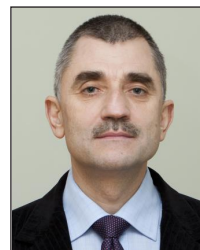




THE SUWALKI GAP – NATO’S FRAGILE HOT SPOT

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Abstract

The so called Suwalki Gap has been lately among important regional security related topics and it has been linked with its geostrategic location and geographical complexity of the terrain for conducting military operations. The threat toward Baltic states cause it to be discussed widely by civilian and military authorities, especially in the context of destabilising Ukraine and annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and possible assertive actions. The paper proposes an approach to the Suwalki Gap issue based on its geostrategic location and operational importance. It includes also its geographical characteristic connected with conducting military operations in that specific terrain. It furthers the discussion of tactical aspects of defensive and offensive operations there. The outcome of the NATO Warsaw Summit is also discussed in the context of Suwalki Gap as a land bridge linking Baltic states with the NATO allies.

Key words: Baltic states, international security, Suwalki Gap, NATO

Note: Opinions expressed by the authors are their own views and they do not reflect in any way the official policy or position of the Baltic Defence College and War Studies University, or the governments of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

Introduction

The destabilisation of Ukraine, linked with the political and military involvement of the Russian Federation to underpin separatists in Crimea, the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, proved to have significant international repercussions. It has been followed by a still ongoing ‘hybrid war’ that included annexation of Crimea and war in the east Ukraine. Those events were a consequence of Ukraine’s decision to enhance cooperation with the European Union, NATO and especially with the US. At the same time, the Russian intervention has been an attempt to rebuild its influence and domination over former Soviet republics as part of a desire to make the country a global player again. The current situation is also an endeavour to destabilise the international security system by challenging NATO’s role as a military power. As an

effect, the Kremlin’s assertive policy is significantly violating security systems of NATO nations, especially for such nations as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Poland has a rather important location in that context, as the country is located in central Europe between two historically expansionist nations and neighbouring Ukraine which is still building its identity and governance. Being such a critical and natural land bridge, Poland must re-evaluate its political and military focus.

As an effect of the Schengen Treaty, European borders have been more open, enabling unconventional threats to rise using such options as uncontrolled migration, flow of weapons and terrorists, more freedom for organised crime and possible movement of ‘little green men’. All of these could be part of ‘hybrid’ threats¹ which could come from the East towards the Baltic States and later to Poland and the West using all available routes. The military conflict in Ukraine makes it clear that Polish and European Union security in general must be enhanced, as just a thousand kilometres from the border there is a real conflict and Europe has so far been powerless to stop it. The same situation could happen in the Baltic region, which is very fragile and geographically isolated especially in the land domain. As a result, the security and unity of NATO nations is linked with cohesion in all dimensions. The land is connected with the Suwalki Gap and an important factor for Russia as a land link with the Kaliningrad Oblast to which the closest road runs through Belarus. If such an attack happened, Russia would occupy the Suwalki Gap, and all three Baltic states could be automatically isolated and it would benefit the Kremlin to seize them and to continue rebuilding its previous sphere of influence. At the same time, NATO’s credibility as a security alliance would suffer significantly. It is important to note that Belarus is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation and it would be forced to be a part of the conflict. It is important to note that, in the case of such aggression, not only the Suwalki Gap would be seized. Moreover, part of Polish territory towards the west – Warmia and Masuria Voivodeship – some 100 kilometres deep, would probably be occupied for freedom of manoeuvre and for pushing NATO’s long range weapon systems out to deny endangering Kaliningrad and military units’ assembly areas.

An article in the Wall Street Journal called the Suwalki Gap “the most vulnerable spot in the Western alliance”² as in the event of hostilities “NATO forces would have to transit the ‘Kaliningrad corridor,’ a 110- to 150-km-wide stretch of territory between the Russian enclave and Belarus that could be subject to long-range artillery and flank attacks from both sides and would require a commitment of (scarce) NATO forces to

1 M. Wrzosek, *Trzy wymiary wojny hybrydowej na Ukrainie*, „Bellona” No 3, Warsaw 2015, p. 36.

2 J. Barnes, *Closing the Gap: NATO Moves to Protect Weak Link in Defenses Against Russia*, Wall Street Journal, New York 17 June 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/closing-the-gap-nato-moves-to-protect-weak-link-in-defenses-against-russia-1466205268> (accessed: 12.08.2016).



Source: *Przesmyk suwalski to autostrada dla wojsk Putina. Tędy Rosja uderzy na kraje bałtyckie*, Wschodnia Gazeta Codzienna Kresy24, 14 December 2015, <http://kresy24.pl/75982/przesmyk-suwalcki-to-autostrada-dla-wojsk-putina-tedy-rosja-uderzy-na-kraje-baltyckie-wideo/> (accessed: 9.08.2016).

