



# WAR OF WORDS: COUNTERING

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Russia's resurgence in recent years caught some by surprise, but many of those who followed Vladimir Putin's rise to power merely shrugged their shoulders and asked, what else should we expect from a former KGB power player? Still those familiar with Russian history add that the return of Great Power status to Russia is neither unexpected, nor terribly worrying because despite having made headlines, the country still faces rampant corruption, a struggling economy and the potential for Kremlin "palace coups" if Putin does not keep his supporters satisfied.

Countering those who either downplay the surprise or the severity of threats posed by a resurgent Russia, are those who know that no matter the weaknesses inherent to Russia, and there are many, the country still controls vast power resources, not least of which is diplomatic leverage over several key "problem" countries for the U.S. The rise of Russian initiatives at critical stages of the Iranian nuclear debate, and Putin's entrance into the battle against Daesh, while pressuring to keep in power the dictator who started the Syrian civil war, complicates an already messy strategic situation. More broadly, Russia's long-term energy partnership with China, as that nation flexes its new found strength and threatens U.S. allies in the region, makes U.S. bilateral relations even more difficult. Then of course there is the use of hybrid warfare in the former Soviet sphere to reclaim lost parts of the motherland and reassert primacy over neighboring countries, all of which points to an interna-

tional environment more complicated than the Global War on Terrorism "good old days" when the U.S. only had to worry about troubling non-state actors. Now, with the return of Great Power politics, the future looks even more complicated than it did a decade ago because those same non-state threats are still around as well.

In the face of these threats, deterring Russian aggression should be an imperative to policy makers, yet the problems go beyond increased security challenges from potential Russian invasions of NATO member states. The biggest challenge from Russia is not military or even economic threats to the European Union. Instead, Putin threatens an inherent, fundamental vulnerability in Western civilization itself. He does it with a war of words, and as of late, it is a war in which Putin has had clear advantages.

The words coming out of the Kremlin to control the perceptions of its actions, both at home and among vulnerable populations, carry great weight because they are the same words used by the West to justify its own actions over the last two decades. Talk of separatists and autonomous regions as a way to guarantee their human rights ring true in the ears of Bosnians, Kosovars, and South Sudanese since all now have independent countries thanks in large part to the United States. More importantly though, the same message also rings true with the great masses of discontented around the world as they buy into Western idealism that democracy will indeed make life better — the Arab Spring followed several populist revolutions in other regions, building on both their methods of change and their aspirations for lasting influence over their futures.

However, the same discontent that led to successful regime changes is also easily manipulated, even pro-



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voked into existence by external actors who fan the flames of economic privation and social injustice. Sounding similar to the justifications for U.S. unconventional warfare, support to resistance is a concept that is an effective tool of statecraft no matter the end goal or even who goes along the path to get there. This is what makes the threat from Russia so existential, so basic to the West itself, because rather than riding in as a noble benefactor whose goals are at least benign in relation to U.S. interests, or better still, clearly beneficial for their focus on rights and protections for citizens, Russia's narrative casts the United States in particular as the harbinger of death. In it, either the watchful U.S. looks on with self-interested neglect or even worse, with genuine disdain for the suffering caused by its mucking about in other countries, breaking systems and leaving a decade of terrorism-fueled insanity in once stable regimes. To counter the obvious Western response that dictators do bad things, often worse things, Putin acknowledges the harm done by autocrats, but only if they do not have the support of the people — thus justifying his own rule and sending a warning to his allies to get their people in line.

A careful observer would ask how any of this differs from the messaging by the United States when it violates the sovereignty of other countries, albeit with UN support and allies aiding in multilateral justifications. The difference is clearly there, but regrettably it is not obvious, nor clearly understood because it is both a product of the Western world, and a process deeply ingrained in democratic societies. The product is restrained government, and the process is an informed, active citizenry to ensure it. Those two things define Western Liberalism, the bedrock idea behind the

Declaration of Independence, Constitution and endless debates that both plague the U.S. system and make it a thing of beauty in a world of all-too-common tyranny in the name of the people, tyranny that really only serves the ruling inner circle. As a result, the message that Russia brings may sound similar, but it is ultimately a fun house mirror image — somewhat discernable at a distance, but up close, distorted and ultimately deceiving.

How then can the United States counter this greater war of words? In many ways the same as done in the Cold War, at least in terms of NATO. The focus has been and will continue to be ensuring that alliance members perceive themselves as capable and the union as unbreakable. To that end, Atlantic Resolve has taken on an enduring, broad spectrum support role in terms of communicating U.S. intentions, NATO unity, and support for those nations most vulnerable to Russian messaging, namely the Baltics with their large Russian diaspora populations. Those areas within Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania carry great risk for their governments and societies, ranging from overt separatist threats and Russian hybrid warfare to capitalize on them, down to the more subtle yet perhaps more important identity questions of what it means to be a part of Narva, as a part of Estonia, while speaking Russian, and feeling marginalized.

