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Preparing for War: Wargaming the NATO-Russia Confrontation in the Baltics

The recent literature has inquired how media, official discourses, popular culture, or even sports and toys, can shape political imaginary into thinking that military intervention is the only relevant course of action. In this endeavor, the role of wargaming in justifying further militarization remains largely understudied. By building upon the RAND Baltic 2014-2015 wargame and the subsequent NATO decision to deploy troops in the Baltics and Poland, I propose that certain wargames can legitimize the use of force in three ways: by reflecting the security community's concerns in the storyline of the game, by designing the game in such a manner that preparation for war becomes the only well-founded means of tackling the issues posed by the game, and by enhancing its circulation in the defense field, notably by presenting the wargame as having the same level of credibility as science. Drawing upon assemblage theory, I propose that wargaming encompasses more than the individual experiences of its players. It encompasses the extensive sociotechnical assemblage of practices, technologies, networks of actors, and resulting emergent properties that together can amplify the conditions of possibility favourable to military deployment.

Keywords: Wargame; Assemblage; RAND; NATO; Baltics

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Introduction

In 2014, following the annexation of Crimea and amid growing tension between NATO and Russia, the Research and Development (RAND) Corporation, one of the leading American think tanks specialized in security and defence, conducted a tabletop wargame, simulating a Russian invasion of the Baltic countries. The wargame, in the form of a board game featuring maps, pawns, and dice, suggested that those countries could fall under Russian control within 36 hours (Shlapak & Johnson 2016a). The resulting study "made waves in Washington and other NATO capitals" (Overhaus, 2019, p. 19; Kofman, 2016) and is said to have shaped NATO's decision to undertake one of the largest deployments of troops in Europe in a generation (Overhaus 2019; Reddie et al. 2018; Shlapak & Johnson 2016a), also known as the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP). The EFP, decided at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, consists in the deployment of four multinational battlegroups to the three Baltic States and Poland.

While multiple authors have suggested the game's influence on the debates regarding the specifics of NATO's deployment of troops in the Baltics (Overhaus 2019; Reddie et al. 2018; Kofman 2016), identifying a direct influence on NATO's decision is particularly elusive. Instead, this article draws upon assemblage theory and its related notion of emergent causality (Deleuze and Guattari 1994), to investigate the "conditions of possibility" that "renders paths possible" (Connolly 1999; 2002; Salter and Mutlu 2012). In other words, it explores how certain practices can further specific imaginary and partake in the enabling of certain policies (Doty 1993). As a result, this article investigates how the assemblage of the RAND Baltic 2014-2015 wargame played a role in amplifying conditions of possibility for military deployment in the region.

Indeed, there has already been extensive research on the role of various forms of mediums such as official speeches (inter alia, Montgomery 2017; Clément et al. 2017), experts and pundits' discourses (Debrix 2005), press and media (Klaus and Kassel 2005, Debrix 2007), video games (Kavaloski 2018, Gangnon 2010, Festl et al. 2013), popular culture (Davies and Philpott 2013), sports (Jenkins 2013), and even toys (Machin and Van Leeuwen 2007) in propping up and legitimizing the use of force in international affairs, the role of wargames in this process has received limited attention. Critical assessments of wargames, when they exist, have then mainly focused on how the immersive aspect of the simulations can shape the players'

cognitions and worldviews (Der Derian 1990; Hirst 2022a, 2022b). This article postulates instead that wargaming is more than the personal experiences of its players, it is also the broader sociotechnical assemblage of networks of actors, technologies, practices, and emergent properties that together can amplify conditions of possibility favorable of military deployment.

To support this argument, this paper builds upon the assemblage theory. This theory is now increasingly mobilized by IR scholars to emphasize and account for the complexity of the social world (Baker and McGuirk 2017, Müller 2015, Bourne 2016, Bousquet 2017, Duez and Bellanova 2012). Mobilizing the concept of assemblage enables the disarticulation of the various characteristics of wargaming to draw attention to their political proclivities, as well as to identify the emergent properties that are sustained by the sociotechnical assemblage of wargaming. I, therefore, make three central arguments as to how wargames may frame the use of force as the preferred way forward. First, by reflecting the concerns of the security community in the storyline of the wargame to enhance the dramatization of its findings. Second, by designing the game in such a manner that preparation for war becomes the only legitimate means of tackling the issues posed by the game. Third, by enhancing the circulation of its key findings and related recommendations, notably by portraying the wargame as having the same veracity as science.

