



REPORT

# BRITISH POWER IN BALTIC WEATHER

THE UK'S ROLE IN NORDIC-BALTIC SECURITY  
AND UK-ESTONIA DEFENCE COOPERATION

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JULY 2023

Title: British Power in Baltic Weather: The UK's Role in Nordic-Baltic Security and UK-Estonia Defence Cooperation

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Publication date: July 2023

Category: Report

Cover page photo: British Chinook helicopter during Exercise Winter Camp 2023 in Estonia (photo credit: Ketter Ojakivi / Estonian Defence Forces via pildid.mil.ee)

Keywords: deterrence, forward defence, enhanced Forward Presence, regional cooperation, unilateralism, Joint Expeditionary Force, Nordic-Baltic region, Estonia, UK, NATO

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ISSN 2228-0529

ISBN 978-9916-709-16-0 (PDF)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is the result of a project conducted by the ICDS in cooperation with Chatham House in mid-2022. Its aim is to explore the UK's defence role in the Nordic-Baltic region and study how UK-Estonia defence relations have been evolving in the context of the deteriorated regional and transatlantic security environment.

The authors are very grateful to all the officials and experts from the Nordic-Baltic region, France, Germany, Poland, and NATO headquarters – and especially those from the UK and Estonia – who made themselves available for the research interviews or informally shared their assessments, insights, and perspectives for this study. We are also very thankful to Valdonė Šniukaitė and Philippine de Lagausie – Chatham House and ICDS research interns, respectively – for their great assistance in conducting desk research for this paper; Tony Lawrence from ICDS and Peter Watkins from Chatham House for their valuable feedback; and to the ICDS partner, Refiner, as well ICDS publications assistant, Tetiana Fedosiuk, for their superb editorial work. Last but not least, we would like to thank our colleagues at ICDS and Chatham House, who helped with organising the roundtable discussions in London and Tallinn as part of this project.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>A2/AD</b>	anti-access/area denial
<b>AUKUS</b>	Australia, the UK, the US
<b>B3</b>	Baltic Three
<b>BALTDEFCOL</b>	Baltic Defence College
<b>BALTOPS</b>	Baltic Operations
<b>BAOR</b>	British Army of the Rhine
<b>BAP</b>	Baltic Air Policing
<b>BMCC</b>	Baltic Maritime Component Command
<b>C2</b>	command and control
<b>CCDCOE</b>	Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence
<b>CEE</b>	Central and Eastern Europe
<b>CSDP</b>	Common Security and Defence Policy
<b>DCP</b>	Defence Command Paper
<b>DCPR</b>	Defence Command Paper Refresh
<b>DIANA</b>	Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic
<b>E2I</b>	European Intervention Initiative
<b>E3</b>	European Three [UK, France, Germany]
<b>EDF</b>	Estonian Defence Forces
<b>eFP</b>	enhanced Forward Presence
<b>FNC</b>	Framework Nation Concept
<b>IR</b>	Integrated Review
<b>ISAF</b>	International Security Assistance Force
<b>ISR</b>	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
<b>JEF</b>	Joint Expeditionary Force
<b>MBT</b>	main battle tank
<b>MCM</b>	mine countermeasures
<b>MoD</b>	Ministry of Defence
<b>NB8</b>	Nordic-Baltic Eight
<b>NCO</b>	non-commissioned officer
<b>NORDEF</b>	Nordic Defence Cooperation
<b>RCDS</b>	Royal College of Defence Studies
<b>RSOM</b>	Reception Staging Onward Movement

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For many decades, the United Kingdom has been a player in the Nordic-Baltic region, and today it aims to increase its contribution to security and stability of the region. London has long been an attractive partner for countries in the region that seek to maintain strong relations with the geopolitical heavyweight possessing a similar outlook on the security environment, transatlantic relations, utility of military force, and the threat from Russia. This report analyses the objectives, priorities, and constraints of the UK's defence policy in the Nordic-Baltic region at a critical juncture for Euro-Atlantic security, as Russia continues its war of aggression against Ukraine and China grows increasingly assertive in the Indo-Pacific. The objective of the report is two-fold: first, to assess the prospects and limits for enhanced UK involvement in the Nordic-Baltic area with regard to the priorities and constraints of the British government; and second, to discuss the expectations and opportunities for closer UK-Estonia defence cooperation.

