"Repel, Don't Expel"

*Strengthening NATO's Defense
and Deterrence in the Baltic States*

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A Report of the CSIS International Security Program

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Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Russian aggression has changed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) security environment. Responding to this challenge, the CSIS International Security Program undertook an assessment of Baltic security in general and Lithuanian security in particular. The study considered Russian threats, NATO responses, the requirements of effective deterrence, and progress toward the goals set at the Madrid NATO summit in 2022.

The study concluded that the Baltic countries are in a particularly dangerous situation. Decisions made at the 2022 Madrid summit and NATO's new operating concept have set the alliance on the right course for dealing with the new threat. However, implementation of the Madrid commitments has been uneven. NATO leaders need to ensure the decisions taken in Madrid to reassure allies and strengthen deterrence are on a clear path to implementation.

Europe's Changing Security Environment

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has transformed the European security environment by dramatically reviving the possibility of cross-border invasion. The Baltic countries–Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia–are at the forefront of this security shift. Lithuania is particularly challenged because of the need to keep the Suwałki Gap open and due to Germany's struggles in expanding its deterrence forces in Lithuania.

NATO and Europe have responded strongly and with remarkable unity to the Russian aggression by providing massive aid to Ukraine, increasing defense budgets, deploying forces to Eastern Europe, and imposing unprecedented sanctions.

The United States has shown a solid commitment to NATO and European security but must balance its efforts in Europe with countering a rising and belligerent China in the Indo-Pacific what its National Defense Strategy calls the "pacing challenge." As a result, Europe needs to take a major role in enhancing deterrence against Russia.

Americans need to keep in mind the stakes involved. The Baltic states vividly remember that, under Soviet rule, free elections ended, national culture was Russified, forced collectivization of agriculture impoverished farmers, religion was suppressed, and over 100,000 citizens were deported to Siberia.

Threats to Baltic Security

The primary threat to the Baltic states comes from Russia. Despite the hopes of the West and many of Russia's people, postwar Russia is unlikely to become a liberal democracy at peace with its neighbors. Instead, Russia will likely be authoritarian, revanchist, suspicious of the West, and a major military power.

Although Russia's military has lost heavily during the war in Ukraine, it will rebuild when the war ends. Indeed, Russia is taking near-term steps to expand its forces permanently. Estimates vary widely on how long a full rebuilding will take. NATO should hope for the best but prepare for the worst.

One outcome of the Russian attack on Ukraine is that the world can now see how Russia plans military operations. Future attacks will likely have five elements: shock and awe, decapitation of national leadership, missile strikes against fixed military targets, deep heliborne insertions, and deep attacks by armored columns. A Russian attack will be swift, violent, and aimed at rapid and complete victory. There will be little time for defending troops to prepare and get into position.

The Military Status of the Baltic States

The Baltic states are taking strong measures to defend themselves. All the Baltic states have increased their military budgets substantially as the threat from Russia has increased. Lithuania's military budget has tripled since 2008. All Baltic countries exceed NATO's 2 percent military spending goal, which only seven other NATO countries have accomplished.

All the Baltic countries have reinstituted conscription, which only four other NATO countries currently have in place. As a percentage of the population in uniform, the Baltic countries are far ahead of most of the rest of NATO. Lithuania, for example, has 0.82 percent of its population in uniform, whereas the United States and Germany have only 0.41 and 0.22 percent, respectively. Since joining NATO in 2004, Lithuania has increased the number of personnel in uniform by 70 percent.

Gaps and Geostrategic Vulnerabilities in Deterrence and Defense

The Baltic states have several major geostrategic vulnerabilities:

- They lack strategic depth as a result of their small size. Whereas Ukraine has been able to defend in depth and use that depth to buy time for strengthening its defenses, the Baltic

countries have no such option. Their capitals lie only a short distance from a threat border. Vilnius, for example, lies only 18 miles (30 kilometers) from the Belarusian border. Russia penetrated 152 miles (244 kilometers) into Ukraine in its attempt to capture Kyiv.

- NATO reinforcements must travel long distances to get to the new front line, as much as 10 times as far as during the Cold War.

- The Suwałki Gap, running between Russia's Kaliningrad enclave to the north and Russia-friendly Belarus to the south, constitutes a major vulnerability. Russian missiles and artillery on both sides of the gap would create a gauntlet of fire in wartime for any NATO attempt to reinforce the Baltic states by land. Russia might even take the high-risk/high-payoff action of trying to close the gap with ground forces.

The inherent vulnerabilities and the small size of the Baltic countries and their militaries mean that, despite their extraordinary efforts, the Baltic states cannot defend the region without the help of the entire alliance.

Made in Madrid

NATO'S COMMITMENTS TO STRENGTHEN DEFENSE AND DETERRENCE

Russian's 2014 aggression in Crimea and the Donbas indicated that the future might not be as peaceful as NATO had once hoped. Thus began the process of reenergizing the alliance as a mechanism for military security in Europe. NATO defense budgets (excluding the United States) have increased 32 percent since 2015. Forward-deployed multinational battle groups were established in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, putting more boots on the ground.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine accelerated this process. A new NATO strategic concept and decisions at NATO's 2022 Madrid summit took several important steps, including

- identifying Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area";

- inviting Sweden and Finland to join the alliance;

- setting a goal of expanding the battalion-sized battle groups (1,000–2,000 troops) to a full brigade (4,000–5,000 troops);

- calling for "credible readily available reinforcements" and pre-positioned equipment in the Baltic region to speed reinforcements in a crisis; and

- calling for establishing division-level structures (the larger forces envisioned in the new operating concept need a nearby division headquarters).

However, implementation of the commitments NATO made at Madrid is lagging behind the rhetoric. Most members do not meet the 2 percent military spending goal. Progress on scaling up the existing Enhanced Forward Presence missions, strengthening regional plans, and generating reinforcement forces appears sluggish. One example is Germany's ongoing struggle to deploy a full brigade in Lithuania despite having Europe's largest economy and one of Europe's largest militaries.

From Madrid to Vilnius
CLOSING NATO'S DETERRENCE GAP IN THE BALTICS

Deterring a war is far better than fighting one, and the strongest deterrence comes from credible, forward-deployed forces. Other strategies might be less expensive and easier to implement but entail a high level of risk in the current environment. "Tripwire" strategies, for example, can be attractive in theory but dangerous in practice. The threat of retaliation may not be credible, and in the case of the Baltic countries, retaking territory is much harder than defending in the first place. Strategies relying on reinforcement need time to work, but time may not be available in a crisis. "Deterrence by detection" failed in Ukraine.

By focusing on the ability to deny a Russian fait accompli, NATO's new operating concept and the decisions from the Madrid summit set NATO on the right path for the future. The Baltic states describe this as "repel, don't expel." In other words, defeat a Russian invasion; don't rely on a counteroffensive after an initial withdrawal.

Implementing the Madrid summit's ambitious goals requires action in several areas:

Provide the needed resources. The Defense Investment Pledge made by allies at the Wales summit in 2014 was intended to be fulfilled "within a decade." Allies will need to start the conversation at Vilnius about what comes next. NATO will need a more aggressive push toward the 2 percent of GDP goal if member states are to provide the resources needed by the new commitments and operating strategy. Many voices, including the Baltic countries, have advocated a higher goal–2.5 percent or even 3 percent.

Build "robust in-place combat-ready forces." For the Baltic states, implementing the new policy of forward defense to deter Russian aggression is critical for national security and indeed national survival. This requires decisions on several unresolved issues:

- **The nature of the forward-deployed brigades:** Specifying "a brigade" is not enough. Decisions are needed regarding how large the brigades will be, which nations will provide the troops, how the brigade will absorb the existing battle group, and where the brigade will get support troops.
- **The stationing of the brigades:** Although it is easier to keep the bulk of the brigades at their home stations, they need to be forward deployed in peacetime to be a credible deterrent and meet the demanding timelines of a crisis.
- **The type and location of pre-positioned equipment:** Pre-positioned equipment speeds force deployment but requires extensive peacetime preparation.
- **The divisional command structure:** The lines of command are becoming unclear as Baltic states stand up their own division headquarters to replace NATO's division headquarters. Building division headquarters capable of wartime operations requires equipment and trained personnel that the Baltic countries currently lack.

- **Enhanced exercise plans:** New kinds of multinational capabilities need new kinds of NATO exercises.
- **The Suwałki gap:** NATO needs to develop concepts for keeping the gap open in wartime and then make the appropriate peacetime preparations.

Refine and implement the new force model. At the Madrid summit, NATO committed to increasing its response force of high-readiness units from 40,000 to over 300,000 personnel through a new force model. While the ambition of the initiative is laudable, it got off to a bad start, with some allies taken by surprise at the scale of the plans. At the Vilnius summit, NATO will reveal the status of this new force model one year on from its conception. There are few signs NATO will generate the massive forces required to meet the one-year deadline set by NATO's secretary general. Yet, highly-ready forces are needed for rapid reinforcement in a crisis.

Establish timelines and periodic reporting. The commitments need a clear timeline with assigned organizational responsibilities and designated milestones so that NATO can track progress. All future NATO summits and defense minister meetings (held quarterly) should include a status report from the secretary general on these actions.

Adapt the plan over time. Plans require continuous evaluation and adjustment. NATO therefore needs to periodically assess whether the new commitments are adequate in light of the evolving threat from an unpredictable Kremlin.

The Madrid summit put NATO on a new course. The 2023 Vilnius summit and subsequent summits have an opportunity to ensure that movement along that course continues.

Europe's Changing Security Environment

I t has become commonplace to note that Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has transformed the European security environment. Yet any discussion of European security in general and Baltic security in particular must begin with this fundamental fact. Europe is no longer an "exporter of security" but now faces aggression and military conflict within its borders that go far beyond the conflicts of the 1990s in the Balkans. The Baltic countries are at the forefront of this security shift. What might be an environment of concern to more distant European states is, for them, a matter of national survival. Lithuania is particularly challenged because of the need to keep the Suwałki Gap open and due to Germany's struggles in expanding its Lithuanian-based battle group to brigade size.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has strengthened NATO by unifying its members and expanding its membership. The United States has shown a solid commitment to European security but is distracted by China and the Indo-Pacific.

War in Ukraine

With the war in Ukraine, the threat of territorial aggression in Europe has reemerged for the first time since the end of the Cold War. This represents a profound shift from the generally benign view of post–Cold War Europe. During that period, Europe faced few external threats beyond the spillover effects of internal conflict in the Balkans, and Russia was seen as a strategic partner. NATO's European members took a peace dividend by deeply cutting their military forces and budgets. NATO's membership expanded eastward as many states sought tighter integration

with Western Europe. Indeed, NATO was seen more as a tool for European integration and the promotion of democracy than as a military alliance.[1]

However, Russia's revanchist activities have changed this environment. This perception began shifting with Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and accelerated with the seizure of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent support to separatists in eastern Ukraine. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine removed any doubt about Russia's aggressive intentions. As Dakota Wood, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel and scholar at the Heritage Foundation, put it, "In a violent refutation of aphorisms such as 'modern states don't make war on each other,' 'major countries are too economically interdependent to risk going to war,' and 'the costs of becoming an international pariah state are too high,' Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to invade Ukraine anyway."[2]

The NATO and European Response

NATO and Europe have responded strongly and with remarkable unity to Russian aggression. This response has fallen into six categories:

1. **Identification of Russia as a security threat:** The 2022 NATO Madrid summit took this step for the first time since the end of the Cold War, overturning language in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act that "NATO and Russia do not consider each other as adversaries."[3]

2. **Provision of military, economic, and humanitarian aid:** The scale of such aid has been unprecedented. The United States has enacted $113 billion in aid through September 30, 2023, with $77.1 billion provided through February 24, 2023. Likewise, European countries have provided $74.5 billion.[4] Without this aid, the Ukrainian resistance would have collapsed after a few weeks.

3. **Imposition of sanctions:** Although sanctions have become a standard tool for statecraft, the restrictions put on Russia have been unprecedented in their breadth and global reach.[5]

4. **Enhanced forward defenses:** NATO moved thousands of troops to its eastern borders to deter Russia from entering NATO territory. It also expanded the long-standing Air Policing function and its Air Shielding mission to monitor airspace and protect against air or missile attacks.[6]

5. **Increased military preparedness:** Many European NATO countries have increased their defense budgets. NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg said at the launch of his annual report for 2022 that many more NATO allies have "announced significant defence spending increases since Russia's invasion" and that he expects allies to agree to "a more ambitious new defence investment pledge" in Vilnius this July.[7]

6. **Expansion of membership:** In an event nearly unimaginable two years ago, Finland has joined NATO as a full member, and Sweden will likely join soon. Russia's strategic situation has deteriorated, with the Baltic Sea becoming a NATO lake and the NATO-Russia frontier doubling in length.