Given the extensive attention that this game has received and the transparency of its organisers, this article is based on a comprehensive collection of data from various sources such as articles published by the organisers of the game, reports of testimony, videos where the game is discussed, and documentation related to how the game was subsequently received. Additionally, this paper draws on an interview conducted with a game organizer in order to complement the follow-up engagement of the policymakers with the game. It is worth mentioning that this paper does not intend to delve into the experience of playing the game or the specific details of its design but instead, its purpose is to reconstruct the context in which it is entrenched and how it entangles with the storyline of the game, the postulates that are behind its parameters of the design of the game, the travel that it has made afterward, and its reception and subsequent adoption by various actors; that is, the sociotechnical assemblage of the wargame.

The rest of this article proceeds in three parts. The first part reviews what a wargame is and its relevant literature, with a particular emphasis on the impact of its immersive nature highlighted by the critical literature. The second one introduces assemblage theory in order to

point out how it can enhance our understanding of wargaming. The third part unpacks the three arguments in light of the theoretical framework by following the thread of the RAND Baltic 2014-2015 wargame.

Wargaming: Shaping the Players' Mind

The practice of wargaming may be traced back to the Romans and their "game of soldiers" (Mason 2018, 77) – a game similar to chess – as well as later on, to the Prussian *Kriegsspiel* (war play) that drew upon contemporary battles to set up the features of its games (Curry 2020). The purpose of the *Kriegsspiel* was to simulate the actual movements of armies with the most accuracy. Nowadays, wargaming is defined by Perla (1990) in the first comprehensive academic book on wargaming as

> *(Adversarial by nature), a wargame is a warfare model or simulation,*
> *using rules, data, and procedures, not involving actual military forces,*
> *and in which the flow of events is affected by, and in turn affects,*
> *decisions made during those events by players representing the*
> *opposite sides.*

In practice, wargaming may unfold in different manners and at different scales. From involving more than six hundred participants to being played by a couple of players on a phone. The budget also ranges from scratch to millions (Caffrey 2019, 43:3). Wargames may also unfold in various formats, including digital simulation, sometimes resembling video games (Deterding 2009; Dorn, Webb, and Pâquet 2020; King and Leonard 2009), tabletop iteration akin to board games, or even as deliberative discussion within seminar settings. The rigidity of their setting varies accordingly (Pournelle 2017). However, in all of these instances, wargaming should not be conflated with any type of simulation and modeling as the former entails a focus on experimentations on "human behavior and decision-making" (Hirst 2022a, 1), and creativity (Oberholtzer et al. 2019; Grossman 2023).

Players may be militaries, but also students, policymakers, businessmen, or lay individuals. Wargame may also be played by participants such as decision-makers who could be in charge in the said simulated situation. As a result, decision-makers may inject their insights and specific knowledge into the game (Reddie et al. 2018). This reinforces the credibility and veracity of the results produced by the game. The decisions however, just like

any laboratory experiment, remain artificial and *ergo* are relevant only insofar as they are recognized as a reconfiguration, a staging, of reality (Cetina 1999, 26–43).

Concretely, however, its purposes are diverse. From 'creat[ing] knowledge, convey[ing] knowledge or entertain[ing]' (Pournelle 2017, 49), wargaming thus displays features of a protean object. In wargaming, data are collected during and after the game. These data may be generated from a range of various sources, such as the observation of players' decision-making processes, forms indicating the players' intended moves, or feedback provided by players and facilitators. When considering the employment of this data for policy-making objectives, the prevailing literature primarily underscores its utilization in a similar vein to that of experimental studies. In other words, it emphasizes the comprehension of participants' behavior and decision-making processes, rather than providing explicit recommendations for precise policy directions (Oberholtzer et al. 2019; Bartels 2019). An exception to this trend can be found in the realm of computer-based wargames, where metrics from the game are employed to shed light on the necessity for the acquisition of military capabilities (Langreck et al. 2021). When it comes to board wargames, like the RAND Baltic 2014-2015 wargame, and as opposed to digital wargames that would enable to take into account more variables, scholars have warned even further about inferring generalizable outcomes to provide strict policy recommendations (Reddie et al. 2018).

