

BRIEF

CREDIBLE DETERRENCE IN
THE BALTIC REGION

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NATO's ability to adapt to an uncertain and ever-changing international security environment has been essential to its enduring success. Since its founding in 1949, the Alliance has experienced several internal and external shocks, but has always been able to adapt and to find solutions to the challenges it faces. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, one of the most significant shocks, has had a rapid and significant impact on NATO's adaptation. This wake-up call for both the Alliance and for each Ally individually has led to a renewed focus on NATO's primary task of collective defence and deterrence. This policy brief describes the Alliance's approach to deterrence in the Baltic region in the post-2014 era, evaluates its successes and shortcomings, and offers recommendations on the steps it needs to take to further strengthen its position in the region.

2014: A TURNING POINT

Russia's annexation of Crimea highlighted gaps and weaknesses in the Alliance's perceptions, approaches, and actions. Since 2014, Allies individually and the Alliance collectively have implemented many changes that have enhanced their deterrence and defence posture. As frontline states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been among the most active advocates of these changes, calling on other Allies to ensure that NATO's ability to address the challenges highlighted by Russia's aggressive approach is strengthened. Several important measures have been put in place, which have contributed to the security of all three Baltic states, bolstered their defence capabilities, and shifted the balance of military

power in the Baltic region in NATO's direction. Yet the question of whether these measures are sufficient to deter Russia from all possible contingencies remains.

One essential element of deterrence is a common understanding of the level and type of threats to be deterred. Decisions taken at NATO's Wales Summit in 2014 and Warsaw Summit in 2016 demonstrated that a change of consciousness and mindset had occurred among Allies following Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Together, these summits indicated that the Allies had arrived at a common understanding of Russia's ambitions and revisionist approach in the international arena, and a common perception of the long-term implications of this threat for transatlantic security.

Reaching this common understanding also marked a turning point for the security of the Baltic states. Before 2014, several central and western European Allies had been interested in normalising relations with Russia, and perhaps even developing some form of civil-military cooperation. From the perspective of Baltic

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threat assessments, this was a risky approach. But in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, NATO heads of state and government instead agreed at Wales and Warsaw far-reaching measures to strengthen the Alliance's collective defence and rapid response capabilities, and to reinforce the central role of the transatlantic relationship in ensuring security in Europe.

NATO RESPONDS

The most important decisions reached at the Wales Summit were the approval of the Readiness Action Plan and the commitment by Allies to spend at least 2% of their GDP on defence by 2024.¹ At Warsaw, the Allies agreed to enhance NATO's military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance, with four army battalions deployed on a rotational basis to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.² Today, these robust, multinational battalions demonstrate the common will of the Allies and the strength of the transatlantic bond, making clear that an attack on one will be met by forces from all.

Both these summits and subsequent meetings of foreign and defence ministers also demonstrated a consensus among the Allies that NATO was vulnerable in its Baltic region. Thus, in

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addition to enhancing presence in the region, NATO's command and control capability here was improved with the creation of a new headquarters, Multinational Division North, in Ādaži, Latvia. The Baltic air-policing mission was also enhanced, and NATO Force Integration Units were created in all three Baltic states, alongside five in other member states on NATO's eastern flank.

Several important steps have thus been taken that alter and complicate Russia's strategic and military calculations when it comes to potential adventurism in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. But it would be a mistake to believe that NATO's deterrence posture in the Baltic region is complete. Without further adaptation and enhancement, this posture may not be enough to deter Russia in all circumstances.

The Kremlin respects strength and power. To have credible deterrence, the Alliance needs to show strength and to demonstrate its ability and will to use military power if required. Demonstrating strength, through large-scale exercises, the continuous deployment of Allied forces, or both, is the best signal to a potential aggressor that the defence of each country, and

thus of the Alliance as a whole, is being seriously planned, tested, and evaluated. Russia would perceive any softening or reduction as a point of weakness to be exploited its own interests. The measures that have been adopted since 2014, including in the Baltic region, are thus the minimum requirements for the current security environment and the basis on which the Alliance's common deterrence and defence policy should be further strengthened.

FURTHER ENHANCING DETERRENCE

Several interrelated aspects further determine the credibility of NATO's deterrence and defence posture. First, time matters, especially in the Baltic region. Russia's aggression in Ukraine prompted Allies to take steps to enhance the speed of their response and their ability to provide an immediate military effect in all directions. At the Wales Summit, a new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) of around 5 000 troops, with some elements able to deploy within 48 hours, was introduced within the NATO Response Force (NRF).³ In 2018, NATO Defence Ministers agreed to adopt the NATO Readiness Initiative—the 'Four Thirties'—to ensure that NATO has 30 mechanised battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 combat vessels, ready within 30 days or less.⁴ Both measures have been steps in the right direction but, given the local advantages of time and space that Russia holds in north-east Europe, may still prove insufficient when it comes to the defence of the Baltic states.