Fig. 1. The geographic location of the Suwalki Gap

secure”³. If it is closed by troops operating from Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus, it would help Russia to “reach the outskirts of the Estonian and/or Latvian capitals of Tallinn and Riga, respectively, in 60 hours”⁴. This is a rather optimistic scenario as the Baltics’ conventional and unconventional forces and other NATO troops located in the region would fight; nevertheless, with battalion size presence no earlier than in mid-2017. Such a combined effort could be important to slow the advance and to inflict casualties. According to US planners, “the allies could have as little as 72 hours to reinforce the Suwalki Gap before Moscow would be able to effectively block access”⁵. The report ‘Closing NATO’s Baltic Gap’, prepared by recognised retired military officers, mentions Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities (A2/AD), as these are a rather important factor as “Russia would be capable not just of sealing off the Baltic states in the ‘bubble’ that covers air, sea and land dimensions, but also of fiercely contesting other spaces of critical importance to military operations—in the electromagnetic spectrum, cyberspace, and even outer space (by using anti-satel-

3 D.A. Shlapak, M.W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank. Wargaming the Defence of the Baltics*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica 2016, p. 4.

4 Ibid., p. 1.

5 J. Barnes, *Closing the Gap: NATO Moves to Protect Weak Link in Defenses Against Russia*, op. cit.

lite capabilities)⁷⁶. A similar opinion is shared by General (ret.) Sir Richard Barrons who estimates that Russia could be ready for action within 48 hours and “some land and control of airspace and territorial waters could be lost before NATO’s 28 member states had even agreed how to respond”⁷⁷. The challenge is that for some years the Baltic states warnings’ about Russian behaviour were ignored and, as for now, battalions to be deployed are not enough as they “had no real firepower to back them up” and is the result of the assumption that “many people have lost sight of what a credible military force is and requires. They think a little posturing or a light force constitutes enough but it isn’t”⁷⁸.

There could be a variety of motives behind a decision to engage the Alliance openly, as mentioned in Russian Military Doctrine 2014 when defining threats like: NATO build-up and expansion, creation of NATO infrastructure next to Russian borders; destabilisation of states or regions; deployment of military units to countries bordering Russia or development of strategic missile defence systems⁹. It is also linked with a desire to show NATO’s lack of capabilities to defend its members and, in a broader sense, undermining the its credibility and attractiveness and it would negatively influence the US role as the lead nation. The issue is of course risk assessment related to an aggressive scenario but, according to a researcher from Tallinn-based International Centre for Defence and Security Studies, “the experience has shown that Moscow is prepared to take very large risks, relying on brinkmanship and escalation”¹⁰. Following the concept presented by General Gerasimov¹¹, all conventional and unconventional tools could be used to achieve expected outcomes. The perception that a ‘hybrid’ way of running war has already been ongoing is already not uncommon. The recent experiences are linked mainly with Ukraine but they are not completely applicable to Baltic nations, as these are both NATO and EU members. The situation of minorities is also different but, nevertheless, they could be influenced by an information campaign trying to radicalise them.

6 W. Clark, J. Luik, E. Ramms, R. Shirreff, *Closing NATO’s Baltic Gap*, International Centre for Defence and Security, Tallinn 2016, p. 13.

7 D. Haynes, *Nato has no plan if Russia invades, warns ex-general*, The Times, 19 September 2016, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dh-nato-0nxssn0rr> (accessed: 21.09.2016).

8 Ibid.

9 *Военная доктрина Российской Федерации*, Moscow 25 December 2014, Website of the: Совет Безопасности Российской Федерации, The Security Council of the Russian Federation, para 12a-d, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/18/129.html> (accessed: 01.07.2016).

10 H. Praks, *Hybrid or Not: Deterring and Defeating Russia’s Ways of Warfare in the Baltics – the Case of Estonia*, Research Paper No 124, NATO Defence College Rome December 2015, p. 2.

11 About the concepts of the General Valery Gerasimov read in: В. Герасимов, *Ценность Науки в Предвидении. Новые вызовы требуют переосмыслить формы и способы ведения боевых действий*, Военно-промышленный курьер, No 8 (476), Moscow 27 February 2103, <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632> (accessed: 12.09.2016) and also in T. Thomas, *Thinking Like A Russian Officer: Basic Factors And Contemporary Thinking On The Nature of War*, The Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), Fort Leavenworth, April 2016, p. 16-19.

