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# Baltic Deterrence Challenges in Neo-Trumpian Times and in the Tailwind of NATO's Ankara Summit

Recent years have been very turbulent for the small NATO member states located near the Russian border. Concerns about the credibility of collective deterrence and overall solidarity have been growing since the start of Donald Trump's second presidency. For the Baltic states bordering Russia, the potential withdrawal of United States military support from Europe, as well as the insufficient levels of stockpiles and defense readiness among European states, have created a significant erosion of security. Baltic needs and expectations regarding European NATO powers could be better articulated and more focused once the United States' levels of commitment and solidarity are clarified. The primary questions, however, center on how much of the Baltic states' future survival is in their own hands and how much depends primarily on global powers with their own ambitions and preferences in the region. New affordable and acceptable solutions need to be found quickly, collectively, and at the intra-state level. Ankara's NATO meeting in 2026 has brought some positive energy to Baltic security and deterrence options during Trump's second presidency. Long-expected contributions from NATO to Baltic defense and security have not only been debated but also promised.

**Keywords**
Baltic states, deterrence, strategy, Russia, NATO

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## Introduction

Recent years have been very turbulent for the small NATO member states located near the Russian border. Concerns about the credibility of collective deterrence and overall solidarity have been growing since the start of Donald Trump's second presidency. For the Baltic states bordering Russia, the potential withdrawal of United States military support from Europe, as well as the insufficient levels of stockpiles and defense readiness among European states, have created a significant erosion of security. Baltic needs and expectations regarding European NATO powers could be better articulated and more focused once the United States' levels of commitment and solidarity are clarified. The primary questions, however, center on how much of the Baltic states' future survival is in their own hands and how much depends primarily on global powers with their own ambitions and preferences in the region. New affordable and acceptable solutions need to be found quickly, collectively, and at the intrastate level. Ankara's NATO meeting in 2026 has brought some positive energy to Baltic security and deterrence options during Trump's second presidency. Long-expected contributions from NATO to Baltic defense and security have not only been debated but also promised. Hopefully, deliveries will follow.

A severe erosion of the rules-based international order and a parallel erosion of deterrence credibility for the Baltic states have not only been caused by Russia's brutal aggression against Ukraine, but the US administration led by President Donald Trump has also contributed its own share to global insecurity and ambiguity. How the US sees its commitment to its European allies and how long this commitment is expected to continue is constantly being reformulated, and new conditions are frequently added to defense solidarity. European NATO powers have attempted to compensate for the erosion of the region's security; specifically, the commitment of the UK, France, Germany, and Italy has been especially visible in 2025-2026. However, for the Baltic states, systematic clarity on both current NATO support and future perspectives is still needed (Kallas, 2025).

The NATO Summit in Ankara in 2026 took several positive steps toward finding solutions for Baltic security and survival. In the upcoming years, short-term containment and risk reduction strategies will be needed to prevent Russia from turning its aggression against the Baltic states once it ends its aggression against Ukraine, especially if it achieves some form of victory. In the long run, a new, affordable,

and sustainable national or trans-Baltic security strategy is needed, as all three nations face the same threats, share the same allies, and have a similar level of resources. It must be cost-effective, supported by NATO (a hopefully unified NATO in this matter) and EU allies, aligned with them, and capable of providing sufficient protection against neighboring Russia for the coming decades. Higher local resilience, total defense, and the pre-deployment of equipment and units are options to be considered either individually, as central elements, or in combination with other strategies within the framework of Baltic cooperation (Ploom & Veebel, 2026).

## 1. Assessing the Deterrence Erosion and Sustainable Strategic Options to Bridge It

How could or should the deterrence deficit in the Baltic states – arising between existing capabilities and commitments and the intensifying risks from Russia – be addressed, measured, or analyzed?

In 2026, there is no consensus among their European and NATO allies regarding the risk levels in the Baltic states, and whether the Baltic states are adequately responding to current risks stemming from Russia, or whether fears are simply exaggerated within Baltic societies. Despite these growing fears, there seems to be no official proof from the Russian side that they consider the Baltic states to be immediate imperial targets similar to Ukraine, or that they are signaling a military strike to deter NATO. It can be argued that the Baltic states, in their risk assessments, should not compare themselves to Ukraine and Georgia, as they are NATO members and can rely on the Alliance's solidarity and support. However, an alternative vision suggests that the Baltic states are also seen (especially in Russia's eyes) as historical parts of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This historical background differentiates them from many other former Soviet bloc states in Central and Eastern Europe, which have never been directly incorporated into Russia or the Soviet Union. Accordingly, while Baltic societies and their leaders feel distinct from Georgia and Ukraine due to their NATO membership, they also share a sense of vulnerability as former territories of the Soviet empire.

