

# Russia's Military Strategy and Force Structure in Kaliningrad

Fredrik Westerlund

The Kaliningrad Oblast is one of the smallest subjects of the Russian Federation, but far from insignificant. It is both a vital military-strategic asset for Russia and a serious liability. This determines the military force structure in Kaliningrad, as long as Russia and the West remain at loggerheads.

Russia's military posture in Kaliningrad Oblast has been strengthened in recent years. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the units deployed there were neglected – as were the Armed Forces in general. The Baltic Sea had become something of a security policy backwater, leaving the Baltic Sea Fleet adrift searching for a *raison d'être*. It was reduced to sending Naval Infantry units to the wars in Chechnya, spearheading integration of air defence assets and assisting in the construction of the Nord Stream pipeline.

With the intensified effort to reform the Armed Forces after the 2008 war in Georgia, a gradual but steady modernisation of equipment and re-formation of units took place, including in Kaliningrad. The recent developments regarding the military force structure there are well in line with the findings in FOI's report on *Russian military capability in a ten-year perspective*, published in December 2016.

Russia's available military assets have continued to increase. In Kaliningrad, unit manning levels have improved, increasing the capability to launch joint inter-service combat operations. All three Ground Forces manoeuvre brigades and the fire support units are probably fully combat-capable by Russian MoD standards. Last autumn, the Oblast also received stand-off warfare capability – that is the ability to strike targets at distances over 300 kilometres. The deployment of *Oniks* anti-ship cruise missiles in August 2016 was followed by *Iskander* missiles and *Buyan-M*-class corvettes carrying the *Kalibr* land-attack cruise missile in October 2016. These capabilities also strengthen strategic deterrence by military means.

Overall, the fighting power of the Armed Forces has increased more in the Western part of Russia, in particular regarding assets for offensive operations. In Kaliningrad, the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Corps has been formed, which improves the ability to combined-arms warfare and offensive operations. The stand-off warfare assets deployed last autumn are also primarily offensive weapon systems. Furthermore, the *Iskander*, *Kalibr* and *Oniks* missiles are all nuclear-weapon capable according to Russian sources, adding to the general trend of offensive non-strategic nuclear weapons growing faster in numbers in the western parts of Russia.

All in all, the Oblast is developing from a neglected province to a military bastion. The driving forces behind this are primarily military-strategic, but also political. Moscow sees Kaliningrad as an asset of growing importance. The Baltic Sea is an important transport route for Russia, primarily for cargo ships, but the air lanes and the underwater pipelines and cables also matter. However, the importance of the Kaliningrad Oblast is not first and foremost its access to this regional commercial hub.

Arguably, Kaliningrad matters because it forms a vital link in Russian perimeter defence in the Western war theatre. The Russian threat perception has increasingly focused on the West as a potential enemy. Kaliningrad forms part of a protective arc, spanning from the Arctic and Barents Sea via the Baltic Sea and Transnistria to Crimea and the Black Sea. In the event of a conflict with NATO, Kaliningrad is key to the northern flank, in particular as Russia so far lacks bases in Belarus.

In peace-time and crisis, Kaliningrad provides a forward position for intelligence collection and surveillance as well as a platform for strategic deterrence by military means. It should be noted that in the Russian understanding, strategic deterrence is not restricted to deterring an attack. It includes coercion and containment.

In the event of war, forces in the Oblast allow for forward air defence of the Russian heartland and for disabling threatening NATO infrastructure, such as the NATO ABM site in Poland. Moreover, the forces in Kaliningrad deny NATO unrestricted use of the Baltic Sea area, by disputing naval and air operations in the southern parts of the Baltic Sea as well as threatening the access through the Baltic Straits and ground forces' operations with missile strikes. The Oblast has become an important asset, as relations with the West have soured.

Kaliningrad has, however, also become a liability for Russia. The vulnerability of the Oblast is often overlooked in the West. Not so by the Russian political and military leadership. Becoming an exclave after the break-up of the Soviet Union, it was always difficult to defend. It is not large enough to provide operational depth for the forces deployed there and reinforcements need to cross two other countries. The number of advance routes for larger reinforcements is limited and the air and sea lanes will be unreliable in the event of an armed conflict. The Oblast is moreover surrounded by NATO countries and it is becoming more exposed, due to the enhanced NATO and US forces' presence in the Baltic states and Poland. The so-called Suwalki gap is as much a headache for Russian reinforcements to Kaliningrad as it is for NATO reinforcements to its Baltic members.

There are also doubts about the quality of the military forces in Kaliningrad. In July 2016, a large part of the officer corps within the Baltic Fleet were purged and top-rank commanders were replaced for having neglected troop morale and readiness. Corruption is not necessarily more widespread in Kaliningrad than elsewhere in Russia, but perhaps Moscow's tolerance was lower due to the Oblast's exposed location.

Added to this are worries among the Russian political and military leadership over Western plans to steal Kaliningrad away from Russia. This may raise eyebrows in Western capitals, but this fear seems to have been reinforced since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, as Paul Goble noted in *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (7 February 2017). Taking Kaliningrad would be 'a natural indemnification for European territorial losses and a form of "compensation" for the inclusion of Crimea into the Russian Federation', as Moscow political commentator

Grigorii Trofimchuk wrote on *Regnum* (31 January 2017).

For political and military-strategic reasons, it is therefore vital to Russia to defend its exclave. Kaliningrad is linked to the survival of the Russian state on several levels. For defence in the Western war theatre, for containment of NATO and for deterrence of the West it is a key military-strategic asset. For Russian foreign policy, a well-armed Kaliningrad provides a platform for military coercion of Baltic Sea area neighbours. Finally, in domestic policy, being able to defend even exclaves such as Kaliningrad is a way of securing legitimacy and regime survival.

In the Russian experience, the only reliable way to keep anything is by force. We can therefore expect further announcements of military build-up and actions to improve the force structure in Kaliningrad. There is furthermore every reason to await additional references to nuclear weapons, as they could become the only effective means of deterrence for Russia in the event of a regional war. This may trigger additional NATO deployments. In short, we are facing a security dilemma centring on Kaliningrad.

At the same time, the military forces in Kaliningrad are unlikely to be available for larger offensive operations against its neighbours. In the event of a military conflict in Europe, they would be needed for the defence of Kaliningrad itself. In addition, Russian fears of losing Kaliningrad could be capitalised on in the deterrence strategies of Nordic and Baltic countries.

*Fredrik Westerlund*

---

Please visit [www.foi.se/russia](http://www.foi.se/russia) to find out more about the FOI's Russia Studies Programme and register to our Newsletter.