In practice, during games, researchers have observed overconfidence, or "positive illusions", which is said to mediate and increase aggressive actions taken during the game (Johnson et al. 2006). As a result, scholars agree that traditional wargaming may promote decisions of a military nature in the game, at the expense of other approaches such as diplomatic or para-diplomatic methods (Hirst 2022a). Along these lines, Der Derian (1990) has further advanced the critical literature on wargaming by examining how the pervasiveness of simulations in a society further enhances the constant preparation for war and, and ultimately, performatively enables war. Der Derian considers that wargames detach wars from their physical realities and in doing so decrease the perceived costs of conflict. Hirst (2022a), then, reviewed the "renaissance" of wargames in the US Department of Defense (DoD) to assert that wargames may militarize their players by focusing specifically on the human mind and consequently by shaping internal thoughts and beliefs. Hirst notably considers that the game militarizes its players by using means of critical thinking such as multiple scenarios and reflexivity, in order to "intervene in the inner world of players in promotion of military ends"

(p. 2). She considers therefore that wargaming shapes its participants by immersing them into a virtual world. These assessments, although particularly insightful, have inferred the performative aspect of wargames on their immersive aspect mostly. This paper goes beyond the immersive aspect that is pushed forward by the critical literature on wargames to reassess their performativity in light of the socio-technical assemblage that they enable. To do so, this paper builds upon the assemblage theory.

Wargaming as an Assemblage

In line with new material theories, Deleuze and Guatarri's (1980) philosophical notion of "*agencement*", or assemblage, emphasizes the importance of connections, heterogeneity, as well as multiplicity in the social realm (p. 13-14). This notion explores how elements of heterogeneity (may they be humans or non-humans, such as practices, objects, and technologies) connect as to form a new phenomenon and propel emergent properties.

In assemblage theory, the technology, the game itself in our case, is reassessed in light of its intrinsic properties, but also in light of the meaning given to it by actors interacting with it, as well as the new properties that their co-functioning create (Bousquet 2014). While the technology may also exert resistance and shape the network of agents that engage with it, it does not, in itself, pilot the assemblage. It is part of the assemblage and functions along with other elements (Bousquet 2014). Further to that, just like in Deleuze and Guatarri's writing where the mechanic become gears of the machine, players of the wargame and actors mobilizing its results become part of the wargame assemblage as well, and the concerns of the international community that become the storyline of the game also become gears in the assemblage of the wargame. Concomitantly, assemblages enable the production of shared ingrained collective beliefs, that is, what Deleuze and Guattari (1986) call a "collective assemblage of enunciation" (p. 82). In other words, the assemblage of the wargame may also enable the ingrained belief that military deployment is the best course of action.

Accordingly, I speak of 'wargaming' instead of 'wargame(s)' to emphasize its substance as a sociotechnical assemblage of practices, technology, and relevant network of actors rather than as a static object.

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Assembling Wargaming into a Preparation for War

In March 2014—shortly after Russia annexed Crimea—three RAND employees pondered the consequences of a potential Russian attack on NATO's eastern flank. Although their first intuition was that NATO would easily counter a Russian offensive, they found that there was no accurate assessment or tentative answer in the literature. Tim Bonds, director of the Army Research Division at RAND, proposed a specific budget to address this issue. Dave Shlapak and Michael Johnson decided to carry out a wargame simulating a Russian attack on the Baltics (interview with a RAND researcher, 2021).

Reflecting the concerns of the security community: Dramatizing vulnerabilities

To understand how organisers of the game decided to question the vulnerability of the Baltic states, a small detour to the international context of the time to emphasize the major concerns of the security community is essential. The follow-up integration of these concerns within the framework of the game became the first element to act as gear in the assemblage of wargaming.

For the last decade, academics and practitioners have discussed how Russia had been reinforcing its brinkmanship in the Baltics and have referred to it as 'anti-access/area denial.' (A2AD[1]), i.e., the positioning of 'highly capable and long-range anti-air, anti-shipping and surface-to-surface missiles in Kaliningrad'(Frühling and Lasconjarias 2016, 96). A2AD is said to render NATO's intervention in the Baltics hazardous, particularly in case of an emergency. The presence of ground-to-air, anti-ship, and ground-to-ground missiles prevents *de facto*, NATO troops from intervening on the territory of the Baltic states in case of aggression. The decisive role of A2AD has generated a 'hype' in the field of security experts, and the subsequent trend of showing maps with a red circle to illustrate NATO's inability to access the territories of its Allies has intensified (Dalsjö and Jonsson 2021). This representation of the Russian threat and the A2AD build-up through maps with red circles implied that NATO had no meaningful way of protecting its Allies and that a Russian invasion meant either abandoning them or entering into a full-blown war with Moscow. Although some scholars have argued that the threat posed by Russia's A2AD is exaggerated due to overestimations of its range as well as underestimations of NATO's retaliatory capabilities (Dalsjö and Jonsson 2021), A2AD became

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[1] A2 (anti-access) refers to the impediment of forces on the territory while AD (area denial) refers to the impediment of movement of forces already within the area.

a central concern for NATO as evidenced by the steady increase in the mentions of the term in documents published on the official NATO website since 2015 (NATO n.d.).