Contributions by Baltic Countries

The Baltic countries have been particularly forthcoming in providing aid to Ukraine. As a percentage of GDP, their donations have been among the highest in NATO.

Figure 1: Aid to Ukraine from Baltic Countries and Illustrative Others (% of GDP)
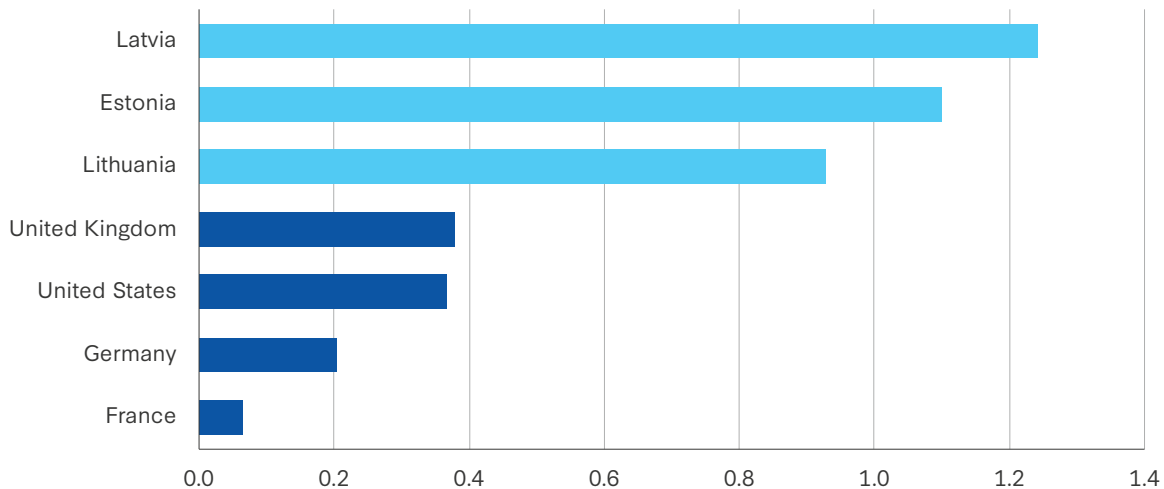
Source: "Ukraine Support Tracker," Kiel Institute for the World Economy, February 24, 2023, https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/.

One downside of the support is the depletion of inventories. All countries have experienced these problems because stockpiles of weapons and munitions were not sized for protracted conflict.[8] This has been a particular problem for the Baltic countries because of their small size. Lithuanian defense minister Arvydas Anusauskas noted, "Part of the support was taken out of our capabilities and now we want to compensate for these capabilities. Delays exist here, delays exist in Europe as well. . . . Certain capabilities cannot be replaced fast."[9]

The United States: Committed to NATO but Distracted by China

The Biden administration has been emphatic that its commitment to NATO's Article 5 is "sacrosanct."[10] As evidence of this, the United States rushed 24,000 troops to Eastern Europe to strengthen deterrence after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. These new forces augmented U.S. forces already in Eastern Europe, making a total of 100,000 permanently stationed and rotational personnel.[11] This was consistent with the 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS), which describes Russia as an "acute threat," specifically stating: "Contemptuous of its neighbors' independence, Russia's government seeks to use force to impose border changes and to reimpose an imperial sphere influence."[12]

A much-diminished U.S. force structure in Europe implemented these actions. The U.S. Army, for example, has only 2 permanently stationed combat brigades, down from a Cold War level of 14. Overall, the number of U.S. military personnel in Europe declined from 350,000 at the end of the Cold War to 66,000 in 2014.[13] Beginning in 2014, the European Reassurance Initiative, now known as

the European Deterrence Initiative, halted this decline, providing funds to maintain the level of U.S. forces in Europe and to rotate a heavy brigade from the United States into Eastern Europe. Defense of the Baltic countries benefited directly through facility construction and additional exercises.

Congress has paid particular attention to the security of the Baltic states. In FY 2021 and FY 2022, it appropriated a total of $349 million in U.S. Department of Defense security assistance funding through the Baltic Security Initiative.[14] There are congressional proposals for this support to continue.[15]

The Biden administration's 2021 Global Posture Review made minor adjustments in Europe. For example, it rescinded the Trump administration's cap on forces in Germany and announced small force increases in Europe for a U.S. Army multi-domain task force and a theater fires headquarters.[16]

In 2022, responding to Russian aggression, President Biden announced much larger enhancements to U.S. forces in Europe, including

- forward elements of a corps headquarters in Poland;
- additional U.S. Navy destroyers in Spain;
- a rotational brigade headquartered in Romania;
- additional rotational deployments in the Baltic states; and
- two additional F-35 squadrons to the United Kingdom and additional air defense and other capabilities in Germany and Italy.[17]

However, global commitments mitigate the U.S. role in Europe. Although the war in Ukraine has redirected U.S. attention toward Europe, the NDS identifies China as the "pacing competition." As the NDS notes, "the most comprehensive and serious challenge to U.S. national security is the PRC's coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavor to refashion the Indo-Pacific region in the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences."[18] That gives the Indo-Pacific theater priority.

Global Commitments Mitigating U.S. Role in Europe

Further, the NDS is clear that the United States can only fight one great power at a time: "To deter opportunistic aggression elsewhere, while the United States is involved in an all-domain conflict, the Department will employ a range of risk mitigation efforts rooted in integrated deterrence."[19] Translated from bland bureaucratic language, this means that if the United States is involved in a conflict with China (an "all domain conflict"), it will not have sufficient military forces to take on Russia at the same time. Instead, the United States will use unspecified "risk mitigation efforts."

Consistent with this focus on the Indo-Pacific, the NDS envisions U.S. posture in Europe as focusing on "command and control, fires, and key enablers that complement our NATO Allies' capabilities and strengthen deterrence by increasing combat capability."[20] That means that the United States will not provide combat forces but will help Europeans bring their forces to bear more effectively. Thus, Europeans must play a major, even dominant role in Baltic security.

Hovering over this Europe versus Asia tension is the uncertain future of the U.S. defense budget and strategy. Administration requests have remained flat after the Trump buildup from FY 2017 to FY 2019. For several years, defense hawks in Congress succeeded in adding money above the request to cover inflation and new investment. However, Republican deficit hawks have regained strength. The recent budget deal caps defense spending in FY 2024 and FY 2025 below the rate of inflation and, if continued beyond FY 2025, would return the national security budget to the days of sequestration. This will force trade-offs between Europe and Asia. Fortunately, funding to support Ukraine is not restricted by the caps.[21]

Beyond the budget debates, the progressive left and populist right have questioned the fundamental tenets of U.S. strategy. The progressive left has for many decades believed that defense spending could be better used domestically and that the United States has a malign influence in global affairs.[22] The populist right, energized by former president Trump, believes that the United States should not be solving other countries' problems.

Finally, a group of strategists would have the United States focus exclusively on China and the Pacific, disengaging from other regions, including Europe, regarding them as distractions. As Elbridge Colby, a prominent advocate for focusing on China, has argued: "Getting bogged down in Europe will impede the U.S.'s ability to compete with China in the Pacific. . . . Rather than increasing forces in Europe, the U.S. should be moving towards reductions."[23]

This project's working group thought these strategy and budget concerns would cause some stepping back from the current emphasis on Europe. However, the United States' global focus and bureaucratic inertia would mean a continuing presence in Europe. There remains a strong bipartisan consensus in Congress for an internationally engaged foreign policy and the robust budgets needed to support it. The working group also noted that maintaining that consensus requires constant effort.[24]

There remains a strong bipartisan consensus in Congress for an internationally engaged foreign policy and the robust budgets needed to support it.

Baltic Memories

One element that has not changed is the memory that Baltic citizens have of the Soviet occupations of 1940-1941 and 1944-1990 (Nazi Germany occupied the Baltic countries from 1941 to 1944). During these times, Lithuania ceased to exist as an independent country, although the United States and others did not recognize the legitimacy of this occupation.

Americans need to recognize the profound difference in perspectives these occupations have produced. On this side of the Atlantic, defense of the Baltic states is an important national security interest, with the international balance of power and diplomatic reputations at stake. For citizens of the Baltic countries, it is a question of national survival and, in many cases, personal survival. They cannot afford to get it wrong.

Under Soviet rule, free elections ended, forced collectivization of agriculture impoverished farmers, religion was suppressed, national culture was Russified, and over 100,000 citizens were deported to Siberia. In Lithuania, armed resistance to Soviet rule sprang up under the Union of Lithuanian Freedom Fighters and continued through 1953 but was crushed.[25]

Threats to Baltic Security

The major threat to the Baltic states comes from Russia. Thus, thinking about the future of threats requires thinking about the future of Russia.

Postwar Russia: Authoritarianism, Revanchism, Suspicion of the West, and Military Power

The war in Ukraine will eventually end, and the future of the Russian threat depends heavily on how it ends. At one extreme, the Russian armed forces could collapse and take the Putin regime with it. At the other extreme, a ceasefire or frozen conflict would allow Putin to keep some conquered territory and assert a narrative of victory. Between these extremes, many intermediary possibilities exist. The outcome will drive the shape of Russia's postwar politics and military.

Regardless of the war's outcome, a few things are clear. Despite the hopes of the West and many of Russia's people, postwar Russia is unlikely to become a liberal democracy at peace with its neighbors. As scholars Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage argue, "Even if Putin loses his grip on Russia, the country is unlikely to emerge as a pro-Western democracy. . . . Policymakers would not be wrong to hope for a better Russia and for a time when a post-war Russia could be genuinely integrated into Europe. . . . They would be foolish, however, not to prepare for darker possibilities."[26] Instead, Russia will likely be authoritarian, revanchist, suspicious of the West, and a major military power. The sections below summarize expert views on these themes.

Despite the hopes of the West and many of Russia's people, postwar Russia is unlikely to become a liberal democracy at peace with its neighbors. . . . Instead, Russia will most likely be authoritarian, revanchist, suspicious of the West, and a major military power.

Authoritarianism: Putin has used the war in Ukraine to strengthen the government's grip over the country. Use of the internet has been restricted, dissent has been suppressed, and severe penalties have been imposed for opposing the government. This has been the rule rather than the exception throughout Russian history. Except for brief periods of quasi-democratic rule (1905-1918 and 1991-2004) Russia has been an authoritarian state.

Revanchism: Putin signaled his views early on by lamenting the breakup of the Soviet Union: "Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century."[27] Nor has this perspective been the aberration of one man. Russia has been an empire since the days of Peter the Great and did not become post-imperial when it became post-Communist. When Putin seized Crimea in 2014, the Russian people responded enthusiastically. Thus, Russia will continue its efforts to reassert control over the territories its predecessors ruled.

Suspicion of the West: According to Andrei Kolesnikov, Putin has made suspicion of the West a major element in his regime's legitimacy, casting the war as "a civilizational battle between the forces of good, embodied by Russia, and the forces of evil, sometimes called 'satanic,' personified by the United States and its allies."[28] As with the other elements discussed here, this has a long history. Russians have long been suspicious that their European neighbors either look down on them or are preparing to invade them. The Kremlin has reinforced these ideas in the population through its control of the media.

Military power: Russia has immense natural resources (e.g., oil, natural gas, metals, and agricultural lands), a large population (143 million), and a territory that spans 11 time zones. It has strong military traditions and the means to maintain a large military, including infrastructure and institutions, military stocks leftover from Soviet times, and a broadly capable defense industry. It also has nuclear weapons. All this will make Russia a major military power regardless of what happens politically in the future.

The bottom line is that whatever regime follows Putin–whether that regime arrives soon because of the war or in the distant future as a result of Putin's natural aging–it will likely share these views even if it does not have, at least initially, the political power that Putin has.

As Fix and Kimmage noted in the opening quotation of this section, NATO should hope for the best but plan for the worst. This approach served NATO well during the Cold War. From its very

first strategic concept, NATO's plans to deter a conflict with the Soviet Union–and fight one if necessary–assumed Moscow's "maximum intentions and capabilities."[29] Prudence, combined with an unpredictable, risk-tolerant Kremlin committed to violent revisionism, requires NATO's leaders and military planners to make the same assumption today. As an Estonian general put it recently: "The times aren't going to be easier for us in the near future. . . . Russia's threat is not getting smaller."[30]

Russia has been an empire since the days of Peter the Great and did not become post-imperial when it became post-Communist.

Threat Environment: Short-Term Opportunity and Long-Term Dangers

Regardless of how the war in Ukraine turns out, Russia's military capabilities for ground operations will be much reduced for many years. Its forces have been devastated, and its people are tired and disillusioned. Reconstitution will take time. The annual threat assessment of the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence makes this point: "Moscow's military forces have suffered losses during the Ukraine conflict that will require years of rebuilding and leave them less capable of posing a conventional military threat to European security, and operating as assertively in Eurasia and on the global stage."[31]

To illustrate this loss of capability, Table 1 shows the beginning levels and estimated losses for several categories of military power as of June 2023.

