iterations of the Saber Strike exercise. The Saber Strike exercises date back to in 2011 and take place in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. They are also considered to be US led exercises. Originally, the exercise took place with only 2,000 troops with the purpose on training the forces from the Baltic States "to integrate them into the alliance's operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere."²³⁶ However, by 2014, Afghanistan was no longer mentioned in the exercise description. This already gives us an idea that NATO significantly shifted its geopolitical message following the events that took place in Ukraine.

Nonetheless, to assess the geopolitical message behind the 2014 version of the exercise, we must discuss what themes did the press releases and official remarks from government. Deterrence was not mentioned in the exercise statements, and the statements linked greater capability to stronger relations; signaling what would fit into a mix of deterrence by punishment and reassurance. The main theme in the exercise description was reassurance and interoperability.²³⁷ For instance, a Troop Commander stated: "our relationship with Lithuania is extremely strong, it's been forged over the last 21 years ... and its specific training instances and training exercises like this that has made our relationship so strong."²³⁸ Other remarks alluded that the strategic goal of the exercise was to contribute to stability in the region. This was evidenced when the Defense Minister of Latvia Raimonds Vējonis, stated that the exercise was not only easing regional cooperation but also "contributing to security and stability in the region" at the opening of the exercise.²³⁹

²³⁶ Clem, 2018

²³⁷ Army Mil, 2014

²³⁸ Shank, 2014

²³⁹ Lithuania Ministry of Defense, 2014

In terms of force posture, the countries who participated included Finland, a non-NATO member, Canada (first time participant), the UK, Denmark (first time participant), Estonia, the U.S.A., Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland.²⁴⁰ The composition of the exercise was around 4,500 troops and the focus was interoperability like other exercises. Troops were dispersed between the three Baltics states. What we know about the actual training that took place is rather limited, therefore, I am unable to discuss the force posture with detail, and I am conducting the analysis mainly based on the press releases. However, the scope of Saber Strike was expanded. Specifically, a quote from an American Troop Commander reads: “the scope of Saber Strike has increased, with recent events in Crimea, the need and desire to increase our training focus with our NATO allies in the Baltics has increased as well.”²⁴¹ By this data, we can infer that NATO’s geopolitical message was that it was committed to the territorial integrity of the Baltic States and Poland and that these trainings would lead to more coherence between allies.

Russia’s response to the drill was intense. While NATO’s geopolitical message according to the evidence present focused on reassuring the allies, Russia’s statements suggest that its interpretation of the message was completely different. On the very same day that Saber Strike 2014 began, Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s Foreign Minister, commented that the progression of NATO’s military infrastructure diving further to the east was counterproductive.²⁴² Russian officials also alleged that the rotational military build-up was hostile and in violation of the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, plus, that it was only creating more problems.

In this response to the message, the force posture aspect allows us to examine Russia’s response more closely. To back up its declarative statements, Russia launched surprise military exercises to Saber Strike 2014. These exercises were based in Kaliningrad and featured Russia’s first strike forces. Russia’s exercised also lasted long enough to mirror a maritime NATO drill that followed, BALTOPS 2014.²⁴³ Russia’s MoD alleged that the military exercises in Kaliningrad was comparable to NATO forces in the Baltic States. Therefore, the MoD admitted that it took BALTOPS 2014 and Saber Strike 2014 into account when announcing these drills. Paratrooper groups in Pskov practiced deployment to

²⁴⁰ Army Mil, 2014

²⁴¹ Shank, 2014

²⁴² “Lavrov...,” 2014

²⁴³ “Russia Launches...,” 2014

Kaliningrad, while marines trained in the coastal line and simulated defense by isolating and eliminating attackers.²⁴⁴ The Air Force also provided air support and brought out SU-34 bombers and Mi-24 assault helicopters. This suggests that Russia saw the exercise as a form of provocation.

Russia's response also gives us insight into the impact of the drill on stability. After all, Russia's response suggests that it saw the exercise as a threat to the strategic balance; therefore, it responded fire with fire because it saw itself forced to respond to the military activities near its borders. This suggests an increase in geopolitical instability for Russia perceived a shift in the strategic balance from an exercise tailored to show unity.

Now I will discuss BALTOPS 2014 because the exercise took place right after Saber Strike 2014. BALTOPS 2014 also represented a geopolitical shift in the Baltic Sea region because Russia had been participating in the BALTOPS exercise series since 1993 and it was scheduled to participate in BALTOPS 2014. The BALTOPS exercises take place annually and are considered US led exercises since 2010.

The decision to disinvite Russia to the drill was itself a statement and critical to understanding the geopolitical message. Mainly because it communicated that the Allies did not approve of Russia's actions in Ukraine. This exercise took place a few months after Russia annexed Crimea. Regardless, the Allies did not declare deterrence as a goal of the exercise. The main theme of the exercise was unity and training together as an Alliance. For example, BALTOPS 2014 commander rear admiral Richard Snyder stated that "here, we send a signal to our nations and to the world that we can come together and operate as a team." Another prominent remark within the mission statement was linking regional stability to capability. The Allies directly claimed that the exercise was crucial to maintain regional stability.²⁴⁵ Almost as if, larger capability is assumed to promote stability and deter aggression, yet the exercise statements did not declare deterrence as the main goal of the exercise.²⁴⁶

The declared strategic goal of the exercise was interoperability against a set of fictional states and the force posture fits the statements. 14 nations participated in the drills: these were Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands,

²⁴⁴ Ibid

²⁴⁵ Backwell, 2014

²⁴⁶ Clem, 2018

Norway, Poland, the United Kingdom, the United States, plus personnel from NATO HQ, along with Georgia, Sweden, and Finland. The exercise started in Karlskrona, Sweden, i.e., in non-allied waters, and continued into the Danish economic zone. The exercise was a display of over 30 vessels and different kinds of aircrafts.²⁴⁷ The scenario of the exercise was an armed conflict between several fictional states, and two groups had to assist and defend one of the countries involved in the conflict.²⁴⁸ The main phase of the exercise dealt with countering mine warfare.²⁴⁹ Therefore, the geopolitical message was to communicate solidarity with the Baltic Sea countries yet also condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine by disinviting them. Once more, NATO's messaging juggles multiple signals, and different characteristics of these signals while bolstering military capability.

Russia responded by conducting simultaneous drills that coincided with BALTOPS and Saber Strike as previously discussed. Thus, this suggests that Russia perceived the exercise as hostile. Now, the exercise also represented force incrementation. The exercise was deemed to be the biggest iteration of the exercise since 1993, signaling force expansion. For example, an operations planner for BALTOPS 2014 stated; "what I can remember of previous exercises is that it was never as big and as impressive as it is now."²⁵⁰ By impressive, he likely referred to the complexity of the operations performed by the Allies and the partner nations. This is crucial to assess if the exercise contributed to geopolitical stability because according to the indicators, the exercise was perceived as a threat to the strategic stability in the region by Russia.

The geopolitical message behind Saber Strike 2015 did not greatly differ from Saber Strike 2014. The main themes in the press releases of the exercise were interoperability, solidarity, and unity.²⁵¹ Deterrence was not directly mentioned in the exercise description. Maj. Gen. Almantas Leika, Lithuanian Land Forces commander, who co-directed the exercise stated that "the aim of this exercise is to train together and ensure that we achieve interoperability in conducting military operations."²⁵² However apart from this, she

²⁴⁷ "The Aukštaitis and the Skalvis..." 2014

²⁴⁸ Ibid

²⁴⁹ Ibid

²⁵⁰ "BALTOPS..." 2014

²⁵¹ Avery, 2014 & US Army, 2014

²⁵² Ibid

mentioned that she hoped the training would lead to more trust between units and their commanders.²⁵³

Limited information is available about the force posture, but we do know that the Saber Strike exercise grew further in size and military capability was enhanced. Saber Strike 2015 included nearly 6,000 troops compared to Saber Strike 2014 which included 4,500 troops. The scope of countries that participated also differed with the participation of Slovenia and Portugal. Germany, the U.S., the UK, Canada, Finland, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Denmark, and Norway also participated. Poland was included apart from the Baltic States as an operational training ground. Overall, troops conducted Field and Situational Training Exercises in the Baltic States. Notably, the US provided air support and brought out strategic bombers (B-52) and A-10 fighter jets.²⁵⁴ Thus, the geopolitical message was that NATO was committed to its allies and stood in solidarity with Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia.

