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Brief

Reorganising Dependence: Lithuania's Response to the Erosion of the Rules-based International Order

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As a small frontline state, Lithuania depends on institutions it cannot control, shifting Allied priorities, and uneven enforcement of international norms. The Trump–Zelensky confrontation and temporary suspension of US military assistance to Ukraine in early 2025 demonstrated the volatility of Washington's policy. Lithuania's response has been not to escape dependence, but to reorganise it by making external commitments more distributed, institutionalised, and durable.

Lithuania has a structural interest in a rules-based order that constrains the use of force and preserves predictability. Its alignment with western democracies has given its foreign policy a strong normative dimension, reflected in support for democratic movements and civil society in Belarus, Ukraine, and Georgia; demands for accountability; and engagement with democratic partners beyond Europe. This orientation has been described as a "values-based" foreign policy.[1]

Rules, Values, and Strategic Dependence

Values-based policy has also served strategic purposes. Lithuania's 2021 decision to open a "Taiwanese," rather than "Taipei," representative office reflected both normative commitments and closer alignment with US priorities toward China. The resulting confrontation with Beijing strengthened Lithuania's ties with Washington, including through US-led Indo-Pacific dialogues. When China pursued secondary economic sanctions, Lithuania received visible US support.[2] Lithuania also Europeanised the dispute, helping catalyse the EU's emerging anti-coercion policy.

Values-based policy also served strategic purposes

The UN Charter remains the legal foundation of the rules-based order, but rules require credible enforcement. The US and NATO's Article 5 provides the principal security guarantee, while Ukraine's resistance continues to constrain Russia's military power and strengthen Lithuania's security. Lithuania supports the EU sanctions against Russia and Belarus, the establishment of a Special Tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine, and the work of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Accountability is important not solely for normative aspirations: impunity weakens the prohibition on force by signalling that violations do not carry intolerable costs.

Balancing Principles and Security

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Donald Trump's return have altered Lithuania's strategic calculus. The war made the rules-based order an immediate security interest; Trump's return increased uncertainty over whether US power will uphold the rules and arrangements on which Lithuania depends. The shift from multilateralism towards bilateral, transactional great-power relations narrows small-state room for manoeuvre.

Taiwan case illustrates this recalibration. Washington's reassessment of China policy, demonstrating the willingness to manage these relations bilaterally, and changes in Lithuania's domestic politics have reopened the debate in Vilnius over whether the office should be renamed.[3] Yet reversal could damage Lithuania's reputation without securing meaningful concessions from Beijing, create friction with a Washington where a hard line against China remains bipartisan, and conflict with the EU's de-risking agenda. The question is how far Vilnius can reduce tensions without weakening its broader strategic credibility.

Trump's claims regarding Greenland, including his initial refusal to rule out coercive measures, sharpened the same dilemma. They placed core principles—sovereignty, territorial integrity, and inviolable borders—in tension with relations with the United States, Lithuania's principal security guarantor. Despite close ties with Denmark, Vilnius affirmed Danish sovereignty cautiously, unlike Estonia's more unequivocal stance.[4]

US pressure could force Vilnius to choose between an institution central to accountability and a security relationship essential to deterrence

Pressure over the ICC presents an even sharper potential conflict. US officials have reportedly pressed Lithuania to reconsider its ICC membership, linking the issue to concerns about the legal exposure of US troops stationed in ICC member states, although they have not explicitly threatened to withdraw American forces.[5] Lithuania is a longstanding member, supports its role in addressing crimes related to Russia's war against Ukraine, and referred alleged crimes against humanity by the Belarusian regime to the Court. Withdrawal would conflict with its accountability policy and the common EU position.

US pressure could force Vilnius to choose between an institution central to accountability and a security relationship essential to deterrence. The challenge is no longer simply how to defend the rules-based order, but which rules, through which institutions, and at what cost.

A Layered Security Architecture

Foreign Minister Kęstutis Budrys has summed up Lithuania's current foreign policy priorities as follows: "We must maintain NATO's role as the cornerstone of security in the transatlantic space and increase Europe's contribution to collective security."[6] As the security environment deteriorates, foreign policy is increasingly organised around deterrence and territorial defence. Lithuania seeks stronger European defence while preserving NATO's primacy and US engagement, without assuming Europe can substitute for US capabilities. Ukraine is increasingly both a deterrent to Russia and a security partner for Lithuania, providing battlefield experience, knowledge of Russian capabilities, and combat-tested technologies that directly strengthen Lithuania's defence and regional security.

The resulting division of labour is layered. NATO provides deterrence, including nuclear deterrence, military planning, and collective defence. The EU contributes sanctions, regulatory power, defence-industrial mobilisation, military mobility, infrastructure protection, economic security, and instruments against coercion. Nordic-Baltic cooperation facilitates coalition-building and preference aggregation. Bilateral partnerships translate general commitments into forces, infrastructure, bureaucratic cooperation, and host-nation arrangements. Partnerships beyond Europe broaden Lithuania's diplomatic and economic reach.