Table 1: Estimated Russian Inventories and Losses (February 2022–June 2023)

	Beginning Level	Losses
Personnel	900,000	~200,000
Main battle tanks	2,840	2,025
Cannon artillery (towed and self-propelled)	2,088	577
Fighter/attack aircraft	864	70

Source: Beginning levels: IISS, *The Military Balance 2022* (London: IISS, Routledge, 2022), https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781003294566; Russian equipment losses: Stijn Mitzer et al., "Attack On Europe: Documenting Russian Equipment Losses During The 2022 Russian Invasion Of Ukraine," Oryx, February 24, 2022, accessed June 8, 2023, https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-equipment.html; Russian personnel losses: Dara Massicot, "The Russian Military's Looming Personnel Crises of Retention and Veteran Mental Heath," RAND, June 1, 2023, https://www.rand.org/blog/2023/06/the-russian-militarys-looming-personnel-crises-of-retention.html; and Ministry of Defence (@DefenceHQ), "Latest Defence Intelligence update on the situation in Ukraine – 17 February 2023," Twitter post, February 17, 2023, 1:45 a.m., https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1626472945089486848.

Russian capability losses have not been limited to forces and equipment. Lithuania reports that cyberattacks and infiltration by intelligence services have decreased, at least temporarily, as Russia's resources and attention have focused on Ukraine.[32]

This gives the Europeans a window during which they can rebuild their forces. It is particularly an opportunity to invest in programs with longer timelines, such as facilities, supporting civilian infrastructure, and equipment modernization.

With time, however, Russia will rebuild its military capability. How long will that take?

In the near term, Russia plans to increase the size of its armed forces from 900,000 personnel prewar to 1.1 million personnel today and 1.5 million in the future.[33] Russia hopes to increase the number of contract soldiers (volunteers) from 450,000 to 650,000. In addition, Russia is adding two divisions–one army and one naval infantry–in the Western Military District.[34]

Estimates vary regarding the time required for a full rebuilding. Private discussions with officials from the Baltic region indicate that they believe this timeline is about five years once the war ends. Other estimates are as short as two months or as long as decades.[35]

CSIS analysis indicates that Russian defense industry may not be as badly damaged by the war and sanctions as originally thought. While these interactions have taken their toll, "the Kremlin still possesses a significant degree of adaptability to Western sanctions, taking advantage of its prewar stockpiles of older equipment, as well as countries willing to supply Moscow with restricted dual-use items and technology via a web of illicit supply chains."[36]

The working group participants for this project judged that this reconstitution would take five to seven years, though they acknowledged the great uncertainty in making such an estimate. They pointed out that elements would be rebuilt at different rates, with ammunition and lower-tech items being ready earlier than high-tech items such as missiles. Some force elements, such as the Russian navy, have been relatively unaffected by the war and will be ready quickly. Other elements, such as the armored forces, may take many years to recover. Further, a rebuilt Russian military would likely look different from the prewar Russian military, having incorporated lessons learned from the Ukraine war. It might also be a battle-hardened military.[37]

The bottom line is clear: whether sooner or later, the time will come when Russia will again be able to threaten its neighbors.

In making a judgment about Russian reconstitution, NATO needs to avoid mirror imaging. Putin has shown that he was willing to take risks that most NATO nations would regard as imprudent. He might strike with forces that NATO believes are inadequate. The fact that NATO nations might be correct in this judgment does not change Putin's calculation. NATO needs to be ready.

Sooner or later, the time will come when Russia will again be able to threaten its neighbors. . . . NATO needs to be ready.

If Russia Strikes . . .

One useful outcome of the Russian attack on Ukraine is that the world can now see how Russia conducts military operations. The fact that the invasion failed to achieve a rapid victory is unlikely to change the fundamentals of Russia's military planning because of their deep institutional and cultural roots. Instead, the Russian military will incorporate lessons learned from the Ukraine war in order to do better next time. Based on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, future attacks will likely have five key elements:

Shock and awe: Shock and awe refer to a campaign designed to strike so suddenly and violently that it causes panic and paralysis in an adversary and allows the early achievement of military goals. It fits with Russian doctrine about violent attack, and the concept structured the initial phases of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To achieve mutually reinforcing effects, this campaign will likely consist of strikes in different geographical areas, across different domains, and across the entire geography of the target.[38]

Decapitation of national leadership: Russia was reported to have sent assassination teams after President Volodymyr Zelensky when the war began.[39] The assassination teams failed, likely because of Ukrainian precautions, both by having leaders move frequently and by rapidly setting up effective protection systems. This was not an unprecedented operation for the Russians; decapitation is part of Russia's standard tool kit. It used the same tactic in its 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, when special forces teams landed at the presidential palace and killed the Afghan president.

Missile strikes against fixed military targets: Russia had considerable success in striking military targets at the beginning of the war. Its failing was that the Ukrainians had dispersed many assets and the Russian kill chain did not operate fast enough to respond. Russia will certainly try to execute a disabling initial strike in future operations but with faster kill chains to make dispersion less successful.[40] In conducting such strikes, the Russians will likely inflict many civilian casualties and extensive collateral damage to civilian infrastructure.

Deep heliborne insertions: Russia tried to capture Hostomel airfield northwest of Kyiv at the outset of the war. The attack was a near-run thing, but Ukraine's counterattack eventually dispersed the Russian forces. If the landing had succeeded, Russia could have airlifted forces directly into the battle for the capital rather than trying to push them down the long highway from Belarus that was clogged with vehicles and under fire. The high payoff for such risky operations makes them attractive to Russian military planners.

Deep attacks by armored columns: Russian doctrine for such attacks dates to the Soviet era and was honed during the great offensives of World War II. They are part of Russia's military DNA. Thus, Russian armored columns pushed south from Belarus and southwest from Russia proper to capture Kyiv. These columns initially made substantial progress but then bogged down in the face of Ukrainian resistance and poor Russian logistics. Russian columns attacking toward Kherson and Mariupol were more successful. The Russians are certainly looking at this experience and figuring out how next time they might build on the successes and overcome the weaknesses.

These patterns of Russian attacks have profound implications for Baltic security preparations. A Russian attack will be swift, violent, and aimed at rapid and complete victory. There will be little time for troops to deploy and get into position. For this reason, commentators have expressed concerns about a Russian fait accompli–the rapid establishment of facts on the ground before NATO can react effectively. This would force NATO into the role of aggressor as it slowly builds forces and counterattacks.[41]

3

The Military Status of the Baltic States

Although the Baltic states are taking strong measures to defend themselves, their exposed position, small size, and the scale of the Russian threat mean that they need help from other NATO countries. For example, as a percentage of GDP, the defense spending of all Baltic countries exceeds NATO's 2 percent goal that was set at the Wales summit in 2014.[42]

Figure 2: NATO Defense Expenditures as a Share of Real GDP, 2022

Share of Real GDP (%)
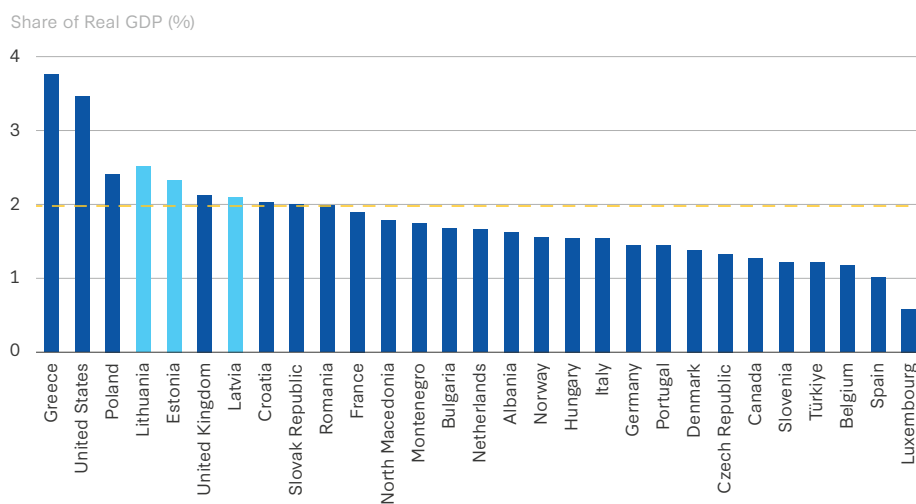
Note: Lithuania shown at the 2023 level of 2.52 percent.

Source: "Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2014-2022)," NATO, June 27, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_197050.htm.

However, because the economies of Baltic states are so small, the resulting military budgets are modest, barely visible when compared to other NATO countries (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: NATO Member States Defense Expenditures, 2022

Millions in Constant 2015 U.S. Dollars
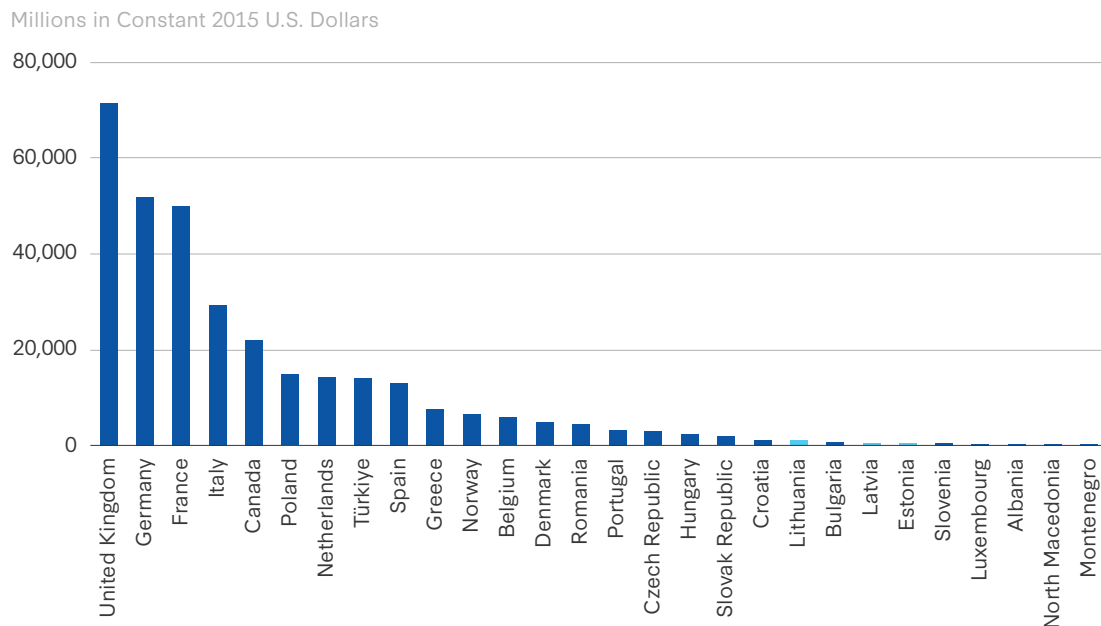
Source: "Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2014-2022)," NATO.

The Baltic states have increased their military budgets substantially as the threat from Russia has increased. Figure 4 shows Lithuania's military budgets from 2008, during the period before Crimea, when Europe was thought to be an exporter of security, to today. Lithuania's military budget has nearly tripled over that time, rising faster than the defense budgets of other NATO countries and even faster than its fellow Baltic countries, Estonia and Latvia.

Figure 4: Baltic Countries Military Expenditures, 2008–2022 (USD, 2021 millions)
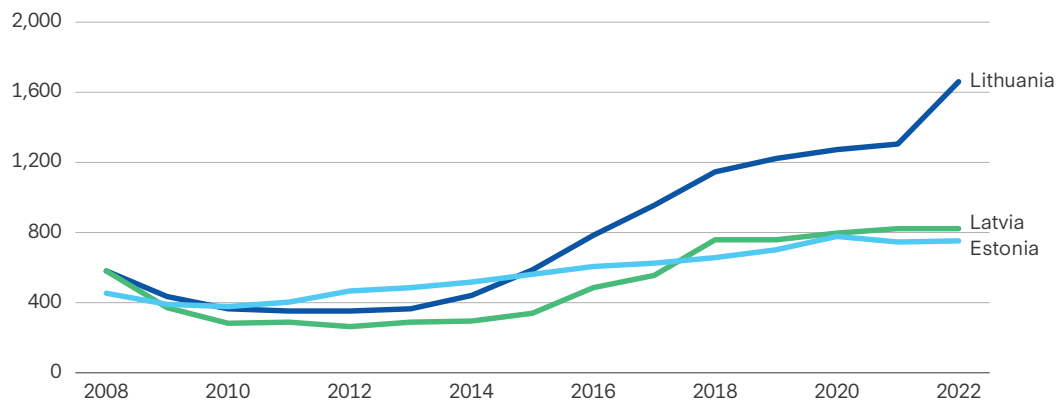
Source: "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023, https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex.