This raises some important questions about Atlantic Resolve, questions that go beyond its bolstering effect on the alliance and the Baltics in particular, as well as beyond the resulting deterrence NATO assumes the Kremlin will see. The real question deals with the follow-on effects on those same vulnerable populations, both in the Baltics and beyond by implication. Does Atlantic Resolve show that NATO, and the U.S. in

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The Narva River is a natural border between Estonia and Russia. On the left is Estonia's Hermann Castle in the town of Narva, facing off with Russia's Ivangorod Fortress on the right.





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particular, are simply entrenching the status quo that marginalized people want so much to change? Does Atlantic Resolve prove to them that their anger is justified and worse, that they are powerless to do anything about it? If so, the chances of Russian operationalization of those vulnerable, marginalized and now even angrier populations, increases.

So what is to be done? How can the U.S. reduce the broader risks of necessarily reassuring allies and communicating clear intent to protect the alliance borders? An interesting and instructive exercise was conducted in mid-2015 by the Joint Special Operations Master of Arts program as part of the National Defense University's College of International Security Affairs. The exercise included faculty, students, members of the SOF community at large, diplomatic input from current U.S. ambassadors, as well as partner nation military and political officials. The intent was to showcase several strategies within a complex and evolving scenario centered on one of the most difficult and potentially dangerous areas of Russian influence — the Estonian region of Narva.

### GALLANT SENTRY

Operation Gallant Sentry began with the status quo, that Russian diaspora communities have Estonian citizenship but with increased pressure to join their ethnic country of origin under Russia's Compatriot Policy. This policy grants Russian citizenship to those who consider themselves ethnic Russians, or more broadly, hold to the

values and ideals of Mother Russia. Putin has used this policy to justify application of UN Responsibility to Protect provisions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia prior to the conflict with Georgia in 2008, and more recently in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. The Compatriot Policy offers a blanket justification within Russia's narrative for indirect intervention as well, whether through funding opposition groups working to change the political system or through targeted media broadcasting into those regions that speak Russian and consider that identity more important than their national citizenship.

The exercise began by placing participants into teams as part of the Russian political and security apparatus, as well as both Estonian government and Narvan community leadership roles. NATO and UN roles brought in a broader international perspective to the local problems. Structured in successive rounds designed to articulate and establish interests, goals, and methods of achieving them within each group, the exercise proceeded through regular negotiation phases, while allowing for spontaneous "backroom" meetings. As a result, participants engaged in the complex two-level game of politics: internal group debates conditioned and were conditioned by external interactions with other groups.

Several key trends developed out of the phases. First, several escalatory measures by Russia, followed by Estonian responses ramped up the inevitable hardening of positions, thereby making negotiations less and less likely to restore either the status quo calm, or promote long-term solutions. These impromptu events designed by the exercise control group were meant to highlight the complexity of negotiations when both parties have diverse interests and pressures within their sides, not just between themselves and their adversaries. Second, the most successful interactions were between the Estonians and the Narvan representatives. While Russian officials at first appealed to the Narvans' perception of marginalization, the Estonians were

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initially hostile to any negotiations outside established political processes. That is, they refused to engage in “special” dialogue to hear Narvan grievances. These competing push/pull pressures on the Narvans initially kept their representatives in check and under Moscow’s thumb. However, when elements of the Estonian political system began back channel dialogue with other members of the Narvan leadership, thereby threatening the spokesperson’s position of diplomatic and governing primacy, this incentivized a willingness to concede by the Narvan group as a whole. Critical at this time were the assurances and good faith signals of benign intent by the Estonians, no easy task given their own reticence to treat the Russian Estonians as anything other than Estonians at best, foreign interlopers at worst.

In response to these positive overtures within the Estonian context, Russian pressure increased with a typical media “smear campaign” to discredit the Narvan leadership, as well as more direct threats against personhood and property. In the end, the Estonians agreed to greater internal autonomy over local taxation and government support for Russian language media from Estonian television stations, as well as further talks to help improve the business climate and economic opportunities within Narva. These included greater transportation mechanisms for workers living in Narva but employed further afield in the capital, and grants to support startup businesses. The Narvans agreed to participate in national elections, and the local leadership issued several press statements supporting the Estonian parliamentary system as representative and a means to address their community’s concerns. In the end, the Estonians viewed the Narvans as less hostile, the Narvans embraced their place in Estonia, and the Russians moved on to other areas to test both NATO’s resolve in countering hybrid warfare, and the strength of democratic governments along its borders.

