

# THE MILITARY-GEOGRAPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SUWAŁKI GAP

**Brig. Gen. Eng. Ryszard PARAFIANOWICZ, Ph.D.**

War Studies University, Warsaw, Poland

## Abstract

*Dynamic changes in the security environment are forcing us to reflect on the shape of the international order at the end of the second decade of the 21st century. The aggressive policy of the Russian Federation, which is confirmed by the conflict with Georgia in 2008 and the current situation in Ukraine, indicates that the use of military violence in the resolution of international disputes is not a historical category at all. This is of particular importance to the geopolitical location of the Republic of Poland. The length of our land border with the Russian Federation is 210 km, while with Belarus it is 418 km. The above fact has a fundamental impact not only on the public debate on the security of our country and the region, but also, and perhaps most importantly, on the shape of defence policy and the content of planning possible measures to prevent and counteract the escalation of prospective tensions in NATO-Russia relations. Both Russian military doctrine and the opinions expressed by politicians and specialists dealing with military issues and political and military experts indicate that, from the Russian perspective, the Baltic States' membership of the North Atlantic Alliance and the presence of NATO troops on the territory of these countries, is highly unfavourable. Therefore, there are grounds to believe that countries such as Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, are treated by Russia as natural bridgeheads, convenient for bringing possible strikes against Russia. Therefore, it is possible that blocking communication routes leading to these countries, while cutting them off from the support of allied land forces, may prove to be a key success factor in the situation of a hypothetical armed conflict, aimed not only at depriving these countries of their sovereignty, but also aimed at discrediting the power of the Alliance.*

**Keywords:** national security, military activities, the Suwałki Gap

## Introduction

The “Suwałki Gap”, which is the subject of this article, plays a key role in the problem area mentioned in the title. The basis for undertaking a discussion on the military-geographical characteristics of this area was the need to obtain a scientifically justified answer to the research problem expressed in the form of the following question: what impact on military operations can be exerted by the military-geographical conditions specific to the “Suwałki Gap”?

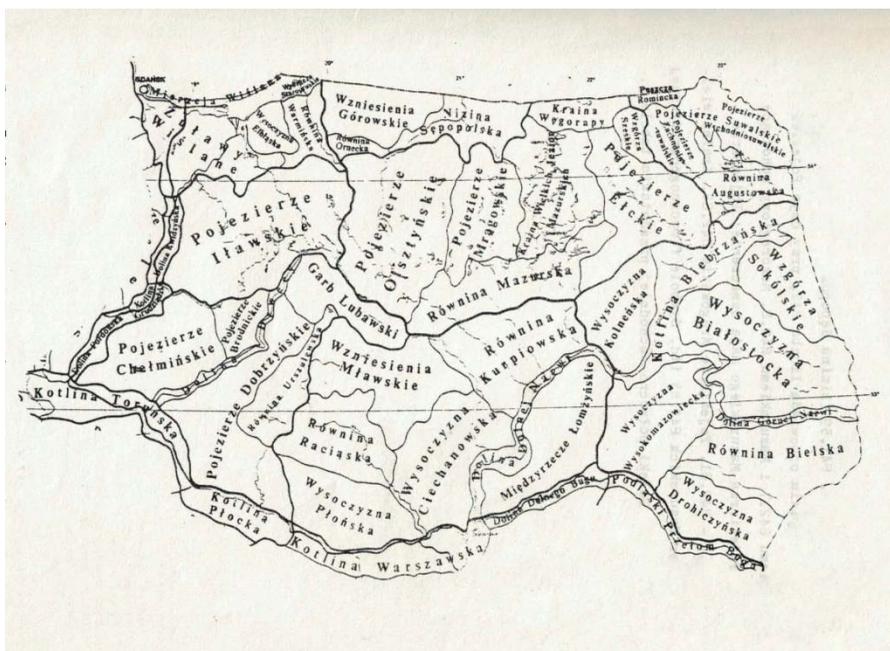
The need to make an effort to solve this research problem results not only from the desire for scientific cognition, but also from the need to emphasise North-Eastern Poland's rank (Mazury's Operational Region) and the “Suwałki Gap” in contemporary geopolitical conditions. It might seem that the land connection of the Baltic countries from the territory of the NATO countries does not deserve deeper reflection. However, the growing interest in this area from Russia and Belarus fully confirms the legitimacy and need for further work related to the issues raised in this article.