Russia did not respond intensely to this exercise, but Russia conducted its own set of snap military exercises right before the drill as NATO sent planes to join Nordic forces as they conducted drills in Sweden's sub-arctic north.²⁵⁵ This exercise took place about a month after the Baltics and Poland asked for a permanent NATO deployment in the region to deter Russia.²⁵⁶ This suggests that Russia communicated discontent with the military activity in Europe prior to the drill. At the same time, the data indicates that the drill had a negative impact on geopolitical stability because the 2015 iteration of the exercise evidence how NATO strengthened its posture in comparison to 2014.

The geopolitical message behind the 2016 iteration of Saber Strike was louder considering it boasted a solid defense posture. Nonetheless, I will first examine the main themes within the press statements. In contrast with the previous iterations of this exercise, the exercise description in 2016 stated that this exercise was about showing strength. Deterrence was directly mentioned in the description of the exercise. However, what conception of deterrence was employed in the exercise was never specified. A press release reads: "Exercises like Saber Strike provide participating nations with tough realistic training that strengthens their ability to operate as a combined force, demonstrates the resolve and

²⁵³ Ibid

²⁵⁴ "Минобороны," 2015 & "Американские...", 2015

²⁵⁵ France Presse, 2015

²⁵⁶ Ibid

commitment of the Alliance and partner nations, and presents a credible deterrent.”²⁵⁷ Often, flexing military muscle fits a deterrence by denial conception. In fact, showing strength was linked with the sovereignty of one’s nation.²⁵⁸ However, the statements were riddled by different signals. Prominent themes in the statements were: reassurance by assuring allies of the U.S. commitment to Article 5, unity, and interoperability.²⁵⁹ In terms of force posture, 10,000 troops participated in the exercise.²⁶⁰ In the summer of 2016, 13 nations participated in the exercise: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, United Kingdom, and the United States.²⁶¹ Information about the trainings is limited, but included live fire, cyber warfare training, command post, and air support from the U.S. for the multinational ground forces.²⁶²

The limited information about the force posture mostly fit the press statements. As previously noted in the past Saber Strike series, the U.S. leads the Saber Strike series and often allows other nations to employ its own military equipment as a symbol of support. During Saber Strike 16, two M142 HIMARS multiple launch rocket systems were delivered to Estonia by transport aircrafts to be used during the exercise.²⁶³ Geographically, the exercise also took place less than 150 kilometers from the Russian border and during this time, Russia had voiced its discontent with other U.S. military equipment in Romania, Poland, Bulgaria and the three Baltic States.²⁶⁴ Therefore, the geopolitical message was to voice disapproval of Russia’s actions in Ukraine and show that Russia would not have a say on the weaponry nor military activity NATO decided to conduct.

In terms of a response, surprisingly, I was not able to find a statement linked to Saber Strike 16 from Russia’s part. However, there was a response from the Allies themselves who felt the exercise could be escalatory. 2016 was a year where the allies were actively looking for a solution to the militarization in the Baltic and Black Seas along with the Ukrainian conflict. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier who believed the exercise could prove to be escalatory and called NATO’s military maneuvers in Eastern Europe as saber

²⁵⁷ Colvin, 2016

²⁵⁸ Colvin, 2016

²⁵⁹ “Saber Strike 16...,” 2016 & Colvin, 2016

²⁶⁰ Frankfurter, 2016

²⁶¹ “Saber Strike 16...,” 2016

²⁶² Ibid

²⁶³ “США доставили...,” 2016

²⁶⁴ “Шойгу: действия,” 2016

rattling and counterproductive when it came to stability and security in the region.²⁶⁵ For example, he stated “whoever believes that a symbolic tank parade on the alliance's eastern border will bring security, is mistaken.”²⁶⁶ Therefore, this exercise could have been perceived as a threat to dialogue with Russia.

More importantly, while US led exercises usually list stability in the region as a goal; an ally that participated in the exercise perceived the exercise as escalatory. To boot, Saber Strike 16 expanded the scope of the Saber Strike drills. This was evidenced when Brig. Gen. Artur Tiganik, the deputy commander of the Estonian Army, even boasted, “Saber Strike is no longer simply three Baltic States and U.S. Army exercise in Europe, it is a regional training event with 13 allied and partner nations.” Thus, this suggests that the exercise contributed little to geopolitical stability.

The Saber Strike drill further enlarged in 2017. However, 2017 presented changes in NATO’s military posture in Europe. Prior to assessing the geopolitical message behind Saber Strike 2017, I will reiterate the changes in NATO’s force posture. By August 2016, NATO held the Warsaw Summit and determined that it would change its force posture in the Baltic and the Black Sea regions. EFP entailed the creation of the multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. The Battlegroups would be fully deployed in July 2017, and they were able to train during this exercise. EFP was declared to be a mechanism to deter aggression according to western scholars, yet the conception of deterrence behind the strategy is ambiguous.²⁶⁷ After all, allies perceive the EFP deterrence strategy and the type of deterrence it is in different ways.²⁶⁸

Now, I will focus on the common themes in the press statements. The main themes were deterrence and reassurance. This was evidenced when Stoltenberg stated: “what we saw in Crimea and Ukraine was that there was a lack of a strong military presence that made it possible for Russia to act in the way they did, with hybrid warfare, with little green men in Crimea, [Lithuania] is a very different country, but we need an increased NATO presence with multinational forces, improving our situational awareness to be able to send a very clear

²⁶⁵ “Steinmeier...,” 2016

²⁶⁶ Ibid

²⁶⁷ Noll et al, 2021

²⁶⁸ Ibid

message that any attack, any threat against any NATO ally will trigger a response from the whole Alliance.”²⁶⁹

Like the other exercises, statements claimed that this along with other training events served to enhance regional stability and security.²⁷⁰ In terms of force posture, Saber Strike 17 involved about 11,000 troops. The drill took place prior to Zapad 2017 which was declared to be smaller than Saber Strike. Participating nations included: Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. Jens Stoltenberg, the current NATO Secretary General, noted that NATO also beefed up its Joint Response Force up to 40,000 troops. The main training events featured basic demolition, air drop resupplies, logistical support to sustain units, live fire exercises in both Poland and Lithuania, plus, “an air assault by the British Royal Marines at the Polish and Lithuanian border; and a river crossing in the same area.”²⁷¹

Heavy logistics training took place during Saber Strike 2017. However, what gives us further insight into the geopolitical message behind the drill is the location. Saber Strike 17 focused on an area of newfound vulnerability to NATO military planners, the Suwalki Gap; making sure the U.S. led Battlegroup Poland can move from Eastern Poland through the Suwalki Gap into Southern Lithuania. As previously discussed, in case of a conflict between NATO and Russia, Russia would lose Kaliningrad if it failed to secure the Suwalki Gap. General Ben Hodges commented about the exercise, “Deterrence means you have to have the capability to compel or defeat a potential adversary. You must demonstrate that capability and the will to use it, and these exercises are that demonstration. Deterrence means you must have the capability to compel or defeat a potential adversary. You have to demonstrate that capability and the will to use it, and these exercises are that demonstration.”²⁷² What General Ben Hodges remark tells us about the exercise is that it is seen by military planners as an attempt to shift to a posture focused on deterrence by denial. Yet Stoltenberg’s remarks about sending a message that a threat against any NATO member would trigger a response is more

²⁶⁹ Schultz, 2017

²⁷⁰ Tryphena, 2017

²⁷¹ “Media Advisory...,” 2017 & Otte, 2017 & “Air Drop...,” 2017

²⁷² Clem, 2017

akin to deterrence by punishment. Therefore, a multiplicity of signals on NATO's behalf can be observed.

In general, the force posture is hampered by the same ambiguity and multiplicity as NATO's declarations. Of course, NATO's exercises are about showcasing a taste of what is to come in case of an article 5 violation through the drill. NATO was rehearsing a complex operation in a scenario where an adversary carried out an incursion in the territory of a NATO member. Nevertheless, one could also argue that Saber Strike 17 was too small of an exercise to deter Russia in a meaningful way along with other exercises and that the force posture did not fit the declaration of deterrence by denial. The exercises lack heavy armor and artillery, plus, they do not involve all combat arms nor the logistics training that would be entailed in case of large-scale Russian attack.²⁷³ While the military does gain experience and knowledge from this exercise, the exercise is not nearly as complex nor uses the equipment to credibly deter Russia. After all, a scenario indicating that NATO can cut through Russian Forces in the Suwalki Gap is questionable.²⁷⁴ Second, NATO military planners focus on forward deployment tactics while studies point out that this requires a range of heavy forces already in place or relatively nearby.²⁷⁵ Thus, given these observations, it might seem like NATO is communicating to Russia that it would terribly lose in a conventional conflict if it meddled with the territorial integrity of a NATO member, but in reality, the force posture fits a different interpretation of the message. While the geopolitical message was that NATO did not approve of Russia's actions in Ukraine, and that it was committed to the defense of the Baltic states. The message was about commitment rather than deterrence by denial yet given the multiplicity of signals in NATO's exercises; room for misinterpretation is palpable.

