



# BALTIC DEFENCE COLLEGE

BALTDEFCOL Policy Brief

## **Twenty Years On: The Contemporary Security Environment of the Baltic States Two Decades After Joining NATO**

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### Introduction

2024 is an important anniversary for the Baltic states. It marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Baltic states joining NATO and the European Union. Security was the top priority immediately after regaining independence and it remains so twenty years later. This policy brief investigates the contemporary security environment of the Baltic states.

Northern Europe has now become NATO's center of gravity.<sup>1</sup> As the security environment in Europe grows more complex, the three Baltic states on the northeastern flank of NATO find themselves in a familiar position. Finland and Sweden opted in 2022 to end decades of neutrality and apply for NATO membership, becoming the 31<sup>st</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> members of the Alliance, respectively. Given the nature of the unjust war of conquest being waged against Ukraine, which evidences the complete disregard of the Russian Federation for both the territorial integrity of sovereign countries (and not for the first time) and the rules-based international order, coupled with a history of aggression and occupation of the three Baltic states, the security needs of NATO's northeastern flank have been significantly elevated. Within the northeastern flank, the security situation is the most dire in the Baltic states.<sup>2</sup>

The eastern flank was given heightened attention during the 2022 Madrid Summit as Allies realised the vulnerabilities of the existing security architecture. This was stressed again in the Vilnius communiqué, and the commitment to move from battlegroups to brigade-size units was reaffirmed. What the Baltic

states had been stressing for a considerable amount of time was finally realised by Allies once Vladimir Putin initiated the second stage of an unjust and horrific war against Ukraine in February 2022.

The risk of Russian aggression in Europe has been the dominant and underlining cornerstone of Baltic security architecture.

The events of February 2022 have led the three Baltic states to be amongst the staunchest champions of Ukraine in Europe, along with Poland, but they have also led to a further increase in defence spending and an acceleration of plans to bolster national defence capabilities.

### Land, air, and sea

Land has been the primary focus of Baltic security. However, air and maritime are receiving increasing attention. The ongoing high-intensity war of aggression in Ukraine demonstrates the need for air superiority. The 2023 communiqué produced in Vilnius notes the Allies' agreement to approach air defence on a rotational basis, highlighting the eastern flank. Further strengthening Baltic airspace, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania agreed to strengthen airspace cooperation at the Vilnius Summit.<sup>3</sup> Allies agreed on a rotational air defence model for the Baltic states. An increased

<sup>1</sup> H. Vanhanen, "NATO and Northern Europe: No Longer the Forgotten Flank", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 December 2023.

<sup>2</sup> T. Rostoks, "Latvia's Security and Transatlantic Relations: From Vilnius to Washington", *Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook 2024*,

Latvian Institute of International Affairs, January 2024.

<sup>3</sup> NATO, "Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania strengthen airspace cooperation", NATO.int, 12 July 2023.

maritime presence in the future will further secure the region. Although some have cautioned against labelling the Baltic Sea as a 'NATO lake'<sup>4</sup>, it is currently a NATO-dominated sea. With the accession of Finland and Sweden, the maritime security of the region is significantly bolstered. However, there is still a Russian capability in the Baltic Sea Region, whose assets have not been entirely depleted in Ukraine, which includes nuclear weapons. Russia has aircraft based in Kaliningrad that have repeatedly conducted intercepts of NATO aircraft.<sup>5</sup> The Russian navy possesses mines which could be deployed in both gray zone operations as well as an active war.<sup>6</sup> Thus, though a 'NATO lake', the alliance is not without the risk of Russian aggression, even if unlikely. In a fragile security environment, all scenarios should be taken into consideration, and the Baltic states are all too aware of this.

