

Michael H. Clemmesen: Notes for the 8-9 December 2015 Stockholm (FOI) Workshop on Baltic States States' security and defence against Russia

Premise I: The risk of war, even nuclear, with Russia must be seen as real

This understanding is essential because it helps people understand that whatever steps we take to contain Russia's revisionist raids on the 1991 world reorganization (to them an unjust equivalent to what the Versailles Treaty was for Interwar Germany), we have to keep that risk in mind.

Premise II: We should be aware of the risk of "mirror-imaging"

It is important to remember what we thought in the 1980's and what we now know.¹

When we thought that we could manage a crisis by deliberate piecemeal increases in forward defence presence levels, the Soviet leadership then perceived our steps as preparations for war that could be countered only by pre-emption.

When we in the West thought that it was obvious because of our open society that we would never start war and only initiate nuclear strikes in a desperate situation, the Soviets considered this as a hypocritical smokescreen for possible first strike intent.

In the West we thought it obvious that nuclear weapons should never be employed at the start of hostilities. These ultimate weapons should be seen as an element of the in-conflict crisis management. However, until past the mid-1980s the Soviets never made a war plan, a major exercise or a staff course map exercise without tactical nuclear warfare as a central element. The then sobering event was Tjernobyľ.

Vladimir Putin is a product of the late 1970s and early 1980s KGB paranoia, and the way the West is now presented as hostile to the Russian people would make it highly imprudent to assume that this is only rhetoric.

What Putin perceives is a divided and confused West, with the U.S. both dangerous and weakened in resolve, a situation very much suited to the type of brinkmanship conducted by Hitler from 1935 to the spring of 1939.

Premise III: We must address our lack of strategic thinking

Our political masters and Ministries of Finance in Western-Europe (including Denmark) have (tacitly) been assuming that the time of risks of major war in Europe is finally over. This is a far more wide-ranging and inherently dangerous premise than the British Interwar Ten-Years Rule, because that did not rule out a worsening situation later. We have a situation where most Western European policy-makers, scholars, and journalist are blind to even clear threats that they interpret as mere economic positioning, or culturally motivated, immature posturing. This means that they reject a dialogue with their own military expertise and may opt for policies which they insist is bound to escalate an already dangerous situation.

¹ 1981-83 I was a member of the Board of the Danish Government Commission on Security and Disarmament Affairs in parallel with service in the Defence Staff Long Term Planning Section. 1988-89 I was member of the Danish 1988 Defence Commission. In between service as regimental and staff officer and academic activities as historian.

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Addressing this grave deficit in the civil-military dialogue is of utmost importance.

Premise IV: We must realise and address our lack of military capability

With the exception of Finland North-Western Europe has heavily over-administered, over-officered, under-general combat exercised, extremely weak armed forces.

In our force balance/correlation-of-forces analysis even senior officers seem not to be able to rise above the basic bean-counting level of civilian "experts" (thus ignoring that military power depends on sizable, combined-arms-balanced, intensely and realistically trained, cohesive, fully manned units, professionally officered and commanded, logistically supported and moveable, and at a reasonably high mental and practical combat readiness).

Some officers may have Peace Support Operations, Air Policing, low threat offensive air operations, anti-piracy or even low-level COIN combat experience. Otherwise they have been fed for two decades with a profession-devoid diet of empty buzz-words and New Public Management rubbish. They have not conducted full reconnaissance and exercising or critical plans war-gaming for low and high troop density forward or territorial defence operations in potentially high-intensity combat. There has been little professional discourse compensating for the lack of practical activities.

Due to Western passivity, Russia has stolen a march in crucial fields for Baltic States defence such as ECM, combined air-defence systems and cruise-missile technology. She must be considered to have gained an effective sea denial posture of the Baltic Sea and air superiority or supremacy over the Baltic States with the possible exception of waters west of Gotland and across the Aland Sea. This means that deterrence in the Baltic States depends on local land forces, and allied in-place forces hopefully supplemented with Allied forces deployed no later than early in crisis.

If a conflict does break out, it will be even less likely to develop according to predictions than the catastrophe that started in 1914. Then as now new and emerging technologies and social-political developments work prohibits prediction. However, then the officer corps' of the belligerent had spent decades trying to predict and prepare. Now, we have hardly started to try, and the combination of low troop levels, improved target acquisition and long-range precision weapons, dependence on potentially vulnerable satellite navigation and very weak mostly civilian communications infrastructure, and the possible degrading effects of cyber-attack make the outcome of the initial phase of a conflict impossible to predict. This is likely to add to the pressure for escalation to homeland attacks of various types.

Outline policy and capability prescriptions

In order to minimize the risks of unintentional escalation, the Baltic States' and allied measures should emphasize deterrence by denial rather than by post-hoc punishment. They should remove tempting "low hanging fruit" vulnerabilities. Baltic capitals should have a visibly effective and ready defence against airborne and sea landed coup. The risk of overland mechanised raids should be countered by deep zones of territorial force controlled and secured prepared demolitions that will interdict logistic support of the raid

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and facilitate containment. Regular forces, both Baltic and Allied, should create a robust, direct combined-arm defence of key areas such as the Vilnius plus land-bridge to Poland area, and the Courland West Coast. They should also be present in support of other stabilisation and security measures such as the creation of locally recruited, but loyal, constabulary forces in areas with a potential for Russian "New Generation Warfare" activities such as Riga, Latgale and north-east Estonia.

However, another way forward is to use an understanding of what Russians really respected in the West during the Cold War – the superior technology that threatened the emasculation of their operational capabilities. It is absolutely essential that maximum effort is spent to re-awaken and deepen that latent Russian inferiority complex by fast progress in Western ability to counter Russian air assets, air defence systems and cruise missiles in flight.

A third way forward is to alter the Russian geostrategic situation in a way that adds significantly to their need to deploy their ever limited forces for strategic defence. The most obvious gain in this field would be a Finnish-Swedish move towards NATO that Russia has to foresee would result in formal membership if necessary.

I would suggest that ideas about how to counter a "New Generation Warfare" combination of internal destabilisation and threats against an extended and thinly defended border could be nourished by an open-minded study of historical cases.

One such obvious case is the British-Australian/New Zealand-Malaysian combination of efforts during the 1963-65 "Confrontation" with Indonesia over North Borneo. The responses combined international politics, armed and security forces' employment and domestic reforms. The Indonesian failure led to the fall of the dictator and – unfortunately only much later – to democracy and remorse.



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