Russia did not directly respond to this exercise, for I could not find a remark linked precisely to the exercise. Regardless, a month prior to the exercise. Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, called the NATO exercises near the Russian border destabilizing.²⁷⁶ This suggests that the exercise was perceived as contributing to instability in the region. Based on this development, plus, the force incrementation and the change in rhetoric shifting from reassurance to deterrence, suggests that the exercise had a negative impact on geopolitical stability.

²⁷³ Ibid

²⁷⁴ Ibid

²⁷⁵ Ibid

²⁷⁶ "Lavrov...", 2017

Little changed in 2018. As usual, we will begin with the press statements related to Saber Strike 2018. The main themes found in the press statements were reassurance and an ambiguous form of deterrence. For instance, U.S. Army Europe also stated that the exercise was “a demonstration of the commitment and solidarity of the Alliance” at the time when Russia’s military maneuvers are increasingly worrying nearby NATO members.²⁷⁷ The exercise was portrayed by the NATO side as “typical deterrence” despite the inclusion of Israel in the exercise.²⁷⁸ The main goal of the exercise was noted to be interoperability between the multinational battlegroups and show force readiness.²⁷⁹

Force structure was incremented during Saber Strike 18. At the same time, information of what exactly took place is limited; what we do know fits the exercise description, and that is that Saber Strike 18 was a forward deployment military exercise that involve logistics and mobility training and the personnel for a complex operation. 18,000 troops participated in the annual Saber Strike exercise across the Baltic states and Poland from 18 different countries including Canada, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom.²⁸⁰ The main training event involved a convoy of the US 2nd Calvary Regiment from Germany to Lithuania via multiple routes while they participated in air assault operations plus river crossing operations with German and English engineers to ensure mobility throughout Poland and Lithuania.²⁸¹ The four multinational battlegroups also supported the exercise through military planning and coordination of incoming troops.²⁸² Drills were also held in the Suwalki Gap although partly.²⁸³ Circumstances are also vital to understand the geopolitical message behind the drill. The exercise ran amid discussion for further Polish American cooperation. In 2018, a proposal emerged for a permanent American base in Poland that was going to be named “Fort Trump” and Poland was willing to contribute about 2 billion USD to the project.²⁸⁴ Therefore, this suggests that the geopolitical message was that NATO is committed to support its allies in the case Russia were to try anything like its actions in Ukraine

²⁷⁷ “US Led...,” 2018

²⁷⁸ Ibid

²⁷⁹ Brown, 2018

²⁸⁰ NATO, 2018

²⁸¹ Arce, 2018

²⁸² “19 NATO...,” 2018

²⁸³ “18,000...,” 2018

²⁸⁴ Plucinska et al, 2018

Russian officials expressed caution with the drills. For example, Dmitry Peskov, Press Secretary of the President, stated that Russia was carefully watching NATO's military manoeuvres near Russia's borders.²⁸⁵ He also mentioned that NATO infrastructure approaching Russian borders did not contribute stability or security in Europe when speaking about the rumours about Fort Trump.²⁸⁶ This indicates that discontent with the drill was not visceral but in general, the idea of more NATO military infrastructure in the Alliance's eastern flank was destabilizing to Russia. The basis to determine if the drill contributed to geopolitical instability is not just declarative statements, for incrementations of force posture can also be seen through Saber Strike 18. Hence, according to the criteria, the data suggests that the drill did not have a stabilizing effect as it intended to.

In conclusion, I discussed the Saber Strike series and BALTOPS 2014 and the geopolitical messages behind the drills, and I introduced the notion that NATO's multiplicity of signals may lead to ambiguous signals in accordance with Russia's perception. Russian officials responded negatively to NATO's exercises and the developments surrounding NATO's force posture multiple times, and at times hostile or aggressive. I also examined the incrementations in force structure and the complexification of the drills that lead me to argue that the drills did not contribute to geopolitical stability as they were declared to do.

b. Anakonda Exercise Series

In this section, I will discuss the Anakonda exercise series. The Anakonda series is different from BALTOPS or the Saber Strike Series mainly because it began as a Polish led exercise but later shifted to a U.S.-Polish led exercise. Regardless, Anakonda is perceived as a NATO exercise due to the widespread participation of the allies (mainly the U.S.) since 2016. To discuss this exercise, I will use the same format I used in the previous exercises. I will first assess the geopolitical message, then present Russia's response, and comment on the possible effects on instability.

²⁸⁵ “Москва отслеживает...,” 2020

²⁸⁶ “NATO War...,” 2018

In 2014, NATO's force posture changed after Russia's actions in Ukraine, and Anakonda 2014 was part of a series of exercises that the Alliance conducted to reassure its eastern flank rather than deter. Data on the first iteration of Anakonda is rather scarce. The main topic within the press statements was military readiness.²⁸⁷ The main goal of the exercise to conduct defensive operations and to form the conditions needed to receive ally reinforcements.²⁸⁸ Poland's Defence Minister now, Tomasz Siemoniak, mentioned that the exercise carried special significance in 2014 due to the events in Ukraine.²⁸⁹ This remark confirms that the planning considered Russia's annexation of Crimea and the events in the Donbas. From September-October 2014, Anakonda 2014 participation was dominated by poles. About 12,500 Polish troops participated in the exercise in contrast to a total of 750 multinational forces from 9 allied countries. Polish participation at the time was massive. The U.S. also sent "120 armoured personnel carriers, 50 rocket launchers, 17 vessels, including submarines, plus 25 aircraft, including helicopters, fighters and multi-purpose aircraft."²⁹⁰ Troops conducted live fire drills, defensive operations and practiced providing support to allies in Orzysz; about 90 km from Kaliningrad.²⁹¹ The other nations who participated were Canada, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Great Britain, United States.²⁹²

Anakonda 2014 contained two geopolitical messages within this drill. The first is Poland's geopolitical message, because this iteration was mainly Polish exercise. Poland's message centered on military readiness, territorial defense, and even resistance to the prospect of Russian aggression; a message that resembled deterrence by denial. Meanwhile, another geopolitical message exists which is of the allies. The support and cooperation of the Allies with Poland in the exercise via military equipment and participation suggests that NATO's geopolitical message was that it was ready to support Poland in case that Russia might try anything like its actions in Ukraine, a mix of reassurance with aspects of deterrence by punishment.

Interestingly so, despite its proximity to Kaliningrad and the exercise's proclaimed "special significance," open-source data on the response of the reaction of Russian officials is

²⁸⁷ "Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania..." 2018

²⁸⁸ <https://defence24.com/Anakonda-14-the-largest-exercise-of-polish-army>

²⁸⁹ "Anakonda 2014..." 2014

²⁹⁰ "Anakonda 12..." 2014

²⁹¹ "Anakonda 2014..." 2014

²⁹² Lasconkarias, 2014, P.4-6

insignificant in contrast to the 2016 and 2018 iterations of the exercise. Due to the lack of data, I will refrain from assessing Russia's response and the effect of the drill on geopolitical instability.

