Geopolitical Implications for Poland's Security - The Problem of Kaliningrad Oblast

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Abstract: *The article examines how the specific geographical location of the Kaliningrad Oblast influences Poland's security. The Russian exclave, situated between Poland and Lithuania and separated by land from the rest of the Russian Federation, is simultaneously one of the most militarised regions in Europe and a logistically vulnerable area exposed to potential blockade by NATO and EU member states. Drawing on qualitative analysis of strategic documents, expert reports and specialist media from 2022-2025, the study identifies the main military, missile-nuclear, hybrid and economic dimensions of the threats arising from the presence of Russian forces in Kaliningrad. Particular attention is paid to the Suwałki Gap as a key vulnerability on NATO's north-eastern flank and to the role of the exclave in Russia's strategy in the Baltic Sea region. The article argues that, despite Russia's temporary reduction of forces in Kaliningrad due to the war in Ukraine, the medium-term risk of remilitarisation and further missile deployments remains high. For Poland this implies the need to sustain elevated defence expenditure, strengthen air and missile defence and long-range fires, deepen cooperation with Baltic and Nordic allies, and develop civil resilience, especially in regions bordering the Kaliningrad Oblast.*
KEYWORDS: *KALININGRAD OBLAST; POLAND'S SECURITY; SUWAŁKI GAP; NATO EASTERN FLANK; BALLISTIC MISSILES; HYBRID THREATS; BALTIC SEA REGION*

1. Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022 has accelerated the redefinition of European security. NATO and EU member states – including Poland – have been forced to revise their strategic assumptions, increase defence spending and speed up modernisation of armed forces [2],[12]. In this context, the Kaliningrad Oblast – a Russian exclave between Poland and Lithuania, cut off by land from the rest of the Russian Federation yet possessing access to the Baltic Sea – has gained renewed importance.

For years Kaliningrad has been one of the most militarised areas in Europe. Analyses by the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) pointed to heavy saturation of the region with air and missile defence systems (S-300/S-400), Iskander-M ballistic missiles and Baltic Fleet forces, creating an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) 'bubble' over the southern Baltic [3]. A 2024 report by the Danish Institute for International Studies describes the Oblast as a 'vessel of havoc on the Baltic Sea', used as an instrument of Russian military, political and informational pressure in the region [1].

The exclave's location means that it is simultaneously: (1) Russia's westernmost foothold for projecting power against Poland and the Baltic States; (2) a potential land bridge to Belarus via the Suwałki Gap; and (3) a vulnerable area exposed to maritime and land blockade [1],[4]. The Suwałki Gap – around 65 km of Polish-Lithuanian border between Kaliningrad and Belarus – is widely described as NATO's 'Achilles heel' [4],[6],[8],[9]. Its seizure by Russian-Belarusian forces could temporarily cut off Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia from land-based Allied support from Poland [4],[6],[7].

Poland, which since 2023 spends over 3% of GDP on defence and plans further increases, shares about 210 km of land border with the exclave [2],[12]. This border constitutes both a potential direction of aggression and an area exposed to limited incidents below the Article 5 threshold. The aim of the article is therefore to analyse how the Kaliningrad Oblast's location affects Poland's security and what implications this has for Polish security and defence policy.

From Poland's perspective, the renewed centrality of Kaliningrad coincides with a broader shift from expeditionary deployments to forward defence on NATO's eastern flank. Public debate increasingly links the security of the north-eastern voivodeships with the credibility of the Alliance as a whole, and with the long-term costs of deterring Russia in the Baltic Sea region. This makes the way in which the Kaliningrad factor is framed in Polish strategic documents and planning processes not only a technical military issue, but also a question of political communication and social resilience [2],[12].

2. Prerequisites and means for solving the problem

In Polish literature, external security is understood as a state's ability to resist military and non-military threats in the international environment, taking into account alliances, economic processes and informational influences [2]. In this article, Poland's security is treated as a function of three groups of factors: (1) the strategic environment (the war in Ukraine, developments within NATO and the EU, changes in Russia's policy); (2) the potential and role of the Kaliningrad Oblast (location, forces, infrastructure, symbolic significance) [1],[3]; and (3) Polish security and defence policy (strategy, expenditure, force structure, societal resilience) [2],[12].