The report examines the political and strategic context of British engagement in the Nordic-Baltic region, with a particular focus on the challenges that British defence strategy and capability plans face as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The refresh of the UK's Integrated Review in 2023 (IR2023), triggered by Russia's aggression, was welcomed in the region as it focuses on the UK's contribution to the security of Northern Europe (encompassing the Baltic states and the High North), while clarifying and limiting the extent of the earlier "tilt" towards the Indo-Pacific. The Nordic-Baltic region, identified as of direct strategic interest to the UK, is now a primary area of British activity and leadership. However, the UK is faced with the challenge of matching its ambitions and commitments with its limited resources. In particular, there is some acute tension between regenerating military power – especially in the land domain – configured for high-intensity conventional war and simultaneously investing in new cutting-edge capabilities. Despite broad support across the political spectrum, there are risks that British leadership in the Nordic-Baltic region might face credibility issues in the future due to resource limitations.

Other military and economic heavyweights might potentially increase their engagement with the Nordic-Baltic region, thereby adding to British efforts or compensating for the UK's possible shortfalls in the long run. The report explores whether other key security players – such as Germany, France, or Poland – could eventually take a stronger lead in the Nordic-Baltic area and how that would impact the UK's involvement and leadership. At present, none of them seems able or willing to serve as a major organising power for security and defence across the region in the same way as the UK does, even though their contribution has already been growing significantly as a result of fundamental shifts in their strategies and ambitions when confronted with Russia's threat.

For the UK, a litmus test for its leadership role will be its ability to deliver NATO's strengthened defence and deterrence posture in the region, especially by building credible forward defence in Estonia, where the UK is the leading nation of the Alliance's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP). The report investigates the arrangements aimed at enhancing the UK's military footprint in Estonia – in the framework of NATO's collective defence and deterrence – that were developed in the run-up to and after NATO's June 2022 Madrid summit and implemented ahead of the July 2023 Vilnius summit. The arrangements – which envisage designating a full brigade for Estonia's defence but permanently forward-deploying only part of this brigade along with some divisional-level enablers – represent a compromise between Tallinn's understanding of what forward defence requires and London's wish to maintain flexibility. However, this arrangement is likely to come under pressure, both in terms of military requirements stemming from the collective defence plans for the region drawn by NATO (that may require additional capability contributions) and in terms of political expectations due to Germany's recent pledge to forward deploy a full brigade in Lithuania.

The UK's leadership and contribution to Nordic-Baltic security and defence is also manifested in its efforts to organise flexible and effective instruments outside the Alliance's framework. The report explores how minilateral formats – such as the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) – fit into the regional security architecture and how London seeks to leverage them to sustain its leadership

role. The JEF is highly valued for its flexibility when addressing the concerns of the participating nations. It provides a platform for enhancing interoperability, increasing the speed of reaction to adverse events, and demonstrating political solidarity among its members. The JEF has successfully integrated into the region's overall defence construct and thus offers an additional option for policymakers. Its role and value are being recalibrated in the context of NATO's new defence posture and Finland's – and soon Sweden's – accession to NATO. It, therefore, will remain an important avenue to provide an extra insurance and diversification strategy for regional partners.

