



MILITARY IMPORTANCE OF THE KALININGRAD OBLAST

ZNACZENIE MILITARNE OBWODU KALININGRADZKIEGO

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— ABSTRACT —

The aim of this paper is to analyse the military importance of the Kaliningrad Oblast. The geostrategic location of the Kaliningrad Oblast determines its military importance on a global, regional and local scale. The exclave is a kind of "barometer" that determines the state of relations between Russia and the West, which translates into the level of security in the Euro-Atlantic area. On the one hand, the region bordering the countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union is extremely important for ensuring Russia's security and significantly increases the strategic depth in the western direction. Secondly, the military potential deployed in the Kaliningrad Oblast poses the greatest threat to the Baltic states and Poland.

Keywords: Kaliningrad Oblast; Russian Federation; military importance; strategic bastion; military threats

— ABSTRAKT —

Celem niniejszego opracowania jest analiza znaczenia militarnego obwodu kaliningradzkiego. Położenie geostrategiczne obwodu kaliningradzkiego określa wpływa na jego znaczenie militarne w skali globalnej, regionalnej i lokalnej. Eksklawa stanowi pewnego rodzaju „barometr”, który określa stan relacji pomiędzy Rosją a Zachodem, co przekłada się na poziom bezpieczeństwa na obszarze Euroatlantyckim. Z jednej strony, obwód graniczący z państwami Organizacji Traktatu Północnoatlantyckiego i Unii Europejskiej ma bardzo duże znaczenie dla zapewnienia bezpieczeństwa Rosji oraz znacząco zwiększa głębokość strategiczną na kierunku zachodnim. Po drugie, potencjał militarny rozmieszczony w obwodzie kaliningradzkim stanowi zagrożenie w największym zakresie dla państwa bałtyckich i Polski.

Słowa kluczowe: Obwód kaliningradzki; Federacja Rosyjska; znaczenie militarne; bastion strategiczny; zagrożenia militarne

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The Kaliningrad Oblast is the westernmost region of the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as the Federation, Russia). The exclave borders the countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO, hereinafter, the Alliance, the Pact) and the European Union (EU, hereinafter, the Union). Ensuring the defence of the oblast translates into the security of the Federation, as it is an “advanced outpost” in the confrontation with the West. In the event of a possible conflict, there is a risk of military action to obtain a land connection between the Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus. This issue fundamental to NATO’s defence of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia by NATO, i.e. the fulfilment of the 5th Article of the Washington Treaty. In such circumstances, the so-called Suwałki Gap is of great significance to both the Alliance and the Federation. Moreover, the oblast also secures Russia’s presence in the Baltic Sea (Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 129, 182, 296–297, 300; Raś, 2018, pp. 298–315; Żęgota, 2021, pp. 268–272, 334–335, 401–402; Żyła, 2018, pp. 91, 188, 204–205, 299–300).

The aim of this article is to analyse the military importance of the Kaliningrad Oblast for the Russian Federation and NATO countries. The following research hypotheses were adopted:

1. Due to its geostrategic location, the Kaliningrad Oblast is of significant economic and military importance. Nevertheless, at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, and especially after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, its military role clearly prevails, both for the Federation and NATO.

2. The Kaliningrad Oblast allows Russia to maintain the military presence in the Baltic Sea basin, and after the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, it prevents complete isolation in the west. This largely depends on the outcome of the war with Ukraine and maintaining military control over the territory of Belarus, which also translates into a military threat to the Alliance, especially Poland and the Baltic states.

Factor analysis was used to verify the adopted research hypotheses. It is complemented by research techniques, such as: content analysis of scientific studies, document analysis. The military significance of the Kaliningrad Oblast is complex. The Federation uses the exclave in its military activities at the global [the United States of America (USA), NATO and the EU], regional (Baltic States and Belarus) and local (cross-border relations) levels. Moreover, from Russia’s point of view, the oblast has a defensive character, while countries in its close surroundings perceive it as a source of threats (Żęgota, 2021, p. 399; Raś, 2018, p. 309). The first section of this article includes the characterisation of the deter-

minants of the military importance of the Kaliningrad Oblast. The second part analyses the significance of the exclave as an advanced strategic stronghold. The third section provides a description of the oblast as an instrument for creating military threats. The chronological range covers the years 2016–2023.