The Baltic societies on the one hand and distant NATO states on the other are assessing the situation differently; this might be the

primary challenge to overcome inside the NATO family: fears and expectations look very different from Baltic capitals compared to NATO headquarters, both in terms of perceived risks and proposed solutions. One could suggest analyzing, what Russia's state propaganda and strategic communication are signaling on this matter. Currently, there are no visible signs of imminent aggression against the Baltic states, at least in Russian state media. Here, the main question is whether we should trust this seemingly peaceful reflection or suspect it of being deceptive. Russia is well-known for its mastery of strategic deception, sending signals that appear to be official statements from governmental bodies, but are actually intended to mislead. As experienced before Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, Russia is ready, officially and at a very high level to deny any hostile intentions repeatedly, only to launch a full-scale attack afterward. Accordingly, Western leaders and experts are faced with a dilemma regarding whether strong claims that the Baltic states are not seen by Russia's leadership as military targets should be believed or treated as a deception to avoid. Additional EU and NATO commitments might positively shift those expectations. There might be no need for immediate deployments for deterrence or defense purposes, but rather a need to build up social resilience and the public belief that the NATO commitment to keep Russia away from the Baltic states is strong.

Next to the global geopolitical challenges and different risk assessments among allies, national resource limitations represent a key challenge for the Baltic states in achieving the needed deterrence and defense effects within the existing timeframe. The availability and sustainability of resources are central factors in the selection and long-term sustainability of force development, as they force states to choose between immediate readiness and modernization.

What are the main defense and deterrence challenges identified by Baltic political (Kallas, 2025) and military leaders (Herem, 2023) to compensate for the effects of current deterrence erosion in recent years?

The first challenge is to find solutions for improving conventional and hybrid military capabilities to reduce the risks of occupation and genocide, if deterrence fails. The central idea of this effort is to contribute to deterrence, as an actual conventional fight would have a devastating effect on Baltic territory and the population from day one, given their small geographic size and the long reach of Russia's weapon systems. The second main aim is to avoid the actual occupation of the territory

or the genocide of its population until supporting NATO forces are deployed.

The second challenge for the Baltic states is improving the credibility of NATO deterrence by adding local elements of deterrence by denial (Veebel, 2023), while trying to regain eroded deterrence solidarity and commitment among leading NATO member states (NATO Summit in Ankara has greatly contributed to this aspect). For the Baltic states, collective deterrence within NATO has been defined as a central element of survival and security for more than two decades, serving to influence the adversary's calculation of success and to avoid actual aggression. Once deterrence fails in the Baltic area, and conventional or hybrid aggression starts, the consequences for small Baltic societies could be devastating (Herem, 2023).

The third option is to focus on increasing social and political resilience and preparing for a total war scenario instigated by Russia. This option is also seen as an affordable force multiplier for conventional defense and deterrence by denial. However, due to the high number of Russian speakers and a pro-Kremlin population in Estonia and Latvia, increasing social resilience is not as straightforward or linear as expected, as strengthening resilience within potentially hostile and vulnerable groups may undermine overall resilience (Ploom & Veebel, 2026). Accordingly, tailored local solutions need to be developed. On the positive side, there are no obstacles to fully committing to the political and infrastructural resilience improvements described and required in NATO's "Seven Baseline Requirements," which cover expectations for essential infrastructure and services, vital to national resilience during crises (NATO, 2024).

However, how should we assess which of those options to prioritize in terms of deterrence when making resource distribution decisions in the upcoming years? Is there a sufficient vision regarding which capabilities are needed to bridge the existing and upcoming deterrence deficit? Which might be the most reasonable and sustainable choices to be made, and which are the most painful tradeoffs to be expected? Where and when does the window of opportunity open, and when does it close? Should the Baltic states prioritize modernization and conflict preparation efforts as soon as possible, or wait until the end of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and analyze its lessons first before making their choices for future capabilities?