To acquire the personnel needed to build a more robust defense, all the Baltic states have reinstituted conscription: Estonia in 1992, Lithuania in 2016, and Latvia in 2023.[43] Only four other countries in NATO currently have conscription (Denmark, Finland, Greece, and Turkey). Lithuania has increased the number of personnel in uniform by 70 percent since joining NATO in 2004. The increase has mainly been in the army since a ground invasion is most threatening. Air and naval capabilities have remained small and relatively constant.

Quality does not seem to have suffered. Lithuanian forces regularly train with and against NATO troops. One article celebrated Lithuanian ambush skills against U.S. forces in a 2021 training exercise.[44]

Table 2: Major Lithuanian Force Elements in 2004 and 2023

Force Element	2004	2023
Active-duty military personnel	13,510	23,000
Armored fighting vehicles	22	266
Helicopters	9	6
Patrol craft	5	4
Paramilitary	14,600	14,150

Source: IISS, *The Military Balance 2004* (London: Routledge, 2004), https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/tmib20/104/1; and IISS, *The Military Balance 2023* (London: Routledge, 2023), https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/tmib20/current.

The Baltic countries are far ahead of most of the rest of NATO in terms of the percentage of the population in uniform. Table 3 shows the Baltic countries and an illustrative sample of other NATO countries. However, small population size limits what the Baltic states can do. For example, Lithuania has about four times as much of its population in uniform as Germany, yet Germany's armed forces are eight times larger.

Table 3: Percentage of Population in Uniform

Country	Population (thousands)	Full-Time Personnel in Armed Forces (thousands)	Percentage of Population in Full-Time Armed Forces
Lithuania	2,801	23.0	0.82%
Latvia	1,885	16.7	0.89%
Estonia	1,331	7.2	0.54%
United States	331,894	1,359.6	0.41%
Germany	83,196	183.2	0.22%
United Kingdom	67,327	150.4	0.22%

Source: Population totals from "World Bank Open Data," World Bank, n.d., https://data.worldbank.org/; and personnel data from IISS, *The Military Balance 2023*.

The Baltic nations are already more committed than most countries to NATO and European security. Could they do more, such as increase spending to 3 percent of GDP? All three Baltic countries have proposed such a goal. A Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) study proposes this as a way to equip the Baltic forces with modern weapons, particularly anti-tank and air defense systems, and to build facilities for rapid reinforcement. However, such a proposal goes beyond the scope of this study.

Even if the Baltic states increased their already substantial efforts, their small size and lack of strategic resources mean any substantial enhancements to Baltic security will need to be a whole-of-NATO effort.

4

Gaps and Geostrategic Vulnerabilities in Deterrence and Defense

Compared to a hostile Russia, the location, small sizes, and limited resources of the Baltic states creates several vulnerabilities, including a lack of strategic depth, a time and distance challenge for reinforcements, and constricted access through the Suwałki Gap.

The Geostrategic Problem: Lack of Strategic Depth

As a result of their small size, the Baltic countries have a major geostrategic problem: their lack of strategic depth. Whereas Ukraine has been able to defend in depth and use that depth to buy time for strengthening its forces, the Baltic countries have no such option. Their capitals lie only a short distance from a threat border.

Table 4: Distance of Capital City from Nearest Threat Border

Country	Capital City	Threat Border	Distance
Lithuania	Vilnius	Belarus	18 mi (30 km)
		Russia (Kaliningrad)	94 mi (152 km)
Latvia	Riga	Russia	135 mi (217 km)
Estonia	Tallinn	Russia	115 mi (184 km)
Ukraine	Kyiv	Belarus	56 mi (89 km)
		Russia	173 mi (279 km)

Deepest Russian advance toward Kyiv	From Belarus	42 mi (68 km)
	From Russia	152 mi (244 km)

Source: Google Maps.

The bottom row of Table 4 compares distances to capital cities from the closest threat border with the deepest Russian advance toward Kyiv in March 2022. Even though the Russians were unable to capture Kyiv, such an advance would have been sufficient to threaten any of the Baltic country capitals.

A 2016 RAND study explored the problem of a sudden Russian invasion in the case of Estonia and Latvia. The study concluded that "the outcome was, bluntly, a disaster for NATO. Russian forces . . . were at the gates of or actually entering Riga, Tallinn, or both between 36 and 60 hours after the start of hostilities."[45] The study further concluded that

- rapid initial defeat would leave NATO with unattractive options: a bloody counteroffensive, escalation, or temporary acceptance;

- the light forces of the Baltic states and the rapidly deployable forces of NATO would be inadequate in the face of Russian heavy forces; and

- airpower could slow attackers but alone could not stop the attack.

The study recommended a large, permanently stationed force of seven brigades, including three armor brigades, to buy enough time for reinforcements to arrive.[46]

The RAND wargame is not without its detractors, who argue it was unrealistic on several fronts, ranging from the strategic rationale of a Russian invasion (although in hindsight, perhaps that is not implausible) to the provocation that further forward deployments would constitute to the Russians, given the vulnerability of their position in the Baltic.[47] The success of infantry anti-tank weapons during the early stages of the war in Ukraine might reduce the number of heavy units required if the analysis were updated. Regardless of the political considerations, the study's pessimistic military analysis has been widely accepted.

Discussions about threat borders might seem irrelevant to Lithuania since, unlike the other Baltic countries, it does not border the main territory of Russia but instead borders Belarus to the east. Belarus's military forces are small (45,000) and designed to maintain territorial integrity. About 40 percent are conscripts with limited training and deployability.[48] Belarus might be viewed as a buffer between Lithuania and Russia. In fact, Belarus acts as an extension of Russian territory for military planning purposes. It allowed Russian troops to use its territory for the invasion of Ukraine pursuant to a 1997 treaty.[49] Belarus continues to provide Russia with training areas and logistical bases. Further, it has authorized the movement of Russian nuclear weapons onto its territory, and the first weapons may have already arrived as of June 2023.[50] It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that Belarus will allow Russia to use its territory in future conflicts even if Belarus does not participate itself.

Lithuania also borders the Russian outpost of Kaliningrad to the southwest. Although Russia is unlikely to conduct a major ground attack from Kaliningrad–many of the local ground forces were

rotated to Ukraine and suffered heavy losses–it could harass Lithuanian forces and launch air and missile strikes from the enclave. Indeed, Kaliningrad can establish a strong defensive bubble, often called an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capability, with anti-ship missile units and medium-range Iskander missiles. Kaliningrad's air defenses are exceptionally strong–six S-400 battalions and two S-300 battalions–allowing it to threaten NATO air movement and likely prevent airlift to Lithuania during a conflict because of the particularly high vulnerability of large cargo aircraft.[51]

Figure 5 shows the range of Russian air defense systems based in Kaliningrad. As is evident, the systems can cover the entire country of Lithuania and most of Latvia.[52]

Figure 5: Russian Air Defense Coverage from Kaliningrad
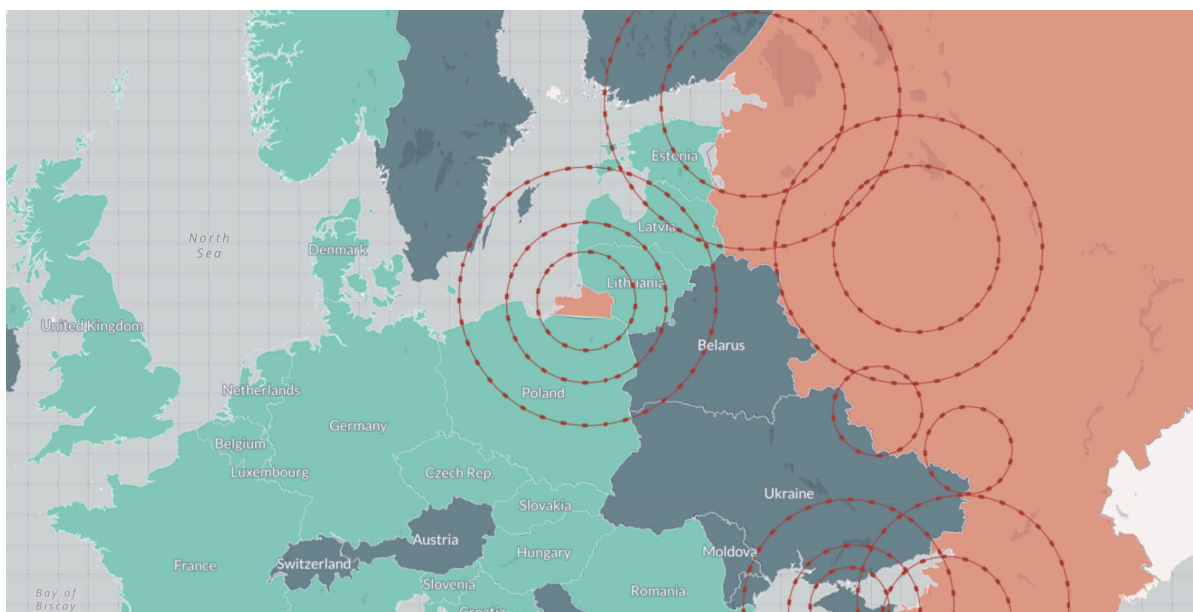
Source: Ian Williams, "The Russia – NATO A2AD Environment," CSIS, *Missile Threat,* January 3, 2017, https://missilethreat.csis.org/russia-nato-a2ad-environment/.

NATO's Time and Distance Problem

The lack of strategic depth might be manageable if NATO could reinforce quickly. That was NATO's plan during the Cold War, where West Germany had very little territory to trade and was, in any case, unwilling to cede territory for political reasons. However, the short distance from peacetime garrisons to wartime positions meant that NATO forces could get into position quickly, increasing the chances that they would be ready when conflict began. Table 5 shows the deployment distances for an illustrative group of Cold War combat units.

Table 5: Distance from Unit Garrison to Front Lines during the Cold War

Unit	Peacetime Garrison	Distance to Wartime Position
German 1st Infantry Division	Hanover	64 mi (102 km)
German 2nd Infantry Division	Marburg	46 mi (74 km)
U.S. 10th Infantry Division	Würzburg	77 mi (123 km)
U.S. 4th Armored Division	Göppingen	71 mi (115 km)
U.S. 11th Airborne Division	Augsburg	20 mi (32 km)
UK 20th Armoured Brigade	Westfalen Garrison	73 mi (117 km)
UK 4th Armoured Brigade	Osnabrück Garrison	118 mi (190 km)
Forces Françaises en Allemagne (French Forces in Germany), HQ	Baden-Baden	168 mi (270 km)

Source: U.S. forces from Donald A. Carter, *Forging the Shield: The U.S. Army in Europe, 1951-1962* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2015), 300; others from IISS, *Military Balance 1978 and 1985*. Coordinates from Google Maps.

The situation in the Baltic countries today is entirely different. Baltic forces can get to the front lines quickly, as can the NATO forward-deployed battle groups. However, as Table 6 shows using the Lithuanian battle group as an illustration, reinforcing NATO forces and any battle group units still in their home countries have much longer distances to travel, up to 10 times as far as during the Cold War.[53]

Table 6: Distance from Illustrative Unit Garrisons to Front Lines in Baltic Countries Today (Lithuanian battle group countries)

Unit	Illustrative Peacetime Base	Distance
Germany	Oldenburg	666 mi (1,072 km)
Belgium	Leopoldsburg	836 mi (1,345 km)
Czechia	Žatec	558 mi (898 km)
The Netherlands	Schaarsbergen	786 mi (1,264 km)
Norway	Bardufoss	985 mi (1,586 km)
Luxembourg	Diekirch	844 mi (1,357 km)

Note: The battle group's headquarters at Rukla, Lithuania, is assumed to be the wartime destination.

Source: Google Maps.

A recent assessment by two researchers at the Brookings Institution confirms this problem. As they conclude:

> Through comparing the relative combat power of NATO's forces in the Baltics with Russia's forces in its Western Military District and Kaliningrad oblast, we confirmed that the NATO

capability gaps identified in previous studies remain large. We also found that potential NATO high readiness reinforcements would be incapable of closing the gaps for at least a month in a crisis scenario. These capability shortcomings clearly hinder the United States' and NATO's ongoing efforts to conventionally deter Russian aggression in the Baltics or to decisively respond in a crisis.[54]

Distance is not the only challenge. During the Cold War, military planners were deeply concerned about whether there would be enough time after strategic warning for NATO to come to a decision about mobilization and then execute the required tactical movements. Those concerns are much greater today because the threat is more distant and the number of NATO countries has doubled since the Cold War, meaning reaching a decision to respond to Russian attacks may take longer. Admiral James Stavridis, former supreme commander of NATO, likened NATO decisionmaking to having, at that time, "28 pairs of hands on the steering wheel."[55] This is a particular challenge today, as some states have developed different views about the Russian threat and where to draw the line between prudent precautions and unnecessary provocations.