DETERMINANTS OF THE MILITARY IMPORTANCE OF THE KALININGRAD OBLAST

The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation of 2 July 2021 identified activities that resulted in an increase in military threats to the state. These included attempts to exert pressure, the expansion of NATO's military infrastructure near the country's borders, increased intelligence activities and exercises involving large military formations and nuclear weapons targetting the Russian Federation. Similar issues were also included in the Military Doctrine of the Union State of 4 November 2021. The document included among the negative factors the strengthening of NATO's military potential on the external border of the Union State and the deployment of military units with a high level of combat readiness in neighbouring countries and the expansion of military infrastructure (President of Russia, 2021; Standing Committee of the Union State, 2021). At a meeting on the problems of ensuring national security in northwestern Russia, held on 21 June 2022 in Kaliningrad, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev emphasised the issue of increasing NATO's military presence and intelligence activities on the country's borders (Security Council of Russia, 2022).

The Baltic Sea is of strategic importance for the Federation, as the only route to the ocean, but it is the route to Europe, runs through it. The basin is important for exports to the markets of countries in this region, including petroleum products, natural gas, coal, metals, wood and fertilizers. In this respect, Russia strives to maintain free maritime transport and counter various attempts to violate it (Faliczew, 2022, p.7; Mickiewicz, 2022, p. 255).

In the *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* of 31 July 2022, the Baltic straits are defined as important zones for the protection of national interests affecting the scope of state security at the strategic and regional levels. Russia's main challenges and threats include the expansion of NATO's military infrastructure at the country's borders, as well as an increase in the number of manoeuvres carried out in the waters of the seas adjacent to its territory. The development

of the Baltic Fleet's military and basing system was also raised to ensure the Federation's ability to guarantee the protection of its interests in the Baltic Sea. Actions in this area require maintaining free transport to the Kaliningrad Oblast through permanent ferry connections with Ust-Luga and Saint Petersburg. The construction of submarine transmission and energy systems to the oblast is also an important issue. After Finland and Sweden joined NATO, Russia's response was to depend on the nature and degree of threats to state security. In this respect, the use of all available military and technical means was permissible, including in the Baltic Sea (Prezydent Rosji, 2022; (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 2022; Mickiewicz, 2022, p. 95; Raś, 2018, p. 314).

The geostrategic location of the oblast is both an asset and a burden for the Federation. On the one hand, it allows Russia to maintain its military presence in the Baltic Sea. In this respect, it is also crucial to take into account the specific geographical and hydrometeorological conditions of this reservoir.¹ Baltiysk and Kaliningrad are of great importance in the state's military security system. First, they are Russia's only frost-free ports in the Baltic Sea. In the case of units stationed at the Kronstadt base, some of them have limited opportunities to conduct winter operations in the Gulf of Finland due to icing. Moreover, there is the possibility that these ships can be easily blocked by NATO countries, especially after the accession of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance. Secondly, Baltiysk is the main base of the Baltic Fleet and Kaliningrad is the transshipment point for supplies for the entire region. The well-developed coastal infrastructure of both ports enables the stationing and handling of all types of units operating in this area, including those of the main classes. Approximately 160 medium and small warships can be permanently moored there. The exclave also has an extensive network of military airports and airstrips. Thirdly, the provision of a free "exit" to the Atlantic Ocean. These issues directly affect the military importance of the district (Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 119, 221; Żęgota, 2021, pp. 241–243, 270, 369; Żyła, 2018, pp. 91–92, 174, 190; Raś, 2018, p. 298–315).

A key problem concern, however, is the supply of the oblast in the event of deterioration of relations with the West. The exclave is approximately 550–600 km away from Russia and 65 km from Belarus in the Suwałki Gap. The introduction of a ban on transporting troops, military equipment and supplies by land

¹ Geographical characteristics and hydrometeorological and hydrological conditions of the Baltic Sea, see: Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 72–113, 288–289.

away from the oblast forces the use of sea and air transport. Prior to 3 April 2023, NATO countries owned 40% of the Baltic Sea coast. However, after Finland and Sweden join the Alliance, approximately 95% of the coastline will be under its members' control. Additionally, NATO aircraft can reach Kaliningrad within one minute. This situation has a significant impact on the freedom of action of the Baltic Fleet, including providing combat and logistical support to the exclave. A very important issue is the substantial strengthening of the military potential, i.e. the militarisation of the Gotland Island by Sweden (Topolski, 2013, pp. 106–107; Kjellén, 2021, pp. 25–26; Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 176, 225, 287–290, 305).