The geostrategic location of the Suwalki Gap

The main importance of the Suwalki Gap is linked with its geostrategic location and the geographical complexity of the terrain for conducting military operations. The topic was raised recently as part of the threat posed by the Russian Federation to the security of the Baltic states and, in general, towards NATO and the European Union. It can be considered as one of the fragile hotspots with great importance in the event of any conflict. In that context, it is important to mention that, following new Russian Military Doctrine of 2014, one of important issues is that “the Russian government defines security along its borders as a top priority”¹². It is also linked with so called *sootchestvenniki*, also known as ‘compatriots’ and it covers the need to support and defend Russian citizens living abroad and they are minorities in all three Baltic states and Poland. In September 2015, General Ben Hodges, commander of the United States Army Europe, when discussing military security, explained his position regarding possible hotspots in the current security setup. He mentioned among them: Syria, Donbas and the Suwalki Gap. The latter was linked with possible military conflict with Russia and the predicted desire to create a land corridor to link with Kaliningrad Oblast to consolidate the country and to isolate the Baltic region by closing land lines of communication as part of the comprehensive A2/AD concept – fig. 2.

The challenge is that this 100 km long borderline is of importance for the Alliance as of an obligation related to Article V of the Washington Treaty towards Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Its occupation would make such obligations more complicated to fulfil. Romuald Szeremietiew, former Polish minister of defence, has recognised the Suwalki Gap as the probable location of an initial direction of attack in the case of war initiated by Russia¹³. Although Polish troops are located there and there will be deployment of battalions from other NATO nations, the forces will not be in position to defend against surprise attack, taking into account mobilisation and modernisation of Russian armed forces as presented during ‘snap’ exercises. It requires a serious approach to be taken by all the Baltic states’ and Polish Ministries of Defence, and not only in relation to Article V but also in relation to Article III and IV. The scale and complexity of war in Syria and Ukraine, as recognised by Hodges, are more challenging, but the Suwalki Gap should not be underestimated. The possible threats from Russia could significantly endanger the whole eastern NATO flank and as shown by the wars in Georgia and Ukraine, military options are still an element of the Kremlin’s policy of shaping security and the foreign policy landscape.

¹² V. Zakem, P. Saunders, D. Antoun, *Mobilizing Compatriots: Russia’s Strategy, Tactics, and Influence in the Former Soviet Union*, CNA’s Occasional Paper November 2015, p. 14.

¹³ R. Szeremietiew, *Przesmyk suwalski to kluczowe miejsce*, interview by Stanisław Żaryn, 7 October 2015, <http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/267697-prof-szeremietiew-przesmyk-suwalkski-to-kluczowe-miejsce-jesli-rosja-zechce-rozpozacz-wojne-nasz-wywiad?strona=2> (accessed: 9.08.2016).



Source: E. Walker, UC Berkeley, *Eurasian Geopolitics, Word Press*, 29 March 2016, <https://eurasiangeopolitics.com/2016/03/29/putins-dilemma-why-pushing-back-against-nato-encroachment-makes-russias-nato-problem-worse/suwalki-gap/#main> (accessed: 22.08.2016).

Fig. 2. The location of the Suwalki Gap in relation to Kaliningrad Oblast

NATO should not underestimate military options in the region next to unconventional threats, which could influence security by destabilising the vital domains of any nations. Poland and the Baltic states, being NATO and EU members, and neighbouring Russia and Belarus, should be prepared to face both types of threats and, by proper preparations, to create preconditions to react effectively. It is, however, clear that they are not strong enough and ready to do so alone. It requires constant improvement of security systems and their evolution towards emerging threats following national interests, but also solidarity and obligations within regional security structures. It must take into consideration threat assessment and consideration of risks in the event of Russian aggression. The question is mainly about Moscow's desire and readiness to attack the eastern NATO flank. The constant demonstration of military power is used by Russia to keep pressure on NATO and to preserve the perception of threat. But first, direct engagement of NATO could initiate the strategic defeat of Russia, as location of NATO armed forces allows operations to be conducted in a few directions and there are no Moscow capabilities to defend all

the borders effectively. Second, Moscow's relations with Ankara are tense although some signals of improvement are there; Turkish armed forces are second in size in NATO and they would be obliged to take part in the struggle. Third, Russia is involved militarily in Syria, Crimea, Ukraine, Moldova, and the Arctic, so the effort is rather dispersed involving significant combat power¹⁴. Finally, open conflict with NATO, and especially the US, could undermine its current efforts to be a global player, as it could cause further isolation and new sanctions. There is another factor connected with the internal situation in the country, as any strong instability could cause the leadership to be less aggressive towards the external world and asking to focus on internal issues. In that case, the newly created National Guard would not be enough to handle them.