The analysis is based on qualitative methods: study of strategic documents and expert reports (DIIS, OSW, Polish and international think tanks) [1],[2],[3],[4],[5],[6],[7],[8],[9]; analysis of specialist media on Russian missile capabilities and organisational changes in the Russian armed forces [10],[11]; and scenario analysis of possible crisis variants involving the Oblast. A key limitation is the low reliability of Russian statistics and official communiqués, and incomplete data on losses suffered by units linked to Kaliningrad in the war in Ukraine [1].

For analytical purposes the following categories of threats stemming from the Oblast's location are distinguished: conventional military threats (use of land, naval and air forces against Poland); nuclear and missile threats (deployment of short- and possibly medium-range systems such as Iskander-M and the prospective Iskander-1000) [3],[10],[11]; hybrid threats (information operations, cyberattacks, sabotage of critical infrastructure, instrumentalisation of migration and transit) [1],[5],[9]; and legal-political threats (use of the region's status in Russian narratives and internal politics to undermine the European security order) [1],[3]. These categories structure the further discussion of the exclave's geostrategic, military and economic characteristics and their consequences for Poland.

In the scenario analysis three stylised variants were considered: (a) peacetime pressure involving mainly hybrid tools and limited military signalling; (b) crisis below the threshold of open war, including incidents at sea and in the air, temporary obstruction of transit or provocations on the border; and (c) open armed conflict in the region as part of a wider confrontation between Russia and NATO. Although these scenarios are simplified, they help to identify which Polish capabilities and alliance mechanisms would be most critical in each phase and where the main vulnerabilities of the north-eastern flank currently lie.

3. Solution of the examined problem

3.1. Geostrategic location of the exclave

Kaliningrad is the westernmost federal subject of the Russian Federation, bordering Poland and Lithuania and open to the Baltic Sea. Its central position in the southern Baltic, and the fact that it covers the northern part of former East Prussia, make it a specific 'semi-exclave': the lack of land connection with Russia is compensated primarily by maritime links with the Leningrad Oblast and St. Petersburg [1]. EU sanctions and temporary restrictions on

rail transit through Lithuania after 2022 increased the role of ferry connections and exposed the region's logistical vulnerability.

The Vistula and Curonian Lagoons and the limited depth of shipping channels constrain port operations in Baltiysk and Kaliningrad, but the Oblast remains a natural logistics hub and node on land and sea routes. Moscow has tried to integrate it into China's Belt and Road Initiative, though with limited economic success [1].

The key geostrategic element is the Suwałki Gap, which connects the Baltic States with the rest of NATO and separates Kaliningrad from Belarus. In many Western analyses, a rapid operation aimed at seizing the Gap and linking Russian forces from Kaliningrad and Belarus is treated as one of the most dangerous scenarios on the Alliance's north-eastern flank [4],[6],[7],[8]. NATO's enlargement to Finland and Sweden somewhat reduces the Baltic States' isolation by increasing options for sea- and air-based reinforcement, but simultaneously leaves Kaliningrad surrounded by an even denser ring of Allied states.

3.2. Military potential and operational role of the Oblast

The strategic significance of Kaliningrad is primarily due to the concentration of Russian armed forces. The region hosts the main base and headquarters of the Baltic Fleet, the 11th Army Corps and numerous land, artillery, missile, air defence and naval aviation units [1],[3]. Before the invasion of Ukraine, around 12,000 troops and significant armoured and artillery assets were stationed there, including Iskander-M systems with a range of up to 500 km [1],[3],[10].

Since the mid-2010s Russia has been systematically expanding air and missile defence (S-400) and reinforcing the A2/AD 'bubble' over the southern Baltic [3]. In 2022 the Ministry of Defence confirmed the deployment of MiG-31K aircraft armed with Kinzhal hypersonic missiles in the Oblast [1]. The war in Ukraine led to heavy losses among ground units of the 11th Army Corps, but the core missile and air defence infrastructure remained largely intact [1].

In 2024 Moscow formally re-established the Kaliningrad Military District, incorporating the 11th Army Corps and linking it in planning terms with forces in the Kola Peninsula [10]. At the same time, Russia continues work on medium-range ballistic systems (Iskander-1000), which, if deployed in Kaliningrad or western Russia, would bring most of Central and Northern Europe within range [11]. Even if these programmes face delays, they indicate an intention to maintain and expand missile pressure on NATO.