For Estonia, the UK is a crucial strategic partner in the context of NATO, within minilateral formats, and in developing national defence structures and capabilities. The report highlights some key aspects of the UK-Estonia bilateral defence cooperation and analyses its opportunities, challenges, and prospects. Notably, the cooperation is not a one-way street where Estonia is just a recipient of benefits such as the UK's military presence. The UK sees many opportunities to learn from Estonia: its resilience, whole-of-society approach to security and defence, and digital solutions. Estonian annual exercises (such as Spring Storm and Hedgehog) offer unique insights for British planners into how synergies between the armed forces, reserve units, voluntary paramilitary organisations, and allied forces can be built for greater military effect.

The report concludes that the UK will continue playing a crucial role in strengthening defence and deterrence in the northern and north-eastern flank – that is, if its commitments can be sustained, and possibly increased, in the long run. Moreover, the UK itself benefits from widening its engagement in the Nordic-Baltic region: it is a chance to showcase regional leadership at a time of dire need, to have more weight in strategic debates about the continent's future security architecture, and to learn from a cluster of highly innovative nations. The Nordic-Baltic countries champion many of the best practices in a whole-of-society approach to resilience and possess advanced technologies in fields such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, 5G, space technology, and robotics.

The report recommends that the UK and Estonia should:

- **Manage mutual expectations.** Both countries need to continue open and clear communication regarding what they can commit to and expect from each other.
- **Cooperate on keeping NATO alert.** They should continue working closely together to ensure that early warning indicators of Russia's intent are well appreciated and heeded by the Allies outside the Nordic-Baltic region.
- **Push for higher defence spending in NATO.** As both countries have committed to staying above the existing 2% of GDP benchmark, they should jointly advocate a similar commitment to fellow Allies.
- **Engage Sweden and Finland on regional security issues.** A mini-Quad of the four countries could complement NATO's deterrence efforts and collective defence plans, as well as the JEF activities in a strategically important part of the Baltic Sea between Sweden, Finland, and Estonia.
- **Deepen trilateral consultations with France at the strategic level,** building on the good operational cooperation in the eFP, France's increased interest and engagement in the region, and the three countries' presence in the French-led European Intervention Initiative (E2I).
- **Broaden UK-Estonia bilateral defence partnership** by seeking to foster defence-industrial cooperation and deepening mutual understanding of their respective strategic and political cultures through enhancing links between academic institutions, think-tanks, and civil society organisations involved in building a whole-of-society approach to security and defence.

The UK should:

- **Develop a coherent and comprehensive strategy** for the Nordic-Baltic region, bringing together various strands of its involvement in sub-regions (Baltic, High North, etc.) and subordinating them to clear goals as well as identifying the necessary means.
- **Rebuild credibility in the land domain** for the scenario of a high-intensity protracted conventional war in Europe.
- **Invest more into logistical enablers for rapid reinforcement** that remains at the heart of the new forward defence posture.

- **Consider greater rotational maritime, air, air defence, and ISR presence in the Nordic-Baltic region**, especially in the context of NATO's new defence plans.
- **Revitalise the Northern Group** as a political-military consultation forum and invite important external stakeholders (e.g., France and Canada) to join it.
- **Align the JEF's new focus on hybrid threats with the EU's work in the field**, in complementarity with NATO's, thus enabling the JEF as a platform for practical NATO-EU cooperation in countering hybrid threats in the Nordic-Baltic region and the High North.
- **Consider expanding the activities of the JEF "upstream" from the operations** by providing a framework for coordination and cooperation on aspects such as armaments, future cutting-edge capabilities development, training, and education.
- **Involve Estonia in discussions about common military activities in the Indo-Pacific** as a means to provide Tallinn with an additional framework for engaging in this area and thus expand bilateral co-operation outside the Nordic-Baltic region

Estonia should:

- **Continue delivering on the commitments for increased host nation support** necessary for hosting the Allied forces by providing the required training infrastructure, logistical support, and other aspects needed to enable a credible and effective forward defence posture.
- **Consider some niche capabilities for maritime operations in the High North** that would increase Estonia's relevance in and contribution to the JEF activities in this area.
- **Draw upon the UK's competence and support** in strengthening the national defence innovation system and capacity for technology absorption in the Defence Forces.
- **Leverage bilateral relations with the UK** to prompt the UK to renew its involvement in the Baltic Defence College – a regional hub through which the UK's military competence can most effectively contribute to the development of future generations of senior staff officers and defence civil servants in the Baltic states.
- **Continue investing efforts into engaging with other military heavyweights** (such as France, Poland, and Germany) as part of diversifying defence partnerships beyond the UK (and the US).
- **Communicate to the Estonian public and stakeholders** the tenets of the current rapid reinforcement model – as well as the Allies' limited capacity – in order to appropriately manage expectations.



## “It’s baltic outside”

baltic: adjective.

In Scottish or Irish informal English: very cold.

*Cambridge Dictionary*

## INTRODUCTION

For many decades, the United Kingdom has been a player in the Nordic-Baltic area, and today it aims to increase its contribution to the security and stability of the region. London has long been an attractive partner for countries in the region that seek to maintain strong relations with a geopolitical heavyweight possessing a similar outlook on the security environment, transatlantic relations, utility of military force, and the threat from Russia. Even the UK’s exit from the European Union (EU) – although disruptive and frustrating for many – did not put a major dent in its appeal as a security and defence partner for the Nordic and Baltic countries. Given London’s interest for global engagement and its limited means, ensuring continuous and reliable British involvement in the region is a priority for Nordic-Baltic states.

*London has long been an attractive partner for countries in the region that seek to maintain strong relations with a geopolitical heavyweight possessing a similar outlook on the security environment*

This report analyses the objectives, priorities, and constraints of UK defence policy in the Nordic-Baltic region at a critical juncture for Euro-Atlantic security, as Russia continues its war of aggression against Ukraine and China grows increasingly assertive in the Indo-Pacific.

The objective of the report is two-fold: first, to assess the prospects and limits for enhanced UK involvement in the Nordic-Baltic area with regards to the priorities and constraints of the British government; and second, to discuss the expectations and opportunities for closer UK-Estonia defence cooperation.

The report draws on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in London and Tallinn with defence and foreign policymakers and military practitioners in the second half of 2022 and in 2023. To have a better understanding of other regional perspectives, the authors also engaged with Nordic, Baltic, French, German, and Polish experts and NATO officials, in part through two roundtables held in September 2022 and January 2023. The report offers perspectives both from London, where balancing growing commitments and limited resources is a continuous challenge, and from the Nordic-Baltic countries – especially Estonia – where the need to enhance the military engagement of key Allies, including the UK, is seen as an imperative.

The report is structured into five chapters. The **first chapter** analyses the political and strategic context of British engagement in the Nordic-Baltic region, with a particular focus on the challenges that British defence strategy and capability plans face as a result of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The **second chapter** explores whether other key security players, such as Germany or France, could eventually take a stronger lead in the Nordic-Baltic area and how that would impact the UK’s involvement and leadership. The **third chapter** discusses the arrangements aimed at enhancing the UK’s military footprint in Estonia – in the framework of NATO’s collective defence and deterrence – that were developed in the run-up to and after NATO’s June 2022 Madrid summit. The **fourth chapter** explores how unilateral formats, such as the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), fit into the regional security architecture and how London seeks to leverage them to sustain its leadership role. Finally, the **fifth and last chapter** highlights some key aspects of the UK-Estonia bilateral defence cooperation and analyses its opportunities, challenges, and prospects.