There is a general perception that the Baltic states are a potential target due to their being a relatively weak part of NATO, both militarily and as regards their geopolitical location. The Russian minority issues are complicating the situation. The territory factor also does not support their position in relation to Russian military capabilities in the West Military District and Kaliningrad and as regards geography. In that context, the short piece of land linking them with the rest of NATO does not support their operational – strategic situation. Based on reports coming from the large scale military exercise (e.g. *Zapad* series), it is known that Russia and Belarus have already exercised a decisive pincer attack from Kaliningrad, being “the most militarized region in Europe”¹⁵, and from Belarus to cut the gap. The Kremlin is trying to undermine the political cohesion of NATO nations, to destabilise its decision making processes, being aware that it is militarily ready and capable to cut the Baltic states; so it is focused on denying NATO the opportunity to react in time.

Geographical characteristic – military considerations

The Suwalki Gap area is composed of macroregions and these include several geographically defined mesoregions which are characterised by their specific natural environment features¹⁶. The important attribute of macroregions is their common division line with the national border in three important directions: to the north, northeast (Suwalki Gap) and east (see fig. 1). The Suwalki Gap is located in the Warmia and Mazury Lake District and some 50% is covered by forests and lakes. The area is bordered to the north and east by the national border with the Russian Federation and Lithuania, to the south by the Biebrza and Noteć rivers and Mława,

¹⁴ See also: D. Michalski, *Wpływ Polityki Rosji na obronność Polski*, National Defence University, Warsaw 2016, p. 54.

¹⁵ M. Baranowski, B. Lete, *NATO in a World of Disorder: Making the Alliance Ready For Warsaw*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington March 2016, p. 6.

¹⁶ Polish division of regions has been created by Jerzy Kondracki in the second part of the XX century. J. Kondracki, *Geografia regionalna Polski*, PWN, Warsaw 2000.

Brodnica, Grudziądz, and to the west by the Vistula river and Vistula Lagoon. From the military point of view, the area has some militarily important characteristics such as: a number of forests and lakes, specific climate and soil conditions, urbanisation and minorities. The area includes other important features such as rivers, swamps, hills etc. and is considered as hilly, with many moraine lines with diversified topography. The hills are 100-300 metres above sea level and they are placed latitudinally. They are intersected by rivers and lakes and some 11% of the terrain is covered by swamps; these, when linked with clay and sandy clays, are impossible to cross during rainy weather. The climate is specific as snow covers the ground for some 90 days per year; there are some 50 days with heavy frost and some 130 with ground frost temperature. Winters are snowy and frosty with soil frozen up to 120 cm deep and the ice on lakes is present until April; summers are wet and relatively cold. There are some 3000 lakes in the region (total space 150 thousand hectares) and moraine-dammed lakes are rather shallow, widely dispersed with soft embankment and ribbon lakes have steep and high banks and irregular bottoms. Rivers, flowing towards the north, are narrow and winding with steep and high heavily forested banks. They are linked with forest and swamps located in passes between lakes and are covered by plants typical for a wet climate.