The area of the oblast accounts for 0.09% of the territory of the Federation, i.e. nearly 13,400 square kilometres, and including the Vistula Lagoon and the Curonian Lagoon, approximately 15,100 square kilometres. From the borders of the oblast, the distance to the capitals of the region's countries does not exceed 550 km, i.e. Vilnius (~160 km), Warsaw (~240 km), Riga (~230 km), Tallinn (~505 km), Berlin (~480 km), Copenhagen (~480 km) and Stockholm (~500 km). A significant part of the borders, mainly in the western, northern and eastern sections, is natural, including the seacoast (almost 150 km), the Neman, Skirwita, Szczyn and Syrwinta rivers (Lithuania – 200 km). However, the southern section of the border is mainly artificial. In total, the land borders amount to approximately 410 km, of which Poland covers almost 210 km, some of which are swampy and forested areas. In terms of optimising the shape of the borders, the Kaliningrad Oblast has a favourable defensive position – its latitudinal and meridional extents amount to 195 and 110 km respectively. The exclave has low-land characteristics, and over 70% of the area lies below 50 metres above sea level. The oblast has a well-developed road and rail communication network, which enables the rapid movement of military units. However, the region's connections with neighbouring countries are less developed due to the low level of external transport accessibility (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 2023; Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 296–297; Żyła, 2018, pp. 85–91, 138, 204–205; Sakson, 2014, p. 111; Żęgota, 2021, pp. 177–178, 193–194, 268–272, 367–368, 385–386; Komornicki, 2021; Kowalska-Sendek, 2022).

KALININGRAD OBLAST AS A FORWARD STRATEGIC BASTION

Russia attaches great importance to ensuring security in the so-called the western flank, the main direction of confrontation with NATO. In this respect, the Western Military District (MD), and, after its dissolution, the Leningrad Military District, to which the Kaliningrad Defence District (KDD) was also subordinated, plays an important strategic role.² At the same time, due to its geostrategic location, the oblast itself is of key importance in Russia's military actions towards the Alliance. The KDD, described as the most militarised area in Europe, is an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" (military base), which significantly increases the strategic depth of the Federation towards the west. Russia treats the oblast as a forward strategic defensive bastion. In this respect, the military potential deployed in the exclave plays a deterrent, defensive and offensive role. However, the dividing line in this respect is fluid, with individual military formations performing more than one function. Russia regards the oblast as an "outer defence ring," allowing it to maintain military dominance in this part of Europe (President of Russia, 2024; Topolski, 2013, pp. 106–107; Forsström, 2019, pp. 733–734; Kjellén, 2021, pp. 25–26; Mickiewicz, 2022, p. 117; Wolff, 2022; Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 287–290, 305; Raś, 2018, p. 309).

According to Stephen J. Blank, in the case of the Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia has moved to a bastion strategy. A significant naval force was deployed there, supplemented by a contingent of land and air forces, and a very extensive, integrated air defence system was established. In addition, it was reinforced with Iskander-M cruise missile launcher systems (Blank, 2019, p. 21).

Due to its isolation from the territory of Russia and therefore the possibility of easy blockade, the Kaliningrad Oblast has the military potential and infrastructure to ensure self-sufficiency in terms of combat and logistical support of troops. This issue concerns the possibility of limiting or preventing the operation of ships of the Baltic Fleet, including guaranteeing the safety of communication routes to the exclave. This problem exacerbated by the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. In such a situation, the ability to rapidly (i.e. in a short time) transfer soldiers, weapons and equipment to and from the exclave remains a challenge. The armed forces deployed in the region were prepared to conduct

² On 26 February 2024, the structure of military ships in Russia was reorganised, including: the liquidation of the Western Military District (MD) and the reconstruction of the Leningrad MD and the Moscow MD in its place, see: President of Russia, 2024.

independent operations. There are extensive fortifications in the KRO and significant amounts of weapons and ammunition, including probably tactical nuclear charges, were stored in warehouses. These depots were adapted to a long-term siege, even supplies were interrupted. The defence of the oblast, described as an “impregnable bastion,” is expected to last until the arrival of the troops of the Russian Federation, also taking into account those stationed on the territory of Belarus. In May 2022, military expert Konstantin Sivkov indicated that Russian troops would be able to unblock the exclave through Lithuanian territory within three days (Goble, 2022; Litowkin 2021; Wolff, 2022; Domańska et al., 2019, pp. 67–71; Palmowski 2018, pp. 356–363; Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 176, 292–309; Żęgota, 2021, pp. 177–178, 268–272, 334–335, 401–402; Żyła, 2018, pp. 151, 178, 204–208; Żukov, 2022; Sokirko, 2022; Yepiszczenko 2022).