# 1. THE UK IN NORDIC-BALTIC SECURITY

## 1.1. EVOLUTION OF FOREIGN AND DEFENCE STRATEGY

On 13 March 2023, the UK government under Prime Minister Sunak published a “refresh” of its 2021 Integrated Review, aimed at updating its foreign and defence policy priorities in light of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>1</sup> The 2021 document (IR2021), published during Boris Johnson’s premiership, marked a broad rethinking of the UK’s ambitions and priorities after Brexit. It aimed to set the course for a “Global Britain” both anchored in the Euro-Atlantic and “tilting” to the Indo-Pacific – meaning London’s ambition to deepen its engagement with the region.<sup>2</sup> British officials broadly argue that most of the IR2021’s assumptions and diagnosis were correct, as the war in Ukraine vindicated the UK’s stance on Russia (described in the IR2021 as the “most acute” threat to the UK) and its early support for Ukraine, as well as the integrated approach to deterrence, defence, and resilience that sits at the heart of the UK’s strategy. However, the various impacts of the war in Ukraine, as well as China’s increasingly assertive strategy, prompted a refresh of the UK’s two-year-old strategy; another factor was London’s more positive re-engagement with several European partners and the EU.<sup>3</sup>

*The UK’s ambition is to take on a more active global role and to keep up with technological change by using a wide range of military and non-military tools against 21st-century threats*

Building on the previous document, the 2023 refresh (IR2023) firmly anchors the British defence posture in the Euro-Atlantic (which it describes as the UK’s “overriding priority”), with the threat posed by Russia as “the most

pressing national security and foreign policy priority in the short-to-medium term” and NATO at the core of British defence planning.<sup>4</sup> The IR2023 states that London’s ambition for an Indo-Pacific tilt has now been “delivered” and draws links between the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific regions, in a deteriorating context marked by a rise in strategic competition and the erosion of the rules-based international order. Overall, the UK’s ambition is to take on a more active global role and to keep up with technological change by using a wide range of military and non-military tools against 21st-century threats. Much of the analysis and many of the objectives are close to NATO’s newly adopted 2022 Strategic Concept.

The 2021 Defence Command Paper (DCP2021) – which translated the IR2021 strategy into objectives for defence – will be updated in the summer of 2023. In the DCP2021, the UK announced its ambition to refocus its armed forces on high-end capabilities enabled by data and digital technologies, with a reduction in the overall size of the armed forces, especially that of the British Army. Some strands of DCP2021 might be reviewed, drawing on lessons from the war in Ukraine, but the overall direction is expected to remain the same.<sup>5</sup>

Both the language and the objectives in the IR2023 have been broadly welcomed by London’s partners. However, in a context of fiscal pressure and high inflation, doubts remain as to London’s ability to deliver on its ambitions.<sup>6</sup> The UK budget, announced on 15 March 2023, allocates an additional £5 billion for defence for the next two years, and a further £2 billion per year in subsequent years up to 2027-28.<sup>7</sup> However, rising inflation will impact the annual defence budget (in cash terms) and the additional £5 billion is already earmarked

<sup>1</sup> UK Government Office, [Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world](#) (London: Cabinet Office, 13 March 2023), last modified 16 May 2023.

<sup>2</sup> UK Government Office, [The Integrated Review](#) (London: Cabinet Office, 16 March 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Pepijn Bergsen, Alice Billon-Galland, and Richard Whitman, “UK-Europe relations finally head in the right direction,” *Chatham House*, 24 January 2023.

<sup>4</sup> UK Government Office, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> The DCP2023 was expected to be published in the first half of June 2023; it has been delayed and might be released around the NATO summit in Vilnius in July. At the time of writing, it was not yet available to the public.

<sup>6</sup> Will Jessett CBE, Tom McKane, and Peter Watkins, “How Refreshing? An Initial Assessment of the UK’s Integrated Review Refresh,” *RUSI*, 27 March 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Esme Kirk-Wade, *UK defence expenditure* (London: House of Commons Library, 20 April 2023).

for major projects and investments, such as funding the next phase of the trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK, and the US (AUKUS), modernising the country's nuclear programme, and replenishing ammunition stocks. The IR2023 also pledged that the UK would move towards a target of 2.5% of GDP for defence "as fiscal and economic circumstances allow" but specified neither means nor timeframes (the government announced a defence spending review for after 2025), therefore casting doubts on the UK's ability to deliver on that pledge in the foreseeable future.