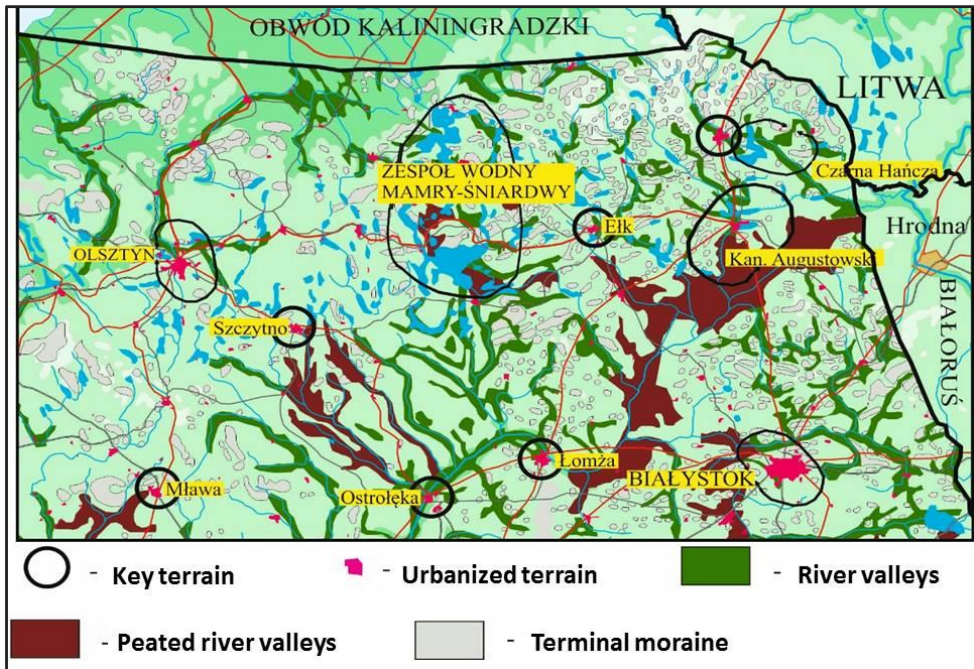


Fig. 3. Key terrain and terrain features

Mainly coniferous forests are not easy to cross and, in many cases, they are no-go terrain. The old trees are some 15–30 m high with thickness up to 45 cm; young forests are up to 15 m high with trunks up to 15 cm thick¹⁷. The ground is covered by sandy or clay-sandy soils. The road system is poor, negatively influencing trafficability, which is further degraded by weather conditions. In spring and autumn, rain and thaw make the surface much softer and, during winter, snow is restricting movement. However, frozen lakes, swamps and rives are an option to be used for cross-country mobility. The road system is supported by forest roads and those used by forest services and the logging industry; however, the quality is poor and these are cut by small rivers and streams. The combination of lakes, forests and intentionally destroyed road infrastructure supports blocking any movement using limited forces.

The population is composed mainly of Polish nationals, reaching some 2 million with an average 57 persons/km². The minorities include: Ukrainians (65 000), Lithuanians (up to 25 000 mainly in Suwalki district) and Russians (some 11 000). As a potential operational direction, the Suwalki Gap is recognised as a possible area of operations for the Alliance in the case of war. The terrain characteristics (forest, lakes, and canals) will inevitably shape military operations by creating natural defensive lines enabling defence operations (fig. 3). It could be enhanced by developing engineering obstacles, enabling camouflage and deception, creating conditions for disposition of combat support and combat service support assets. The terrain also restricts manoeuvrability, restraining land and air reconnaissance, canalizing movement for heavy military forces. In general, the considered area is different than typical terrain and it requires specific capabilities and tactics at tactical level to conduct both defence and offence and it supports delaying operations.

Tactics – hypothetical framework

Considering possible military aggression within the Suwalki Gap area and taking the terrain into consideration, an enemy would be able to apply classical offensive tactics linked with asymmetric or ‘hybrid’ elements. For a defender, a challenge is linked with the geographical location of the gap between Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus as of limited distances and vulnerability for long-range weapon systems. The ‘hybrid warfare’ scenario application and using minorities, like in Ukraine, would be unlikely as ‘little green men’ would be noticed early. The complexity of the Suwalki Gap requires close cooperation between Polish and Lithuanian troops to deny enemy success, as taking the area back would require significant capabilities to be concentrated.

¹⁷ *Warunki terenowe i klimatyczne Polski*, cz. IV. Lasy, Ministry of National Defence, Warsaw 1981, p. 13–15.

In the context of cross border cooperation, threat assessment, one solution would be the creation of a unit specifically designed for forested and lake terrain with ‘hybrid warfare’ capacities. It could be a Polish-Lithuanian brigade composed of 4-5 battalions. Two battalions could be light infantry units based on wheeled armoured vehicles (e.g. *KTO Rosomak*) to conduct delay operations, to create mobile reserve, to attack the enemy’s flank or to create blocking positions. Two battalions should be mechanized units based on a tracked armoured fighting vehicle assigned to defend the main defensive positions and, finally, a tank battalion as a reserve. All units should have capabilities to fight and fire in limited visibility conditions. Taking the terrain into consideration, an important factor is artillery support (artillery battalion equipped with e.g. Lithuanian PzH 2000 SPA or Polish *Krab* self-propelled howitzer) with a range of 40 km and real time fire support capabilities. The next requirements are linked with air defence, anti-tank assets, combat engineers, snipers supported by reliable reconnaissance units and drones. Such a structure would enable organisation of independent battalion task forces to defend separated avenues of approach and the creation of a variety of reserve units. Moreover, army aviation (helicopters) should be an integral part of fire and recce support to land troops. The brigade must also cooperate closely with Territorial Defence forces under development in Poland and Lithuanian National Defence Volunteer Forces. It would enhance overall capabilities and combat power based on using unique characteristics of regional troops with knowledge about the terrain and understanding of the local population. They could complement conventional units enhancing abilities to wear down the enemy causing losses and damaging morale. It requires good training of territorial defence forces, and equipping them with light anti-tank and air defence assets and well developed local recce and intelligence nets.

