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ARTICLE



Identifying intentions: Latvian policy-makers' perceptions of Russia's intentions

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ABSTRACT

There is much disagreement on the specific aspects of behavior that are the most useful for estimating intentions of potential adversaries. One view is that military capabilities are the most useful. Alternative views consider that an adversary's domestic politics, or symbolic-normative aspects of its behavior, contain valuable information for assessing its intentions. This article tests these three competing views on Latvia as a case study, based on in-depth interviews with 10 high-ranking decision-makers. The article concludes that although the interviewees regarded information on the potential adversary's military capabilities to be crucial for inferring its intentions, other indicators were also regarded as important.

KEYWORDS Intentions; perceptions; Latvia; Russia; military capabilities; domestic politics; international norms

Introduction

The intentions of other states are notoriously difficult to discern. However, the task is so important that it cannot be avoided by decision-makers. Although incorrect assessments of other states' intentions are bound to occur occasionally, if not frequently, the security needs of states dictate that such assessments must be performed. Unfortunately, an incorrect assessment of other states' intentions may have dire and far-reaching consequences. The consequences of assessing that a state, which is actually harboring malicious intentions, as not having such intentions, can be unfortunate, as the assessor state is caught unprepared, which can have negative implications for its security. However, if a state without hostile intentions is assessed as having such intentions, the result can be a downward spiral in their relations. It could also result in a preventive war, when the assessor state takes active military measures against what it perceives to be an emerging threat. In short, the assessment of intentions of other states touches upon core aspects of the security of states. The significance of the subject is underlined by the numerous attempts aimed at assessing the intentions of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, China's future intentions vis-à-vis its neighbors in East Asia, and Russia's intentions with regard to Ukraine and the Baltic states more recently. The assessment of intentions is not confined to great powers, as Iran's motivations behind its nuclear program have also received extensive scholarly treatment.

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Despite the recent resurgence in interest on state intentions (Yarhi-Milo 2013; Yarhi-Milo 2014; Rosato 2014/2015; Glaser, et al. 2015/2016), there is still disagreement on two key issues. First, on whether assessments of intentions matter at all. Offensive realists like John Mearsheimer (2001) and Sebastian Rosato (2014/2015) claim that states cannot achieve near certainty with regard to the intentions of other great powers and, therefore have to make worst-case assumptions about their intentions. The assessments of intentions are considered unreliable, and therefore, states should focus on assessing the capabilities of their potential adversaries. Other researchers claim that states routinely produce estimates of the intentions of other great powers and that they largely benefit from such assessments (Kydd 2005; Haas 2007). Second, there is disagreement on the specific attributes and behavior of a potential adversary that can be assessed as particularly salient in conveying its intentions. The literature on intentions tends to be heavily skewed toward an emphasis on the importance of military capabilities, but other aspects of an adversary's behavior are also regarded as reliable indicators of its future behavior such as its domestic politics and the specific characteristics of its behavior (Edelstein 2002).

The claims made in this article are that even though the focus on an adversary's capabilities in the existing literature on state intentions is largely justified, other indicators matter as well. In assessing an adversary's intentions, domestic politics and symbolic-normative indicators matter a great deal. It is the combination of military capabilities and other indicators specifically that is used by decision-makers to assess an adversary's intentions because military capabilities must be placed in a larger context, together with other indicators. The first part of the article defines intentions and expands the range of indicators that are taken into account by decision-makers when they produce assessments of an adversary's intentions. This article puts forward the claim that the disagreements on indicators of intentions extend the boundaries of defensive vs. offensive realism debate (Edelstein 2002) and should also include contributions from liberalism and constructivism. In short, intentions should be inferred not only from military capabilities and geography but also from domestic political and economic characteristics and symbolic-normative behavior, which is largely about the adherence to norms and rules of accepted behavior.

The second part of the article diverges from the existing literature on state intentions in two ways. First, the article looks at a contemporary rather than a historical case study. There is a wealth of literature on how great powers have assessed the intentions of their adversaries in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries (Yarhi-Milo 2014; Haas 2007), but there is less theoretically informed analysis of how the intentions of potential adversaries have been assessed after the Cold War. An analysis of contemporary cases usually suffers from a lack of information on decision-makers' preferences. To avoid this shortcoming, the empirical part of the article is based mainly on personal interviews with 10 Latvian decision-makers working on foreign and defense policy issues. Second, it looks at how decision-makers in Latvia, which is a small state, assess the intentions of its more powerful neighbor, Russia. This approach sheds light on how small states identify the intentions of their more powerful neighbors. Facing a continuous and irreparable power asymmetry with the potential adversary, small states are likely to pay attention not only to the adversary's military capabilities but also to its domestic characteristics and symbolic-normative behavior. The supremacy, in terms of the military capabilities of the more powerful neighbor, is a permanent feature and, therefore, in estimating the adversary's intentions a premium is placed on

other – domestic political and symbolic-normative – indicators. Also, Latvia represents an interesting case study because it has neglected defense spending after joining NATO in 2004 (Kļaviņš, Rostoks, and Ozoliņa 2014), despite having concerns over Russia's military capabilities and future intentions. Thus, Latvia has seemingly gone against the conventional wisdom that intentions are derived from military capabilities by keeping defense spending low despite the modernization of Russia's military. The article concludes that although Latvian decision-makers regard the rise of Russia's military power as worrisome, their estimates of whether Russia is likely to use military force against Latvia and its Baltic neighbors are influenced by other indicators, such as the character of Russia's domestic politics and its symbolic-normative behavior. In short, Russia's illiberal political system, its ability to manipulate public opinion at home, and recent violations of international norms and agreements shape the context for identifying Russia's intentions vis-à-vis Latvia.

Perceiving threatening intentions

How are intentions defined? At the most basic level, intentions can be defined as the goals and plans of an actor. However, this definition does not account for the impact of external influences, that is, it discounts the possibility that the behavior of other actors can significantly affect the behavior of the actor whose intentions are under investigation. Randall Schweller (2006, 38) writes that the 'intentions of an actor cannot be separated from its resolve and willingness to run risks'. Robert Jervis (1976, 48) defines intentions 'as the actions he [the actor] will undertake under given circumstances'. Sebastian Rosato (2014/2015, 52) defines intentions as 'the actions that a state plans to take under certain circumstances'. Intentions are about the interplay between external circumstances and an actor's own goals, plans, and willingness to run risks. David Edelstein (2002, 3) writes that 'a state's intentions refer to that state's ambitions, how it is likely to act to achieve those ambitions, and the costs it will bear to realize those goals'. This aspect of intentions has been an important part of the literature on deterrence because the most important goal of measures aimed at deterring the adversary is to dissuade it from hostile behavior by altering its cost-benefit calculus (Freedman 2004; Morgan 2003; Jervis, Lebow, and Gross Stein 1989). Thus, intentions are the result of interaction between an actor's capabilities, plans and goals, the actor's propensity for risk, and pressures and incentives provided by the external environment. As a result, any assessment of another state's intentions must necessarily incorporate not only information about that actor's goals and plans, but also its readiness to run certain risks to put plans into action in order to achieve stated aims. As such, intentions are different 'from interests, motives, and preferences, which are terms that refer to a state's goals' (Rosato 2014/2015, 53). Intentions are also somewhat different from policies. Although policies are intentional, they cannot always convey reliable information about intentions because intentions drive policies, not the other way around. When estimating other states future behavior, states try to identify intentions because they logically precede policies.