In operational terms, the forces in Kaliningrad are closely integrated with other components of the Russian Armed Forces through regular exercises and joint naval–air activities in the Baltic Sea. Large-scale drills such as the Zapad series, as well as unannounced snap exercises, have repeatedly rehearsed scenarios involving rapid reinforcement of the exclave, missile strikes on targets in Poland and the Baltic States, and the disruption of NATO's sea lines of communication. Even if some of these activities currently remain at a reduced scale due to personnel and equipment shortages linked to the war in Ukraine, they provide valuable insight into Moscow's planning assumptions and priorities [1],[3],[5].

3.3. Transit and economic dimension

The Oblast's location also has an important economic and transit dimension. After the collapse of the USSR, Kaliningrad became a semi-exclave whose connections with Russia depend on decisions taken in Vilnius, Warsaw and Brussels [1],[3]. Projects to turn the region into a special economic zone and logistics hub for traffic between Russia and Western Europe brought mixed results due to infrastructural constraints and growing political tensions [1].

The 2022 dispute over Lithuanian transit restrictions on selected EU-sanctioned goods demonstrated how easily the issue of supplying the exclave can turn into a political crisis affecting the whole EU [1]. From Poland's perspective, the proximity of Russian passenger and freight traffic to Polish transport, energy and port infrastructure creates room for incidents and pressure, for example in Gdańsk Bay or on the Vistula Lagoon.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Military and missile-nuclear dimension

Kaliningrad remains a direct source of military threat to Polish territory. The range of Iskander-M systems covers a large part of Poland, including Warsaw and the Tricity agglomeration, and further developments of medium-range missiles would extend this coverage to most of Central and Northern Europe [3],[10],[11]. For Polish defence planning this implies the need for multi-layered air and missile defence (Wisła, Narew) and dispersion of critical military infrastructure.

The exclave's location increases the risk of limited offensive operations against the Suwałki Gap, designed to hinder reinforcement of the Baltic States. NATO has responded by strengthening its eastern flank, deploying multinational battlegroups, conducting exercises such as 'Steadfast Defender 2024' and improving contingency plans [4],[7],[8]. At the same time, Russia uses the presence of nuclear-capable delivery systems in the Oblast to bolster its deterrence posture and nuclear signalling towards Poland and the Alliance [3],[10],[11].

As a response, Poland is investing heavily in layered integrated air and missile defence. The Wisła programme (Patriot batteries with PAC-3 MSE interceptors), the Narew short-range system, the modernization of the Air Force and the procurement of long-range artillery and rocket systems such as HIMARS and Chunmoo are all justified in public discourse primarily by reference to the missile threat from Kaliningrad and western Russia [2],[12]. By dispersing key assets, hardening infrastructure and improving command-and-control systems, Warsaw seeks to increase the costs and reduce the effectiveness of any potential first strike from the exclave.

4.2. Hybrid and informational dimension

The Kaliningrad Oblast serves as an important platform for hybrid operations. According to DIIS, the region has become a laboratory for Russia's neo-conservative narrative portraying Kaliningrad as a 'civilisational fortress' surrounded by a hostile and decadent West [1]. Poland, Lithuania and other neighbours are presented as aggressive states seeking to isolate the exclave.

Such narratives are used to justify military build-up and political pressure, as illustrated by Moscow's reaction to Lithuanian transit restrictions in 2022 [1]. In parallel, the presence in Kaliningrad of specialised units capable of subsea operations increases the risk of sabotage against energy, telecommunications and transmission infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, which directly affects Poland as a participant in projects such as Baltic Pipe and other critical links.

4.3. Poland's response and implications for security policy

Poland has reacted to the deteriorating environment with a major increase in defence spending, adoption of the Homeland Defence Act and acceleration of armed forces modernisation [2],[12]. Key priorities include expansion of land forces and territorial defence, development of air and missile defence, strengthening the reserve system and improving resilience of critical infrastructure [2],[12].

Expert debates increasingly stress that military measures alone are insufficient. Investments in civil defence, shelters, warning systems and defence education are needed, especially in voivodeships bordering the Kaliningrad Oblast [4],[12]. Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO opens new possibilities for joint planning, including alternative routes for reinforcing the Baltic States and better coordination of maritime operations [5],[6]. For Poland, consistent integration of national plans with Allied planning on the north-eastern flank is therefore crucial [14].

