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ANALYSIS

Assessing a Russian Fait Accompli Strategy¹

Michael Kofman

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Abstract

This article questions whether current scenarios for a Russian fait accompli in the Baltics are representative of this stratagem and challenges prevailing arguments that a Russian “fait accompli strategy” is possible, along with commonly held interpretations of Russian strategy in defense planning circles.

Introduction

Since 2014, the United States and NATO allies have invested considerable resources to deter the threat of Russian territorial revisionism by fait accompli. This contingency is a strongly held thesis among American defense planners, driving many of the operational warfighting scenarios and wargaming premises for a hypothetical conflagration in the Baltic. There are three central problems with this premise. First, the fait accompli is not being correctly interpreted as a tactic or stratagem given its history. Second, the fait accompli as a strategy for territorial revisionism remains fundamentally impractical for Moscow to pursue in the contexts where it is most feared. And finally, no evidence of such strategic intent can be deduced from Russian military activity, political statements, or posture. As a consequence, the U.S. conversation on faits accomplis has become a Bantustan of pseudo-theories regarding adversary behavior.

Perhaps surprisingly, this discussion need not focus on Russian strategic intentions, since intentions can be debated and change over time. Defense planners must consider vulnerabilities, and this means that capabilities matter, since they govern military options even as intentions can prove difficult to predict. Defense estab-

lishments logically seek to hedge against an uncertain future, but in the process tend to make ill-informed choices about where to focus their efforts and the likely fights they will face. This is because they privilege what they find most accessible, namely military technology and the military balance, over what matters: the opponent’s military thinking, political decision-making, and the historical logic of these scenario constructs. The fait accompli, as it has been used to describe a potential Russian strategy, is a proposition that can be evaluated without the need for a specific interpretation of Russian political intentions.

Fait Accompli as a Tactic for Territorial Revisionism

At the heart of U.S. and NATO thinking on this problem lies scenario confusion and an ahistorical understanding of what faits accomplis are. A fait accompli constitutes the imposition of gains at the expense of the other side, under the calculus that they will not counter-escalate and cause a larger conflict. This strategy is based on the belief that gains can be attained in a relatively bloodless manner because the opponent will not show up to the fight. The history of this form of territorial revisionism

¹ This article is based extensively on Michael Kofman, “It’s Time to Talk about A2/AD,” WOTR, September 2019, and a forthcoming article in *War on the Rocks*, “Getting the Fait Accompli right in US strategy.” This article makes extensive use of the work and research by Dan Altman in: Altman, Dan: *By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries*, *International Studies Quarterly* 61(4): December 2017, 881–891, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx049>; Altman, Dan: *The Evolution of Territorial Conquest After 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm*, *International Organization* 74(3), 2020, 490–522. doi:10.1017/S0020818320000119; Altman, Dan: *Advancing Without Attacking: The Strategic Game Around the Use of Force*, *Security Studies* 27(1), 2018, 58–88.

is surprisingly consistent. It is a means by which states acquire parts of other states, but, by definition, is not a form of conquest with maximalist aims.

These forms of territorial revisionism cluster around low-value territory, with the driving calculus being that the victim will not fight for object in question. Often, the territory in dispute is not especially valuable *per se* (islands, deserts, mountains, etc.) but has political worth for the aggressing party. Most importantly, *fait accomplis* tend to happen where the territory's status is in legal dispute and the norms of sovereignty unlikely to deter an aggressor because they believe that this land is rightfully theirs. The present scenarios for Russian aggression against a NATO member do not follow this logic, but are in fact large-scale territorial conquests of entire countries, reminiscent of pre-World War II territorial revisionism. These are not *fait accomplis* because they involve prolonged warfare, occupation, and the conquest of whole states. Hence, they constitute a total war between the respective parties.

There is the prospect of Russian seizure of territories belonging to Baltic states, but not the states themselves. However, there is no such territory in legal dispute between Moscow and NATO members. Russian irredentism must have some basis, and without any claim or historical dispute related to the territory of a NATO member, it is difficult to substantiate a Russian motive for aggression. Furthermore, because the states are small, they tend to value their territory; anything presumably worth fighting for could bring with it the threat of a prolonged conflict. This implicitly deters the *fait accompli* rationale, which is a judgment of the other side's resolve to resist. Similarly, there is nothing in the region that would prove of substantial political value to Moscow, akin to Crimea, that could substantiate this calculus. Consequently, the impulse for a *fait accompli*, opportunistic or otherwise, is hard to divine. In general, the region is not particularly well-suited to *fait accompli* strategies, given its physical geography and established political boundaries.

