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Kaliningrad. From a Challenge to a Threat to Polish Security

Kaliningrad: od wyzwania do zagrożenia dla bezpieczeństwa Polski.

Abstract
Kaliningrad Oblast has been recognized as Poland's troublesome neighbor, causing challenges during peace and threat in the case of crisis and war. Threat levels have been elevated after the Russian annexation of Crimea and aggression against Ukraine. Poland has reacted by denying cross-border traffic to limit hybrid threats. Militarization of the Oblast is a real concern requiring denying the threat utilizing national and NATO capabilities. The paper aims to discuss the Kaliningrad Oblast-based challenges within Russian aggressive foreign policy, using both military and hybrid tools. The case study method, the collection of original data and a systematic review of literature and research, along with analysis, synthesis, and comparative analysis will support the study. Another method was structured interviews with predetermined questions. The hostile actions and narratives suggest that the Russian Federation is using and will continue to use the Oblast as a bridgehead for hybrid operations constituting an existential threat, and it will utilize it as a forward military base for military operations. It requires Poland to improve internal security and enhance its military capabilities with regional and international support.

Keywords: Kaliningrad Oblast, Poland security, NATO, hybrid threats, Russia

Streszczenie
Obwód królewiecki, sąsiadując z Polską, stanowi realne zagrożenie dla bezpieczeństwa państwa w czasie pokoju i w razie kryzysu i wojny. Zagrożenie zwiększyło się po aneksji Krymu przez Rosję oraz agresji przeciw Ukrainie. Polska zareagowała zniesieniem ruchu transgranicznego by ograniczyć zagrożenia hybrydowe. Militaryzacja obwodu to realne wyzwanie wymagające przeciwstawienia się przy użyciu potencjału narodowego oraz NATO. Artykuł ma na celu omówienie wyzwań związanych z obwodem królewieckim oraz agresywną polityką zagraniczną Rosji, wykorzystującą siły zbrojne oraz operacje hybrydowe. Metoda studium przypadku, studium danych oraz przegląd literatury i badań, wraz z analizą, syntezą i analizą porównawczą wykorzystane zostaną w artykule. Wykorzystani też wywiad kwestionariuszowy. Wrogie działania i narracja sugerują, że Federacja Rosyjska będzie wykorzystywać obwód, jako przyczółek do działań hybrydowych oraz operacji militarnych stanowiąc egzystencjalne zagrożenie. Wymaga to od Polski wzmocnienia bezpieczeństwa wewnętrznego i inwestowania w potencjał wojskowy przy regionalnym i międzynarodowym wsparciu.

Słowa kluczowe: Obwód Królewiecki, bezpieczeństwo Polski, NATO, zagrożenia hybrydowe, Rosja

1. Introduction

The outcome of the Potsdam Conference shaped the after-war division of Europe permitting Russia to preserve Kaliningrad Oblast as part of its territory, previously part of Germany as East Prussia. It was founded on the need to control the east part of the Baltic Sea, the Bothnian Bay and the Gulf of Gdańsk, also securing access to the Gulf of Finland. Therefore, any other nation's presence in this territory was unacceptable to Moscow and the Oblast was fully integrated with the Soviet Union until 1991, based on unlimited access to sea and land lines of communication. The independence of Baltic countries and Poland moved those nations out of Russian orbit changing the situation significantly and creating Kaliningrad as a semi-exclave. Consequently, the Oblast's importance proved to be even more substantial for Moscow than before, followed by strong militarization and reinforcement of the Baltic Sea Fleet. When Russia lost access to seaports and naval facilities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania[1] along with Estonian islands, it complicated the Russian control of the Baltic Sea, while enhancing the importance of Kaliningrad. What is worth noticing, there were tendencies for the Oblast to be more autonomous after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was opposed by Moscow being afraid that "prosperous and Europe-integrated Kaliningrad will drift away from Russia."[2] It included the creation of a free trade zone 'Jantar' being a 'special economic zone' and the European Union's readiness to cooperate. However, due to a lack of consent from the central government, contacts with the West were limited. Especially, after Putin took power centralizing control over the country, the geostrategic importance of the semi-exclave proved for him to be one of the key geographic locations.[3] Yet, militarization had a positive impact on the Kaliningrad population by creating many employment opportunities underpinned by economic support from the mainland and commercial opportunities with Poland and Lithuania within cross-border trade. It was seen as a strategically important forward military base, although isolated from the Russian mainland by economic sanctions, traffic limitations and restrictions for cross-border movement. The sanctions on Russia, after the illegal annexation of Crimea, had a strong impact on Oblast causing its isolation and economic problems. Lately, Kaliningrad has suffered economically as the industrial production index dropped by about

[1] The seaports included Tallinn, Paldiski, Liepaja, and Klaipeda; among islands e.g. Saaremaa (Dejevo military base and S-200 anti-aircraft missile capabilities).