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Challenges to Moving Forces to the Baltic Region

Physically moving military forces within Europe is difficult. The existing road and rail infrastructure is superb for moving masses of people and civilian goods. However, it is not well designed for moving heavy military equipment. There are legal and bureaucratic impediments to moving military equipment with respect to diplomatic clearance, transportation safety regulations, and differing ammunition transport standards between countries.

A 2017 study from the U.S. Army concluded that the "reality is that it is extremely difficult to provide sustainment to exercises and forces deployed into Eastern Europe and the Baltic regions due to cumbersome and time-consuming requirements to gain diplomatic and security clearances for convoys. The long lead time (normally 30 days), specificity required, and inability to change requests make the process a great hindrance."[56]

The European Union is seeking to reduce these barriers through its Permanent Structured Cooperation Organization (PESCO), which has a project on "simplifying and standardizing cross-border military transport procedures."[57] The project needs to come to an agreement on ways to expedite movement and then implement it. The Baltic countries will not have time to wait for bureaucratic procedures in an emergency.

The Suwałki Gap Problem

In the Cold War, the Fulda Gap—an area of open ground among the hills near Frankfurt that provided the shortest route from East Germany to the river Rhine—gained almost mythical status as the most likely invasion route for Warsaw Pact forces into West Germany, a NATO ally.[58] This strategic pinch point became the focus of NATO and Warsaw Pact forces stationed in the region.

Today's equivalent is the Suwałki Gap, also known as the "Kaliningrad Corridor."[59] As the map shows, this is the 40-mile (65-kilometer) gap between Kaliningrad and Belarus where Lithuania borders Poland. Russian artillery stationed on both sides, in Kaliningrad and Belarus, could cover the entire corridor. A complete closure of the corridor is probably beyond the capabilities of the Russian forces available. Nevertheless, the Lithuanians also worry that the Russians might attempt the high risk/high reward operation of using ground forces to seal the gap, even if temporarily. In any case, the Russians would try to slow NATO reinforcements, either by interdicting networks or by forcing a time-consuming operation to suppress the artillery. Thus, NATO forces moving by ground might have to run a gauntlet of fire. In peacetime, the corridor constitutes a flashpoint similar to the Berlin corridors during the Cold War. Incidents might easily arise during the transit of Russian equipment and personnel through NATO territory to Kaliningrad.

Figure 6: Map of the Suwałki Gap
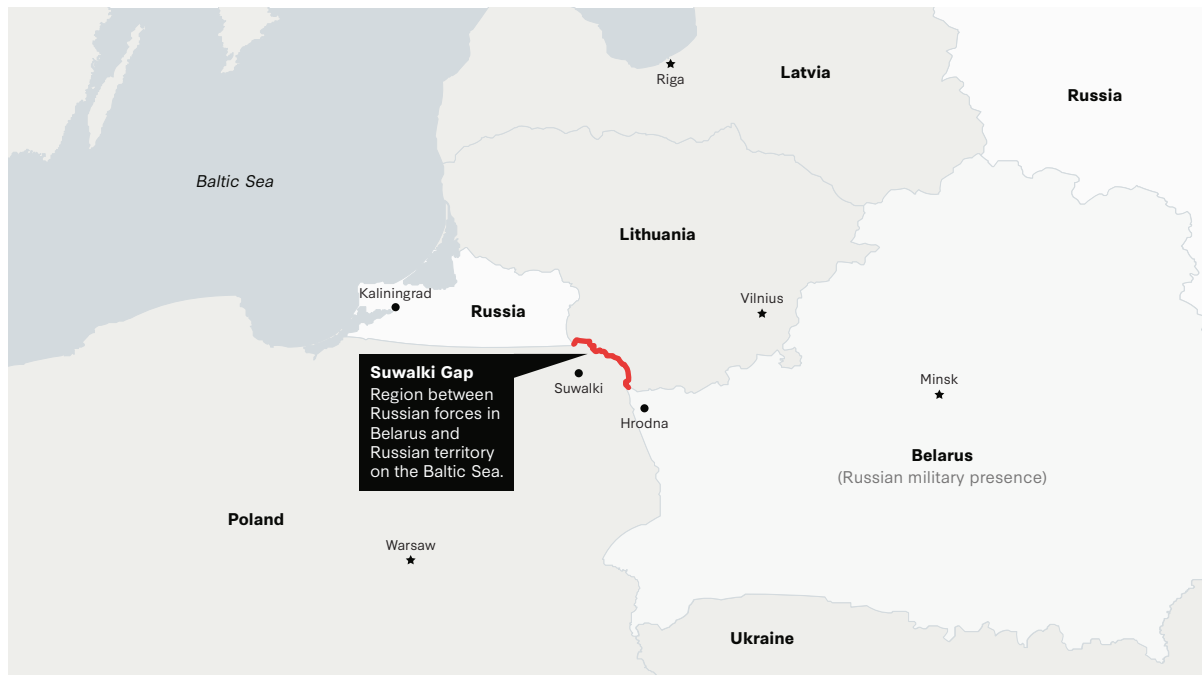
The Suwałki Gap is a major problem for NATO military planners as it is vital for the defense of the Baltic countries but is far from NATO centers of power. Solving the Suwałki Gap problem is a matter for every NATO member, but it has particular implications for both Lithuania and Poland, which border the area.[60] They are best placed to host the forward-deployed forces required to keep the gap open in a no-notice or short-notice invasion scenario.

5

Made in Madrid

NATO's Commitments to Strengthen Defense and Deterrence

Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine has reenergized the NATO alliance. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine ended NATO's post–Cold War strategy of engagement with Russia. Over the last two decades, NATO allies have collectively realized they must strengthen their own defenses to deter an aggressive Kremlin.

This realization was captured in NATO's new strategic concept and in a series of commitments made at the leaders' summit in Madrid to turn the strategic concept into reality by strengthening defense and deterrence.[61]

This chapter offers a brief assessment of the current status of those commitments.[62] It concludes that NATO will struggle to implement them ahead of the Vilnius summit next month, as the secretary general initially promised.[63]

The New NATO Strategic Concept

At the Madrid summit in June 2022, NATO approved a new strategic concept, the eighth since the alliance began.[64] In addition to European military security, the concept covers a broad set of topics such as Chinese assertiveness, terrorism, climate change, the role of women, and arms control. The key change for European security is highlighting Russia as an immediate threat: "The Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine has shattered peace and greatly altered our security environment. . . . The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area."[65] The concept reiterates the

alliance's defensive purpose and three core tasks: deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management, and collective security.

At the Madrid summit in June 2022, NATO approved a new strategic concept, the eighth since the alliance began. The key change for European security is highlighting Russia as an immediate threat.

Several items are particularly relevant to Baltic security:

- First, this concept rejects the previous "deterrence by reinforcement" approach and instead states, "we will deter and defend forward with robust in-place, multi-domain, combat-ready forces."[66]

- Building on this theme, the concept states the intention "to defend every inch of Alliance territory, preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all allies and prevail against any aggressor."[67] That rules out a strategy of withdrawal and counterattack.

- The concept emphasizes readiness: "We will continue to enhance the collective readiness, responsiveness, deployability, integration and interoperability of our forces."[68] High readiness is necessary to implement a forward defense strategy.

- The concept endorses nuclear modernization, recognizing the need to offset Russia's modernized nuclear forces. Further, the concept recognizes the need to develop mechanisms for countering Russian nuclear saber rattling.

- Finally, the concept highlights the importance of resources, without which concepts will remain just words and lack real-world impact: "We will ensure our nations meet the commitments under the Defense Investment Pledge, in its entirety, to provide the full range of required capabilities."[69]

Establishment of Forward-Deployed Forces

In 2016, NATO established four battle groups of reinforced battalion size in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. These missions–known as Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP)–host multinational forces under the leadership of the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, and the United States, respectively.[70] In 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO established four additional EFP battle groups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, led by Italy, Hungary, France, and Czechia, respectively.

The four northeast battle groups currently fall under NATO's Multinational Corps Northeast located in Szczecin, Poland. For coordination of training and preparation activities, the Lithuanian battle group comes under the Multinational Division Northeast in Elbląg, Poland. Troops in Latvia and Estonia come under Multinational Division North in Ādaži, Latvia.

A limitation of the battle groups is their small, "proportionate" size, intended to emphasize their defensive purpose.[71] The battlegroup in Lithuania, one of the largest, had about 1,200 personnel prewar and has about 1,600 personnel today, thanks to Germany reinforcing its forces after the war began.[72]

Table 7: Typical Composition of the NATO Battle Group Lithuania

Country	Unit Composition
Germany (framework nation)	Headquarters, peacetime coordination, and (currently) one mechanized infantry battalion
Belgium	Logistics team
Czechia	Varies, typically one company-sized combat unit
Iceland/ Luxembourg	Small support teams
The Netherlands	Mechanized infantry company
Norway	Combined arms company

Source: NATO fact sheets on enhanced forward presence, May 2017, February 2018, October 2020, June 2022, and November 2022, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/144032.htm.

As a statement of support for the Baltic countries and an enhancement to deterrence, these battle groups are an important addition to NATO's efforts in Eastern Europe. Over half of NATO member countries participate in the four battle groups involved with Baltic security, and all NATO members participate in the eight battle groups. Putting troops on the ground is a powerful statement about political support.

As warfighting organizations, however, the battle groups have serious weaknesses arising from the constant rotations and the diverse national elements, leading some critics to refer to them as "Christmas tree units." The fact that the battle groups have been operating for several years helps, but the history of multinational warfighting organizations is not a happy one.[73]

NATO's forward deployments are not limited to land forces. NATO's Air Policing mission was established during the Cold War in 1961 and has been operational for over 60 years. While NATO has been protecting the Baltic skies since 2004, the Air Policing mission was strengthened in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 when a persistent presence based in Ämari Air Base in Estonia was added in addition to the existing presence at Šiauliai Air Base in Lithuania. This was further enhanced in 2022 by additional aircraft in Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania. These forces regularly intercept Russian aircraft.[74]

In addition, NATO's Air Shielding mission was added in 2022 to "provide a near-seamless shield from the Baltic to the Black Sea, ensuring NATO allies are better able to safeguard and protect alliance territory, populations, and forces."[75] The Air Shielding mission comprises ground-based air defense systems deployed across Eastern Europe, including a Spanish NASAMs unit in Lithuania, alongside fighter aircraft operating in air defense roles through the Air Policing mission.

NATO has increased maritime readiness and forward deployments as well. In 2022, NATO's Standing Naval Forces came under the command of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) for the first time as part of the NATO Response Force. These forces comprise four groups: two Standing NATO Maritime Groups and two Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Groups. They are informally supported by the maritime forces organized under the Joint Expeditionary Force, a group of 10 northern European militaries led by the United Kingdom.[76] The addition of Finland, and potentially Sweden, to the NATO alliance also opens new possibilities for strengthening the security of the Baltic Sea through NATO.[77]

NATO Reinforcement Plans and Capabilities

Increased budget resources have allowed NATO to expand its capabilities. For example, the 2018 NATO Readiness Initiative set a goal of "four 30s": 30 infantry battalions, 30 air squadrons, and 30 naval ships, all available in 30 days. This builds on previous initiatives for a NATO response force and a 5,000-service member "spearhead force."[78] In the summer of 2022, NATO announced an even more ambitious goal under its new NATO force model, a high readiness force of 300,000 troops.[79] However, the scope of this announcement appeared to take some allies by surprise.[80] Generating realistic plans to meet this ambitious goal will be a focus of the Vilnius summit and beyond.

As an illustration of these reinforcement capabilities, NATO rushed troops to the east when Russia invaded Ukraine.[81] Over 40,000 troops, plus air and naval assets, were placed under the direct command of SACEUR. The United States bolstered its presence in Europe by over 20,000 troops.[82] Four new EFP battlegroups were added in Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania.

In the summer of 2022, NATO announced an even more ambitious goal under its new NATO force model, a high readiness force of 300,000 troops. However, the scope of this announcement appeared to take some allies by surprise.

The United Kingdom sent forces to Estonia and Poland, the French and Belgians sent forces to Romania, and the Germans sent a reinforced company to Lithuania.[83]

A significant change in NATO force readiness in Eastern Europe is Poland's emergence as a military power. It is the hub of support going to Ukraine and has expanded its military capabilities. As Polish ambassador Marek Magieroswki noted at a CSIS conference, "Poland has been perceived until recently as a net recipient of security. Now we are trying to transition to a new role of net provider of security."[84] This bodes well for a NATO response to a future crisis in the Baltic region since reinforcing forces must flow through Poland, and Poland needs to take a major role in keeping the Suwałki Gap open.