For small countries like the Baltic states, a lack of strategic depth, and limited resources are reflected in the asymmetry of instruments

and means for effective deterrence. Dependence on stronger partners further reduces the room for error or miscalculation. Geographically, demographically, and economically small states operate in conditions of limited or absent strategic depth. Financial issues are the most straightforward way to describe the essence of these challenges. For example, Estonia, after several years of meeting the 2% defense budget level set by NATO, is reaching a 5% level for 2025-2026 and promising 7% in the near future. Being, in relative terms, the biggest spender among European NATO members, it has started to feel affordability issues when growing its defense budget larger and larger. At the same time, larger NATO members themselves, while spending an average of 2% on defense or less, are still pushing the narrative that small European member states spend too little on defense and its modernization, and therefore, in the case of conflict, may not deserve a fully functional NATO commitment to protect them.

This illustrates a deadly dilemma for small nations next to aggressive imperial neighbors between maintaining a healthy, competitive economy and ensuring economic and financial sustainability and survivability through defense and deterrence. And to make this situation even more complicated, most modernization efforts and procurements may appear obsolete or overpriced in the context of tomorrow's warfare, while the debts for those procurements still need to be paid. As a result, small states have to choose between two dangerous options: either overspending when building a modernized, deterring army while suffering economically and socially, or underspending to build a healthy economy and resilient society but leaving themselves with an obsolete army.

However, to make rational, effective, and sustainable decisions for defense, deterrence, and modernization, the nature of tomorrow's warfare and its expected costs need to be clarified first, in order to know when and what kind of investments are relevant and affordable to achieve the necessary deterrence effect.

The first vital variable is the relevance of specific capabilities to bridge the security or deterrence gap, based on the latest experience of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This aggression has sent three important messages to the Baltic states regarding their security concerns and considerations (Veebel, 2023). First, the Russian leadership does not worry about international reaction or reputation, except for those of the United States and the People's Republic of China. Even more, Russian leaders are openly ready to threaten every

other state and organization showing support or helping the victim. The only language the Russian leader understands is power and force (Van der Vorm & Tuinman, 2024), as well as the actual situation on the battlefield. Also, the brutality of the Russian army sees no limits in terms of the Geneva and Hague Conventions. Russia ignores those commitments so deeply that it does not even accuse Ukraine of violating them.

The second central variable is the availability, affordability, and sustainability of the needed capabilities to maintain the deterrence posture for the necessary period. In the framework of capability selection or prioritization, the focus is on achieving the best return on investment. Trade-off decisions and alternative cost calculations are particularly relevant for the Baltic states, as they have rather limited nominal financial resources despite a high share of defense spending in GDP (Euronews, 2025b) and small territories with very limited air defense. When assessing affordability, it is therefore necessary to consider the strategic impact of individual capabilities and how the cost equation can be optimized, for example, by combining them with NATO capabilities.

Third, for the Baltic states, it is also important to prepare their strategy toward Russia for two scenarios: first, where Russia achieves some kind of victory over Ukraine, and second, where Russia is forced to leave the occupied Ukrainian territories. Options should be prepared for the possibility that Russia will quickly become hostile to the Baltic states (Herem, 2023).

Last but not least, external security trends have also played a crucial role in shaping defense and deterrence options for the Baltic states. In this area, the developments have been twofold. Earlier, US support and deterrence credibility were clear and transparent, but they have been eroding under President Donald Trump and his administration, which views the US and NATO as separate actors with distinct identities (Eesti Rahvusringhääling, 2026). Also, despite growing risks in the region, the US has neither deployed nor promised additional capabilities, instead stressing that Europe should manage its security challenges on its own. From the positive side, the NATO summit in Ankara took the Baltic security needs and concerns seriously, and several positive promises and decisions were made.

# 2. Strategic Options: Deterrence by Denial, Regional Alliance and Force Multiplying Effect of Resilience

In its core definition, strategy involves a consideration of means and ends; it must be affordable and achievable and have a clear aim in terms of needs. However, in some cases, parallel strategic options can be pursued or even complement each other's efficiency. Defense and assurance can contribute to credible deterrence. There are, of course, limitations when choosing a (security) strategy. Several considerations apply: first, specific circumstances and capabilities, such as population, budget, know-how, and economic affordability; second, political readiness and internal factors, for example, hostile minority groups; third, moral and cultural considerations and limitations, such as European normative values; fourth, reasonableness and effectiveness – for instance, will the strategy deliver the needed result? There is a high risk that the strategy may not offer the best outcome for the money spent. In practice, some strategies might be preferred, but if the state considers itself unable to succeed with them, it may lead to other, less favorable choices.

## 2.1. Dilemma Between Conventional Balance and Total Defense Readiness

The first deterrence dilemma to be addressed in this study is the one between investing resources in a conventional warfare balance or preferring investments in total defense readiness. The starting circumstances to address this dilemma are very complicated for all three Baltic states. Russian aggression against Ukraine has brought total defense, as possible alternative, back into the spotlight and the ongoing debates. The brutality, the dimensions of fighting, and the costs and losses in Ukraine have clearly shown that, for the Baltic states to survive, a strategic reform of national security is needed.

