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Un juego de guerra muestra cuán vulnerable es Europa ante un ataque ruso

Con la retirada de Estados Unidos, Rusia podría estar lista para una nueva guerra mucho antes de lo estimado previamente.



Bareras de hormigón cerca de Marijampole, en la frontera de Lituania con el enclave ruso de Kaliningrado. PATRICK WACK/NILAND PARA EL WSJ

Por [Yaroslav Trofimov](#) [Seguir](#)

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Resumen rápido

- Un juego de guerra que simuló una incursión rusa en Lituania reveló la posible falta de preparación e indecisión de la OTAN.
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MARIJAMPOLE, Lituania—Los gobiernos europeos se preparan para la guerra con Rusia. Un juego de guerra recién publicado sugiere que aún no están listos.

Una incursión rusa, o una invasión directa, en países de la Organización del Tratado del Atlántico Norte y la Unión Europea se ha vuelto más probable debido a las tensiones de Europa con el presidente Trump por Groenlandia, Ucrania, el comercio y otros asuntos, dicen muchos líderes políticos y de seguridad europeos.

Señalan que Rusia ha pasado a [una economía de guerra](#), concentrando los recursos nacionales en un programa de rearme y reclutamiento militar que van mucho más allá de las necesidades de la campaña en Ucrania.

La pregunta clave es: ¿cuándo? En Berlín y otras capitales se creía inicialmente que Rusia no podría amenazar a la OTAN hasta alrededor de 2029. Ahora existe un creciente consenso de que dicha crisis podría llegar mucho antes, antes de que Europa, que está expandiendo su inversión en defensa, esté en condiciones de contraatacar.

“Nuestra evaluación es que Rusia podrá movilizar grandes cantidades de tropas en un año”, declaró el ministro de Defensa neerlandés, Ruben Brekelmans, en una entrevista. “Vemos que ya están aumentando sus inventarios estratégicos y expandiendo su presencia y activos a lo largo de las fronteras de la OTAN”.

El presidente Vladimir Putin quiere resucitar las glorias del Imperio ruso, convirtiendo en objetivos obvios a países que antaño formaron parte de él, como las naciones bálticas de Lituania, Letonia y Estonia. Todos ellos han sido miembros de la UE y la OTAN durante dos décadas.



El presidente Vladimir Putin visita una fábrica en Nizhny Tagil, Rusia, en 2024. RAMIL SITDIKOV/ASSOCIATED PRESS



An ad promoting military service in the Russian army's unmanned systems forces in St. Petersburg, Russia. ANTON VAGANOV/REUTERS

“Anxiety is very visible in my country, but at the same time, we are preparing to defend ourselves,” said Deividas Matulionis, Lithuania’s national-security adviser. While Lithuania expects the U.S. and other NATO allies to assist in case of a Russian incursion, he added, the country’s own troops shouldn’t be underestimated: “They will be fighting, definitely, even before the reinforcements come.”

NATO military planners also worry about potential Russian designs on Swedish, Finnish and Danish [islands in the Baltic Sea](#), parts of Poland, and the Norwegian and Finnish far north, as well as a campaign of strikes on European strategic infrastructure as far west as the Dutch port of Rotterdam.

The exercise simulating a Russian incursion into Lithuania, organized in December by Germany’s Die Welt newspaper together with the German Wargaming Center of the Helmut-Schmidt University of the German Armed Forces, became an object of heated conversation within Europe’s security establishment even before the newspaper [published its results on Thursday](#). The exercise involved 16 former senior German and NATO officials, lawmakers and prominent security experts role-playing a scenario set in October 2026.

In the exercise, Russia used the pretext of a humanitarian crisis in [the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad](#) to seize the Lithuanian city of Marijampole, a key crossroads in the narrow gap between Russia and Belarus. Russian portrayals of the invasion as a humanitarian mission were sufficient for the U.S. to decline invoking NATO's Article 5 that calls for allied assistance. Germany proved indecisive, and Poland, while mobilizing, didn't send troops across the border into Lithuania. The German brigade already deployed to Lithuania failed to intervene, in part because Russia used drones to lay mines on roads leading out of its base.

"Deterrence depends not only on capabilities, but on what the enemy believes about our will, and in the wargame my 'Russian colleagues' and I knew: Germany will hesitate. And this was enough to win," said Franz-Stefan Gady, a Vienna-based military analyst who played the Russian chief of general staff.

A town of some 35,000 people, Marijampole is home to one of Europe's most strategic highway intersections. Running southwest is the Via Baltica superhighway to Poland, clogged with trucks from all over the EU and Ukraine. Running west is the transit road between Belarus and Kaliningrad that Lithuania must, under a treaty, maintain open to Russian traffic. This week, it was busy with Russian trucks, mostly stripped of markings on their containers, that, just before the border, drove past a tower with the Ukrainian and Lithuanian flags and the motto "Together to Victory."

Baltic Chokepoint

A single strategic highway, vulnerable to Russian attack, connects Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia overland to the rest of the NATO alliance.



Emma Brown/WSJ

In the wargame, absent American leadership, Russia managed within a couple of days to destroy the credibility of NATO and establish domination over the Baltics, by deploying an initial force of only some 15,000 troops.