Madrid Summit Commitments and Their Current Status

NATO held its annual summit in Madrid on June 23-29, 2022.[85] Making this summit unique, however, was the upfront statement that "war has returned to the European continent." The summit's main focus was therefore the war in Ukraine. The summit condemned Russia's "war of

aggression," committed to "democracy, individual liberty, human rights, and the rule of law," and pledged "unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders."[86]

At the Madrid summit, NATO allies made several commitments to implement the defense and deterrence measures in NATO's new strategic concept. Shown below are the commitments most relevant to Baltic security and an assessment of their status as of June 2023.[87] The assessments are summarized below in Table 8.

1. "We will build on our newly enhanced posture, and significantly strengthen our deterrence and defence for the long term to ensure the security and defence of all Allies."

NATO's long-term commitment to strengthening deterrence is underpinned by the defense spending of allies. As the Madrid declaration also stated:

> We reaffirm our commitment to the Defence Investment Pledge in its entirety. We will build on that pledge and decide next year on subsequent commitments beyond 2024. We will ensure that our political decisions are adequately resourced. We will build on the progress made to ensure that increased national defence expenditures and NATO common funding will be commensurate with the challenges of a more contested security order. Investing in our defence and key capabilities is essential.

Overall, NATO military budgets increased 32 percent from 2015 to 2020 (see Figure 7).[88]

Figure 7: NATO Europe and Canada Total Defense Expenditures, Annual Percentage Change
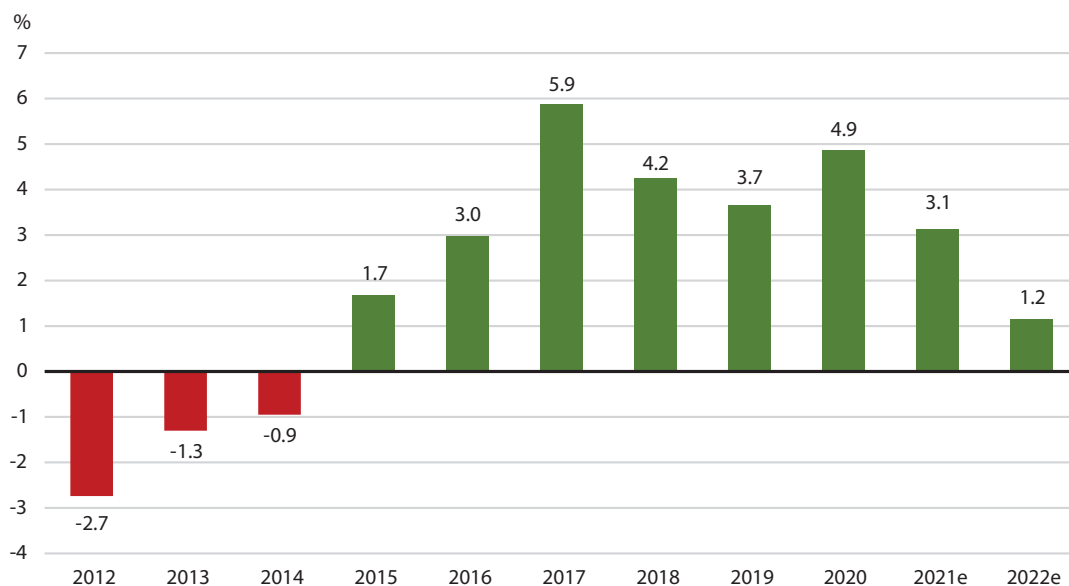
Source: Derived from NATO annual expenditure chart. NATO, "Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2013–2020)," Press release, June 27, 2022, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220627-def-exp-2022-en.pdf. Reported as percentages based on 2015 prices and exchange rates.

At the 2014 Wales summit, NATO members set a target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense.[89] As Figure 2 showed, the number of nations meeting the 2 percent spending target increased to 10 in 2022.[90] Member states on NATO's eastern flank in particular have taken steps to meet and, in some cases, exceed the goal. This includes Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. The United States, United Kingdom, Croatia, and Greece also meet the goal. Secretary General Stoltenberg has expressed confidence in continued improvement: "Nineteen allies have clear plans to reach it by 2024, and an additional five have concrete commitments to meet it thereafter."[91] Still, 21 states do not now meet the goal. Indeed, even though the total wealth of the United States and European NATO countries is roughly the same, Europe has typically decided to spend around half what the United States does on defense, hence the saying: "Americans are from Mars, Europeans from Venus."[92] There is much room for improvement.

Germany remains the key outlier. Since 2014, it has increased its defense budget by 32 percent in constant dollars, but the country's defense budget still constitutes only 1.5 percent of GDP.[93] Nevertheless, even this modest GDP percentage produces Europe's second-largest military budget, so German policy matters a lot.

Immediately after the invasion, Germany announced a dramatic change in its national security policy, proposing to increase military spending to 2 percent of GDP, including the creation of a €100 billion ($112 billion) investment fund.[94] Although the FY 2023 budget does not show much growth, the FY 2024 budget will reportedly include a €10 billion increase, a 20 percent jump if implemented. However, Germany is finding out how hard it is to fulfill a dramatic announcement and to break with half a century of Ostpolitik–Germany's long-standing effort to reach out to the east, originally to the Soviet-bloc countries and, later, Russia.[95]

Not only does Europe spend less, but the fragmented nature of its military and industrial base means it produces much less "bang" for its euro than the United States does for its "buck."[96]

This has exacerbated Europe's "defense dilemma"–while defense spending has risen, defense cooperation has fallen.[97] This leads to serious inefficiencies in European defense. As a result, some have advocated for a stronger European pillar in NATO, enshrined within NATO's defense planning targets.[98] Part of the solution will also be encouraging more cooperation between European allies.

2. "Allies have committed to deploy additional robust in-place combat-ready forces on our eastern flank, to be scaled up from the existing battle groups to brigade-size units where and when required. . ."

The centerpiece of the Madrid commitments to strengthen defense and deterrence was the pledge to increase the size of the combat forces deployed under the eight EFP missions across NATO's eastern flank. This may be the most demanding commitment, given the costs and infrastructure required to generate combat ready, in-place forces that need to be housed, trained, exercised, supplied, and enabled through command and control structures. However, NATO has no choice: its "new" strategy of forward defense is not credible without them.

NATO has taken several steps toward this goal in the 12 months since the Madrid summit. In the Baltic region, two EFP missions have demonstrated their ability to rapidly scale up to brigade level through multinational exercises: the U.S.-led battle group in Poland and the UK-led battle group in Estonia.[99] Germany, the framework nation for the battle group in Lithuania, has doubled its forces in Lithuania to 1,000 since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022, including deployment of a 100-strong brigade headquarters.[100] Canada and Latvia signed an agreement in Madrid to augment the Canadian-led battlegroup to "work with Latvia and NATO Allies to generate and stage forces in order to surge to a combat capable brigade."[101]

However, despite these positive and necessary steps, none of the Baltic region battle groups have yet been upgraded to brigades. As various commentators and analyses point out, NATO's forward defense strategy remains a "work in progress."[102]

One example is the German-led battlegroup in Lithuania. Lithuania's EFP mission has high visibility because of Lithuania's vital importance to NATO's forward defense and deterrence due to its proximity to Belarus and Kaliningrad, as well as the vulnerable Suwałki Gap. Also, Lithuania is hosting the next NATO leaders' summit in July, which will inevitably highlight the state of NATO's support to Lithuania's requirements for defense and deterrence.

The governments of Germany and Lithuania are in active discussions about how to implement the goal of stationing a full brigade and have reached an agreement in principle. A 2022 joint communiqué states, "Germany is ready to lead a robust and combat-ready brigade in Lithuania dedicated to deter and defend against Russian aggression. Initially, led by a permanently deployed brigade forward command element in Lithuania, this brigade will consist of German combat forces specifically designated for this purpose, potentially augmented by possible multinational contributions."[103] A joint working group will develop implementation details.

In the same 2022 joint communiqué, Lithuania pledged to provide the required infrastructure, which is quite substantial. For example, a contract for over €110 million ($120 million) was signed in February 2023 to build facilities in Pabradė to accommodate up to 3,000 troops for use "by the NATO Forward Presence troops, US battalions and troops from other allied countries coming to Lithuania."[104] In addition, three new battalion-size facilities are also under construction in Šilalė, Šiauliai, and Vilnius District. To support garrison and training facilities for a full brigade, Lithuania has stated a multiyear (2023–2027) commitment of €430 million ($470 million).[105]

Lithuanian president Gitanas Nausėda reiterated these points in an April 2023 visit to Germany. He told Lithuanian media that he and German chancellor Olaf Scholz had agreed on the gradual deployment of the German brigade, depending on what progress is made in developing the necessary military infrastructure in Lithuania. He stated that the infrastructure would be ready in 2026. The Germans did not respond directly.[106] Although Lithuania wants a German-led brigade deployed permanently there, German defense minister Boris Pistorius has said it will be "up to NATO."[107] In May, President Nausėda hosted German president Frank Walter-Steinmeier and again reiterated that "We need your boots on the ground!"[108]

Despite the high-level discussions, visits, and communiqués, it remains unclear what the composition of the brigade will be and when it would be fully established in Lithuania after an initial period when the majority would be based in Germany.

Regarding composition, the Lithuanians have asked that the brigade be either medium or heavy. Light brigades, they believe, are not credible to the heavily armored Russians. RAND analyses, previously cited, also recommend heavy brigades. However, army units are far too expensive for any Baltic state to field. The annual operations costs for the United States of an armored brigade combat team is $690 million. With support, that rises to $1.8 billion. Lithuania's entire annual defense budget is $1.6 billion.[109] The Germans seem leaning toward a heavy brigade, which would meet the Lithuanian request.

Regarding stationing, the Baltic states have strong opinions. As Artis Pabriks, a former Latvian defense minister, stated, "They should not be in Germany–they should be in Lithuania, at least 70 to 80 percent of the brigade strength."[110] Lithuania's concern is that the brigade never develops from its current status of being mostly in Germany to being fully or mostly on the ground in Lithuania. This concern also reflects those of Lithuania's Baltic and Eastern European neighbors. Just as Germany has stated its preferred solution is to reinforce Lithuania from Germany, the same approach has been advocated by the United Kingdom in Estonia, Canada in Latvia, and France in Romania.[111]

The problem is that pre-assigning NATO forces is not the same as deploying them. As the saying goes, "virtual presence is actual absence."[112] If this tension between the Madrid commitments, the needs of the Baltic and Eastern European nations, and the solutions proposed so far by the EFP lead nations is not resolved at the Vilnius summit, this issue may become a litmus test of NATO's credibility and cohesion.

3. ". . . underpinned by credible rapidly available reinforcements, pre-positioned equipment, and enhanced command and control . . . [including] establishing division-level structures."[113]

Pre-positioned equipment: Pre-positioned equipment refers to the staging of equipment in the threatened region. It has long been an element of U.S. military preparations, with equipment sets in Europe, the Middle East, and the Pacific. The advantage is that personnel are much easier to move than equipment. Thus, combat capability can be established more quickly than by moving an entire unit. Nevertheless, there is some delay in fielding units in a crisis since the troops must physically deploy, then get the equipment out of storage, move to the front lines, and become absorbed in the existing command structure (a process the military calls "reception, staging, onward movement, and integration").

Establishing a set of pre-positioned equipment is complex and expensive, requiring the acquisition of real estate, the building of warehouses, the procurement of extra sets of equipment, and the provision of maintenance support to keep equipment ready during peacetime.

The United States has opened a facility in Poland for pre-positioned equipment, though it will take some additional time for the facility to become fully operational. Even getting this far has taken

six years.[114] Lithuania is building 30 warehouses and plans to build 70 more. NATO launched the Multinational Ammunition Warehousing Initiative (MAWI) in 2021, which now features 20 members and opened its first facility in Estonia during 2022.[115] The MAWI Eastern Arc "is intended to provide a fully coordinated and integrated multinational approach for enhancing the munition storage infrastructure within the host nations for NATO's multinational battlegroups."[116]

Command and control: Planned wartime reinforcements and the upgrade of battle groups to full brigades would bring the number of units to a level requiring a division headquarters on location in peacetime. Estonia has stood up an initial division headquarters, and there are plans for establishing national division headquarters in Latvia.[117] Lithuania just authorized the establishment of a national division headquarters, with full operating capacity set to be reached in 2030.[118] Although Baltic national divisions would have operational functions when augmented in wartime, the "divisions" lack many of the support capabilities (e.g., fires, communications, engineers, and logistics) needed to operate at this level of command and may, therefore, also depend on augmentation by NATO allies.