[2] I. Oldberg, *The Kaliningrad Region as a Problem Between Moscow and Europe,* [in:] *Kaliningrad: its internal and external issues*, eds. A. Żukowski, W. T. Modzelewski, Olsztyn 2016, p. 36.

[3] Ł. Gemziak, *Obwód Kaliningradzki – rosyjska enklawa wewnątrz Unii Europejskiej*, "Dialogi Polityczne" 2008, no. 10, pp. 344-345.

90% in 2023,[4] and one of the reasons was limitations related to land transport through Lithuania and closing the border with Poland affecting the Russian citizens' quality of life and limiting access to required products.

in and answersisThe aim of the article is to address the impact of threats and challenges posed by Kaliningrad Oblast as an important geostrategic location within Russia's aggressive foreign policy toward Poland and Lithuania, implemented through military and hybrid instruments. The article also examines the implications of these threats for broader NATO and EU security. The study employs selected research methods, including a case study, the collection of original data, and a systematic review of existing sources, supported by analysis, synthesis, and elements of comparative analysis. An important methodological tool was the structured interview with predetermined questions. The study incorporates responses from six experts; their anonymous opinions are included due to their relevance to the focus of the paper. **The research question is:** *What developments related to Kaliningrad Oblast as a key Russian military hub pose a threat to Polish security, and what tangible actions are required to counter this threat?* The initial findings indicate that the Russian Federation uses and will continue to use the Oblast as a bridgehead for hybrid operations, constituting an ongoing challenge and an existential threat. Kaliningrad Oblast is also likely to be employed as a forward military base for operations against neighbouring states. These activities require Poland to strengthen its internal security and enhance its military capabilities, alongside expanded regional and international cooperation.

2. Kaliningrad – prominent geostrategic location for Russia

Kaliningrad Oblast has been recognized as a threat to Poland's security although cross-border relations initially benefited Polish businesses. Close relations of the Kaliningrad population with Polish citizens from bordering Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodship and cross-border trade were recognised by the Kremlin as a danger of promoting the Western style of life. However, it was an opportunity for Russian intelligence services to monitor the Polish border regions, spread propaganda and create a network of supporters. In 2016, the border traffic was suspended because of security concerns like the growing militarization of the Oblast accompanied by the boosting military personnel and increased activity of special services and

[4] *Obwód Królewiecki chce się podnieść po kryzysie wynikającym z sankcji*, Biznes Alert, 15 January 2024, https://biznesalert.pl/obwod-krolewiecki-rosja-sankcje-wzrost-produkcji-inwestycje-norma-energetyka/ [date of access: 04.08.2024].

other intelligence departments.[5] Although the cross-border relations with the Oblast were beneficial for Polish local businesses, it did not change the perception of Kaliningrad as a challenge to Poland's security presented within Moscow's imperialistic policy but it included some hopes. The aggression against Ukraine significantly impacted the perception of the Oblast by both Russia and Poland and more broadly, by the EU. The Kaliningrad started to be seen a real threat, which has been visualized by observable and dynamic militarization by Russia, seeing it more as forward operating base and anti-access/area-denial hub. To highlight the change of its perception, in May 2023, Poland decided to reject using the Russian name '*Калининград*' and replace it with the Polish name *Królewiec*.[6] This symbolic decision and political message, criticized by Moscow, reflected the link with M. I. Kalinin, one of the persons responsible for the mass murder of Polish officers in Katyn in 1940.