How easy, or difficult, is it to produce accurate assessments of other states' intentions? There are two views on this issue. The first view is that intentions are impossible to detect. States can never be certain about the intentions of other states. As a result, they should prepare for the worst. At best, military capabilities can be used as a viable indicator of potential aggressors' intentions. Offensive realists assume that all states

have aggressive intentions (Tang 2008). The aggressiveness of states is limited only by the amount of power that they have (Mearsheimer 2001, 37–40). States are guided in their behavior by the mere possibility that other states might be aggressive (Brooks 1997). A slightly different version of this line of thought emphasizes the changing, if not volatile, nature of intentions. As states become more powerful, their behavior becomes more assertive, if not outright aggressive. Sebastian Rosato (2014/2015, 51) claims that ‘great powers cannot confidently assess the current intentions of others based on their domestic characteristics or behavior, and they are even less sure when it comes to estimating their peers’ future intentions’. Thus, only marginal reductions in uncertainty are possible. And, if uncertainty is to be reduced at all, the basis for that should be a careful analysis of an adversary’s military capabilities. Dale Copeland extends the uncertainty argument and claims that states face uncertainty not only about the future intentions of others, but also about the ‘future character, incentives, and existential situations’ of others (Copeland 2011, 444). This makes producing estimates about the long-term intentions of others even more problematic.

The second position is more optimistic. Admittedly, complete certainty about an adversary’s intentions cannot be achieved, but this is a threshold that has been set too high by offensive realists. Writing from different theoretical perspectives, scholars have looked at the various ways used by states to obtain valuable information about the intentions of potential adversaries. Their conclusion is that states can succeed in signaling their intentions to other states. Defensive realists claim that states are security-seekers rather than power-seekers (Waltz [1979] 2010) which implies that it makes sense to assume that other states are not aggressive. David Edelstein has written that states can actively shape other states’ intentions and, thus, use uncertainty to their benefit (Edelstein 2002). He is somewhat skeptical though about whether attempts to shape the intentions of rising great powers are likely to succeed. Rationalist approaches argue that states can succeed in communicating their intentions with the help of costly signals. James Fearon distinguishes between tied hands and sunk-costs strategies for signaling resolve (Fearon 1997). Charles Glaser has noted that competitive strategies can be costly and that states can succeed in signaling their peaceful intentions to other states (Glaser 2010). Elsewhere, Charles Glaser and Andrew Kydd note that in today’s world great powers routinely produce estimates of intentions of other great powers. According to Glaser et al., ‘a rational state should cooperate if its belief that the other side intends to reciprocate exceeds a certain threshold’ (Glaser, et al. 2015/2016, 198). That threshold does not require near certainty about the intentions of others.

Estimations of an adversary’s intentions, however, usually commence with an assessment of military capabilities. The two most often cited tangible elements that affect the assessment of others’ intentions are military capabilities and geographical proximity. Geographical proximity affects the possibility of projecting military power. It is easier to project military power over short distances. With regard to capabilities, David Singer has written that ‘perception is a function of both estimated capability and estimated intent’ (as cited in Schweller 2006, 38). Intentions only become an important factor in the presence of certain capabilities for inflicting harm. Thus, capabilities must logically precede hostile intentions. Keren Yarhi-Milo claims that intelligence agencies usually rely on estimates of an adversary’s capabilities and on armament policies (Yarhi-Milo 2013, 2014). Decreasing capabilities should signal peaceful intentions, but an increase in military capabilities should be seen as

potentially threatening, especially when offense–defense balance is clearly distinguishable and favors offense (Jervis 1978; Van Evera 1999). Thus, the combination of increasing capabilities and geographical proximity should be seen as an especially threatening combination.

However, estimating intentions from capabilities and related indicators is problematic. William Wohlforth has documented the difficulties that the United States and the Soviet Union faced during the Cold War in measuring the balance of power (Wohlforth 1993). Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder have written about the difficulties that European great powers faced before both world wars in estimating the offense–defense balance and got the balance wrong both times (Christensen and Snyder 1990) because the offense–defense balance is not always clearly distinguishable. Mark Haas and John Owen conclude that states ‘frequently make major errors in judging others’ capabilities’ (Glaser, et al. 2015/2016, 206–207). This clearly indicates that placing a premium on the analysis of an adversary’s capabilities, at the expense of other indicators from which intentions can be inferred, can be a wrongheaded strategy. It does not mean that a better result will always be achieved by adding a few other indicators nor that an analysis of military capabilities is a foolproof approach. Therefore, a wide range of indicators should be included in an assessment of an adversary’s intentions.

A number of scholars have focused on the importance of domestic politics in conveying credible signals about intentions. Barbara Farnham has argued that liberal-democratic norms heavily influence the threat perceptions of democratic leaders. Democratic leaders are likely to perceive nondemocratic countries as threatening when they show signs of contempt for democratic processes of accommodation (Farnham 2003). Andrew Kydd has argued that democracies reveal their foreign policy motivations through their transparent political process (Kydd 1997, 117). This view is also supported by Alexander Wendt who claims that ‘the actors and processes of civil society provide considerable information to other states on their own state’s intentions and capabilities, and the spread of democracy will only increase this openness in future’ (Wendt 1999, 223). Here, threat assessment is heavily influenced by the regime of the opponent. A democracy can be perceived by a fellow democracy as nonthreatening despite its possession of sizable military capabilities, while a non-democracy can be perceived as more threatening than its military capabilities would warrant. Michael Doyle’s claim that democracies may engage in imprudent aggression against nondemocratic countries is based on an assumption that democracies perceive the intentions of non-democracies as threatening because of their regime type (Doyle 1983, 2012). Mark Haas has broadened the argument concerning ideology. Not only is liberal ideology (or the absence of it) an important indicator of a state’s intentions, but all ideologies are important in this respect. Haas argues that ideological distance between potential adversaries heavily influences their mutual perceptions. The greater the ideological distance between states, the greater the likelihood that they will see each other as threatening. Small ideological distance, in turn, breeds security (Haas 2007; Glaser, et al. 2015/2016; 202–208).

Andrew Kydd’s work on trust and mistrust in international relations reveals that states which seek security can build trust by sending costly signals to other states (Kydd 2007). According to Kydd, past cooperative actions should have a positive effect on reinforcing mutual cooperation between states. Thus, past actions help determine states’ intentions. Kydd writes that ‘the mechanism that enables states to learn about

each other's motivations is cooperation' (Kydd 2007, 19). The importance of trust has also been recognized by Raymond Cohen who in an earlier study of six historical case studies of international crises concludes that 'in all six cases the relevant cue or cues were perceived by decision makers to imply betrayal of trust or the performance of an illegitimate action – the infringement, in some sense, of rules of the game governing relations between the actors involved' (Cohen 1978, 100). Klaus Knorr has argued that threat perception is experientially easy for actors that have repeatedly been subjected to aggression, which is a version of past action theory (as cited in Schweller 2006, 40).

Neoclassical realist authors, in turn, have emphasized the importance of leaders' perceptions and the ability of governments to extract resources from their societies for foreign policy purposes (Rose 1998; Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009). Neoclassical realism draws attention to domestic factors that may either constrain a potentially revisionist power or allow it to carry out its expansionist aims (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2016). The more belligerent the rhetoric of political leaders (especially in nondemocratic political systems) and the greater the ability of the political elite to make society pay for military adventures, the greater the likelihood that a state's intentions will be perceived as threatening. The perceptual aspect in assessing others' intentions is important not only because of the need to assess the proclivity of others to run risks, but also because of the perceptual lens of the country that is assessing an adversary's intentions, as there can be variation among decision-makers and states with regard to the assessment of the adversary's readiness to run risks in order to achieve its aims. In short, neoclassical realism is useful not only for the purpose of explaining state behavior, but also for assessing state intentions because this approach identifies a number of domestic variables that can be used as indicators for this purpose.

