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EASTERN EUROPE YOUTH EMPOWERMENT SPACE

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Think Tanks Essentials

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ABOUT US

The International Charitable Foundation "UDONATION" is a young and ambitious organization that brings Ukrainians around the world together to drive systemic change. We initiate cooperation between representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora and Ukrainian youth to strengthen their capacities, expand access to knowledge and resources, and implement projects aimed at protecting and supporting every Ukrainian.

We strive to create a unified intellectual space for Ukrainian youth in Ukraine and abroad. It is a platform for exchanging ideas, knowledge, and experience—where new initiatives emerge and a shared vision for the future of Ukraine is shaped.

"In unity there is strength."
We believe that unity is the source of strength. Together, we are building a future in which every Ukrainian feels supported and has the opportunity to realize their full potential.

This project is implemented within the youth initiative EEYES – Eastern Europe Youth Empowerment Space. We sincerely thank our team and experts who actively contribute to our initiatives, as well as all partners whose support made this project possible.

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WEBSITE INSTAGRAM FACEBOOK

In a rapidly changing world, think tanks have become key players in shaping international debates and strategies. They not only generate ideas but also define the direction of political decision-making and influence public opinion.

The magazine “ThinkTanks Essentials” was created to summarize and analyze the most important expert research, demonstrating how it shapes our understanding of the global order.

This publication is valuable for anyone seeking to navigate the increasingly complex landscape of international politics. It allows readers to track key trends and explore the arguments of leading experts who influence the decisions of governments and international organizations. For researchers and students, it serves as a convenient source of analytical insights and up-to-date case studies; for diplomats and policy experts, it is a tool for understanding global processes and anticipating possible scenarios; and for a broader audience, it offers an opportunity to look beyond news headlines and grasp the deeper context behind them.

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THE EASTERN EUROPE YOUTH EMPOWERMENT SPACE

Foreword

Europe's security architecture is undergoing its most profound transformation since the end of the Cold War, a shift that is moving the continent's strategic centre of gravity decidedly north-eastwards. As the analyses in this eighth issue of Think Tanks Essentials demonstrate, a new «North-Eastern Security Belt» (Onyskiv, p. 94), comprising the Bucharest 9 and NB8 countries is taking shape as a functional security cluster backing up the NATO Alliance with technological capabilities and experience that has already been built up in the region. We are witnessing a moment in which EU enlargement, defence and industrial policy have merged into a single, interconnected dimension of Europe's response to a rapidly changing strategic environment. While these developments are often analysed separately, the contributions brought together in this issue demonstrate that they are increasingly interconnected.

Firstly, there is a new momentum for enlargement: while Ukraine expressed the ambition to join the EU as early as 2027 as part of a peace plan, Brussels and Berlin introduced the first political proposals for a differentiated approach to enlargement policy in 2026, bringing new impulses such as "reversed membership" and "associated membership" into the debate. Although these proposals have been perceived very differently, there is growing consensus that the current enlargement methodology was designed for peaceful times and that there is the need for a frank debate on how to adapt this model to the new geopolitical realities.

At the same time, a pivotal milestone was reached on 15 June 2026, when the EU formally opened the first accession negotiation cluster, the Fundamentals, with Ukraine and Moldova. This marks the moment when Ukraine's European path finally moves from the realm of political commitment to one of concrete steps with verifiable reforms and interim benchmarks. This review not only highlights the centrality of rule of law and fundamental rights in the accession process but also that enlargement is a two-way test: While candidate countries must deliver far-reaching reforms, the EU faces its own institutional challenges, as an enlarged Union with potentially more than 30 member states will not be able to function in the same way as it does today. This includes reforms to decision-making procedures, the budgetary framework and core policies such as Cohesion Policy or the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

Secondly, the analyses collected in this issue point to a broader reconfiguration of European security: Growing uncertainty regarding the future of the transatlantic relationship has intensified discussions about Europe's ability to assume greater responsibility for its own defence most recently emphasised at the NATO Summit 2026, held in Ankara in July. This includes a new strategic approach: a «NATO 3.0» model is emerging as Europe prepares for a possible era of US disengagement. This shift is particularly visible along the Eastern Flank. Driven by the «painful experience of Ukraine» (Brus, p. 80), which has demonstrated that even short-term occupation can lead to severe humanitarian consequences, the Alliance recognises the necessity of «defending every inch from the very first moment of an invasion» (Brus, ibid.). Projects such as the Baltic Defence Line and Poland's Eastern Shield translate this doctrine into physical reality. Poland and the Baltic states, now allocating up to 5 per cent of their GDPs to defence, are leading the way to a new collective deterrence strategy towards Russia. A forecast analysis by 71 Ukrainian experts (p. 31) considers seven scenarios for the trajectory of Russia's war of aggression for 2026–2027. The study underscores that Ukraine's resilience will depend not only on developments on the battlefield but on sustained European military, financial and political support, as well as on the Union's ability to maintain unity and strategic resolve over the long term.

One of the most significant themes of this issue is the evolving role of Ukraine, which is recognised not merely as a recipient of aid, but as a security provider and an exporter of combat experience. Through the new «Drone Deals» (Fedchenko, p. 84) and technological partnerships, Ukraine and its allies are increasingly working as equal partners, integrating wartime innovations into long-term European defence planning. Whether through the Delta battlefield management system or Ukraine's mastery of low-cost drone warfare, Ukrainian expertise is already influencing military doctrines from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

Beyond the conventional battlefield, Europe is navigating a frontier of «sensors and sabotage» (Horobei, p. 67) in the Baltic Sea, where critical undersea infrastructure and data highways are under constant threat. There is still no NATO protocol for these grey-zone attacks resulting in a lack of rapid and coordinated European response to cyberattacks, electronic warfare and other forms of hybrid aggression. The EU is also awakening to a geo-economic rivalry in which dependencies on critical raw materials, particularly those sourced from China, are being weaponised. The Union's growing emphasis on «reactive assertiveness» (Riekeles & Folkman, p. 43) reflects a new determination to protect Europe's industrial base and technological sovereignty against external economic coercion.

The contributions prepared by the researchers of the Insight Lab provide fresh analytical perspectives on these developments. Their work highlights how more flexible regional coalitions and the integration of practical wartime experience are reshaping the European security order. The value of this issue lies not simply in the breadth of topics it addresses, but in the connections it reveals between them. The analyses presented here demonstrate that Europe's future security will depend not only on military capabilities but equally on resilient institutions, technological innovation, economic competitiveness and credible pathways for enlargement. The contributions offer an important reminder that Ukraine's EU accession process and Europe's own security transformation are no longer separate agendas, but mutually reinforcing processes that will shape the stability of our continent for decades to come.

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FUNDAMENTALS FIRST: WHAT DOES THIS NEW PHASE OF UKRAINE'S NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE EU MEAN?

Kateryna Nedashkivska, author and manager of "Think Tanks Essentials"

On June 15, 2026, Ukraine and Moldova took an important step in their negotiations on accession to the European Union. At intergovernmental conferences in Luxembourg, the EU formally opened the first negotiation cluster—"Fundamentals"—for both countries. This is a significant moment, as Ukraine's European integration finally moves from the realm of political promises to that of concrete procedures: negotiating positions, interim benchmarks, and verifiable implementation of reforms.

As early as June 12, the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission announced that all member states had agreed to open the cluster. Subsequently, the European Council separately welcomed this decision and expressed support for the further opening of other clusters based on an assessment of each country's actual progress. From now on, progress toward EU membership will depend on the extent to which a country is able to meet the specific requirements of the negotiation process.

In the 2025 Enlargement Package, the European Commission explicitly acknowledged that Ukraine had met the conditions not only for opening the first cluster but also for clusters 2 and 6. The same conclusion was reached regarding Moldova. In other words, the readiness of Kyiv and Chisinau was confirmed as early as November 2025, but the Council's formal decision came only more than half a year later. Thus, the opening of the first cluster represents a procedural breakthrough, yet the delay in this process also highlights the limitations of the current enlargement policy.

It is noteworthy that the think tanks CEPS and EPC had already drawn attention to this very issue before June 2026. Their assessments showed that the delay was linked not so much to insufficient preparation on the part of Ukraine or Moldova as to the internal politics of the European Union itself. And this is perhaps the main lesson to be drawn from this story. Even when the European Commission considers a country ready for the next stage, actual progress depends on the unanimity of member states and the EU's ability to overcome its own political roadblocks.

Therefore, the opening of the first cluster should not be reduced to a mere gesture of support. It truly marks the beginning of the practical accession process. At the same time, however, it serves as a reminder that membership negotiations remain a deeply political process. Ukraine is entering a new phase of European integration—one that is more concrete, measurable, and demanding. Nevertheless, the success of this process will depend not only on Ukraine's reforms but also on whether the European Union itself is prepared to act in accordance with its own decisions.

What did the European Commission's 2025 report reveal?

Every year, the European Commission adopts the Enlargement Package—a set of documents outlining its policy on EU enlargement.

According to the Commission's 2025 report on Ukraine, the bilateral review of the alignment of Ukrainian legislation with EU law was completed in September 2025. As early as May 14, 2025,

Ukraine adopted roadmaps in the areas of the rule of law, public administration reform, and the functioning of democratic institutions, as well as an action plan on national minorities and a negotiating position on the first cluster, "Fundamentals."The Commission assessed these documents positively and, on this basis, concluded that Ukraine had fulfilled the conditions for opening the first cluster.

The Commission highlighted several areas as Ukraine's strengths. First, the overall electoral framework remains suitable for holding democratic elections following the lifting of martial law, and some of the recommendations of the OSCE and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights have already been implemented. Second, in the area of public administration, Ukraine is at a level between "initial" and "moderate" readiness, while demonstrating noticeable positive changes in digitalization, the development of public services, wage reform, and progress toward the full implementation of the Law on Administrative Procedure. Third, the institutions responsible for coordinating European integration are already operational, and the preparation of the National Program for Adaptation to EU Law has officially begun.

Separate progress has also been noted in the judicial sphere: this includes the establishment of new administrative courts in Kyiv, appointments to the High Council of Justice, and the further development of electronic services within the judicial system. In the area of fundamental rights, the Commission assessed the overall framework as satisfactory and deemed the restrictions on rights during martial law to be generally proportionate to the security situation. Progress was also noted in financial oversight following amendments to the law on the Accounting Chamber.

The anti-corruption sector remains the most sensitive area. The Commission notes only limited progress: it acknowledges that the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU), the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), and the High Anti-Corruption Court continued to produce tangible results, but at the same time highlights signs of stagnation, legislative attempts to weaken the independence of specialized anti-corruption bodies, increasing pressure from state institutions, and trends that call into question the sustainability of Ukraine's anti-corruption course.

There are also problems in public procurement. Here, the Commission also notes limited progress: the long-awaited new procurement law had not yet been adopted at the time of the assessment, and legislation on public-private partnerships had significant gaps compared to EU standards. In the political and institutional area, the Verkhovna Rada can operate only partially effectively under martial law, and the quality of policy-making remains weak. In particular, there is a lack of a comprehensive, data-driven approach, high-quality explanatory notes, and proper impact assessments of legislative initiatives.

Thus, while the report confirmed Ukraine's readiness for the practical phase of negotiations, it also sent a clear signal that further progress toward membership will require serious reforms and a proven ability to implement them in practice, not just on paper.

What does this new phase of negotiations mean?

In EU accession negotiations, the "Fundamentals" cluster serves as the central pillar of the entire process. It encompasses the issues without which membership in the European Union would lose its practical meaning: the rule of law, fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions, public administration reform, and economic criteria. This cluster also includes negotiation chapters 23 and 24, as well as chapters 5, 18, and 32—that is, the judiciary and fundamental rights, justice, freedom, and security, public procurement, statistics, and financial control.

The EU assesses whether the country is capable of ensuring compliance with European rules through its courts, administration, budget, and public policy, as well as its overall capacity to function as a predictable, accountable, and institutionally mature system.

The "Fundamentals" cluster is opened first and closed last. This means that progress in this cluster determines the overall pace of negotiations and influences decisions on whether to open or close other clusters. The EU sets interim benchmarks for chapters related to the rule of law, as well as for the cluster as a whole. Without meeting these benchmarks, no chapter can move on to the final phase. For public procurement, statistics, and financial control, conditions for the early closure of the relevant chapters are established immediately.

More importantly, this system works both ways. The negotiations explicitly provide for mechanisms to respond to serious or prolonged stagnation, as well as to setbacks in reforms. The EU may refrain from opening or closing other clusters, reopen chapters that have already been closed, and even roll back a previously opened cluster. Thus, if a country demonstrates progress in sectoral policies but at the same time falls short in the rule of law, institutional independence, or the fight against corruption, negotiations may be slowed down, frozen, or even partially reversed. The European Union is thus seeking to avoid a situation where formal alignment with EU law is not accompanied by genuine institutional transformation.

This is precisely why Ukraine's civil society views the opening of the "Fundamentals" cluster as a turning point, where anti-corruption reform, the rule of law, and the quality of public administration become the main path to EU membership. Behind this lie hundreds of recommendations and commitments. In the area of public procurement, for example, Ukraine will not only have to align the rules governing government, defense, and concession procurement, as well as public-private partnerships, with EU law, but also demonstrate the effectiveness of its systems for oversight, appeals, and the prevention of conflicts of interest.

Ukraine and Moldova Are Moving Together, but Not in the Same Way

At the institutional level, Ukraine and Moldova are indeed moving almost in sync. In its 2025 report, the European Commission recognized both countries as ready to open three clusters—"Fundamentals," "Internal Market," and "External Relations." In both cases, the bilateral review of the alignment of national legislation with EU law was completed in September 2025. Both countries adopted roadmaps for the "Fundamentals" cluster and, on June 15, 2026, received formal approval to open the first negotiation cluster.

The synchronized nature of this process is creating a new wave of the EU's eastern enlargement, in which Kyiv and Chisinau are often viewed as interconnected candidates.

Despite a similar pace of progress, the challenges faced by Ukraine and Moldova on their path to EU membership differ significantly. Ukraine is a large country with a more extensive economy, a powerful agricultural sector, a complex budgetary system, and a war that directly affects all spheres of public administration. Its accession negotiations inevitably intersect with issues of defense, reconstruction, energy security, macro-financial support, and post-war modernization. The European Commission explicitly links its recommendations to the priorities of Ukraine's Plan under the Ukraine Support Mechanism.

For Ukraine, EU membership is not merely a gradual alignment with European rules. It is also a matter of long-term security, investment confidence, economic recovery, and consolidating the country's stability after the war. This is precisely why Ukraine's path is more complex in scope, as the country is simultaneously at war, implementing reforms, and preparing for membership.

Moldova faces a different set of challenges. It is smaller, more institutionally compact, but at the same time significantly more vulnerable to external pressure. In its report on Moldova, the European Commission notes the generally stable functioning of democratic institutions but explicitly points to ongoing attempts at external interference, hybrid attacks, and marked political polarization. Added to this are the issues surrounding Transnistria, limited human and administrative resources, and a high dependence on external financial support.

In the area of judicial reform, the European Commission noted good progress thanks to integrity checks on judges and prosecutors at the highest levels. Improvements in practical results were recorded in the fight against corruption. Moldova has also demonstrated significant progress in statistics and financial control. Furthermore, in May 2025, it adopted the National Program for EU Accession for 2025–2029 as the main plan for fulfilling its negotiation commitments. However, Moldova's current successes do not yet mean an easier path ahead.

Both countries are under constant pressure from Russia. For Ukraine, the main challenge remains the full-scale war, which affects all areas of public administration and reforms. For Moldova, the main risks are more closely tied to Russia's hybrid tools of influence.

Through its actions, the European Union effectively confirms the approach that Ukraine and Moldova are moving toward the EU together, but not in the same way. And for enlargement policy, this is perhaps the most realistic formula.

Is the EU itself ready for Ukraine and Moldova?

The question of readiness for enlargement concerns not only candidate countries, as it is also relevant for the European Union itself. Back in 2023, the European Council described enlargement as a geostrategic investment, but at the same time emphasized that not only candidate countries but also the EU itself must be ready by the time of accession. In response to this new momentum in enlargement policy, the European Council announced that it would hold a separate strategic discussion on enlargement and the Union's internal reforms in October 2026.

For the accession of Ukraine and Moldova to become a realistic institutional strategy, the European Union will have to adapt its own rules, budgetary mechanisms, and decision-making system. Enlargement cannot be viewed as a process in which only the candidate countries change. The European Union itself must also change.

The most sensitive issues are the budget, the Common Agricultural Policy, and cohesion policy. On the one hand, calculations by the Bruegel think tank show that under current rules and without special transitional mechanisms, the annual net budgetary cost of Ukraine's integration for existing members would amount to approximately 0.13% of the EU's GDP. This does not appear to be an insurmountable burden, especially when considering the potential benefits for the Union through trade, migration, investment, and the reconstruction of the Ukrainian economy.

On the other hand, the budget debate will be much more complex than it might seem. A European Parliament study on future enlargements shows that, in a scenario of simultaneous large-scale enlargement, spending on the Common Agricultural Policy would have to increase by 22 billion euros, and nine new members could receive 68 billion euros in transfers under this policy. Under certain assumptions, average agricultural payments to current member states could be reduced by approximately 15%. This means that enlargement will inevitably spark a complex debate on the redistribution of resources within the EU.

Due to the scale of its economy, territory, and population, Ukraine will become one of the largest new members in the history of the European Union. That is why its integration will have a significant impact on all EU policies. Ukraine is a potential source of substantial benefits for the Union, as it can strengthen Europe's food security, expand the internal market, bolster the EU's defense capabilities, and create new opportunities for investment and economic growth. For the EU, the issue of Ukraine's post-war reconstruction is also an investment in the stability, security, and competitiveness of the entire European space. That is why financial support, reconstruction, and the negotiation process are already viewed today as interrelated elements of Ukraine's future integration into the Union.

There is another, no less important dimension—the institutional one. The German think tank SWP notes that the internal reforms necessary to prepare the Union for functioning with more than 30 members have effectively stalled. Thus, expansion without internal reforms within the EU itself risks paralysis. And this is no exaggeration.

Geopolitically, the European Union has already recognized that Ukraine and Moldova should be part of the European space. But institutionally, it has not yet decided what form the Union should take following this expansion. And the strategic discussion on the Union's expansion and internal reforms, announced by the European Council for October of this year, is precisely intended to demonstrate whether the EU is ready to adapt.

Conclusions

The opening of the first "Fundamentals" cluster for Ukraine and Moldova marked an important milestone in the EU enlargement process. Further progress toward membership will be assessed based on the state of the judicial system, the independence of anti-corruption bodies, the transparency of public procurement, the effectiveness of parliament, the capacity of the public administration, and the fulfillment of commitments made.

This is precisely why the "Fundamentals" cluster plays a central role in the accession process. It focuses on areas upon which the functioning of the entire state system depends. If Ukraine demonstrates progress in individual sectors but faces challenges regarding the rule of law, the fight against corruption, or institutional independence, this could negatively impact the pace of negotiations.

Ukraine is navigating this stage amid a full-scale war, which makes the task particularly challenging. The war has accelerated political rapprochement with the EU, but at the same time has exposed problems in certain areas of public administration. The next stage of negotiations will largely depend on how successfully the country can strengthen its institutions in the areas of the judiciary, budget management, public procurement, the civil service, statistics, and oversight. It is precisely in these areas that Ukraine's future readiness for membership will be determined.

This process concerns not only Ukraine and Moldova. The European Union also faces the need to adapt to future enlargement. Even if the candidate countries successfully meet all requirements, the process may run into internal budgetary, institutional, and political constraints within the Union itself. Enlargement will require Brussels to make decisions regarding agricultural policy, cohesion policy, decision-making procedures, and the EU's role in the security sector.

Thus, the opening of the first cluster for Ukraine and Moldova signifies a transition to more intensive work on reforms, and for the EU itself—a test of its readiness for a new round of enlargement. Consequently, the issue of EU membership and enlargement will increasingly depend on the practical results achieved by all parties involved in the process.

This article was written for Think Tanks Essentials magazine.
The views expressed in the article are those of the author.

SECTION 1. OVERVIEW OF THINK TANKS ANALYSES

EUROPEAN SECURITY, DEFENSE, AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

The European Pillar of NATO in the Era of US Disengagement

Nicolò Murgia, Instituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Italy
13.05.2026

In this study, the author analyzes the strengthening of NATO's European component as a strategic necessity in light of the United States' gradual distancing from Europe, the Trump administration's conditional approach toward allies, and the continuing Russian threat. The author emphasizes that this is not about creating a "European army" or completely replacing NATO, but rather a pragmatic strengthening of the European component of the Alliance, specifically: the ability of Europeans to plan, command, and develop their defense industry more independently, and to withstand the initial phase of a potential crisis on the eastern flank even in the face of a limited or politically constrained U.S. response.

A key shift is the realization that Europe must not only spend more but also assume real responsibility for command, joint capabilities, and defense-industrial integration. At the same time, the study highlights the political constraints of this process, particularly the fact that European states still lack a unified vision of the extent of U.S. disengagement, and that mini-formats such as the E5[1] can serve as both a tool for cohesion and a manifestation of fragmentation.

In the short and medium term, Europe is unable to function fully without key U.S. strategic support capabilities, particularly in the areas of intelligence, command and control, aerial refueling, strategic airlift, and missile defense. That is why the goal should not be complete emancipation, but a transition from dependence to interdependence. In other words, Europe must become militarily and industrially significant enough that the U.S. cannot treat it merely as a junior partner or a buyer of American weapons. A strong European pillar of NATO should transform Europe into a more serious strategic partner for Washington.