The future security strategy for the Baltic states needs to be budgetarily affordable, sustainable, and supported by society. One of the most debated alternatives is the combination of total defense and the existing NATO collective deterrence. While the credibility of NATO's collective deterrence depends mostly on the larger member states and institutional commitment, total defense is seen as an option for the local effort of the whole society to ensure Baltic survival and

independence. In practice, there is clearly no reasonable alternative to systematic planning and the mobilization of all resources to develop the total defense capabilities of the Baltic states.

However, modernizing and improving conventional warfare has been the most problematic challenge for the Baltic states in recent years. First, the imbalance in favor of Russia is already huge, and many weapon categories are not represented at all in the Baltic states. Second, Russia is undergoing intensive modernization based on its combat experience in Ukraine; and third, the availability and affordability of acquiring modern weapon systems have worsened quickly since 2022 due to the growing demand and prices in global markets.

Those circumstances have not stopped the Baltic states from procuring, since 2022, assets that are affordable and deliverable within the next five years, even without a clear vision of which strategic gap they might fix and how those assets can or will be integrated with their existing capabilities and those deployed by allies. The situation is further complicated by ongoing donations of existing equipment to Ukraine. For example, for Estonia, which relies mostly on large reservist units, it means that there are trained men ready to fight, but their weapons have in many categories have been donated to Ukraine; thus, they need to be retrained on new systems.

This concerns prioritizing and allocating resources in a situation where security threats are limitless but financial and human resources are clearly limited, particularly in the small Baltic states. Although all Baltic states spend around 5% of their GDP on defense in 2026, this is insufficient, even for current or short-term needs. Accordingly, implementing the total defense model would require a societal consensus to accept additional costs and commitments for national defense. Moreover, even if people in the Baltic states commit to a growing budget for national defense, as they have in recent years, the question remains whether to prioritize investments in conventional capabilities or in total defense assets.

The implementation of total defense in the Baltic states incorporates a strong element of cooperation between military structures and the private sector. There is certainly much to do in this regard, such as increasing awareness among key public-sector personnel regarding the importance of involving both firms and civilians in coping with the crisis of resisting an aggressor.

## 2.2. Resilience as a Force Multiplier for Deterrence and Defense Strategies

Resilience and readiness for total defense are seen as a force multiplier for both deterrence by denial and conventional defense strategies (Flanagan, 2019). Those strategies are also preferred and implemented for affordability and to achieve immediate results to increase security.

The main dilemma for the Baltic states as the defending side is which of the three resource-intensive processes to prioritize: military readiness, social and civilian resilience, or the dominance of the information space, both in terms of moral and technical aspects. The main challenge is how to convince a peaceful society of the preparations needed for total defense (Ploom & Veebel, 2026) without creating panic. The main complication in assessing resilience trends and their impact on outcomes in the Baltic states lies in the diversity of specific ethnic, cultural, and language groups: some are loyal, some are disloyal, and some are ignorant of resilience needs. In terms of resilience, there is no single Baltic society but several fragmented groups with very different resilience values and aims. An increase in the resilience of some groups might decrease it for others.

There is a political vision, or even a consensus, that more resilience is needed, both at the national and Alliance level (NATO, 2024). This vision suggests that resilience can be achieved most rapidly through strategic communication, propaganda, and education among the so-called "vulnerable groups". However, as explained above, there is a logical paradox in this approach: the vulnerable groups are defined as such because some have chosen to be vulnerable, or even take pride in it. As a result, they are not receptive to critical strategic communication or education that does not align with their existing values and knowledge. Therefore, long-term integration involving social and economic policy initiatives is needed.

Expanding on this, it is crucial to recognize that resilience is not merely a technical or logistical challenge but also a deeply social and political one. Effective resilience strategies must address the underlying socio-economic disparities and cultural divides that contribute to vulnerability. This involves fostering a sense of shared identity and purpose among different groups, promoting inclusive policies that ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities, and building trust between the government and its citizens.