Recent events in Estonia and Latvia in 2024 have seen hybrid operations carried out by Russian agents.<sup>7</sup> The previous year saw suspicious damage to the Balticconnector gas pipeline, which is located in Finnish waters, and to cables which belong to Elisa, an Estonian telecommunications company. The Estonian Defence Minister along with seismologists, ruled out the possibility that these events were due to an explosion.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See J. Pawalk, "No, Don't Call the Baltic a 'NATO' Lake", *Rusi*, 5 September 2023. Though this is a term used by NATO defence planners. See also, J.R. Deni, "Is the Baltic Sea a NATO Lake", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 December 2023.

<sup>5</sup> S. Wills, "Why BALTOPS Matter in a NATO Lake", Center for Maritime Strategy, 13 June 2023.

<sup>6</sup> S. Wills, "Why BALTOPS Matter in a NATO Lake", Center for Maritime Strategy, 13 June 2023.

## The New Nordic Members

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Moving beyond the immediate Baltic Sea Region, their presence will also strengthen the security of the Arctic Ocean. NATO's border with Russia will cover from the Arctic Ocean to the Baltic Sea. Finland significantly strengthens NATO's border with Russia which stretches from the Baltic to the Arctic. It boasts one of the largest militaries among European NATO members, including one of the most robust artillery forces — a critical asset, as demonstrated by the indispensable role of artillery in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

Sweden's membership significantly strengthens the defence of the Baltic Sea as well as contributes significant air assets. Finland will also add air assets to the Alliance, as well as coastal defence. Sweden's presence within NATO will allow for easier troop deployment to the Baltic states, in the event Russia would attempt an incursion. Sweden, which has the leading defence industry in the Nordic region would be capable of resupplying European arms arsenals which have dwindling stocks due to shipments to Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> One of the largest benefits for the Baltic states is that with Finnish and Swedish membership in NATO, this signals a clear focus in security towards the northeast of Europe.

<sup>7</sup> "Estonia thwarts Russian hybrid operation, arrests 10", *Politico*, 20 February 2024.

<sup>8</sup> ERR News, "Ministers: Balticconnector Pipeline Damage was Deliberate", 10 October, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> C. Kleberg and J. Black, "Finland Joins NATO, Sweden's Accession Remains Uncertain", RAND, 4 April 2023.

<sup>10</sup> J. Deutsch and R. Grammer, "Sweden Pushes to Fast-Track Delayed NATO Bid", *Foreign Policy*, 7 June 2023.



## Deter and Defend!

Deterrence has been *the* objective for NATO's members on the eastern flank (deterrence and defence is one of NATO's three core tasks, along with crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security). With recent developments in the region coupled with the Alliance's decision at the Vilnius Summit, new defence plans designed by SACEUR were agreed upon which specify what each member state will do and provide specific details regarding the number of troops they will commit.

These plans are a huge gain for the Baltic states as the plans are largely designed to further strengthen the eastern flank. It remains to be seen how long implementation of these plans will be – and it could be a matter of years – but as NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept accurately states, the Euro-Atlantic area is *not* at peace. Allies are in for the long haul and moving forward, NATO is prepared to undertake serious strategic shifts which will further secure its borders with Russia and address an increasingly uncertain security environment.

As of now, twenty-three NATO allies meet the guideline of investing 2 percent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in defense. The United States will increase its spending. Canada and European allies will also increase spending. The Baltic states not only meet but exceed the NATO guideline of 2 per cent.

NATO must be prepared to defend and deter for as long as the war of aggression against Ukraine continues.<sup>11</sup> However, the Alliance should also be of the mindset that deterrence and defence should still be the priority and the mindset after this phase of Russia's war of aggression is

over. The security environment and global political climate have shifted, resulting in increased uncertainty.

## The Baltic states in NATO

As the post-Cold War era is over<sup>12</sup> the Baltic states have, as of this year, spent twenty years in the Alliance. Prior to joining, aspiring to join NATO was part of a comprehensive effort by the Baltic states to secure their regained freedom. Once members, they have been staunch contributors to NATO, offering significant insights, including their extensive knowledge and foresight regarding Russia. Several leaders from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have kept crucial security issues for their countries within the purview of NATO, the United States, and other leading transatlantic powers.