Furthermore, Moscow's strategy with NATO was most often understood by the security community by zooming in on Russia's practice of '*fait accompli*' (Zapfe 2017, 149). This element of *'fait accompli'* consists of a rapid intervention and a definitive annexation of territory leaving it to the Kremlin's diplomats and politicians to resume 'business as usual' or to wait until the international community recognizes it *de facto* or starts a conflict to regain it. This policy is based on the assumption that Western states will prefer to launch a 'reset' policy towards Russia, and thus *de facto* recognize the annexation, rather than maintain sanctions against Moscow indefinitely, or even intervene militarily. Although Obama delivered a speech in Tallinn where he pledged that the territorial integrity of the Baltic states will be protected by NATO (The White House 2014), the Baltic countries' fear of the inertia of the Alliance's founding countries remained. The latter might be reluctant to mobilize their soldiers in a direct conflict with Russia in case of an attack on NATO's eastern flank. Either way, both scenarios would delegitimize NATO (Zapfe 2017). Along these lines, the media has also stepped up its portrayal of Narva and Daugavpils (respectively Estonian and Latvian cities with a Russian-speaking majority and situated at the border with Russia) as the new Crimea. However, Russia's potential use of the '*fait accompli*' practice is contested in the literature for two reasons. First, only 'limited land grabs' may be captured via this tactic, whereas seizing the Baltics' territory would instead necessitate a full-scale war. Second, it implies that Russia would risk a war for the sole purpose of politically delegitimizing NATO (Kofman 2016). Furthermore, no territory in the Baltic is actually contested by Russia (Kofman 2020).

It is these concerns of the international community that have provided the game's storyline, indeed the wargame's purpose was to "examine(d) the shape and probable outcome of a near-term Russian invasion of the Baltic states" (Shlapak and Johnson 2016a, 1) and hence to investigate the necessary force composition capable of defending the eastern flank of NATO and deterring Russian aggression (Reddie et al. 2018). In the spirit *of 'fait accompli'*, Russian troops from its Western Military District and Kaliningrad *oblast* attack the territory of Estonia or Latvia (or both), aiming to take control of their territory (Shlapak and Johnson 2016a, 4).

In an assemblage, the technology is reassessed in light of the meaning given to it by actors. In this case, one of the organisers of the game stated that their aim was "to provide a realistic assessment of […]the risks that policymakers have accepted with NATO's current

posture and plans." (U.S. Helsinki Commission, 2016). The RAND Baltic 2014-2015 wargame voluntarily reflected the concerns and dominant narratives of the security community at that time. The context and notably the 'hype' around A2AD and the increased fear of the Baltic states of becoming Moscow's next target is central in this process. In the same vein, Obama's pledge to the Baltics following the annexation of Crimea has also partaken in the assemblage. The explicit purpose of the game was to shed light on this situation to propel political decisions, and more precisely, to drive the decision-making process towards the deployment of additional troops.

The concerns of the security community and their mobilization within the storytelling of the wargame act as elements of heterogeneity, that exist independently, yet, cofunction to propel new properties, that is, the dramatization of these concerns, their materialization, and reification. As a result, the concerns surrounding the security of the Baltic countries intensified, despite the contested nature of the fears addressed within the game.