Ingmar Oldberg described the region as follows: "all Russian regions are unique, but the Kaliningradskaya oblast is more unique than most."[7] In general, the Oblast's military importance as a threat has proved to be more critical for Warsaw than before 2022, being the most western region of Russia ready to utilize existing opportunities. For NATO, after accepting the membership of the three Baltic nations in 2004, the geostrategic location of this semi-exclave has caused a danger to isolate them creating a 'security island', especially after denying movement through the Suwalki Corridor. Further escalation was linked with Russian desire and abilities to employ nuclear weapon systems there, like nuclear-capable Iskander missiles. Until 2018, such deployments were temporary, but this year the deployments were more aggressive. It was explicitly highlighted by Vladimir Shamanov, who stated, "Yes, they have been deployed …, the deployment of foreign military infrastructure automatically falls onto the priority list for targeting."[8] It was a security destabilization factor, as the missile (range up to 500 kilometres) could cover a part of Poland, but using modified Iskander-M[9] missiles (range 700 kilometres) Russia could attack the whole of Poland, three Baltic countries and

[5] W. Kotowicz, *The Local Border Traffic Between Poland and Russia – Political and Security Dimension*, [in:] *Kaliningrad: its internal and external issues*, eds. A. Żukowski and W. T. Modzelewski, Olsztyn 2016, pp. 145-146.

[6] *Zmiana nazwy. Królewiec zamiast Kaliningrad*, Ministry of Economic Development and Technology, Warsaw 10 May 2023.

[7] I. Oldberg, *The Kaliningrad Oblast – A Troublesome Exclave*, [in:] *Unity of Separation. Center-Periphery Relations in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. D. R. Kempton, T. D. Clark, Westport 2002, p. 143.

[8] V. A. Shamanov, the head of the Russian State Duma's Defence Committee. J. Stubbs, *Russia deploys Iskander nuclear-capable missiles to Kaliningrad – RIA*, Reuters 05 February 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1FP22B/ [date of access: 23.08.2024].

[9] Iskander-K is under tests, and the range could be extended even further.

part of Germany.[10] One of Moscow's explanations was the reaction to US plans for ballistic missile defence (BMD) facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic. The inauguration of the U.S. Aegis Ashore missile defence base in Redzikowo caused angry comments from Russian politicians and propagandists defining is as a priority target for neutralization.[11] The base with AN/SPY-1 radar, Mk 41 VLS launcher and SM-3[12] anti-ballistic missiles contributesng to NATO's integrated air and missile defence system making "Poland part of the most effective and largest air defence in the world."[13] The base is within the range of Kaliningrad-deployed long-range systems being the real threat. Moreover, reportedly, Russia trained the use of Kaliningrad-based tactical nuclear weapons against Warsaw during the exercise 'Zapad 2009'. The nuclear threat is linked also with Belarus deployments, especially as "Moscow has brandished the potential for 'deliberate' nuclear escalation to deter NATO's direct involvement" in support of Ukraine.[14] The new edition, nicknamed 'Zapad 2025', located next to NATO Eastern Flank nations, raised some concerns as to show of force and hostile scenario.[15] Uncertainty about Russian intentions triggered sequence of NATO exercises 'Iron Defender-25' in the East Poland; meanwhile, Lithuania and Latvia conducted military drills.[16]

After Finland and Sweden joined NATO, the regional situation changed significantly because of the increased Alliance's capabilities to control the Baltic Sea. It was slightly different already in 1999 when Poland joined the Alliance as Kaliningrad started to border NATO. So, all the Oblast's military facilities were automatically within the range of a variety of Poland's and NATO's strike platforms located in the Masuria region. Therefore, compared to the "case of a Crimea or a Ukrainian scenario, there's actual ability to defend territory," and "with Finland

[10] *Russia moves nuclear missiles into Kaliningrad*, Deutsche Welle, 10 August 2016, https://www.dw.com/en/russia-moves-nuclear-missiles-onto-natos-doorstep/a-35997378 [date of access: 23.09.2024].

[11] Е. Шпак, *Пресс-секретарь МИД России Захарова пригрозила Польше ударом по новой противоракетной базе НАТО*. В Варшаве ответили, Novoe Vremya 21 November 2024, https://nv.ua/world/geopolitics/baza-nato-redzikovo-v-polshe-mozhet-stat-celyu-rossii-zayavila-zaharova-polskiy-mid-otreagiroval-50468332.html; S. Hudson, *US military base in Poland is 'priority' target, Russia warns*, Politico 21 November 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/us-military-base-poland-priority-target-russia-war-ukraine/ [date of access: 18.12.2024].

[12] SM-3 - Standard Missile-3.