Prospects for a Russian *Fait Accompli* Strategy against NATO

If the current scenarios do not constitute a *fait accompli*, then what about the proposition of large-scale territorial conquest employing a so-called “*fait accompli* strategy” against the United States as the security provider? This would envision a Russian conquest of the Baltic states, or some part thereof, presumably in a manner designed to prevent a U.S. counter-intervention. The conquest via “*fait accompli* strategy” against the United States is a more accurate way to describe how planners think about the scenarios that constitute the Russian threat to NATO. This is militarily impractical, leaving aside the

lack of evidence that anyone in Moscow thinks it is feasible. Additionally, it tends to conflate military strategies designed to interdict or fight a third party with those intended to attain gains without fighting. The distinction is important, since it reflects that two different strategies are at play. *Fait accomplis* are born of political judgments that gains can be imposed without escalation to a larger conflict, not assessments of the military balance, and are therefore often initiated by the weaker side in the conflict.

Since U.S. forces are deployed in the Baltic states and NATO has robust plans for rapid reinforcement in the event of crisis, it is not possible for the Russian military to operationalize a *fait accompli* strategy. (Moreover, Baltic forces can also be expected to fight for their own nations.) Any reasonable timetable for force generation and deployment would give NATO the opportunity to forward deploy additional forces to support those already stationed in the region. This means there is no way for the Russian General Staff to devise an operation that places the initial burden of escalation on NATO, but most importantly, gains cannot be made without fighting NATO forces. Specific advantages offered by time or distance in such scenarios are not especially relevant, since the *fait accompli* calculus rests on a determination of the opponents' will to fight. Theories to the effect that Russian military capabilities can somehow “hold NATO at bay” are essentially a discourse on the prospects of large-scale conventional warfare, not a *fait accompli* strategy, and are wrong in their own right on the technical merits of how such capabilities work. Therefore, even a classic surprise attack cannot render a *fait accompli* strategy viable in this case, which is all that matters for political decision-makers.

Unlike land grabs via *fait accompli* tactics, which have been studied and documented, *fait accompli* strategies against security providers remain intellectual constructs that in the Russian case lack a *casus belli*. Efforts to right this intellectual ship by proposing that Moscow's objective would be to ruin NATO's credibility do not have a discernible basis in the history of state behavior. An objectless invasion remains an illogical construct. States fight over things, not to discredit alliances, which can be done without resort to war. The premise of a credibility-based war is imaginative, but illustrates that the Russian motives for military aggression in these scenarios are not well thought through.

The “credibility attack” is hardly a novel supposition. Indeed, strategists came up with similar theories for how the Soviet Union might attack NATO and defeat it politically via “political *blitzkrieg*.” Unsurprisingly, these were never validated. The resultant scenario selection strangely lends itself to cases where Russian aggression would be the most escalatory and easiest to defeat, such

as the Suwalki gap, as opposed to those where it could easily challenge NATO's credibility with minimum risks.

Military Capabilities and the *Fait Accompli*

Political leaders tend to judge intent based on their counterparts' observed behavior in international affairs, penchant for risk-taking, and their sense of another state's ambitions. This tends to result in generalizing from few cases and reasoning by analogy across dissimilar scenarios. Analysts look at military capability, force posture, and observable data that could be used as evidence to build a case for an assessment of intent. However, capability-based assessments can lead to erroneous conclusions on intent or strategic planning if they do not emphasize the other military culture's interpretations, its operational concepts, and the calculus of its political leadership. Without due consideration for the political and military views of the other establishment, it is easy to mirror-image and invent strategies for one's opponent while overlooking their actual plans. Thus, perceptions are paramount.

Consequently, two profound misgivings emerge about contemporary interpretations of Russian intentions based on military capabilities. First, they appear to be based solely on tactical-level assessments of technology that do not necessarily reflect Russian military thought or operational concepts. Hence, an area-denial and anti-access theory has emerged for describing Russian military strategy that, while plausible, is broadly incorrect. Military cultures have differing interpretations of the utility of capabilities, and they often come to different conclusions as to their implications for the military balance or military strategy. There is a strong desire to presume an objective offense/defense advantage to the observed military capabilities of the two sides, but no such impartial determination can be made. Tanks, artillery, aircraft, missiles, and ships can all be used in support of an offensive in theater just as they are essential to defensive operations.

Here it truly matters what the Russian General Staff believes. Russian military operations emphasize disorganization, attrition, and the annihilation of adversary forces, not area denial or interdiction. There is also strong evidence in Russian military thought that they view rote defense as impossible in the case of large-scale aerospace attack, requiring cost imposition and attrition-oriented strategies. As such, the notion of a Russian offensive to take territory and then successfully defend against a superior aerospace opponent is misaligned with what the technology can do, and more importantly with what the Russian military believes it can accomplish. Strategic aerospace defense without sustained offensive operations is not possible, and in many cases is even considered to be cost-prohibitive. This means that a *fait*

accompli strategy is simply not in the cards, requiring at a minimum regional or large-scale warfare in the European theater.