Moreover, it might take time for NATO's highest political decision-making body, the North Atlantic Council, to authorise the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) to employ the VJTF and the rest of NRF. Front-line Allied capitals could be overrun while NATO deliberates. In the absence of consensus—which may be difficult to reach in 'grey zone' cases where the evidence supporting a NATO response is ambiguous—the VJTF and the NRF will remain unused. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance to further increase the pre-authorised rapid response force pool that could be used immediately by SACEUR in a short-notice conventional scenario.

Second, the large-scale Allied reinforcement of the region in a contested environment needs to be stress-tested. Russia is already able to carry out a short-notice attack that would cut the Baltic states off from the rest of Alliance territory. Senior military commanders have warned that in a very short amount of time, Russian and Belarusian troops could block the border between Poland and Lithuania, isolating three NATO Allies from the rest of the Alliance.⁵ Russia's anti-access and area denial capabilities could then make reinforcement by Allied forces challenging.

Large-scale military exercises, to stress-test and demonstrate the Alliance's ability to reinforce its outer territories, including by forces from the other side of the Atlantic, are thus another vital element in NATO's overall deterrence and defence posture. It is important that the Alliance should have plans and a common understanding of how to reinforce its flanks with additional units and supplies in the event of a military conflict—and that these plans are exercised. Exercises like the US-led Defender Europe 2020 build strategic readiness by deploying combat credible forces to and across Europe. These exercises should be synchronised with and complemented by NATO's new series of large-scale, Article 5 exercises. The NATO series should focus on readiness, responsiveness, and reinforcement for substantial deployments, especially to the north-east flank, to prove NATO's ability to coordinate large-scale military movements with Allies and partners.

Third, the Alliance's adaptation process in the post-2014 era has largely been land-based, leaving the maritime and air dimensions vulnerable. Russia has superiority in the Baltic region both in the air and on the sea. The costs associated with the procurement of systems in these domains will prevent the Baltic states from providing a full response to their challenges without significant support from other Allies. One of the most topical and critical points, for example, is the challenge of integrated air and missile defence. At the very least, the Baltic Air Policing mission should be transformed into an air defence mission in the medium to long term. But effective air and missile defence in the region will require both that the Baltic states invest

more in this area, and that the Allies contribute to a collective response to this collective challenge.

Finally, a credible deterrence and defence posture in the Baltic region also requires the Baltic states to be able to provide, together, a response to any aggression that is as large and as lasting as possible. Joint and coordinated action by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania is thus essential.

Since 2014, the Baltic states have been united in their public statements and have strengthened several elements of their military cooperation; however, there is a significant room for improvement. The three states have struggled to agree on any large-scale, joint procurement, including in areas where the case for cooperation is strong, such as air defence. And they are behind the curve when it comes to the need for synchronised and tested operation and

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capability development plans. As, in the event of a conflict, the Baltic states may be separated from the rest of the Alliance, it is important that they signal that their actions in such circumstances will be united and have been planned in advance. Together, they can deliver a more significant counterattack than they could separately.

CONCLUSION

The list of requirements for enhanced deterrence outlined in this policy brief is ambitious, and likely to receive pushback from some Allies who may believe, for example, that enough has already been done, or that NATO faces more pressing challenges to its south. However, the failure of deterrence on NATO's north-east flank would be catastrophic not just for the Allies affected, but for the whole of NATO. While continuing to enhance deterrence against threats from any direction is only prudent, it will require common threat perceptions, additional resources and solidarity. The Baltic states can lead by example by continuing to invest all necessary resources in

defence and enlightening Allies on the challenges their region is facing—given the dynamics of domestic development in neighbouring countries, the threat to the Baltic states will most likely increase.

The credibility of NATO's deterrence and defence posture in the Baltic region is like a tower of Jenga blocks—if one piece is removed, the whole structure risks failure. But a steady hand alone is not enough. The Baltic region has borders with an actor, Russia, that exploits the weaknesses of its opponents to satisfy its own

interests. Russia continues to build its military forces every day, making the strengthening of deterrence a permanent task. Reducing the speed of adaptation can only stimulate its appetite to test the Alliance's readiness and responsiveness. To deter such an adversary, the Alliance must continue to strengthen its capabilities, ensure an enhanced and integrated Allied forward presence, and send signals that any form of aggression will provoke a broad and rapid collective response.

ENDNOTES

¹ NATO, "[Wales Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales](#)," press release (2014) 120, 5 September 2014, paras 5, 14.

² NATO, "[Warsaw Summit Communiqué. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016](#)," press release (2016) 100, 9 July 2016, para 40.

³ NATO, "Wales Summit Declaration," para 8.

⁴ NATO, "[Defence Ministers to agree NATO Readiness Initiative](#)," 7 June 2018.

⁵ "[U.S. Army commander warns of Russian blocking of Baltic defence](#)," *The Baltic Times*, 9 November 2015.

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