"The Russians achieved most of their goals without moving many of their own units," said Bartłomiej Kot, a Polish security analyst who played the Polish prime minister in the exercise. "What this showed to me is that once we are confronted by the escalatory narrative from the Russian side, we have it embedded in our thinking that we are the ones who should be de-escalating."

In real life, Lithuania and other allies would have had enough intelligence warnings to avoid this scenario, said Rear Adm. Giedrius Premeneckas, Lithuania's chief of defense staff. Even without allies, Lithuania's own armed forces—17,000 in peacetime and 58,000 after an immediate mobilization—would have been able to deal with a limited threat to Marijampole, he said. Russia itself would have to consider the high stakes involved, he added: "It would be a dilemma for Russia to sustain Kaliningrad, and if Russia starts something, it must be said very clearly by NATO that if you do, you will lose Kaliningrad."

The commander of German land forces, Lt. Gen. Christian Freuding, said on a visit to Lithuania on Wednesday that, while NATO intelligence still assesses that Russia wouldn't be able to act against members of the alliance until 2029, Germany and its allies "are ready for the fight tonight, whatever it takes." He added that he wouldn't speculate on how much time Europe has left.

Fencing along a border crossing in Kybartai, Lithuania, and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. A view of Russia's Kaliningrad across the Neman river from the Lithuanian city of Panemune.

PATRICK WACK/INLAND FOR WSJ

The debate over the immediacy of the Russian threat determines the nature of European military planning. Skeptics point out the slow pace of Russian advances in Ukraine, where Putin has been bogged down in [a costly war of attrition](#), losing more than a million men. “Putin has failed in virtually everything he set out to do,” Finnish President Alexander Stubb said in an interview. “He hasn’t even attempted to come to NATO because he is not succeeding in Ukraine. So don’t overestimate Russian capacity.”

While Russia recruits some 35,000 fresh troops a month, it loses about 30,000 on Ukrainian battlefields monthly, slowing its capacity for a buildup, said Lithuania’s Premeneckas.

“We are very thankful to the Ukrainians who, every day, with their blood and their losses are giving us time to prepare better,” he said. “We are using this time wisely because we know that, if there is a deal in Ukraine, Russia will accelerate its war machine. We don’t have the luxury to let Russia feel that we are weak.”

Even without an agreement on Ukraine that the Trump administration is pushing, some European officials and security analysts say, the Russian military could instantly free up as many as 200,000 battle-hardened troops just by switching from offensive operations to holding the line. That is more troops than Putin used for the initial full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

TAP TO UNMUTE

German and other NATO troops marching in Kaunas, Lithuania’s second-largest city, on Wednesday.

YAROSLAV TROFIMOV/WSJ

“Putin is opportunistic, and if he sees an opportunity, he will toy with it, test the reactions, and when he has more capabilities, try to expand the results,” said Nico Lange, a former senior German defense official and a senior fellow with the Munich Security Conference who participated in Die Welt’s exercise. “It can happen right now. If the goal is to show that NATO’s Article 5 doesn’t work, to split the Europeans, what you need is the will, and not the extraordinarily large military capabilities. Why should Putin wait for the Europeans to be ready?”

Russian officials insist that the Kremlin has no designs on EU or NATO members' territory. Russia also insisted four years ago that it had no intention to invade Ukraine.

The Trump administration's new national defense strategy, released in January, says that Russia "will remain a persistent but manageable threat" to NATO's eastern members. It adds, however, that Russia "is in no position to make a bid for European hegemony" because European allies dwarf it in terms of population, economy, and thus latent military power.

This is why Russia wouldn't attempt to wage against NATO the kind of attrition warfare it is practicing in Ukraine, but not a reason why it would be deterred altogether. "Protracted war would be detrimental for Russia because we would outproduce and out-mobilize them," said Lt. Col. Amund Osflaten, who teaches land warfare and doctrine at the Norwegian Defense University College. "So, if they are going to do something, they would want to do something early, where they get into advantageous positions that they can easily defend later."

That is exactly what happened in Die Welt's scenario. Alexander Gabuev, the director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin who played Putin in the exercise, pointed out that the smokescreen of "humanitarian" intervention was crucial to enable Russian conquest. "It was very helpful to keep beating the drum that we need the humanitarian corridor because the evil Lithuanians are preventing us from supplying the poor and hungry people of Kaliningrad."

A building and traffic at a border crossing between Kybartai, Lithuania, and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.

PATRICK WACK/INLAND FOR WSJ

Such hybrid tactics, especially at a time when many in the Trump administration openly embrace Putin's narrative, pose an increasing threat to NATO's decision-making, European officials say.

"There is a gray area, and as Russia is taking additional steps, the gray zone is becoming darker," warned Brekelmans, the Dutch defense minister. "At the end, it is up to the NATO ally affected, and the 31 other NATO allies, to decide whether the Article 5 line has been crossed. Russia knows, of course, that this is not a hard science—and we know that it will try to further push that."

Corrections & Amplifications

A map in an earlier version of this article incorrectly labeled Norway as Finland in some versions. (Corrected on Feb. 5)

Watch: Inside the Elite Ukrainian Drone Unit That Cost Putin \$12 Billion

An entrepreneurial ethos allowed them to adapt drones and combat tactics to counter evolving Russian threats. Now they're sounding the alarm over Europe's vulnerability to the high-tech war they are fighting. Photo: Ben C. Solomon

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