Designing to Lose: Unrealistic Deterrence

Based on this storyline and with the purpose of alerting NATO of the risk it was taking with its current policy, RAND established the Baltic wargame. The game is played by approximately 30 players. There are two teams: a blue team (NATO) of about 20 players and a red team (Russia) of about 10 players. The game is overseen by 6 to 10 defence analysts from RAND in charge of helping to 'translate [the] military decisions [of the players] into game terms' (Mueller 2016, 56). The game on the territory of the Baltics also necessitated a different approach to that commonly followed by RAND, that is, computer-based simulation. This is mostly due to the size of the territory and the small number of troops deployed, which meant that it was not a 'shoulder to shoulder' type of operation where the front line moves back and forth, but instead 'it was going to be a war of maneuver across space' (interview with a RAND researcher, 2021). The 'old-fashioned' paper map wargame was thus brought back, with a blackboard of result tables and calendars. The use of paper board game instead of computer-based simulation was also motivated by the desire to provide outcomes faster by not having to spend "a year" on a computer-based simulation (Shlapak and Johnson 2016c). The two maps were 1:500,000 tactical pilotage charts with hexagon-shaped patterns (Shlapak and Johnson 2016a, 12). The hexagon is the shape that enables the most entries (six) and may still be pieced together. Hexagon symbolizes a distance of 10 kilometers and each turn of the game corresponds to a

time span of 12 hours, one unit equals a battalion, and air unit equals half squadron (Mueller 2016, 56; Shlapak and Johnson 2016b, 12)

Before the game, RAND organisers estimated the Russian forces at 25 battalions with mechanized and motorized infantry and airborne and naval battalions, accompanied by 10 units of artillery, 5 units of long-range rockets, 6 battalions of mi-24 helicopters, and 27 squadrons of aircraft (Mueller 2016, 54; Shlapak and Johnson 2016a, 5-6). On the NATO side, they evaluated the ground forces at 17 to 20 mechanized and motorized infantry, and about 18 squadrons of aircraft (Shlapak and Johnson 2016a, 4-5). They evaluated the Russian military pace (with no resistance, on the highway) at 5 miles per hour, thus underestimating it to the maximum to ensure the veracity of the game. In these settings, NATO is notified of Russia's intention one week prior to the attack (Tertrais 2016, 151). Although a second iteration of the game entailed a change in the types of units, enhanced capabilities, and more battalions on the NATO side and a slight increase on the Russian side as well (U.S. Helsinki Commission, 2016), the main sets of directives for the game remained the same.

As it is,

'*The games' findings are unambiguous: As currently postured, NATO cannot successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members. Across multiple games using a wide range of expert participants in and out of uniform playing both sides, the longest it has taken Russian forces to reach the outskirts of the Estonian and/or Latvian capitals of Tallinn and Riga, respectively, is 60 hours.'* (Shlapak and Johnson 2016a, 1)

The game's parameter initially concurs with generative modeling affording players the capacity to exert influence over the gameplay. This assertion held true to some extent, as exemplified by the unexpected inclusion of Sweden as a NATO base, a decision informed by player feedback (Shlapak and Johnson 2016a, 5). Nevertheless, a comprehensive analysis of the overall results suggests a discernible leaning towards a degenerative design approach, characterized by the convergence of outcomes towards a singular result (Weuve et al. 2004; Tekinbas and Zimmerman 2003, 241). Indeed, while the potential for NATO to emerge victorious was theoretically plausible, empirical evidence demonstrates a consistent victory of the "red side". The degree of variation was only manifested in the duration required for Russia to attain triumph, ranging from a minimum of 36 hours to a maximum of 60 hours.

To make sense of the situation, one can turn to the intrinsic properties of the technology of the assemblage, that is, the parameters of the game and their implications. To begin with, the wargame was not designed as a pol-mil game[2] enabling political and diplomatic decisions but focused instead on military capabilities in the Baltic theatre. In other words, it tested military operations and neglected diplomatic and paradiplomatic responses. Then, the wargame tested 'deterrence-by-denial,' which requires enough forces in the region to completely counter a potential Russian attack. Hence, 'deterrence-by-denial' entails a strategic defeat, while 'deterrence-by-punishment' implies strategic retaliation. At the operational level; the former translates as battlefield defeat, while the latter means punitive resistance (Snyder 1960, Mueller 2021). Furthermore, the wargame was played in one theatre of operation, the Baltics, instead of across multiple theaters encompassing geographic areas such as the southern flank of NATO or the Arctic. Finally, RAND simulated a conventional attack on the Baltics instead of hybrid attacks; therefore, the nuclear factor was not covered by the parameters of the game. Put differently, the game has tested NATO's military capacity to counter a Russian conventional attack, in one theatre of operation characterized by a lack of access wherein elements such as nuclear dissuasion, and retaliation across different theatres have been overlooked. The strict design of the RAND Baltic 2014-2015 wargame can only point toward emphasizing the Baltic region's vulnerability next to Russia's geographical advantage. As such, these settings entail a wargame that NATO was sure to lose.