## Major geographical characteristics of the Masurian Operational Region

The Masurian Operational Region is part of the North-Eastern Strategic Area. The Northeast Strategic Area covers the following operational areas: the Mazurski Operational Region, Mazowiecki Operational Region and the Podlaski Operational Region. Geographically, it includes a number of macro-regions. These include: the Gdańsk embankment, the Old Prussian Lowland, the East Baltic Lakeland, the Masurian Lake District, the Lithuanian Lake District, the Chełmno-Dobrzyńskie Lake District, the North-Azerbaijan Lowland and the North Podlaska Lowland (Skrzyp 1993, p. 6).

The terrain conditions of the Masurian Operational Region significantly influence the organisation and conduct of military activities. The southern sections of the Ełk lake district and the Koleńska Upland occupy a convenient corridor between the Great Masurian Lakes and the Biebrza Basin. In this area, roads leading from

the Kaliningrad District, through Lithuania to the centre of Poland and to Belarus are marked out. In addition, there are convenient facilities in them for blowing aerial descents from the direction of Kaliningrad region and Belarus. Larger urban centres of the Masurian Lake District and the Suwałki Lake District may be, in turn, used as independent defence zones, and the army favours their deployment in an interstate gap and significant afforestation. The area of the Masurian operational region has long been the object of interest of many countries, especially Russia (the Soviet Union), Germany and Poland. The region provided the opportunity to control the southern Baltic from the bases and seaports on its east coast. After 1945, control over the area of the eastern Baltic Pobrze region added to the area of the Soviet Union, thus improving its strategic position on the Baltic Sea. It resulted from the need and the possibility of controlling the navigation in the Gulf of Gdansk and developing the attack deep into the territory of Poland and Lithuania. It can also be a convenient area for developing offensive activities towards the middle and lower sections of the Vistula River in order to cross transport routes connecting Silesia and Warsaw with the Tri-City ports.



*Fig. 1. North-eastern Poland (Masurian Operational Region) (Skrzyp 1993, p. 9)*

In terms of hypsometric height above sea level in the operational region, it ranges from 0 m on the borderline of depression to the south of Elbląg up to 309 m above sea level (Szeska Góra). The vast majority of the area extends, however, at altitudes from 100 to 200 m above sea level. A special feature of the area is a dense network of hills with a small diameter (about 100-150 m) and a relative height of up to 50 m. The slopes oscillate around 2-15 points. The hills are arranged in latitudinal lengths between which there are no-way-out depressions. A characteristic feature of the relief is longitudinal reductions with steep, high and mostly forested slopes. The Masurian Lake District covers 10608 km<sup>2</sup> of the discussed area, the length of this region from the eastern Polish border is 144 km, and the width ranges from 80 to 130 km. The average population density here is around 45-50 people per km<sup>2</sup>. The existing groups of national minorities are Ukrainians, Russians and Lithuanians.

The Staropruska lowland occupies an area of 2663 km<sup>2</sup> in the area being considered. It is notable for its poorly developed settlement network. The population density is around 61 people per km<sup>2</sup> for the eastern part of the lowlands, and 76 people per km<sup>2</sup> for the western part. The population density is clearly falling in the belt near the border with the Kaliningrad District (Obwód kaliningradzki in Wikipedia). The lake district has an abundance of inland waters, which occupy about 11% of its area. There are numerous swamps around standing water and lakes. A characteristic feature of the Lake District is that the main water department of the Vistula and Pregoła runs through this area. In the discussed area, it visits the Vistula with its waters in Narew, with its right-bank tributaries, Biebrza, Pisa and Szkwa. These rivers, in combination with lakes and canals, form a system of waterways of the Iława Lake District, the Great Masurian Lakes and the Augustów Canal.

A characteristic feature closely related to forests and lakes are the occurring sections of boggy terrain, especially around water reservoirs and on the isthmus between lakes. The basic obstacle to the passability is the Biebrza Basin filled with deep peat deposits. In addition to the bog of the Biebrza Valley, there are numerous smaller swamps that fill river valleys, the largest on the Kurpiowska Plain.