By no means were the relatively positive outcomes assured or to be expected in the exercise. Several key moments tested the intentions of even those “dovish”

participants seeking reconciliation, not least of which were Russian violations of Estonian territorial waters, and Estonian security personnel getting into fights with Narvan protestors. Yet at those moments, key players arose within the Estonian delegation, and more importantly the Narvans themselves. By seeing their interests in primarily economic terms, rather than nationalistic or even ethnic ones, Narvan representatives opened the door to receive the strength of Estonia and NATO countries in general – economic prosperity compared to Russian promises of support that often did not materialize. In addition, the wanton devastation of Eastern Ukraine served as an essential break on Russian efforts to operationalize Narva. Thus, when offered a realistic choice between living like Donetsk or Tallinn, the Narvans choose to be part of Estonia given its realistic potential to improve their lives rather than hold on to past Soviet glories and present Russian grievances. The Estonian representatives also offered the key mechanism for achieving that brighter future – space within the political process to address grievances, while also maintaining specific boundaries on the kinds of actions possible with the political system. The Estonians welcomed greater debate from the Narvans, and the Narvans committed publically to play by the democratic rules of the game. In the end, democracy proved its worth by giving voice to those who perceived they had none, while preserving the system in which they and all Estonians can express their interests and resolve their differences peacefully.

## WHAT IT ALL MEANS...

The long game of U.S. strategy is about changing perceptions of the United States and its goals, but more broadly, what democracy and liberal ideals can do for a society. Gallant Sentry showed the value of including disparate groups in the process of defining who they are in relation to the greater community, while also preserving what the larger community holds as its core values.

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The city of Narva sits on the Northeastern tip of Estonia on the border of Russia. Estonia covers 17,505 square miles, making it about twice the size New Jersey.

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American and Estonian Special Operation Forces work together during a joint training event in Estonia.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY  
SPC TIMOTHY CLEGG







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Key to that outcome was the process itself: inclusive dialogue within parameters set by the state. That is, Narva was not permitted to exit Estonia nor become wholly autonomous within it. The Russian diaspora needed to remain a part of the country in both political and practical terms – voting in national elections and maintaining free movement of goods and people within, and between it and the greater country.<sup>01</sup>

Choosing to begin that process was by no means easy for the Estonian government or the Narvan enclave, and that is the great risk of democracy – to set off on a path that includes many participants, not all of whom agree on the destination or even the best route to get there. Gallant Sentry showed that setting boundaries for discussions with the Narvan population and its chosen leadership, even with heavy Russian influence operations, undercut the Kremlin's main argument that their compatriot citizens were being mistreated. Inclusion within the parameters of state territorial continuity, and participation within the larger Estonian political system, incentivized Narvan moderation in part by exposing the fundamental and inevitable divisions

within the community. Some wanted to be part of Russia, some part of Estonia, but most simply wanted a better life in general, and the parameters for discussion about those goals worked to give a sense of inclusion to those who saw themselves as politically and economically marginalized. It also allayed understandable concerns within the Estonian government that they were letting the foxes into the henhouse.

As a result, the exercise showed that the power of Russia's war of words can be defused and defeated by holding fast to the core of what makes Western civilization so special — granting a seat at the table, but doing so does not mean the newcomers get to change the table or the rules of etiquette while sitting there. Setting and maintaining boundaries for the public to participate in the process of governance means that discussions have limits in both what can be discussed, but equally important, the manner in which it gets discussed and ultimately decided. Those limits can indeed change, but not by the whims of only one set of voices. Inclusion thus incentivizes coalition building within the political sphere, while also constraining the ways conflicts get resolved strictly through non-violent means.

Gallant Sentry showcased the power of the U.S. message in both regards. It communicated the boundaries of U.S. support in the region, what the U.S. and NATO will not allow to happen, but also that the public space for debate within those boundaries is broad enough to include those who feel on the outs. The process is also genuine enough to show that their concerns, along with those of the majority Estonians around them, can in fact find resolution by working together. In the end, that is the best strategy for defeating Russian aggression and removing the potential operationalization of vulnerable people, as they themselves chose no longer to be Putin's pawns. **SW**

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01  
American and Estonian Special Operation Forces participate in a wing exchange jump during a joint exercise. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC TIMOTHY CLEGG

02  
U.S. and Lithuanian forces prepare to head out for a three-day field training exercise in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. MEGAN LEUCK

**NOTES** 01. The Narvans were encouraged to have their own local elections, which the central government would validate if they were deemed free and fair by international observers. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has done that before in Estonia, and because Russia is a member, OSCE monitoring gives the Kremlin a chance to show its "protection of compatriot interests"; it also mutes the impact of Russian criticisms of the process if Russia chooses not to participate.