Some scholars also contested concrete aspects of the game by pointing out that the necessary logistical halts in Russia's deployment of troops were missed by the settings of the game (Vershinin 2021). Specifically, the intense dependency of Russia on railroads and the necessity of either capturing the Baltic railroads and operating from them or switching from trains to trucks to supply troops in the Baltics are likely to contribute to delaying Russia's overall military advance in the Baltics. The related logistical support halts would hamper Russia from controlling the territories in a relatively lasting manner (Vershinin 2021). Adding to this, a potential Polish counter-attack before the activation of the NATO Response Force and the scenario of a rapid *fait accompli*—as it plays out in the RAND Baltic 2014-2015 wargame—becomes further contested (Vershinin 2021).

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[2] Pol-mil games are wargames that encompass both military and political variables—that is, incorporate military and diplomatic elements.

Every wargame entails its set of shortcomings and related compromises, not everything can be tested and a simulation is, in essence, a reduction of reality. Wargame designers must therefore find a balance between simplifying the world in order to draw inferences, while also remaining faithful enough to draw conclusions that can prove accurate (Reddie 2021). The parameters of the design of the RAND Baltic 2014-2015 wargame can only shed light on the military vulnerabilities of specific regions and these strict settings turn the preparation of war into the only legitimate means of tackling the issues posed by the game. If the wargame does not pilot the assemblage, its intrinsic properties may also incline it in a specific direction. As Grossman (2023) points out "if overly designed, a wargame can help reinforce the agenda of its creators" (p.3).

Furthermore, in wargames, opponents are often depicted as distinct entities, symbolized by a "red pawn." The objective of the red pawn to engage and overcome the blue pawn is accepted within the game, which reduces the need for extensive analysis of motivations or reasoning behind their actions. As such, pawns, part of the wargaming assemblage, mask the complexities of the NATO-Russia relations and the controversies behind Russia's actual determination to attack the Alliance to create instead a sense of comprehensiveness and straightforwardness. In our case, organisers have set the parameters of the game so that Russia's goal was "to demonstrate NATO's inability to protect its most vulnerable members and divide the alliance" (Shlapak and Johnson 2016a, 4) despite the debates on this premise in the literature. In this way, the game effectively conceals the true complexity of the situation, creating a façade of simplicity and clarity where decisions become easier to take.

Enabling Frenetic Circulation: Performing the Scientific

After the game, Johnson and Shlapak wrote a 16-page report, which was made available online. The first page displays the key findings of the wargame as well as straightforward recommendations for restoring the balance of power with Russia in the region, specifically, the deployment of "seven brigades, including three heavy armored brigades" (Shlapak and Johnson 2016a, 1). This report is one of RAND's most downloaded reports (RAND 2017) and has been cited more than 300 times on Google Scholar. The results of the wargame were then disseminated by its authors across various mediums. A condensed version of the original report, entitled 'Outnumbered, Outranged, and Outgunned: How Russia Defeats NATO' (Shlapak and

Johnson, 2016b), was widely circulated among members of the defence community (Kofman, 2016). This article, which bore a stark title, gained significant traction and attention.

Subsequently, the wargame was widely construed and reinterpreted as a scientific study by numerous individuals. Indeed, to accentuate the validity of its conclusions, RAND emphasized a variety of scientific attributes of the wargame in its publications. To begin with, the game was presented as a model where maps and pawns are used as "a technology of correspondence" of the actual Baltic territory (Cetina 1999, 35). This justifies the generalization of the results from the game. Transparency of the method and reproducibility of the findings were emphasized by the organisers and the game's capacity to predict was watermarked throughout their research.

RAND also emphasized the reproducibility and veracity of the results obtained based on the fact that the game has been repeated across various geographical locations and involved a diverse array of stakeholders (Shlapak and Johnson 2016a, 12). The game was presented as a lab experiment where direct observations can lead to the identification of causal relationships. All these elements propelled new properties of the game and brought it closer to science. In the case of the RAND Baltic 2014-2015 wargame, however, the variation of independent variables emphasized by the organisers, that is, players involved, locations, and various military tactics, suggested the identification of a specific causal relationship, that of the number of troops on the security of the Baltics. However, the literature on wargaming emphasizes that when the game itself serves as the 'unit of analysis' (Lin-Greenberg et al. 2022, 97), which is the case here, as opposed to the behaviour of the participants, it is expected that variations occur in the game's settings in order to test different outcomes. In essence, by introducing a range of player types (such as civilians or military personnel), changing the location, and, to some extent, adapting tactics, the game brings insights into the ways decision-making is influenced by specific conditions rather than actually offering policy recommendations.