There is similarly contradictory evidence when looking at Russian force structure, which appears to be expanding in size to the detriment of readiness and manning levels. This force is increasingly built out for regional and large-scale war, presuming months of indications and warnings, and an observable change in the military-political situation. This is the opposite of what one would expect to see from military planning around a *fait accompli* strategy. The latter would emphasize readiness and forward deployed forces near the Baltic states rather than expanding formations that take longer to mobilize. Although *fait accompli* strategies feature surprise attacks, they often do not need to do so, as states signal their intentions via irredentist claims. Hence, many cases of *fait accompli* revisionism are remarkably predictable. However, Russian force structure design appears to be maximizing NATO's opportunity to react and introduce forces into the Baltic region rather than minimizing it. Perhaps the Russian military will attain overmatch, or local superiority, in the initial period of war, but that is not determinative of success when evaluating a *fait accompli* strategy.

As it stands, there is little in Russian force posture or operational concepts that might substantiate the intention to commit a *fait accompli* in the Baltic region, or the prevalence of "*fait accompli* strategy" against the United States as a security provider. The Russian armed forces clearly plan for large-scale war in Europe, with NATO being the central opponent, but not in the manner ascribed to them. Conversely, defense planner arguments for why such a strategy might exist have always carried a logical contradiction. Their premise has always been that Russia is militarily inferior to NATO and therefore has need of a *fait accompli* strategy, but is militarily superior due to its newfound military capabilities and might be emboldened on the same account.

Conclusion

Military strategy is often confused for political strategy. While military communities may debate the significance of capabilities or the implications of force postures, most of those conclusions are irrelevant for political decision-makers, who make the actual decisions when it comes to war. Capability match-ups, tactical advantages or disadvantages, etc., are not relevant factors for decision-making when it comes to the *fait accompli*. Political leaders are neither emboldened nor deterred by specific military capabilities. In the case of a *fait accompli*, the matter rests almost entirely on a judgment in Moscow of whether NATO will show up to the fight, not how well it would fare if it did. Here, a modicum of capabil-

ity goes a long way toward shaping decisions, but the military edge plays at best a marginal or insignificant role. Indeed, abstract perceptions of superiority or inferiority are largely irrelevant once it has been established that the opponent has the means to resist and that the fight may escalate.

There is no need for NATO or the United States to project the ability to win in the initial period of war, since victory is hardly a requirement of deterrence. The possibility of a sustained battle effectively eliminates the prospect of a *fait accompli* strategy. Warfighting, be it through annihilation or attrition, inherently carries risks and costs that are not likely to be commensurate with prospective Russian gains in the Baltics. This makes positional *fait accompli*, gains in relative position that do not involve territorial revisionism, much more lucrative, especially for nuclear powers in a context where war carries the risk of nuclear escalation.

To be clear, there are reasons why Moscow and NATO might come to blows, but there is little evidence for the notion that Russia harbors a *fait accompli* strategy or has need of one. This article renders no judgment on whether Moscow has designs on territorial revisionism writ large, simply on the premises that govern U.S. and NATO defense planning and scenario constructs. The notion of NATO as object, or *casus belli*, has proven the most puzzling. Alliances are sabotaged or neutralized through subversion, steady erosion of relative influence, and wedging strategies (which generally fail), rather than objectless declarations of war. Hence, NATO remains safe from overt challenges, but vulnerable to death by a thousand cuts and the internal disconnect between its desire for greater cohesion along with a desire for further enlargement.

About the Author

Michael Kofman serves as Director of the Russia Studies Program at CNA and as a Fellow at the Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, DC. His research focuses on Russia and the former Soviet Union, specializing in the Russian armed forces, military thought, capabilities, and strategy. Previously, he served as a Program Manager and subject matter expert at National Defense University, advising senior military and government officials on issues in Russia and Eurasia. Mr. Kofman is also a Senior Editor at War on the Rocks, where he regularly authors articles on strategy, the Russian military, Russian decision-making, and related foreign policy issues. Mr. Kofman has published numerous articles on the Russian armed forces and security issues in Russia/Eurasia, as well as analyses for the U.S. government.

ANALYSIS

Will Russia's Efforts to Prevent the Weaponization of Information Succeed?

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Abstract

In September, Russia made another effort to negotiate the nonmilitary use of cyberspace with the United States. Predictably, Washington rejected the proposal, despite admitting the urgency of the issue and the need to find a consensus solution with Moscow. The problem is not new: Russia has insisted on establishing common cyber norms in the United Nations for a long time, while the US has reserved the right to develop its own military cyber capabilities and blocked all Russian initiatives. With the stakes raised dramatically, Russia and the US have to find a way to agree on cybersecurity.

Russia's Proposal to the US

President Putin suggested a comprehensive information security program to the US. It was predictable that the US would reject the Russian proposal, for many reasons. First, an agreement with Russia on any issue, especially

on cybersecurity, is political suicide for Donald Trump. Second, regardless of Donald Trump's relations with Vladimir Putin, the American political establishment would never believe that Russia is not interfering in the elections: Russia's voluntary commitment not to meddle