The whole area is dominated by loamy soils with an admixture of stones and gravel. The level of groundwater varies depending on the region and soil system, from 0.5 to 20 m.

The forests of the discussed area are difficult to pass due to the high density of rivers and lakes and channels, and a small amount of wide apertures, and in some areas impassable, in addition to the existing road network. The largest forest complexes of the area are the Augustów Primeval Forest, the Borecka Forest and forests in the vicinity of Orzysz. The range of visibility in forests is from 50 to 100m. The stands are dominated by pine, beech and pine forests as well as spruce and pine forests. The height of the trees is 12-35 m, trunk thickness 14-45 cm. In spring and autumn, the softness of the soil is generally increased, worsening the condition of forest roads. In the summer, especially in the dry season, there is a threat of fires. In winter, the deciduous forest provides a minimum masking of troops, and moving off the road due to snowdrifts or snow-covered rifts is usually difficult. Climatic conditions can significantly affect the fight, especially in the conditions of precipitation, thaw and cold winter.

The buildings are predominantly compact in the centre, and loose outside, which may be conducive to the defence of the town and particularly important road junctions. Straight streets of hard-surfaced cities usually have a width of 6 up to 20 m and there are currently many beltways under construction. In the event of an air operation being initiated by an opponent, this may involve difficulties in regrouping troops and occupying the centres of convenient areas of defence. The number of towns with a conventional surface area is 120 to 172, the lowest in the border areas. Almost seventy percent of the population live in towns with fewer than 200 inhabitants, of which there are around 64%.

The transport and communication network should ensure the efficiency of the national economy functioning during peacetime as well as during a war. There are hard roads in the discussed area, which may serve as a prognostic regrouping path for forces of the order of tactical connection. The density of the hard surface road network is a widely accepted measure of the development of the country's road surface. In the square marked with the towns of Suwałki, Lidzbark Warmiński, Ciechanów, and Zambrów, there is currently no longer a section of a motorway or expressway. Important routes that can be used to regroup the opponent's forces are: Kaunas - Suwałki - Ełk - Grajewo - Łomża; Ełk-Mrągowo - Olsztyn; Mrągowo - Ostrołęka - Maków Mazowiecki; Białystok - Ostrołęka -Nidzica. The roads with hard surfaces are supplemented with dirt roads. The spatial layout of the area's dirt roads is usually accidental, resulting from a multi-stage development

of settlement and agricultural economy. The railway system in the considered area is poorly developed with a characteristic meridian system and has one of the smallest density indices in the country, amounting to 6.5 km per 100 km<sup>2</sup>. Main railway routes are: Suwałki - Augustów - Białystok, Gołdap - Ełk and Bartoszyce - Lidzbark Warmiński - Ostrołęka. The Masurian Operational District has a lack of airports and a shortage of convenient places to organise helicopter landing sites.

## **Military significance of the Suwałki Region**

The Suwałki Region mostly occupies the Suwałki Lake District. It is within the macroregion of the Lithuanian Lake District, part of the sub-provincial East Baltic Lakeland. The southern part of the macroregion is occupied by the mesoregion of the Augustów Plain, and the East Suscepture Lake District extends to the north (Kondracki 1998, p. 27). The area is mostly wooded (partly the Augustów Primeval Forest), with the highest elevation reaching up to 300 m above sea level. Such a terrain with 250 lakes makes it, from the point of view of conducting combat operations, a forested area convenient for conducting irregular activities and also other types of combat, especially all forms of defence, delaying or special actions (Bujak 2000, p. 69).

During the defensive war in September 1939, in the Suwałki region, as a dead-end in operational terms, no large-scale combat operations were carried out, and just a few reconnaissance raids on the territory of East Prussia on the orders of the Commander of the Suwałki Cavalry Brigade General Brig. Zygmunt Podhorski were carried out. The Brigade was withdrawn from occupied defensive positions in the Suwalki region on the night of 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> September. In its place, the units of the Border Protection Corps were introduced, including the newly formed 3rd KOP regiment, the 24th Bureau of the KOP "Sejny" and the company of the Border Guards District "Suwałki", which took over the responsibility for the defensive section of Augustów. However, these units, as a result of the unfavourable strategic situation on the front and orders from the Supreme Commander, soon left their defensive positions. On the eve of Soviet aggression on Poland on September 16, the 24th Battalion of KOP "Sejny", commanded by Lt. Col. Michał Osmola together with the Suwalki sub-units of the Border Guard were the last remaining in the Suwalki region. Since that time, no military branches have been in Suwałki