The terrain creates natural avenues of approaches and mobility corridors which are predictable as road systems, forest and lake locations reinforced by climate and weather conditions. It will obviously influence the tactical level of warfare due to: limited manoeuvrability, effective camouflage and deception, limited lines of sights and observation influencing targeting and range of weapon systems. Next, the terrain impedes or denies the possibility of reorganising combat disposition of units to react to the tactical situation, along with restricting logistics support. The terrain supports covert deployment and employment of a reconnaissance and saboteurs’ detachment to conduct reconnaissance, to act as forward artillery observers, mortar fire controllers or forward air controllers (FAC). Another threat is linked with their capabilities to conduct direct actions against key elements of combat formations. This is a challenge for artillery, damaging effective coordination of fire and creating the danger of friendly fire. In many cases, it will be necessary to decentralise command of artillery units and the task of organising them. The direct influence of soldiers and units reduced orientation in the terrain complicates the command and control and synchronisation of operations and tactical actions.

The complexity of external factors forces all types of forces to implement significantly different tactics compared to typical terrain conditions. It is related to combat units and also combat support and combat service support requiring

understanding of the environment and special training along with the necessity to be equipped with proper weaponry and equipment. This is a rather challenging task and requires the dedication of purposefully prepared units to be deployed to the region to be also intentionally reorganised within the order of battle. The training is also specific, as units should have enhanced leaders' and soldiers' capabilities to fight independently when cut-off from their own troops. A mission command type approach to leadership is a required solution based on quality and dedicated people at all levels of warfare.

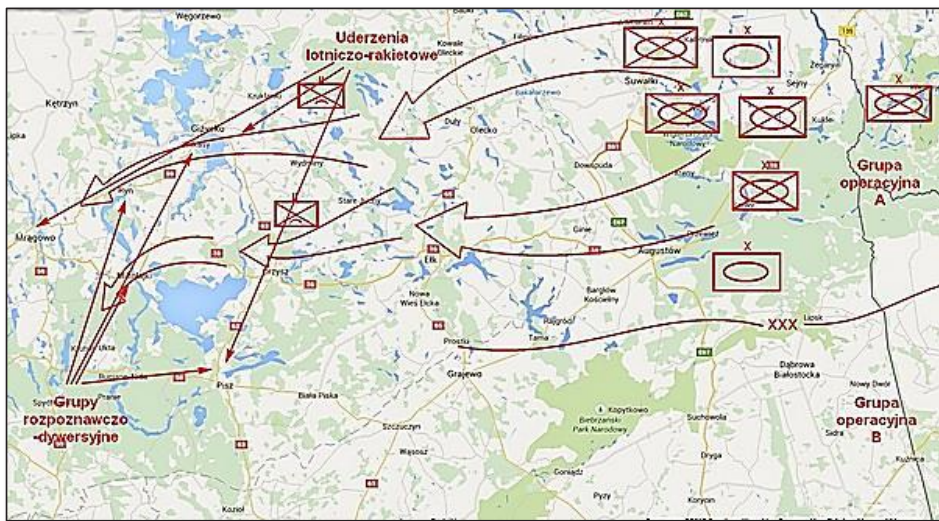
The terrain forces the need to conduct operations out of combat vehicles after dismounting and foot movement slows operations significantly, not allowing rapid manoeuvre. This is especially related to movement as roads and cross-country marches cause fatigue and limit soldiers capabilities and combat effectiveness. Limited visibility and space has a psychological effect on soldiers and long-term deployments could have devastating impact on combat capabilities. It requires rotation of units to preserve their combat effectiveness over time. Vehicles mobility is linked with available roads causing significant challenges for combat service support units, especially logistics, and that support is very important and difficult as regards distances and road systems. Young forest permits movement of tracked vehicles but rains and swamps could also prevent cross-country manoeuvre. Possession of tracked and wheeled platforms with capacities to cross water obstacles on the bottom or having amphibious capability is an advantage. The desired factor could be low ground pressure enabling crossing snow-covered and boggy terrain along with reasonable range, off-road speed and cross-country ability. Mechanised units mobility options are easy to recognise, so avenues of approach are to be blocked by obstacles, minefields, fires or ambushes. This permits the destruction of all columns by suitably prepared ambushes. Such a threat can be partially eliminated by organising independent task forces at platoon and company level, raid detachment, reserve units, but also tactical air assault detachments.

The combat is a fight over short distances with limited knowledge about enemy disposition. It is characterised by focusing on possessing and holding key terrain including the most important road nodes, bridges, isthmuses as regards their importance for advancing forces and movement canalising effect. Properly deployed reserve units are important to enable flexibility to react to any development of a tactical situation; creation of one reserve unit is linked with the risk that it could be identified by the enemy and blocked, leaving a commander without such an important element of subordinated unit disposition. Next, reconnaissance and security detachments deployed forward and on flanks must be supplemented by troops securing gaps, as these could be exploited by the enemy to infiltrate friendly formation allowing important elements such as command and control, and logistics to be attacked. Covert operations are significantly enabled and could be run for prolonged time periods.