## 2.3. Deterrence by Denial or by Punishment?

Deterrence theory, in general, is designed for great powers with strategic and nuclear capabilities, or for equal powers aiming for a regional balance. Not many deterrence applications and logical models have been designed for small states acting alone, or even for smaller alliances seeking balancing power alongside great powers with nuclear capabilities (RAND Corporation, 2020). For example, the three Baltic states next to Russia (with its 140 million people) have a combined population of 7 million. In a possible alliance with Nordic countries, their combined population would reach 23 million, which is comparable to Taiwan's or half of the Ukrainian population. Both examples offer valuable experience in developing different deterrence models against a much more powerful adversary.

At the general theoretical level, deterrence theory distinguishes between deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial, emphasizing the importance of credibility and the adversary's calculation of success. These models assume resource sufficiency, escalation capacity, and strategic depth, which small states generally do not have. General deterrence is built on the long-term formation of perception, will, and capabilities intended to create hesitation towards aggression. The question therefore remains how credible deterrent effects can be generated under structural and resource limitations. The final factor depends on the rationality and calculation logic of the recipient. For Western democracies, Eastern autocracies, and Middle Eastern totalitarian states, the rationality calculation models assessing the credibility of the deterrence posture are different.

Deterrence by denial as a strategy does not require uniform coverage across all operational domains, but it does require effective coverage in key areas to discourage the enemy. Its effectiveness lies in limiting the aggressor's freedom of maneuver and reducing the likelihood of achieving territorial or political gains. The center of gravity and operational focus, therefore, need to be concentrated where they can influence the course of a potential aggression and change the opponent's calculations before the final decision (Lebow, 2005). Possessing equipment alone does not automatically generate a denial effect; rather, the combined effect of capacity, usability, and motivation is crucial. For the defending-deterring actor, such as the Baltic states, the denial effect is created by the combination of available capabilities and the motivation and ability to use them

(Morgan, 2003). The capabilities include early detection of the enemy, protection of one's own forces and critical infrastructure, and combat actions that create the necessary effect of disrupting the enemy's maneuver (RAND Corporation, 2015). Together, they can create a concentrated denial-oriented capability, thereby reducing the aggressor's likelihood and hope of rapid success.

The challenge in terms of outcome for the small Baltic states is to find a balance between the denial effect and defensive persistence (Veebel, 2018). From the perspective of an imminent armed conflict, denial is a short-term tool and does not guarantee a successful long-term struggle. On the other hand, preparing for and waging a long-term war is particularly exhausting and structurally unsustainable for a small state. As an important limitation, analyses of NATO's eastern flank point to the structural impossibility of achieving a conventional balance of power (RAND Corporation, 2015) and the limited ability of small states to wage a long-term conflict without rapid collective support from allies (Veebel & Ploom, 2018).

To summarize, for a small state without a strategic nuclear arsenal or power projection forces capable of striking an adversary in depth to deter retaliation, a more realistic approach to deterrence is through denial. Since a small state lacks escalation and de-escalation tools as well as strategic depth, its ability to threaten punishment is limited, which increases the relevance of deterrence by denial.

## 2.4. Deterrence by Hedgehog Strategy or by Porcupine Strategy?

The porcupine strategy of deterrence is a specific approach for small states when defending against global imperial powers trying to occupy them (Woolmore, 2025), most known in the practical use of this model are the efforts of Taiwan against the People's Republic of China (Fu et al., 2026). Among the Baltic states, Estonia has stressed its specific adaptation of this logic, calling it the hedgehog model of deterrence. However, there is no established theoretical model based on hedgehog deterrence logic to be referenced by Estonian military planners and developers.

The closest approach to hedgehog deterrence is the porcupine deterrence model, followed by Taiwan and Singapore (Timbie et al., 2021), which is, in many respects, similar to hedgehog denial logic and is also adaptable to Baltic preconditions and capabilities. The

most important practical difference or takeaway is that the hedgehog strategy does not deploy any retaliatory or punitive power against the aggressor, making it fully defensive and open to numerous tests by the aggressor.

To porcupine strategy, on the other hand, aims to deliver lethal punishment to the opponent to deter further aggressive actions (Beres, 1979), or sometimes even provoke the opponent into unprepared attacks that cause devastating punishing effects, thereby avoiding the attacks in the future. The main difference between the hedgehog and porcupine deterrence models lies in the level of punishment; the hedgehog model has a minimal punishment effect unless the attacking side commits to full-scale aggression, while the porcupine model, on the other hand, has high-level punishment options even for hybrid and low-intensity aggressions to avoid the adversaries' numerous testing attempts (Fu et al., 2026).