Unclear is whether the Baltic states have the capability of developing such headquarters individually or whether, as a CSBA report recommends, that capability should be developed regionally.[119]

In terms of multinational NATO command and control structures, Exercise Griffin Lightning in March proved the readiness of NATO's newest division level command, Multinational Division North, headquartered in Ādaži, Latvia. It included troop contributions from 13 allies, including the German 1st Armored and Polish 12th Mechanized Divisions.[120]

4. "We welcome the initial offers by Allies to NATO's new force model, which will strengthen and modernise the NATO Force Structure and will resource our new generation of military plans."

One notable commitment made by NATO in Madrid was to increase its response force of high readiness units from 40,000 to over 300,000 personnel through a new force model.[121] According to NATO:

> The NATO Force Model will deliver an Allied response at much greater scale and at higher readiness than the current NATO Response Force, which it will replace. It will provide a larger pool of high readiness forces across domains, land, sea, air and cyber, which will be pre-assigned to specific plans for the defence of Allies. It will improve NATO's ability to respond at very short notice for any contingency and enable Allies to make more forces available to NATO on an assured basis.[122]

While the ambition of the initiative is laudable, it got off to a bad start, with some allies taken by surprise at the scale of the plans announced by Secretary General Stoltenberg.[123] Furthermore, there are few signs the ambition is on track to meet its goal of being completed this year.[124] For example, according to one analysis by a German think tank, the scale of forces required by Germany will be difficult to generate, given that "since 2014, Germany has been unable to provide NATO with a single brigade . . . providing two more brigades in the brief period remaining will require a superhuman effort."[125]

FOI, the Swedish Defence Research Agency, studied the readiness of NATO forces and found severe problems in many areas, especially with Germany, whose capability to "marshal and deploy heavy . . . formations of brigade size [is] low."[126] Movement for the German high-readiness Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) brigade from Münster, Germany, to Żagań, Poland, takes approximately 10 days. This is followed by the Initial Follow-on Forces Group, within 30 to 45 days, and the NRF Follow-on Forces Group, which FOI estimates could take months to deploy. The severe readiness shortfalls of German military forces have led some experts to conclude that Germany has a military designed for mobilization rather than for current operations.[127]

The viability of NATO's new force model is hard to judge, as implementation detail is very sparse. What is clear is the scale of the commitment. Even the first 300,000 troops at 30 days' notice–or about 15 to 20 divisions–is far beyond the previous "four 30s" target of 30 *battalions*. This is an increase of scale of around 10 times. Moreover, this is happening when Europe's biggest defense spender, the United Kingdom, may struggle to generate one warfighting division by 2025 and Germany cannot generate a brigade.[128] And this is just land forces–serious gaps exist across European navies, air enablers, air defense, and high-end capabilities.[129]

5. "We will enhance our collective defense exercises to be prepared for high intensity and multi-domain operations and ensure reinforcement of any ally on short notice."

NATO already has an extensive annual series of exercises, many of which aim to enhance the defense of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. For example, nine major exercises focused on the region in 2021. In the past few months NATO has held several significant exercises to fulfill its commitment to strengthening deterrence. These include the following:

- In March 2023, over 14,000 NATO troops from 11 allies participated in exercise Spring Storm, the largest exercise in Estonia.[130] This included reinforcing the UK-led EFP battle group to brigade size through deploying 1,500 troops and 140 vehicles.[131]

- In May, Griffin Shock demonstrated the rapid expansion of the U.S.-led EFP battlegroup to brigade level in Poland, with over 3,000 troops from multiple nations, including the U.S. Army's 2nd Cavalry Regiment.[132]

- In June 2023, BALTOPS (Baltic Operations), a large annual exercise in the Baltic Sea, saw 50 ships, more than 45 aircraft, and 6,000 personnel from 20 allies conduct large-scale exercises in the Baltic Sea.[133]

- Also in June 2023, NATO held its largest ever air exercise, Air Defender, with 250 aircraft and 10,000 personnel from 25 allied countries taking part. The exercise was hosted and led by Germany, with training missions over the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, and Southern Germany.[134]

- Also in June, the Lithuanian EFP battlegroup demonstrated its integration into the Lithuanian "Iron Wolf" brigade.[135]

This robust series of multinational exercises demonstrates a strong willingness across the alliance to meet the Madrid commitment to collective defense exercises to reassure allies and deter Moscow. However, only two of the eight EFP missions have been scaled up to brigade size for exercises.

One specific challenge for the Baltic countries when it comes to exercising is the limited room and training facilities to hold large-scale, multinational combined arms exercises on Baltic territory.

Summary

The table below summarizes the above assessment of the current status of NATO's Madrid commitments to forward defense and deterrence. When NATO made these commitments, Secretary General Stoltenberg recognized that "the biggest overhaul [of] our collective defence since the end of the Cold War" will not happen straightaway–"We'll take the decision now and then we'll start implementation and then they will be available and ready next year."[136] Thus, the fact that implementation is incomplete is not evidence of failure. Nevertheless, given the immediacy of the threat, continuous progress is needed.

Table 8: Status of Madrid Summit Decisions about Forward Defense and Deterrence

Madrid Commitment	Status	Assessment
Defense spending	Partially met	Only 10 allies meet the existing Defense Investment Pledge to spend 2 percent of their GDP on defense. The current pledge expires in 2024.
Forward defense forces	Partially met	None of the eight EFP missions have been strengthened to brigade level. Some have deployed brigade HQs and surged for exercises.
Forward defense enablers	Partially met	Pre-positioned stocks—and warehouses to store them—are being developed, albeit slowly. NATO's command and control structures have been developed and exercised, but those based on national headquarters remain a concern.
New force model	Not met	There is significant uncertainty around the viability of NATO's new force model given the scale of the commitment—around 10 times larger than plans for previous high-readiness forces—combined with existing readiness concerns and capability gaps across European forces. There is little sign it will meet the target set in Madrid of being implemented this year.
Exercise program	Partially met	NATO has implemented a robust exercise program in the past few months, including exercises to reinforce the Baltic states and the biggest air exercise in NATO's history, Air Defender. However, only two of the eight EFP missions have demonstrated their ability to scale up to brigade level.

Source: CSIS research and analysis.

In summary, the "back to the future" strategy of forward defense NATO allies agreed on in Madrid is the right one for the alliance, given the unpredictability and danger of the current Russian regime. However, the reality of implementing the commitments NATO made to strengthening its defense and deterrence in Madrid appears to be lagging behind the rhetoric. While allied defense spending continues to rise and NATO has implemented a robust exercise program to reassure allies and deter Moscow, progress on scaling up the eight EFP missions, strengthening regional plans, and generating forces for the new NATO force model appear sluggish.

From Madrid to Vilnius

Closing NATO's Deterrence Gap in the Baltics

All eyes will be on Lithuania next month when it hosts the next NATO leaders' summit in Vilnius. One year on from its historic Madrid summit, NATO should use the summit to demonstrate progress on the commitments it made in Madrid to strengthening defense and deterrence. This situation affects the Baltic nations more than others because of their strategic vulnerability to attack from Russia and the challenges of reinforcing the region. Each Baltic state has its particular vulnerabilities. Lithuania is highly vulnerable because of its proximity to Russian forces based in Belarus and Kaliningrad, as well as the exposed Suwałki Gap.

This final chapter builds on the assessment of the current status of NATO's Madrid commitments above to recommend what NATO needs to do in Vilnius to meet its own commitments to strengthen defense and deterrence in the Baltic states.

An Ounce of Prevention . . .

A major lesson from the conflict in Ukraine is that it is far better to prevent a conflict than to fight one. A conflict in the Baltic region might be short, but it might also degenerate into a stalemate that lasts months or years, inflicting military and civilian casualties, crippling economies, destroying equipment, and laying waste to the surrounding territory.

Aid to Ukraine provides a perspective. Prewar, the United States provided about $300 million per year, for a total of $1.9 billion between 2016 and 2021.[137] For the first year of the war, the United States committed $77.1 billion of aid (including military, economic, and humanitarian) and the

Europeans committed another $74.5 billion.[138] Looking back, it would have been far preferable to have provided more aid up front and deterred the conflict than to help Ukraine fight the conflict.

No Substitute for Forward Deployments and Forward Defense

While the new strategic concept agreed in Madrid sets out a "back to the future" strategy for NATO of a return to deterrence by denial through forward defense, it is worth briefly recapping the logic behind this strategy.

The U.S. Department of Defense defines deterrence as "the prevention of action by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction and/or belief that the cost of action outweighs the perceived benefits."[139] In discussing deterrence, scholars make distinctions between deterrence by punishment (threatening retaliatory action), deterrence by reinforcement (taking action when a crisis comes), and deterrence by denial (physically preventing an adversary from achieving objectives). All these approaches can work in the right circumstances, but current circumstances in the Baltic region push NATO toward deterrence by denial.[140]

The spectacular failure of "deterrence by detection" in preventing Russia's invasion of Ukraine should eliminate that concept from future consideration. Detection and publication of Russia's intentions did not stop the invasion. The lesson is that early detection of adversary intentions is valuable in taking counteractions but is highly risky as the basis for national survival.[141]

Deterrence by punishment in the case of a Russian invasion of the Baltic countries would require massive strikes, conventional or nuclear, against the Russian homeland. This is a "tripwire" strategy whereby a small force is put in harm's way. This forces the aggressor to take military action and inflict casualties, which would presumably induce the defender to respond. The strategy received attention during the Cold War, when scholars suggested this as a way to offset weaknesses in conventional forces by leveraging nuclear capabilities. The tripwire would cause a nuclear response. It became U.S. strategy in the 1950s ("Massive Retaliation"). U.S. nuclear superiority during this period made the threat plausible.[142]

Tripwire strategies are attractive because of their low cost but are risky and have a questionable track record. Scholars Paul Poast and Dan Reiter concluded from a study of forces: "Militarily inconsequential forces are surprisingly ineffective at deterring aggression. . . . Potential attackers will still strike if they believe they can achieve their territorial goals swiftly, winning a fait accompli before larger reinforcements can arrive."[143]

Even if the concepts were viable when the United States had nuclear superiority in the 1950s or conventional superiority in the 1990s, they do not apply to the Baltic region today, where the United States lacks nuclear superiority or regional conventional superiority. Further, many NATO nations would be unwilling to risk nuclear war by striking the Russian homeland, even with conventional weapons.

Deterrence by reinforcement is viable if there is time. However, as shown in the previous chapters, NATO may not have much time to react to a Russian invasion. Further, the readiness shortfalls of many allies undermine the credibility of a strategy based on reinforcement.

Reinforcement also implies the need for at least some counteroffensive efforts since reinforcing forces are unlikely to arrive in sufficient strength to completely repel an attack. Retaking lost territory through counterattacks is feasible and has been done throughout military history. The problem is that it is difficult and expensive. Defense has many advantages, including the ability to employ barriers, the ability to fight from entrenchments, and a simpler command and control environment. Counterattack to gain lost territory requires a massive buildup of forces to achieve the needed superiority. Military literature often cites a requirement for a 3:1 superiority in the attack.[144] Although there is a lively debate about the precise ratio required and how to measure it, there's no question that the attacker needs superiority to overcome the advantages of the defense.[145] For example, the Iraqis overran Kuwait in 48 hours in 1990. To eject them, the coalition took five months to build up its forces, eventually totaling 540,000 service members.[146]

Counterattack strategies also relinquish territory to Russian occupation, even if temporarily. As seen with the atrocities in Bucha, Ukraine, even short Russian occupations can inflict massive suffering on the civilian population.

Deterrence by denial has the advantage of physically preventing, or threatening to prevent, an adversary from succeeding. Typically, this is accomplished by having strong forces on the ground continuously, which presents tangible evidence of commitment and warfighting capability. It also reduces or avoids entirely the need for a costly counterattack and protects civilians from a harsh military occupation. Thus, many Baltic country officials use the phrase "repel, don't expel" in advocating this strategic approach.[147]

Deterrence by denial has the advantage of physically preventing, or threatening to prevent, an adversary from succeeding. It also reduces or avoids entirely the need for a costly counterattack and protects civilians from a harsh military occupation.

Further, having forces already on the ground reduces the burden on senior officials by not requiring an early decision on deployment during a crisis. Decisionmakers can let a situation evolve and not worry about defensive measures being seen as provocative or mistaken for preparations to attack. This reduces the risk of escalation.

Forward Deployed in the Baltics: Enhancements Have Value

There is a strong argument that there is no substitute for troops on the ground. As General Sir Patrick Sanders, UK chief of the general staff, has summarized: "In Ukraine we've seen the limitations of deterrence by punishment. It has reinforced the importance of deterrence through denial–we must stop Russia seizing territory–rather than expecting to respond to a land grab with a delayed counteroffensive."[148]

Yet a total "deterrence by denial" approach may not be possible because of the large forces required. Defense of the Baltic countries will therefore need to be a combination of denial and reinforcement.