Heightened uncertainty has increased the importance of demonstrating that Lithuania is a security provider rather than merely a consumer. This logic underpins defence spending of 5.38% of GDP in 2026 and major host-nation and defence-infrastructure investments. Despite these efforts, most US troops have departed at the end of their rotations, and uncertainty remains over the scale and duration of any future US presence.[7]

The EU's complementary role is increasingly important, converting economic scale and regulatory power into security outcomes NATO alone cannot provide. Vilnius supports EU defence-industrial and capability initiatives when they reinforce NATO and remain open to US participation. Tensions may arise where new EU procurement regulation constrains Lithuania's transatlantic defence-industrial links.

The UN and international legal institutions still preserve the framework in which rules are defined and contested, despite enforcement failures and shifts in global power. As China and global south states gain influence, future norms may reflect interests and traditions different from those of western democracies.

Since 2025, Lithuanian foreign policy has not fundamentally changed, but its internal balance has begun to shift. Greater US uncertainty has increased the value of European capabilities, regional coalitions, and embedded bilateral partnerships. The objective is not to replace US-centred dependence, but to build resilience around the transatlantic anchor.

Regionalisation, Embeddedness, and Wider Partnerships

Lithuania addresses airspace, drone, air-defence, and reinforcement vulnerabilities as risks to NATO's north-eastern flank rather than national weaknesses. The 2021 migration crisis illustrated this: framing Belarus's instrumentalisation of migration as a hybrid attack relevant for the whole region mobilised EU and NATO attention. Recent initiatives have translated regional vulnerabilities into Alliance-level responses: Baltic Sentry addressed threats to undersea infrastructure, while Eastern Sentry elevated Russian airspace violations into an eastern-flank challenge. The Nordic Baltic Eight (NB8) amplifies Lithuania's influence by coordinating regional positions before they enter NATO, EU, and bilateral negotiations.

Lithuania also seeks to make Allied commitments credible and costly to reverse by embedding defence in economic, political, bureaucratic, societal, and cultural ties. The permanent stationing of a German brigade demonstrates this logic. Although Berlin initially envisaged crisis reinforcement from Germany, Vilnius pressed for permanent deployment and funded the necessary infrastructure and host-nation support. Germany's 2023 decision strengthened forward defence while anchoring German personnel, resources, and political responsibility in Lithuania, deepening the bilateral relationship. The wider strategy is to embed Lithuanian security in dense military, political, economic, and societal ties. This raises disengagement costs and makes commitments more durable. It cannot remove asymmetry, as larger Allies retain discretion, but it reduces reliance on declaratory reassurance.

Lithuania shape how dependence is distributed, institutionalised, and sustained

Partnerships beyond Europe, especially in the Indo-Pacific, diversify Lithuania's political and economic ties and strengthen cooperation against coercion. For instance, Taiwan, Japan, and Australia provided political and economic support to Lithuania that mitigated Chinese pressure.

Lithuania's growing attention to Latin America reflects the same logic. Its refusal to ratify the EU–Cuba Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement aligns with support for democratic opposition and civil society in Belarus, Venezuela, Cuba, and Hong Kong. It may also create convergence with the current US administration, in a similar way Taiwan did, particularly Marco Rubio's longstanding focus on Cuba. Budrys was the only Baltic foreign minister to secure a bilateral meeting with Rubio so far.

From Dependence to Strategy

Lithuania cannot eliminate its dependence on larger powers, but it can shape how that dependence is distributed, institutionalised, and sustained. Its emerging strategy combines continued reliance on the transatlantic relationship with stronger European capabilities, Nordic-Baltic coalitions, embedded Allied commitments, and wider diplomatic partnerships. The central challenge is to preserve

strategic credibility with Washington while defending the rules, institutions, and partnerships that protect Lithuania's sovereignty and reduce the risks of unilateral dependence. This analysis yields the following policy recommendations:

- Make US engagement valuable beyond troop presence. Even if the US military footprint declines, Lithuania should preserve American strategic involvement through intelligence, cyber and air defence, exercises, technology, pre-positioned equipment, and defence-industrial cooperation, while deepening ties with Congress, the Pentagon, military commands, political parties and US industry. Lithuania should define its legal and political red lines, clarify existing protections for US personnel, and coordinate with EU partners to prevent ICC and other disputes with Washington.
- Turn Nordic-Baltic cooperation into a regional bargaining coalition. NB8 should evolve from consultation towards systematic pre-negotiation and pursuit of shared positions in NATO and the EU. Lithuania should promote regional packages on air defence, counter-drone systems, maritime security, military mobility, ammunition, procurement, and financing, incorporating Poland where geography and capability make its participation essential. The objective is to convert regional convergence into leverage over Alliance priorities and resource allocation.
- Europeanise exposure to economic coercion before the next crisis. The China experience showed the risks of exposure to retaliation; Lithuania should aim to strengthen EU anti-coercion and economic-security instruments, diversify supply chains, and deepen Indo-Pacific partnerships to ensure that defending shared European principles does not leave individual member states bearing the costs alone.
- Defend universal principles selectively but consistently. Although Lithuania cannot respond equally to every violation of international law, it should avoid legitimising the breach, coordinate positions with the EU and like-minded allies, and limit bilateral confrontation where its security interests require continued US engagement.

Endnotes

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