In practice, the porcupine strategy would prioritize capabilities and weapon systems that slow down the enemy, hit them painfully during the first contact of the conflict, and cause high attrition among their forces. In the Baltic states, this is aimed to be achieved with long-range rocket artillery, 155mm howitzer systems, infantry fighting vehicles, kamikaze drones, landmines, and pre-built defense installations. As of 2026, most existing Baltic military assets are aimed at deterrence by denial; only the long-range rocket launchers – the US-made HIMARS and South Korean-made K239 Chunmoo – are dedicated to the punishing effect of deterrence (Estonian Ministry of Defense, 2026).

## 3. Analysis: Three Deterrence Options for the Baltic States in 2027–2028

In the past two decades, most small member states of the European Union and NATO, including the Baltic states, have harbored calming illusions about a future of prosperity and peace in Europe (Ansip, 2012). The expectations of the Baltic states regarding NATO when applying for membership can be summarized as joining a solidarity-based family in an environment of fully functional international law and institutionalism, where commitments are respected and peace and prosperity are the main aims. Although NATO's collective deterrence is

a pillar of Baltic security, its effectiveness depends on the level and speed of partners' engagement and adaptivity, particularly considering the American contribution. Integration into NATO structures strengthens defense planning and expands cooperation beyond the regional sphere (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025).

Baltic defense strategies and operational plans did not account for conventional conflict in Europe against NATO or EU member states. Procurements and capability development followed NATO's collective preferences (for example, expeditionary capabilities). None of the three Baltic states considered the procurement of main battle tanks, jet fighters, or self-propelled artillery, even after the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. There was a belief in the strength of the US commitment and in the sufficiency of military equipment in European warehouses to deal with any probable threat scenario. This vision also included high hopes for the reliability of international law and institutions, trust in collective defense and solidarity, the necessity of sharing sovereignty in exchange for greater integrity, and the expectation of credible deterrence in pursuit of the 2% defense spending target (The Official Journal of Estonia, 2015). Those were the central components of this complex security and survival vision that the Baltic states have been following for more than 20 years.

With the return of war in Europe, the security environment in the Baltic states has worsened since 2022. Given the security situation in 2026 and the Baltic region's geopolitical impact, a limited-to-large-scale conventional aggression from Russia represents a relevant scenario. For the Baltic states as NATO eastern-flank frontline states, Russia's aggression in Ukraine and President Trump's hesitation regarding US readiness to commit to defense – or even his hesitation to show solidarity to his Eastern European allies – increases the importance of strengthening national defense capabilities. This corresponds to NATO's assessment that "The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area" (NATO, 2022, p. 4).

There are multiple objective reasons why the Baltic states need to rely on collective defense if the deterrence posture fails. The worsening demographic situation, the miniature size of their militaries, their economic and budgetary capabilities, the absence of a military-industrial complex, and the lack of strategic depth are the most influential factors. The Baltic states also have serious gaps in their maritime and air defense capabilities. All three nations have

small navies whose main purpose is presence and mine clearing, and they have only recently begun improving their air defense capabilities by procuring medium-range air defense systems and strengthening short-range air defense.

What is evident is that given limited resources, for small countries like the Baltic states, investing in conflict prevention is a more effective and cheaper option than building broad-spectrum capabilities across various conventional areas. Investing effort in visible prevention increases the threshold for aggression and, at the same time, reduces the ambition to wage a protracted armed conflict. However, in some time periods and cases, conflict prevention is only possible with committed and motivated allies, and their absence might be crucial even when spending 5.5% of GDP on defense.

### 3.1. Can Regional Nordic-Baltic Alliances Compensate for the Erosion of NATO Deterrence?

Starting in 2025, the main challenge for Baltic security has been aligning expectations and needs – first among the Baltic states themselves, second with their regional allies (Poland and the Nordic countries), and finally with their global partners (the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France). In this respect, at least, the political and military leaders of the Baltic states have a lot of work to do to understand the different interests and expectations of their NATO partners, and to identify the common interests and resources required to support them. Deeper Nordic-Baltic cooperation or an alliance inside NATO could be one option due to geographical proximity and shared risks and fears. The NATO Ankara Summit has positively contributed to most of those questions, but practical implementations need to follow.

Next to the natural option of the Baltic deterrence and defense alliance, which might be logical but at the same time both insufficient and carrying the disadvantages of operational size, geographical depth, warning time, and the negative effect of local pro-Kremlin Russian speakers, a wider Nordic-Baltic alliance could be seen as a reasonable alternative to deterrence to the whole NATO-based deterrence posture and defense effort (Duenow, 2025). This initiative is not in any way meant to compete with existing NATO activities but to offer added value in complicated times, forcing adaptions and cooperation in many areas: legislation, procedures, procurements, and exercises,

among others.