Instead, I will move on to discussing Anakonda 2016 and its geopolitical message. Now I will focus on the themes in the press statements. The main themes were interoperability and deterrence. Russia was also a prominent theme when it came to official statements from officials. Statements from US Army Europe and NATO officials directly state how they are concerned about the possibility of Russia conducting a military operation disguised as an exercise near the borders of the Baltic States. General Ben Hodges of US Army Europe commented about Russia; "everybody that lives close to them absolutely believes that this is a real possibility. We must do everything we can to show that we are prepared. That is what deterrence is all about."²⁹³ Other themes mentioned were about unity, particularly building friendships through training.²⁹⁴ The main goal of the exercise was to reinforce assurance and deterrence measures by showing the defense capabilities of the Allies.²⁹⁵ According to the statements, this exercise goal contributed to regional stability.²⁹⁶

Details of what took place in the training are scarce, yet it is plausible to assume with the data we have that the exercise featured more complex operations. Anakonda 2016 involved about 31,000 troops and the exercise took place prior to the 2016 Warsaw Summit. The exercise also included the participation of 24 different nations including non-NATO members like Georgia, Finland, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Sweden. Among NATO member states, Albania, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States took part.²⁹⁷ The drill was also held concurrently with Saber Strike and BALTOPS 2016 which is also likely why it is not difficult to see Anakonda 2016 as a NATO drill. Troops conducted situational training exercises, live fire exercises, night-time helicopter assault, cyber operations, decontamination procedures plus mass casualty drills were practiced.²⁹⁸

²⁹³ Welna, 2016

²⁹⁴ Ready, 2016

²⁹⁵ Ibid

²⁹⁶ Ibid

²⁹⁷ "U.S., Poland..." 2016

²⁹⁸ Ready, 2016

However, the force posture did not support deterrence by denial as the main exercise goal, but it was promoted as such. For instance, General Ben Hodges recognized that Anakonda was not a show of force, for the number of troops in the exercise were not enough to pose a roadblock to an adversary.²⁹⁹ This suggests that the message behind the exercise of the exercise was to reassure Poland and the Baltic states when it came to Russian aggression. Yet why was there an attempt to portray this exercise as a massive show of deterrence by denial? Well, the exercise took place right before the 2016 Warsaw Summit, and Poland was requesting a permanent NATO presence in the country since January, but it had not yet been approved.³⁰⁰ Since it had not yet been approved, the exercise was likely an attempt to reassure Poland as Poland flexed its deterrence muscle. Therefore, despite the large displays, NATO's geopolitical message was that it was committed to defending Poland in the case of an article 5 violation. Warsaw's message was once more one of robustness and military readiness.

Russia was not the only country to respond to Anakonda 2016, for the Allies themselves had mixed feelings about the exercise. Anakonda 2016 was a subject of scrutiny. First, many allies tried to dissociate themselves with the exercise and withheld approval of turning it into an official NATO exercise. After all, German Foreign Minister Walter Steinmeier had previously called the Polish exercise was "sabre rattling. Retired NATO Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Philip Breedlove confirmed that there was a lot of internal disagreement about Anakonda 2016. For instance, he stated that "there were those voices in the alliance that were worried about that signature being too big. The political leadership of the alliance chose to keep them separate so as not to be too bellicose."³⁰¹ Meaning that there was no consensus when it came to the Anakonda 2016 exercise and how it was done, and NATO members were concerned about Warsaw acting provocatively.³⁰²

Despite the attempts to communicate the exercise as a Polish one, Russia's response to the exercise was highly negative to the exercise. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told his Finnish counterparts that the Kremlin would take its own set of measures to respond to NATO's military activity.³⁰³ He also voiced discontent with Finland participating in

²⁹⁹ Welna, 2016

³⁰⁰ Gibbens, 2016

³⁰¹ Judson et al, 2016

³⁰² "Warsaw;s Provocative..." 2016

³⁰³ Ibid

Anakonda 2016, BALTOPS 2016, and Saber Strike 2016. Lavrov stated that “we do not hide our negative attitude to the movement of NATO’s military infrastructure towards our borders, to dragging new states into the military activity of the bloc.”³⁰⁴

Russia’s reaction and the internal reaction of the Allies must be considered when discussing if Anakonda 2016 contributed to stability. After all, Lavrov directly stated there was little justification for militarizing the Baltic Sea region. Allies themselves also feared of the exercise’s escalatory potential, and in terms of force posture, a national exercise grew into a regional event with a large incrementation in the forced structure used to carry out the exercise. This suggests that the exercise did not contribute to stability in the region.

Anakonda 2018 followed a similar pattern although it was not as large as Anakonda 2016, but the exercise was expanded geographically. The 2018 iteration of the exercise was less intense than the 2016 iteration. To analyze the geopolitical message behind the drill, it is necessary to look at the prominent themes in Anakonda 18’s press statements. The main theme found was military readiness. A statement by Major General Tomasz Piotrowski, Commander of Polish Armed Forces Operational Command reads: “This exercise is an opportunity to present the readiness of the Polish Armed Forces and our Allies to operate within the complex, contemporary, multidomain environment. Conducted in Poland and in the Baltic States, ANAKONDA is the venue for the certification of the Multinational Division Northeast.”

Data on the trainings that took place was limited. Regardless, less troops participated in the exercise in 2018 than 2016. However, Anakonda 2018 expanded the geographical scope of the drill. In 2018, the exercise not only included training in Poland, but Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. Anakonda 2018 is the 7th iteration of the exercise, yet it was the first time it included the Baltic states. Meaning that while less personnel was involved in the exercise, the drills that took place were more complex. Overall, 12,500 troops conducted drills in Poland while 5,200 from NATO countries trained in the Baltic states. Some sources claim that over 100,00 troops participated in the exercise but 12,500 which is under the count needed for required observation under the Vienna Document.³⁰⁵ Other nations who participated were

³⁰⁴ Ibid

³⁰⁵ Radziunas, 2018

Turkey, the U.S., Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.³⁰⁶ The training included river crossings to test mobility, live fire by American and Polish troops, chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) defense, and military medicine.³⁰⁷ This version of Anakonda also used the might of EFP presence, troops also practiced air defense, and field artillery.³⁰⁸ Like other exercises since 2014, Anakonda simulated defense against an attack by an adversary.³⁰⁹ The scope of the attack included hybrid warfare techniques, sending scouts, and use of artillery and infantry units.³¹⁰

Russia did not voice a direct response to Anakonda 2018, but it did monitor the exercise along with Belarus.³¹¹ However, Russia was prominently voicing its concern about the prospect of a permanent US military base in Poland at the time. Given this, and that, Anakonda 18 was a large display of solidarity between US and Polish troops, the exercise was not likely perceived in a positive light. Ultimately, since there is not a direct response by the Russians, I will not comment on this exercise's impact on geopolitical instability in the region.

In conclusion, the Anakonda series shows us a complex dynamic within the geopolitical messages that NATO members send. On one hand, the evidence suggests Russia mainly responded negative to the prospect of permanent US presence in Poland and the Baltic Sea region as a whole. On the other hand, NATO members also seemed concerned about the thin line between provocation of aggression and deterrence, yet at the same time, attempting to signal reassurance to NATO's eastern bloc. Overall, Anakonda highlights a complex dynamic when it comes to geopolitical messaging as an alliance.

c. *BALTOPS 2015-2019*

BALTOPS is perhaps the best exercise series that show how NATO's military expansion and Russia's actions surrounding the exercises have contributed to regional

³⁰⁶ "Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and...", 2018

³⁰⁷ Ibid

³⁰⁸ "Tenn National...", 2018

³⁰⁹ NATO PA, 2019, P.10

³¹⁰ Ibid

³¹¹ Belarusian Military..., 2018 & "Moscow to Conduct...", 2018

instability. The BALTOPS exercises cemented the status of the neutral Scandinavian countries as NATO's geopolitical partners in the region. Previously, I discussed how Russia conducted side to side drills amidst BALTOPS 2014 to signal discontent. Now, I will tackle the other iterations of the BALTOPS exercises.

As previously stated, BALTOPS is an exercise with history. Prior to 2014, Russia was a participant of the BALTOPS exercise series. BALTOPS 2015 takes place a year following Russia's actions in Ukraine. To examine the geopolitical message, I will first focus on the main themes in the press statements. The main themes were solidarity in defending the Baltic region and enhancing interoperability.³¹² Therefore, maintaining regional security and heightening the level of interoperability was the strategic goal of the exercise. Deterrence was not listed as an aim of the exercise, yet capability was reinforced. For instance, NATO striking and support forces commander vice-admiral James Foggo III stated: "this exercise represents an important opportunity for our forces, as allies and partners, to enhance our ability to work together and strengthen capabilities required to maintain regional security."³¹³

In terms of force posture, the exercise featured "total of 49 ships, 61 aircraft, one submarine, and a combined amphibious landing force of 700 American, Finnish and Swedish troops."³¹⁴ This was different from BALTOPS 2014 which included 52 aircrafts and 30 ships.³¹⁵ The inclusion of the amphibious landing was also highlighted unlike in 2014. Overall, troops rehearsed anti-submarine warfare, amphibious landings, air defense, and the interception of suspect vessels.³¹⁶ About 5,600 troops were stated to be involved and 14 NATO Allies participated in the exercise (Turkey, Belgium, Canada, the U.S., Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). Geographically, the exercise mostly took place in Poland and Sweden.³¹⁷

Overall, the exercise focused on a fast concentration of forces. Meaning that the scenario was based on NATO having to respond to an article 5 violation in its eastern flank;

³¹² "NATO Allies...", 2015

³¹³ Ibid

³¹⁴ Samseer, 2015

³¹⁵ Eckstein, 2015

³¹⁶ Ibid

³¹⁷ NATO Allies..., 2015

therefore, troops rehearsed repelling an adversary in the initial stages on conflict.³¹⁸ In other words, the allies were indeed practicing interoperability, but against a large conventional threat. Given the fact that Russia was excluded from the exercise, and that it is the only state in the region that could engage in a conventional incursion in NATO's eastern flank, this data only leaves Russia as the possible adversary. Thus, the force posture did not fit the declarative aim, for NATO members put on a display to show what was to come if an adversary advanced into the territory of a member state. The scenario was akin to deterrence by punishment, but that is not to deny that interoperability and solidarity play a part in deterrence by punishment. The following suggests that NATO's geopolitical message was that it would defend its allies in case of an article 5 violation against Russia, and that Finland and Sweden would assist NATO in the case of a conflict in the region. In sum, NATO engaged in sending an array of signals to different receivers.