Other authors have focused their efforts on the workings of international institutions which reduce uncertainty in international relations (Keohane 1984). International institutions and regimes stabilize patterns of amity by embedding states in thick networks of international cooperation. States that choose to remain outside such cooperative networks, in turn, are held suspect because they are less constrained than their peers who are bound by the agreed upon rules and norms. In other words, institutions contribute to predictability. They also moderate states' behavior.

Although the international realm is usually regarded as anarchical and lacking centralized authority, the importance of written and informal rules of behavior should not be underestimated. Constructivist argument has largely focused on the impact of rules, norms, and identities on state behavior. The main contribution of constructivism to international relations theory has been through offering a different ontology – emphasizing the importance of ideational factors over material ones. Constructivist claims, however, have also implications for research on state intentions. Two implications are of particular importance. First, in a system where most actors are playing by the rules, their behavior becomes more predictable because intentions that contradict the existing rules are less likely to be carried out. Alexander Wendt's claim that states currently live under Lockean (rather than Hobbesian) anarchy is a case in point (Wendt 1999, 246–312). While states are expected to compete under Lockean anarchy, more hostile behavior such as 'killing' another country is precluded because states recognize one another and their sovereignty rests upon recognizing the sovereignty of other states. By severely undermining the sovereignty of others, they would endanger their own sovereignty and right to exist. Second, if state identities are relatively stable (as

constructivists claim they are), they preclude states from carrying out intentions that are inconsistent with their identities. Intentions that are inconsistent with the identity of the given state, most likely, would not form in the first place. Identity-related factors strongly influence state behavior even in the realm of national security where 'collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity' are claimed to exist (Katzenstein 1996, 5).

The importance of actors' adherence to accepted rules of behavior has also been noted by authors who can hardly be considered constructivist such as Raymond Cohen, Thomas Schelling, and Randall Schweller. Threatening intentions are derived from an infringement of the rules of behavior. When a state breaks widely accepted rules of behavior, others are likely to conclude that the infractor is ready to proceed further and break other rules as well. It is also a sign that the infractor is a risk-acceptant. In the worst-case scenario, others may assume that the whole system of rules or the whole relationship is at risk. As Raymond Cohen writes,

Within any structure of relations which it is desired to preserve, certain rules of the game will be developed which regulate permissible behavior between the actors. In a dangerously uncertain world they allow a minimal degree of certainty. But they are like a seamless web. Damaged at one point, the whole fabric threatens to disintegrate. (Cohen 1978, 107)

Randall Schweller writes that 'when an actor deliberately steps over a boundary on a conceptual dimension, it commits an act that flagrantly violates accepted rules of the game and, in doing so, signals its intentions to do harm' (Schweller 2006, 41). A similar claim has been made by Thomas Schelling who wrote that the danger in overstepping a certain boundary is that 'there is just no other stopping place that can be tacitly acknowledged by both sides' (Schelling 1980, 259). Dean Pruitt wrote that 'the sign from which an intention is inferred consists of *stepping over* a 'boundary' on a conceptual dimension' (as cited in Cohen 1978, 100). In sum, breaking accepted rules of behavior is widely regarded as a signal of malign intentions. Thus, the normative-symbolic actions of the potential adversary can be perceived as signals of intentions.

To summarize, the academic literature offers no shortage of competing explanations on how states assess the intentions of their adversaries. This literature falls largely within the broad parameters set by realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches and emphasizes the importance of both the current capabilities and past actions of a state, the intentions of which are being scrutinized. There is disagreement, however, regarding the aspects of the adversary's behavior which are the most revealing about its intentions. In contrast with offensive realists, who claim that intentions cannot be discerned with sufficient certainty, defensive realists emphasize the importance of an adversary's military capabilities, its military doctrine, and geographical proximity in estimating its intentions. Liberal approaches focus on the adversary's domestic characteristics and its place in the international institutional setting. The broad version of the ideology argument claims that states with similar domestic ideologies are unlikely to perceive their peers as threatening while the narrow version of the argument focuses on relations between democracies and nondemocratic countries, with heightened threat perceptions on both sides. States that are becoming increasingly illiberal are likely to be perceived by democracies as harboring threatening intentions. Approaches that fall within the constructivist

approach emphasize the significance of those aspects of the adversary's behavior that can be best described as normative, symbolic, and identity-related.

Are these various approaches to how states define the intentions of their peers competing or complementary? They can be both, but this debate can only be settled by empirical evidence from case studies on how states identify the intentions of other states. These approaches are competing if the goal is to compare their explanatory power and, if possible, to declare one of them a winner. Much of the literature on state intentions clearly follows this pattern. They are also complementary though, because it is likely that states pay attention to all aspects of their adversaries' behavior. Instead of placing all of their eggs in one basket, states may receive valuable information about the intentions of their peers from a wide variety of aspects in their behavior. Because intentions are context-dependent, estimations of intentions can also be context-dependent. Although the next section mainly aims to test whether indicators from more than one meta-theoretical approach – realism, liberalism, constructivism – are regarded as important by decision-makers when estimating intentions of a potentially threatening state, it should be acknowledged that psychological explanations of intentions also matter. This article, though, tries to find out whether all of the three international relations theories have something to offer in terms of identifying threatening perceptions. It does not aim to use insights from psychological approaches to the analysis of foreign policy in order to determine why there are considerable differences among decision-makers when it comes to threat perception. The next section looks at how Latvia's decision-makers assess Russia's intentions with regard to Latvia. The analysis, which is based mostly on personal in-depth interviews with current and former key foreign and defense decision-makers, shows that although Russia's military capabilities are seen as the prime indicator of Russia's intentions vis-à-vis Latvia, decision-makers regard other indicators such as symbolic-normative behavior and domestic political characteristics as relevant.

Estimating Russia's intentions: the case of Latvia

How do Latvian decision-makers identify Russia's interests with regard to Latvia? What aspects of Russia's behavior do they find most informative when trying to discern Russia's intentions? This section begins by explaining how key variables are operationalized. The case study of Latvia is analyzed on the basis of interviews with key decision-makers involved in foreign and defense policy. To test the arguments of state intentions derived from the theoretical literature, the three main approaches have to be broken down into the nine more compact indicators that were used during the interviews. The latter part of this section presents the key findings from the interviews with Latvia's decision-makers.

Various approaches to identifying state intentions focus on capabilities and past actions. The three dominant international relations theories – realism, liberalism, and constructivism – offer insights into various aspects of state intentions. Although some elements of the literature on state intentions cannot be easily placed under a particular theoretical banner, realists place a premium on military capabilities and related indicators, while the liberal paradigm emphasizes the importance of domestic politics (particularly the characteristics of a political regime), and constructivists draw attention to symbolic and normative aspects of state behavior. To test these competing explanations, they need to be operationalized. The following paragraphs demonstrate

how these three approaches have been broken down into nine specific components which have been identified to various extent in Russia's domestic politics and behavior vis-à-vis other countries in recent years. Although there is no separate group of indicators on Russia's foreign policy (there is one on Russia's domestic politics), there are several indicators – heightened activity by an adversary's intelligence agencies, violations of norms and international agreements, and widespread deception and lies – which offer opportunities to discuss Russia's foreign policy.

