

The Russia house

by Stephen Aguilar-Millan

Normally the scenarios I read

are not as long as this one. They also tend to be set a bit further in the future. The book outlines the story of a military conflict between Russia and NATO between May and August 2017. The author, as a former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, writes from a position of some authority.

The book contains a message that we all ought to heed. The story is a simple one. Emboldened by his success in Ukraine and Crimea, encouraged by the apparent weakness of the Western Powers over Syria, President Putin decides to roll the dice and invade the Baltic States. The political case is not as weak as some might think. There is a degree of institutional prejudice against the Russian speaking citizens of the Baltic Republics to cause something of a grievance. I was unaware of this prejudice prior to reading this book. It is this discrimination that gives President Putin the opportunity to claim to represent the oppressed Russian minorities.

At that point, the story has a familiar feel. Russia engages in a campaign of disinformation and hybrid war. An incident is fabricated that allows the full scale occupation of the Baltic States. The question gets very interesting when assessing the response of NATO. It is at this point that the underlying assumptions



War With Russia

by General Sir Richard Shirreff

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mould the course of the narrative. The key assumptions could be seen as concerning the American response, the European response, and the response from within the Baltic States.

One could argue that the whole scenario became tainted from the second sentence. In it, the author states that, in 2016, the United States elects its first female President. The policy stance that she adopts is to accommodate China and to confront Russia. We now know that this assumption is not correct, and the United States has elected a President who seems willing to accommodate Russia and to confront China. From the outset, the reader is left with the question of whether

or not this incorrect assumption invalidates the scenario.

On the whole, we take the view that it doesn't. The author makes a plausible case that there are enough US military assets in Europe, posing a sufficient threat to Russian military assets, to ensure that combat is engaged between American and Russian forces irrespective of the political stance in Washington. I am quite willing to believe that the NATO trip-wire in the Baltic States works. From that point on, the narrative becomes a question of whether the Russian forces can consolidate their position in the Baltic States before the American military reinforcements arrive.

Much depends upon how that question

is answered by the European NATO nations. The story has the Baltic States invoking Article 5, but the North Atlantic Council being rather equivocal about it. The sympathies of the author leak out as the British representatives are keen to support the Baltic States, the Greek and Hungarian delegates are against collective action, whilst the German representative takes a non-committal position. I have no doubt that the author writes from a position of authority, but I did find the national stereotypes to be a bit wooden.

In any case, within the story, the political wrangling becomes academic because the Russian forces make the mistake of sinking a pair of British and German warships in Riga harbour. This act, almost automatically, brings the European NATO nations into the conflict. It is at this point that the author makes his political point aimed at domestic UK politics. Without

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the support of American forces, there is little that the European NATO nations can do to confront the Russian forces.

Britain attempts to send an expeditionary force on HMS Queen Elizabeth - Britain's single aircraft carrier that has no aircraft. Needless to say, the ship is sunk by a Russian submarine, as the episode provides a literary device for the author to outline a number of consequences of the reductions in UK defence spending since 2010. This serves as something of a soapbox, but the points are well made from a very informed source. The theme is then widened to cover the consequences of the European NATO nations failing to keep to the agreed level of defence spending of 2% of GDP. It seems that the British cupboard is not the only one bare.

If the American forces have yet to arrive, and if the European NATO forces are too ineffectual to intervene, it is left to the Baltic States to provide their own defence. They are over-run quickly by the Russian forces, but then engage in a form of guerrilla resistance through what the author terms as the 'Forest Brothers'. I was really surprised to find that this form of civil defence actually exists, is trained, and is armed and ready to engage in this type of asymmetric warfare. The author has them as a very effective force. Whether or not they would be remains to be seen. Either way, the Forest Brothers tie up large numbers of Russian troops until the NATO counter-attack is prepared.

I liked the way in which the counter-attack was conceived and delivered. It is essentially a Special Forces operation, with a focus on the occupation of Kaliningrad. It commences with a massive cyber-attack on the Russian command and control system orchestrated by GCHQ, followed by the Russian tactical nuclear facilities

being secured prior to the occupation of Kaliningrad by British and US Forces. I found the politics here interesting. The remaining European NATO allies are not told about the attack until it has occurred simply because the British and American staffs don't trust the other European NATO allies. I have no doubt that not all allies are as equally reliable as each other, but I did find it interesting that the author



Russian tanks on manoeuvres. Image by Vitaliy Ragulin via [Wikimedia Commons](#). CC-BY-SA-3.0.

suggests this line of approach. As I have said before, I have no doubt that this is an informed position born from experience. I found the end of the scenario weak. Kaliningrad is occupied, Russian forces withdraw from the Baltic States, and the Russian nuclear capacity is significantly degraded. This neatly occurs in three months and finishes with a rounded and well polished ending. I did like the setting of the final chapter—Brown's in Oxford, a restaurant I happen to know and like. That helped me to overcome my antipathy towards an all too convenient ending.