## The Russian war of Aggression and Conquest: What Comes Next

At present, Russia is unable (and likely unwilling) to wage a kinetic war against NATO and to violate the territorial sovereignty of the Baltic states. However, in the future, this possibility cannot be ruled out. There is a considerable degree of uncertainty about the outcome of Russia's war of conquest against Ukraine, as well as their capacity to rearm and their long-term military reconstitution program.<sup>13</sup> It is nearly inevitable that Russia will rebuild once their war of conquest in Ukraine is over, and they are taking near-term steps to permanently expand their forces.<sup>14</sup>

Denmark's Defence Minister, Troels Lund Poulsen issued a dire warning that a Russian attack on a NATO member state cannot be ruled out in the next three to

<sup>11</sup> G. Jeglinskis and Z. Sergejeva, "How to Keep NATO relevant into 2024 and beyond", Atlantic Council, 6 November 2023.

<sup>12</sup> J. Sullivan, "The Sources of American Power: A Foreign Policy for a Changed World", *Foreign Affairs*, 24 October 2023.

<sup>13</sup> F. Gady, "NATO's Confusion Over the Russia Threat", *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2024, and D. Massicot and R. Connolly, "Russia's Military

Reconstitution: 2030 Pathways and Prospects", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2024.

<sup>14</sup> M.F. Cancian and S. Monaghan, "Repel, Don't Expel: Strengthening NATO's Defence and Deterrence in the Baltic States", Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 6 July 2023.

five years.<sup>15</sup> This was not NATO's assessment one year prior.<sup>16</sup> It is unlikely that the Kremlin would opt for a kinetic invasion of NATO's northeastern flank now, as they are incapable of launching such an offensive due to their military failures and heavy losses in Ukraine. Even though NATO militaries are stronger and better prepared, the current geopolitical reality - shaped by Russia's actions and its history of aggression in the region — drives changes in the Alliance's strategic thinking and planning. This has become increasingly evident with every Summit Communiqué since the second phase of Russia's war of conquest against Ukraine.

In 2024, the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service issued a warning that Russia aims to become the dominant military force in the Baltic Sea Region and plans to increase its troop presence there within the next three to four years to achieve this objective.<sup>17</sup> Were this to happen, such an army would likely be technologically inferior to NATO in most areas, with the exception of electronic warfare and long-range strike capabilities.<sup>18</sup> A few months after this report was published, Vladimir Putin exchanged his Defence Minister, replacing Sergei Shoigu with Andrei Belousov, in a move which suggests that the Kremlin plans to link the security economy with Russia's general economy and amplify Moscow's war-of-attrition strategy.<sup>19</sup> This likely also points to a strategy of attempting to build up a better military than NATO, even if an unlikely outcome. In addition to the discussion surrounding kinetic options for the Kremlin within the

next decade, the primary and contemporary security threat from Moscow remains their use of gray-zone aggression in Finland, Poland, and the Baltic states. NATO's center of gravity is the unity, solidarity, and cohesion of the Alliance<sup>20</sup>. While maintaining a 360-degree approach, the Alliance's geographical center of gravity has shifted toward its northeastern flank, given the current security environment<sup>21</sup>. Thus, for these reasons, Russia consistently attempts to threaten and degrade both the Alliance and the countries which comprise its northeastern flank through hybrid means. Russia utilizes a diverse toolkit of hybrid tactics including cyberattacks, disinformation, psychological pressure, instrumentalized migration, and acts of sabotage which it exercises against the Baltic states, Poland, and Finland<sup>22</sup> as well as other Allied nations.<sup>23</sup> Such gray-zone aggression is taken very seriously by the Alliance.

In the Washington Summit Declaration, Allies account for hybrid activities as well as accounting for the information environment.

In the document, Allies note that hybrid operations directed at Allies could reach the level of armed attack and, thus, lead

<sup>15</sup> "As Donald Trump threatens NATO, the Baltic states stiffen their defences", *The Economist*, 10 February 2024 and "Russia could attack a NATO country within 3 to 5 years, Denmark warns", *The Financial Times*, 09 February 2024.