## 1.2. CONTRIBUTION TO NORTHERN EUROPEAN SECURITY

Developments related to British defence policy are observed with particular attention in the Nordic-Baltic region, where the UK has long been seen as an important contributor to regional security. The UK's interest has been growing over the past decade and a half. Parts of the region (e.g., the Baltics and the High North) have been identified as of direct strategic interest to the UK, constituting its immediate neighbourhood. Thus, the Nordic-Baltic region is now a primary area of British activity and leadership.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, London's Russia policy aligns with the perspective of the countries in the region, which singles out the UK as a key partner among the "E3" (the UK, France, and Germany). The UK sees the Baltic countries as thought and action leaders on how to deal with Russia and draws some inspiration from the region regarding the "best practices" of whole-of-society resilience – one of the principal themes of the IR2021.

*The UK sees the Baltic countries as thought and action leaders on how to deal with Russia and draws some inspiration from the region regarding the "best practices" of whole-of-society resilience*

The IR2023 emphasises that the UK will make "a particular contribution to northern European

<sup>8</sup> UK Ministry of Defence and The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North* (London: Ministry of Defence, 29 March 2022).

security."<sup>9</sup> The overall objectives of British involvement are to protect the national interests of the UK and its partners, reinforce the rules-based international order, and contest destabilising actions by competitors and adversaries (primarily Russia and now, increasingly, China). The UK's climate security agenda also reinforces British interest in the region.

The UK is a major contributor to NATO's deterrence posture on the eastern flank, as it serves as a framework nation for NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroup in Estonia and contributes to another battlegroup in Poland. Together with its contribution to NATO's Baltic Air Policing (BAP) mission – even though starting after its inception – and to the Alliance's maritime forces that occasionally operate in the area, this makes London a significant security partner in the region. Moreover, the fact that the UK is a nuclear power is part of its deterrence package and one of the advantages of cooperation with London for regional partners, especially in the Baltic region.

The UK has also been steadily increasing its military footprint and engagement by developing a dense network of bilateral and multilateral relations. It has recently signed public political declarations with all three Baltic states individually to increase cooperation across the board. It also leads the JEF, a highly valued military cooperation format of ten members (see Chapter 4). It must be noted that the Brexit-related tensions between the UK and the EU have been relatively siloed and overall had limited impact on bilateral UK relations with Nordic and Baltic partners – especially compared with other EU states such as France, Italy, or Germany.

Russia's war on Ukraine led the UK to redirect even more attention and military capabilities towards Europe and the Nordic-Baltic region, with a clear uptick in British activity in the area since 24 February 2022. The UK temporarily added a battlegroup to Estonia and made additional commitments at the NATO Madrid summit in June 2022. The UK's strong stance towards Moscow, the bilateral

<sup>9</sup> UK Government Office, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 20.

security guarantees it provides to Sweden – and previously Finland – during the period of its accession to NATO, and the concrete steps to assist Ukraine, as well as buttress defence and deterrence on NATO’s eastern flank, have been widely appreciated in the Nordic-Baltic area. The role of the JEF has also expanded as a framework for regional cooperation, with more consultations at the political level.

*There is a consensus across the political spectrum to keep the Nordic-Baltic region as a key area for British defence engagement*

Even though Prime Minister Sunak is perceived as less foreign- and defence-policy-minded than his two predecessors (who had both served as foreign secretary and were personally involved in issues relating to NATO’s eastern flank), there is a consensus both within the Conservative Party and widely across the political spectrum to keep the Nordic-Baltic region as a key area for British defence engagement. This is unlikely to change in the medium term. Opposition leader Sir Keir Starmer reiterated the Labour Party’s commitment to NATO and the British lead of the eFP in Estonia during his visit to the country.<sup>10</sup>