[1]E5 – E5 is an informal mini-format comprising five key European states: Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Poland, and Italy. The author refers to it as a potential core for coordinating European defense policy, as these countries carry the greatest combined political, economic, and military weight in Europe. The main idea is that when all EU or NATO members cannot quickly coordinate their efforts, a smaller group of leading nations can more swiftly develop a common position on defense, support for Ukraine, industrial projects, or responses to crises. – here and below, ed. note.

The B9 and Nordic Countries Summit in Bucharest

Jakub Pieńkowski, Tomasz Zduńczyk, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Poland
18.05.2026

The authors view the Bucharest 9 and Nordic Countries Summit, held on May 13, 2026, in Bucharest, as a step toward the formation of a broader security space stretching from the Black Sea to the Arctic. The meeting was intended to demonstrate the unity of NATO's eastern and northern flanks ahead of the Alliance's summit in Ankara, where discussions are expected to focus on the "NATO 3.0" model—featuring increased defense spending and greater responsibility on the part of European allies for their own security—against the backdrop of a reduced U.S. military presence in Europe.

It is emphasized that participants at the Bucharest summit identified Russia as the most significant, long-term, and immediate threat; reaffirmed the importance of the alliance with the United States; expressed support for Ukraine's defense and its Euro-Atlantic aspirations; and reaffirmed the commitment to spend 5% of GDP on defense. The practical dimension of the meeting was reflected in the focus on integrated air defense, countering drones, protecting critical infrastructure, and addressing hybrid threats. It is particularly important that Ukraine is emerging as a source of combat experience, as an agreement was signed on the sidelines of the summit with Lithuania to involve Ukrainian specialists in strengthening Lithuania's air defense.

Overall, the summit laid the groundwork for closer cooperation between the Bucharest Nine and the Nordic countries. This trend is already being reinforced by the growing military presence of the Nordic countries on the eastern flank: military personnel from Denmark and Norway, as well as civilian specialists from Iceland, are stationed in Estonia and Lithuania as part of NATO battle groups; Sweden has deployed a mechanized battalion in Latvia as part of a multinational brigade. In the future, cooperation may intensify through joint operations in the Baltic Sea and the development of a multinational NATO battle group in northern Finland, to which only Sweden has so far committed.

This architecture is further strengthened by the Nordic-Baltic Eight format, which brings together the Baltic states and Northern European countries.

At the same time, there are serious limitations to this unity. The Nordic countries have a clear view of Russia as the main threat, while political differences persist within the Bucharest Nine, particularly due to the positions of Hungary, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Such divisions may hinder the effectiveness of cooperation among these countries.

Peace Through Strength: Why NATO Must Return to Its Core Mission

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia Baiba Braže, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia
20.05.2026

The study, from a Latvian perspective, argues that NATO should, in effect, return to its original mission—collective defense, deterring aggressors, and preserving peace through strength. Baiba Braže emphasizes that after decades in which the Alliance focused largely on operations outside its territory, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has once again brought the issue of defending allies to the forefront. For Latvia, with its experience of fifty years of Soviet occupation, this logic has never lost its relevance.

The key argument is that European allies and Canada must more quickly assume greater responsibility for conventional deterrence and defense. NATO's physical presence on the eastern flank, in the Baltic Sea, and in the Arctic already demonstrates the effectiveness of deterrence, but political commitments must be rapidly translated into real capabilities. Latvia is cited as an example of this approach: it was the first country to legislate an annual defense spending target of 5% of GDP.

Russia's war against Ukraine, the conflict in the Persian Gulf, and the roles of Iran, North Korea, and China are not isolated crises but parts of a broader system. Iran and North Korea are militarily and technologically strengthening the Kremlin's ability to wage war in Europe. China supports the Russian war economy. Russia, in turn, is deepening the global economic and energy crisis by facilitating Iranian attacks against partners in the Persian Gulf.

Thus, Europe's security can no longer be viewed in isolation. Russia's war against Ukraine is part of a broader authoritarian challenge, in which Moscow, Tehran, Pyongyang, and Beijing directly or indirectly reinforce one another.

Particular attention is also paid here to the lessons from Ukraine. The war has exposed the weaknesses of the European defense industry, the slowness of procurement processes, and the need for urgent investments in air defense, ammunition, drone interceptors, robotic systems, and resilient supply chains.

Sailing Through Uncertainty: Nordic-Baltic Military Integration as Plan B

Peter Viggo Jakobsen, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia

21.05.2026

The author analyzes how the North Baltic region should adapt its defense planning to the worst-case scenario—Russian aggression with minimal or no U.S. support. This is not about an alternative to NATO, but rather about deeper military integration within the Alliance, since its command infrastructure remains indispensable. The turning point was the crisis surrounding Greenland in 2026, which demonstrated that U.S. support under the Trump administration could no longer be taken for granted.

In this context, the region has two options. “Plan A” is to keep the U.S. engaged through increased defense spending, meeting capability targets, establishing new headquarters, conducting exercises, and implementing NATO’s regional defense plans. “Plan B” is to be capable of executing these plans with forces already in the region, without critical dependence on Washington. Of particular importance are the integration of the Nordic countries following Finland and Sweden’s accession to NATO, coordination through NATO’s two joint force commands—JFC Norfolk and JFC Brunssum—as well as the development of joint commands in the Baltic Sea and on land.

The practical foundation of such readiness includes joint procurement, interoperability of forces, security of supply, and defense-industrial cooperation. The region must be prepared to deter both conventional and hybrid scenarios posed by Russia, as well as develop a common position on a European complement to the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

French Forward Deterrence: What Is in It for the Baltic States?

Héloïse Fayet, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia
25.05.2026

In this study, the author analyzes how the French concept of forward deterrence might affect the security of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania amid the most severe stress test of European deterrence since the Cold War. Russia's war against Ukraine, Moscow's nuclear threats, hybrid operations, and doubts about the reliability of U.S. guarantees are forcing European states to seek additional deterrence mechanisms. In this context, France is attempting to emphasize the European dimension of its own nuclear doctrine without altering its fundamental basis: the decision to use nuclear weapons remains strictly national, and Paris is proposing neither a replacement for the U.S. nuclear umbrella nor a model of joint nuclear control.

For the Baltic states, the significance of this initiative is indirect but important. They were not explicitly mentioned in Emmanuel Macron's speech, which can be explained by differences in the perception of the Russian threat, the central role of NATO and the U.S. in Baltic security, and a weaker tradition of nuclear debate in the region. At the same time, an attack on the Baltic states would inevitably affect France's vital interests, as it would undermine trust in NATO and set a dangerous precedent for all of Europe.

The author considers practical cooperation—not abstract nuclear debate—to be the most promising path forward: intelligence, cyber defense, maritime security, critical infrastructure protection, countering the "shadow fleet," strengthening NATO's forward presence, and rapid reinforcement. Overall, French deterrence could indeed become part of a broader, more collective, and more reliable European defense architecture.

EU Defence Series: European Autonomy in Orbit

Béatrice Hainaut, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia
26.05.2026

Why is the EU's strategic autonomy in space becoming a security necessity rather than merely a technological ambition? Russia's war against Ukraine has shown that satellite communications, navigation, intelligence, meteorology, logistics, banking operations, and military command are critical to the functioning of states. A cyberattack on the ViaSat KA-SAT network—used by both Ukrainian military and civilians—occurred one hour before the full-scale invasion. The consequences extended far beyond Ukraine's borders: tens of thousands of satellite internet users in France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom were affected. This cyberattack demonstrated the vulnerability of commercial space systems and the lack of a ready European response to attacks falling below the threshold of open warfare. In contrast, the rapid deployment of Starlink for Ukraine showed just how indispensable private providers have become in times of war.

Commercial satellite services provide important capabilities but cannot replace a robust European architecture, as they are vulnerable to cyberattacks, electronic warfare, political restrictions, and exploitation by adversaries. NATO remains the cornerstone of European security but is not developing its own space capabilities and relies heavily on the United States, which underscores the EU's need for its own solutions.

Europe is already moving in this direction through the IRIS² program (the future European secure satellite communications system), Galileo (the European satellite navigation system), and Copernicus (the Earth observation program), as well as government satellite communications, space situational awareness, and the growing budget of the European Space Agency. At the same time, the main challenges remain fragmentation, unclear governance between member states, the European Commission, and the European Space Agency, the need for long-term funding, and the need to combine space autonomy with digital sovereignty.

RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AND HYBRID WARFARE, ESCALATION, AND SECURITY SCENARIOS

Russia's Shadow Fleet under Pressure. Boosting the Impact of Western Sanctions

Elżbieta Kaca, Tymon Pastucha, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Poland
19.05.2026

The authors analyze how Russia's "shadow fleet" has become a key mechanism for circumventing G7+ oil sanctions, but at the same time has turned into a vulnerability for further Western pressure. The embargo on Russian oil and petroleum products, along with the price cap mechanism, has already limited Russia's fiscal capacity: between 2021 and 2025, the share of hydrocarbon revenues in the Russian budget fell from 40% to 25%, and in real terms, the reduction amounted to about one-third. At the same time, Moscow has cushioned the blow by redirecting exports to China, India, and Turkey and creating an ecosystem of at least 700 old, opaquely registered, and often inadequately insured tankers.

The "shadow fleet" operates through hidden ownership, frequent flag changes, manipulation of the Automatic Identification System (AIS), ship-to-ship oil transfers, and intermediary networks in third countries. This is not only a sanctions issue but also a threat to maritime security, the environment, and critical infrastructure, especially in the Baltic and North Seas.

Russia continues to purchase old tankers through intermediaries, quickly re-registers them in poorly regulated jurisdictions, and exploits loopholes in international law—particularly UNCLOS—that make it difficult to detain vessels on the high seas. Another problem is that sanctions often target individual vessels but do not always affect the entire ecosystem: ports, insurers, flag registrars, repair yards, traders, banks, brokers, spare parts suppliers, and leasing companies. It is precisely this network that allows Russia to quickly replace lost vessels and maintain its exports.

The authors propose three key steps to increase the pressure of sanctions. First, expand sanctions from individual vessels to the entire "shadow fleet" ecosystem, including ports, insurers, flag registrars, traders, repair facilities, and financial intermediaries. Second, once the global oil market has stabilized, impose a complete ban on maritime services for the transport of Russian oil. Third, if a complete ban proves politically difficult, gradually lower the price ceiling to the level of production costs in order to minimize Russia's oil revenues as much as possible. These recommendations are of particular importance for Ukraine, as tightening sanctions directly limits the Kremlin's financial resources for continuing the war.

What Is Happening in Moscow?

Michel Duclos, Institut Montaigne, France
19.05.2026

In this article, the author analyzes signs of a crisis in the Kremlin following the May 9, 2026, celebrations, which were humiliating for the Russian regime. The author draws a cautious parallel with the late Soviet Union: just as the Soviet system became bogged down in Afghanistan, so Russia has become bogged down in Ukraine; just as the Soviet economy entered a period of stagnation, so the Russian war economy is increasingly showing signs of exhaustion. At the same time, the author cautions that these analogies should not be overstated, as the current Russian leadership remembers the collapse of the USSR and is unlikely to allow the emergence of a "new Gorbachev."

The main cause of the Kremlin's difficulties is Ukraine. Not only is Ukraine continuing its resistance, but it is also striking at Russia's rear—its oil and gas infrastructure, defense industry, and strategic facilities—with increasing effectiveness. This undermines Russia's narrative of a war against "all of NATO," as Ukraine is holding out primarily with European support, despite all its limitations.

The author describes the struggle on three fronts: the battlefield, where Russian troops are suffering heavy losses; the energy war, where Moscow is trying to destroy Ukraine's infrastructure; and the negotiating table, where the Kremlin seeks to force Kyiv to make concessions through Washington. The most dangerous scenario is Russia's attempt to avoid defeat in Ukraine by expanding its hybrid war against Europe. Therefore, the main conclusion for Europeans is to accelerate rearmament and, at the same time, develop their own initiative to resolve the war, relying on support for Ukraine, frozen Russian assets, security guarantees, and the prospect of Kyiv's accession to the EU.

What conclusions can be drawn from the Ukrainian drone attack on Moscow?

(FR. Quels sont les enseignements de l'attaque de drones de l'Ukraine contre Moscou ?)

Jean-Pierre Maulny, Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques (IRIS), France
20.05.2026

The author analyzes the Ukrainian drone attack on Moscow primarily as a political and psychological signal, rather than as an operation with significant military impact. The drones used were relatively light and had a limited payload, so their purpose was not to significantly weaken the Russian military machine, but to convey several important messages to the Kremlin, Russian society, and international partners.

The first message is that Ukraine has weathered Russia's winter campaign against its energy infrastructure. Moscow sought to break Ukraine's resilience and morale, but the strike on Moscow demonstrated that Ukraine is not only defending itself but also retains the ability to strike back. The second message concerns Ukraine's defense-industrial base. Despite Russian strikes, Kyiv is capable of producing large quantities of simple, inexpensive, yet long-range drones. This is fundamentally important, as the attack was carried out using Ukrainian assets rather than Western weaponry, which strengthens Ukraine's autonomy and reduces the risk of NATO being accused of escalation.

The strongest effect here is psychological. Ukraine has shown that Moscow is no longer out of reach. The drones traveled over 500 km and were not intercepted by Russian air defense systems, and videos of the attacks were filmed by residents of the capital themselves. This undermines the Kremlin's narrative of a controlled "special operation" and demonstrates to Russians that the fear of war could spread to their side.

Seven Security Scenarios on Russian War in Ukraine for 2026–2027

GLOBSEC, Slovakia
22.05.2026

The study presents a scenario-based forecast for the course of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2026–2027, based on assessments by 71 Ukrainian experts in security, defense, and foreign policy. The main conclusion is that the most likely outcome is neither a quick peace nor a decisive victory for either side, but rather a protracted war of attrition. The combined probability of "war" scenarios exceeds 80%, while the probability of peaceful settlement scenarios is estimated at less than 20%.

The experts consider seven basic scenarios. The most likely is the "protracted war with internal tensions and external sources of support" scenario, in which hostilities continue, Ukraine faces internal challenges, but compensates for them through international support. The second most likely scenario is "neither war nor peace," in which the front line remains relatively stable, negotiations yield no results, and the West continues its support without a clear strategy for ending the war. The third scenario envisions the gradual attrition of Russia and the creation of conditions for a more advantageous negotiating position for Ukraine. The fourth scenario involves a partial freeze of the conflict, with high tensions persisting and the risk of a resumption of large-scale hostilities. The fifth scenario describes the achievement of a fragile peace settlement through negotiations and external pressure. The sixth scenario envisions a deterioration of Ukraine's position due to a reduction in international support and internal difficulties. The seventh scenario—according to experts, an unlikely but most positive prospect for Kyiv—involves a strategic turning point in Ukraine's favor and a significant weakening of Russia. An important shift is also noted: in 2026–2027, military and non-military factors reach parity for the first time. The decisive factors will be not only the situation on the front lines but also European military aid, macro-financial support for Ukraine, U.S. policy, EU unity, Ukraine's mobilization capacity, and the development of its defense-industrial base.

It is particularly important that Europe emerges as the main external factor in the future dynamics of the war, while the role of the U.S. is increasingly linked not to the volume of weapons but to Washington's political stance toward Kyiv and Moscow. Thus, Ukraine's long-term resilience will depend on a combination of its own technological adaptation, long-range strikes against enemy military targets, mobilization, and Europe's ability to maintain long-term political and military support for Ukraine.

White Paper on Russian Acts of Sabotage and Subversion against Members of the Council of the Baltic Sea States

Filip Bryjka, Anna Maria Dyner, Aleksandra Kozioł, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Poland
29.05.2026

The authors analyze Russian acts of sabotage and subversive activities against the member states of the Council of the Baltic Sea States from the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine through April 2026. These incidents are not isolated but constitute a systematic hybrid campaign against NATO and EU countries, particularly those that actively support Ukraine. Its goal is to damage critical infrastructure, test the allies' response, create a sense of constant threat, and undermine societal resilience.

The Baltic region has become one of the key theaters of this campaign due to its immediate proximity to Russia and Belarus, its role in supporting Ukraine, and the presence of ports, logistics routes, energy facilities, and vulnerable undersea infrastructure. In the maritime domain, Russia employs reconnaissance, a "shadow fleet," ships flying foreign flags, and sabotage of cables and pipelines. On land, "one-time agents"—recruited via social media—are increasingly being used to carry out arson, conduct reconnaissance of facilities, and launch attacks on transportation, military, and defense-industrial infrastructure. In the air and maritime domains, airspace violations, drones, and GNSS/GPS jamming pose a particular threat.

The authors warn that Russia is likely to escalate the level of risk if it does not receive a coordinated response. Therefore, countries in the region need a joint mechanism for information sharing, clear attribution of attacks, a catalog of best practices, enhanced protection of critical infrastructure, and strengthened societal resilience.

GEOECONOMIC SECURITY, ENERGY, RAW MATERIALS, AND FINANCIAL LEVERS

“National Plan for Rare Earth Metals”: Can France and the EU Catch Up with China?

(FR. « Plan national sur les terres rares » : la France et l’UE peuvent-elles endiguer leur retard face à la Chine ?)

Guillaume Pitron, Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques (IRIS), France

11.05.2026

The author analyzes rare earth metals as one of the key instruments of China’s geo-economic power and a strategic vulnerability for France and the European Union. These resources are used in medical technologies, electric vehicles, wind turbines, electronics, imaging systems, and defense equipment. Permanent magnets—particularly samarium-cobalt magnets—are especially critical, as they are vital for military systems, where dependence on China is nearly absolute.

The main problem lies not only in extraction but in control over the entire value chain. China mines about 60% of the world’s rare earth metals, refines approximately 85% of production, and manufactures about 94% of the permanent magnets based on them. This gives Beijing not only an industrial advantage but also leverage for diplomatic pressure: restrictions on the export of rare earth metals and magnets are already being used in the trade dispute with the United States and could affect European industries.

France’s national plan for rare earth metals is an important signal, but not a turning point. It supports initiatives already underway, particularly in the areas of processing, magnet production, and material recycling, but acknowledges that France is unable to independently reestablish the full production chain from raw material extraction to magnet manufacturing. At the EU level, the Critical Raw Materials Act and the 47 strategic projects provide the necessary framework, but funding and industrial capacity remain insufficient. In reality, Europe will remain vulnerable to Chinese control over critical materials for a long time to come.

The Euroclear Saga

Jan Balliauw, Egmont Institute, Belgium
12.05.2026

The Belgian financial infrastructure Euroclear has found itself at the center of discussions regarding the use of frozen Russian assets following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since 2022, approximately €290 billion in Russian assets have been frozen in the West, of which roughly €185 billion in reserves from the Central Bank of the Russian Federation were held in Euroclear—an institution that holds over €38 trillion in securities. This transformed a technical mechanism of financial markets into a lever of pressure on Moscow and a potential source of support for Ukraine.

The author demonstrates that the first compromise involved using not the assets themselves, but the income generated by them. Belgium and the EU channeled tax and interest revenues toward aid for Ukraine. However, following a reduction in U.S. support, Europe began seeking long-term financing, which brought to the forefront the idea of a "Reparations Loan"—a loan to Ukraine secured by frozen Russian assets. Politically, it seemed attractive, but legally and financially, it created an asymmetric risk: the entire EU would benefit, while the main responsibility would fall on Belgium as the country where Euroclear is located.

Ultimately, the EU rejected this risky mechanism and agreed to a €90 billion European loan for Ukraine for 2026–2027. An important conclusion is that support for Ukraine is gradually becoming a structural budgetary commitment for the EU, rather than merely a set of temporary crisis solutions.

Beijing's critical raw material weapon — And how to dismantle it

Joris Teer, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), EU-level think tank
12.05.2026

This study analyzes how China has turned its control over critical raw materials into a geo-economic weapon. Rare earth elements, gallium, germanium, graphite, tungsten, and other materials are fundamental to the defense industry, energy sector, medicine, digital infrastructure, semiconductors, drones, radar, satellites, and communications systems. China controls 70% or even more of global production or processing for half of the materials that the EU defines as critical, and is therefore capable of disrupting Western manufacturing without direct military conflict.

In 2025, Beijing sharply reduced exports of critical raw materials to nearly all countries, using licensing not only as a means of pressure but also to gather data on Western industrial and defense supply chains. Such a policy weakens deterrence in Asia and Europe: it could influence the positions of Taiwan's partners and also complicate European rearmament and support for Ukraine.

Europe's main weakness lies not only in extraction but, above all, in processing and component manufacturing, where China maintains a near-monopoly. Therefore, the author proposes an emergency action plan aimed at rapidly reducing dependence on Chinese supply chains. First and foremost, this involves creating a coalition of the EU, the G7, and other partners to develop the extraction, processing, and production of critical materials outside of China. To this end, governments must secure funding for new projects, provide procurement guarantees, and temporarily support manufacturers through pricing mechanisms so that they can compete with Chinese companies. The author also proposes introducing origin requirements for raw materials in public procurement, making more active use of European instruments against economic coercion, and establishing a European Office for Geoeconomic Assessment to analyze the risks of dependence on critical resources and coordinate supply security policy.