<sup>16</sup> "As Donald Trump threatens NATO, the Baltic states stiffen their defences", *The Economist*, 10 February 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, "International Security and Estonia 2024."

<sup>18</sup> BNS, "Intelligence: Russia to Increase Military Personnel near Estonian Border in Near Future", *Postimees*, 13 February 2024,

<sup>19</sup> "Sergei Shoigu's Sacking Points to yet more Attrition in Ukraine", *The Economist*, 13 May 2024,

<sup>20</sup> T. Varma, "Europe and NATO are Stepping up on Ukraine", Brookings, 2 February 2023.

<sup>21</sup> H. Vanhanen, "NATO and Northern Europe: No Longer the Forgotten Flank", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 December 2023.

<sup>22</sup> H. Praks, "Russia's Hybrid Threat Tactics Against the Baltic Sea Region: From Disinformation to Sabotage", Hybrid CoE, May 2024.

<sup>23</sup> R. Gramer and A. Mackinnon, "Russia Ramps up Sabotage Operations in Europe", *Foreign Policy*, 13 June 2024.

the North Atlantic Council to invoke Article 5.<sup>24</sup>

### **Bilateral Security Agreements with the US and the Enhanced Forward Presence**

While the United States serves as the framework nation for the multinational battlegroup for Poland, as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), a crucial component of the Alliance's defence and deterrence posture, the U.S. also has bilateral security agreements with Poland and each of the Baltic states. Shortly after the Washington Summit, U.S. Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin assured his Estonian counterpart, Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur, of the long-term military presence of American troops in Estonia.<sup>25</sup> Latvia and the United States have several defence-related agreements and recently have signed agreements for substantially upgrading Latvian military capabilities and reinforcing Latvia's border with Russia and Belarus.<sup>26</sup> Lithuania also enjoys several defence agreements with the U.S. All three Baltic nations signed bilateral defence cooperation road maps with the U.S. for the next five years.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the security of the Baltic states seems to be in a strong position, given the current security environment.

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<sup>24</sup> NATO. *Washington Summit Declaration*. 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Republic of Estonia Ministry of Defence, "Pevkur in Washington: Austin reaffirms long-term commitment to Estonian security".

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Embassy in Latvia, "Ambassador Robinson: United States and other Allies stand with you to defend our collective security against any threat".

<sup>27</sup> Ministry of Defence Republic of Latvia, "The United States and Baltics sign bilateral defence cooperation road maps for the next five years".

## NATO Turns 75 and the Impact of the Summit for the Baltic states

The year 2024 marked a special anniversary for the Baltic states. This same year is also a special anniversary year for NATO.

In July, NATO celebrated 75 years as the most powerful, successful, and enduring alliance which has become a guarantor of peace.

NATO is growing in terms of combat power and is stronger than before Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine.<sup>28</sup> In the three summits since the second phase of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Madrid Summit saw a window of opportunity opened to modernize the Alliance for a new era of collective defence, which was followed by the 2023 Vilnius Summit, which took this a step further and supported the Strategic Concept by the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA).<sup>29</sup>

As Sten Rynning appropriately notes, NATO's aspiration is to make war impossible and unthinkable.<sup>30</sup> The Washington Summit this year accounts for Allies undertaking the biggest reinforcement of collective defence in a generation, modernizing the Alliance for a new era of collective defence to do just

that. The Washington Summit Declaration notes that NATO cannot discount the possibility of an attack against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Allied territory.<sup>31</sup> To address this, Allies have strengthened the Alliance by deploying combat-ready forces to the Eastern Flank, put in place a new generation of defence plans that enable NATO to better deter and defend every inch if necessary, and on short notice. Allies continue to guard the skies over the Baltic states. Shortly after the conclusion of the Washington Summit, Italy took over a four-month Baltic Air Policing rotation from Spain and Portugal, and NATO updated its Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) policy and implemented the IAMD Rotational Model, focusing on the Eastern Flank.<sup>32</sup>