5. Conclusion

The Kaliningrad Oblast's geographical location gives it a dual character from the perspective of Poland's and NATO's security. It is at once a heavily militarised exclave equipped with assets capable of striking deep inside Allied territory and a logistically vulnerable area surrounded by NATO and EU states. In a crisis, it could support operations against the Suwałki Gap, but would also itself be exposed to isolation[13].

The analysis indicates that the military threat from Kaliningrad is real, although in the short term partly limited by Russia's engagement in Ukraine. In the medium term, however, reconstruction and reinforcement of forces in the region, including ballistic capabilities, should be expected [5],[10],[11]. Hybrid and

informational activities linked to the exclave already constitute an important tool of pressure on Poland and its neighbours and are likely to intensify [1],[5],[9].

Poland's response – high defence expenditure, modernisation of the armed forces and active participation in NATO initiatives – is generally adequate but must be accompanied by systematic development of civil resilience and infrastructure protection [2],[12]. In practice, this means: maintaining investment in air and missile defence and long-range fires; strengthening military presence and infrastructure in north-eastern Poland and cooperation with Lithuania in defending the Suwałki Gap; and building societal resilience to disinformation and other hybrid instruments.

Given current trends, the Kaliningrad Oblast will remain one of the main points of tension on Europe's security map. For Poland this requires treating the region not only as a potential military 'front', but also as a constant source of political, economic and informational challenges demanding a comprehensive, long-term response.

For decision-makers in Warsaw, one of the key challenges will be to sustain political consensus and predictable funding for these measures over the long term. Given that the Kaliningrad problem is unlikely to be resolved quickly, short electoral cycles should not lead to abrupt reversals in defence planning or to neglect of less visible areas such as civil protection, strategic communication and education in the field of security. Only a combination of stable military investment, resilient institutions and informed public opinion can ensure that Poland is able to manage the risks posed by the Russian exclave while avoiding unnecessary escalation.

Taken together, these observations confirm that the Kaliningrad issue cannot be treated as a narrow, technical question of force posture. It requires a comprehensive and long-term approach which links national defence planning with NATO's regional posture, EU initiatives and bottom-up efforts to strengthen societal resilience in the border regions most directly exposed to Russian pressure.

This article has focused primarily on the military and politico-strategic dimensions of the problem. In the longer run, however, it will also be necessary to address environmental, demographic and socio-economic processes in the broader borderland between Poland, Lithuania and the Russian exclave. These factors will shape the resilience of the region and its ability to absorb external shocks, including those generated by crises involving Kaliningrad.

Conversely, neglecting the specific vulnerabilities of north-eastern Poland or allowing public debate to be dominated by alarmist or defeatist narratives could make it easier for Russia to exploit Kaliningrad in order to intimidate local communities, drive wedges between allies or test the limits of NATO solidarity through calibrated provocations and hybrid operations.

From a broader regional perspective, the way in which Poland manages the risks and opportunities connected with Kaliningrad will also influence the security of the Baltic States and the credibility of NATO's deterrence posture in Northern Europe. If Warsaw succeeds in combining firm defence measures with careful crisis management and effective communication, the exclave may become a factor that strengthens rather than undermines allied cohesion.

Finally, the evolution of the security environment around the exclave should be seen not only as a source of risks, but also as a catalyst for closer integration within NATO and the EU. If properly managed, the challenges posed by Kaliningrad may encourage deeper defence cooperation, more efficient use of resources and stronger solidarity among allies on the Baltic Sea, all of which would ultimately enhance Poland's security and stability in the region.

Another important element is cooperation with academic institutions and think tanks which can provide independent assessments of Russia's behaviour in the Baltic Sea region, monitor changes in the force posture in the exclave and propose policy options tailored to Poland's specific geographic and political situation. Such expertise can help decision-makers avoid both complacency and overreaction when interpreting signals coming from Kaliningrad.

From a domestic perspective, one of the most demanding tasks will be to translate high-level strategic concepts into practical guidelines for local authorities, emergency services and critical infrastructure operators in the voivodeships bordering the exclave. This includes clear division of responsibilities, tested communication channels and realistic training scenarios that take into account both conventional and hybrid threats emanating from Kaliningrad.

At the operational level this implies a sustained effort to integrate Polish planning with that of neighbouring allies, in particular Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Sweden. Shared situational awareness in the Baltic Sea region, compatible contingency plans and regular joint exercises reduce the space for miscalculation and signal to Moscow that attempts to exploit Kaliningrad in isolation from the wider regional context are unlikely to succeed [15].

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