AccelerateEU: European responses to a new energy crisis

Gonzalo Escribano, Elcano Royal Institute, Spain
19.05.2026

The author views the European Commission's AccelerateEU action plan as an attempt to respond to the new energy crisis caused by the conflict in the Middle East, while at the same time reinforcing the EU's long-term commitment to decarbonization and electrification. The energy transition is becoming a prerequisite for Europe's economic competitiveness, social sustainability, and security. After two energy crises in less than five years, the EU recognizes that the strategic challenge lies not in replacing some fossil fuel suppliers with others, but in the very dependence on gas and oil imports.

The AccelerateEU plan contains 44 measures grouped into five areas: coordinating member states' actions, protecting vulnerable consumers and industry, accelerating clean energy and electrification, developing and integrating energy grids, and mobilizing investment. In the short term, the European Commission's options are limited, as key fiscal and energy levers remain with the member states. Therefore, the document currently serves primarily to establish a framework for coordination and set out the principles for targeted, temporary, and timely support.

Thus, one of the document's key ideas is that the EU's long-term energy security must be based on the development of electrification, renewable and nuclear energy sources, the modernization of grids, and an increase in energy storage capacity. At the same time, the author notes that AccelerateEU relies primarily on existing policy instruments and does not propose any significant new mechanisms for financing or achieving the set goals.

NB8 Series. Geo-economic Resilience: Collective Measures Against the Weaponisation of External Dependencies in the NB8 Region

Thorsteinn Kristinsson, Ludvig Broomé, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia
22.05.2026

The study analyzes how the Northern Baltic Eight should adapt to a new era of geo-economic competition, in which external dependencies can become a tool for political pressure. According to the authors, in global trade, states are increasingly using tariffs, subsidies, export controls, sanctions, and market access restrictions as means of influencing others. This is particularly dangerous for the small, open economies of the NB8, as their strength is rooted in international integration, yet this very integration creates vulnerabilities in critical raw materials, technologies, digital infrastructure, financial systems, logistics, and key services.

The authors propose shifting from individual risk assessments to collective regional resilience. To achieve this, the NB8 countries must jointly map external dependencies, rank them by criticality and concentration, identify opportunities for intra-regional supply, and coordinate the diversification of external sources. Mutual support is a key element of this approach: in the event of geo-economic pressure, countries in the region must be prepared to provide one another with access to critical resources, reserves, and alternative supply channels.

At the same time, the authors caution against turning diversification into protectionism. The goal is not to abandon open trade, but to selectively reduce the most dangerous dependencies and align regional policy with the EU's economic security.

What Do Companies Fear? The New Geography of Geopolitical Risk

Thomas Gomart, Lucie Mielle, Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI), France
28.05.2026

This study analyzes how geopolitical risk has become a central factor in corporate strategy over the past few years. Drawing on the annual reports of the world's 100 largest companies by market capitalization, the authors highlight not so much the actual level of risk as the way corporations themselves articulate their fears, priorities, and vulnerabilities.

The main conclusion is that geopolitical risk has a dual geography: it depends both on the company's country of origin and on the geography of its operations, assets, and supply chains. American companies largely view this risk as a threat to national security, technological leadership, and U.S. global hegemony. European corporations frame it in terms of the erosion of the rule of law, multilateralism, regulatory predictability, and increasingly complex relations with the U.S. and China. Chinese companies view risk through the lens of party loyalty, while Indian companies perceive the restructuring of the world order more as an opportunity linked to a policy of multi-vector diplomacy.

A second important line of research is the sectoral nature of risk. For the energy sector, risks include the vulnerability of infrastructure and routes; for finance, sanctions and legal pressure; for pharmaceuticals, the resilience of supply chains; and for technology, the fragmentation of the digital ecosystem. The authors also highlight a temporal asymmetry: geopolitics consumes the present, while climate risk is often deferred to the future. As a result, geopolitics has become one of the key factors in competitiveness, determining which companies will be able to adapt to the new world order and which will lose their positions.

Electric collective: Europe's clean energy future without Russia

Szymon Kardaś, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), EU-level think tank
28.05.2026

The author analyses how, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU and its Member States refocused their energy diplomacy on finding new suppliers and gradually phasing out Russian energy sources. This has been one of the greatest successes of European energy policy: between 2021 and 2025, the share of Russian gas in EU imports fell from around 45% to 12%, that of oil from over 25% to around 2%, whilst imports of Russian coal were halted due to sanctions. At the same time, the author emphasises that whilst Europe has largely replaced Russian fossil fuels with supplies from other sources, it has not overcome its structural dependence on imported gas and oil.

The ECFR Energy Deals Tracker database shows that, after 2022, the EU's most active partners were the US, Norway, Qatar, Azerbaijan, Algeria and other suppliers, whilst the largest number of deals were concluded by individual Member States, primarily Germany, France and Italy. This helped to avert shortages, but at the same time intensified competition among European buyers, the risk of price gouging, duplication of infrastructure and excessive dependence on liquefied natural gas.

One of the main challenges facing European energy diplomacy is that gas supply agreements usually entail clear legal obligations, whereas agreements on hydrogen, critical raw materials and the development of clean energy often remain mere political declarations without any mechanisms for implementation. The author recommends that the EU develop a common framework for energy diplomacy, strengthen coordination between Member States when concluding external energy agreements, coordinate infrastructure investments and avoid duplication of projects. At the same time, the EU should also more actively support the development of renewable energy, hydrogen technologies and supply chains for critical raw materials through more concrete and legally binding international agreements. The author also emphasises the need to align energy security objectives with climate policy, strengthen partnerships with supplier countries on the basis of long-term mutual benefit, and complete the full phase-out of Russian fossil fuels by 2027.

From openness to deterrence: Europe's doctrine of reactive assertiveness

Georg Riekeles, Varg Folkman, European Policy Centre (EPC), EU-level think tank

31.05.2026

Europe finds itself caught between two revisionist economic powers – the US and China – which are increasingly using trade, industry, technology and dependency as instruments of geopolitical pressure. The author argues that the post-war order of open trade, established under US leadership, no longer works, as Washington itself is turning to tariffs, export controls, industrial subsidies and economic nationalism, whilst China is building up unprecedented state-led industrial capacity.

The main threat to the EU is the gradual erosion of its industrial base. Chinese overcapacity is already putting pressure on steel, solar panels, electric vehicles, batteries, chemicals and mechanical engineering, and may in future affect semiconductors, the aerospace sector and advanced manufacturing. The experience of energy dependence on Russia following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine has shown that economic ties can be used as a tool for political pressure; in the author's view, both Beijing and Washington are increasingly applying this logic.

The author emphasises that Europe possesses significant levers, such as the Single Market, instruments to counter economic coercion, anti-dumping rules, protective measures and strategic industrial hubs such as the Dutch company ASML – the world leader in the manufacture of semiconductor production equipment. The problem lies not in a lack of capabilities, but in a lack of confidence in the EU's willingness to use them. Europe therefore needs a doctrine of firm response to coercion: clear red lines, rapid response mechanisms and a mechanism similar to the US Section 301, which allows for the swift investigation of and response to unfair trade practices by other states. Without such resolve, the EU risks losing its industrial base, technological autonomy and political agency.

TECHNOLOGY, DIGITAL SECURITY, CYBERSPACE AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

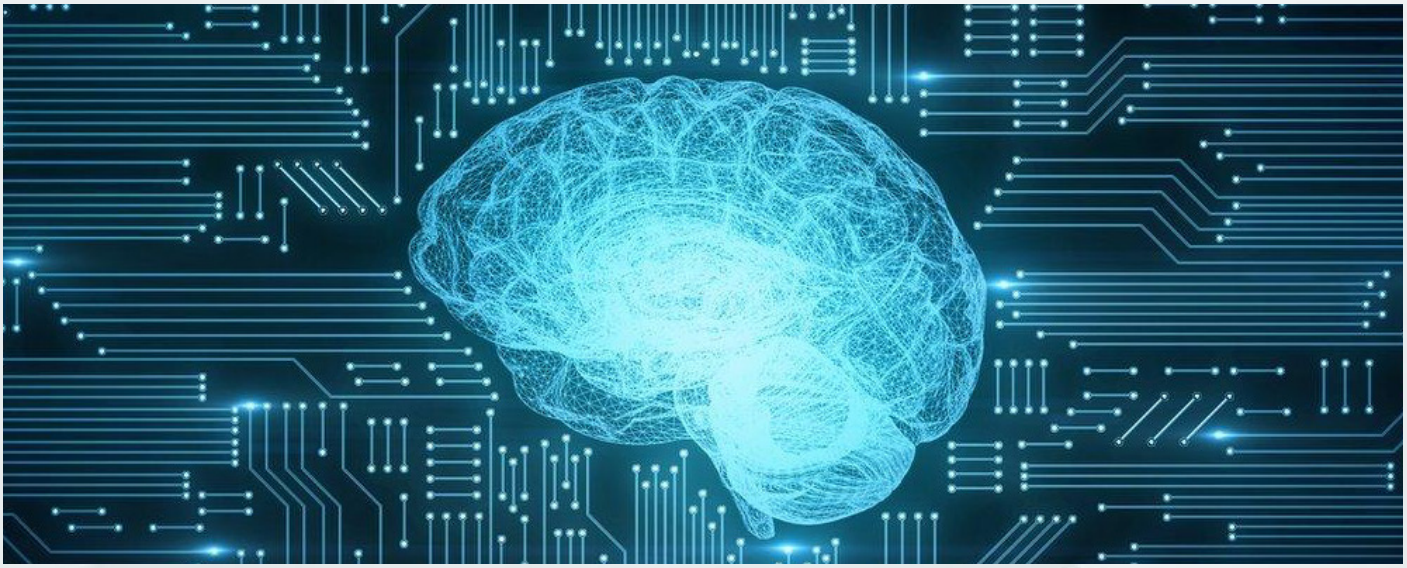
The Double Edge of Russian Sovereign AI: Isolation and Narrative Consistency

Ivan U. K. Klyszcz, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia
11.05.2026

The study analyses how artificial intelligence is transforming Russian campaigns of external information manipulation and interference. The author demonstrates that AI has made it cheaper and faster to produce synthetic content, deepfakes, bot networks, disinformation, social engineering techniques (manipulating people to obtain information or prompt them to take certain actions) and other tools of influence. According to the European External Action Service, in 2025, 29 per cent of documented campaigns of foreign information manipulation and interference were linked to Russia, whilst 27 per cent of incidents involved content created or enhanced using artificial intelligence.

Particular emphasis is placed on the evolution of Russian policy in the field of AI. Whilst in 2019 the Kremlin sought global leadership, following the full-scale aggression against Ukraine, sanctions and technological isolation, its approach has shifted towards the concept of 'sovereign AI'. Russia is increasingly seeking to develop local models, isolated from 'Western' information and subject to national security considerations. Examples cited include the large language models YandexGPT (now Alice AI) from Yandex and GigaChat from Sberbank. Their distinctive feature lies not only in their focus on the Russian-speaking information space, but also in their built-in mechanisms for censoring politically sensitive topics. The author provides examples of how such models can reproduce the Kremlin's official stance on the war against Ukraine, avoid criticism of the Russian authorities, or present information about the occupied territories in line with the state narrative. This is precisely why the development of these systems is viewed not merely as a technological project, but also as a tool for upholding information sovereignty and state propaganda.

Isolation is hampering Russia's technological development, but it may help to create ideologically more consistent propaganda tools, particularly regarding the war against Ukraine and the Kremlin's unlawful territorial claims. Therefore, Russia's 'sovereign AI' should not be underestimated, as even under current restrictions, ongoing experimentation may yield new and effective methods of information influence.



Shared threats, shared resilience: Integrating enlargement partners in EU digital and cyber security

Clotilde Bômont, Bojana Zorić, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), EU-level think tank
26.05.2026

The authors analyse why the digital and cyber security integration of EU candidate countries needs to be strengthened even before formal accession. The EU, Ukraine, Moldova and the countries of the Western Balkans already operate within a single threat environment, where cyberattacks, digital dependencies and information operations rapidly cross borders. A telling example is the Russian attack on the Viasat KA-SAT satellite network in 2022, which was directed against Ukraine but affected users across Europe.

The main problem is that formal alignment with EU standards and regulations is not always accompanied by sufficient practical capacity to respond to cyber threats. Compliance with EU cybersecurity legislation and the implementation of relevant policies are important, but do not guarantee resilience without specialists, crisis procedures, information sharing, joint exercises and access to operational mechanisms. Existing frameworks such as ENISA-supported capacity building, the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre, the EU-Ukraine Cyber Dialogue, and Moldova's access to the EU Cybersecurity Reserve are useful, but remain uneven and insufficiently integrated.

The authors propose building digital resilience at three levels: political, societal and industrial. This entails better coordination, the development of digital skills, the protection of critical infrastructure, a reduction in dependence on external providers, and support for regional digital solutions. It is particularly important that Ukraine and Moldova are viewed not merely as recipients of aid, but as sources of practical experience in cyber resilience under sustained pressure.

Cyber (Dis)armament in Practice: The EU's Role in Governing Software ulnerabilities in a Fragmented International Order

Eugenio Benincasa, SIPRI, Sweden
May 2026

The author analyses why the traditional understanding of disarmament is largely ineffective in cyberspace. Unlike nuclear or conventional weapons, cyber capabilities are not discrete physical objects that can be counted, restricted or destroyed. They consist of people, software tools, infrastructure, organisational procedures and software vulnerabilities. This is precisely why the author suggests viewing practical cyber-disarmament not as a ban on 'cyber-weapons', but as the management of vulnerabilities, which often pave the way for cyber-espionage, sabotage and attacks.

A key problem arises when a researcher or government body discovers a flaw in software. There are two courses of action: report it to the developer so that they can fix the problem, or keep it secret and use it to gain access to other people's systems. The second option may be useful for intelligence services or law enforcement agencies, but it also means that criminals or other states could exploit the same vulnerability. The author therefore believes that, in most cases, it is safer to report any vulnerabilities found and ensure they are rectified promptly. It is precisely this approach, known as coordinated vulnerability disclosure, that helps to reduce risks for users and enhances overall cybersecurity.

The EU has already partially harmonised this area through NIS2, the Cyber Resilience Act and the ENISA vulnerability database. At the same time, deep fragmentation persists, as legal protection for researchers acting in good faith is uneven, and the retention of vulnerabilities by public authorities is scarcely regulated. In the author's view, the EU should establish a more coordinated approach to managing vulnerabilities: ensuring effective mechanisms for their coordinated reporting, guaranteeing legal protection for researchers, and strengthening the institutional capacity of the bodies responsible for cybersecurity.

CHINA, THE US AND THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY

Donald Trump's Visit to China: De-escalation of Bilateral Relations

Marcin Przychodniak, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Poland
19.05.2026

Donald Trump's visit to China on 13–15 May 2026 signalled not a resolution of the US–China conflict, but a temporary de-escalation. Both sides remain competitors, but recognise the depth of their mutual dependence on critical raw materials, semiconductors, tools for the development of artificial intelligence, trade and industrial supply chains. That is why the visit was predominantly economic in nature. The US delegation included executives from Tesla, Visa, Apple and Nvidia, and the sides agreed to continue negotiations and establish trade and investment councils.

At the same time, the outcome of the meeting remained unclear. The leaders did not sign any major agreements, and the statements from Washington and Beijing differed significantly. China claimed that tariff reductions and easier access for Chinese food products to the US market had been discussed, but the White House did not confirm this. The US side, on the other hand, spoke of Chinese commitments regarding rare-earth metals, the purchase of oil, agricultural products and 200 Boeing aircraft, but these points were not reflected in the Chinese statement. Separately, there have been unofficial reports of a possible US authorisation for the sale of a limited quantity of Nvidia H200 chips to China. However, according to subsequent comments, the Chinese side is reportedly not particularly interested in these supplies, as it seeks to develop its own solutions and not rely on American technology.

Taiwan has once again become the most sensitive political issue. Xi Jinping stated that mishandling the Taiwan issue could lead to conflict between the US and China, and emphasised that Taiwan's independence and peace in the Taiwan Strait are incompatible.

The author concludes that both the US and China are using this period to strengthen their own positions. Washington seeks to reduce its dependence on China and bolster its industrial and military capabilities, whilst Beijing is attempting to consolidate Xi Jinping's domestic political standing and emphasise China's status as an equal partner to the US. For the European Union, this situation means continued pressure from Chinese exports on the European market and the need to defend the integrity and competitiveness of the single market more vigorously.

Europe Between the Hammer and the Anvil

Hiski Haukkala, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia
22.05.2026

The author analyses the current transatlantic security crisis as the most dangerous moment for NATO in recent decades. At the Munich Security Conference, representatives of Donald Trump's administration, notably Elbridge Colby and Marco Rubio, were still attempting to reassure Europeans that the US remains formally committed to NATO, but expects Europe to take on significantly greater responsibility for the continent's conventional defence. The problem, in the author's view, lies not in the very idea of such a redistribution, but in its chaotic nature. The transition to a hypothetical 'NATO 3.0' requires time, new capabilities, a mature European strategic culture and a self-reliant defence posture.

Subsequent events, in particular a US war with Iran without proper consultation with allies, have revealed the fragility of this 'thaw'. Trump's policies are undermining the most crucial psychological element of deterrence – the belief in an automatic allied response. This is particularly dangerous because Russia remains a state that pragmatically exploits favourable geopolitical circumstances and the vulnerabilities of its opponents, and may attempt to test NATO if it perceives weakness or division.

At the same time, the experience of the war in Ukraine demonstrates the rapid transformation of modern warfare and the need for Europe to accelerate the development of its own defence capabilities. In the author's view, Europe must currently maintain NATO as the foundation of its security, but also gradually prepare for a more independent role in deterring threats.

Crusade Against Norms that Prohibit the Use of Force: The 'Might' of the Autocrats Meets the Detractors of 'Right'

Oana-Cosmina Mihalache, Instituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Italy
25.05.2026

In this study, the author analyses the systemic pressure on the international legal regime, which, since 1945, has prohibited the aggressive use of force and territorial conquest. The rise in the number of autocracies, the rollback of democracy and the increasingly frequent use of force outside the framework of international law are undermining one of the key foundations of the post-war order – the principle that 'might' does not create 'right'.

The starting point is the sharp rise in the number of armed conflicts: in 2024, 61 interstate or intra-state armed conflicts were recorded – the highest number since the Second World War. Most of the states involved in such conflicts are autocracies or hybrid regimes, which have fewer internal checks and balances and find it easier to justify external violence. At the same time, the author emphasises that the problem is not limited to autocracies: democratic states, notably the US, are also increasingly resorting to military action and rhetoric that run counter to the legal order they themselves helped to establish.

Russia's war against Ukraine is presented as a prime example of a return to the logic of territorial conquest, disguised by rhetoric of 'defending compatriots'. A similar erosion of norms is evident in the actions of China, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Thus, the danger now lies not only in the violation of norms, but in the gradual normalisation of a world where 'might makes right'.

Bridging the Oceans

Jonathan Berkshire Miller, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia
27.05.2026

The study analyses the convergence of transatlantic and Indo-Pacific security in the context of the weakening of traditional US leadership, the rise of authoritarian revisionism and the growing role of democratic middle powers. The author emphasises that Europe, Canada and partners in the Indo-Pacific region can no longer rely solely on the US as the main 'leader' of interregional cooperation. They need to establish, on their own, a permanent and institutionalised link between the two strategic spaces.

The rationale for such rapprochement is clear. Events in one region affect the security situation in the other: Russian aggression against Ukraine is of significance to countries in the Indo-Pacific region, whilst rising tensions surrounding Taiwan and in the South China Sea are of increasing interest to European states. Additional factors include dependence on critical technologies, raw materials and supply chains, as well as the increasingly close cooperation between Russia, China, North Korea and Iran.

The author believes that the most promising mechanism for cooperation is the NATO-IP4 format – cooperation between NATO and four partners in the Indo-Pacific region (Australia, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand). At the same time, he emphasises that this is not about creating a new military alliance with mutual defence guarantees, but rather a platform for coordination and joint responses to contemporary challenges. Its value lies in consultations, the exchange of threat assessments, cyber and space cooperation, the coordination of technologies and standards, and responses to economic coercion.

What Is the Status of Middle Powers?

Michel Duclos, Institut Montaigne, France
29.05.2026

In this article, the author examines whether the argument that middle powers can play an increasingly important role in international politics remains valid. The starting point is a speech given by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in Davos, in which he called on middle powers to unite and not to accept the dominance of the great powers. Subsequent events – the US war against Iran, the US's partial withdrawal of support for Ukraine and the limited impact of certain diplomatic initiatives – have cast doubt on this argument. However, the author does not believe that this decisive 'moment' for middle powers has come to an end. Rather, middle powers have not yet learnt to act in a sufficiently organised manner.

The author highlights several specific examples that demonstrate the growing role of middle powers. During the Iran crisis, before deciding to launch strikes against Iran, Donald Trump consulted not only with traditional allies but, above all, with regional partners – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan. This shows that even superpowers are increasingly forced to take into account the position of influential regional actors. Another example is the 'Central Asia–Italy' summit in Astana, where Kazakhstan sought to cement its role as a key intermediary between Europe and Central Asia. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev emphasised the country's importance as a supplier of energy resources and critical minerals, a key transport hub and a proponent of multilateral diplomacy.