One of the most important goals of the Russian Armed Forces deployed in the region is to deter the enemy, i.e. the West, from launching a “potential attack.” This function is performed primarily through the provision of non-strategic nuclear weapons and, to some extent, strike systems. These provide a kind of counterbalance when conducting military operations with the use of conventional forces, including the possibility of carrying out a pre-emptive attack. In practice, this means maintaining a protective umbrella over the exclave, probably also a nuclear one, without which units stationed in the perimeter may be isolated (Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 224, 300–301; Żęgota, 2021, pp. 385–386).

The basis of the Federation’s deterrence against the West is a non-strategic nuclear triad located in the region. The nuclear strike capability mainly includes the *Iskander-M* and *Bastion*³ systems (land component), MiG-31I aircraft carrying *Kindzhal* missiles (air component) and *Kalibr* cruise missiles deployed on warships (naval component).⁴ These assets have an operational-strategic strike ability. The range of *Kalibr* ballistic missiles is approximately 2,000–2,500 km, *Iskander-M* 500–700 km, and *Kindzhal*, considering the range of MiG-31I, over 2,000 km. It remains unknown whether or how many nuclear devices were deployed in the exclave, and especially which versions of the *Kalibr* missiles. Secondly, Russia’s military presence in Belarus also provides a kind of “cover”

³ Bastion system – includes the ability to launch *Kalibr* cruise missiles and possibly *Zirkon* hypersonic missiles.

⁴ Military potential deployed in the Kaliningrad Oblast, see: Topolski, 2022a.

for the oblast (Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, p. 307; Żęgota, 2021, pp. 279–280; Topolski, 2022; Kaliningrad. 2022; Venckunas 2022).

The Kaliningrad Oblast is of fundamental importance to the Federation for the development and deployment of A2/AD⁵ anti-access systems, which are offensive and defensive in nature. The development of the military potential in the exclave since 2016 has been aimed at gaining the ability to block the entry of NATO naval forces into the Baltic Sea area during a potential crisis and to limit the possibility of access and manoeuvring freedom of troops in the Baltic states and parts of Poland. A2/AD systems provide a high impact capability, i.e. generating military threats in this region, which significantly affects the security of the Alliance members (Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 301–306; Goble, 2022; Mickiewicz, 2022, pp. 94, 256; Żęgota, 2021, pp. 401–402).

The A2/AD systems deployed by Russia are intended to significantly reduce the offensive potential of a potential enemy and establish an “electronic shield” over the oblast capable of disrupting external communications. This means creating an anti-access zone in the Baltic Sea basin, especially in its southern and central parts, in the event of an armed conflict. Within their range are NATO bases and US anti-missile systems in Europe, as well as a significant part of the airspace of the Baltic states and Poland. Consequently, this can make free navigation difficult or virtually impossible. These systems are multi-layered because they include (Żukow, 2022; Domańska et al., 2019, pp. 71–74; Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 128–129, 301–306; Żęgota, 2021, pp. 281, 404; Żyła, 2018, pp. 207–210):

- a) coastal defence missile systems (*Bastion*, *Bal*);
- b) anti-missile and anti-aircraft defence systems (S-400);
- c) advanced electronic warfare systems;
- d) ballistic and cruise missiles of the *Kalibr*, *Iskander-M* and *Kindzhal* types.

⁵ A2/AD – Anti-access/Area denial – military and technological measures enabling effective prevention (“Anti-Access”) of free access to a given region and the possibility of striking moving targets (“Area-Denial”) threatening the region. These systems create the so-called anti-access “bubble,” including the concentration of anti-aircraft, anti-missile, anti-ship and electronic warfare assets, see: Williams, 2017.

