NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 673 November 3, 2026

Strengthening Deterrence Against Russia's Conventional Attack of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia

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The Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania occupy the closest geographical position to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) principal threat: Russia. By attacking Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 and then again full-scale in 2022, Russia has demonstrated that it remains an imperialistic power, ready and willing to impose on other nations' sovereignty. Russia views NATO as a threat to its security and an obstacle to its colonial ambitions.[1] To secure its borders and continue its territorial expansion, Russia is determined to challenge NATO. The Baltic States need a defensive posture based on a strategy of denial that would strengthen deterrence against a potential Russian attack in the region. NATO must take six steps to implement its strategy of denial in the Baltics: increasing military personnel, establishing infrastructure, reinforcing the Baltic Defense Line, sustaining an American presence, mobilizing around its Secretary General, and aiding Ukraine's defense. Through the above-mentioned steps, NATO could turn the Baltic region into the alliance's impenetrable wall and strengthen deterrence against a Russian conventional attack.[2]

Introduction

In August 2025, a leading Russian academic, Nikolay Mezhevich, published an article arguing that NATO has turned the Baltics into a potential theater of military operations, which warrants Moscow to take the necessary steps to ensure NATO cannot threaten Russia.[3] Historically,

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Russia has pursued a policy of imperialization and Russification of the Baltics since Tsar Peter the Great.[4] After World War II, Russia occupied and incorporated all three Baltic States into the Soviet Union, where they stayed until 1991.[5] Once all three Baltic States joined NATO in 2004, Moscow perceived them as a threat to Russian security.[6] Russia views NATO as an aggressive, expansionist, and confrontational alliance that compromises Russian security.[7] Russia considers a NATO attack originating from the Baltics to be a national security concern.[8] The Baltic States are seen as responsible for bringing NATO to Russia's borders.[9] Russian ambitions and military strategy make NATO's current defense posture in the Baltics obsolete.

Russian Ambitions

During the twenty-first century, Russia has invaded two nations, Georgia and Ukraine.[10] Moscow appears to believe that the future of Russian society lies in militarily expanding Russian borders.[11] Russia's authoritarians are worried their rule would not survive should the country move toward democracy, as was the case for members of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union.[12] Russia also maintains this aggressive posture because Moscow likely believes NATO is unwilling to stand up to Russian military might.[13] The Baltic States provide an enticing opportunity for Russia to continue expanding its borders due to their small size, flat terrain, and relatively large Russian-speaking populations.[14] However, above all, Russia wants to conquer the Baltic States to destroy allies' confidence in NATO.[15] The Baltic States are NATO's most vulnerable members, as they rely heavily on the Alliance's defense guarantees in order to maintain their sovereignty.[16] Moscow is likely aware of the Baltic States' security dependency on NATO and knows that any Russian attack on the Baltic States would compel NATO to act, and therefore test NATO and provide Russia with an opportunity to break NATO's unity.[17] NATO's failure to protect the Baltic States from Russia's aggression would cause a legitimacy crisis that could cause distrust among Alliance members, or the complete breakdown of the Alliance.[18] If Russia succeeds in breaking NATO's unity by attacking the Baltics, then Moscow would move a significant step closer to extending Russian influence across Europe.[19]

Russian Military Strategy and NATO's Current Defense Posture in the Baltics

The most concerning scenario involving a Russian attack on the Baltics would be a fast thrust into the region where Russian forces quickly seize territory.[20] Based on how Russia has conducted itself in Georgia and Ukraine, an attack on the Baltics could see Russia hit first, hit hard, and hit so fast that it would give NATO little time to prepare or get into position.[21] Russian lightning warfare is highly problematic, as one of NATO's defensive elements in the Baltics are Enhanced Forward Presence units (EFP).[22] EFP units consist of multinational battlegroups from several NATO member states that are designed to act as tripwire deterrence units that ensure a response from the Alliance if Russia attacks.[23] EFP units lack stopping power and are meant to buy time for NATO reinforcements to be deployed.[24] If Russia attacked the



EFP units, NATO could in theory respond by mustering a 200,000-strong rapid reaction force that could be deployed to the Baltics within ten to thirty days.[25] However, a rapid reaction force could not defend the Baltics from Russian aggression, as the region is too geographically small and flat to depend on its defense from NATO units not immediately in the region.[26] If NATO attempted to trade space for time in the Baltics, then it would be completely pushed out of the region.[27] NATO would likely not have time to move forces into the Baltics to respond to a Russian invasion. As former head of the NATO military committee, now Czech President Petr Pavel warned, "Russia could take the Baltics in two days."[28]