[13] *The opening of the Redzikowo base is a milestone in missile defence*, Ministry of National Defence of Republic of Poland, 13 November 2024., https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/the-opening-of-the-redzikowo-base-is-a-milestone-in-missile-defence [date of access: 16.11.2024].

[14] W. Bowen, *Russian harassment of NATO aircraft and escalation risk*, King's College, London, 20 April 2023, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/russian-harassment-of-nato-aircraft-and-escalation-risk [date of access: 03.10.2024].

[15] M. Бооне, Joint Military Exercises of Russia and Belarus "Zapad-2025": What to Expect? 23 October 2024, https://eaukraine.eu/en/2024/10/23/спільні-військові-навчання-росії-і-бі/ [date of access: 25.10.2024].

[16] *NATO stages counter-exercises as Russia and Belarus begin 'Zapad-2025' military drills*, TVP World, 12 September 2025, https://tvpworld.com/88885378/poland-leads-nato-drills-in-response-to-zapad-2025 [date of access: 06.10.2025].

and Sweden in, and [the Swedish Baltic island of] Gotland so close to Kaliningrad, in case of highly unlikely yet possible aggression from Russia".[17] Next, Finland and Sweden's capabilities merged with Poland and the Baltic nations' armed forces render Kaliningrad units rather limited in utility in the case of Russian aggression as it cannot use the sea in as unrestricted way as before.[18] Then, it is Poland's role to play, as any attempt e.g. to seize Gotland could be denied with support of Poland-based long-range anti-ship systems and direct engagement of Kaliningrad-stationed land forces and the Baltic Fleet assets.

3. The vital importance for Russia

Russia has many reasons to preserve Kaliningrad Oblast as a pressuring factor toward Poland and NATO. Experts' opinions[19] are very similar as they highlight the military aspect; moreover, some define the semi-exclave as a forward area to conduct hybrid operations against Poland.[20] The geographical value is not only linked to an ice-free port on the Baltic Sea allowing continuity of sea trade. Having such a forward operating base located several hundred kilometres to the West, Russia has military advantages during peace, crisis and wartime. During peacetime, this allows monitoring of NATO activities e.g. within airspace even up to 6000 kilometres. It was enabled by deploying in 2014 the Voronezh-DM over-the-horizon radar, just 50 km from Poland's border. The advantage of the radar is that it is not limited by the horizon line enabling to cover most of Europe including British Island and part of the Atlantic. A new radar installation in the Kaliningrad region is close to completion being "expansive circular array of antennas designed for radio intelligence and communications" extending existing reach in the Baltic region and ability to "to monitor and potentially influence activities along NATO's eastern flank."[21]

Next, common varieties of provocations include are common by violating Polish airspace causing activation of Poland-located radars or radio-electronic reconnaissance assets. There were cases of Russian aircraft shadowing NATO aircraft over the Baltic Sea or harassing intelligence-gathering aircraft. One such

[17] L. Kayali, *Sorry Russia, the Baltic Sea is NATO's lake now*, Politico 13 July 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-lake-what-sweden-and-finland-will-change-in-the-baltics-russia-ukraine-war/ [date of access: 18.10.2024].

[18] Op. cit. op. cit. podajemy z autorem. (moze chodzi o ibidem?)

[19] Six experts provided their anonymous opinions concerning the focus of the chapter in autumn 2024.

[20] Hybrid operations include hostile historical narrative, INFOOPS, espionage, indirectly migrations, fake news to divide and radicalize, sabotage against the critical infrastructure (lately Russia-paid agents set some on fire), cyber-attacks.

[21] W. Moore, *Russia Nears Completion of Strategic Radar Facility in Kaliningrad*, Military Affairs 01 October 2025, https://voennoedelo.com/en/posts/id1680-russia-builds-major-radar-site-in-kaliningrad-nato-alarmed [date of access: 08.10.2025]

incident involved the violation of Estonian airspace by three MiG-31 fighter aircraft, which remained there for a total of 12 minutes. ".[22] Estonia requested NATO Article 4 consultations, just a few days after Poland did the same. To intercept aggressive Russian fighters NATO Air Policing in Baltics or in Poland are deployed allowing Russians to verify their readiness and reaction time.[23] Testing NATO assets always creates a risk of confrontation and escalation because of incorrectly anticipating the second or third-order consequences of actions in question.[24] The Electronic Warfare systems ('Svet' or 'Samarkand') are employed for searching and detecting "radio emissions and locating the sources of such emissions when working with stationary and mobile complexes of technical radio intelligence"[25] including frequencies of air-defence systems, military airfields to use data in the case of war. Another threat could be elite naval Spetsnaz units, trained as saboteurs in Primorsk being able to do reconnaissance and attack military naval and other critical infrastructure. Those are located close to Polish seaports planned as ports of debarkation for incoming U.S. reinforcements; it has been validated during the 'Defending Europe' exercises.

