

BRIEF

NATO'S NEW DEFENCE
PLANS

VILNIUS SUMMIT SERIES, NO. 4

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NATO's Vilnius Summit, the second summit to be held in the Baltic states after the one in Riga in 2006, will be a pivotal event with immense importance for the security of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. NATO summits are crucial milestones for the Alliance. Political guidance for operational plans, priorities for strengthening defence capabilities, and policies guiding NATO's daily business are agreed at the highest level. The Vilnius Summit will play a vital role in reflecting on the progress made since the last summit in Madrid, seeking consensus on various key issues, and providing taskings for further work. These include several items that are critical from the perspective of the three Baltic states.

First, the summit should address the vital task of planning for and providing long-term support to Ukraine—while the war continues and beyond. Ukraine's success in defeating Russia's aggression is critical to Europe's security.

Second, the summit needs to address existing challenges in the air and sea domains in the Nordic-Baltic region. Developing strategies to enhance defence capabilities for and ensuring a robust presence in these domains is essential for regional security.

Third, the accession of Finland and the potential accession of Sweden will significantly alter Europe's security dynamics, particularly in the Baltic Sea region. This development warrants comprehensive discussion, and the identification and implementation of whatever adaptations are needed to take account of the new playing field.

Taking these elements together, one of the primary objectives of the Baltic states for the Vilnius Summit is to secure agreement to NATO's new defence plans, in particular those specifically designed for the Baltic region. These plans should recognise the new realities facing the Alliance, including its weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and should incorporate the lessons learned from Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine. They should also address the long-standing security concerns of the Baltic states, including those related to the risk of short-notice attacks, to shortfalls in the air and sea domains, and to the need to establish a permanent Allied troop presence in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Moreover, clear, more robust, pre-agreed rules of engagement for those troops stationed on Baltic soil must be defined.

NATO's new defence plans should address the long-standing security concerns of the Baltic states

This brief explores the interconnected aspects that need to be considered in order to shape NATO's military doctrine and, more broadly, the security architecture, in the Baltic Region and beyond in the face of Russian aggression in Ukraine. NATO's new defence plans for the Baltic region (which, naturally, will not be public documents) will be an important vehicle for delivering the necessary changes.

PROGRESS SO FAR

In recent years, NATO has made significant decisions that have bolstered deterrence and defence in the Baltic region. Several elements

have been implemented as part of the preparations necessary to ensure that the Alliance's current defence plans for the Baltic states—part of NATO's Graduated Response Plans (GRP)—could be successfully activated in a crisis. However, ever since their adoption, the Baltic states have argued that the GRP are inadequate, both from the operational perspective, and in terms of encouraging capability development.

At the NATO Summit in Warsaw in 2016, the decision to strengthen the presence of Allied forces in the Baltic states and Poland in the form of the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) sent a clear message to potential aggressors and underlined the Alliance's renewed focus on collective defence as its primary task.¹ The Madrid Summit in 2022 reinforced this decision by agreeing to scale up the eFP from battalion to brigade-level units.² The objectives are to establish robust, combat-ready multinational units in the region to showcase Allied unity and strong transatlantic ties, and to signal that there will always be a collective response from the Alliance to any aggression against a member state.

Regrettably, the meaning of the caveat “where and when required” contained in the Madrid declaration has been a source of friction between the host nations and the troop contributors.³ This will need further discussion, but in any event, it is clear that the Baltic states have work to do in completing the national-level preparations required to ensure proper host nation support to deployed forces. Meanwhile, NATO will need to encourage individual Allies to contribute the capabilities that are needed to fill the gaps in the region's defences.

The timely activation of NATO's current graduated response plans is key to their success

Significant progress has also been made in transforming NATO's command and control arrangements in the Baltic region. Latvia, for example, has established a main command centre for the headquarters of the Multinational Division North in Ādaži, just north-east of Rīga. The Baltic Air Policing mission has been reinforced, and NATO Force Integration Units

have been set up in all three Baltic states, as well as in five other eastern NATO countries. The Baltic states themselves have developed an unprecedented level of solidarity since 2014, frequently coordinating policy positions in NATO and the EU.

However, it would be a mistake to consider the Baltic states a ‘done deal’. There are still gaps that need to be addressed by the new defence plans for the Baltic region.

THE NEW DEFENCE PLANS

The development and approval of NATO's new defence plans have been—in the Baltic region at least—among the hottest topics of media and public discussion ahead of the Vilnius Summit.⁴ This is not the first time that defence plans for the Baltic states have received public attention. For example, before the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of heads of state and government in London in 2019, Turkey's temporary veto of the approval of NATO's plans for the region was widely discussed.⁵ Baltic leaders have also often emphasised the need for new defence plans in their public communications. More recently, the plans were highlighted in relation to their activation at the request of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁶

As their name suggests, the existing GRPs involve a graduated response, meaning that their timely activation is key to their success. One of the most significant concerns expressed by Baltic leaders over the years relates to Russia's development of military infrastructure along the Baltic border, which would allow it to carry out an attack within a very limited timeframe and without obvious preparations. With Russia currently heavily engaged in Ukraine, a short notice attack is unlikely. However, given the importance Russia attaches to military force as an instrument of state power, such a threat is likely to re-emerge in the future.

From a military perspective, it is important that the new plans incorporate three vital elements that the Baltic states have long argued are essential to their success. First, time: NATO must take decisions rapidly and respond rapidly.