The author of the study also mentions the diplomatic initiatives of Brazil and India regarding the war in Ukraine. Although these have not yielded tangible results, the very fact of their emergence testifies to the desire of middle powers to participate in the resolution of global conflicts, rather than remain passive observers.

In this context, Europe appears weakened, but not powerless. Its key advantage remains its support for Ukraine and the EU's potential to serve as a pole of moderation and stability for middle powers in the Global South. In the author's view, the future of middle powers depends on their ability to act collectively and to shape a coordinated agenda on issues of trade, climate, the environment and global governance.

Putin in Beijing: Russia's growing dependence and Europe's China dilemma

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29.05.2026

Vladimir Putin's visit to Beijing on 19–20 May served more as evidence of the growing asymmetry in relations between Russia and China than as a demonstration of the strength of their partnership. Moscow sought to show the West that it has a powerful partner capable of offsetting the pressure of sanctions, technological isolation and the loss of European energy markets. However, the outcome of the visit showed the opposite: China has far more options, resources and leverage, whilst Russia is increasingly dependent on Chinese money, technology, markets and diplomatic cover.

The author interprets the phrase 'partnership without limits' as political rhetoric rather than a reflection of the actual balance of interests between the two states. Although China and Russia regularly demonstrate political closeness and a shared rejection of Western influence, their cooperation has clear limits, defined primarily by China's economic and geopolitical interests. China supports Russia's military resilience not through direct military intervention, but structurally – through the expansion of trade, the supply of dual-use technologies, access to components necessary for industrial production, and by maintaining economic channels that help Russia mitigate the impact of Western sanctions. At the same time, Beijing is trying to avoid steps that could trigger large-scale secondary sanctions or seriously damage its relations with key trading partners in Europe and the US.

The lack of progress on the Trans-Siberia II gas pipeline is particularly telling. For the Kremlin, this project is of strategic importance, as following a sharp decline in exports to Europe, Russia needs new major gas markets and long-term contracts that could offset the loss of revenue. For China, however, the situation is different: it already has diversified energy supply sources, including imports of liquefied natural gas and supplies from other Central Asian countries.

This is precisely why Beijing is showing no willingness to rush into an agreement on Moscow's terms. The lack of concrete agreements during Putin's visit was further evidence that, in energy negotiations, it is China that holds the stronger bargaining position and can dictate the pace and terms of cooperation.

The author concludes that the West is unlikely to be able to drive a wedge between China and Russia, as Beijing has an interest in preserving a weakened, dependent, but not destroyed Russia as a counterweight to the US. For the EU, this means the need for a policy of containment, leverage and selective engagement: stricter controls on dual-use goods, sanctions against Chinese companies aiding the Russian military economy, a reduction in critical dependencies, and linking access to the European market to greater restraint on Beijing's part regarding its support for Moscow.

SECTION 2. INSIGHT LAB ANALYTICAL MATERIALS

EEYES Insight Lab – a youth-oriented think tank of the International Charitable Foundation «UDoNation» / Eastern European Youth Empowerment Space (EEYES). The center conducts research in the fields of international and domestic politics, economics, and security, and engages financial expertise as needed. The priority of Insight Lab's activities is to ensure high quality standards for its analytical products.

Research within Insight Lab is implemented both on the team's initiative and at the request of partners; it may be intended for either public or restricted distribution. The current geographical focus covers Germany, Poland, and France, with the prospect of further expansion to the European region as a whole. At the same time, Insight Lab functions as a platform for professional dialogue, exchange of expertise, and development of modern research approaches.

An important area of the center's work is the internship program for young researchers. Insight Lab systematically invests in the development of a new generation of analysts, creating conditions for the acquisition of practical skills, professional growth, and the public presentation of their work results.

The materials presented in this magazine were prepared by Insight Lab interns within the framework of the internship program under the supervision of the center's team.

A European Defence Alliance Outside NATO: A Realistic Scenario or a Political Fantasy?

Iryna Rabchuk

Over the past few years, it has become clear that Europe and the United States have increasingly diverged on key strategic issues within NATO.

This problem has become particularly evident during Donald Trump's second presidential term. While Europe has viewed Russia as the principal threat to European security, the United States has refused to recognize Russia as an aggressor state, cast controversial votes at the UN, and repeatedly threatened to suspend military assistance to Ukraine, at times following through on those threats. Instead, the United States' strategic focus has increasingly shifted toward the Pacific region.

It is important to emphasize that the problem is not limited to Trump alone. Many researchers believe that the general trend of the United States gradually reducing its attention to Europe began decades ago and will continue beyond the current administration.

Against the backdrop of these developments, European countries have increasingly sought to create additional security mechanisms that may be described as a form of "NATO beyond NATO." This includes the development of the defence industry, joint procurement programs, ammunition production, the protection of critical infrastructure, military mobility, and operational coordination among groups of states without the participation of the United States.

The EU as the Basis of Future European Defence

The European Union has long evolved beyond the level of a purely economic union and common market that characterized the early stages of European integration. A decisive step in this transformation was the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, which established the legal foundations for the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

In particular, the revised Treaty on European Union (TEU) introduced Article 42, which became one of the key provisions for the institutionalization of the defence dimension of European integration. It also drew the attention of researchers to the EU's potential as an independent security and defence actor.

Importantly, Article 42 explicitly states that the development of the CSDP must be compatible with the commitments of EU Member states within NATO. Consequently, the CSDP is generally viewed as a complement to the Alliance rather than a substitute for it.

Of particular importance is Article 42(2) TEU, which provides that the CSDP includes "the progressive framing of a common Union defence policy", potentially leading to a "common defence" should the European Council unanimously approve such a decision.

Article 42(7) TEU establishes a mutual obligation of assistance in the event of armed aggression against a Member State. Notably, the wording of this provision is not only similar to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty but, in some respects, goes beyond it. While Article 5 refers to "such action as it deems necessary", Article 42(7) TEU obliges Member States to provide aid and assistance "by all the means in their power".

It is noteworthy that following the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, French President François Hollande invoked Article 42(7) TEU rather than Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. This suggests that EU Member States do indeed regard EU mechanisms as a potential instrument of security cooperation alongside NATO.

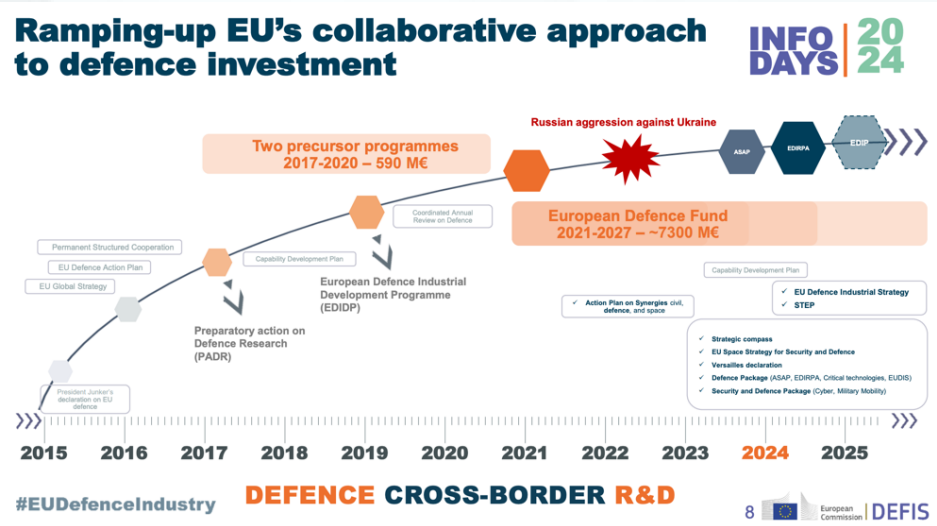
In addition, the EU possesses competences in the fields of industrial policy and the internal market. In recent years, the European Commission has adopted a functional interpretation of the founding treaties in order to expand its role in, and partially incorporate, the defence sector into EU policymaking. Notably, Directives 2009/81/EC and 2009/43/EC were adopted in 2009 to regulate defence procurement and the intra-EU transfer of defence-related products.

In 2017, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework was established. It enables those Member States "whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria and which have made more binding commitments" to jointly implement defence projects and coordinate the development of military capabilities.

In 2021, the European Defence Fund (EDF), created to support defence research and development, became fully operational. This development is particularly significant because Article 41(2) TEU explicitly prohibits the use of the EU budget to finance expenditure arising from "operations having military or defence implications". The European Commission justified the creation of the EDF on the grounds that the fund does not finance military operations but is intended exclusively to support industrial and research projects.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 served as a catalyst for the further expansion of the EU's role in security and defence. In 2023, the EU introduced two interrelated short-term instruments: the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) and the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA).

Under ASAP, Member States could receive EU funding to expand or modernize ammunition and missile production facilities, rapidly increase production capacity, and coordinate industrial orders with other Member States. Under EDIRPA, Member States were encouraged to conduct joint procurement of defence equipment and received EU financial support on the condition that purchases were made collectively.



Promoting cooperation on defence investment. Source: European Commission. (2024). EDF Info Days 2024 [Presentation]

In 2025, the EU consolidated these two initiatives within the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), creating a more comprehensive and long-term framework for strengthening the European defence industrial base.

It follows from the above that, at the normative level, the EU has made significant progress in developing its defence dimension and, as some scholars argue, is moving towards the creation of a defence union. However, in practice, implementation remains limited.

First, Article 42(7) TEU lacks a clear operational mechanism. The activation of this provision by France in November 2015 did not result in the formal involvement of all EU Member States in a single military operation against ISIS, unlike the potential consequences of invoking Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. EU Member States expressed political solidarity and provided military and logistical assistance, but the implementation of this mechanism occurred not through centralized EU institutions or within the framework of the CSDP, but primarily through bilateral forms of support.

Second, as demonstrated by a 2020 study by the European Parliamentary Research Service, EU Member States systematically avoid applying Directive 2009/81/EC and Directive 2009/43/EC by relying on Article 346 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which allows derogations from internal market rules where such measures are necessary to protect essential security interests.

Third, the implementation of the PESCO initiative is widely regarded as ineffective. The original purpose of PESCO was to establish a group of Member States willing and capable of pursuing deeper defence integration. In practice, however, 25 out of 27 EU Member States joined the mechanism from the outset, significantly weakening its initial selective character. As a result, PESCO has produced more than 75 separate and unrelated projects in different configurations of participants.

Finally, the adoption of new defence-industrial instruments has also faced resistance from Member States. In the initial proposal for the ASAP Regulation, the European Commission envisaged mechanisms for identifying and continuously monitoring the availability of defence products, their components, and production capacities within EU Member States. However, several states opposed these provisions, and they were subsequently removed from the final text during interinstitutional negotiations. A similar pattern can be observed in the financing of defence initiatives, which remains relatively limited. For example, the ASAP budget was reduced from the initially proposed €500 million to €300 million.

The procedural complexity of decision-making in the defence area should also be taken into account. Within the CSDP framework, key decisions are adopted unanimously, effectively granting each Member State a veto power and allowing individual states to block initiatives supported by the rest of the Union. Even where defence-related issues are addressed through the ordinary legislative procedure, the multi-level coordination process involving the European Commission, the Council of the EU, and the European Parliament often significantly delays decision-making.

Minilateralism as a New Model of Defence Cooperation

The EU can, therefore, provide European states with a regulatory and legal framework for strengthening defence cooperation. However, it has not yet demonstrated the ability to establish a fully-fledged defence union with a high level of operational integration. Under these conditions, European states have increasingly sought alternative formats of cooperation.

One possible response to these challenges is the development of small defence clusters — cooperation among several countries with shared interests and common threat perceptions. Such formats already exist and, in many cases, have proven more effective than large-scale pan-European initiatives.
The most basic form of such cooperation involves joint weapons development and procurement programmes, such as the Eurofighter programme.

A more advanced level consists of the structural integration of specific military capabilities. For example, within the framework of Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation (BeNeSam), the two countries have achieved a high degree of integration in naval force management, including joint command structures, training, and logistics. Similarly, the Netherlands has integrated a significant part of its land forces into German command structures, effectively creating a model of "embedded" national units within broader allied military formations.

An even more developed example of minilateral defence cooperation is the Northern European Defence Area. NORDEFCO serves as a framework for defence coordination among the Nordic countries. The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) brings together Northern European and Baltic states under British leadership to ensure a high level of operational readiness. In parallel, joint armament programmes are being developed, including the CAVS (Common Armoured Vehicle System) and cooperation around the CV90 platform.

Among the key advantages of such cooperation is its high capacity for practical operationalization. While Article 42(7) TEU creates an obligation without a corresponding capability, defence clusters create capabilities without formalized collective defence obligations. In other words, they provide tangible military and industrial capacities without establishing supranational commitments in the field of collective defence.

It is also important that the members of such defence clusters share a common perception of strategic needs, and their cooperation is based not on institutional coercion but on voluntary coordination. Within the EU internal market, Member States often invoke Article 346 TFEU to derogate from general rules on defence procurement and resist deeper integration, but within frameworks such as CAVS or BeNeSam, states voluntarily agree on requirements and procurement decisions because they have a direct interest in achieving common outcomes.

The cluster approach also addresses some of the structural limitations of PESCO. Within already established clusters, the same states can participate simultaneously in several interconnected initiatives, creating cumulative effects of integration among the same participants. For example, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and the Baltic states participate in parallel in NORDEFCO, JEF, CAVS, and cooperation surrounding the CV90 platform. Unlike PESCO, where numerous projects often exist separately from one another, cluster arrangements allow the same groups of states to develop a more coherent and interconnected system of defence cooperation across multiple areas.

Another important advantage is a significantly faster and more flexible decision-making process. These formats rely on intergovernmental cooperation and do not require the complex multi-level procedures characteristic of the EU or NATO. This is particularly evident in the coalitions supporting Ukraine established after 2022. These include, among others, the tank coalition, artillery coalition, F-16 coalition, IT Coalition, and Drone Coalition. Such formats emerged rapidly and without the need for complex NATO or EU decision-making procedures.

From a legal perspective, cluster models are compatible with both NATO structures and EU law and can therefore operate alongside both frameworks.

NATO contains no provisions preventing Member States from establishing additional bilateral or multilateral mechanisms for military cooperation.

Regarding the EU, there is currently no case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union directly addressing intergovernmental defence clusters among Member States. However, in the landmark 2012 Pringle judgment, the Court held that intergovernmental agreements outside the EU framework are permissible provided that they do not alter the existing allocation of competences under the EU Treaties and respect the institutional balance of the Union.

Therefore, since defence remains primarily a responsibility of the Member States and does not fall within the exclusive competence of the Union, Member States retain considerable freedom to establish additional cooperation mechanisms.

Moreover, in terms of financing, individual projects may benefit from instruments such as the EDF, SAFE, and EDIP. Thus, minilateral formats can use institutional developments within the EU to increase their effectiveness, while the EU can simultaneously facilitate the further development of such defence clusters.

At the same time, cluster models face inherent political limits to integration. Such formats facilitate coordination, integration, and enhanced interoperability, but their effectiveness depends on the political will and level of trust among participating states. JEF, NORDEFCO, and similar initiatives do not constitute collective defence alliances and do not contain provisions equivalent to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty or Article 42(7) TEU. Consequently, they do not create an automatic obligation to provide military assistance in the event of aggression against one of the participants.

Another significant limitation of the cluster approach is its potential to increase fragmentation within the European defence landscape. On the one hand, such a model corresponds to the logic of differentiated integration embedded in the EU Treaties. The very existence of PESCO reflects this principle.

On the other hand, EU strategic documents, including Mario Draghi's 2024 report on European competitiveness, emphasize the negative consequences of excessive fragmentation in the defence market. The report notes that the existence of numerous types of tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and artillery systems across different Member States reduces production efficiency, complicates logistics, and increases costs. Therefore, the cluster model represents both a means of improving the effectiveness of defence cooperation and a potential source of further structural fragmentation.

Existing EU mechanisms, such as the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the Capability Development Plan (CDP), can help mitigate these risks. CARD provides a regular process for coordinating Member States' national defence plans and identifying areas for potential joint investment and cooperation. By contrast, the CDP establishes priority areas for the development of European defence capabilities based on a common assessment of future threats and requirements. Through these instruments, defence clusters could develop not in isolation but within an EU-level framework of agreed priorities, thereby improving the compatibility of their projects and reducing the negative effects of fragmentation.

Conclusion

In addressing the question of whether a defence union outside NATO is possible, it can be argued that the emergence of a centralized European military alliance in the near future remains unlikely. A more realistic scenario is the development of a multi-level security architecture in which NATO provides strategic deterrence and collective defence, the European Union ensures financial, industrial, and regulatory coordination, and minilateral defence formats provide military interoperability, rapid response capabilities, and deeper cooperation among specific groups of states.

Such an architecture could partially mitigate the risks associated with weakening transatlantic ties and a gradual reduction of US involvement in European security. It would not replace NATO, but it could significantly strengthen the resilience of European defence.

This article was written for the magazine "Think Tanks Essentials".
Views expressed in the article are those of the author.

The Baltic Sea as a part of Europe's internal security space

Dariia Horobei

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, despite Russia's disinformation campaign and Turkey's pressure regarding the Kurdish issue, has significantly altered the collective security architecture and expanded the Alliance's geopolitical influence in the Euro-Atlantic region. In particular, the 1,340-kilometer extension of the land border with the Russian Federation and the integration of Scandinavian military capabilities have strengthened the Alliance's strategic flexibility and expanded its capacity to deter Russia in the Baltic and Arctic regions. At the same time, Russia retains significant potential for asymmetric influence through A2/AD tools, electronic warfare capabilities, submarine operations, hybrid sabotage, and the use of a shadow fleet.

Although Western analysts refer to the Baltic Sea as an "inland sea" or "NATO's lake," this does not mean there are no threats. The loss of opportunities for open dominance in the Baltic Sea and the high risks of direct confrontation with the Alliance are prompting the Kremlin to increasingly use tools of hybrid influence, shifting the confrontation into the "gray zone" of underwater sabotage and acts of subversion against critical infrastructure.

Anatomy of Threats: "War on the Seabed" and Hybrid Sabotage

Modern hybrid attacks on undersea communications in the Baltic region are blurring the classic concept of an "armed attack" as defined in the NATO Treaty. Aggression without a single shot fired is capable of inflicting critical damage on the economy of an entire region, demonstrating the inadequacy of traditional defense mechanisms in the face of new geopolitical realities. Russia actively exploits these limitations, deliberately keeping the level of its sabotage and intelligence activities below the threshold of open war. Russia actively exploits these limitations, deliberately keeping the level of its sabotage and intelligence activities below the threshold of open war. This approach complicates the formulation of a rapid collective military response, since invoking the mechanisms of Article 5 requires not only political consensus among allies but also conclusive evidence of an attack and determination of responsibility for it.

An example of this occurred in October 2023, when the Chinese vessel NewNew Polar Bear damaged the Balticconnector gas pipeline with its anchor. The incident demonstrated the practical limitations that arise within the legal framework established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Since the damage occurred in an exclusive economic zone and the vessel was flying the Chinese flag, the affected states' ability to detain the vessel and take coercive procedural actions was limited. As a result, the investigation depended to a large extent on cooperation with the flag state, which complicated the prompt establishment of liability.

Another manifestation of this strategy was the explosions on the "Nord Stream" pipelines in September 2022, which demonstrated the effectiveness of Russia's tactic of "deliberate ambiguity." Despite confirmation of the sabotage, investigations in Sweden and Denmark were concluded without formal charges being brought against specific individuals or states, while the German investigation continued. The incident highlighted the complexity of legally establishing responsibility for attacks on critical undersea infrastructure and the difficulties in developing a coordinated international response.

Underwater internet cables connecting Scandinavia and the Baltic region to Europe are also critical targets. Damage to them threatens to paralyze the economy and disrupt communications in NATO's military command systems. The main vulnerability of these data highways is their accessibility on the open seabed and the public availability of their coordinates. An aggressor does not need submarines to cause widespread chaos: a civilian vessel with a heavy anchor or a deep-sea drone is sufficient, as has already been observed on multiple occasions in the Baltic region.

A series of incidents involving damage to undersea cables in Finland, Estonia, and Norway—including an incident that forced Finnish police to conduct a special operation on a Russian shadow tanker—has demonstrated the inability of traditional military patrols to protect regional communication lines. In response to this systemic threat, states have shifted from passive defense to a large-scale infrastructure overhaul: countries are jointly investing in the laying of new, deeply protected undersea trunk lines to diversify routes and ensure the region's digital resilience.

The third element of the threat is offshore wind farms, which have become the foundation of Europe's energy independence from Russia. Their main vulnerability lies in the power cables connecting the wind farms to the mainland; damage to these cables during peak periods could trigger widespread energy chaos. Currently, systematic preparations by Russia for such sabotage have been documented: Russian reconnaissance vessels (notably the "Admiral Vladimirsky" and the "Yantar"), with their AIS systems turned off, are conducting military mapping of undersea networks.

Russia's "shadow fleet" has evolved from a tool for circumventing sanctions and engaging in illegal economic activities into a potential instrument of hybrid influence. In this study, the "shadow fleet" refers to a fleet of predominantly obsolete tankers with opaque ownership structures that are used to transport Russian energy resources in circumvention of sanctions and often operate with their Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) turned off or tampered with. On the one hand, the operation of such vessels without adequate insurance coverage creates risks of environmental accidents in the straits and coastal areas of the Baltic Sea, which could potentially disrupt civilian shipping and divert the resources of NATO member states' coast guards. On the other hand, some analytical studies point to the possibility of using such vessels to conduct hybrid operations, including the covert deployment of underwater drones, damage to underwater infrastructure, or other actions in the "gray zone."

