



# Protecting the Baltics

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**Related Categories:** Europe; Russia; Ukraine

There is an old piece of folk wisdom which, in light of current events, must translate neatly into Russian: "Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me."

As an already shaky second cease-fire crumbles following the Russian capture of the Ukrainian town of Debaltsevo and with Moscow's intent to also seize Mariupol, it is becoming ever clearer that Russia has no intention of keeping the peace with Ukraine — and that the Kremlin is emboldened by what it perceives to be Western weakness.

There is ample reason for Moscow to doubt Western resolve. In December, Congress passed the Ukraine Freedom Support Act, which authorized the White House to send \$350 million in military aid to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's beleaguered Army. On Jan. 14, US Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, released a statement urging the president to "fully implement this legislation."

Ash Carter, the newly confirmed secretary of defense, has signaled his support for arming Ukraine. The list goes on and on.

Yet Washington has done little of substance. Fearing an escalation advantage in favor of Russia, the White House has been extremely careful not to "poke the bear" by providing lethal aid to Ukraine. It has failed to act, moreover, despite mountains of evidence that Russia is sending heavy weaponry, tanks and even conscripted soldiers to aid separatist forces operating in Ukraine's east, and continuing to do so despite the second cease-fire struck last month in Minsk, Belarus.

Washington is only now beginning to wake up to the reality that Russia's revanchist designs on Eastern Europe remain unabated. But what should be done? Although some have argued convincingly that it is necessary to arm Ukraine, it is also clear that any escalation of US involvement needs to be implemented as part of a broader strategy vis-à-vis Russia.

A gradual tit-for-tat approach won't address the flaws in our deterrence strategy, and would allow Putin to remain on a rhetorical defensive.

Former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski has an interesting solution to this problem. In recent testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Brzezinski laid out a strategy for deterring further Russian aggression in Eastern Europe.

"Deterrence," he said, "has to have meaning, it has to have teeth in it." The teeth he was referencing are prepositioned forces in the Baltic states.

Brzezinski's proposal calls for limited troop deployment in Latvia and Estonia by a coalition comprised of Germany, France, the US and the UK, one that would deter without provoking.

"An American company in Estonia," Brzezinski explained, "is not going to invade Russia, and Putin will know that."

But placing troops in these countries forces Russia to include into its calculations the contingency of combating American troops. And because it will, there's reason to believe that this relatively small gesture could provide a level of deterrence sufficient to assuage fears among the Baltic states of a Russian invasion.

Other efforts are already underway. Great Britain has announced that it will commit 1,000 troops to a 5,000 strong NATO rapid response force tasked with responding to a "major crisis" in Europe within 48 hours. It will also commit several RAF Typhoon jets to help with the air policing of Baltic airspace.

A larger response force of 30,000 will also be able to deploy within a few weeks. Germany, France, Italy and even Spain, whose incoming government may withdraw from NATO, are cooperating in this plan to simultaneously counter potential threats from Russia to the east and Syria to the south. The US is even positioning officers in six command centers in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Poland and Bulgaria.

But existing NATO plans, like the administration's aid package to Ukraine, fall short of what is necessary, since a response force, however light on its feet, is only a reactive measure. Troops on the ground would show a real commitment to our easternmost NATO allies, and offer a substantial, cost-effective way to augment their deterrent potential in the face of Russian aggression.

After all, if the White House has learned anything in its dealings with the Kremlin to date, it is that there's no substitute for seriousness.