Russia responded negatively to the exercise but did not issue a press statement. As a signal of discontent with the exercise, Russian corvettes slid alongside groups, and SU-24 fighters buzzed ships.³¹⁹ Hence, Moscow responded with a low-level provocation. In view of this, and the incrementation of force structure and the inclusion of amphibious landings rehearsal during BALTOPS 2015, the data suggests that the drill failed to bring stability.

BALTOPS 2016 had the same goals as BALTOPS 2015. Discursively, the official goal of the exercise was interoperability.³²⁰ Reassuring the Baltic Sea region was also a key topic in the press releases. For instance, "the stability and security of the Baltic Sea region," was deemed a priority; alluding that the exercise was contributing to the stability of the region.³²¹ Concerning the force structure in the exercise, BALTOPS 2016 saw a heftier presence with about 6,100 troops participating in the exercise.³²² More NATO members (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, UK, and US) also participated in the exercise, plus, Sweden and Finland.³²³ The main event was anti-submarine warfare and amphibious operations, but it

³¹⁸ Frear, 2015

³¹⁹ Larter, 2016

³²⁰ Ibid

³²¹ Ibid

³²² Babis, 2016

³²³ "BALTOP 16," 2016

was deemed to be more complex than the previous years.³²⁴ Troops conducted mine sweeping drills and maritime interdiction, practiced searching other ships, plus, rehearsed air defense.³²⁵ BALTOPS 2016 included two additional submarines plus an extra-amphibious landing in comparison to BALTOPS 2015.³²⁶ To BALTOPS 2016, RT reports claimed Finland contributed a 160-infantry company of the Usiima Brigade and the minelayer Usiima while Sweden's input was one corvette, one submarine, marine troops, six Gripen fighter jets, and the Stockholm archipelago as a training ground.³²⁷

The evolution of BALTOPS is different from the Saber Strike series. As we can see, with BALTOPS 2016, force structure stabilizes yet drills achieved a greater complexity.³²⁸ Nonetheless, the training that took place during the exercise is consistent with the scenario of an adversary conducting an article 5 violation. Nevertheless, BALTOPS 2016 is similar to BALTOPS 2015 in the sense that the force posture and scenario fit a deterrence by punishment aim yet declaratively, the cornerstone is interoperability and geopolitical stability. This suggests that NATO's geopolitical message was that it was committed to defending the Baltic states and Poland in case of Russian aggression, and that Sweden and Finland would come to NATO's aid. Regardless, NATO's message is not clear-cut.

Russia did not directly respond to the exercise. Moscow only observed the exercise and kept its cool from a distance.³²⁹ However, one vital piece of information, can put this into context. Russia conducted its own set of snap drills in the final phases of the Saber Strike/BALTOPS/Anakonda 2016 exercise series.³³⁰ However, this exercise was not declared to be linked to NATO's exercises, Therefore, Russia's response is unreliable to determine how it perceived of the exercise. Yet, Russian media criticized the participation of Sweden in Anakonda 2016, an exercise that took place in the same month and deemed the exercise as a part of an effort to militarize the Baltic Sea region.³³¹ Given this context, it is difficult to

³²⁴ Eckstein, 2016

³²⁵ Ibid

³²⁶ Ibid

³²⁷ "Provoking..." 2016

³²⁸ Ibid

³²⁹ "Presence of Mind..." 2016

³³⁰ Elvfing, 2016

<https://jamestown.org/program/russias-june-2016-snap-exercise-same-old-story-but-with-a-new-touch/>

³³¹ "Provoking..." 2016

argue that Saber Strike 3016 contributed to regional stability given the fact the scope and complexity of the exercise were expanded.

Since 2015, NATO began training to conduct high end warfare.³³² BALTOPS 2017 exemplified a pivot towards anti-submarine capabilities, mine searching, amphibious landings, and practicing air defense (air – sea maneuvers).³³³ The geopolitical message behind the drill was not different from the years before, yet NATO’s statements became clearer. The main theme of the press statements regarding the exercise was achieving interoperability for regional stability or possibly defending the region if necessary.³³⁴ Acknowledging the possibility of defending the region was an admittance of deterrence by punishment although the term was not mentioned. The force structure of the exercise stabilized in 2017 although the drills became more complex. Over 4,000 troops participated in the exercise along with 50 ships and 55 aircraft.³³⁵ In terms of participation, we can see stabilization. 12 Allied (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States) members participated in the drills, plus, Sweden and Finland.³³⁶ The new element in the exercise was air maritime integration, which means that NATO forces worked on coordination and cooperation with air forces for the very first time in these drills.³³⁷ The drills centered on air integration along with a longer “free play” part of the event but now a component of the event on its own.³³⁸ As a result, the data suggests that the geopolitical message behind the drill was that NATO’s commitment to the defence on the Baltic Sea is steadfast and that in the case of a conflict in the region, Sweden and Finland will not remain neutral.

Russia did not notably respond to the drill officially, three Russian ships merely shadowed the exercise in international waters.³³⁹ Therefore, I cannot comment on the drill’s effect on geopolitical stability based on Russia’s response; Russia’s actions only show that it was cautious about the exercise. Regardless, BALTOPS 2017 is consistent with the assertion

³³² Rasmussen, 2017

³³³ Ibid

³³⁴ “BALTOPS 17...,” 2017

³³⁵ Eckstein, 2017

³³⁶ “CAOC In Charge...,” 2017

³³⁷ Eckstein, 2017

³³⁸ “Exercise BALTOPS...,” 2017

³³⁹ Eckstein, 2017

that the BALTOPS series shows that the exercises are being expanded and complexified in the interest of a deterrence by punishment strategy while simultaneously signaling reassurance.

BALTOPS 2018 had similar parameters to BALTOPS 2017; therefore, it is only natural that the geopolitical message is not different. Nonetheless, the drill pre-dated NATO's Trident Juncture 2018 which was one of the biggest drills NATO had ever performed since the end of the Cold War and that is crucial context. The main themes in the press statements about the drill were the same as BALTOPS 2017; a mix of interoperability, broad deterrence, and reassurance.³⁴⁰ Once more, the exercise statements alluded those drills like this contribute towards the stability of the region and invoked an abundance of signals. The exercise also continued the trend of stable participation yet more complex drills. In terms of force structure, almost 5,000 personnel participated in the drills including 16 NATO Allies (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States) who provided forces, plus Sweden and Finland.³⁴¹ In total, 43 maritime assets and over 60 air assets were separated for the exercise.³⁴² The air component of the exercise was further reinforced in comparison to BALTOPS 2017. Hence, the drills included two amphibious landings, mine sweeping practice, live fire drills, neutralization exercises, plus, neutralization exercises.³⁴³ A new feature was to introduce personnel recovery training and integration of air and sea platform integration.³⁴⁴ The free play portion of the exercise was also augmented by expanding the quantity of troop members that played the role of adversaries in the exercise in a simulation.³⁴⁵ The description of the exercise and the trainings that took place suggest that the geopolitical message was that NATO has been consistently practicing how to defend the Baltic Sea region in the case of an article 5 violation alongside Finland and Sweden. The exercise was also an expression of solidarity with NATO's most vulnerable members. Both messages imply deterrence by punishment and reassurance.

³⁴⁰ Eckstein, 2018

³⁴¹ "Exercise BALTOPS..." 2018

³⁴² Sparks, 2018

³⁴³ Eckstein, 2018

³⁴⁴ Ibid

³⁴⁵ "BALTOPS 2018 Continues..." 2018

During this iteration of the exercise, Russian ships shadowed the exercise from a distance.³⁴⁶ A signal of caution and a degree of mistrust. While I cannot comment on the effect BALTOPS 18 had on instability on this basis, it is appropriate to state that new features were introduced in the exercise and that simulated combat with the adversary was extended. .

