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U.S. Official: Russia Could Defeat NATO in Less Than 3 Days

Alliance forces would be outnumbered and outgunned.

By Kyle Mizokami
Jun 14, 2016



Could Russia really take down NATO in just a couple of days? A Department of Defense official has backed the Rand Corporation think tank's claim that the Russian military could defeat NATO forces in the Baltics in just 60 hours. The statement is the latest in a string of warnings that the Atlantic Alliance is too weak to mount a defense of its member nations.

Michael Carpenter, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, endorsed the Rand Corporation's report, "Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank." The report says that the Baltic States, including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, are too weak to oppose a Russian attack and that too few NATO forces would be able to assist in their defense.



Estonian light infantry.

According to the report, those three countries together have the equivalent of 11 combat battalions, mostly light infantry suited for defensive purposes only with some mechanized and motorized forces. Meanwhile, 46 battalions of Russia's Western Military District and the Kaliningrad Oblast—about nine combat divisions' worth—are arrayed against them. Most of these forces are tank, mechanized infantry, airborne, marine, artillery, surface-to-surface missile, and attack helicopter battalions. They are ideal forces for a conventional attack.

Because defense is easier than attack, most attacking military forces require a 3:1 superiority ratio to have a reasonable shot at victory. The current ratio in the Baltics is more than 4:1, and NATO forces on the ground field considerably less firepower than their Russian counterparts.



British, Italian and American paratroops conducting an air drop during NATO's SABRE JUNCTION exercise.

That's where the rest of NATO is supposed to come in. NATO can quickly add another 8 battalions in a crisis, mostly American forces with a single battalion from the United Kingdom. That brings the ratio up to about 2.5 to 1. That certainly sounds better, but many of these NATO reinforcements are lighter, less capable forces that trade firepower for strategic mobility.

NATO is planning to add four more battalions of tanks and mechanized infantry, which would add heft to a defense of the Baltics. The U.S., United Kingdom, and Germany will each contribute a battalion. But the rest of NATO, whose armies field hundreds of additional combat battalions, have yet to step up and provide the fourth battalion. Assuming this happens, that will put the alliance at 2:1.

Will that be enough to deter any Russian action against the Baltics? Let's hope NATO doesn't find out the hard way.