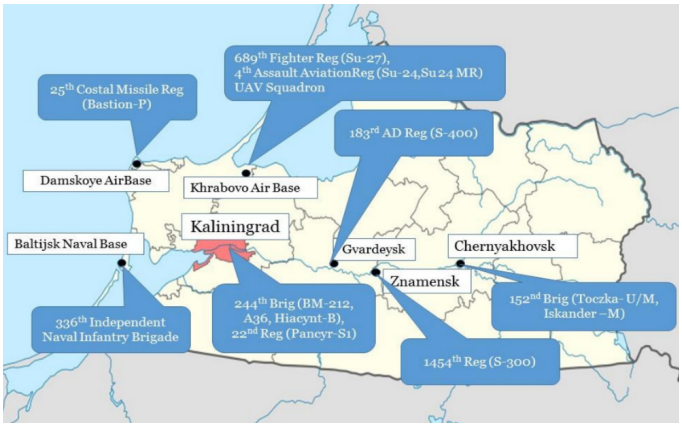


Figure 1. Dislocation of the main forces in the Kaliningrad Oblast A2/AD.

Source: Konrad Dobija, *The Political and Military Aspects of Creating Anti-Access/Area-Denial Systems (A2/AD): The Example of China and Russia,* Safety & Defense Vol. 7(2), Warsaw 2021, p. 30.

[22] Three Russian fighter jets entered Estonian airspace without authorization, Postimees 19 September 2025, https://news.postimees.ee/8327443/three-russian-fighter-jets-entered-estonian-airspace-without-authorization [date of access: 08.10.2025].

[23] *Italian jets stationed in northern Poland scramble to intercept Russian planes over Baltic Sea*, TVP World 29 March 2024, https://tvpworld.com/76701870/italian-jets-stationed-in-northern-poland-scramble-to-intercept-russian-planes-over-baltic-sea [date of access: 02.08.2024].

[24] F. E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*, miejsce wydania 2008, p. 23.

[25] R. McDermott, *Moscow Deploys Latest Electronic Warfare Systems in Kaliningrad*, Eurasia Daily Monitor Vol. 15 Issue: 174, 11 December 2018, https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-deploys-latest-electronic-warfare-systems-in-kaliningrad/ [date of access: 04.10.2024].

This anti-access/area-denial (AA/AD) hub has been weakened lately when 11 Army Corps units were employed in Ukraine; however, a variety of systems are still present there or could be deployed in a short time using sea routes that could be monitored and tracked. However, Russia has experience in utilizing the concept of 'maskirovka' to camouflage its actions. The long-range land-based systems are a threat, ready to activate on short notice combined with assets located in Belarus as a Russian CSTO ally.[26] Neutralizing those systems rapidly is recognized by experts as one of the major tasks if war could be initiated by the Russian Federation. It requires Polish authorities to have options and procedures to minimize risks associated with such threats and it could be only achieved by developing a reliable and coordinated national strategy to respond. In the broader context, using anti-ship capabilities (3K60 BAL, K-300P Bastion-P) and Baltic Fleet assets Russia could deny at least for a few days any deployment using NATO transport vessels along with the ability to impact air situation employing air defence systems (S-400 and S-300PS) and Chkalovsk based air force. The AA/AD capabilities are a real threat during the initial phases of any conflict and there is a role of Poland, supported by other NATO capacities, to deny utilization of those capabilities. As of its aggression against Ukraine, Russia decided to redeploy some assets from Kaliningrad but those could be deployed there again in a short time being an indicator of preparations to act against NATO both in Poland and in Baltic countries. Lately, within the reorganization of the Russian military structures, the forces located in Kaliningrad became part of the Leningrad Military District, which possesses offensive capabilities.