Despite the obvious risks, NATO countries' options for a forceful response to the activities of suspicious vessels in peacetime remain limited. Freedom of navigation, guaranteed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), does not permit the detention or blocking of vessels in international waters or exclusive economic zones without sufficient legal grounds. At the same time, states can use other control measures, including port inspections, sanctions mechanisms, maritime monitoring, and enhanced surveillance of high-risk vessels.

The Kaliningrad Factor: "A Fortress in the Rear"

The militarized Kaliningrad exclave forms the Suwalki Corridor—the only land link between the Baltic states and the rest of NATO. The deployment of "Bastion" systems (equipped with "Onyx" and Kh-35 anti-ship missiles with a range of up to 300 km) and an "Iskander-M" tactical missile brigade has transformed the region into a key hub of Russia's A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) strategy. This is complemented by the "Kinzhal" hypersonic missile carriers (MiG-31K) deployed in 2022, which, according to some estimates, can be equipped with both conventional and nuclear warheads.

The defensive component of the bridgehead has been reinforced with S-400 air defense systems (with an interception range of up to 400 km) and Pantsir-S1 systems, as well as powerful electronic warfare and radar capabilities. In particular, the "Voronezh-DM" early-warning radar system for detecting missile attacks has been deployed along the coast, and there are plans to launch the 29B6 "Container" over-the-horizon radar with a detection range of up to 3,000 km. Combined with electronic intelligence assets and research vessels, this infrastructure significantly expands Russia's capabilities to monitor the air and maritime situation in the Baltic region.

This coverage of the water and airspace fundamentally alters the Alliance's defense calculations. Since the deployment of reinforcements by sea or air into the area covered by Russia's A2/AD "dome" becomes an extremely high-risk operation, NATO's logistical focus is shifting to the Suwalki Corridor. However, this sole land route is geographically constrained by forests and swamps and has critically weak infrastructure, consisting of only two roads and a single railroad track. The realization that external aid might not arrive in time due to this logistical bottleneck became one of the factors driving NATO's subsequent transition to an enhanced forward presence and the expansion of military infrastructure on its eastern flank.

As part of this strategy, the four eastern battalion groups are being scaled up to brigade level, increasing the Alliance's regular troop strength in the Baltics to 22,000 personnel, in particular through the permanent deployment of Germany's 45th Armored Brigade in Lithuania. At the same time, the national armies of Poland and the Baltic states—capable of mobilizing a combined total of nearly 680,000 military personnel—form the basis of deterrence. To address infrastructure vulnerabilities, the "Baltic Line of Defense" project was launched in 2024 to fortify the borders with Russia and Belarus. In parallel, a new military training ground is being built near Kapčiamestis, Lithuania, directly within the Suwałki Gap; the Vilnius–Augustów highway is being modernized; and the integration of the European Rail Baltica railway network is being accelerated to enable the rapid deployment of heavy equipment.

Despite the intensification of training, the deployment of additional air defense systems, and the launch of the Baltic Sentry mission to protect undersea infrastructure, European defense capabilities still fall short of regional defense targets. Against the backdrop of risks of delays or limitations in U.S. support, European NATO members are forced to develop classified contingency plans that account for the possibility of a temporary or partial disruption of logistics routes to the Baltic region during the first weeks of a conflict.

A powerful electronic warfare (EW) node deployed in the exclave has become a distinct instrument of aggression in the "gray zone." Using GPS spoofing technology (replacing real coordinates with false ones), Russian systems regularly and deliberately jam navigation signals over Poland, the Baltic states, and the surrounding waters. This not only complicates the operation of NATO military drones but also poses critical threats to civilian infrastructure: ships and aircraft in the region systematically report deviations from their routes and loss of communication, forcing crews to switch to backup navigation methods.

The scale of this hybrid threat became evident in September 2025, when a large-scale disruption of GPS services—which a number of European officials and sources attributed to Russian interference—paralyzed navigation and forced the plane carrying European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to make an emergency landing using paper maps. Such incidents demonstrate that Kaliningrad functions as a cross-border destabilization hub capable of instantly crippling Europe's critical transportation arteries.

For the Alliance's security architecture, the Kaliningrad factor significantly complicates the implementation of the classic "rapid response" concept. The presence of a militarized exclave on NATO's eastern flank limits the ability to rapidly deploy naval and air reinforcements to the Baltic states without conducting complex operations to neutralize Russian A2/AD capabilities. As a result, the Kaliningrad factor hinders the Alliance's ability to contain a crisis within the "gray zone" and increases the risk of rapid conflict escalation.

Polish Naval Modernization: From "Coastal Defense" to "Regional Leadership"

With the Suwałki Corridor remaining the most vulnerable point on NATO's eastern flank, the role of the navy has been radically redefined. The fleet is no longer merely an instrument of remote deterrence but has become one of the key elements of regional resilience and security in the Baltic region. The realization that land-based communications can be cut off in a matter of hours is forcing Warsaw to accelerate its rearmament efforts. By allocating a record-high nearly 5% of GDP to national defense, Poland is transforming its Navy from an instrument of local coastal defense into a key factor in ensuring regional stability.

A key element of this strategy is the "Miecznik" program, with a total budget of approximately 16 billion zlotys, which is being implemented by a consortium at the PGZ naval shipyard in Gdynia with the support of foreign partners. The platform for the three new multi-purpose frigates is the British Arrowhead 140 prototype developed by Babcock International. With a displacement of up to 7,000 metric tons, the ships will become the largest combat units in the Polish Navy. Equipped with modern anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems, guided missiles, and torpedoes, the frigates are being designed as mobile air defense and missile defense platforms, fully integrated into the overall NATO architecture. They will be capable of intercepting air threats at long ranges, thereby minimizing the strike potential of the Kaliningrad missile force.

The "Miecznik" program has a clear deployment schedule: the first frigate, "Wicher" ("Whirlwind"), laid down in August 2023, is scheduled to be launched as early as 2026; for the second ship, "Burza" ("Storm"), an official steel-cutting ceremony was recently held, with launch expected in 2027; and the final frigate in the series, "Huragan" ("Hurricane"), will join the combat squadron of the 3rd Naval Flotilla by 2031. This upgraded strike group will be fully interoperable for conducting joint operations with NATO's Combined Naval Forces in both the Baltic and North Seas.

At the same time, coastal defense is being strengthened through a large-scale expansion of divisions equipped with mobile Naval Strike Missile (NSM) systems and the procurement of attack helicopters to provide coastal coverage. The high precision and long range of the NSM systems allow Poland to establish tight fire control over the Baltic Sea, ensuring the ability to strike Russian forces directly at their bases and block the Russian fleet in Kaliningrad.

The strategic rationale behind the modernization is to create a sovereign "shield" around maritime communications. In the event that the Suwalki Gap is blocked, it is the navy and coastal defenses that are tasked with mitigating the risks of disruption to sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and ensuring their resilience in times of crisis. This will ensure the uninterrupted operation and receipt of critical military and energy resources through the deep-water ports of Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Świnoujście—which is vital for the survival of Poland and the Baltic states in the event of the region's land-based isolation.

Thus, the Baltic region has become NATO's second strategic frontier, but one characterized by a fundamentally different nature of warfare. While the land border in the East is a classic "iron" frontier of tanks and physical military deterrence, the Baltic space in the North is a frontier of "sensors and sabotage." An invisible hybrid war is being waged here, where the main targets are not territories, but data, energy hubs, and logistics routes. Under these conditions, the protection of undersea cables, offshore wind farms, and maritime supply lines is just as important as the number of divisions on land. The large-scale militarization of Kaliningrad and threats to the Suwalki Corridor have forced NATO and Poland to completely rethink their defense strategies. The security of the Baltic states is no longer a local issue; it is now a key condition for the survival and resilience of the entire Alliance.

This article was written for the magazine "Think Tanks Essentials".
Views expressed in the article are those of the author.

Who is investing in the defence of the Baltic states?

Viktoriia Stasenko

At a time when the whole world is in the grip of a security crisis, the Baltic states, more than any others, face a real military threat from Russia. Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, its 'shadow fleet', Narva, Kaliningrad and the Suwalki Corridor - these are a number of factors that could potentially become a tipping point for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia at any moment should Russia take action.

That is precisely why, following the NATO summit in The Hague in 2025, it was decided that member states' spending should amount to at least 3.5 per cent on the armed forces and 1.5 per cent on security infrastructure, cyber defence and logistics annually until 2035. These officially announced figures came as a shock to many European countries, yet the realities of today had been leading inexorably towards this outcome since 2022. The Baltic states took immediate action; for example, Estonia announced that it would increase its spending from 3.35 per cent of GDP in 2025 to 5.37 per cent in 2026, amounting to over 10 billion euros for defence between 2026 and 2029. For its part, the Latvian Saeima approved the final version of the 2026 budget, which states that 4.91 per cent of GDP, or 2.16 billion euros, will be allocated specifically to the defence budget. Finally, Lithuania, as the country with the highest absolute figures and the largest number of personnel in its armed forces, has decided to increase funding for the country's defence by €12 billion over the period 2026–2030, i.e. to 5–6 per cent of GDP annually.

An investigation into the sources of funding for defence in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia reveals that EU loans through the Security Actions for Europe (SAFE) programme play the most significant role. Eighteen member states are involved in this project, receiving loans from the EU's common budget. The Baltic states are both beneficiaries and participants in joint tenders, alongside Poland. Lithuania has been allocated €6.38 billion in loans under the SAFE programme, with a significant portion of these funds earmarked for the procurement of tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and ammunition from European suppliers. For Latvia, which has received SAFE loans totalling €3.5 billion, the procurement of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), anti-drone systems and missile systems are also key items on the country's list of requirements. In Estonia, the government recently decided to suspend planned purchases of infantry fighting vehicles and instead allocate funds to the acquisition of unmanned aerial vehicles, counter-drone measures and air defence systems. A significant portion of these procurements may be financed through loans under the SAFE programme, totalling €2.34 billion, which the country has received from the European Union.

At the same time, the Baltic states also have their own budgets, though these are not without public debt. In order to maintain financial stability, the Estonian government, amongst other measures, has raised the VAT rate to 24 per cent and the income tax rate to 22 per cent for its citizens. Lithuania has introduced a progressive three-tier income tax and raised corporation tax to 17 per cent. Incidentally, Lithuania also funds its defence through the National Defence Fund, established in 2024. It is funded from several sources: an increased corporation tax, excise duties on tobacco and alcohol, a 'security contribution' from banks, as well as payments from local authorities. Furthermore, the aid provided to Ukraine by the Baltic states played a major role, placing them at the top of the ranking of the largest donors following the start of the full-scale invasion. According to data from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Estonia alone spent 3 per cent, Lithuania 1.9 per cent and Latvia 1.5 per cent of their GDP.

To identify the main donors to the Baltic states, we first need to understand exactly what is being funded within the defence industry, broken down by category. In the event of a Russian attack on any of the Baltic states, events would unfold in the same way as in Ukraine, namely with missile strikes on cities. That is precisely why air defence is a key aspect here. It is also essential for preserving sovereignty, as it ensures the integrity of airspace and thwarts potential threats. For example, Estonia is redirecting funds earmarked for combat vehicles towards the purchase of additional drones, air defence equipment and air defence systems, whilst simultaneously extending the service life of its existing fleet of second-hand CV90 armoured personnel carriers (powerful and highly protected Swedish infantry fighting vehicles). Furthermore, in 2026, Estonia announced that it was prepared to spend 1 billion euros on the acquisition of new air defence systems capable of countering ballistic missiles. Options currently under consideration include the American Patriot system, the Franco-Italian SAMP/T system and the Israeli David's Sling system. Tallinn hopes to finalise agreements by the end of 2026. For its part, Latvia has also decided to join the procurement of the IRIS-T medium-range air defence system in order to develop a layered air defence system. The creation of such a joint air defence network between Estonia and Latvia will not only be cost-effective but will also facilitate a faster response to threats and the coordination of defence across the entire Baltic region. The development of Lithuania's air defence is also gathering pace, as the possibility of deploying a unified regional early-warning system for missile strikes is being actively explored as part of a joint initiative between the Baltic states and Poland. This is particularly relevant given Lithuania's immediate geographical proximity to the Kaliningrad exclave (a stronghold where Russia has deployed Iskander operational-tactical missile systems, S-400 air defence systems, and electronic warfare capabilities). It is clear that the deployment of military equipment by the Russian side is nothing less than a means of exerting political pressure and escalating tensions on NATO's borders.

Indeed, according to all statistical data, the United States of America is the largest foreign investor in safeguarding NATO's eastern flank. For example, the Baltic Security Initiative (BSI) is a specific plan from the US government, which focuses on one area: providing funding directly to countries such as Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. The BSI was launched in 2020 with the aim of developing the Baltic states' independent defence capabilities and operational interoperability. The funds received by Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania amounted to $228 million in 2024; $225 million in 2023; $180 million in 2022; and $169 million in 2021. US security assistance was also used to procure HIMARS multiple launch rocket systems, equipment to support integrated air and missile defence capabilities, communications systems, night-vision devices, ammunition, including Javelin missiles and large-calibre artillery rounds, maritime radars for situational awareness, and military medical equipment.

Nor can we overlook the pan-European initiative in the Baltic region to protect airspace, known as the 'Sky Shield' (ESSI), for which Germany has been the main initiator and coordinator since 2022. ESSI provides participating countries with access to multi-layered air defence architectures, joint procurement of interceptors, as well as joint training and the integration of radar systems, which is intended to address one of the most acute vulnerabilities on NATO's north-eastern flank near the borders with Russia. The project itself involves 24 states and aims to focus on three levels, namely short-, medium- and long-range defence systems. The first tier is a German ground-launched medium-range system known as the IRIS-T SLM. The second tier is the American 'Patriot' system, which is capable of intercepting unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), cruise missiles and ballistic missiles. Finally, the third tier is the Israeli 'Arrow 3' system, developed in collaboration with the United States. This long-range system has a much greater operational range. Incidentally, Germany's choice of systems, only one of which is of European manufacture, is the main source of scepticism regarding this project, particularly from one of its most prominent opponents - France.

It is worth noting that the Baltic states can also count on the support of the United Kingdom and Canada. It is known that between September and October 2025, the UK coordinated the largest Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) exercises in 11 years in the North Baltic region, involving 1,700 British military personnel. Furthermore, with regard to Estonia, it should be noted that in May of that year, over 3,000 British service personnel took part in the NATO 'Hedgehog' exercises, during which, for the first time, the UK's 4th Brigade was fully integrated into an Estonian division. Canada, for its part, is focusing on Latvia to balance forces in the Baltic region and plans to complete the deployment of brigade-level capabilities in Latvia by 2026, namely 2,200 Canadian troops as part of a multinational brigade. Germany's target country, meanwhile, turned out to be Lithuania.

Thus, the main investors in the Baltic states' defence can be divided into two main groups - regional donors (Germany, the United Kingdom and the EU as a whole) and transatlantic partners, namely the US and Canada. The United States of America remains the greatest guarantor of security in financial terms for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, as this serves its geopolitical interests. Aid to the Baltic states allows the US to contain the Russian Federation in the east without entering into direct confrontation. Furthermore, the text also mentioned that the states of the Baltic region are maintaining their level of defence spending as a proportion of GDP. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are not entirely dependent on international support, as they are implementing reforms in their domestic policies that enable them to accumulate more funds in the state treasury.

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Poland as Eastern Europe's Defence Hub: Leadership, Ambitions, and Risks

Ivan Potapchuk

Abstract

Russia is increasingly asserting itself as a multidimensional threat to Eastern Europe, acting as the principal catalyst behind the region's rapid militarisation. Poland has actively capitalised on this shift in the security landscape in an effort to establish itself not merely as a territorial military power capable of deterring Russian aggression, but as a strategic centre of a broader regional coalition. Through frameworks such as the Bucharest Nine (B9) and the Three Seas Initiative, Warsaw seeks to secure a distinct role as a regional leader; however, its long-term success remains structurally dependent on Western partners in matters of defence procurement and economic stability.

Why Is Change Necessary?

Modern European security strategy has historically relied on diplomatic and military mechanisms shaped in Berlin and Paris. However, this centralised model failed to deter Russia from annexing Crimea and initiating the war in Donbas in 2014 and ultimately proved incapable of preventing the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As a result, countries on NATO's eastern flank increasingly question the determination of Western European leaders to contain escalation in the region. This systemic gap has created a critical security vacuum on the eastern flank, highlighting the urgent need for a militarily capable regional actor that can both defend its own borders and help build a unified collective front.

As Skujins (2026) argues, the current crisis surrounding air defence and unmanned systems clearly illustrates these vulnerabilities. Unauthorised drones, frequently identified as Russian in origin, regularly violate European airspace, generating serious domestic and geopolitical instability.

For example, in Latvia, the political consequences of failures in airspace coordination directly resulted in the resignation of the Minister of Defence and the subsequent collapse of the coalition government (Preiherman, 2026). Although it was later established that the drones had originated from Ukraine, they had been diverted due to Russian jamming and electronic warfare operations.At the same time, a recent incident occurred in Romania, where a drone struck a residential apartment building in Galați and injured two civilians (Leduc & Jacqué, 2026). To reduce these hybrid and kinetic threats, the region can no longer rely solely on delayed Western responses; it requires a localised and highly coordinated command structure capable of serving as the backbone of Eastern European defence.

Poland's Military Potential

Empirical indicators of Poland's defence spending demonstrate the country's potential to become the military centre of NATO's eastern flank. Warsaw has pursued an aggressive militarisation strategy: defence expenditures have risen to an unprecedented 5% of GDP, the highest proportional defence spending figure in the entire North Atlantic Alliance. Within the framework of the European Union's SAFE initiative (Security Assistance Framework for Europe), which serves as a critical pillar of the €800 billion ReArm Europe plan, Poland was recently allocated €43 billion for defence procurement. Notably, among all 13 participating states, Poland alone received 29% of the total programme budget (SAFE, 2025).

Moreover, Poland's strategic location, its politically conservative president whose views are broadly aligned with Trump's political orientation, and its exceptionally high defence spending relative to GDP have elevated the country to the top tier of U.S. strategic partners. In the Pentagon's FY 2027 Written Force Posture Statement, Poland—alongside Finland and the Baltic states—was explicitly identified as a "model ally" within the strategically critical Nordic–Baltic Northeastern Corridor. This suggests that Warsaw may expect preferential political attention and access to advanced technological capabilities from the United States (Michta, 2026).

Equally important is the development of Warsaw's defence cooperation with South Korea, particularly in the procurement and localisation of K2PL tank production. At the end of April 2026, Poland signed a new agreement with its Korean partners that provides for domestic production of these tanks on Polish territory. According to current military modernisation plans, Poland aims to field approximately 1,100 tanks by 2030—more than France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy combined (Ptak, 2026). At the same time, Poland is already NATO's largest arms importer: approximately 47% of its military imports come from South Korea, while another 44% originate from the United States (Ptak, 2026).

Yet the central question remains: is Poland capable not only of expanding its own military power, but also willing to assume the role of a regional defence leader? And if so, does it possess sufficient capacity to do so?

How Does Poland Expand Its Influence Across the Region?

Poland is moving away from the concept of defending only its own borders. Instead, it is actively attempting to consolidate neighbouring states around a shared security agenda, using its substantial military budget to position itself as a genuine leader in Eastern Europe.

The first major instrument Poland employs to build this coalition is the Bucharest Nine (B9). Established in 2014 immediately after Russia's annexation of Crimea, the B9 was designed to unite NATO frontline states—including the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Poland—so they could present a unified and influential voice within the Alliance.Poland and Romania have emerged as the most active members of the group (Pieńkowski & Żornaczuk, 2024). At the B9 summit in May 2026, Polish President Karol Nawrocki articulated the country's leadership ambitions explicitly:

"Russia's war is not an isolated conflict. Its objective is to weaken the unity of NATO and democratic states, which is precisely why the Bucharest Nine is more important today than ever before. We are not on the periphery—we are NATO's centre of gravity." (B9 Summit, 2026)

More recently, Nordic countries and Ukraine were invited to participate in the latest B9 summit, demonstrating an ambition to build an even broader regional security coalition.However, the B9 has a significant limitation: it remains primarily a platform for discussion and policy coordination. The group possesses no direct authority over military forces, and differing national interests frequently slow down decision-making on strategic issues.

The second framework through which Poland is expanding its regional influence is the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). This grouping includes 13 countries and expands beyond the B9 by incorporating Greece, Slovenia, Croatia, and Austria. While the initiative originally focused on transport, energy, and digital infrastructure projects, its agenda at the latest summit shifted increasingly toward strengthening regional security. Poland functions as the initiative's informal leader and is even

expected to represent the interests of the entire Three Seas region at the G20 summit (Ogrodnik & Pieńkowski, 2026). Despite this prominent position, the initiative continues to struggle with insufficient funding and limited institutional capacity.

It is important to note that both initiatives share a common vulnerability: internal political divisions that Russia could exploit to weaken regional cohesion. For a long period, Hungary under Viktor Orbán served as such a factor, repeatedly blocking or delaying decisions aimed at increasing support for Ukraine and strengthening common security policy. Following the 2026 parliamentary elections, Budapest's foreign policy orientation may shift; however, this does not eliminate the broader challenge of internal disagreement within regional frameworks. In this context, some analysts increasingly point to Slovakia, whose government under Robert Fico has adopted a more restrained approach toward support for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia.