NATO also relies on the Baltic Defense Line to defend the region; however, it cannot do so in its current iteration.[29] The Baltic Defense Line is presented as a defensive position that spans all three Baltic States, and is intended to delay a Russian invasion rather than prevent Russia from capturing Baltic territory.[30] During peacetime, the Baltic Defense Line is essentially a barren border checkpoint between Russia and the Baltics, as no defensive measures are being taken to fortify it.[31] Defensive measures along the Baltic Defense Line will only be taken after a military threat is perceived as imminent, with all defensive equipment stored in nearby storage units.[32] However, given how quickly a Russian military operation in the Baltics could unfold, NATO may not have time to reinforce the line, and it could be too late once Russia acts.[33]

Russia has rattled the nuclear saber on countless occasions during both of its invasions of Ukraine.[34] It is widely believed that the reason NATO has not directly intervened to stop the current Russian invasion of Ukraine is due to Russian nuclear threats, even if these threats were in some respect limited in their effectiveness.[35] If Russia successfully pushed into the Baltics, then it could threaten nuclear retaliation if NATO tries to intervene.[36] Russian nuclear threats could force NATO to make a difficult decision: risk the possibility of nuclear exchange to liberate the Baltics or expose that NATO may not protect its members.[37] Russia may interpret NATO's current defense posture as the Alliance's unwillingness to defend the region.[38]

Solutions

In addition to current activities, NATO and its members can take several additional steps to strengthen deterrence against Russia's attack in the Baltics.

Increased NATO Military Presence in the Baltics

At the Vilnius Summit in 2023, NATO declared that it was prepared to defend every inch of NATO territory.[39] The current NATO defense posture cannot fulfill the 2023 Vilnius Summit declaration, and NATO must change its defensive posture in the Baltics.[40] To successfully defend the Baltics, NATO must switch to a deterrence strategy of denial and implement defensive measures to discourage and deny Russian aggression.[41] Reinforcing the Baltics with additional soldiers from contributing NATO members could substantially aid in deterring Russia. Through additional military presence, NATO would show Russia that it is willing to defend the Baltics, not merely respond after a Russian invasion.[42] Additional permanently



stationed NATO forces would be more operationally effective in the Baltics due to their defensive preparedness to anticipate a Russian attack.[43] Since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO has slowly scaled up the number of military personnel in all three Baltic States from 1,000 to an estimated 3,000-5,000 in each Baltic State.[44] Other NATO members, such as Germany, Canada, and the United Kingdom, are scaling up their presence in the region to showcase NATO's resolve.[45] More NATO members should follow the lead of the Germans, Canadians, and British, as the increased presence of Alliance soldiers could be one of the key factors that deters Russia from attacking the Baltics.[46]

Constructing Required Infrastructure in the Baltics

To make the presence of any additional Alliance military forces to the Baltics possible, the region must have the infrastructure to support such an influx. Currently, all three Baltic States are in the midst of building the required infrastructure to support allied deployments on their territory, shelter machinery, and provide training grounds.[47] However, the Baltic States are struggling to complete construction on time, and NATO members should contribute to ensure the facilities are completed as soon as possible.[48] The proper infrastructure would be a visible reminder that NATO troops and machinery can be quickly prepared to defend the region, so would completed and utilized training grounds.[49]

Equipping the Baltic Defense Line

To further bolster NATO's strategy of denial in the Baltics, the Alliance must present the Baltic Defense Line as a line intended to completely discourage and deter a Russian invasion.[50] NATO's Baltic member states must not wait until they perceive Russian aggression.[51] A logical step to reinforce the Baltic Defense Line would be to place barbed wire, dragon's teeth, and landmines that are currently sitting in storage units across the Baltics into positions that would discourage and deny Russian aggression toward the region.[52]

Anti-tank defenses such as dragon's teeth hinder, direct, and deny mechanized advancement.[53] Properly placed pre-positioned dragon's teeth would complement anti-tank ditches already dug in the Baltics by channeling Russian mechanized units into areas advantageous for NATO defenders.[54] Pre-positioned dragon's teeth would further signal to Russia that an invasion of the Baltics would not be quick or without substantial toil. Moreover, all three Baltic State NATO members ought to lay landmines for additional defense and deterrence value. Landmines are exceptional psychological weapons that force any advancing army to question every step it takes, thereby slowing and discouraging movement.[55] Landmines can have devastating effects against soldiers and mechanized vehicles, making their dual threat a terrifying reality for any advancing army.[56] Due to their lethality, effect on morale, and the hesitation they force advancing armies to account for, landmines are widely considered one of the most effective deterrent weapons in all of military history.[57] Because of their ability to shape the battlefield and deter aggressors, landmines would deny Russia the

fast warfare it relies on waging in the twenty-first century.[58] Therefore, with NATO's Baltic State members taking the necessary steps to present the Baltic Defense Line as a defensive obstacle intended to discourage and deter a Russian invasion, NATO's deterrence strategy in the region would gain added credibility.[59]

Creating A Permanent American Presence

NATO's defensive assurances rest on the U.S. ability to defend the Alliance.[60] NATO's Baltic State members are acutely aware of the U.S. power, with Latvian Defense Minister Artis Pabriks calling the United States, "The most powerful ally, and its deterrent effect is not comparable to other allies."[61] From the Russian point of view, U.S. military capabilities are what gives NATO its terrifying appearance as the world's most powerful Alliance.[62] Currently, the United States has an estimated 1,700 troops on a rotational basis in the Baltics.[63] While the U.S. force presence in the Baltics is small, the deterrent value that American soldiers provide should not be underestimated.