The refreshed message of the IR2023 is that the UK “will seek to lead and galvanise where we have most value to add, giving particular priority to the contribution [...] we can make in northern Europe as a security actor.”<sup>11</sup> Some, however, doubt this will be possible without committing new resources. As Nicolai von Ondarza and Dominik Rehbaum argue, “Overall, IR23 cannot resolve the contradiction of simultaneously expanding the country’s presence in Europe and the Indo-Pacific despite only marginally increasing its resources.”<sup>12</sup> The instinct to do “everything everywhere all at once” may have serious implications for the UK’s ability to play an enhanced role in the Nordic-Baltic region.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Justin Parkinson, “Ukraine war: Starmer meets Nato troops on Estonia visit,” *BBC News*, 10 March 2022.

<sup>11</sup> UK Government Office, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Nicolai von Ondarza and Dominik Rehbaum, *From “Global Britain” to Realpolitik – the Updated Integrated Review* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 24 April 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Cornish, *The UK Integrated Review Refresh 2023 – Everything Everywhere All at Once* (CityForum, April 2023).

### 1.3. FORCES AND CAPABILITIES IN THE REGION

As one of the most capable NATO Allies, the UK brings to the table a broad array of capabilities – from traditional land, air, and naval assets to those in the new cyber and space domains. Due to its experience and resources, the UK is also seen as a mature and highly competent organising power that is capable of generating and sustaining multinational political and military efforts, which positions it as an efficient framework nation and leader of minilateral formats. The

key questions are what those capabilities are configured for, how available they are, and what state of readiness and quantity they are in. These are challenges that all Allies face. However, given the UK’s leadership role, the delivery of its commitments is particularly crucial. The IR2023 and the latest defence budget already provide some elements as to London’s current capacity and plans; the new DCP2023 should give final answers during the summer. In this regard, and especially in the context of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, answers to these questions are of particular importance to London’s Nordic-Baltic partners, who applaud the UK’s actions and leadership but are concerned about the capability-expectations gap in London’s strategy.

The first question is about **the core purpose of the UK armed forces**. The previous strategic review (IR2021) framed the utility of military power in terms of shaping the security environment in various parts of the globe, deterring adversaries, reassuring allies, and otherwise promoting the UK’s national interests. In the context of increasingly confrontational international politics, the emphasis moved from counterinsurgency operations towards configuring the armed forces for a wider range of tasks in the so-called “grey zone” of conflict. (Below the threshold of major conventional war, strategic effects can be delivered by deploying cyber and information warfare capabilities, special forces, and security assistance units, as well as through flexible short-term deployments rather than a permanent presence.) The outbreak of a large-scale conventional war in Europe has put significant pressure on the UK to rethink the core purpose of its armed forces

and perhaps revert to configuring them for a high-intensity – and potentially protracted – multi-domain war in the Euro-Atlantic area, while focusing less on influencing and shaping the strategic environment through smart applications of military power. Recent comments by the British political and military leadership indicate that this rethinking might as well be happening. However, far from shifting towards a large-scale war scenario as a baseline for defence planning, the IR2023 maintains that “systemic competition between states represents the most immediate and substantial threat to UK interests”.<sup>14</sup> In the view of some of London’s Nordic-Baltic partners,

*With Russia’s potential defeat in Ukraine, the UK might again come to see it as more of a long-term chronic threat in a “grey zone” rather than an acute conventional military threat*

whose threat perception differs, this carries some risks. One would be that, with Russia’s potential defeat in Ukraine, the UK might again come to see it as more of a long-term chronic threat in a “grey zone” rather than an acute conventional military threat. In that case, London could feel less urgency and pressure to prepare its armed forces for a possible large-scale war.