The plot had five significant pivots, each of which suggests an interesting game in itself. The first pivotal point was when the Russian forces attacked the US forces stationed at the Lielvarde Air Base in Latvia. This gave the Americans sufficient cause to consider that war had been declared. What would have happened if the White

House had interpreted the situation differently? The incident could have been interpreted as a regrettable loss of life caused by the ground crews being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It would be interesting to game the American response from within the White House Situation Room, with some arguing for war, whilst others argue for restraint. Given the campaign rhetoric of President

Trump, there must be some doubt in European capitals as to whether or not a President Trump would support the invocation of Article 5 in this case. It is certainly an interesting situation to model, both from a European and an Asian perspective.

The next pivotal point

came when the Russian air force made the mistake of sinking a British and a German warship in Riga harbour. This event served as a plot device to ensure the participation of the European NATO nations in the defence of the Baltic States. Just suppose that Russia didn't make that mistake. Could the support of the European NATO states be relied upon in the event of a Russian invasion of the Baltic States? This is an interesting situation to game. The author has Britain as an advocate of war, Greece and Hungary as advocates of peace, and Germany as undecided. Collectively, how

would the European NATO allies decide to act? It would be interesting to game the response from within the North Atlantic Council. It is by no means certain that a collective decision for war could be agreed.

The story then moved on to the third pivotal point, where HMS Queen Elizabeth is sunk by Russian submarine. The author renders the ship almost defenceless by assumption. What if the ship was not as helpless as the plot has it? There is also an interesting game about political co-operation that could be played out here. For example, could the Royal Navy have "borrowed" some aircraft from, say, France or the US? Couldn't the navies of the European NATO allies have

modelling the post-conflict political settlement.

This led the story into the final key pivot—the occupation of Kaliningrad. The set piece contained a number of assumptions that would have been interesting to game differently. For example, the cyber-attack launched by GCHQ might not have been as effective as the story had it be.

Alternatively, the Russian nuclear threat from Kaliningrad might not have been dealt with as effectively as outlined in the book. It seems that there are a number of ways to wargame this aspect of the book differently. What would have been the outcomes from varying some of the key

time of austerity is far more complicated than the author makes it out to be. One of the consequences of living in a democratic framework is that if the electorate prioritise welfare over defence, then it is only a matter of time before politicians accede to those wishes. Of course, it is perfectly acceptable for the military to argue differently to the public, and that is exactly what this book does.

The book contains a tale of a future war in Europe. It is limited in that it restricts itself to this topic. As I was reading the book, I gave some thought about the wider diplomatic impacts of a Russian invasion of The Baltic States. One theme that came to me time and again was how China might react within this crisis. Would the government of China do nothing? Would they incline towards NATO in order to seize territory, especially energy rich territory, from Russian Central Asia? Or might the Chinese government be tempted to sympathise with Russia as a means of expanding into the South China Sea?

These imponderables were not included in the book, which, to my view, rather weakened the case. An open conflict between Russia and NATO is unlikely to be contained as a regional conflict and has the potential to erupt on a more global canvas very quickly.

With the uncertainty surrounding US policy in the near future, a tale of an emboldened Russia gains a certain amount of currency. We hope that this is a future that doesn't come to pass. If it does, then we cannot say that we haven't been warned. It may be that actual future events do not end quite so favourably for us as they do in the book. ◀

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provided a degree of escort protection? All of this pre-supposes a degree of political co-operation that it would be interesting to game.

An important aspect of the story is that the Baltic States vigorously resist Russian occupation. It is important because the occupation diverts defending troops away from Kaliningrad. What if the occupation of the Baltic States had occurred without a great deal of resistance? What if the Russian forces had been more successful in quelling the resistance of the Forest Brothers? These are situations that could give rise to some interesting games - both at the political and the military levels - especially when

assumptions? This rounds the circle quite nicely because those outcomes might have argued taking a different approach in the first place.

It all speaks to the purpose of the book. This is an exploratory future that has a purpose—to warn us of the dangerous path which the author sees us as taking. It is written as a polemic, which can sit awkwardly at times. The author also brings to the book a number of conflicts which he appears to have had in his professional life. There are complaints against what is seen as the spreadsheet mentality at the top of the MoD—an undisguised attack on a former UK Defence Secretary.

I found this to be too simplistic. Maintaining a defensive posture during a