The starting strength of this option is that the Nordic countries play an increasingly positive role in Baltic security and strategy formation. Nordic support has been visible, tangible, and self-motivated, as stronger Baltic states give Nordic countries a more advanced warning of possible Russian aggression. Nordic NATO enlargement has more than doubled the NATO-Russia border by adding 1,300 kilometers and will force Russia to relocate a significant share of its remaining military capabilities to the "new NATO border", easing pressure on the Baltic and Polish borders. At the same time, the Finnish and Swedish defense forces provide a significant boost to NATO capabilities in the region, helping to secure the Baltic skies and deploy naval and land forces quickly if needed. Another question in this partnership is "what is in it for the Nordic countries".

The Baltic Sea has, in practice, not yet become a "NATO lake" or an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) area (Duenow, 2025), which would be the preferred solution of regional NATO member states. However, events related to the Nordic NATO accession have been evolving faster than the Baltic states' ability to adapt their security strategies, given the benefits and risks of new NATO borders and capabilities in the region.

### 3.2. Can Baltic States Independently Afford Necessary Deterrence Capabilities Against Russia?

The combination of structural asymmetry with the predicted greater opponent and limited available resources makes it very complicated for small states to build cross-domain modern forces without risking lethal gaps and fragmentation, which would harm the deterrence outcome. The solution might be selective capability development based on clear strategic choices. Security and defense planning need therefore to determine priorities and address shortcomings, rather than aiming to build and sustain full-spectrum, cross-domain capabilities. Ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Iran have also highlighted the importance of sustainability and independence in supply chains. The ability to provide timely weapons, equipment, and logistical support is critical for long-term operations, where demand may exceed production and delivery capacity (as has been seen with US delivery delays to the Baltic states in 2026).

The state budgets define the framework and pace of defense capability development. In conditions of limited resources, it is not

possible to ensure high readiness, modernization, and sustainability without clearly defined priorities and the acceptance of trade-offs. Unclear long-term goals or frequent changes in them lead to resource dispersion and the emergence of capability gaps, even with the current 5% defense spending level relative to GDP and hopes to increase it up to 7%. The absence of prioritization may lead to resource dispersion, which reduces the resulting deterrent effect. Experience suggests that for small states, the key is to optimize capabilities rather than maximize their scope. Accordingly, collective (alliance-based) deterrence by denial is more affordable for small states with limited structural resources than deterrence by punishment.

Therefore, for the Baltic states, it is a realistic strategy to focus on disrupting the opponent's intentions in the initial phase to create time and space for a collective alliance response, enabling even a small country to support the maintenance of regional escalation dominance. The deployment and use of military and national capabilities with a denial effect have crucial practical implications in the first four days of a conflict, by preventing the moment of surprise, maintaining air superiority, disrupting the opponent's maneuver, and acting kinetically deep into his space. The visibility of capabilities, highlighted by the potential of the conventional capability cluster and society's determination to defend itself, appears as a rational element here. This combination of the clear presence of capabilities and the will supports the active denial effect, amplifying the aggressor's uncertainty about the probability of success.

For small alliance members, there is also a dilemma regarding interoperability in a case of a possible conflict scenario: whether to rely on independent capabilities or on the interoperability effects of joint NATO activities. Interoperability enables joint activities in the area of operations and thus compensates for the resource limitations of smaller states, thereby significantly supporting collective defense. Moreover, if NATO interoperability is chosen, then which one, given Trump's statement that the US might leave NATO, and that interoperability will, in that case, be based on European NATO preferences? And do the biggest and nuclear-armed European NATO members have the same vision and priorities about it? The NATO Ankara Summit has lifted some concerns in this matter, but there are still numerous urgent and important choices to be made for the Baltic states.

### 3.3. Challenges of Damage Control: What if Deterrence Fails for the Baltic States?

For the Baltic states, damage control is the center of gravity for their national security and survival strategy. In the event of deterrence erosion, the Baltic states need to have mechanisms in place to prevent the paralysis of decision-making processes, ensure continuity of command, protect critical infrastructure, and create conditions for allies to arrive. Strategic planning cannot, therefore, be based solely on a successful scenario, but must also systematically account for the risk of failure. As a practical example, how will the fulfillment of the NATO's baseline requirements for resilience be ensured, and what if the Baltic states fail to meet NATO's expectations? What can they expect, and how will they plan their survival? In this matter, the US continues to be a critical variable in Baltic security. The American presence in Europe increases the overall stability and credibility of the Alliance's deterrence mechanism. However, it cannot be considered an immutable planning constant. Meanwhile, even existing alternatives, like the concept of total defense and an increase in social resilience, are seen as applicable in a dramatically changed security environment: both internally and externally, and mostly in terms of affordability. For those aims, even some compromises with Russia in the past were considered appropriate (including border treaties).