Since the Cold War, fear of direct military conflict with the United States has been the primary deterrent in preventing Russia from using its military power against NATO.[64] Historically, Russia has been reluctant to risk any military conflict that could lead to an open and direct confrontation with the United States.[65] Consequently, many analysts believe Russia will likely continue to avoid conducting any military operations in an area where there are American soldiers stationed.[66]

To further reinforce NATO's deterrent strategy of denial in the Baltics, a permanent American troop presence would be required. The permanent stationing of American troops in the Baltics would mean that any attempted seizure of the Baltics would immediately involve American troops.[67] The United States has a long history of establishing robust military bases far from its borders.[68] A U.S. permanent military presence would act as the most powerful deterrent to a Russian invasion of the region.[69]

Rallying Around NATO's Secretary General

NATO's deterrence strategy of denial in the Baltics could take considerable time to implement. NATO does not possess any forces or substantial military equipment and must rely on its members' voluntary contributions.[70] Due to NATO's unique non-compulsory structure, a competent, strong leader would be needed to rally the Alliance and convince its members to implement a strategy of denial in the Baltics.

NATO's Secretary General is one of the Alliance's most important offices, as he serves as a decision facilitator, helping lead and guide decision-making throughout the Alliance.[71] This role allows him to exert influence on the decision-making process and to encourage Alliance members to take initiatives and reconcile their positions for the benefit of the Alliance.[72] Mark Rutte, the current Secretary General, himself, believes NATO must bolster its defensive capabilities on its Eastern Flank.[73] Rutte continuously calls on all NATO members to strengthen



capabilities, readiness, and deterrence on the Alliance's Eastern Flank.[74] Rutte is exceptionally well-liked by four NATO members whose support would be vital to adequately defend the Baltics: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany.[75] He has been able to form consensus among NATO members, including Turkey, Hungary, and Slovakia.[76] The Secretary General's continued calls to bolster deterrence capabilities in the Baltics are needed to encourage NATO members to contribute to the defensive measures required to implement the Alliance's strategy of denial in the Baltics.

Supporting Ukraine

Secretary General Rutte's calls for NATO members to continue supporting Ukraine's defensive war against Russia are also crucial.[77] Russia is less likely to go to war with NATO over its Baltic members if it is not well-prepared and well-supplied for the invasion.[78] Due to the intensity of the war in Ukraine, Russia is most likely unable to prepare for an invasion of the Baltics while its invasion of Ukraine continues.[79] Once the Russian invasion of Ukraine ends, the estimates of when Russia will be able to conduct a military invasion against NATO varies widely, from as low as six months to as high as ten years.[80] Yet, the earlier estimates of a Russian invasion against NATO may be more accurate as Russia reportedly allocates half its national budget to military spending.[81] This means that Russia cannot shrink the size of its military or slow down its military spending without a massive shock to its economy.[82] Russia is therefore unlikely to simply abandon its military spending excess.[83] Continued NATO support to Ukraine would further extend the time NATO has to implement its strategy of denial in the Baltics.[84] As Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics stated, "And we know that Ukraine is fighting not only for us but, to some extent, I would say Ukraine is fighting instead of us."[85] NATO's continued support for Ukraine is paramount in order for NATO to have adequate time to make the Baltics' denial strategy a reality.

Conclusion

Russia is not an insurmountable adversary. In the Baltics, NATO could strengthen deterrence against a Russian attack.[86] However, deterring Russia from attacking the Baltics will be more difficult under NATO's current defensive posture in the region. NATO cannot afford to wait to make the necessary defensive preparations, as Russia appears to desire expansion into the Baltics. A properly implemented denial strategy in the Baltics would deny Russian objectives and showcase NATO's defensive competence in protecting its members. NATO can and must reinforce the Baltics in a way that transforms the region into an impenetrable wall of the Alliance, capable of discouraging and deterring Russian aggression. While Russian aspirations and military tactics would most likely defeat NATO's current defensive posture in the Baltics, NATO could strengthen deterrence against Russia with a strategy of denial, and could implement its denial strategy through augmenting military deployments, erecting infrastructure, outfitting the Baltic Defense Line, perpetuating an American presence, heeding



the calls to strengthen the Alliance's deterrence capabilities as recommended by NATO's Secretary General, and assisting Ukraine to defeat Russia.

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