BALTOPS 2019 also follows a similar pattern within the series. In comparison to the previous iterations of the exercise, the main theme in the press statements was a mix of broad deterrence and reassurance, yet ever present was the notion of achieving interoperability to possibly defend the Baltic Sea. NATO spokesperson, Oana Lungescu, stated that “BALTOPS is now in its 47th year and is not directed against anyone – but clearly the security environment in the region has deteriorated after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea. BALTOPS tests how well our forces work together and shows that NATO can defend itself against any adversary.”³⁴⁷ Lungescu’s statement is counterproductive for the drills are not directed against Russia yet no other country in the Baltic Sea Region could pose an adversarial threat to NATO members in the region on a military level.

The force posture fit the declaration; NATO carried out a complex military exercise that focused on showing what is to come in the case of an article 5 violation. About 8,600 troops participated in the exercise; 18 NATO members participated (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States), plus Sweden and Finland. Nearly 50 ships, and over 40 aircraft were included in the exercise and training focus on amphibious assaults, mine sweeping drills, and air-sea integration. Equipment included the high-end Aegis Combat System-based air defense frigates to signal an operational event of a higher level. Russia has also voiced that it considers the Aegis system as destabilizing previously. The event was also the first major exercise of the UK led Joint Expeditionary Force, a group of armed forces of the following nations: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, which was agreed upon at the 2014 Summit.³⁴⁸ This data suggests that NATO’s geopolitical message is that it is committed to defending the Baltic sea region if a conflict erupts, and that Finland and Sweden’s neutrality will be void; no space will be neutral.

³⁴⁶ Mehta, 2018

³⁴⁷ “NATO’s Navies...,” 2019

³⁴⁸ Royal Navy, Unknown Year

Russia's responded by the exercise in two ways. Firstly, they sent ships from the Baltic Fleet to monitor the exercise and deployed reconnaissance assets.³⁴⁹ Reportedly, during a day where NATO soldiers rehearsed landings in Sareema, simultaneously, Russian forces rehearsed sinking an enemy submarine in the Baltic Sea.³⁵⁰ Meanwhile in Kaliningrad, Russian forces simulated a missile strike against an enemy ship.³⁵¹ The MoD also posted a video of SU-27 fighters intercepting a US Air Force RC-135V spy plane and a Swedish Air Force Gulfstream reconnaissance aircraft for approaching Russia's borders too closely.³⁵² Thus, Russia's actions suggest that it saw NATO's exercise as provocative and responded with low level provocations.

Taking this into account, plus, the fact destabilizing equipment was used during Russia's response, the data suggests that the exercise did not contribute to geopolitical stability. While less personnel were involved in BALTOPS 19; the exercise was more intricate than BALTOPS 18.

In conclusion, I have shown how the BALTOPS series became an advert display on how Sweden and Finland became NATO's geopolitical partners, signaling to Russia that they would not be neutral if a conflict erupted in the region. The nucleus of the BALTOPS series was reassurance and international cooperation. As the security situation in Europe evolved, the exercise became a display of a plurality of signals on NATO's behalf. I also argued that the BALTOPS series has only grown in terms of posturing, and while the drills may declare that they contribute to geopolitical stability, the data shows otherwise.

d. Trident Juncture 2018

Trident Juncture 2018 was one of the largest NATO drills in the post-Cold-War era since 2002. .³⁵³ⁱⁱⁱ I included this exercise in the sample because of its size. I will use Trident Juncture 18 to show that the exercise follows the same pattern as the BALTOPS exercises in

³⁴⁹ "Three Russian...", 2019

³⁵⁰ "NATO and Russia...", 2019

³⁵¹ Ibid

³⁵² "Video of Russian...", 2019

terms of geopolitical message, response from an adversary, and its effect on geopolitical stability.

The first Trident Juncture took place in 2015, but it took place in Italy, Spain, and Portugal.³⁵⁴ Therefore, the exercise is beyond the scope of the study. However Trident Juncture 2018 took place in three locations in October: parts of Norway, different areas of the North Atlantic, plus the Baltic Sea. Norway hosted the exercise, and numerous NATO allies participated, plus Sweden and Finland. Some exercises took place in Sweden, Finland, and Iceland.³⁵⁵ The main themes found in the press releases about the exercise were interoperability and deterrence. Nonetheless, this was not just about unity; interoperability was linked to defending territory in the case of an article 5 violation, and the deterrence theme was linked to a display of raw military power to make an adversary think twice about an incursion into NATO territory; deterrence by denial. For instance, Adm. James Foggo, commander of NATO's Allied Joint Force Command, noted that the amphibious landings in the exercise would serve as a deterrent for anyone who might think about crossing a contiguous border or violating the sovereignty of an Alliance member.³⁵⁶

In terms of force posture, Trident Juncture 18 was a large-scale exercise and the operations that took place fit the declaration. About 50,000 troops participated in the exercise, equipment included 250 aircraft, 65 ships, and nearly 10,000 vehicles. Norway had been planning the exercise since the 2014 Wales Summit following Trident Juncture 2015 and the goal was to feature NATO's Response Force, an advanced multinational force made up of air, land, and maritime and Special Operations Forces, in the training.³⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the US Navy led the exercise.³⁵⁸ Regular training included crisis management elements, intense coordination between the civilian and defense sectors, cold weather training, civilian evacuations, forces simulated air assaults, practiced mobility, and rehearsed several missions among other drills.³⁵⁹ More importantly, a whole session featured a live execution/freeplay in late October.³⁶⁰ This data suggests that NATO's geopolitical message was that it would not

³⁵⁴ "Exercise Trident Juncture," 2018

³⁵⁵ "U.S. Joins NATO's...", 2018

³⁵⁶ Sisk, 2018

³⁵⁷ "NATO'S Response...", 2022

³⁵⁸ Masters, 2018

³⁵⁹ Cayemite, 2018 & "Norway Uses...", 2018

³⁶⁰ "U.S. Ready...", 2018

hesitate to defend the Baltic region and that there was to be serious consequence in the case of Russian aggression. Another part of NATO's geopolitical message was that Sweden and Finland would cooperate with NATO militarily in the case of Russian aggression in the region. In fact, Trident Juncture 18 tried to "seamlessly integrate" sea and land Finnish and Swedish forces in a simulation of an article 5 violation.

Evidence suggests that NATO military planners had considered how Russia would perceive its geopolitical message. Several months prior to the exercise, NATO held a press briefing and officials were asked about how Russia would perceive the exercise. Officials retorted that Trident Juncture 2018 was a defensive exercise and used the opportunity to bring attention Russia's non-transparent behavior and its exercises.³⁶¹ Admiral Foggo stated: "And I would kind of turn the question around and say, where's the transparency on the other side, from Moscow? So, during Zapad, do we get this kind of a press conference, and do you see this kind of openness from the Russians? Is a SNAPEX something that builds confidence in the west when the Russians do a large 50,000-person snap exercise? And what are the motives behind that? I think it's... this is a much more deliberate approach."³⁶² NATO officials also stated that Russia had been invited as an observer in accordance with the stipulation of the Vienna Document.³⁶³ Foggo's remark does not only give us insight into the geopolitical message behind Trident Juncture's 2018, but of how Russia's behavior influences the one of NATO behaviors. Be it for deterrence purposes or other reasons, Russia obfuscates the aims and force posture regarding military exercises. Consequently, NATO members are forced to consider Russia's reputation and prioritize their expectations of Russia's behavior in their exercises and the information they reveal about NATO's own exercises.

Russia's response to Trident Juncture 2018 was extremely negative to the exercise, and some might argue that Russia's response bordered on brinkmanship. Russia simultaneously conducted missile drills in international waters nearly side by side with the NATO exercise near the seacoast of Norway.³⁶⁴ Russia was also accused of jamming GPS signals at this time.³⁶⁵ Spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, referred to the exercise and NATO's

³⁶¹ "Press Briefing..." 2018

³⁶² Ibid

³⁶³ Ibid

³⁶⁴ "Russia Reacts..." 2018

³⁶⁵ Episkopos, 2018

activities in the North as an escalation and that it served as unprecedented militarization of Norway's northern latitudes.³⁶⁶ Hence, it is safe to assume that Trident Juncture 2018 was seen as a provocation.³⁶⁷ Along with noting Norway's decision to increase the number of rotational marines in the country, Zakharova remarked that Russia would take tit for tat measures in order to guarantee its own security.³⁶⁸

Russia's reaction demonstrates that it saw exercise as a threat to strategic stability, and in its perspective, Moscow felt the need to respond with a reactive training exercise. Trident Juncture 2018 also indicated a shift in NATO's force posture. Large scale military drills from NATO's side were back in the Baltic Sea region since the Cold War. This data suggests both Russia and NATO perceived that the strategic balance in the region was altered. Thus, the exercise had a negative impact on geopolitical stability according to the indicators established.