Capabilities

Any assessment of the intentions of an adversary must, necessarily, take capabilities into account. However, what matters here is more than just military, economic, and other capabilities because how capabilities have changed and evolved over time is also important. Thus, military capabilities, as an indicator of Russia's intentions vis-à-vis Latvia, have to be supplemented with other tangible indicators. Material capabilities, as a general category, were broken down into five separate elements that, taken together, may provide useful information for Latvian decision-makers regarding Russia's intentions.

1. *Military capabilities*: Military capabilities reflect Russia's ability to achieve its military objectives (if it has any objectives of this sort) toward any of its neighboring countries, Latvia included. Taking into account the fact that the military disparity between Latvia and Russia is vast at any point, the main emphasis here is on changes in the relative capabilities and the development of specific military instruments that would help Russia achieve its military objectives in the Baltics more easily. Russia has modernized its military, especially after the brief war against Georgia in 2008, and therefore it can be hypothesized that Russia's increasing military capabilities are going to be a major factor in the calculations of Latvia's decision-makers.

2. *Geographical location*: Geography as an indicator of intentions is frequently used in conjunction with an adversary's military capabilities. Geography affects the use of military force and influences outcomes when military force is used. Although geography may seem like a constant factor, perceptions of geography may shift. Moreover, the impact of geography on offensive and defensive behavior may change over time. For example, certain geographical features that might hinder an adversary's offense may become useless due to technological advancement. Latvia's decision-makers were asked to assess the importance of geographical proximity in estimating Russia's intentions.

3. *Military training exercises*: Military organizations prepare for various contingencies, but they are more likely to train for the most likely contingencies. Thus, military training exercises are likely to provide useful information about the contingencies for which an adversary's military is preparing. The frequency of, and proceedings during, military exercises also indicate the level of preparedness of an adversary's military. Some of the scenarios in the military training exercises held by an adversary can be more worrying than others. Russia has conducted a number of military exercises close to Latvia's borders (Zapad 2009, 2013, 2017) and these are likely to have contributed to the estimations by Latvia's decision-makers of Russia's intentions.

4. *Specific vulnerabilities*: Irrespective of the military capabilities of the adversary, the potential target of the aggression may have specific vulnerabilities which can be exploited by the aggressor. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was preceded by

soldiers without insignia appearing in Sevastopol and elsewhere in Crimea. Russia's troops were already stationed in Crimea before the start of the conflict. It seemed at the time that there was a genuine secessionist sentiment in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. In addition, the relative economic deprivation in some parts of eastern Ukraine may have played a role in alienating the local population from the central government in Kyiv. This allowed Russia to gain time for completing the annexation of Crimea. Although Latvia does not share a number of the vulnerabilities of Ukraine (e.g. there are no Russian troops in Latvia, while the standard of living is roughly similar in Latvia and Russia), Latvia has a substantial minority of ethnic Russians (approximately 26% according to the National Census data from 2011) and Russian speakers – a category which includes ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians (approximately 37% of the total population). Moreover, the majority of the Russian speakers reside in the capital city, Riga, and in Latgale, the sparsely populated easternmost region of Latvia that borders Russia. Thus, Latvia's decision-makers may be more inclined to see Russia as harboring threatening intentions because Latvia shares some of the vulnerabilities which Russia exploited in Ukraine.

5. *Heightened activity by an adversary's intelligence agencies:* Military conflicts are usually preceded by the heightened activity of intelligence agencies. Therefore, increased activism (if detected at all) can provide useful information about an adversary's intentions. Although publicly available information regarding the work of intelligence agencies and the activities of Russian intelligence services in Latvia is scarce, Latvia's decision-makers were nevertheless asked whether there had been an increase in the activities of Russian intelligence services in Latvia, as this information is of a general character and could, therefore, be stated publicly. For example, the Constitution Protection Bureau of the Republic of Latvia identified a moderate increase in terms of the activities of Russian secret services in Latvia in 2015 (Constitution Protection Bureau of the Republic of Latvia 2015, 4).

Domestic politics of the adversary

The literature on the domestic politics of the adversary largely focuses on the impact of the ideological distance between the countries in question and state–society relations in the country where intentions are being measured. Thus, an increasing ideological distance between the potential aggressor and the target state is likely to signal aggressive intentions. As Russia has become less democratic in recent years (Freedom House 2015), it is more likely to be seen as harboring aggressive intentions vis-à-vis Latvia because the ideological distance between Latvia and Russia has increased. The ability to shape the worldview of the general public and to mobilize society for foreign policy purposes can also be regarded as a signal of malign intentions because society would be unwilling to act as an obstacle to government's aggression toward its neighbors. The domestic politics approach has been operationalized in this article in two ways that capture the dynamics of the ideological distance between states and the state–society relationship within the country which is the potential adversary.

6. *Insensitivity to costs:* Military aggression may incur costs that extend far beyond the direct military losses suffered during the conflict. Today, military aggression is usually met with international condemnation. At a minimum, economic and other sanctions can be expected. At a maximum, other states may provide military

assistance to the victim of the aggression. The signaled readiness to face economic and military losses is an important indicator of intentions. Governments in democratic countries are limited in their foreign policy ambitions because the general public is not willing to bear these costs. Nondemocratic countries, in turn, are better equipped for controlling dissent at home which may allow them to pursue foreign policy aims at a greater expense. In addition, foreign aggression is likely to be regarded as less risky if there is little reason to expect negative domestic repercussions. Domestic support alters the risk calculus by lowering the threshold for aggression. In the wake of the military conflict in Ukraine, Russia has demonstrated that it is ready to bear the costs of economic and other sanctions. Although the Russian leadership decries Western sanctions, these have not resulted in Russia's pulling-out of the military conflict. Thus, it is likely that Latvia's decision-makers would see Russia as having threatening intentions because of Russia's demonstrated willingness to absorb the costs of military aggression against Ukraine.

7. *Control over society*: The ability of a country to carry out military aggression abroad, or to engage in other kinds of foreign policy behavior that is usually considered controversial, largely depends on its elites being able to convince large segments of society that such a course of action is necessary. This is likely to be problematic (although by no means impossible) in democratic societies where the media are free to voice views that contradict those of the government and where the general public can stage mass protests against the government's policies. Wars of aggression are difficult for democracies. This is not the case in Russia, where the political leadership has increased its control over the media in the past 15 years and, thus, the ability to shape the opinions of the Russian population. As a consequence, Russia is able to withstand external pressure without risking public discontent over the pursuit of its foreign policy objectives. If Russia chooses to confront Latvia or any other small frontline NATO member state, it is unlikely that the Russian media or the general public would oppose this decision. In fact, the Russian media are likely to rally popular support and advocate for the government's policies. The ability of the Russian government to shape media content and public opinion can be perceived as threatening by Latvian decision-makers because it largely removes constraints on the Russian political leadership in carrying out threatening intentions toward countries that Russia sees as unfriendly.

Violation of widely accepted rules of behavior

This part of the analytical framework refers to the symbolic-normative aspects of international politics. Although international relations take place in an anarchical realm without a central government that would create and enforce rules of behavior, there are indications that this view does not correspond to current international realities. Contributions by the English School of international relations have demonstrated that states may establish order – sets of rules that states follow in their foreign policy – through interaction (Bull 1977). This claim is restated in a slightly different form by constructivist authors such as Alexander Wendt who claims that norms and rules influence states behavior (Wendt 1999). David Lake, representing the realist school, has argued that powerful states may establish regional hierarchies, which entail systems of rules that are accepted by weaker powers and are to a certain extent also internalized by great power(s) (Lake 2009). Thus, rules and norms are an integral

part of international relations. They make interactions between states more predictable by excluding certain types of behavior that are widely regarded as illegitimate. When such rules are violated, however, such instances are usually interpreted as an assault on rule-based international relations and are seen as threatening. An obvious example of a violation of widely accepted rules of behavior is the infringement on another states' sovereignty, an assault on the rules-based system which can take place in many different forms, and a disregard for international agreements. In addition, states that use deception can be seen to be threatening.