or throughout the poviát. The battalion took part in heavy fighting on September 21-23 with Soviet troops in Sopoćkini, near Kalety and on the Augustów Canal, shielding the retreat of Polish troops to Lithuania (Kowalski 1999, pp. 206-237). Opposing the Kopists was the Mechanised Group of the 27th Armored Brigade, targeting the Suwałki Region. The battalion fought the hardest battles at Sopoćkiniami and near the town of Kodziowce, providing support to the 101st Uhlan regiment (Grzelak and Kozłowski 1994, p. 53). After three days of fighting on the night of September 23/24, Lt Col Osmola led the battalion to Lithuania. Before crossing the border, most of the combat equipment was hidden in selected localities in the Augustów Forest. This was justified because it was a border region protected from 1926 by a battalion. Many of the interned soldiers of the PEC in Lithuania later, entered the West through Riga as part of the re-forming Polish Army or returned to the country, including the creator of the underground in the Suwałki region, cpt. Marian Świtalski.

In the area abandoned by the civilian authorities and the army of Suwałki, the protection of public facilities for the safety of residents was taken up by the law enforcement service organised on the initiative of the valued Suwałki attorney and social worker of Bonaventure Lutostanski (Polskieradio.pl 2011). The inhabitants used the period of hostile occupation to hide souvenirs and national symbols.



**Fig. 2. Variant of the direction of impact in order to occupy the “Suwałki Gap” (Dubński 2015)**

Despite the fact that, in 1939, the area of Suwałki region was not an area of more serious struggles, its importance in the aspect of potential military use remains important. The specific location between the enclave of Russia and its favourable Belarus forces highlights the role and the place of this area in the plans and defensive concepts of Poland and the Alliance. According to experts dealing with defence and security issues, the Baltic states may constitute a viable goal of Russia's action, serving the purpose of discrediting NATO as a whole. The seizure of the "Suwałki gap" could turn out to be a profitable activity for Russia, which the West does not expect (Figure 2). That is why it is so important to carry out the related considerations and plan appropriate pre-emptive actions, aimed at discouraging the potential aggressor to undertake military actions. The allied assumptions related to securing NATO's eastern flank are an excellent example of this. The leading nature of such activities seems to be a key determinant of their success. They cannot, however, be a response to the opponent's actions, but have an active character, aimed at overtaking a potential aggressor. While this seems to be possible in a national approach, it can be very difficult in allied conditions. In reference to securing the "Suwałki gap", it may be necessary to introduce a new strategic category to military practice preventive and anticipatory-deterrence projects. Within their framework, actions such as: deterring, overtaking an opponent, information domination, domination in space and cyber space, and the ability to fight separatist movements, may be applied. The above-mentioned approach based on the results of scientific research is a response to threats that may be characteristic of the beginning of the 21st century, which may also occur in relation to the "Suwałki gap". This approach, however, requires further detailed research leading to the negation or confirmation of the undoubtedly questionable assumptions.

## Characteristics of the "Suwałki Gap"

Throughout the interwar period in the border area of Suwałki region, the length of the boundary line of Germany extended over 78 km, and of Lithuania 105 km. The length of the poviat base (southern border of the Augustowski district) was 95 km and was proceeded over its entire area by Augustowski Forest (Buczyński 1991, p. 6). The total length of the Suwałki county borders was 276 km, of which

2/3 coincided with the border of the Polish state. It is a specific border location, somehow in the shape of a peninsula surrounded on three sides by German borders and Lithuania which meant that it can often be found described as the “Suwalski protrusion” or “Suwalski sack” (Parafianowicz 2015, p. 15).