Despite the shortcomings of a "tripwire" strategy, the challenges to building a robust denial strategy might lead some commentators to conclude that any reinforcement is futile. Better to save resources than to implement a partial solution that will fail. There are three problems with this reasoning.

The first is that the added units have warfighting value. Larger NATO deployments mean that even if Russia were eventually able to defeat NATO forces, success would take time and come at a high cost. That introduces uncertainty and risk into Russian military planning. The Russians will be conscious for many years about how the war in Ukraine devolved into an attritional stalemate and will hesitate to get into a similar situation.

The second value is preventing a coup de main. Russia's aim would certainly be the same as it intended in Ukraine: achieve victory quickly before the victims and NATO can react effectively. Strong forward-deployed forces would delay a Russian advance long enough for additional NATO troops to arrive. Further, the additional time that a determined defense provided would allow building a global coalition and a diplomatic pushback through sanctions. This is what the Ukrainians were able to do in the first month of the Russian invasion. Delays to the Russian advance caused by the initial Ukrainian defenses allowed Ukrainian forces to mobilize fully and deploy to the threatened areas. Further, the delay allowed NATO equipment to arrive, especially critical anti-air and anti-tank weapons. Time has value.

The final value is political. Even a successful Russian offensive would cause thousands of NATO casualties, thus involving many NATO countries in a way that a lightning strike would not.

The Berlin garrison during the Cold War illustrates these three functions. At that time, Berlin was divided, with the Western allies holding half the city and East Germany and the Soviet Union holding the other half. Berlin was deep inside territory of the Warsaw Pact and highly exposed. To protect West Berlin, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France each stationed a brigade and stockpiled supplies for a siege. It was long known that West Berlin would have had a difficult time holding out indefinitely against a Warsaw Pact attack. However, this was more than a tripwire force. It ensured that a coup de main was not possible. Capturing the city would take an all-out attack and an extended campaign. The Soviet Union was never willing to do that. Thus, West Berlin stayed secure during the entire Cold War.

Expectations for NATO's Vilnius Summit

The next NATO leaders' summit will take place on July 11 and 12, 2023, in Vilnius, Lithuania. The summit provides an important opportunity for NATO allies to take the next step in implementing the key commitments they made at the 2022 Madrid summit.

NATO leaders have two major tasks for the Vilnius summit. The first and main task is ensuring that the Madrid summit's ambitious goals are implemented. The second task is to review whether the level of ambition set in Madrid is appropriate to deter Russia's "maximum intentions and capabilities."

Implementing the Madrid Commitments

Without the stronger forward defenses endorsed at the Madrid summit, "NATO's new posture will look to some like a slightly thicker tripwire."[149] Indeed, Eastern European NATO countries are reported to be nervous: "Some Eastern European allies fear that NATO forces deployed near Russia's borders aren't being expanded quickly enough or backed by adequate defense spending commitments from their allies further west."[150]

Resources for defense: As military lore holds, plans without resources are hallucinations. NATO leaders at Vilnius need to ensure that the member states allocate the resources needed to implement their plans. The 2022 Madrid summit reiterated the importance of defense investment. The 2 percent of GDP goal has been helpful, but most NATO members do not meet it. In this regard, three key questions must be addressed at Vilnius.[151]

Plans without resources are hallucinations. NATO leaders at Vilnius need to ensure that the member states allocate the resources needed to implement their plans.

The first is how to get nations to meet the target. Only 10 allies, including the three Baltic countries, currently meet the 2 percent target. Progress has been better on the target of spending 20 percent of allies' defense budgets on major equipment spending, which 24 allies now meet, compared to only seven in 2014 when the target was set.[152] Getting more countries to meet the spending targets can be done through a combination of incentives, such as using common funding to encourage spending or coordination with EU defense investment programs that provide tax and fiscal incentives to member states, and disincentives, such as naming and shaming allies who do not step up.[153]

Second is what to spend collective resources on–and how to do so more efficiently to produce more "bang" for allies' "buck" (or euro). Part of this equation is how to encourage more cooperation between European allies who are facing a "defense dilemma"–while spending has risen over the past decade, cooperation among them has declined.[154] This leads to serious inefficiencies in European defense.

Third is what the next target should be. NATO may need to push member states harder. The Defense Investment Pledge made by allies at the Wales summit in 2014 expires next year. Allies will need to start the conversation at Vilnius about what comes next. A consensus appears to have already been reached that the 2 percent of GDP target must become "a floor not a ceiling."[155] Many allies, including the Baltic states and Poland, have already committed to spending 3 percent of their GDP on defense, as have other allies, such as the United Kingdom, even if only briefly.[156] However, 3 percent is unlikely to be accepted across the alliance, given the other demands on government spending combined with slow post-pandemic growth. A target of 2.5 percent seems like a logical next step but also seems somewhat arbitrary.

Building "robust in-place combat-ready forces": For the Baltic States, implementing the new policy of forward defense to deter Russian aggression is critical for national security and indeed national survival.

However, implementing the commitment for "robust in-place combat-ready forces" requires decisions on several unresolved issues:

- **The nature of the forward-deployed brigades:** The term "brigade" needs definition. It could be a unit of anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000 personnel, depending on the structure and the amount of support attached. U.S. brigade combat teams, for example, number 4,000 to 5,000 personnel because they include supporting artillery, engineers, reconnaissance, and service support. If the Baltic brigades do not include these support troops, then where will they come from? Such support is needed to make the brigade fully combat capable. Further, the current language implies that the brigades will absorb the existing battle groups. The relationship between the two needs clarification. Will the brigades be as multinational as the battle groups, or will one nation predominate? The former spreads the burden, but the latter has more warfighting coherence.

- **The stationing of the brigades:** This study has made a strong argument for why brigades need to be deployed forward in peacetime. This could be through "heel-to-toe" rotation or permanent stationing. There are advantages and disadvantages to each that go beyond the scope of the study. However, the notion of establishing a small forward element that would be reinforced from the rear in a crisis is not viable given the likely short timelines involved. In the case of Lithuania, Germany seems particularly unable to meet these reinforcement timelines because of its past underinvestment in defense and lack of unit readiness.

- **The nature and location of pre-positioned equipment:** As described earlier, pre-positioning can be a powerful tool for creating warfighting capabilities and would be preferred to moving whole units in a crisis. However, it requires extensive peacetime preparations–acquiring real estate, building warehouses, and stocking the warehouses with equipment. NATO has begun this process, but the size and complexity of such an undertaking requires detailed planning and long-term commitments. The relationship between pre-positioned equipment, the existing battle groups, and forward-deployed brigades also needs clarification. Ideally, the brigades will be fully staffed forward in peacetime, but that might not be possible. Prepositioning could fill the gaps, but which gaps?

- **The divisional command structure:** The Baltic states need a divisional structure between the brigades/battle groups and the NATO corps headquarters in Poland. For this reason, NATO created the two multinational divisions, northeast and north. Currently, the three Baltic countries are seeking to establish national divisions. A key question is whether these national divisions will conduct wartime operations or be limited to peacetime coordination and planning. If intended for wartime operations, then these new divisional structures face three challenges: experience (the Baltic states have no recent experience with this level of operations), command and control capabilities (which requires extensive communications equipment and network operations), and supporting units (of which divisions need many beyond the subordinate brigades).

  Further, there is little clarity on how the several U.S. and NATO headquarters in Poland will interact with these national divisions in peacetime and wartime. The CSBA describes the situation as "wildly confused command structures/headquarters."[157] Therefore, first, there needs to be clear plans for providing the personnel, training, doctrine, and equipment for effective division command, and second, there needs to be clarification of command responsibilities.

- **Solving the Suwałki Gap problem:** While meeting the Madrid commitment to deploy brigades to the Baltic states should be the priority for Vilnius, serious thought should also be given to handling the wartime challenge of the Suwałki Gap. NATO needs unimpeded movement through the gap in wartime to sustain a credible defense of the Baltics. This might be accomplished by developing new force packages or by augmenting the EFP missions in Poland and Lithuania. One template is the defense network of guided rockets, artillery, mortars, and missiles (known as G-RAMM) advocated by a CSBA study that looked at the problem.[158]

New force model: At the Vilnius summit, NATO will reveal the status of its new force model one year on from its conception. There are few signs that NATO will generate the massive, highly ready forces required to meet the one-year deadline set by the secretary general. The scale of forces required is an order of magnitude larger than any previous NATO commitment to high-readiness forces, at a time when the state of investment and readiness of European forces remains in doubt.

Yet despite the uncertainty that surrounds it, NATO's new force model is an important development. As one analysis suggests: "Overall, the decision to set up a new NATO Force Model might be much more important for the future NATO deterrence and defence posture, but only next year will more details on it be known."[159] NATO's force model is important because it is linked to the other Madrid defense and deterrence commitments. Without rapid reinforcement, the small size of the EFPs, even if upgraded to brigade size, will not be sufficient.

It is unlikely that NATO leaders will be able to announce in Vilnius that they have met the force and readiness targets required by their new force model. Instead, they will need to demonstrate credible plans to gradually transition from the previous NATO Response Force (NRF) to the new force model. They should concentrate on the "Tier One" forces, for which the force model set a target of 100,000 forces in 10 days. The centerpiece of the Vilnius update might therefore be the announcement of a Tier One exercise in 2024 or 2025 where NATO would demonstrate the

deployment of up to 100,000 troops, including land, air, and maritime force elements, to Eastern Europe within 10 days. Given that the NRF already planned for a force of 40,000 in 15 days, many of which were deployed in short order after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this could be achievable.

Enhanced exercise program: As assessed above, NATO has a robust exercise schedule. The Baltic countries have participated extensively by hosting and leading multinational exercises at various levels of command and investing significantly in new facilities to house troop surges for exercise purposes. However, the full implementation of the Madrid commitments will heighten the demand, increasing the frequency and scale of NATO exercises. These include the operation of new division structures; coordination of battle groups, forward-deployed brigades, and reinforcing forces; and the employment of pre-positioned equipment.

Because NATO's exercise planning extends many years into the future (five years for concepts, two years for detailed specifications), events that include these new capabilities should be planned now.[160] Yet the current exercise program for the year ahead released by SHAPE looks threadbare, with only two maritime exercises planned, in Turkey and Portugal.[161] This exercise program should build on the multiple exercises held in the Baltic and Eastern European region in March through June 2023. NATO's exercise program in the region should be spread out across the year to avoid both bottlenecks and long gaps and to prolong the reassurance and deterrence effect of having multinational NATO forces surge into the region.

In particular, NATO's forward exercise program should include surging brigade-level forces into the remaining six EFP missions that have not yet demonstrated this (all except the U.S.-led mission in Poland and the UK-led mission in Estonia). Among these, Baltic region EFP missions should be prioritized–the Canadian-led mission in Latvia and the German-led mission in Lithuania–because of the more immediate threat to these areas.[162]

Timelines and status reports: Making these changes takes time, so the fact that they are not yet in place does not imply failure or a lack of commitment. However, the policies need a timeline with assigned organizational responsibilities and designated milestones so that NATO can track progress.

All future NATO summits and defense minister meetings (which are held quarterly) should include a status report from the secretary general on these actions that shows progress to date, what remains to be accomplished, and whether plans are on track. In this way, NATO can discuss in a timely and open way whether changes or interventions are needed. Doing so will contribute to both reassuring allies and deterring the Kremlin.

Dealing with Russia's "Maximum Intentions"

The second task for NATO leaders at Vilnius is assessing whether the new commitments are adequate. Plans will need continuous evaluation in light of the evolving threat from an unpredictable Kremlin.

Allies need to answer the question: Will NATO's new level of commitment deter a more aggressive and unpredictable Russia–even if it has less capable land forces in the short term? It may be that the

Russians can reconstitute more quickly or more robustly than currently envisioned or, conversely, that this reconstitution takes longer or is less immediate, thus allowing some adjustments.

Allies need to answer the question: Will NATO's new level of commitment deter a more aggressive and unpredictable Russia—even if it has less capable land forces in the short term?

By agreeing to "new guidance for NATO's defence planning" at February's meeting of defense ministers, NATO leaders and military planners have now enshrined the Madrid level of ambition in the first step of the alliance's four-year-long defense planning process.[163] They need to be sure their guidance–and the force posture and capability targets that result–is sufficient to deal with the Kremlin's maximum intentions. To answer this question, every NATO summit should include an assessment–made behind closed doors but explained to the public–of whether the Madrid commitments are still appropriate and, if not, what changes are warranted.

The Madrid summit was a historic event for NATO, adapting the alliance to the new European security environment. However, it is a work in progress, unfinished until its ambitious commitments are fully implemented. The Vilnius summit can take an important step in that direction.

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