8. Violations of norms and international agreements: Sovereignty is widely regarded as the foundational norm of the current international system. Although this norm is violated occasionally, there is nevertheless no viable alternative to it and states continue to emphasize the importance of this norm. Therefore, the most severe violations of sovereignty, such as the forceful annexation of another state's territory, are widely condemned. States that have committed such hostile acts are likely to be seen as revisionist powers harboring threatening intentions. Russia's orchestrated campaign to annex Crimea is a case in point. Most Western countries regard the annexation of Crimea, which was carried out by Russia in the spring of 2014, as a blatant land-grab. Russia disagrees, citing the example of Kosovo which seceded from Serbia under the watch of the EU and NATO member states (Putin 2014). Despite its claims that the annexation of Crimea was in accordance with international law, Russia is now likely to be perceived as having threatening intentions against its small neighbors. States take particular note of another state's behavior when it flagrantly violates commitments, especially when it comes to sovereignty and security. States are also expected to fulfill their contractual commitments vis-à-vis other states. Russia's annexation of Crimea can be regarded as a violation of former pledges by the Russian government 'to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine' (The Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances 1994) and, thus, its behavior is likely to be perceived by Latvia's decision-makers as a demonstrated readiness not to be constrained by international agreements.

9. Widespread deception and lies: National governments have a wide variety of instruments of statecraft at their disposal. Deception and lies can be used for strategic purposes. States tend to engage in concerted deception campaigns when they are in a hostile environment. Lying is mostly used during international conflicts (Mearsheimer 2013). However, when political leaders are caught lying, such acts can be regarded as an indicator of threatening intentions. Russia's leaders have been caught lying to their Western counterparts repeatedly during the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in eastern Ukraine. Such behavior has made Russia less trustworthy and, therefore, Russia's assurances that the security and sovereignty of its smaller neighbors is not at risk is not likely to be taken at face value. In short, Russia's deception and lying (which is not confined to the Ukraine crisis) are likely to be seen by Latvia's decision-makers as indicators of malign intentions.

These nine indicators were tested through the help of in-depth interviews with Latvia's decision-makers. The distribution of the above indicators, however, is disproportional. The capabilities category has five indicators, while the domestic politics and symbolic-normative categories have only two each. The asymmetry in terms of the number of indicators in each category is irrelevant though because the aim of this article is to find out whether decision-makers produce estimates of an adversary's intentions using indicators from just one category or across all three of them. The fact

that the latter two categories have only two indicators each does not produce methodological difficulties. The aim is not to produce a rank of all indicators from the most important to the least important, but to simply to find out whether decision-makers use indicators from just one category or from all of them when producing estimates of an adversary's intentions. It is, however, possible that there are indicators not captured by the present analysis.

Ten interviews were conducted from the end of September to early December 2015 with Latvia's key decision-makers who have been dealing with foreign and defense policy. A brief explanation on the temporal context in which the interviews took place would be useful here. After heavy fighting in eastern Ukraine in the summer of 2014 and in early 2015, the conflict had receded somewhat by September–December 2015. The bulk of the interviews took place immediately after Russia commenced its military intervention in Syria. This was seen by a number of those interviewed as an attempt to deflect attention from Russia's involvement in the conflict in Ukraine. The domestic context against which the interviews took place was in the aftermath of Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first part of 2015, and affected by substantial concerns over the deterioration of the international security environment of which Latvia is a part, an increasing number of NATO military training exercises in the Baltic states, the worsening refugee crisis in the EU, and efforts to increase Latvia's defense expenditure which had been hovering at around 1% of GDP until 2014. Latvia's decision-makers have now pledged to increase defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2018, and the data for 2016 indicate that Latvia's defense budget has already increased to 1.4% of GDP (approximately 368 million euros). The domestic context was also influenced by rumors that the government of Ms Laimdota Straujuma was likely to fall. The government fell on 7 December 2015, three days after the last interview was conducted. Most ministers, including the Defense Minister Mr Raimonds Bergmanis and the Foreign Minister Mr Edgars Rinkēvičs, retained their posts within the new government which was formed by Prime Minister Mr Māris Kučinskis in early 2016.

The list of interviewees (name, position, former position (where applicable), and date of the interview):

- Mr Jānis Kažociņš, National Security Adviser to the President of Latvia Mr Raimonds Vējonis (interviewed on 30 September 2015);
- Ms Solvita Āboltiņa, Chairwoman of the National Security Committee at the Latvian Parliament (interviewed on 1 October 2015);
- Mr Andrejs Pildegovičs, State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (interviewed on 2 October 2015);
- Mr Ojārs Kalniņš, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee at the Latvian Parliament (interviewed on 2 October 2015);
- Mr Jānis Sārts, Director of the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence; former State Secretary at the Latvian Ministry of Defense (2008–2015) (interviewed on 9 October 2015);
- Mr Jānis Garisons, State Secretary at the Latvian Ministry of Defense (interviewed on 12 October 2015);
- Mr Raimonds Bergmanis, Minister of Defense (interviewed on 19 October 2015);
- Mr Edgars Rinkēvičs, Minister of Foreign Affairs (interviewed on 19 October 2015);

- Ms Ināra Mūrniece, Speaker of the Parliament (interviewed on 26 November 2015);
- Mr Artis Pabriks, Member of the European Parliament; former Minister of Defense (2010–2014) and Minister of Foreign Affairs (2004–2007) (interviewed on 4 December 2015).

The 10 interviews which were held represent the views of the executive and legislative branches of the Latvian government. These interviews also represent a mix of views from political leaders and high-ranking civil servants. A few interviews were also conducted with political leaders and civil servants who no longer hold high-ranking positions in the Latvian government. The interviewees include two current ministers and one former minister, two current state secretaries and one former state secretary, two chairpersons of parliamentary committees, the speaker of the parliament, and the national security advisor to the president. All interviews were conducted on the condition of anonymity, that is, the views expressed would not be attributed to a particular person. The interviews lasted from 30 to 60 min. Although the condition of anonymity would normally present a major challenge for a research project, it is not as damaging in this case because the aim of the research was to find out which aspects of Russia's behavior were regarded as the most threatening by Latvia's decision-makers. The fact that most of them regard Russia's behavior as a major security concern is not controversial. Therefore, the aim of this article is twofold. First, it aims to find out whether there is agreement among Latvia's key decision-makers who deal with foreign and defense policy consider that Russia's military capabilities constitute a major threat. Second, the article aims to establish whether Russia's domestic politics and symbolic-normative behavior indicators are also regarded as conveying valuable information about Russia's intentions.