In view of the aggressive policy of the Russian Federation, the term “Suwalski gap” recently became popular, referring to the areas located around Suwalski, Augustów and Sejny, constituting a combination of the territory of the Baltic states with Poland and the rest of the NATO countries and those separating the territory of the Kaliningrad region and Belarus (Fig. 3) (Przesmyk suwalski in Wikipedia). Geographically, the area is a macroregion called the Lithuanian Lake District. However, from the point of view of military-geographical division of Polish territory, the “Suwalski gap” forms a section of the Masurian Region Operational component of the North-East Strategic Area.

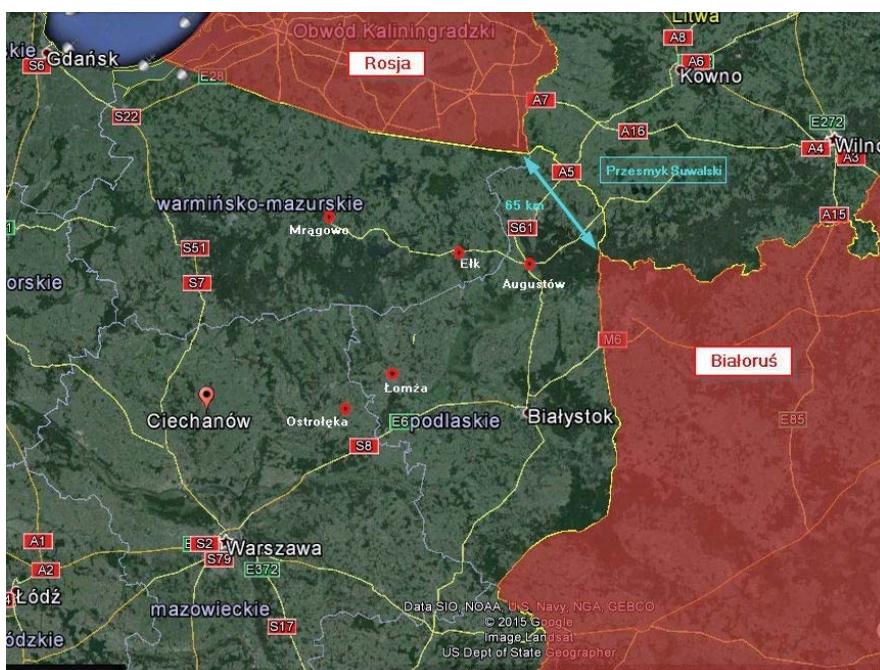


Fig. 3. Graphic illustration of the “Suwalski gap” (Rogacin 2015)

The “Suwałki gap” covers parts of the Romnicka Forest, the Zachodniosuwalski Lake District, the Wschodniosuwalskie Lake District and the Augustów Plain, from the Masurian Lake District it is separated by the Rospuda Valley. This area is notable for its varied terrain, with relative heights oscillating between 20 and 300 m. There are both high post-glacial hills and deep gutters (e.g. Lake Hańcza - 108 m). On the Augustów Plain, the land falls gently towards the Biebrza Basin (from 190 m in the area of Suwałki to 130 m in the area of Augustów).

The climatic conditions of the area under consideration have continental features. The average temperature at the beginning of the year is  $-4.4^{\circ}\text{C}$  (reaching  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ ), in summer  $17.4^{\circ}\text{C}$  (maximum  $34.9^{\circ}\text{C}$ ). The maximum rainfall falls in July (206mm). The lowest temperatures usually occur from December to mid-March, the snow persists until mid-April.

In the “Suwałki Isthmus” there are diverse, clayey soils in the northern part, sand in the south, and bogs both in the north (Puszcza Romnicka) and in the south (Puszcza Augustowska). The conditions for running the field fortification construction are convenient. All engineering work can be done by hand as well as using earthmoving machines.

In the considered area, forests are unevenly distributed. Most afforestation is part of the Augustów Primeval Forest, covering areas east of Suwałki, up to the state border. The Romnicka Forest stretches northwards, growing on the Polish-Lithuanian-Russian border.

Inland waters occupy about 3% of the described area. Larger clusters of lakes are located in the vicinity of Augustów and east of Suwałki. In the remaining part of the “Suwałki Isthmus”, the lakes occur less frequently, filling in principle gutters, into which also flow rivers (Rospuda, Czarna Hańcza), connecting with the Augustów Canal. The Zachodniosuwalskie Lakeland is dominated by small gutter-type lakes located in the glacial rivers of the Rospuda, Przerośl and Rivers Jarka (a small tributary of Gołdap).