Nonetheless, the game started to travel across actors. In total, the game was run 24 times (U.S. Helsinki Commission 2016). This is the stage of "*intéressement*" where the technology interacts with actors from the receiving environment and their respective interest in engaging with the object comes into play (Akrich et al. 2002).

The first stop for RAND was at the DoD to present the findings of the wargame (interview with a RAND researcher, 2021). RAND experts also gave testimony at the House of

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Armed Services Committee and at the Helsinki Commission (Dec. 2016) where they also played the game with members of the commission (2017) as well as Congressional staff of other offices. The game sparked interest in the defense community and in February 2015, a memo was issued by the Pentagon urging to "reinvigorate, institutionalize and systematize wargaming across the department" (USNI 2015). The game was then sponsored by the Office of the Under Secretary of the Army (Shlapak and Johnson 2016a, 1), this resulted in the latter's incorporation into the sociotechnical assemblage that shapes and defines the wargame and questions the potential for "sponsorship bias" (Lin-Greenberg, Pauly, and Schneider 2022).

The game was played with members of NATO but also presented in the form of reports or briefed to the Alliance. The game was thus played with the US European Command in the UK, and US Air Force Europe in Germany, then with NATO allies in the RAND office in Cambridge. The results of the RAND 2014-2015 wargame were briefed by RAND to the international staff of the Alliance (interview with a RAND researcher, 2021) and the Secretary General (SecGen) distributed the report to each Permanent Representative (PermRep) (RAND 2017). The results of the game were also mentioned by the president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in his annual report which subsequently encouraged more troops on the ground to deter a potential Russian attack (NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2016). In other words, the nature of the game displayed a fluidity that allowed for diverse types of engagements. In any case, the wargame itself, along with its results, were reappropriated within the realm of NATO, serving as a basis for advocating the reinforcement of subsequent troop deployments.

The wargaming assemblage connected different actors and created space for debate on what to do with the Russian problem, while concomitantly delineating it to this specific framing of the issue, that is, the collective assemblage of enunciation. After the wargame, in May 2015, Petr Pavel, the Chairman of NATO Military Committee, was quoted in the media of his country warning that it would take Russia "48 hours to take the Baltics" (Zapfe and Glatz 2016). At the House of Representatives on 25th of February, 2016, a speaker from the House Armed Services Committee mentioned a discussion with NATO SACEUR Breedlove regarding RAND's wargame and the sixty hours that Russia would need to take over the Baltics, as well as the need for seven brigades and three heavily armored ones. The speaker then inquired further about ways to meet RAND's recommendations (EUCOM 2016). The debate was also raised at national levels. For instance in the UK, at the Defense Committee of the UK Parliament (U.K.

Parliament 2016a, 2016b) and the House of Commons then built upon the study to position themselves, while also remaining cautious vis-à-vis the results (U.K. Parliament 2016c). The results of the game were therefore reappropriated by the actors and they all became spokespersons of the game, concomitantly acting as gear in the broader assemblage at play. The issue raised by the RAND Baltic 2014-2015 wargame has also been brought up multiple times by journalists to the SecGen in 2016 during press conferences (NATO 2016a; 2016b; 2016c). The game elicited a substantial uproar, necessitating repeated justifications from the Alliance.

New properties emerged and the wargaming assemblage became an argument for further militarization. In a controversy, the wargame presents itself as a scientific experiment upon which decisions can be taken (Latour 1987). The game can thus be seized by actors with different interests. These actors respectively refer to the wargame as an argument from authority. Accordingly, various policymakers, from NATO's President of the Parliamentary Assembly to NATO SACEUR, referred to the wargame as a study (NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2016, EUCOM 2016). The nature of the wargame transformed, through the meaning given to it by the security establishment, to become as construed as a scientific experiment.