Second, collectiveness: Allies must be engaged together from the first minute of a conflict and equipped with pre-authorised rules of engagement. Third: reinforcement: which must be large-scale and timely, and hence rehearsed.

The issue of response time has been at the heart of the Baltic states' concerns about NATO's ability to deter Russian aggression in their region. Although Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014 prompted the Alliance to adapt, both in streamlining its decision making and in terms of measures to enhance the speed and capability of its response forces, NATO's ability to deal with a sudden unannounced, short or no-notice attack on the Baltic states weighed heavily on Baltic leaders. Estonia's prime minister Kaja Kallas illustrated this concern in commenting to the media that the Alliance's existing defence plans for the three Baltic states was to allow them to be overrun before liberating them after 180 days.⁷ From a Baltic perspective, it is extremely important that the new plans should incorporate the notion of a pool of pre-authorised and available rapid response forces for the SACEUR's immediate use.

A related concern is that Russia's anti-access/area denial capabilities pose challenges to forces deploying to the region. The new plans thus need to address the timeliness of reinforcement by both transatlantic and European forces. A related issue is the need for a permanent, sizeable Allied force presence in the region, which has long been a defence policy priority of the Baltic states. The presence of NATO forces demonstrates solidarity and is a visible commitment to the collective defence of the region, as well as promoting interoperability and allowing for the integration of identified forces into operational and defence planning. Germany's decision to deploy 4 000 troops to Lithuania may indicate a change of heart among Allies, but the new plans need to include a common and systematic approach to NATO presence in the Baltic states.⁸

OPERATIONAL AND DEFENCE PLANNING

A key aspect of the new operational defence plans is their connection to NATO capability

planning. This, a new development for NATO, gives the Alliance the ability to insist that all Allies invest in the capabilities required to make the operational plans credible. Focal points for the Baltic states include rapid response, air and sea assets, regional cooperation, and cyber security and hybrid threats.

Rapid response involves the establishment of forward-deployed NATO units, the pre-positioning of equipment and supplies, and the development of infrastructure to facilitate rapid reinforcement in the event of a crisis or aggression. In Ukraine, Russia has engaged in large-scale conventional warfare that requires significant defensive military assets to be in place from the first moments of the conflict. NATO's current deterrence approach, which relies on small tripwire forces and reinforcement, may lead an adversary to miscalculate. The best possible message to any adversary is that NATO possesses a significant pool of forces, ready and trained for a wide range of rapid response operations.

A key aspect of the new operational defence plans is their connection to NATO capability planning

NATO's adaptation efforts since 2014 have primarily focused on the land domain. Addressing the vulnerabilities that remain in the air and maritime domains is one of the most critical elements for Baltic defence and deterrence: Russia has superiority in air and maritime forces in the Baltic Sea region. Given the costs associated with developing capabilities in these domains, the Baltic states cannot provide a comprehensive response to the challenges alone and must seek significant contributions from Allies. Even if combined, the budgets of the three Baltic states would be insufficient to provide fully-fledged air and maritime capabilities.

An urgent and vital area of concern is establishing air defence in the Baltic states. Russia's war in Ukraine has illustrated how the air domain can be of utmost importance in a conflict situation. NATO's new defence plans thus need to incorporate the air and naval dimensions as key aspects of its overall response

to any contingency. Once approved, the requirements set out in the operational plans can be translated into the next cycle of the NATO Defence Planning Process and capability targets for the air and maritime domains allocated among the Allies.

The Baltic states have actively pursued cooperation initiatives within NATO, including joint military exercises, information sharing, and the coordination of defence policies and strategies among themselves and with other regional allies. Cooperation strengthens collective defence capabilities and improves interoperability. In this context, the new defence plans will, of course, incorporate Finland (and potentially Sweden) into operational and capability planning. Finland's (and Sweden's)

participation in eFP would also facilitate military cooperation.

Finally, the new plans should recognise the importance of dealing with emerging security challenges, such as cyber threats and hybrid warfare. Russia's operational planning includes the substantial use of hybrid instruments alongside traditional military ones. NATO thus needs to enhance its capabilities for countering cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and other non-conventional forms of aggression, which could undermine their security and stability. Currently, the Alliance mostly considers defence against hybrid threats to be a national responsibility.⁹ The new defence plans should, however, address the need for collective planning against hybrid activities from the outset of any conflict.

ENDNOTES

¹ NATO, "[Warsaw Summit Communiqué](#)," press release (2016) 100, 9 July 2016, para. 40.

² NATO, "[Madrid Summit Declaration](#)," press release (2022) 095, 29 June 2022, para. 9.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For example: "[Kallas: NATO's new plan moves from deterrence to defense](#)," *ERR*, 18 May 2023; "[NATO draws up Baltic defence plans, presents them to member states](#)," *LRT*, 19 April 2023.

⁵ Robin Emmott and John Irish, "[Turkey still blocking defence plan for Poland, Baltics, NATO envoys say](#)," *Reuters*, 17 June 2020.

⁶ UK Parliament, "[NATO's response to Russian military action in Ukraine](#)," research briefing, 25 February 2022.

⁷ Richard Milne, "[Estonia's PM says country would be 'wiped from map' under existing Nato plans](#)," *Financial Times*, 22 June 2022.

⁸ Peter Wilke and Hans von der Burchard, "[Germany ready to put 4,000 soldiers permanently in Lithuania](#)" *Politico*, 26 June 2023.

⁹ NATO, "[Countering hybrid threats](#)," 6 July 2023.

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