In the basin of Jarka, on the extension of the Rospuda river gutter, is the Black Lake, which has an outflow to Lake Garbaś. In turn, in the Wschodniosuwalskie Lakeland, are mainly gutter lakes located in postglacial gutters, which are connected with each other by numerous rivers.

In the lake districts is Poland's deepest lake - Hańcza, and Lake Wigry (half located within the Augustów Plain). On the Augustów Plain, the lakes are concentrated around Augustów and in the area of the southern part of Lake Wigry. The Augustów Lakes are connected to each other by the Augustów Canal. Morphometric data of selected lakes is included in Table 1.

| Lake name                         | Area (ha) | Capacity (thousand of m <sup>3</sup> ) | Average depth (m) | Max. length (m) | Max. width (m) | Length of shore line (m) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|--|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| <b>West-Suwałki Lake District</b> |           |  |                   |                 |                |                          |
| Czarne                            | 172,2     | 17116,8                                | 9,9               | 3750            | 1020           | 10650                    |
| Rospuda                           | 341,7     | 49731,8                                | 14,5              | 5800            | 850            | 13650                    |
| Mieruńskie Wlk.                   | 189,4     | 12717,9                                | 6,7               | 3950            | 925            | 11250                    |
| Garbaś                            | 152,5     | 31809,7                                | 20,9              | 3450            | 730            | 8300                     |
| Oleckie Wlk.                      | 227,3     | 37912,5                                | 16,7              | 4860            | 1110           | 10950                    |
| Bolesty                           | 138,8     | 9716,4                                 | 7,0               | 5800            | 450            | 12150                    |
| <b>East-Suwałki Lake District</b> |           |  |                   |                 |                |                          |
| Hańcza                            | 311,4     | 120364,1                               | 38,7              | 4525            | 1175           | 11750                    |
| Szelment Mł.                      | 168,5     | 12577,3                                | 7,5               | 3535            | 1005           | 9525                     |
| Szelment Wlk.                     | 356,1     | 53492,0                                | 15,0              | 6250            | 1125           | 19100                    |
| Gałduś                            | 728,6     | 92474,7                                | 12,7              | 10600           | 1500           | 26925                    |
| Wigry                             | 2118,3    | 336726,7                               | 15,8              | 17500           | 3550           | 72225                    |
| <b>Augustow Plain</b>             |           |  |                   |                 |                |                          |
| Blizno                            | 238,5     | 24191,1                                | 10,0              | 4900            | 750            | 12325                    |
| Serwy                             | 460,3     | 67181,5                                | 14,6              | 6900            | 1100           | 20250                    |
| Necko                             | 400,0     | 40561,4                                | 10,1              | 5400            | 850            | 13000                    |
| Białe                             | 476,6     | 41716,5                                | 8,7               | 5950            | 1200           | 18650                    |
| Sajno                             | 522,5     | 52446,8                                | 10,0              | 7100            | 1050           | 15050                    |

**Table 1. Morphometric data of selected lakes of the "Suwałki Shed"**

The region is notable for its not very dense settlement network. The main centres here are Suwałki and Augustów. The industry is underdeveloped, agriculture, forestry and tourism dominate. The construction of villages, from several to several dozen farms, is loose, with a significant number of isolated farms. Communication is not well developed, the main road junctions are the already mentioned Suwałki and Augustów. They are local in nature, although there is a constant increase in their importance (e.g. construction of the Via Baltica road) (Generalna Dyrekcja Dróg Krajowych i Autostrad 2017).

The “Suwałki gap” is a convenient region for multidirectional activities into Central and Eastern Europe. There is also a so-called “August’s junction” through which there are communication routes leading from Poland to Lithuania and the main railway line connecting Poland with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The importance of the region is also confirmed by the exercise scenarios in which Russia defines this direction as convenient for impacting.

## **Slaughter cover as a prospective military action area?**

The results of the research presented in the earlier part of this article indicate that although the area of the “Suwałki Isthmus” was not a place of more serious military clashes in the past, in the current geopolitical conditions, this possibility cannot be ruled out. In view of the above, the results of research on the hypothetical threats posed by a potential opponent of the Alliance and adequate counter scenarios related to securing the area under consideration will be presented below.

