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## How World War III could begin in Latvia

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Four years ago, I predicted Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Here's my next prediction, which by now will strike many people as obvious: The Baltics are next, and will pose one of President-elect Donald Trump's first and greatest tests. It probably won't take the form of an overt invasion.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has a clear goal and a grand strategy. But it's not the most realists perceive. Some argue that he is driven by fundamentally rational, defensive goals: NATO expansion appeared threatening and Russia is pushing back. The West expanded its sphere of influence at Russia's expense, and Russia is now retaliating. That's why the "Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," according to John Mearsheimer.

As with most academic realist analysis, this is nonsense. Putin is not driven by cold calculations of rational self-interest, because no human is. We are not Vulcans. We are driven by our perception of self-interest as shaped and defined by our deeper presuppositions and beliefs — which is to say, our ideology or religion.

Putin believes hegemony over Russia's near-abroad is necessary for Russian security because of his beliefs about Russian nationhood and historical destiny. Putin (and, perhaps more so, his inner circle) isn't merely nationalist. The Kremlin appears to be driven by peculiar form of

Russian nationalism infused with religion, destiny, and messianism. In this narrative, Russia is the guardian of Orthodox Christianity and has a mission to protect and expand the faith.

A truly rational Russia would not see NATO and European Union expansion as a threat, because the liberal order is open and inclusive and would actually augment Russia's security and prosperity. But, for Putin and other Russians who see the world through the lens of Russian religious nationalism, the West is inherently a threat because of its degeneracy and globalism.

In this view, NATO is not the benign guarantor of liberal order in Europe, but the hostile agent of the degenerate West and the primary obstacle to Russian greatness. Thus, Putin's grand strategy requires breaking NATO. Specifically, he must make the Article V mutual security guarantee meaningless.

Putin has already succeeded in eroding NATO's credibility. His last two targets, Georgia and Ukraine, were not NATO members, but in 2008 had been explicitly and publicly assured that they would be granted Membership Action Plans, the roadmap to membership. Russia clearly and publicly opposed any steps towards NATO membership for both countries — and then proceeded to invade them.

Russia's invasions of Georgia and Ukraine created disputed territories — South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Crimea — occupied by Russian soldiers. No country will ever join NATO while being partly occupied by Russia.

Putin now has the most favorable international environment since the end of the Cold War to continue Russian expansion. European unity is fractured. Alliance members are questioning the value of the mutual security pact. And the next American president seems openly favorable to Russia and ready to excuse Russia's irresponsible behavior.

Putin's next step is more dangerous than the previous ones, because he is likely to move into the Baltics, which are NATO members. He will not send large formations of uniformed Russian soldiers over the international border — even the most cautious NATO members will not ignore an overt conventional invasion.

Armed men, believed to be Russian servicemen, take cover behind an armoured vehicle as they attempt to take over a military airbase in the Crimean town of Belbek near Sevastopol March 22, 2014. Shamil Zhumatov/Reuters

Instead, Putin will instigate an ambiguous militarized crisis using deniable proxies, probably in the next two years. Perhaps Russian-speaking Latvians or Estonians (a quarter of Latvians and Estonians are ethnically Russian) will begin rioting, protesting for their rights, claiming to be persecuted, asking for "international protection."

A suspiciously well armed and well trained "Popular Front for the Liberation of the Russian Baltics" will appear. A few high-profile assassinations and bombings bring the Baltics to the edge of civil war. A low-grade insurgency may emerge.

Russia will block all United Nations Security Council resolutions, but will offer its unilateral services as a peacekeeper. The North Atlantic Council will meet. Poland will lead the effort to invoke Article V, declare the Baltics under Russian attack, and rally collective defense against Russian aggression. The Germans and French will fiercely resist. Everyone will look to the United States to see which way the alliance leader tilts.

If the Alliance does not invoke Article V, NATO's mutual security guarantee becomes functionally meaningless. No alliance member will put any faith in the treaty to guarantee its own defense against Russia in the future. The geopolitical clock will rewind to 1939. Some Eastern European states may choose to bandwagon with Russia. Others, starting with Poland, will begin arming to the teeth. Putin's dream of a fractured West and an open field in Europe will be realized.

But if the Alliance does invoke Article V, it will be tantamount to a declaration of war by the West against Russia. And that's when Trump will have to decide if the defense of Latvia is worth risking World War III.