To sum up, Trident Juncture 2018 contributed to the militarization of the Baltic Sea region. Through the drill, NATO communicated that there would be catastrophic consequence in the case of Russian aggression. To this, Russia responded with low level provocations. This dynamic is not different from the dynamic observed analyzing the BALTOPS exercises.

³⁶⁶ Sisk, 2018

³⁶⁷ Ibid

³⁶⁸ Ibid

e. *Defender and BALTOPS 2020*



Map of Defender 20 Exercise Plans – US Army Europe

Defender and BALTOPS 2020 were chosen as part of the sample mainly because these were large exercises that were meant to take place. Nonetheless, the exercises were heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. I chose these two exercises to show the NATO-Russia exercise dynamic during the pandemic; a time where military activity was not considered a priority for states. During this period, Russia reportedly proposed a set of CSBMs regarding military exercises in the NATO-Russia contact lines as states battled against the pandemic.

Defender 2020 taking place was a geopolitical message. NATO was signaling that it was not leaving reassurance and deterrence on the backburner. Before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, NATO scheduled Defender 2020, an exercise which featured the largest deployment of U.S. troops in 25 years to train. The exercise consisted of forward deployment all the way from Germany to Poland to the Baltic states (plus other eastern European nations) to the Scandinavian countries, and a component of the exercise also took place in Georgia ³⁶⁹ Defender was classified as a U.S. exercise rather than a NATO exercise

³⁶⁹ Judson, 2019

but given the fact that numerous NATO (17) members participated in the exercise, that it took place in the territory of the Alliance, and that the U.S. is a founding NATO member, it is more than appropriate to include in the study. The main theme behind the exercise was commitment and assurance to U.S. allies.³⁷⁰

Regarding the force posture behind the declarative statements, Defender 20 was intended to be a massive exercise, but it did not work out. However, what gives us insight into the geopolitical message behind Defender 20 was the fact it was scaled back and not called off. To boot, the Allies were already planning a 2021 iteration of the exercise. Originally, the planning that Defender 2020 required drew from the REFORGER (Return of Forces to Germany) exercises in the Cold War era; the REFORGER exercises focused on mobilizing forces to one country in defense of a popular location against an adversary.³⁷¹ According to the original exercise description, the deployment would be made up of 20,000 U.S. troops and 13,000 pieces of military equipment across all domains (land, air, and sea) and simulated the U.S. mobilizing its troops stateside to Europe.³⁷² U.S. Army Europe Commander, Lt. Gen. Chris Cavoli, commented that it would be the third largest exercise conducted in Europe since the Cold War.³⁷³ For 25 years, the U.S. Army did not practice operations at a divisional level.³⁷⁴ Basically, the U.S. would practice deploying an entire division from the U.S. through Dutch ports all the way to the Baltic states and Poland.³⁷⁵ Forcible entry air assault exercises in the Baltic States were also planned for Defender 2020.³⁷⁶ Due to the pandemic, the deployment was a lot smaller; about 6,000 US Army Europe troops were deployed and about 9,000 vehicles: 3,000 from across the Atlantic and the rest from different locations in Europe.³⁷⁷ This suggests that NATO's intended message regarding Defender 2020 is like the Saber Strike series and other recent exercises; to reassure the allies of NATO's commitment to defend in case of Russian aggression with the guaranteed assistance of Finland, Georgia, and Sweden, and to communicate that the pandemic would not significantly affect its commitment to the region.

³⁷⁰ NATO SHAPE, 2020

³⁷¹ Ibid

³⁷² NATO SHAPE, 2020

³⁷³ Judson, 2019

³⁷⁴ Milevski, 2020

³⁷⁵ Ibid

³⁷⁶ Ibid

³⁷⁷ Thomas et al, 2020

Russia's reaction to the exercise pre-pandemic was extremely negative and they did not recognize the deterrence value of the exercise and hinted that it saw the drill as escalatory. In fact, Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov questioned that the exercise was defensive and criticized the inclusion of Sweden and Finland in the exercise.³⁷⁸ He also alluded that the exercise being classified as a U.S. exercise rather than a NATO exercise showed how NATO was just a tool of the U.S to accomplish its own foreign policy goals rather than a democratic alliance.³⁷⁹ As we can see, the specific role of U.S. troops in the exercise creates a vibrant image for Russia; the one of Russia's main adversaries (U.S.) at the helm, pulling its troops into a foreign continent with the assistance of its allies and non-NATO members conducting a large-scale military operation approaching Russia's borders in the Baltic and Black seas.

Following Defender 2020, Russia conducted sea missile drills in the Baltic Sea (based on Kaliningrad). Approximately 20 Baltic fleet combat ships (boats and vessels were also included) participated.³⁸⁰ The training included artillery and missile firings against multiple simulated sea and air targets.³⁸¹ Soldiers also practiced radiation and ship contamination, plus ship damage control.³⁸² This drill technically took place concurrently to Defender 2020, but it was not declared as a response. After all, the final phase of Defender 2020 would take place from July to August. Since it was not declared a response to Defender 2020, I cannot argue that it was part of a NATO-Russia action-reaction exercise dynamic like I could with the BALTOPS series and Trident Juncture 18, but I can argue that the exercise sends a geopolitical message to the Allies, and that message is that despite the pandemic, military readiness is a priority for Russia.

Ironically, both sides voiced concerns about the effect of increased military activity at this time. Scaling down military activity was a topic of conversation between Russia and NATO for there was hope that the pandemic could bridge an opportunity to lessen military activity in the Baltic Sea region. By the end of Defender, Russia allegedly presented a set of proposals to limit military activity. According to Sergey Ryabkov, Russia presented a moratorium of military exercises in Europe during the pandemic and NATO never responded

³⁷⁸“Russian Baltic,” 2020

³⁷⁹ Ibid

³⁸⁰ “Russian Baltic...,” 2020

³⁸¹ Ibid

³⁸² Ibid

to these proposals.³⁸³ Ryabkov also added that Russia had already taken steps to lower its military activity. While NATO Spokeswoman, Oana Lungescu, did admit that Russia had decreased its military exercises, yet it had conducted large exercises in the name of supporting military-civilian efforts to combat the pandemic, but NATO believed that this was meant to message Russia's combat readiness during the pandemic.³⁸⁴ She also brought to attention that NATO had indeed also decreased the size of its military activity.³⁸⁵

While the decisions to continue conducting military activity during the pandemic can be interpreted as a de-escalation of sorts, the parties did not choose to de-escalate because of a genuine willingness to advert military activity. The decision was made because they feared that personnel might get sick and that the drill might put the personnel at risk; not because adversaries intended to de-escalate. In fact, the implication behind Lungescu's statement is that choosing to conduct exercises despite the pandemic sent an array of signals that NATO felt it needed to respond to. This suggests that the contribution to geopolitical stability of these exercises was limited.

With Defender 20, I discussed an opportunity for both NATO and Russia to de-escalate the military activity in the region. BALTOPS 20 is a completely different case, and the data suggests that the exercise marked the beginning of a return to the pre-pandemic NATO-Russia exercise dynamic. Ultimately, the dynamic between Russia and NATO during this exercise can be classified as an action-reaction dynamic. In the summer of 2020, NATO conducted its annual BALTOPS exercise which lasted from June 7-16. This version of BALTOPS was also heavily reduced. After all, the Alliance held at sea events only with ships commanded from the shores.³⁸⁶ Basically, the exercise was redesigned to be conducted entirely by sea. This, of course, breaks with the previous iterations of the exercise which attempted to complexify NATO operations in the Baltic Sea and increase its forces. Nonetheless, this can be attributed to the effects of the pandemic.