For dismounted troops, there is a requirement to be well prepared based on training, capabilities and equipment to move in difficult terrain. The role of infantry and its weapon systems is of critical importance as regards limitation for tanks,

combat vehicles and artillery limiting heavy weapon systems’ support. Anti-tank, air defence systems and mortars are important when infantry is to fight on the separated axis of the enemy’s advance. That weakness could be mitigated by reinforcing them with tanks, specialised combat support units, combat engineers, and self-propelled artillery.

Tank units are usually used as reserve as organised formations but, in many cases, units and single tanks will be attached separately requiring proper training of crews. This will include training with infantry to ensure close cooperation, as tanks without infantry cover are very vulnerable. In some cases, heavy equipment could be used to enable cross country movement by cutting trees and clearing roads.



Source: *Gra obronna „Mazury” – obrona Polski i działania w terenie lesisto-jeziornym*, Polish Territorial Defence Forces, Militarium.net, 11 July 2015, <http://militarium.net/gra-obronna-mazury-obrona-polski-i-dzialania-w-terenie-lesisto-jeziornym/> (accessed: 9.08.2016).

Fig. 4. Hypothetical map used for exercise in the Warmia and Masuria Voivodeship

The terrain supports especially defensive operations (fig. 4), so when the area is lost, the challenge will be linked with conducting offensive operations to regain control over it. Heavy forests linked with lakes will be exploited by the enemy. Again, roads will stop movement of mounted units that will be canalised in isthmuses, dividing advancing units and not allowing their superiority in numbers, technology and capabilities to be effectively harnessed. The terrain significantly limits numerical advantages and there will be a need to deploy NATO units and these will be not familiar with the specific terrain there, limiting their effectiveness. Any concentration of units and forces could be spotted, exposed and attacked by fire and air causing losses and having a devastating impact on morale. Minefields could limit mobility inside the forest-lake terrain and the area as such could be isolated by cutting land roads and railways denying the possibility to sustain units and to reinforce or withdraw them.

The complexity of the terrain in the vicinity of the Suwalki Gap is a real factor impacting any type of operations. The defence is already a complicated form of tactical activities, so if the terrain is lost, it will require significant effort to control it again and, for NATO, it will mean that the land connection between the West and the three Baltic nations will be lost, allowing the enemy freedom of action over an extended period of time. This is because air and navy alone are not able to achieve a desired NATO end state without land force capabilities. From historical and Cold War perspectives, it is worth mentioning that, during that fragile period, “military leaders focused much of their training on the Fulda Gap, an area of the border between East and West Germany where war planners thought a massive tank-on-tank battle would take place were tensions between the Soviet Union and the West to escalate into a full conflict”¹⁸. Currently, the Suwalki Gap is recognised as a similar hotspot as part of “a new ‘Iron Curtain’ that is descending across the continent, from the Sea of Barents and the Arctic to the Black Sea, through the Baltic”¹⁹.

Conclusions

In general, the reassurance of NATO readiness and dedication to defend the NATO’s eastern border and the territorial integration of all the members is of critical importance. It is not only about nations, it is also about NATO as a credible security organisation ready to defend all its members in whatever circumstances. It is also one of the purposes of Russian policy to undermine that organisation regionally and globally and to deny its ability to act in a unified way. However, NATO’s assurance and deterrence steps are not enough as real political cohesion and military capabilities must be in place to show a strong desire to act when necessary. This is why the political and military developments in Russia are being observed very carefully and are being analysed by experts. Especially as Russian Military Doctrine 2014 recognises as number one among the main external military dangers “capacity power potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and giving it global functions carried out in violation of international law, the approach of military infrastructure of countries – members of NATO – to the borders of the Russian Federation, including through further expansion of the block”²⁰. At the same time, NATO is not closing doors for discussion and is still open for dialogue as

18 J. Barnes, *Closing the Gap: NATO Moves to Protect Weak Link in Defenses Against Russia*, op. cit.

19 *How to respond to Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD)? Towards a NATO counter A2/AD strategy*, NATO Defence College, Concept Note, Rome 20 January 2016, p. 1.

