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OPINION

After Transnistria, the Suwalki Gap

By MATTHEW BECKER Guest columnist

Apr 28, 2022



Matthew Becker

Courtesy photo

On April 22, General Rustam Minnekayev of Russia’s Central Military District stated that the “second phase” of the war in Ukraine is to expand beyond the Donbas and create a land bridge to Transnistria, which is a breakaway region of Moldova that shares a land border with Ukraine.

Specifically, Minnekayev said that “control over the south of Ukraine is another way out to Transnistria, where there is oppression of the Russian-speaking population.” An attempt to legitimize control of occupied territories is to have referendums on independence in these oblasts, of which the outcomes are already known.

Transnistria is de facto independent and willing to be absorbed; Russian “peacekeepers” have also been present there since the Transnistrian War ended in 1992 with a ceasefire. Overall, this points towards more brutal fighting ahead.

It is my belief that Russia will not stop at Transnistria if Moscow is successful and the Western world loses interest in Ukraine as the war drags on. The potential “third phase” would be a drive to connect the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad Oblast, which borders NATO members Poland and Lithuania. This action would entail the Russian military seizing the Suwalki Gap, which is the border between Poland and Lithuania, with Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus on the two endpoints.

ADVERTISING



The Suwalki Gap is a mere 65 miles end-to-end. Those 65 miles between the exclave and Belarus (which Moscow is using as a staging area for its invasion of Ukraine) is NATO territory. On April 25, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated after a visit to Kyiv that the U.S. goal in Ukraine is to “see Russia weakened to the degree that it can’t do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine.” For me, this statement is a tacit recognition that we are in a proxy war in the defense of the Baltic States and Poland.

We must therefore provide everything the Ukrainians ask for — including tanks, additional heavy artillery and fighter aircraft. If we do not, we truly do risk a wider European war — specifically an attack on two NATO member-states, plus drawing in non-member Moldova.

As part of the defense of the Suwalki Gap, we must also heed the calls of Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, who has advocated for the U.S. to establish a permanent military base in her country. Estonia shares a land border with Russia and has a minority Russian-speaking population that may need “liberation” if Russia is not expelled from Ukraine.

I ask readers to contact your representatives to express your continued support to arm Ukraine as well as support of our Eastern flank NATO allies. Let's provide the Ukrainians with the tools they need to defend the free world and expel Russia. Let's defend NATO and democracy by defending Ukraine — otherwise, the Suwalki Gap will trigger Article V of the North Atlantic Charter.

MATTHEW BECKER, Ph.D., teaches on politics and security issues in Eastern Europe at the University of Mississippi. He has a doctorate in political science from Ole Miss and a master's in international affairs from Florida State University. He may be reached at MatthewBeckerPHD@gmail.com.