4. The military challenges

As mentioned, there is a constant need to monitor the Kaliningrad Oblast; the territory is not very vast (some 15,000 square kilometres) limiting options to hide deployed units. The NATO assets possess surveillance ability to follow any movement or reinforcements or weapon systems transfer, particularly as Russia can rely on rail transit through Lithuania, which could be denied along with limitation to use airspace. Moreover, rail movement of military hardware is forbidden. Similarly, after Finland joined NATO, the Gulf of Finland can be closed for the Russian Navy; those steps could be activated in the case of war making Kaliningrad fully isolated. Units located in Poland could attack key military infrastructure based on credible reconnaissance completed during peace and crisis within preventive strikes. It is related to engaging 11 Army Corps and Baltic Fleet vessels as of extended control

[26] CSTO - Collective Security Treaty Organization.

of the Baltic Sea by NATO. It is not clear if there are nuclear weapon capabilities there, but Russia made a reconstruction of special-purpose storage to deploy or store nuclear warheads.[27] Nevertheless, there is a role of Kaliningrad in the case of war as it could cause real damage during the first days of any conflict before being annihilated. Surprise first strike is important from the military point of view and is one of the tenets of Russian warfare, as "dictatorships understand the value of striking with surprise"[28] as it happened lately in Crimea and on 24th February 2022 when attacking Ukraine. It is important, as the first days of potential Russian aggression could cause isolation of Baltic countries by denying any movement through the Suwalki Corridor. To enhance the importance of this chokepoint Polish and Lithuania units participated in e.g. the exercise 'Brave Griffin 24/II' presenting the ability to protect this land bridge endangered by Russian long-range fires and offensive capacities positioned in Oblast and Belarus. There are differing experts' opinions about the Suwalki Corridor, seeing it as an artificially created topic 'by some academics' without geostrategic importance. Some are still considering its 'strategic value as corridor', but only during peacetime and crisis, as during war borders with the aggressor do not exist. Another opinion is that it could be 'one of potential directions of Russian offensive in the region'. Next, the Suwalki land bridge will not be available for troops and supplies movements anyway as of 'long-range capabilities possessed by Russia'.

Polish 16th Mechanized Division, with three combat brigades, combat service and combat service support units, is responsible for containing an attack from Kaliningrad to create conditions to seize the Oblast by follow-on forces. The defence operations along 210 kilometres border are supported by difficult terrain, poor road systems, swamps and forests. The Division's equipment is modernized, including long-range artillery or missile platforms, modern tanks and air defence systems. The new 'Shield-East' project will reinforce the defence of both Kaliningrad and Belarus borders[29] including fortifications, forward operating bases, logistics hubs and telecommunication systems reinforced by units from other NATO nations deployed to the Eastern Flank. An initiative, under development, is the EU's planned 'drone wall' to face this new threat. There are experts' suggestions to place 'minefields' in selected areas during peacetime or crisis to activate in the case of war. Besides, here thethe Coastal Missile Division equipped

[27] H. M. Kristensen, *Russia Upgrades Nuclear Weapons Storage Site in Kaliningrad*, Federation of American Scientists 18 June 2018, https://fas.org/publication/kaliningrad/ [date of access: 19.10.2024], see photos.

[28] J. Antal, *Next War. Reimagining how we fight,* Philadelphia and Oxford 2023, p. 33.

[29] P. Kapusta, *Tarcza Wschód. Eksperci mówią, co Polska powinna zrobić w pierwszej kolejności*, WP Wiadomości 28 May 2024, https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/tarcza-wschod-eksperci-mowia-co-polska-powinna-zrobic-w-pierwszej-kolejnosci-7032421328091840a [date of access: 12.09.2024].

with Naval Strike Missile Block 1A, allowing it to reach Baltiysk, the base of the Baltic Fleet and naval targets within 300 kilometres range, may play a role. When employed with other similar antiship NATO nations capabilities the Russian Navy's freedom of navigation will be significantly denied.

Kaliningrad is one of the cards in Russia's hands to pressure NATO at will and Poland is explicitly exposed to military capacities located there. Those will be used aggressively not considering any possible losses and casualties as a Russian way of fighting a war, as visible during aggression against Ukraine. Experts recognize the growing capabilities of Polish armed forces, but still, NATO capabilities are required, namely air defence, long-range artillery and missile systems and radio-electronic warfare supplemented by US-led enhanced forward presence unit (preferably brigade-size). There is consensus among questioned experts about close coordination within NATO to orchestrate military capabilities as Poland's deterrence capabilities 'alone are not enough'. Therefore, 'constant presence of NATO allies on Polish territory is limiting Russian intentions and actions'; it matters as NATO is 'preparing for defence' and 'enemy for offense'.