20 *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, Moscow, 25 December 2014, Part II. The Military Risks and Military Threats Encountered by the Russian Federation, para. 12a; the full text in English available at: <https://pl.scribd.com/doc/251695098/Russia-s-2014-Military-Doctrine> (accessed: 27.08.2016).

stated by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. He said that “a key way to enhance our long-term security in Europe is to engage in meaningful dialogue with Russia, NATO’s largest and most powerful neighbour. That is why we held another meeting last week of the NATO-Russia Council” as “NATO’s two-track approach toward Russia is the right one. We need more defence and more dialogue. NATO is delivering both”²¹. So, forward presence should be linked with dialogue with Russia and it is about keeping the door open, but political dialogue must be closely linked with a show of real power. Some nations understand that power and lack of power is recognised as weakness worth exploiting. In that context, the outcome of the Warsaw Summit 2016 is a step that shifts from assurance to enhanced deterrence by, among others, the decision to deploy combat battalion task forces to reinforce the east flank in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. However, “the Alliance’s success in defending the Baltic States depends on the efforts of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as much as on the contribution of other Allies”²². That is understood in the Baltic region, as all the countries are considering increasing military budget, new weapon acquisition, extensive programmes of international exercises and regional integration. This was expressed by General Riho Terras, Chief of Estonia’s Defence Forces, who stated that “NATO nations should understand that Article 5 (the article of collective defence) is important but it can only function if Article 3 is taken seriously, which says that every nation needs to be able to defend itself”²³. It is showing the will and determination to defend the country at all costs.

The initiatives of the Warsaw Summit such as: The United States’ European Reassurance Initiative, the Transatlantic Capability Enhancement and Training Initiative, UK-France Combined Joint Expeditionary Force concept or the Visegrad Group decision to provide a rotational presence are important²⁴. Nevertheless, according to sources, next year Russia will lose its Reserve Fund and the National Wealth Fund will shrink and it will have a problem to pay its budget deficit and, if sanctions are not lifted, the country could be on the edge²⁵. It will require the Kremlin’s decisions and one of them could be linked with playing the military card again. It could be the Caucasus, Ukraine again, but also 3BS could be targeted in

²¹ *Opinion piece by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg*, NATO Website, 19 July 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_134210.htm (accessed: 27.08.2016).

²² W. Clark et al., *Closing NATO’s Baltic Gap*, op. cit., p. 25.

²³ S. Jones, *Thousands take part in Estonia’s war games*, the Financial Times, 13 May 2015, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/604c015c-f8b7-11e4-be00-00144feab7de.html#axzz4L6JAwq7W>, (accessed: 20.08.2016).

²⁴ *Warsaw Summit Communiqué*, Warsaw, 9 July 2016, para. 78, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm (accessed: 28.08.2016).

²⁵ *Russia’s Reserve Fund to Run Empty in 2017*, The Moscow Times 05 July 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russias-reserve-fund-to-run-empty-in-2017-54464> (accessed: 28.08.2016). D. Korsunskaya, *Russia will likely exhaust its Reserve Fund by next year to pay its budget deficit*, The Business Insider, 5 July 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-exclusive-russia-to-exhaust-reserve-fund-in-2017-finance-ministry-proposal-2016-7> (accessed: 28.08.2016)

a ‘hybrid’ way. So, all the decisions to support the region could be just too late to face the threat, especially as NATO battalions are to be deployed in the region no earlier than in May 2017. Delaying that decision is not a good message for the Alliance and the region. Nevertheless, the question will always be: is it enough? Just after the Warsaw Summit at the end of August 2016, selected units from three military districts (Central, Western, Southern MDs), North Fleet, Aerospace Forces and Airborne Troops were put into full combat readiness as a precondition for the strategic level command-staff exercise of the Southern Military Districts ‘Caucasus 2016’, with 12 500 troops supported by aviation and heavy equipment²⁶. It was a message towards NATO showing that the decisions of the Warsaw Summit are not changing anything and the scale of NATO deployment is minor compared to the real capabilities of the Russian Federation. Looking from the Russian side, the Baltic region is just one of many concerns around the national border covering thousands of kilometres. Currently, troops are already deployed abroad in Syria, the situation in Caucasus is fragile after the last conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Arctic development is ongoing, and the situation in East Asia is also fragile. As a result, the country has many possible hot spots around and, even though it has big armed forces in size, it must carefully consider deployments. Nevertheless, following priorities for the last years, Kaliningrad Oblast was mentioned in that context and it is not only a theory, as next to reinforcing land forces, air defence, air force and navy were built up to increase the pressure on neighbours. In the context of such capabilities, that area is critical for Russia to gain time, which is an important operational factor supporting the other two: space and force enabling the desired speed to reach the desired end state.

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²⁶ Минобороны РФ проинформировало страны ОБСЕ, Китай и Иран о внезапной проверке в ВС России, TACC News Agency 25 August 2016, <http://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/3566038> (accessed: 28.08.2016).

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