KALININGRAD OBLAST AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR CREATING
MILITARY THREATS

The Kaliningrad Oblast, or rather the military potential deployed there, seems to be a kind of “barometer” determining the state of relations between Russia and the West, which translates into the level of security in the Euro-Atlantic area. If NATO or the EU took actions that the Federation considered a violation of its interests or a threat, the issue of strengthening the armed forces stationed in the exclave arose. Increasing the security of Poland and the Baltic states through the development of military potential, including the deployment of Alliance combat units, leads to emphasising the military importance of the region and its further militarisation. The Federation uses the armed forces deployed in the exclave as an instrument of military and non-military influence, primarily through the constant threat to the sovereignty of the Baltic states. One of its forms is to increase military potential through: deployment, modernisation, replacement of weapons or deployment of additional personnel. Such activities are aimed at achieving various non-military goals. Firstly, they are used as a means of exerting political pressure on the countries of the Baltic Sea basin. The level of militarisation of the oblast is perceived by Poland and the Baltic States as a potential source of threat and conflict. Secondly, by 2022, in order to undermine unity within NATO and the EU, by explaining Polish and Lithuanian opposition to the militarisation of the oblast with traditional Russophobia. The third problem concerns the questioning of the ability of the Alliance and, indirectly, of the Union to protect its members against external threats in the Baltic Sea basin and Central and Eastern Europe. In this context, the increase in military capabilities was aimed at showing that Western structures are ineffective in ensuring international security and, consequently, discouraging countries from joining NATO and the EU (Forsström, 2019, pp. 733–734; Siegień, 2022, pp. 69–71; Żęgota, 2021, pp. 241–243, 330–336, 360–369, 387, 400–404; Żyła, 2018, pp. 91, 192–193, 210).

The geostrategic location of the oblast and the armed forces deployed there enable the achievement of military goals. The relatively small military potential compared to NATO countries allows the Federation to put pressure on the West by posing a threat of escalating the conflict. Moreover, with the enlargement of the Alliance to include Finland and Sweden, the military importance of the exclave remains considerable in terms of generating or escalating possible tensions and crises. The Oblast, as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier,” is intended to weaken The KDD is crucial in terms of conducting observation, intelligence and

early warning activities, as well as potential threat projection, especially towards Poland and Lithuania. There is a radar station for early warning against attacks by *Voronezh-DM* ballistic missiles in the region. This system has a range of up to 6,000 km, which allows observation of the airspace in the Baltic Sea, Northern Europe, as well as the area between the Azores and Greenland. Electronic warfare units responsible for controlling the activity of aircraft and reconnaissance ships of NATO countries are also noteworthy. The prepared infrastructure, especially the *Murmansk-BN* complex, may largely block the operation of radio engineering systems in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic region, as well as in the areas of the Baltic Sea and the north-west Atlantic Ocean. The formations stationed in the region have the ability to take actions against underwater infrastructure, i.e. pipelines, telecommunications and energy cables. A very serious concern is the possibility of Russia using the exclave to carry out asymmetric (hybrid) operations, including various types of armed incidents conducted by, for example, special forces. The threat related to the Federation creating a migration crisis on the Polish-Russian border should also be pointed out. Such a situation may result in the involvement of some Polish Army units to protect it, which results in, among others, distracting soldiers from the training process and affects their combat readiness (Kjellén, 2021, p. 55; Wolff, 2022; Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 229–235, 300–308; Siegień, 2022, pp. 69–71; Żęgota, 2021, pp. 177–178, 268–276, 334–335, 401–436; Żyła, 2018, pp. 155, 204–208; Domańska et al., 2019, pp. 67–71; Studzińska, Żęgota, 2024; pp. 6–7; Dmitrijew, 2023, pp. 1, 9; Poroskow, 2022).

A significant number of assault ships and offensive coastal defence missile units of the Baltic Fleet have been deployed in the region, complemented by *Iskander-M* missiles and the air force. In practice, this part of the military potential poses a threat to the Alliance countries. Firstly, it could block the entrance to the Baltic Sea and limit the freedom of action of NATO naval and air forces in this area. The second goal is to destroy enemy air and missile defence systems, as well as strategically important facilities, i.e. command posts and communication centres, concentrations of troops and equipment, artillery, ships, planes and helicopters at airports and other facilities. The range of *Iskander-M* missiles covers Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, as well as parts of Germany, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Czechia, Slovakia and a section of Norway including Oslo. However, *Kalibr* systems are capable of destroying infrastructure in a significant number of NATO countries, including: the Baltic Sea countries, Poland, Finland,

Sweden, Romania and Bulgaria (Domańska et al., 2019, p. 74–75; Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, pp. 120–128, 300; Żęgota, 2021, p. 369).