The decisions taken at the Washington Summit were welcomed by all three Baltic states. There are several points included in the Washington Summit Declaration that are commensurate with the security and defence concerns of the Baltic states, such as the IAMD Rotational Model. Additionally, as highlighted by the then Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, Allies made a political commitment to focus investment on three areas of high priorities for the Baltic states: ammunition, air defence, and long-range fires.<sup>33</sup>

Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna stated that all three of Estonia's goals going into the summit were fulfilled.<sup>34</sup> These decisions fall under the overarching principle as stated in the Declaration of modernizing the Alliance to be best prepared for a new era of collective

<sup>28</sup> Sir J. Everard, "Foreword" in, J. Halland Matlary and R. Johnson (Eds) *NATO and the Russian War in Ukraine: Strategic Integration and Military Interoperability*, London: C. Hurst and Co. 2024.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* The DDA is particularly important for the Alliance's northeastern flank as it includes regional plans which are now in place which integrate NATO plans and acknowledge the geostrategic reconfiguration of the Northeastern flank.

<sup>30</sup> S. Rynning. *NATO: From Cold War to Ukraine, a History of the World's Most Powerful Alliance*.

New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Washington Summit Declaration.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Republic of Estonia Government, "Kallas at Washington Summit: We have agreed to prioritise key NATO capabilities and have adopted an important support package for Ukraine".

<sup>34</sup> Republic of Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Minister Tsahkna: Decisions of NATO's summit are a great contribution to reinforcing the security of Allies".



defence.<sup>35</sup> That it was reaffirmed by Allies that Russia poses a direct, long-term threat to the Alliance and, as such, NATO will continue to focus on thwarting Russia's aggressive actions directly strengthens the Baltic states.

## Conclusion

The question is frequently raised as to whether the Baltic states are safer than ever, as NATO members, in a security environment where Russia has violated the sovereignty of Ukraine in a most inhumane and illegal manner, or whether they are now at more risk than ever before, since regaining independence after the Soviet Union's illegal occupation. This paper has briefly touched upon the hybrid threats faced by the Baltic states and the feasibility of the Russian Federation rearming in the near future. NATO has swiftly responded to the drastic changes in the security environment since February 2022, incorporating strategic foresight in anticipation of potential challenges to Allied territorial integrity.

When subsea infrastructure was damaged, the Alliance stepped up patrols in the Baltic Sea. When Russia launched the second phase of its war of aggression and conquest against Ukraine, Allies agreed to increase their presence in the Baltic states – and they are following through. The pledge by framework nations of NATO's Enhanced Forward

Presence (eFP) to scale up to the brigade level, is taking place.

The Baltic states have set shining examples within the Alliance, closely adhering to Article 3 of the Washington Treaty. The Baltic states are also actively thwarting hybrid operations, and all three now utilize conscription. This year, the three Baltic states announced that they would construct a defence line on their borders with Russia and Belarus. NATO's recent summit was historic, marking the Alliance's seventy-fifth anniversary. The Washington Summit delivers on the promises made in Madrid and Vilnius and NATO has undertaken a major reinforcement of collective defence. While there is much to celebrate in the recent decisions made at the three summits following the second phase of Russia's unjust war of conquest against Ukraine, there is still a great deal of work to be done.

If the Baltic states face an uncertain future, they will certainly not face it alone.

NATO has two hashtags which ring true to its purpose: #WeAreNATO and #StrongerTogether. After twenty years as part of the world's most successful and enduring alliance, the Baltic states can certainly attest to this.

<sup>35</sup> NATO. *Washington Summit Declaration*.



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As the battlefield and the international security environment evolves, so does our curriculum. The BALTDEFCOL received ACT accreditation as an education and training facility in 2022. As such, the BALTDEFCOL strives to become a hub of knowledge on AI, digital transformation, and multi-domain operations, while continuing to serve as a center of expertise on Russia, and all issues of security and defence in the turbulent international security environment.



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