Consequently, the long-term effectiveness of both the B9 and the Three Seas Initiative will depend heavily on their members' ability to preserve political cohesion despite external pressure and internal disagreements. Ultimately, Poland also relies on powerful institutions such as the European Union to advance its strategic objectives, as demonstrated by the SAFE programme. This initiative—which allocates billions of euros to support defence financing for frontline states—was largely conceptualised and promoted by Poland. As Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk stated:

"We did everything possible to make NATO's eastern border a priority for all of Europe." (SAFE, 2026)

By shaping EU initiatives such as SAFE, Poland demonstrates its ability to encourage Western Europe to finance Eastern security priorities, reinforcing Warsaw's role as an indispensable intermediary in regional defence. The future of Poland's military sector appears highly promising. As demonstrated above, the country is investing extraordinary resources into its defence and has already begun building robust multilateral blocs. Based on these developments, Poland has exceptionally strong prospects of becoming the primary hub for military cooperation in Eastern Europe.

Can Polish Leadership Challenge France and Germany?

Against the backdrop of Poland's rapid economic and military expansion, a central question emerges: can Poland challenge traditional European powers such as France and Germany in the struggle for continental leadership? To answer this, it is necessary to examine the actual figures. While Poland allocates an impressive 5% of its GDP to defence spending, Germany spends only around 2.4% (Military Spending as a Share of GDP, 2025). However, due to the significantly larger size of the German economy, this 2.4% translates into approximately €86 billion, compared with Poland's €38 billion. France's military expenditures are also substantially higher, reaching approximately €60 billion (Military Spending as a Share of GDP, 2025).

Military infrastructure and industrial production remain additional structural challenges. Although Poland has begun expanding its domestic defence industry, it still lacks the scale and industrial capacity of Germany's powerful defence manufacturing sector (Holmlund, 2025). Furthermore, France maintains a highly autonomous military-industrial base. Unlike most European countries, it independently develops and produces advanced air and naval capabilities and also possesses an independent nuclear deterrent (Strategic Sovereignty—How France Built an Independent Military, 2025). In light of these factors, it becomes evident that Poland cannot realistically compete for absolute leadership in Europe, as it lacks the economic scale and industrial strength available to Western European powers.

Nevertheless, Poland is becoming sufficiently influential to shape the policies of these European giants directly. This became particularly visible during the "Free the Leopards" initiative, which resulted in a major expansion of military assistance to Ukraine. The Polish government assumed a leading role and, supported by several partner countries, successfully pressured Germany into approving the transfer of Leopard tanks to Ukraine. This effort culminated in the creation of the Leopard 2 tank coalition and represented a major political victory for Warsaw (Michta, 2023). Therefore, although Poland lacks the capacity to become a classical European superpower, it clearly possesses the ability to influence major global actors and advocate for strategic outcomes across the Eastern European region.

Recommendations

Short-Term Objectives

The first recommendation for Poland should be the establishment of a joint command structure for securing the Eastern border. Such a structure should be capable of effectively deterring and collectively responding to Russian threats. At a minimum, this initiative should begin with Poland and the Baltic states, with the longer-term objective of incorporating Finland and Romania. Additionally, these countries should actively cooperate with Ukraine in order to absorb practical experience in conducting and deterring modern warfare.

Another critically important objective is strengthening existing Eastern European platforms such as the Bucharest Nine (B9) and the Three Seas Initiative. Poland could act as one of the key proponents of strengthening these frameworks by expanding mechanisms for coordination, joint planning, and practical security cooperation, thereby supporting their gradual evolution from predominantly economic and consultative platforms into more operationally effective instruments in the field of defence.

Naturally, achieving this would be extremely difficult, as individual states remain highly protective of their military sovereignty and are reluctant to relinquish control over their armed forces. To overcome this barrier, Poland's diplomatic argumentation should focus on the direct and tangible nature of the Russian threat, emphasising that no state in the region is capable of countering Russia independently. Despite potential disagreements, countries facing the most immediate security pressures—such as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—may support deeper defence cooperation if Poland provides credible guarantees and demonstrates the effectiveness of its deterrence strategy.

Long-Term Objectives

If such a unified framework can be established, it would not only strengthen individual states but also create opportunities for deeper industrial integration. Building a self-sufficient regional supply chain for ammunition production and drone technologies is a critical prerequisite for enabling the region to withstand a potential military conflict with Russia without complete dependence on external assistance.

In addition, rather than competing with Germany and France for dominance in Europe, Poland should use its growing influence to foster deeper defence dialogue with its Western partners. Warsaw should prioritise the development of more efficient and reliable logistical corridors capable of seamlessly connecting Western European military infrastructure directly with the Eastern front. Ultimately, Poland should advocate for a permanent Western European military presence on NATO's eastern flank, leveraging French and German armed forces as a powerful collective deterrent against future Russian aggression. Such cooperation could be advanced through the argument of practical and enforceable defence commitments. This would stand in direct contrast to the ineffective European military pacts of the 1930s, which ultimately failed because they existed largely as paper guarantees without joint exercises, integrated logistics, or unified command structures.

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Baltic Defence Line as a Shield and Deterrent on the Eastern Flank of Europe

Anastasiia Brus

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, having long confronted Russia's hybrid warfare, are well aware of notorious reality: should the Kremlin dare to open the second front in Europe, their readiness to deliver an instantaneous response, prevent a blitzkrieg and buy time for the mobilisation of NATO forces and the activation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty is an indispensable prerequisite for transforming Europe's Eastern flank into a line of containment against Russian expansion. To this end, on January 19, 2024, the defense ministers of the three nations initiated the construction of the Baltic Defence Line (BLO) along their borders with the Russian Federation and Belarus. This echeloned (layered fortification system is designed to perform a counter-mobility deterrence function in the event of conventional aggression. In total, the BDL will span over 700 kilometers in specific sectors, and will consist of diverse types of fortifications. Construction is being carried out in three phases and is scheduled for completion by 2027, though plans for intermittent modernisation extend well beyond. For instance, the Lithuanian government has announced an investment of 600 million euros into the joint defense project over the decade.

Sun Tzu wrote: "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting". By building a joint Defense Line, the Baltic states seek to embody this wisdom within the modern geopolitical reality, where a security architecture of such a scale serves as a tool of deterrence and a political signal. The relevance of this analysis lies in dissecting one of Europe's most salient security dilemmas, while its objective is to determine whether the Baltic Defence Line can genuinely serve as an effective defensive shield on Europe's Eastern Flank in the era of high-tech conflicts.

The BDL project is a part of NATO's new strategy, rooted in the concept of forward defence and "deterrence by denial", which has replaced deterrence by punishment. The shift in approach lies in the reimagining of territorial defence as the NATO now recognises the exigency of defending every inch from the very first moment of an invasion, rejecting the possibility of temporary occupation followed by subsequent liberation. This shift and the recognition of the previous logic as obsolete can be attributed to the painful experience of Ukraine as restoring territorial integrity requires immense resources, and even short-term occupation leads to severe humanitarian and ecological crises. Furthermore, the need for a comprehensive fortification system is amplified by the geographical terrain of the Baltic countries. The region lacks natural barriers, such as large rivers or mountains, which facilitates an enemy's advance toward the capitals – located from a mere 30 to 210 kilometers from the Russian and Belarusian borders. Essentially, by attaining counter-mobility deterrence by the Line, the Baltic states buy the pivotal time and operational space required until the arrival of Allied forward forces.

The Baltic Defence Line does not follow any unified standard, monolithic blueprint or a template strategy across its echelons. The Estonian Centre for Defence Investments, the primary coordinator for the construction of the Estonian segment of the Line, defines it as a complex network of engineering positions and fortification hubs deployed according to the tactical requirements of each nation and the specific features of the national landscape. This renders the BDL's architecture adaptive to each individual section of the potential line of contact.

Estonia has opted for a stationary area-defence model, characterised by the direct construction of permanent defensive stains on the border zone during peacetime. By the end of 2027, they plan to complete 600 concrete bunkers designed to accommodate tactical units of 10-12 personnel and withstand heavy 152 mm artillery fire. These concrete hubs are integrated into corridors between natural obstacles such as swamps, forests and lakes. Since the summer of 2025, Tallinn has deployed large-scale anti-tank ditches, the total length of which will exceed 40 kilometers. These will impede the advance of Russian tanks and BMP's (infantry fighting vehicles), making the deployment of bridge-laying equipment a mandatory condition for a breakthrough, which in turn renders the enemy an easy target for artillery. Each border strongpoint is equipped with specialised containers holding engineering equipment, stockpiles of "dragon teeth", barbed wire and anti-tank mines to ensure rapid deployment in the event of an offensive.

For Lithuania, the primary catalyst for reinforcing its border was the 2021 migration crisis orchestrated by the Lukashenko regime and backed by Russia. Back then, irregular migrants from the Middle East and Africa began entering the country across the Lithuanian-Belarusian border, to which Vilnius responded by erecting a physical barrier. Within the framework of the BDL, Lithuania initially focused on mobile-counter mobility assets; however, in August 2025, it announced the creation of a three-tier defensive line up to 50 kilometers deep. This included anti-tank ditches, minefields, and two lines of strongpoints with an extensive network of infantry trenches. The infrastructure is being actively prepared for defence: bridges are prepped for demolition, forest abatis are created along roads, drainage canals are deepened. Counter-mobility parks will ensure the rapid distribution of "hedgehogs", "dragon teeth", and concrete blocks.

Despite high-profile domestic corruption scandals, Latvia is demonstrating high rates of engineering implementation on its border with the Russian Federation. Riga has already allocated 25 million euros out of the planned 303 million for the construction of engineering resource parks in Letgale, where tens of thousands of counter-mobility elements have already been installed.
According to the concept of threshold warfare, articulated by Australian military analyst David Kilcullen, Russia employs "salami-slicing" tactics – biting off piece by piece – below the threshold of open conflict, acting in such a way that no single provocation is sufficient to trigger Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. The BDL blocks Russia's classic, Crimea-tested scenario of a rapid provocation involving "little green men" entering Narva and proclaiming a puppet entity there. The necessity of deploying heavy artillery to overcome the BDL elevates the aggression to a conventional war, which automatically triggers NATO's collective defence mechanism.

The effectiveness of the Baltic Line in the realities of high-tech warfare can be evaluated by drawing parallels with historical models and lessons learned from the battlefields of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Critics label the BDL with the cliche of a «new Maginot Line", a project that proved catastrophic during World War II. However, in their fortification practices, the Baltic states are fully aware that completely halting Russian forces will be impossible due to their significant numerical superiority. The objective of the Line is to buy time for NATO's reaction forces. While mobilising 100 thousand troops would theoretically take ten days, and 200 thousand would take about thirty, the actual response could be delayed by political debates. This is especially important given the volatile foreign policy of the Trump administration. Furthermore, the Baltic Defence Line forms a single cohesive front with other NATO defensive initiatives – namely Poland's "Eastern Shield" programme and Finland's defensive fortifications. This eliminates the possibility of Russian troops simply bypassing the barrier, as the Nazis did with the Maginot Line by outflanking it through the Ardennes in Belgium, which

was covered by reserve units lacking adequate anti-tank weapons. The monolithism of the French prototype, built for the rigid positional defence, stands in contrast to the greater versatility and decentralisation of the BDL.

The utilisation of the natural barriers – swamps, forests, rivers – and the integration of fortifications into the landscape are conceptual features shared by the BDL and the Mannerheim Line of the Winter War era. This type of camouflage offers more effective protection against strikes from Russian aviation and FPV drones. However, the Ukrainian combat experience proves that in a war of technologies, the use of Electronic Warfare (EW) to suppress enemy unmanned systems, networks of reconnaissance drones, and modern anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) is a necessity for creating a complete and dynamic defensive ecosystem; hence, the Baltic Line is actively integrating these tools as well. The outbreak of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine simultaneously demonstrated the vital importance of defensive fortifications, as it was their absence that allowed the Russian Federation to advance rapidly deep into the country during the initial months of the invasion. However, while Ukraine had to construct its defensive system directly amidst full-scale hostilities, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are utilising the opportunity to avoid this scenario, thoroughly testing their own defensive architecture. Conversely, a potential drawback could be the lack of a single rigidly synchronized strategy, as each state deploys its segment of fortifications based on its own national needs. This decentralisation, which at first glance appears to be a sign of adaptability, could result in asymmetric strength across different fringe sectors, potentially opening a window of opportunities for Russia.

Moreover, the military doctrines of the Baltic countries, like those of other NATO member states, rely on swift, mechanized, manoeuvre warfare rather than the slow, positional war of attrition that characterises the current phase of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In developing their defensive strategies, the Baltic states must consider that the Russian army is significantly better adapted to positional warfare, while also noting that Russia could lack resources to restore its mechanised forces necessary to breach the BDL to their pre-2022 state fully.

The sector widely considered the most viable for the Russian strike, frequently appearing in security debates as NATO's Achille's heel, is the Suwalki Gap – a 100-kilometer strip along the Polish-Lithuanian border that separates the highly militarised Russian exclave of Kaliningrad from Belarus. It is also the sole land corridor connecting the Baltic states with other EU and NATO member states. For a long time, a worrisome narrative dominated Western analysis, suggesting that Russia could easily sever this bottleneck, isolating the Baltic states from the rest of NATO. However, as of 2026, the menace posed by Suwalki Gap stands as a double-edged sword.

According to the data from the international non-governmental organisation International Crisis Group, although Moscow continues to maintain a powerful air, naval, and missile component and in the exclave, the size of Russian ground forces in Kaliningrad has plummeted by a record 80% due to the aggression against Ukraine. Consequently, Russia's capability to execute an operation to seize and hold the Suwalki Gap has been significantly degraded. It is also worth considering that following the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, the Baltic Sea has become nearly entirely surrounded by Alliance members, effectively eliminating the isolation of the Baltic Sea as a plausible scenario. However, Moscow is equally fearful of NATO's blockade of the Kaliningrad oblast; thus, any reinforcement of defensive measures around it could be perceived as a pretext for escalation. According to many Alliance officials, the likelihood of a Russian attack will increase if Moscow senses a weakening in NATO's unity, allowing it to seize a limited territory in anticipation of an indecisive Western response. This scenario gains particular relevance if Moscow perceives a window of opportunity in reduced Washington support for its European allies. Ultimately, one of the

primary deterring factors for the Kremlin today is uncertainty regarding the reaction of the Trump administration.

In conclusion, the Baltic Defence Line serves as a palpable instrument for deterring the Russian Federation. It minimises or even eliminates the tactical possibility of blitzkrieg, buys time for the mobilisation of the allied forces, and blocks the hybrid warfare scenarios that Russia has long prepared for through numerous information-psychological operations and provocations. Despite a number of drawbacks, such as decentralisation and the lack of a unified command plan across Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the BDL successfully combines the historical camouflaging lessons of the Mennerheim Line with the positive attributes of structural fortitude from the Maginot Line. However, its primary strategic advantage will come from the integration of Ukrainian combat wartime experience and fortification practices, which have already undergone a trial by fire in high-tech war against a numerically superior adversary. This includes the implementation of modern technological assets of positional warfare to which Russia has also adapted, such as EW, drones, and mass-purchased M142 HIMARS. The BDL can also be seen as an effective political sign: to Russia, that the Baltic states do not intend to cede their territorial integrity; to NATO, that they are ready to allocate resources toward building a stronger European security architecture but require the timely activation of Article 5 in the event of Russian aggression; and to their own populations, as a catalyst for consolidation around the idea of national unity.

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Ukraine as a security partner on the eastern flank: combat experience, defence innovations and a new role in deterring Russia

Yaroslav Fedchenko

Introduction

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, states bordering Russia realised that Moscow was prepared to use more than just diplomatic pressure or economic blackmail to maintain its influence across the post-Soviet space. Due to the world's extremely limited response at the time to the Chechen wars, to the Kremlin's support for separatists in Transnistria, and to the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, and ultimately the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in the Donbas, the member states on NATO's eastern flank faced a very real threat of losing their sovereignty.

NATO's eastern flank and the threats

NATO's eastern flank stretches from the Baltic states through Poland, Slovakia and Hungary to Romania and Bulgaria. Furthermore, given Ukraine's experience of coexisting alongside the Russian Federation, following the outbreak of full-scale aggression, Finland and Sweden joined NATO; consequently, NATO's eastern flank now stretches from Finland's Arctic border all the way to the Black Sea in Bulgaria. This region is extremely diverse, yet it has several vulnerabilities. One of the weakest points on NATO's eastern flank is the Suwałki Corridor – a narrow strip of land border connecting the Baltic states with Poland via land infrastructure, which, in the event of a potential conflict, would be under complete enemy fire control. This strip prevents Russia from having free access to the Kaliningrad region, but Russian control of this territory would, first and foremost, significantly complicate the deployment of NATO reserves to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and would subsequently allow for the rapid seizure of the main road in Lithuania leading to Kaliningrad. In addition to this, there is another potentially vulnerable point on Romanian territory known as the Focșani Gate – a flat area 80 kilometres wide from the Carpathians to the Black Sea, which is extremely conducive to large-scale armoured operations. Enemy control of this territory would allow a deep incursion into Romania and further into Europe. However, given that the Russian military's route to this 'gateway' runs through Ukraine and Moldova, the level of threat is significantly lower than it might otherwise be. At the same time, following Sweden's accession to NATO, another strategically important point requiring reinforcement has emerged – the island of Gotland. With NATO's expansion onto the Scandinavian Peninsula, the Baltic Sea has effectively become an internal sea of NATO, and the island of Gotland plays a key role here – an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' that Russia would also be keen to strike first.

At the same time, there is a high risk of Russia employing hybrid threats in the region. During the Russia-Ukraine war, violations of airspace by Russian drones have become commonplace; however, Russia has recently begun using electronic warfare systems to alter the flight paths of Ukrainian drones flying to bomb Russian territory. As a result, Ukrainian-made drones have crashed on Latvian territory, and a maritime drone exploded in a Romanian port. Such incidents highlight the need for deeper coordination between Ukraine and the states on NATO's eastern flank in the areas of air defence, data sharing, the identification of aerial objects, and responding to the effects of Russian electronic warfare.

Incorporating Ukraine's experience into national doctrines

The most obvious revisions to national doctrines concern Sweden and Finland. Taking Ukraine as an example, both countries realised that non-alignment and neutrality do not help to avoid war and, as a result, both have joined NATO. Within NATO itself, the most important issue is the revision of the defence strategy for the Baltic states. Prior to the start of Russian aggression, it was assumed that forward forces would absorb the initial blow, after which NATO's main forces would liberate the occupied territories. Quite logically, this did not suit Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and, in fact, following the Madrid Summit in 2022, NATO announced the importance of defending every centimetre of its members' territory in the wake of Russian atrocities in the occupied territories of Ukraine. At subsequent summits, this idea was further developed and, as a result, the number of NATO multinational forces in the three Baltic states is increasing.

One of the fiercest theatres of the Russian-Ukrainian war is the Donetsk region, where a deeply echeloned system of defensive fortifications – the construction of which began as far back as 2014 – has been established and continues to develop. As of June 2026, it is in this region that the Russian Federation's army is suffering its heaviest personnel losses in its attempts to advance. In view of this, the Europeans have designed and begun to implement two major defence lines on NATO's eastern flank: the Baltic Defence Line in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and The Eastern Shield in Poland. In addition, NATO has begun establishing a new command structure that will enable an increase in NATO troop numbers in the region and the rapid deployment of an army corps in the event of aggression.

The Russia-Ukraine war has shown that control of airspace remains one of the key objectives during wartime. This is precisely why Poland has allocated significant financial resources to the procurement of air defence systems, whilst the Baltic states are part of the European Sky Shield initiative, which is also aimed at strengthening air defence systems. The Swedish island of Gotland also plays a significant role in regional air defence; it is of critical importance for the deployment of aircraft, as the flight time from the local airbase to the Baltic capitals is only a few minutes.

At the same time, the war in Ukraine has highlighted the paramount importance of protecting air bases, which have been systematically subjected to Russian bombing since the start of the invasion. With this in mind, Sweden plans to deploy IRIS-T air defence systems on the island of Gotland in the near future. However, it is also important to note that in Ukraine, Russia frequently employs the tactic of launching drones that fly along bodies of water to evade detection by air defence radar systems. The same tactic could be employed to launch drones at ultra-low altitudes over the Baltic Sea; consequently, in addition to strengthening air power and expanding ground-based air defence, it is necessary to draw on Ukraine's experience in developing systems to address the weaknesses of ground-based air defence missile systems in detecting and identifying drones flying at ultra-low altitudes.

Furthermore, NATO military personnel are drawing on Ukraine's experience in integrating women into the armed forces. However, the most significant doctrinal changes involve the widespread and large-scale deployment of electronic warfare (EW) and drone innovations. To this end, a roadmap for cooperation between NATO and Ukraine in the field of innovation was approved in 2024. This agreement facilitates the exchange of best practice regarding Ukrainian technologies, tactics and military innovations, as well as technological changes within NATO.