The responses of the 10 Latvian decision-makers who were interviewed were coded according to one of three categories – 'yes', 'partially', 'no' – and each response was assigned a numerical value (yes – 1; partially – 0.5, no – 0). Responses were placed in the 'yes' category when the decision-maker recognized the importance of the particular indicator of intentions, and thought that this indicator was important for his/her assessment of Russia's intentions. At the other end of the spectrum, responses were placed in the 'no' category when a decision-maker did not regard the indicator to be important in general and/or relevant for assessing Russia's intentions vis-à-vis Latvia. The category between the two extremes is more blurred, and contains various responses (the 'partially' category). A decision-maker might recognize that a particular indicator may be important in general, but may have chosen not to apply it to the analysis of Russia's intentions. A variant of this is the possibility that a decision-maker may regard an indicator to be important, but not see any signs of Russia's behavior that would be a cause for worry. For example, one interviewee regarded heightened activities by intelligence agencies as an important indicator of an adversary's intentions, but was of the opinion that Russia's intelligence agencies' activity with regard to Latvia had decreased (Interview 6). Also, there were instances when interviewees responded to questions normatively by explaining what Latvia should do to decrease its vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia or by trying to explain Russia's rationale for behaving in a certain way. These were difficult to place under either 'yes' or 'no' responses and were, therefore, placed under the 'partially' category because there was neither a

denial of the importance of the particular indicator nor active endorsement of its importance.

At first, the decision-makers responded to a question about whether their estimations of Russia's intentions vis-à-vis Latvia had changed when compared to their precrisis (military conflict in Ukraine) estimations. All interviewees confirmed that they were more concerned about Russia's intentions after the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in eastern Ukraine than they were before. However, Russia's behavior with regard to Ukraine, and more broadly, has a number of aspects, some of which can be more (or less) reliable as credible indicators of Russia's intentions regarding Latvia. The next paragraphs discuss the aspects of Russia's behavior which were seen by Latvia's decision-makers as a basis for concluding that Russia may threaten Latvia.

An analysis of the interviews with the Latvian decision-makers confirms the assumption that indicators from all three groups – capability-related indicators, domestic politics indicators, and symbolic-normative indicators – score relatively high (see Table 1). However, military capabilities stand out as an indicator of Russia's intentions with the maximum score of 10 (all interviewees regarded this indicator as highly important). Military exercises score almost equally highly with 9 points. Only two interviewees regarded this indicator as partially important, while all others regarded this as a very reliable indicator of Russia's intentions. These two indicators which are related to Russia's capabilities are followed by three indicators that belong to the other two categories. Violation of international norms and agreements (score 8) was regarded as an important indicator which falls under the symbolic-normative category. Indicators stemming from Russia's domestic politics are also regarded as particularly important by the Latvian decision-makers. The ability of the political elite to control Russian society received a score of 7.5 while Russia's seeming insensitivity to costs in the pursuit of its foreign policy objectives received a score of 7. The main conclusion to be drawn from the interviews with these decision-makers was that capabilities-related indicators can be regarded as particularly significant, but other indicators pertaining to Russia's domestic politics and its violations of widely accepted rules of international relations can also be regarded as providing valuable information regarding Russia's intentions.

The interview responses of the Latvian decision-makers should be explained in a bit more depth as this would reveal the reasons why some indicators received a high score and others did not. For example, the indicator 'Widespread deception and lies' was regarded by Latvian decision-makers as not very helpful in identifying Russia's intentions. This begs the question of *why*? This applies equally to the low importance of geography, specific vulnerabilities and the intensified intelligence activities of Russia. The low scores received for these indicators need to be explained. Thus, instead of assuming that high scores for certain indicators were given for good reasons, the actual reasons for this have to be explained. The following paragraphs explain the reasoning provided by the decision-makers for evaluating the above nine indicators as important or insignificant when estimating Russia's intentions.

Military capabilities (total score 10)

This indicator is clearly regarded as the most important one by the interviewed decision-makers. However, military capabilities per se cannot be the sole indicator of

Table 1. Summary of responses by Latvia's decision-makers on nine indicators of threatening intentions.

Interview No.	Capabilities-related indicators					Domestic politics indicators			Symbolic-normative indicators		
	Military capabilities	Geographical location	Military training exercises	Specific vulnerabilities	Intensified intelligence activities	Insensitivity to costs	Control over society	Violation of norms and international agreements	Widespread deception and lies		
Interview 1	Yes – 1	Yes – 1	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Yes – 1	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5		
Interview 2	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5		
Interview 3	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1		
Interview 4	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	No – 0		
Interview 5	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	No – 0	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5		
Interview 6	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	No – 0	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5		
Interview 7	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	No – 0	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	No – 0		
Interview 8	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Yes – 1	Yes – 1		
Interview 9	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Yes – 1	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5		
Interview 10	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Yes – 1	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5	Partially – 0.5	Yes – 1	Partially – 0.5		
Total score	10	5.5	9	5	5	7	7.5	8	5		

Russia's intentions because there has always been a tremendous gap between Latvia and Russia in terms of military capabilities, but perceptions of Russia's intentions have, presumably, fluctuated over time. Latvia's defense spending did not reach the planned threshold of 2% of GDP after joining NATO. Defense spending decreased considerably later as a result of the economic crisis (2008–2010). When Latvia's economy resumed economic growth in 2011, military expenditures did not increase. In fact, military expenditure remained below 1% of GDP, and it only rose above this threshold in 2015 when it reached 1.02% of GDP. Russia's military modernization was already well under way at this time, but it took a visible and forceful demonstration of Russia's military might in Ukraine to change Latvia's behavior. In addition to the demonstrable results of Russia's military modernization, interviewees emphasized the speed with which Russia can use the military units which are situated close to Latvia's border (interview 9) and the alleged fact that some of Russia's most capable military units and advanced weaponry are in close proximity to its borders with the Baltic states (interviews 1 and 10). Although this indicator was not about the military training exercises held by Russia, a number of interviewees said that Russia's military exercises were a major concern for them because of their offensive scenarios and timing (interviews 7, 8, and 10).

Geographical location (total score 5.5)

When it comes to geography, most interviewees emphasized that geography shapes any state's perceptions of its security environment to a great extent. However, the interviewees considered geography in a variety of ways. There were some who preferred to treat geography as a constant factor (interviews 8 and 9). One interviewee claimed that geography is indeed an important indicator, but that Latvia's geographical features would make it difficult for Russia to seize territory quickly and to move heavy armored vehicles across Latvia (interview 5). Two interviewees spoke about perceptual aspects of geography. They claimed that the Baltic states do not enjoy the same status on the perceptual map of the Russian political leadership that the Scandinavian countries and Poland enjoy and that Russia is not yet ready to treat the Baltic states as fully sovereign states (interview 10). The Baltic states, however, are no longer in the same perceptual category with other former Soviet socialist republics, either (interview 7). Another interviewee indicated that geography poses certain risks of which Latvia was better aware after the outbreak of the military conflict in Ukraine (interview 4). On balance, however, geographical proximity to Russia was not regarded as a particularly useful indicator of Russia's intentions vis-à-vis Latvia, as such intentions largely depend upon the presence of other factors.

Military training exercises (total score 9)

A significant majority of the interviewees indicated that military training exercises conveyed important information on Russia's intentions vis-à-vis Latvia. The interviewees, however, emphasized the importance of different aspects of Russia's military exercises and drew different conclusions about Russia's intentions. One interviewee mentioned that the secrecy of Russia's military exercises spoke volumes about its intentions. International observers are usually not invited to Russia's military exercises

(interview 10). Another interviewee emphasized the importance of offensive scenarios used during such exercises that would separate the Baltic states from their western allies (interview 1). If such scenarios are rehearsed, they may also be used at some point. There was no consensus among the interviewees regarding Russia's intentions in conducting the military exercises. Although most interviewees regarded Russia's military exercises as providing useful information about its intentions, some interviewees claimed that the exercises were simply instruments of generic influence (interviews 4 and 7). Thus, the military exercises were seen as threatening, not only because of the scenarios that were played out, but also because the military exercises could be used by Russia to willingly demonstrate its military might, to bully Latvia into taking Russia's interests into account.