The Kaliningrad Oblast is an enclave of the Russian Federation, isolated from the rest of the territory of this country. The only connection of the Oblast with Russia is by sea. The length of the land border between Poland and the Kaliningrad District is 210 km. It has an artificial character and runs parallel to the Pregoła River. The naval forces of the Russian Federation stationed in the Kaliningrad region have a favourable starting base for the possible blockade of the Gulf of Gdansk and control of maritime transport routes connecting Polish ports with ports of countries such as Sweden, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland. In relation to the Russian land forces stationed in the Oblast, it can be successfully assumed that they have favourable conditions to make an impact towards Poland (along the lower Vistula) in order to block the Tri-City ports from the land and cut off communication between the centre of the country and the north. It is also possible to use these forces to develop offensive operations towards the south and create a threat to Warsaw from the north-west (Skrzyp 1999, p. 70). The proximity of the Kaliningrad region with Lithuania is also not without significance. It cuts the strategic space of Russia and Belarus, thus limiting the freedom of communication in the immediate vicinity of our country.

The lack of natural terrain barriers on the Polish-Russian and Polish-Belarusian borders favours conducting offensive operations towards our country in two corridors, converging in the centre of Poland. Potential directions of activities from the territory of the Kaliningrad District and Belarus cover about 25% of the area of the Republic of Poland, along with Warsaw. This puts our country in an unfavourable position, which is somewhat altered by the neighborhood of Poland and Lithuania, which, as mentioned earlier, cuts the strategic space of Russia (Skrzyp and Lach 2008, p. 104).



**Fig. 4. Convenient directions for developing offensive activities in north-eastern Poland (Skrzyp 1993, p. 52)**

In light of the above research results, selected specialists dealing with defence and security issues recognise the “Suwałki Isthmus” as a highly flammable point in Europe. In October 2015, American General Frederick Benjamin “Ben” Hodges described the borderland of Poland and Lithuania as well as the Donbas region as the most endangered areas on the continent. Hodges also underlined the visible growth of Russian military investments in the Kaliningrad District, while emphasising the development of nuclear potential (wPolityce.pl, 2015). Also significant is the statement of former adviser to Vladimir Putin, Andrei Ilyarionov, who said that the decision on Russian intervention to the west has already been made. In his opinion, Russia’s aggression towards the Baltic States and Poland is only a matter of time (wPolityce.pl, 2015). Therefore, there are serious grounds to believe that if Russia takes measures aimed at occupying the Baltic States, the “Suwałki gap”

may be a convenient direction for bringing an auxiliary strike towards Poland (Figure 4) after they are conquered. This assumption is of course hypothetical and should not cause excessive anxiety. A factor increasing the level of risk associated with possible Russian aggression is that the Baltic States have a significant Russian minority, whose rights in the opinion of the authorities in Moscow are not duly respected (Dudzińska 2012, p. 2636). Experiences related to the heating of conflicts caused in recent years by the Russian Federation indicate that a strict condition for their commencement was strictly defined, favourable conditions. It does not seem, however, that in the event of military intent against the Baltic States, such a condition would be to block the “Suwałki gap” as a transit route enabling for NATO support to those countries. However, an important factor may be the internal instability of NATO, which may be expressed by the lack of unanimity regarding the provision of tangible support to endangered allies. Therefore, the key premise for ensuring security may be the Alliance’s defensive and integrative cohesion as well as consistency in emphasising the premises of NATO unanimity. A significant factor escalating the threats from Russia is the increase of nationalist moods in some European countries, the domination of national interests or questioning the meaning of European integration. An additional risk factor may also be a reduction in American involvement in guaranteeing the security of European NATO countries and the disintegration of the European Union.