Defence cooperation

During the first few years of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine concluded dozens of agreements on security cooperation and long-term support, but the main focus of these agreements was on institutionalising support for Ukraine. At the same time, the 'Drone Deals' format has recently become a popular topic of discussion. A Drone Deal is a ten-year programme aimed at a wide range of cooperation in the fields of security and defence. In these agreements, it is Ukraine that acts as the exporter of security, as in this format, training, defence production and technological development are based on Ukrainian experience. Importantly, this agreement does not replace but complements previous military cooperation agreements.

Discussions are currently underway regarding the signing of such a framework agreement with many countries, and such an agreement has already been signed by Lithuania and Latvia. Kyiv and Vilnius have agreed on the export of Ukrainian maritime drones, the joint production of interceptor drones with the possibility of utilising EU grant funding under the SAFE programme, and the potential deployment of Ukrainian air defence experts. In addition, in early June, Zelenskyy stated that Ukraine had already agreed to send its drone training specialists to Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Romania to share its expertise.

Testing the transformations

In recent years, the Ukrainian military's participation in joint NATO exercises has changed dramatically. Whereas previously Ukrainians were being trained by NATO, the situation is now the reverse. During the Hedgehog 2025 military exercises, held in Estonia, a team of 10 Ukrainian drone operators managed to quickly take out two NATO battalions. Despite strategic changes in planning, NATO is still unable to effectively integrate Ukraine's experience into their tactics. However, in addition to the use of UAVs, Ukraine's Delta battle management system plays a crucial role, enabling decisions to be made within minutes regarding strikes on newly identified positions.

Conclusion

Thus, as early as the first year of the struggle against Russian aggression, NATO began to take Ukraine's experience into account and altered its strategy on the eastern flank. The experience gained in the confrontation with Russia prompted countries in the region to construct fortified lines of defence. At the same time, the main areas of cooperation between NATO and individual member states include the dissemination of Ukrainian defence expertise and innovations, participation in military exercises, the establishment of joint ventures for the production of drones, and the export of Ukrainian armaments – primarily UAVs – which is now gradually gaining momentum. Given that the EU is gradually moving towards strategic autonomy, and Ukraine is a leader in the development and production of drones, it can be concluded that Ukraine already occupies a prominent place in European defence and has every chance of becoming the new core of Europe's defence architecture.

Recommendations

- Expanding the training programme will facilitate faster progress in adapting to modern warfare, drawing on Ukrainian combat experience;
- The successful and early completion of defence lines will help to strengthen NATO's eastern flank;
- The signing of the Drone Deals will make it easier to build up the armed forces' drone stocks;
- Further fortification of Gotland will enhance NATO's capabilities in the northern part of the eastern flank;
- Greater involvement of Ukrainian instructors will enhance the readiness of NATO forces in the event of a real threat;
- Strengthening the defence capabilities of Moldova and Ukraine will neutralise the threat posed by the Focșani Gate.

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Views expressed in the article are those of the author.

Technological specialisation as a deterrence strategy: defence innovation in the Baltic states

Anastasiia Strukova

Abstract

The Baltic region operates in a context of heightened security vulnerability, shaped by Russia's aggressive policy, its proximity to Russian and Belarusian military spheres of influence, and growing risks on NATO's eastern flank. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania cannot compete with Russia in terms of the scale of their human, industrial and military resources; they are therefore increasingly turning to technological specialisation as a tool for asymmetric deterrence (Chmielewski & Tarociński, 2024; International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2025). In this brief, technological specialisation is understood as the concentration of small states' limited resources on specific technological areas where they can create an asymmetric defence advantage over a stronger adversary.

The paper analyses how the Baltic states can enhance their resilience through the development of cyber security, autonomous systems, unmanned technologies and dual-use technologies. The analysis shows that technological specialisation does not replace traditional deterrence, fortifications and allied presence, but rather reinforces them within the broader NATO defence architecture. Particular attention is paid to the role of Ukraine, whose combat experience has served as a source of practical testing for new technologies and has shortened the cycle between their development, testing and deployment (CEPA, 2026; European Commission, 2026a).

Key findings

- The Baltic states already possess competitive advantages in the fields of cyber security, autonomous systems, unmanned aerial vehicles and dual-use technologies.
- Technological specialisation is effective only when combined with traditional defence capabilities, regional coordination and allied support.
- The hostilities in Ukraine have provided valuable experience for adapting military technologies to the modern realities of warfare.
- The main limitations of this approach remain insufficient production capacity, dependence on allies for heavy weaponry, and the adversary's ability to adapt to new technological solutions.

1. Why are changes necessary?

The strategic situation in the Baltic region has changed significantly following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These events demonstrated that previous deterrence mechanisms had failed to prevent Russian aggression and forced Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to review their own approaches to security (Chmielewski & Tarociński, 2024).

For the Baltic states, the key challenge remains the structural asymmetry of power. Russia possesses significantly greater human, industrial and military resources; therefore, a symmetrical response based on the principles of 'tank against tank' or 'factory against factory' is unrealistic for the small Baltic states (IISS, 2025). This is precisely why asymmetric deterrence is seen as the most effective option for countering potential aggression.

Rather than attempting to achieve quantitative parity with Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are focusing on areas where the pace of innovation and close cooperation between the state, the armed forces and the private sector can provide a practical advantage. For example, the Estonian company Milrem Robotics is developing THeMIS unmanned ground platforms, which are already being used by Ukraine, whilst Latvia, through the Drone Coalition, is helping to scale up the production and supply of drones for Ukrainian forces. Such examples demonstrate that, for small states, technological superiority lies not in the quantity of equipment, but in the ability to rapidly create, test and implement solutions that meet the real needs of modern warfare (Milrem Robotics, 2025a; Latvian Ministry of Defence, 2024; CEPA, 2026).

The growth in defence budgets confirms the seriousness of this approach. In 2026, Estonia increased its defence spending to €2.4 billion, or 5.4 per cent of GDP; Latvia approved €2.16 billion, or 4.91 per cent of GDP; whilst Lithuania adopted a record budget of €4.79 billion, or 5.38 per cent of GDP (Estonian Ministry of Defence, 2026; Latvian Ministry of Defence, 2025; Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence, 2025). However, larger budgets do not in themselves guarantee more effective deterrence. The key question is not merely how much to spend, but how to translate funding into technological, operational and institutional advantages.

2. Where the Baltic region is already competitive: technological potential

One of the Baltic region's most notable technological strengths is cyber security, and this is best illustrated by the example of Estonia. Following the large-scale cyber attacks of 2007, Estonia has consistently invested in the digital resilience of state institutions, the protection of critical infrastructure and the development of cyber expertise. A key outcome of this approach has been Tallinn's emergence as one of NATO's key hubs for cyber defence: it is home to the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, which brings together 39 member states and partners as of 2025 (NATO CCDCOE, 2025).

For the Baltic states, cyber security is of practical importance, as a potential crisis in the region could be triggered not only by a military offensive but also by attacks on energy networks, government registers, communications systems and military logistics. This is precisely why Estonia's experience is important not as proof of 'cyber superiority' over Russia, but as an example of how a small state can enhance its resilience through digital infrastructure, specialist training and participation in allied exercises. Locked Shields 2026, organised by the CCDCOE, attracted over 4,000 participants from 41 countries and tested scenarios for the defence of critical infrastructure in the face of a complex cyberattack (NATO CCDCOE, 2026). This demonstrates that Estonia's role is not to build NATO's cyber capabilities on its own, but rather to serve as a key hub for the development of the Alliance's cyber defence.

Another key area of Baltic specialisation is autonomous systems, primarily unmanned ground vehicles and drones. The most notable example is the Estonian company Milrem Robotics, a leading European developer of unmanned ground systems. In October 2025, the company announced the delivery of over 150 THeMIS platforms to Ukraine as part of a Dutch initiative, supplementing the systems already in use in Ukraine since 2022. The THeMIS platform is in service or being used in robotics programmes in 19 countries, making it one of the most widely used unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) in its class (Milrem Robotics, 2025a).

The significance of this case extends beyond exports. Milrem Robotics also coordinates iMUGS2, a European project for the development and integration of unmanned ground systems, which brings together 29 partners from 15 EU member states and associated countries and has received nearly €50 million in funding from the European Defence Fund. (Milrem Robotics, 2025b). This means that the Baltic states are gradually transitioning into the role of developers of solutions that can be scaled up at EU and NATO level.

In Latvia, this field is developing through two complementary initiatives. The first is the Autonomous Systems Competence Centre in Riga, established in 2025 to support the Latvian National Armed Forces in the deployment of aerial, maritime and ground unmanned systems, as well as in testing counter-drone solutions. The second is the Drone Coalition, launched by Latvia in partnership with the United Kingdom on 14 February 2024 to coordinate international support for Ukraine's drone capabilities. Together, these initiatives demonstrate that Latvia's specialisation lies not only in the production or procurement of drones, but also in the creation of infrastructure for their testing, coordination and practical application (Autonomous Systems Competence Centre, 2025; Latvian Ministry of Defence, 2024).

Dual-use technologies—that is, developments that can be used in both the civilian and military sectors—are particularly important for small states. For the Baltic states, this is a practical way of combining the private sector's innovative potential with defence needs: for example, artificial intelligence technologies, sensors, communications systems, drones or cyber solutions can have both commercial and military applications. The European Defence Fund, with a budget of around €7.3 billion for 2021–2027, funds joint defence research and development, including projects involving Baltic companies (European Commission, 2021). NATO DIANA (Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic), NATO's defence innovation accelerator, has a regional hub in Tallinn and provides start-ups with access to an international network of accelerators, test centres and investors (NATO DIANA, 2026). Estonia has established a €100 million defence fund, whilst Lithuania has launched MILInvest-2 — a €40 million instrument to support start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises in the defence and security sectors (Estonian Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, 2025; Ministry of the Economy and Innovation of Lithuania, 2026).

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate that the Baltic states are investing not in an abstract 'technological advantage', but in specific tools that can be used for asymmetric deterrence: cyber defence, autonomous platforms, drones, anti-drone solutions and dual-use technologies. Their value lies in the fact that they adapt more quickly to new conditions of warfare, can be tested against the backdrop of the Ukrainian experience, and complement traditional defence capabilities, which remain limited for small states.

3. How the Baltic States are turning technological advantages into regional influence

Technological specialisation is only meaningful when it translates into tangible political, military and institutional advantages. In the case of the Baltic States, this process takes place through three mechanisms: combat testing in Ukraine, participation in European defence programmes, and regional coordination.

The Ukrainian experience has become a source of practical knowledge of modern warfare for the Baltic states, particularly in the fields of drones, electronic warfare, autonomous systems and secure communications. Technologies tested in real-world conflict conditions enable weaknesses to be identified more quickly and solutions to be adapted to the demands of the front line. This makes

cooperation with Ukraine not only a political act of solidarity, but also an investment in the Baltic states' own defence capabilities (CEPA, 2026; European Commission, 2026a).

The second mechanism is participation in European defence programmes, through which the Baltic states are seeking to occupy specific technological niches. The iMUGS2 project, coordinated by the Estonian company Milrem Robotics, is an example of such a niche in the field of autonomous ground systems: it brings together partners from various EU countries and enables the development of solutions that can be used more widely than just at the national level. For small states, this is important not because they are replacing large defence industries, but because they can test individual technologies more quickly, integrate combat experience and transform narrow specialisation into a contribution to joint European defence (Milrem Robotics, 2025b; European Commission, 2026b).

The third mechanism is regional coordination, without which individual technological successes would remain fragmented. The Baltic defence line, agreed by Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 2024, forms a common defence space along the borders with Russia and Belarus. Combined with Poland's 'East Shield', this approach creates a broader system of deterrence-by-denial on NATO's eastern flank (Estonian Centre for Defence Investments, 2026; Polish Ministry of National Defence, n.d.). Initiatives such as the CCDCOE, NATO DIANA and the Drone Coalition provide the Baltic states with institutional channels for sharing their own experience at Alliance level.

4. What could go wrong: structural constraints

Despite its strengths, technological specialisation is not a one-size-fits-all solution to all of the Baltic states' security challenges. The first constraint is the effect of scale: even if Baltic companies are capable of developing individual innovative solutions, they cannot always move swiftly to mass production. In the case of drones, sensors, munitions and components, the Baltic states are heavily dependent on external manufacturers, international supply chains and access to critical components. Therefore, in the event of a protracted crisis, the main risk will lie not only in developing new technology, but also in the ability to produce it in sufficient quantities, update it regularly and maintain it for combat use. A second constraint is dependence on allies in areas where the Baltic states do not have full technological or manufacturing sovereignty. In air defence, combat aviation, missile systems and heavy armoured vehicles, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania continue to rely on NATO and key allies (Chmielewski & Tarociński, 2024). This does not make technological specialisation any less important, but it highlights its limitations and the need to build up capabilities for use in the event of a protracted conflict.

A third risk is that technological superiority is not stable: Russia is also adapting to the lessons of the war against Ukraine, developing electronic warfare capabilities, anti-drone systems and its own unmanned platforms (IISS, 2025). Therefore, the Baltic states cannot win the arms race with Russia on their own and across all areas simultaneously. Their technological specialisation makes sense not as a substitute for NATO or conventional weaponry, but as a means of raising the cost of potential aggression, buying time in the early stages of a crisis and strengthening defences until the allies can mount a full-scale response. This is precisely why drones, cyber defences and autonomous systems must complement—rather than replace—allied presence, fortifications, ammunition stocks and traditional mechanisms of collective defence (Chmielewski & Tarociński, 2024; Zangheratti, 2025).

Consequently, technological deterrence must operate in conjunction with the allied presence, fortifications, ammunition stocks and traditional mechanisms of collective defence.

5. Political scenarios

Option 1: reliance primarily on their own traditional defence forces.

This scenario envisages that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will concentrate their resources as much as possible on traditional defence capabilities: air defence, artillery, armoured vehicles, ammunition, fortifications, depots and military infrastructure. Its advantage lies in the fact that it is precisely these resources that are critically needed in the event of a protracted conflict. For example, Lithuania's cooperation with Rheinmetall on the production of 155-mm artillery ammunition demonstrates a desire to bolster its own stocks and reduce dependence on external supplies (Rheinmetall, 2024). At the same time, this option has an obvious limitation: due to their limited human, industrial and financial resources, the Baltic states cannot win the arms race with Russia on their own.

Option 2: maximum reliance on NATO.

The second scenario means that the Alliance's collective defence, the allied presence in the region and NATO's ability to respond rapidly to a crisis remain the primary sources of security. Its advantage lies in access to significantly greater military resources than individual Baltic states can mobilise. However, this approach also has a weakness: in the first hours or days of a potential crisis, the speed of response can be decisive, and excessive reliance on external support leaves the region vulnerable to delays in the Alliance's response. Therefore, whilst NATO is an indispensable foundation for Baltic security, it cannot be the sole instrument of deterrence.

Option 3: a combined strategy: core forces of their own, technological specialisation and NATO support.

The third scenario is the most realistic: the Baltic states retain their core traditional defence capabilities, develop technological niches and, at the same time, remain closely integrated into NATO's defence architecture. In this approach, drones, cyber defence, autonomous systems and dual-use technologies do not replace artillery, air defence, ammunition or fortifications, but rather reinforce them. The logic behind this option is simple: national forces are needed for immediate deterrence, technology for asymmetric strikes and rapid adaptation, and NATO for a large-scale military response. This is precisely why this option is recommended: it does not create the illusion of the Baltic states' complete self-sufficiency, but provides the region with the most realistic combination of tools to counter potential aggression.

6. Recommendations

Short-term recommendations: 1–3 years

The Baltic states should establish a streamlined procurement procedure for solutions that have already undergone field trials or demonstrated their effectiveness in Ukraine. This could apply to drones, electronic warfare (EW) equipment, communications systems, sensors and anti-drone solutions.

Institutionalise the exchange of combat experience with Ukraine. Cooperation in the fields of drones, autonomous platforms, electronic warfare and secure communications should be made a permanent feature of Baltic defence policy, rather than a one-off form of support.

The Baltic states should integrate radars, sensors, mobile interception teams, electronic warfare capabilities and critical infrastructure protection. The aim is not to completely neutralise all drones, but to reduce the effectiveness of attacks and make them more costly for the adversary.

Long-term recommendations: 3–10 years

Expand existing formats of defence and technology cooperation into a permanent Baltic platform for defence innovation. This should not involve creating a new structure from scratch, but rather bringing together existing initiatives – NATO DIANA, Baltic defence cooperation, the Drone Coalition and cooperation with Ukraine – into a practical mechanism for testing, certification, data exchange and procurement coordination.

Develop domestic production capabilities. The Baltic states need to gradually localise the production of drones, sensors, communications components, munitions and spare parts.

Integrate technologies into the Baltic Defence Line. Drones, sensors, C-UAS, cyber defence and autonomous systems must be part of defence planning, rather than separate innovation projects.

7. Conclusion

The analysis carried out shows that technological specialisation cannot, on its own, guarantee the security of the Baltic states; however, it can significantly strengthen their deterrence capabilities. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are already developing important niches in the fields of cyber security, autonomous systems, drones and dual-use innovations, but the value of these areas lies not in replacing conventional defence, but in reinforcing it.

The main conclusion is that the Baltic states should not have to choose between NATO, conventional armaments and technology. The most realistic strategy is a combination of three elements: their own core defence capabilities, allied support and technological specialisation. This approach allows the region to adapt more quickly to new threats, draw on Ukraine's combat experience and raise the cost of potential aggression for the adversary.

As Russia is also adapting to modern warfare, the Baltic states' technological advantage cannot be static. Their task is not to win a quantitative arms race, but to make any aggression more costly, slower and less predictable for the adversary. This is precisely where the strategic value of the Baltic states' technological specialisation lies: it does not eliminate geographical vulnerability, but transforms it into an opportunity for faster adaptation, more flexible planning and closer cooperation with allies.

This article was written for the magazine "Think Tanks Essentials".
Views expressed in the article are those of the author.

NB8 + Poland + Ukraine: Europe's North-Eastern Security Belt. Is a new security coalition taking shape, capable of acting more swiftly than the larger NATO and EU frameworks?

Kateryna Onyskiv

A new functional security cluster is emerging between the eight countries of Northern and Baltic Europe (NB8), Poland and Ukraine. It is already operational: joint drone production, cyber coalitions, demining and personnel training. The key idea was set out in a joint statement by the NB8 foreign ministers in April 2026: Ukraine is recognised not only as a recipient of aid, but also as a contributor to the security of its partners. 'The vision we share is one in which Ukraine and the NB8 work as equal partners, strengthening defence capabilities and resilience to external threats, thereby contributing to Euro-Atlantic security' (Joint Statement by the Leaders of the NB8 and Ukraine, 24 February 2026).

NB8 Country Profiles

Group	Country	Population (m)	Military Personnel (Active / Reserve)	Border with Russia (km)	2025 defence spending[1]
Nordic states	Denmark	~5.9	~16,000 + 13,400 active home guard / ~30,000 home guard reserve	0	≈ EUR 13 bn
	Finland	~5.6	~30,000 peacetime, including conscripts, 280,000 wartime / 870,000 total reserve	~1,340	≈ EUR 8 bn
	Iceland	~0.39	0 / 0	0	< EUR 0.5 bn
	Norway	~5.5	~27,000 / ~40,000 home guard	~196	≈ EUR 16 bn
	Sweden	~10.6	~20,300 / ~29,100 including home guard	0	≈ EUR 15 bn
Baltic states	Estonia	~1.3	~4,200 active duty, including Defence League + 4000 supplementary / ~78,800 (total mobilisable force ~230,000)	~324 (Russia)	≈ EUR 1.5 bn
	Latvia	~1.9	~7,870 + 10,000 national guard / ~38,000	~283 (Russia) + ~173 (Belarus)	EUR 1.5 bn
	Lithuania	~2.8	~13,500 + ~19,000 paramilitary Riflemen's Union / ~100,000	~276 (Russia/ Kaliningrad) + ~680 (Belarus)	≈ EUR 3.5 bn
Ukraine		~32.0	~1,000,000 (wartime)	~1,974 (pre 2014 baseline)	≈ EUR 64 bn (wartime, thanks to foreign budgetary aid)
Russia		~138	~1,320,000 / ~2,000,000		≈ EUR 140 bn (wartime)

Source: Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI), NB8–Ukraine: The Missing Piece in Nordic Security.

I Context: Why is this format gaining relevance?

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is having a lasting impact on European politics. NATO is also undergoing significant transformations; although it remains heavily influenced by the US, it is gradually shifting its strategy to place greater emphasis on the resources of European states. As a result of the full-scale invasion, the centre of European leadership is shifting eastwards, uniting the North-Baltic countries with Poland at the helm on issues of security and regional defence. The coalition of the North-Baltic countries, which are geographically close to the armed conflict and acutely aware of the Russian threat, now constitutes a new security alliance, complementing the broader European and transatlantic strategy. The NB8 was officially established in the early 2000s with the aim of forging closer ties between the Baltic states and the Nordic countries following their independence. The coalition's objectives varied depending on the international situation. Initially,

this involved supporting the economic and democratic integration of the Baltic states; subsequently, the focus shifted to issues of digital transformation and climate change; and Russia's invasion of Ukraine has redirected the coalition's focus towards regional security. Currently, the North-Baltic Eight acts as a strong, united bloc and is becoming not merely a regional alliance, but a realistic strategic project. Consequently, Ukraine, as an equal partner, is becoming a valuable ally for the partner countries.

Fig. 1 Venues for NB8-Ukrainian defence-industrial cooperation

Source: Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI), Deepening NB8-Ukraine Defence Industrial Cooperation: A Strategic Win-Win for European Security.