Specific vulnerabilities (total score 5)

All interviewees were of the opinion that the most likely specific vulnerability was that of the so-called 'Ukraine scenario' which would involve the infiltration of Russian troops without insignia (or even dressed as civilians) and the active support of currently nonexistent separatist sentiments in Latgale, the easternmost region of Latvia. One interviewee mentioned that Latvia was used to Russia's attempts to influence the Russian-speaking minority politically, but after the outbreak of the fighting in eastern Ukraine it became clear that Russia's influence may have a military aspect as well (interview 8). Almost all interviewees claimed that although Latvia and Ukraine shared some vulnerabilities (sizable Russian-speaking minorities and a common border with Russia), the differences between the two countries were more prominent (interview 1). Some interviewees noted that Latvia was more vulnerable to the 'Ukraine scenario' before the outbreak of fighting in Ukraine, but these vulnerabilities were in the process of being eliminated (interviews 3 and 4). It would also be problematic for Russia to deny its involvement if such a scenario was to take place (interview 7). Moreover, the element of surprise would be absent if Russia tried to replicate the use of the 'little green men' approach in the Baltic states (interviews 7 and 9). It was also emphasized that, for Russian-backed separatists to succeed, the government of the target country would have to refrain from using force to quell separatists in the face of a massive concentration of military on the Russia side of the border. The Baltic states, protected by NATO Article 5, are unlikely to be intimidated by Russia concentrating its troops on the border with Latvia. Thus, force would be used against foreign-backed separatists in Latvia which would most likely lead to an escalation of fighting. Presumably, Russia would like to avoid such a scenario (interview 6). One interviewee claimed that, from Russia's perspective, the war in the Donbass region was a mistake which was unlikely to be repeated any time soon (interview 1). Another interviewee emphasized that the blaming of the victim of aggression was an old approach, which was used by the Soviet Union in 1940 when it annexed the three Baltic states (interview 10). In summing up, although Latvia has some vulnerabilities in the context of the approach that Russia used with regard to Ukraine, Latvia's decision-makers share the view that Latvia is not sufficiently vulnerable for Russia to replicate the 'Ukraine scenario' with regard to the Latgale region.

Intensified intelligence activities (total score 5)

There are two key reasons why this factor does not feature prominently in the minds of Latvia's decision-makers. First, one interviewee explicitly stated that this indicator is less important than an increase in Russia's military capabilities (interview 3). Second, several interviewees claimed that there has been no increase in activity in terms of Russia's intelligence agencies with regard to Latvia (interviews 5, 6, and 7). Other interviewees, however, claimed that the activities of Russia's intelligence agencies vis-à-vis Latvia have intensified (interviews 4 and 9). Several decision-makers chose to look at this issue more broadly. They talked about Russia's support for compatriot organizations abroad and how this aspect of Russia's foreign policy has become more prominent in recent years (interviews 8, 9, and 10). According to another interviewee, Russia's focus has shifted toward Ukraine, Poland, and the United States (interview 1). One interviewee claimed that the element of routine in Russia's approach to Latvia is particularly strong, the evidence being that activity has not increased and no new narratives or approaches to Latvia had been generated in recent years (interview 3). In sum, Latvia's decision-makers did not see sufficient grounds for using this indicator as a way of providing reliable information about Russia's intentions toward Latvia.

Insensitivity to costs (total score 7)

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its extensive military role in the military conflict in eastern Ukraine has come at a cost. The assessment by Latvia's decision-makers about how far Russia was ready to go in terms of bearing the costs arising from the pursuit of controversial foreign policy objectives, however, was not uniform. One decision-maker saw this indicator as significant, but nevertheless inferior to the one concerning an increase in Russia's military capabilities (interview 6). One decision-maker said that the ability to deal with hardships was part of Russia's identity (interview 5). This ability was allegedly strengthened by the economic growth over the past 15 years which created a better baseline for the economic downturn in the wake of the conflict in Ukraine (interview 1). Others pointed to limitations in Russia's readiness to suffer the consequences of its use of military force against its neighbors. Several interviewees stated that Russia was ready to deal with short-term costs arising from its aggression in Ukraine, but its readiness to deal with the long-term implications of this conflict was questionable (interviews 1, 8, and 10). Another decision-maker emphasized the importance of the difference between economic costs and military casualties. Russia could absorb economic costs with ease, but its ability to absorb human costs from military conflicts abroad was doubtful (interview 7). To summarize, Latvia's decision-makers, in general, regarded insensitivity to costs as an important indicator of the adversary's intentions, but many of them questioned Russia's readiness to suffer long-term costs stemming from military aggression.

Control over society (total score 7.5)

Most interviewees underscored that control over the media and the ability to shape public perceptions about life in Russia and abroad were key to the survivability of the current regime in Russia (interviews 1, 5, 8, 10). Thus, control over society has a primarily domestic function and is seen by Russia's leadership as an essential element of statecraft

(interview 10). However, the ability to shape public perceptions about the world outside Russia has major repercussions for the security of Russia's neighbors. One interviewee claimed that Russia's political elite was less constrained by public opinion than political leaders in democratic societies. The conflict in Ukraine and Russia's swift intervention in Syria in late September 2015 provided evidence that public opinion in Russia could be mobilized at short notice in support of the government's foreign policy (interview 7). Even though Russia had not tried to actively mobilize its public in support of the use of the military against any NATO member state as yet, its ability to shape its citizens' perceptions about other countries made it clear that this was likely to be an easy task, not least because NATO's image as a hostile alliance was strongly rooted in Russian thinking (interview 7). Another interviewee, however, pointed out that the ability of Russia's current leadership to shape domestic public opinion could be limited because Russians were likely to support short and victorious military engagements abroad, but would strongly oppose taking on a NATO member state militarily. The ability to control society would most likely decrease if Russia were to face a prolonged period of economic downturn or if the military operation in Syria were to produce a large number of casualties (interview 3). Although most interviewees did not address the issue of Russia's ability to shape public opinion in support of its foreign policy goals abroad, one interviewee remarked that Russia's propaganda was effective at home, but largely ineffective abroad (interview 6). This is, however, a contentious subject because there is evidence that Russia has been able to shape the views of Russian-speaking minorities in neighboring countries, including Latvia. The attitudes of Russian speakers in Latvia, who consume mainly Russian media, indicate that they are likely to hold unfavorable views about Latvia's western partners, but favorable views on Russia's policies (Berzina 2016).