Taking into account the above-mentioned research results, it can be concluded that there is an awareness of the significance of the social background of contemporary military confrontations among Russian military theoreticians. Confirmation of this assumption is the significant activity in this country of paramilitary and military formations, established with a view to their use for suppressing social disturbances, terrorist acts or border incidents. The choice of regions and scenarios for conducting military maneuvers deserves attention. They usually take place near NATO’s borders and have an offensive character. An example of this is the exercise of Russian airborne troops in the Pskov region, preparing for landing in the border area of Latvia and Estonia, and Russian and Belarusian troop exercises near Brest. Every year, in Russia, there are several thousand polygon exercises at all levels, and there were over three thousand in 2014 (tvn24). Available research results, however, indicate that the prospect of a prospective operating environment will be dominated by hybrid threats targeted at vulnerable points of the armed forces and critical infrastructure of states

constituting the object of aggression (Banasik and Parafianowicz 2015, p. 9). It is also worth mentioning that the threat posed by the Russian Federation is not only due to the rank of its military potential. The following factors are also important: paramilitary organisations, the level of armaments of the armed forces, education of the commanding staff and soldiers' morale, logistics facilities, army mobility, intelligence and counterintelligence as well as the armaments industry. What is disturbing is the fact that these components constitute a combined system (Ścibiorek 2017, p. 31). Thus, only a systemic approach to the problem of threats from Russia can bring tangible conclusions in the form of rational (hypothetical) scenarios of the operation of its armed forces towards Poland or other NATO countries.

As already indicated earlier, the "Suwałki gap" in military-geographical terms is not a convenient area for military action. The principles of martial art explicitly deny the validity of leading an attack in such a territory. It seems, therefore, that the opponent will seek to implement a different scenario.

Due to the aggressive intentions of the Russian Federation towards the Baltic States, it cannot be excluded that their territories can be controlled in such a way as to make ground communication with the Alliance area impossible via the "Suwałki gap". Therefore, it is important to build a military advantage in the Baltic Sea region and maintain the required potential to deter the potential aggressor not only in the land dimension, but above all in air, sea and cyber space. This does not diminish the importance of the deployment of NATO forces in the area of the "Suwałki gap" and in the Baltic States. Despite the fact that their combat potential is not sufficient to defend the entire theatre of war activities, their presence, according to politicians, is a credible deterrent (wPolityce.pl, 2016). However, the approach to the functioning of allied military structures and political processes to create a coherent and credible deterrence strategy requires rethinking. Decisions taken at the NATO summit in Warsaw may be treated by selected countries of Western Europe as a sufficient political signal to Russia, requiring no further steps. The most negative scenario may be an attempt to discredit the decisions of the NATO summit in the next few years. It seems that the key position in this respect may be the position of the United States, which after an unsuccessful attempt to reset relations with Russia will probably strive to maintain its presence at the eastern borders of the Alliance in order to prevent Russia from hypothetically attacking NATO member states.

## Conclusions

The results of the research presented in the non-minor article indicate that, despite the fact that the area of the “Suwałki gap” was not an arena of significant military clashes in the past, it is not possible to exclude such a possibility in the foreseeable future. At the same time, it seems that securing the region under consideration against potential aggression from a potential opponent requires a broader view of the problem under consideration. We are talking not only about the preventive deployment of NATO forces, but also about a number of political and diplomatic undertakings. Military-geographical conditions of the “Suwałki gap” in themselves do not make it a “desirable” region for the opponent. In military terms, it can possibly be used as an auxiliary course of action; however, in the wider perspective (from the point of view of the Alliance’s defence policy) it becomes of political, military and propaganda significance. It cannot be ruled out that a potential opponent will consider the possibility of armed aggression against a NATO member state, but this scenario seems unlikely at present. Undoubtedly, such action will be preceded by undertakings aimed at creating favourable conditions (social, political or military). With this approach, the idea of Russia seizing the “Suwałki gap” in the near future seems doubtful.

It is also worth noting that the aggressive military actions of the Russian Federation have never been directed at a NATO member state. Of course, there have been ventures aimed at disorganising selected elements of NATO countries’ critical infrastructure countries (cyberattack on servers of Estonian state institutions in 2007), but the attackers have never been clearly defined. And it is cybernetic space that is currently seen as a place of clashes between parties (state entities) with opposing interests.

The deployment of Russian forces in the Kaliningrad region, which is adjacent to Poland, should undoubtedly be seen as a hypothetical threat. However, their use for blocking the “Suwałki gap” remains doubtful. This is contradicted not only by the contemporary military-political conditions, but also, and perhaps above all, by the geographical conditions of north-eastern Poland that have remained unchanged for years.

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