II The architecture of the new cluster

1. Drone technology and combat experience

One of the most valuable assets for Ukraine's partners is its expertise in the manufacture of drone technology. Structural cooperation is being developed in the areas of supply and joint production, as well as through the exchange of knowledge. For example, Latvia initiated the Drone Coalition, which it co-chairs with the United Kingdom and which has already been joined by 20 countries. In 2026, funding for the coalition will be doubled to 50 million euros to purchase drones from Latvian manufacturers for transfer to Ukraine. The benefits are mutual: Latvia is developing its own defence industry and gaining a real market for its products, whilst Ukraine receives a continuous supply of UAVs and the opportunity to test new models of equipment directly in combat conditions. In addition, the 'Build with Ukraine' initiative was launched last year, which involves setting up production lines in collaboration with partner countries. According to experts, Ukraine's cooperation is most active with countries in the North Baltic region, particularly Denmark, Finland and Norway. According to RBC-Ukraine, Ukraine is preparing agreements on drones with around 20 countries in total, turning the issue of combat experience into an effective diplomatic tool on the international stage. Consequently, this has proved beneficial for both sides: verified combat experience for allies and support from partners in terms of access to technology and investment for Ukraine.

2. Cyber security

Russia remains an aggressive actor in cyberspace; however, it is precisely in this domain that Ukraine has become the first country to transition from a recipient of aid to an exporter of expertise, having acquired the skills to repel large-scale attacks on the energy sector, the financial sector and state registers. Cooperation in this area has already been institutionalised: under the Tallinn Mechanism, Estonia coordinates the provision of civilian cyber support to Ukraine from allies, though the exchange is increasingly becoming bilateral. The Estonian Government Office and Ukraine's State Service for Special Communications and Information Protection have signed a memorandum of cooperation on the exchange of knowledge in the field of critical infrastructure protection — energy, communications, cyber defence and countering drone threats. Estonia seeks to draw on Ukraine's experience in ensuring the resilience of critical services in the context of actual combat operations, whilst Ukraine is studying Estonian practices in implementing EU requirements. The strategic rationale behind this dimension extends beyond bilateral relations. The resilience of digital defence is in the interests of the entire region, and improved cooperation in this area ensures a more resilient digital environment not only for Ukraine but for the whole of Europe.

3. Demining

It is difficult to assess the scale of the problem of landmines in Ukrainian territories as a result of hostilities. Ukraine is considered one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. The main mechanism for tackling this issue is the Demining Coalition (DMCC), led by Lithuania and Iceland, which has already brought together 23 countries. The coalition coordinates donor assistance, focusing on both immediate needs and the long-term outlook. In its first two years of operation, the coalition has provided Ukraine with over 408 million euros in aid; a further 165 million euros is earmarked for 2026 for equipment, machinery and the training of deminers. The reverse dynamic is also significant: Ukraine is building up its own operational expertise in demining in the context of an active conflict. This reverse transfer of knowledge is already taking place and will gather pace once the active phase of hostilities has ended.

4. Joint production (IT coalitions) and defence-industrial cooperation

Defense-industrial cooperation is another area where collaboration is actively evolving into interdependence. A key focus of the Ukrainian-Polish partnership, in particular, is the development of defense-industrial cooperation and joint arms production. In response to the growing demands of the war, Ukraine is gradually shifting toward the "Build with Ukraine" concept, mentioned above, which involves establishing joint production facilities with partner countries and integrating the Ukrainian defense sector into European production chains. Ukraine is actively expanding its production of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), notably by signing defense agreements with Finland, Denmark, and Latvia. In this context, Poland also holds a special place due to its geographical proximity and well-developed defense industry. Cooperation encompasses the production and modernization of military equipment, ammunition, unmanned systems, and electronic warfare capabilities, as well as the establishment of joint ventures between Ukrainian and Polish manufacturers. The advantage of such a partnership lies in combining Ukraine's experience in modern warfare and rapid innovation with Poland's manufacturing capabilities, access to EU financial resources, and integration into the NATO defense market. Ukraine is also a partner in SAFE—an EU program that provides loans to member states to strengthen their defense industries. This enables our manufacturers to join supply chains for joint procurement, and Ukraine, in turn, is ready to offer its partners exports of its own

products, thereby strengthening joint defense capabilities. In addition, cooperation in the field of digital military technologies and within the IT coalition contributes to the development of cybersecurity, the digitization of troop management, and the implementation of new technological solutions for defense needs. Thus, during the full-scale invasion, Ukraine has become a strategic source of valuable combat data for defense artificial intelligence.

5. Joint Planning

It is also important to note the common "direction" of these countries and the values and ideas they share in the context of continued support for Ukraine, particularly its European integration. A 2024 Eurobarometer survey illustrates strong public support for funding the purchase and delivery of military equipment to Ukraine. The survey showed that 92% of Swedes, 88% of Danes, 88% of Finns, 76% of Lithuanians, 70% of Latvians, and 63% of Estonians fully agree with this statement. Current meetings among state leaders demonstrate that the coalition of partners is moving toward developing common positions with concrete operational implications. A key analytical indicator in this area is the speed of response. The NB8, Poland, and Ukraine are now functioning as a vanguard group within major institutions and are actively advancing their foreign and defense policies.

III. The main question: a new coalition or ad hoc cooperation?

In response to the main analytical question, it can be argued that a new format of security coordination is gradually taking shape, one capable of acting more quickly and flexibly than the large institutional mechanisms of NATO and the EU. At the same time, this is not an alternative to existing security structures, but rather a regional complement and reinforcement of them. Further deepening of cooperation between the NB8 countries, Poland, and Ukraine in the areas of defense-industrial cooperation, joint arms production, unmanned technologies, cybersecurity, and military mobility creates the conditions for greater institutionalization of such a partnership in the future. Therefore, the NB8 should be viewed today as an important regional mechanism for strengthening NATO and the EU, which in the long term could evolve into a more structured format for security coordination, capable of ensuring a rapid response to threats in Northern and Eastern Europe.

IV. Potential Challenges in the Field of Security Cooperation

At the same time, the further development of this format risks facing a number of challenges. First and foremost, cooperation is largely based on a shared perception of the Russian threat; therefore, changes in the security environment or in the political priorities of individual governments could affect the level of states' engagement in joint initiatives. An additional challenge remains the lack of permanent institutional mechanisms for coordination and decision-making, which could limit the format's long-term sustainability. Another important factor is the need to align national defense priorities, the allocation of financial resources, and production capacities within the defense industry.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth noting the strategic need to continue deepening military-industrial cooperation among the NB8 states, Poland, and Ukraine. Given Ukraine's combat experience and the shared assessment of the threat posed by the Russian Federation, a security coalition would be of significant value to all parties. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has demonstrated the growing

importance of regional cooperation frameworks, which can make decisions more quickly, coordinate joint actions, and mobilize resources to respond to security challenges. In effect, a network of regional security hubs is taking shape, enabling a more effective response to crisis situations and new challenges. This plays an important role in strengthening the security of Northern and Baltic Europe, whose member states are key partners of Ukraine in the defense and security sectors, providing significant support to NATO and the EU.

This article was written for the magazine "Think Tanks Essentials".
Views expressed in the article are those of the author.

"Europe's Eastern Shield": From National Fortifications to a Joint Defense Architecture for the Eastern Flank

Dmytro Kyrychok

Introduction

The Russian Federation's armed aggression against Ukraine, systematic threats from Russian elites, and Russia's repeated violations of European countries' airspace have prompted these countries to develop plans to establish defensive lines along their own borders with Russia. The Baltic states, along with Poland and Finland, have begun actively investing in their defense industries, purchasing military equipment and supplies, promoting new military cooperation agreements, and encouraging the deployment of allied troops on their territory. However, are their actions interconnected, and do they aim to form a unified eastern shield for Europe? In the long term, cooperation among the aforementioned countries will lead to the creation of an integrated defense system to deter Russian aggression. However, the essence of this system will be to delay the Russian army for a certain period of time, allowing NATO and its European allies to prepare a large-scale response. This analytical note will then examine the defense initiatives of these countries, aspects of their funding and integration, as well as the challenges facing the system currently under development.

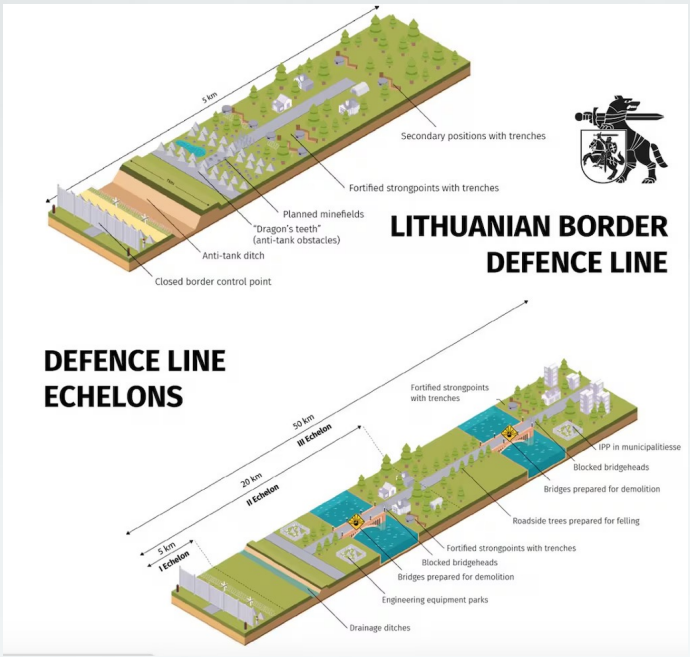
The Baltic Defense Line

In January 2024, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia signed an agreement to establish the Baltic Defense Line by the end of 2027. It aims to strengthen the Baltic states' eastern border with Russia and Belarus by constructing echeloned defensive fortifications extending up to 50 kilometers inland. According to the plan, the line will combine engineering obstacles with modern early-warning and engagement systems. Concrete bunkers, dragon's teeth, anti-tank ditches, and trenches will be supplemented by electronic warfare and air defense systems, anti-drone complexes, and AI-based sensor and camera systems to enhance situational awareness. At the same time, engineering preparations are underway for the transportation infrastructure to enable faster deployment of reserves and effective destruction, with the aim of delaying a possible enemy offensive.

Regarding the funding of fortifications, investment levels vary by country. Estonia plans to spend 60 million euros on construction. Lithuania has allocated 300 million euros for fortifications. Latvia, meanwhile, plans to spend 303 million on its section. Thus, the direct expenditures of the three Baltic states on fortification infrastructure alone amount to approximately 663 million euros, not including costs for weapons, ammunition, and support for allies.

Eastern Shield (Poland)

In May 2024, Poland announced the launch of a four-year national deterrence and defense program called Eastern Shield. It is the largest defense infrastructure project on NATO's eastern flank since World War II. The program, like the Baltic Defense Line, is a direct response to the threat of aggression from Russia and Belarus. It covers a 700–800-kilometer-wide strip along Poland's eastern and northeastern borders, with fortifications planned to extend up to 50 kilometers inland from the border. The program has four strategic objectives: to develop intelligence capabilities and surveillance systems; to limit enemy mobility in the event of an



The Lithuanian Defense Line (Lithuanian Ministry of Defense via X)

invasion; to ensure the mobility of Polish and allied forces; and to protect soldiers and the civilian population in border areas. As for the specific construction elements, the fortifications consist of three lines of defense and include anti-tank trenches, concrete barriers, and camouflaged bunkers. At the same time, a large-scale technological upgrade of the border is underway. Plans call for installing a network of sensors to capture images, electronic signals, and sounds, linked to an artificial intelligence-based data processing system, as well as electronic warfare devices to jam enemy drones. Concurrently, plans are in place to improve the logistical readiness of the road network to meet military needs and to prepare capabilities for rapid river crossings.

Regarding funding, when the program was announced, the Polish government planned to invest approximately 2.3 billion euros. Poland will secure a significant portion of this funding from the EU through the SAFE program. In May 2026, Poland signed an agreement with the European Commission to receive 43.7 billion euros in loans over the next four years for defense spending.

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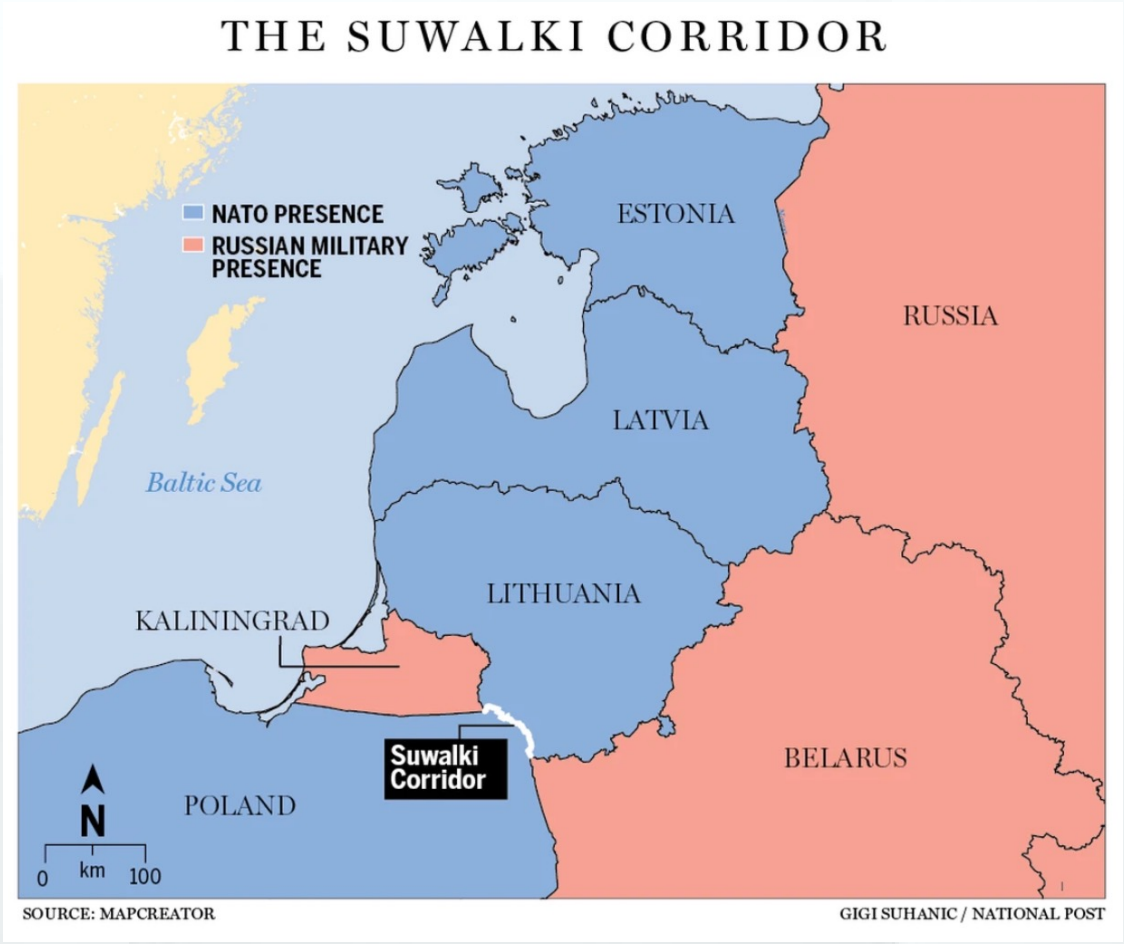
Border Barrier (Finland)

Finland's approach to strengthening its border with Russia differs radically from that of the Baltic states or Poland. In 2023, Finland began construction of a fence along a 200-kilometer stretch of the border with Russia, as Helsinki fears that Moscow might exploit illegal migration flows at the border for political purposes. The fence is not being erected along the entire length of the border, but only in the areas most vulnerable to infiltration near border crossings and adjacent zones. The structure itself is an integrated system combining a fence, sensor-based perimeter monitoring, and a road to facilitate the rapid movement of border guards.

The broader context of Finland's defense capabilities explains why a continuous line of fortifications is not a priority for the country. Due to the abundance of natural barriers and a lower population density, Finland adheres to a strategy of deep-echeloned defense rather than deterrence through preventing entry into its territory. This means that it will engage enemy forces deeper within its territory from strategically advantageous positions, rather than attempting to prevent them from crossing the border at any cost. This strategy has already proven its effectiveness in the Winter War of 1939–1940. Funding for the project is planned to come from the Finnish defense budget.



The Logic Behind Fortifications

Defensive fortifications along the eastern flank of NATO and the EU are intended to buy time for the deployment of allied forces. Permanent fortifications do not prevent aggression, but they dramatically increase the time and human costs for the attacker, allowing allies to mobilize reinforcements and preventing a rapid collapse of the front line. The logic behind the fortifications is based on three interrelated objectives:

- To slow down and channel the enemy into predictable corridors;
- To ensure the capability to deliver precision strikes to hinder the advance (artillery, HIMARS, long-range missiles, drones) from the very first minutes of a potential operation;
- To preserve land connectivity between Poland and the Baltic states via the Suwałki Corridor;

Suwałki itself is the most vulnerable point in the entire system. In a hypothetical offensive scenario, Russia could attempt to cut off the corridor from the west with forces from Kaliningrad and from the east via Belarus. Closing the corridor would isolate Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia from the rest of NATO. The greatest risk to Europe is not a surprise attack, but a rapid collapse of local defenses, which would make allied intervention politically risky and militarily challenging.

A Unified Defense System

All of the initiatives described—the Baltic Defense Line, Poland's "Eastern Shield," and Finland's border barrier—are not isolated national projects but components of a unified regional security architecture. Together, they form a continuous deterrence architecture, relying on both natural and engineered barriers and increasingly coordinating through joint command structures, joint procurement, and joint logistics.

A telling manifestation of this shared logic was the decision by Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, and Poland to withdraw from the Ottawa Convention, which bans anti-personnel mines. Another element of the joint system is the "drone wall." Countries bordering Russia, from Norway to Poland, have agreed to establish a jointly coordinated initiative to protect their external borders using unmanned aerial vehicles. Lithuania's Minister of the Interior noted that the goal is to use drones and other unmanned technologies to protect borders, counter provocations from unfriendly countries, and prevent smuggling.

Issues

1) Lack of sufficient manpower and weapons

Fortifications alone cannot replace manpower. The presence of NATO and European allied forces in the region should increase in proportion to Russia's plans to build up its military capabilities. Otherwise, at the moment of an attack, there simply won't be anyone to defend the fortified positions. At the same time, the small Baltic states and even Poland do not possess the full range of weapons necessary to repel a full-scale offensive. Allies could pre-position long-range missile systems, aircraft, electronic warfare assets, and air defense systems in the region to ensure the capability to deliver massive firepower against Russian and Belarusian territory as early as the initial stage of a Russian operation. Poland is attempting to partially address this issue on its own through large-scale procurements under the SAFE program. However, the underestimation of the role of drones in modern warfare indicates that the Polish army continues to prepare for maneuver-based mechanized conflicts rather than drone-based conflict.

2) Preparing for Hybrid Threats

Fortifications will not protect against attacks that do not require crossing the border. Ukraine's experience since 2014 shows that modern warfare begins with cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, sabotage, and operations involving agents within the country. For the Baltic states, the risk of an operation following the Crimean scenario is particularly relevant. For example, the declaration of a people's republic in Narva, where the population is predominantly Russian-speaking. Therefore, the defense system should encompass not only physical fortifications but also the protection of power plants, airports, and bridges; active countermeasures in cyberspace; monitoring systems based on satellites and artificial intelligence; as well as enhanced cooperation between intelligence agencies and the civilian population to identify spy networks.

3) The Logistics Challenge Through the Suwałki Corridor

Even if Russia does not physically seize the Suwałki Corridor, land-based logistics could become impossible due to the use of new strike systems. As demonstrated by Ukraine's experience, where drones systematically strike logistics routes at distances of up to 100 km, all ground traffic through Suwałki could come under constant fire, completely severing land connections with the Baltic states. Therefore, in parallel with ground fortifications, it is necessary to develop alternative maritime logistics routes through the Baltic Sea, counter the Russian navy in the region, and invest in port infrastructure capable of ensuring both the supply of goods and the evacuation of the civilian population in the event of an invasion.

4) Ukraine as a Potential Part of the System

It would be advisable for Ukraine to become an active and integrated participant in the regional security architecture to create a comprehensive system of deterrence against Russia.
First, Kyiv could provide security guarantees to the Baltic states and Poland, establish joint defense enterprises, and conduct more joint exercises.

Second, in the event of an open armed invasion by Russia into the Baltic states, Ukraine could carry out active missile and drone strikes against the enemy's logistics, command posts, and advancing formations on the territory of Russia and Belarus, within the framework of newly established security mechanisms in the region.

Third, the defense system in northwestern Ukraine could be integrated into European initiatives to strengthen their cohesion and defense capabilities.

Conclusion

The initiatives described above confirm that the countries on the eastern flank are forming an integrated deterrence architecture designed to delay a Russian offensive until NATO can mount a large-scale response. However, the system remains incomplete. Fortifications without sufficient manpower and advanced weapons systems are an empty shell. Preparing exclusively for conventional warfare will not help in a hybrid conflict. The Suwalki Gap could be blocked by drone and missile fire, making maritime logistics a critically underestimated element. Finally, without the active integration of Ukraine, the eastern defense system will be severely limited.

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Views expressed in the article are those of the author.

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