In the meantime, other think tanks started to turn to this issue as well. The Centre for New American Security conducted a two-day tabletop exercise and came up with similar results (Smith and Hendrix 2016). As part of this exercise, the think tank invited 50 highly ranked American and European officials, among them NATO practitioners (Smith and Hendrix 2016; Tertrais 2016). The game results, however, provided insights rather than strict recommendations (Smith and Hendrix 2016), accordingly, the game yielded less leverage in the defense field and to our knowledge, has not been remobilized afterward by the NATO sphere. Apart from think tanks, former SACEUR (Shirreff 2016) but also documentaries (inter alia Range 2016) started to imagine similar scenarios of war with Russia (Tertrais 2016).

The wargaming assemblage enabled the settling of long controversy within NATO. Indeed, that NATO was oblivious to the adverse geographic position of the Baltic states is doubtful. The Latvian Defense Minister notably responded to the unrest that the game had created by underlining that the situation was already well-known to NATO (LSM 2016). As the French PermRep to NATO reported to his Senate, the Warsaw Summit was a compromise between the Baltic states, which were asking for more troops, and the risk of provoking Russia (Sénat 2016). Accordingly, the Baltics continuously asked for more NATO and American troops on the ground as a 'key guarantee of security' (Lithuania's National Security 2012). In parallel, Poland

was asking for 10.000 permanently stationed troops on its territory (Jones 2014). At the Warsaw Summit, NATO opted for four multinational battalions, less than the seven brigades asked by RAND, yet a decisive decision toward the militarization of the Baltic states and Poland.

In line with assemblage theory, the game enabled a collective assemblage of enunciation, that is, the circulation and reinforcement of a specific statement. Although there were some disagreements, the framing imposed by the game refrained from a total reframing of the issue at hand. Even skeptics of the game mobilized its findings to push further deployment. As an illustration, we can turn to the SACEUR Breedlove who publicly answered a question based on the wargame by putting the study in perspective: 'But what you find from a study is tied a lot to how you've been given the problem' (EUCOM 2016). Yet, in 2019, former SecGen Vershbow and SACEUR Breedlove published a report in the Atlantic Council, referencing the RAND Baltic 2014-2015 wargame to stress that although NATO's Summits had already "addressed some of the weaknesses identified in the RAND report", yet, the need for further deterrence in the Baltics remains (Vershbow and Breedlove 2019, 31).

A multiplicity of actors took part in the dissemination and amplification of the message of the wargame and as such created a web of facilitating conditions (Salter and Mutlu 2012, 16) for the militarization of the Baltic. They became concomitantly spokespersons of the wargame and of its results and gears in its overall assemblage. These *de facto* coalitions acted in unison to advocate for increased troop deployment in the Baltics and Poland. The performativity of the assemblage that constitutes the wargame is thus also considered in light of the role that external agents have played in circulating the results and building up decisions based on the game. Whether they were already convinced and instrumentalized in the game and its results, or if they became convinced through their participation in the game does not change that the game was capable, as a protean object, to crystalize different interests. Accordingly, some actors found in the result of the game, the objective information that they were looking for to put further pressure on NATO.

Conclusion

The RAND Baltic 2014-2015 sparked debates among decision-makers and played a contributory role in amplifying NATO's impetus toward deploying troops in the Baltics, thereby augmenting the conditions of possibility favourable to military deployment. However, as emphasized by the literature on wargames, the primary objective of wargaming is to analyze

human behaviors rather than serve as a means to provide decision-makers with ready-made solutions. Board wargames in particular introduce additional simplifications of reality, which can pose challenges when attempting to apply their outcomes to real-world scenarios. In light of these considerations, it is essential to approach wargames as a tool with a clear understanding of their limitations. Specifically, caution should be exercised in employing them directly for political decision-making, especially if the design tends toward narrowing the possible outcomes, if the wargame is played in a heated international context that concomitantly drives the storyline of the game, and finally, if it is subsequently reinterpreted with the same authority as a scientific study and its results travel among policymakers, without references to the limitations of the game.

Theoretically, conceptualizing wargaming as an assemblage enables the theoretical disarticulation and re-articulation of elements of different natures that are extrinsically connected to each other, in order to underline how they all engage in the assemblage. Accordingly, not only atomic agential elements are considered but also their relations and imbrications with one another and the subsequent unity, and symbiosis, that they form. Hence, the wargaming assemblage encompasses not only its immersive aspect but also the deliberate design choices made by its creators, the engagement of networks of actors with it, as well as the credibility and believability of its results. From that emerges a wargame capable of creating and subsequently resolving controversies, enabling a collective assemblage of enunciation and, ultimately, amplifying the conditions of possibility to make military intervention the sole viable course of action.

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