The Kaliningrad oblast borders the Suwałki Gap, described as NATO's weakest point. The main worry concerns the fact that the Alliance troops stationed in the Baltic States could be cut off in the event of a possible attack by the Federation. The anti-aircraft and anti-ship systems and aviation deployed by Russia in the region and in Belarus are intended to limit or prevent the operations of NATO forces. The delivery of aid from Poland to Lithuania through the 65 km section between the exclave and Belarus is vulnerable to attack. If this were to happen, obtaining fire control or occupying the Suwałki Gap by Russia would mean limiting or preventing the provision of military support to the Baltic States by land, as well as incurring significant losses. The alternative is to provide assistance by air or sea – a convoy moving through the Baltic Sea close to A2/AD systems deployed in the perimeter. The accession of Finland and Sweden to some extent allows NATO greater freedom of manoeuvre in this area. In practice, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the exposure of Alliance forces deployed in Poland, especially in the Baltic States, to attacks by missile systems located in the oblast and Belarus have necessitated the strengthening of the military potential in order to develop NATO's defence capabilities in this part of the region. These include the deployment of additional military contingents and, above all, anti-aircraft and anti-missile defence systems. This situation is also dictated by the possibility that Russia may conduct various activities towards critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea basin from the region. Additionally, in the case of the Suwałki Gap, there may be an issue of Russia carrying out hybrid activities from the region, such as creating various armed incidents, including "testing" the response of the Alliance countries in terms of "fulfilling" Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (Keeley, 2022; Szubrycht, Rokiciński, Mickiewicz, 2020, p. 300; Mickiewicz, 2022, p. 262).

Despite the change in geostrategic positioning, full military isolation of the region is not possible after the Alliance's expansion of 2023–2024. The role of a "protective umbrella" is fulfilled by the Joint Regional Air Defence System and the Joint Electronic Warfare System, which cover Belarus and the exclave. Anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems deployed in the region and territory of Belarus complement each other and create a zone of missile engagement in the airspace of the Baltic States and a significant part of Poland. This situation limits the ability of the air forces of NATO countries to operate in this part of Europe (Topolski, 2022, pp. 77–87).

The size of the military potential in the Kaliningrad Oblast has undergone some reorientation following the Federation's attack on Ukraine, entailing the involvement of some troops. The largest contributors are ground forces, marine infantry units and electronic warfare units, which have suffered significant losses including personnel, weapons and equipment. Reservists mobilised in the exclave are also sent to take part in military operations. It is likely that some of the ammunition and supplies placed in depots and warehouses may also have been transferred. In fact, there has been a significant weakening of the land forces, especially their combat capability to conduct offensive operations and defend the exclave. However, attack warships, land-based missile launchers and coastal defence systems remained in the oblast. The number of ballistic and cruise missiles, primarily of the Iskander-M and Kalibr types, also remains an important issue, including the possible location of nuclear charges in the region (Axe, 2022; Daszewskij, Komissarow, 2022, p. 5; Maksimienko, 2023, p. 3; Giema, 2022; Kaliningrad, 2022a, p. 9; Siegień, 2022, pp. 63–72).

CONCLUSIONS

The research hypotheses adopted in the introduction proved to be true. Firstly, due to its geostrategic location, the Kaliningrad Oblast has significant economic and military importance. However, at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, and especially after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, its military role clearly dominates, both for the Federation and NATO. The specific nature of the war in Ukraine "forced" the deployment of a land forces component, including the mobilisation of reservists, which does not mean that the security of the exclave was neglected. The burden of defending the oblast was redirected to naval forces and strike potential. Russia does not underestimate the defence of the Kaliningrad Oblast, and the significant weakening of the combat capabilities of the land forces component is compensated by its striking potential. This mainly includes *Kalibr* cruise missiles deployed on warships, *Iskander-M* systems and MiG-31I aircraft carrying *Kindzhal* missiles. They constitute the basis of Russia's (nuclear) deterrence against the West. Additionally, the Federation's military presence on the territory of Belarus constitutes a "protective umbrella" for the Kaliningrad Oblast.

Secondly, the Kaliningrad Oblast allows Russia to maintain a military presence in the Baltic Sea basin and, following the accession of Finland and Sweden

to NATO, prevents complete isolation in the west. This largely depends on the outcome of the war with Ukraine and maintaining military control over the territory of Belarus, which also translates into a military threat to the Alliance, especially Poland and the Baltic States. This situation necessitates the development of NATO defence capabilities in this area, including through the deployment of additional military units. In the case of the Suwałki Gap, there is a threat that the armed forces of the Federation stationed in the exclave and Belarus may conduct military operations, including hybrid ones, in order to test the response of the Alliance countries in terms of fulfilling Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

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