5. Conclusions. The game changers

Kaliningrad, or rather Królewiec, has evolved from a promising "pilot" project in the 1990s into a militarized stronghold and a tangible threat to Poland and, more broadly, to NATO as a defence alliance confronting an increasingly aggressive Russia. For Poland, the Oblast is the hostile semi-exclave being the centre of surveillance systems and espionage hub to conduct asymmetric war against Poland. There is no doubt that Russian military capabilities in the Oblast must be closely monitored to annihilate this AA/AD hub using long-range systems. However, Russian land offensive is not an option in the near future, because of the limited capabilities and permanent presence of Polish and Alliance troops facing the Oblast. Kaliningrad is a region which could be used to raise tensions and increase security concerns in the EU and Poland; the deployment of nuclear weapons was such an element of information warfare causing uncertainty about intentions. For many years it was disregarded but currently there is another meaning of such 'games' as Russia has already used military forces to forcefully implement imperialistic ambitions. There are still asymmetric threats to be originated from Kaliningrad including possible migration crisis; still not real but one that could be exploited by Russia.[30] Another already recognized factor is jamming GPS signals

[30] M. Kowalska-Sendek, *Na granicy z obwodem kaliningradzkim wojsko działa prewencyjnie*, Polish Institute of International Affairs, 28 November 2022, https://polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/38534?t=Na-granicy-z-obwodem-kaliningradzkim-wojsko-dziala-prewencyjnie [date of access: 29.08.2024].

by Russia affecting air traffic within Poland's air space along with cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure and regional or governmental agencies. Inside Poland, security services have arrested Polish, Belarusian and Russian citizens for spying for Russia; many cases happened near the border with Kaliningrad. Those unconventional acts of hostility are growing as Poland is recognized as an enemy. There is a constant requirement to monitor the Kaliningrad along with the Suwalki Corridor (or Gap) to recognize any indicators and warnings about Russian hostile intentions.

The Oblast as a 'catchy' topic is seen as a hot issue as of geography plus linkage with the Suwalki Corridor to grab politicians' and military leaders' attention. It was highlighted again during 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly when Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused NATO for "preparations for an attack on our Kaliningrad Region".[31] Russian drones violating Polish territory or aircraft entering Estonian airspace on the flight to Kaliningrad are evidence of Russian aggressive attitude, raising tensions. It requires a decisive answer as a proper step to show power, which is well understood by enemy. Politically it is required to enhance regional security cooperation. One option is linked with the 'reactivation' of the Weimar Triangle, but the political situation in Germany and France is hampering it. A combined French-German-Polish strategic cooperation could boost deterrence and defence posture on the Eastern Flank. An option is closing ranks with the Nordic and Baltic countries (NB8) and the Nordic countries (N5)[32] concerned about Kaliningrad, whose leaders stated, "Russia remains the most significant and direct threat to our security in the long term".[33] There is a role for such bodies expressing joint and consensus-based security concerns. A critical factor is constant and reliable US presence in Europe, which is under discussion. Poland is seen a reliable strategic partner, but there is general uncertainty about such the continuity, and it could raise probability of hostile Russian actions.

The Russian threat has impacted Poland's military expenditure, which reached some 4.7% in 2024 investing intensively into specific combat systems. It contributes to possessing real combat power to implement deterrence by denial, in parallel showing the capabilities of deterrence by punishment using long-range

[31] *Remarks by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the General Debate of the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 27, 2025,* The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow 27 September 2025, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/2049686/ [date of access: 06.10.2025].

[32] Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) - cooperation including Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden; Nordic 5 (N5) includes Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland.

[33] *Nordic-Baltic 8 countries meet in Sweden*, Latvian Public Broadcasting 27 November 2024, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/diplomacy/27.11.2024-nordic-baltic-8-countries-meet-in-sweden.a577962/ [date of access: 08.01.2025].

systems. Investments must continue reinforcing units facing the Oblast. Such military capabilities, along with building society resilience and awareness, contribute to the whole-of-government approach to face "threats, including hybrid ones, ensure the universal nature of civil defence and protection of the population as well as build-up and maintain the capacity to recover the necessary resources".[34] To achieve the desired end state, the military instrument of national power must be underpinned by consensus among political elites based on threat assessment and military advice.

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