Violation of norms and international agreements (total score 7.5)

This indicator was regarded as important by most of Latvia's decision-makers (interviews 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8). It provided evidence that symbolic-normative behavior carried weight in estimating the intentions of other countries. Most interviewees emphasized that Russia's recent violations of international norms and agreements in the context of the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in the Donbass region were just the tip of the iceberg (interview 6). In addition, South Ossetia (interview 1), Abkhazia, and the Nagorno-Karabakh region (interview 3), the kidnapping of the Estonian security operative Eston Kohver (interview 6), and violations of the territorial waters and airspace of the Baltic states (interview 10) were mentioned. According to Latvia's decision-makers, these violations provided useful information regarding Russia's intentions vis-à-vis Latvia and Russia's other neighbors. Frequent violations of international norms and agreements, however, were also seen as having a positive function in terms of changing Russia's image abroad. Russia's neighbors have grown accustomed to Russia's casual disregard for their sovereignty, but violations on such a massive scale as in Ukraine were seen as transforming views on Russia in Western Europe (interviews 7 and 8). There were a few other ideas that emerged during the interviews. First, Russia's violations of international norms were not seen as a new phenomenon (interviews 1 and 10). Second, one interviewee emphasized that Russia's violations of the accepted rules of the game posed questions for the West (interview 5). Should the EU and NATO member states continue to play by the rules when Russia is not? Third, there were indications that Russia's behavior was largely an outgrowth of its material power and, in particular, its military capabilities

(interview 2). Thus, normative aspects of state behavior were seen as important, but they were nevertheless conditioned by Russia's material capabilities.

Widespread deception and lies (total score 5)

If normative-symbolic indicators play an important role in estimating the intentions of other states, then why are deception and lies not regarded as reliable indicators of Russia's intentions by Latvia's decision-makers? Arguably, the significance of this indicator depends on the context of the relationship between the countries. There is little doubt that a country that begins to deceive others is likely to be seen as unreliable and, perhaps increasingly, as a country with malign intentions. Latvia's decision-makers, however, expected Russia to deceive and lie (interviews 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9). One interviewee went as far as to state that Russia routinely uses lies as an instrument of statecraft (interview 10). Another interviewee said that Russia's campaign of deception had reached Orwellian heights (interview 1). Thus, if Russia's behavior conformed to this prior expectation, it was unlikely to affect perceptions of its intentions. Decision-makers saw what they expected to see. Estimations about Russia's intentions would need to be updated only if lies and deception were removed from Russia's repertoire. When it comes to specific aspects of the interview responses, several aspects are worthy of mention. First, one interviewee mentioned that Russia's use of deception and lies varied across issues and levels of decision-making. Thus, it should be possible to deal with Russia on those issues where incentives to lie and deceive were absent (interview 2). Second, several interviewees mentioned that Russia's deception and lies had started to backfire, as the level of mutual trust between Russia and the West had reached a new low (interviews 7 and 8). Third, although Russia's behavior had increasingly been inconsistent with its statements over the past years, several decision-makers noted that deception and lies had served Russia well (interviews 8, 9, and 10). If Russia does not admit its wrongdoings in Ukraine and elsewhere, it leaves the door open for Western interlocutors to negotiate with Russia as long as it enjoys the benefit of doubt.

Conclusion

How do states assess the intentions of other states with potentially malign intentions? This article set out to investigate the extent to which capabilities-related indicators of intentions were supplemented by other – domestic politics and symbolic-normative – indicators. It can be concluded that military capabilities are the most significant indicator, but other indicators also play a role in producing estimates about the intentions of other states. The case study of Latvia revealed that all the decision-makers regarded the increase in Russia's military capabilities as a particularly important indicator of its intentions. Some of the interviewees claimed that intentions were an outgrowth of military capabilities. According to their estimates, Russia's intentions had become more expansive in step with the increase in its military capabilities. There are good reasons to doubt, however, that intentions are simply a function of capabilities. If anything, the case study of Latvia indicates that domestic politics and symbolic-normative indicators also play a major role in shaping the perceptions of Russia's intentions because the growth of Russia's military might alone was insufficient to convince policy-makers in Latvia to increase defense expenditures. It took visible

demonstrations of Russia's newfound military power and the military conflict in Ukraine to decisively convince decision-makers that Russia's intentions with regard to Latvia might be more aggressive than previously estimated. In addition to military capabilities and their demonstration through military training exercises, Latvia's decision-makers also look at Russia's insensitivity to costs in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives, the ability of Russia's political elite to control society and shape its world-views, and Russia's violations of international norms and agreements, as viable indicators of Russia's intentions. The latter indicators are considered less indicative than sheer military capabilities, but they are nevertheless considered to play an important role in the process of estimating Russia's intentions.

Although the findings of this study indicate that the intentions of a potential adversary are likely to be regarded as malign even when capabilities-related indicators are supplemented by other domestic and international aspects of an adversary's behavior that can be regarded as threatening, this study has a number of limitations. The first and most obvious limitation is that this conclusion is based on just one case study. It would be necessary to look at how other states estimate the intentions of potentially threatening states and compare the findings with those from the case study of Latvia to see whether the findings are similar or different. Second, although the article concludes that Latvian decision-makers tend to draw upon a wide variety of indicators to determine Russia's intentions, it is unlikely that it will resolve the conceptual debate between the three meta-theories. After all, realism, liberalism, and constructivism do not fall with empirical evidence but rather persist even in the face of contradicting empirical evidence. If anything, this article may even support the realist claim that states identify intentions of potential aggressors on the basis of their military capabilities because this indicator was regarded as the most significant by the Latvian decision-makers. Third, there are good reasons why most case studies dealing with state intentions rely on archival material. The (contemporary) case study of Latvia is based on a limited number of in-depth interviews with high-ranking decision-makers, but the amount of information that can be gathered from archives is greater. In addition, archival information allows us to identify how perceptions of an adversary's intentions change over time, while interviews conducted with decision-makers present a snapshot of their thinking at a particular moment in time. The possibility that decision-makers did not reveal their personal views on Russia's intentions should not be discounted either. It is possible that some of the interviewed decision-makers held personal beliefs that Russia did not intend to undertake military aggression against Latvia or any other NATO member state, for the reason that such a view would not be well-received by the general public and, they therefore, chose not to make it public or reveal this view during the interview for this article. In short, additional information on internal deliberations within the Latvian government which are currently unavailable to the public would, perhaps, offer a basis for revising the conclusions of this case study in later years.

Fourth, the case study of Latvia's decision-makers' perceptions of Russia's intentions can probably be considered as an easy case because Russia's behavior in 2014–2015 signaled malign intentions to its neighbors on virtually all accounts. Decision-makers in one country may be more sensitive to one set of indicators, while decision-makers in other countries could regard other aspects of Russia's behavior as better indicators of its intentions. But, on balance, when a country's foreign policy is seen as threatening on many accounts, then it is likely to be

regarded as harboring malign intentions. After all, Russia's military capabilities have increased demonstrably, its political system has become less democratic, and it has clearly disrespected Ukraine's sovereignty with the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in eastern Ukraine. It is hardly surprising that Russia's smaller neighbors attribute malign intentions to Russia. Fifth, factors other than those discussed in this article might be responsible for a heightened threat perception about Russia's intentions among Latvia's decision-makers. A heavy historical legacy casts its shadow over Latvian–Russian relations. After all, Russia's predecessor, the Soviet Union, occupied Latvia in June 1940. These historical grievances rather than specific aspects of Russia's behavior in 2014–2015 might be partly responsible for the estimations of Russia's intentions. In addition, Latvia's membership in the EU and NATO might have influenced their threat perceptions. For the most part, Latvia's allies in the Trans-Atlantic organizations did not regard Russia as a potential threat until recently. Instead, Russia was seen as a partner. Therefore, the international environment was not receptive to alarmist estimations of Russia's intentions until 2014. When the annexation of Crimea took place in March 2014, however, Latvia's western allies were ready to accept more realistic estimations of Russia's intentions, which also allowed Latvia to become more vocal about its perceptions of Russia's intentions. Thus, although this article provides strong evidence in support of the claim that it is not only capabilities-related indicators that matter in estimating an adversary's intentions, more work is needed to explain the role that other indications of intentions play in different contexts.

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