Like with the other exercises, I will discuss the main themes and the training that took place to assess the geopolitical message. The main themes in the exercise description were

³⁸³ Chernenko, 2020

³⁸⁴ Ibid

³⁸⁵ Ibid

³⁸⁶ Eckstein, 2020

interoperability and broad deterrence. General Tim Radford, Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, commented that BALTOPS 2020 “was a clear demonstration of the resolve and readiness of NATO to protect the sovereignty of the Baltic nations and the region as a whole.”³⁸⁷

The exercise brought 19 NATO Allies (Canada, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, the UK, and the United States) together, plus Finland and Sweden.³⁸⁸ About 3,000 troops participated in the drills.³⁸⁹ The exercise included air and sea forces, and in terms of equipment, NATO reported that 30 ships and 30 aircraft would be used in the exercise.³⁹⁰ The training focused on mine countermeasure operations, anti-submarine warfare, air defense, and maritime interception.³⁹¹ The exercise also held a free-play phase like the previous years, but there was much less of a focus on amphibious landings.³⁹² Nonetheless, due to the pandemic, the Allies agreed on no amphibious landings or personnel transfers, plus implemented other measures.³⁹³ Surveillance aircrafts participated in the exercise, and some air maneuvers took place, but it was very limited compared to the previous years.³⁹⁴ However, these changes in the exercise were declared to take place because of the pandemic and not a willful de-escalation.

Given the fact that no other credible military power in the Baltic Sea Region other than Russia exists that could be the main adversary in the scenario, the evidence suggests that NATO’s message was that it would defend the Baltic States in case of an attack against their sovereignty. The exercise was a show of force readiness despite the pandemic and NATO communicated that the pandemic would not change NATO’s threat perceptions or its commitment.

Russia did not respond positively but certainly provocatively. In fact, the Baltic fleet conducted its own sets of exercises in the Baltic Sea concurrently to NATO’s BALTOPS

³⁸⁷ SHAPE INT, 2020

³⁸⁸ Ibid

³⁸⁹ Ibid

³⁹⁰ Ibid

³⁹¹ “NATO Navies...,” 2020

³⁹² Eckstein, 2020

³⁹³ Ibid

³⁹⁴ “NATO Navies...,” 2020

2020.³⁹⁵ On June 14, Russia publicly declared that missile drills took place in Kaliningrad while NATO was conducting BALTOPS 2020; hence an admission of purposefulness.³⁹⁶ Trainings involved Iskander missile system, a system NATO sees as a threat to strategic stability.³⁹⁷ In the firing area, soldiers prepared individual, and group electronic missile launches at targets.³⁹⁸ Troops worked on defending facilities and getting out of retaliatory missile strikes.³⁹⁹ However, only 200 soldiers and 20 units of special equipment were involved in the exercise.⁴⁰⁰

In this case, I cannot argue that the exercise contributed to geopolitical instability based on the incrementation of force structure in the exercise. Regardless, the decrease in the exercise's force structure was because of the pandemic rather than a willful one. Nonetheless, I can argue that the element of geopolitical instability is present based on the action-reaction dynamic that ensued following BALTOPS 20. In its response to the exercise, Russia responded by conducting an exercise in a location of geographical proximity, Kaliningrad. Russian forces also used equipment that the other party considers destabilizing as NATO conducted its drills. Russia's reaction suggests that Moscow perceived the drill as destabilizing and felt the need to respond. Undoubtedly, a level of mutual distrust affects the exercise dynamic, but actively choosing to carry out the drill during the pandemic can lead to contributing towards geopolitical stability.

In closing, I have shown that NATO and Russia send geopolitical messages through their drills. However, I have also shown that NATO and Russia interpret each other's messages before they are even sent. Russia's actions suggest that Moscow sees NATO's exercises as escalatory and aggressive. Meanwhile, NATO doubts Russia's intentions when conducting exercises. The data suggests that the result at times is an action-reaction dynamic that contributes to geopolitical instability in the Baltic Sea region.

³⁹⁵ Tass, 2020

³⁹⁶ “Военные РФ провели...,” 2020

³⁹⁷ Ibid

³⁹⁸ Ibid

³⁹⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid

5. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to assess the impact of the NATO-Russia exercise dynamic in the Baltic Sea region. To achieve this, I analyzed various exercises from 2014-2020 from a critical geopolitics point of view. I focused on the geopolitical messages behind an actor's exercises, I scrutinized the response of the opposing actor, and I commented on its effect to geopolitical stability in the region. I provide evidence that indicates that NATO and Russia consider each other's military exercises when it comes to military planning and reacting to the exercises. While not always the case, the empirical data suggests that NATO and Russia find themselves in a risky action-reaction exercise dynamic at times. This means that one side conducts an exercise, and the other is forced to react or more appropriate, fight fire with fire based on their own perceptions about the other party.

The NATO-Russia exercise dynamic does not mean that NATO and Russia intend to go to war with each other, but it does affect the geopolitical stability in the region. NATO members including the U.S. often send an array of ambiguous signals ranging from deterrence (of different kinds), reassurance, and interoperability to different receivers including Russia. In turn, this affects how Russia perceives NATO's exercises to an extent. Regardless, Russia consistently sees NATO's exercises as escalatory while NATO member states find Russia's lack of transparency when it comes to its exercises, particularly snap drills, and troop numbers, destabilizing. In turn, Russia's lack of transparency influences the behavior of NATO members. NATO members consistently see the image of Russia's actions in Ukraine and Georgia when Russia's conducts drills in the Baltic Sea Region, and often cite Russia's reputation dealing with non-NATO states. Yet Russia's messaging is often consistent with its own conception of strategic deterrence.

I assert that the boundaries between deterrence and escalation are blurred, and that the perception of the adversary holds primacy. Deterrence is all about convincing an adversary, and if the adversary's perception of a sender's message is skewed, then, it is fair to assume that the sender's signal did not contribute to deterrence. In my research, I found that Russia consistently voiced through its force posture and declarations that NATO's exercises in the Baltic Sea region were provocative. In response, Russia either declared concern and/or caution about Alliance exercises, and at times responded with its own military drills. Worst of all, I also found that both Russia and NATO members did not express a mutual willingness to

limit their exercises and deployments. Both actors consistently adhered to their own conceptions of deterrence and justified their deployments in the name of deterrence. Essentially, neither one side or the other has shown any signs of retreating in terms of rhetoric or force posture. Because of this, the military exercise dynamic in the Baltic Sea region between Russia and NATO will become a key factor of geopolitical instability in the years to come.

Military exercises are ascribed to geopolitical knowledge and reproduce new geopolitical knowledge. NATO and Russia possess expectations and beliefs about each other and keep this in mind when sending or responding to signals. NATO members and Russia have completely different visions about the euro-Atlantic security order. These two perspectives are often in conflict with each other. The reasons for this may be related to status, power, or security. Regardless, the result is the same. Moscow believes that NATO does not take its interests into consideration, therefore, it sees little value in accommodating to its concerns about its posturing in the region. What is true for the Baltic Sea is that it was a region that at some point was seen as possible venue of cooperation (mainly economic cooperation). Yet, the effects of Russia's actions in Georgia and Ukraine and NATO's exclusion of Russia soured this venue. As a result, the perspective of Russia's and Western elites about the space have changed.

Regardless, the study is not without its limitations. Mainly, little data is non-classified on what goes on during a day-to-day basis of these exercises and sometimes little data is available about certain drills. The declarative positions of either parties could be dishonest, and the study does not include every single drill NATO member or Russia conducted in the Baltic Sea region during the 2014-2020. In the absence of time and resources, I opted to tackle exercises that took place in a series throughout the years for a more direct comparison. I also did not examine parts of drills that took place in another location that was not the Baltic Sea. A more comprehensive study with more time and resources to dedicate it could include 2020 and 2021 in the sample, plus, it would include the Black Sea Region and the Baltic Sea region. After all, these are both areas where the frontiers of NATO member states and Russia lie close to each other. Ideally, military incidents (including airspace and sea violations) between Russia and NATO members would also be included in the sample throughout the years. A truly ambitious take would include cyber-incidents as well since they are widely debated to be closer to the conventional domain.

In conclusion, this study is a humble contribution to deterrence studies; and very much dulls conceptions that we think to be obvious when it comes to European security. After all, more military exercises and an expansion of military infrastructure/force structure is a common policy prescription in the West when we talk about Russia's actions in Europe. I attempt to bring to light in this study that military action is innately risky because you may send the wrong message, or the receiving party may interpret the wrong message. Perception and expectations play a large part in effective deterrence, and we should not forget this when prescribing foreign policy solutions.

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ⁱ Among these measures of deterrence are political, diplomatic, legal, economic, ideological, scientific and
 technical non-coercive measures. Forceful measures include demonstrations of military force, moving troops,
 moving troops, training exercises showing military might, and military build-ups among others according to the
 Russian Ministry of Defense:

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ⁱⁱ This measure was never implemented according to OSCE representatives.

ⁱⁱⁱ The exercise took place in “Central and eastern Norway; the surrounding areas of the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea, including Iceland and the airspace of Finland and Sweden” according to NATO.

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_158620.htm