To conclude the previous analysis, the following conclusions can be made. First, security through a conventional balance against Russia seems hopeless given the qualitative and quantitative circumstances and costs; accordingly, allied deterrence and assurance are preferred. Second, there is hardly any compromise with Russia available on the horizon, as peaceful cooperation with Russia is seen as socially and politically unacceptable (Veebel, 2025). Third, at least in the short term, NATO deterrence against Russia in the Baltic region no longer seems credible following political changes in allied leadership. Finally, after attempts at comprehensive defense have produced little added value and considering costs and needs, the final choice is for resilience and total defense. Finally, the Baltic states, like most of their Nordic neighbors (except Finland), have given their utmost to help Ukraine survive in recent years; however, this has left them with reduced ammunition, weapon systems, and financial reserves.

## Conclusions

After Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, Europe, and especially the small states on the eastern edge of the Alliance, faced a situation in which their capacities and capabilities were not optimized for emerging threats. The mismatch between NATO capabilities and national resources, exacerbated by the return of war, has created an acute need to strengthen defense at the national and Alliance level.

The deterrence erosion for the Baltic states has not been an unexpected 'black swan' effect, where a great threat appears without warning out of nowhere, but a perfect storm, coming with an early warning from different directions, or even a slow-motion train crash. It has been accompanied by the political will to ignore most of the warning signals coming from Russian aggression against Ukraine and the political statements of Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin in the recent decade. As a result, there are changes in the security needs of the Baltic region and hopes within the transatlantic community for solidarity and deterrence, even amid a growing, complex situation. Even today, many people and politicians in Western societies hope that Russia's war against Ukraine will lead to a peaceful end and meet Western preferences in terms of a peace agreement, thereby also bringing security to the Baltic and Nordic states.

In terms of the future, global tensions and their effect on the Baltic states may first worsen before starting to improve. The deepening of capability gaps, combined with lower motivation among European states to invest in their own capabilities, may lead to cyclical dependence. In the event of a sudden shift in US priorities and the absence of decisive strategic capabilities, the European region, including the Baltic states, becomes more vulnerable.

Existing NATO activities (the Baltic Air Policing Mission, the Enhanced Forward Presence, and the Joint Expeditionary Force), which were designed before Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, were previously deemed adequate but may, after 2022, be considered increasingly insufficient and require a redesign. Additionally, more convincing containment plans and rapid-deployment solutions might be critical to deter Russia or force it to delay an attack to reconfigure its operational plans (Ploom et al., 2020). This work has already started with the NATO Ankara Summit; another question is if it is sufficient

and delivered on time; however, there is visible progress. But we also need to admit that there is no Baltic consensus about which security and survival strategy would be best. There are even contradictory opinions among national leaders in terms of Russia's provocations in 2025-2026 or about future options, and if and how European powers should participate in negotiations about peace between Ukraine and Russia.

In the upcoming years, short-term containment and risk reduction strategies will be needed to prevent Russia from turning its aggression against the Baltic states once it exits from its aggression against Ukraine, especially when achieving a clear victory. In the long run, a new, affordable, and sustainable national or trans-Baltic security strategy is needed, as all three face the same threats, share the same allies, and have a similar level of resources. It must be cost-effective, supported by NATO (hopefully a unified in this matter) and EU allies, aligned with them, and provide sufficient protection against neighboring Russia for the coming decades. Higher local resilience, total defense, and pre-deployment of equipment and units are the options to be considered either singly as central elements, or in combination with other strategies in Baltic cooperation.

The vital question is whether the Baltic states need to be more concerned about deterrence credibility and defense solidarity during Trump's presidency, or after he leaves. The challenges are both in establishing a sufficient deterrence threshold and in maintaining defense readiness in a socio-economically sustainable way. Is there hope that a unified, solidarity-driven NATO will reappear, or should the Baltic states choose between loyalty to the US, cooperation with continental NATO powers, or creating regional alliances? Related dilemmas also arise when making choices about upcoming urgent weapon procurements and long-term military modernization (Pevkur, 2026). Should the deals with US producers continue, or should the Baltic states look for autonomous alternatives, and when is the time to decide?

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