Second, in line with the assessment laid out in the IR2021, **the UK’s priorities tilted towards naval and new domains at the expense of the British Army.** The latter has been experiencing personnel and equipment cuts ever since the end of the Cold War, with the latest round of reductions having occurred after the strategic review of 2010 in the wake of the global financial crisis. As a result, it shrank from 166 000 troops in 1985, at the peak of the Cold War, to just 77 000 as of 2022.<sup>15</sup> The DCP2021 envisaged further

<sup>14</sup> William Mata, “Ukraine war a ‘massive wakeup call’ for British Army, say veterans and experts,” *The Independent* via *Yahoo! Finance*, 30 January 2023; Aris Roussinos, “Top general: Britain must prepare for war,” *UnHerd*, 28 June 2022; UK Government Office, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> UK Ministry of Defence, “An annual time series for the size of the armed forces.” FOI2017/04440 (*Army, Navy and RAF since 1700*) (London: Defence Statistics, 28 April 2017); Esme Kirk-Wade, Noel Dempsey, *UK defence personnel statistics* (London: House of Commons Library, 23 August 2023).

cuts – down to less than 73 000 – by 2030. The UK’s long-standing tradition of keeping its army small, light, and expeditionary – just as “a projectile to be fired by the Royal Navy” – while relying on its naval superiority has re-asserted itself in the new geostrategic context.<sup>16</sup>

What size and role the Army should have remains a heated debate in the United Kingdom itself. The reality of the war between Ukraine and Russia has confirmed the value of maintaining combined arms capabilities for land warfare and the capacity to withstand prolonged attrition, while still denying the enemy free use of the air, maritime, or cyber domains that enable and facilitate advances on the ground.<sup>17</sup> As Paul Cornish points out, the IR2023 “offers an extraordinary mismatch of diagnosis and treatment, making it possible to draw attention to the ‘notable’ difficulties in the ‘land domain’[...] but

then to offer absolutely no solutions to those difficulties.”<sup>18</sup> Whether some rebalancing has been undertaken will become clear only with the 2023 iteration of the DCP, though no major change is currently anticipated.

For those countries in the Nordic-Baltic region who focus on the maritime domain in the High North and North Atlantic, the tilt towards naval capabilities and the envisaged modernisation of air power are welcome, but it does not change the core dynamic of their cooperation.

*For the Baltic states who are concerned about potential Russian attempts to invade and occupy part or all of their territories, the UK’s strategic de-emphasising of land warfare is problematic*

For others (such as the Baltic states and especially Estonia) who are facing the east and concerned about potential Russian attempts to invade and occupy part or all of their territories, the UK’s strategic de-emphasising of land

<sup>16</sup> “Naval gazing,” *Strategic Overview*, 22 August 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Mykhaylo Zabrodskyy, Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, *Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022* (London: the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 30 November 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Paul Cornish, *The UK Integrated Review Refresh 2023*.

warfare is problematic. While not insisting on a new version of the “British Army of the Rhine” (BAOR) – i.e., the British Army of the Narva River – they feel that the UK’s credibility in the land domain is as important as in the maritime or air domains.

The third question concerns **the loss of quantity**. The number of platforms in all services has been cut in order to make the remaining platforms more capable.<sup>19</sup> The Army has been facing particularly significant shortfalls in equipment. For instance, the DCP2021 envisaged decreasing the number of Challenger 2 main battle tanks (MBTs) from the already low number of 227 to the 148 that are to be upgraded to Challenger 3 by 2030.<sup>20</sup> It also cut the entire fleet of ageing Warrior infantry fighting vehicles, while what will replace these is not yet clear and the Ajax programme to develop new generation armoured reconnaissance vehicles has been experiencing significant setbacks.<sup>21</sup> The 3rd (UK) Division has been in the spotlight as the core formation pivotal to the UK’s NATO commitments, with various assessments painting it as a hollowed-out force.<sup>22</sup> The UK will likely have a significant gap in heavy armour capability extending well into the early 2030s, while similar problems have emerged in areas such as heavy artillery, air defence, and various munitions (although the issue of depleted munitions stocks will be addressed by channelling at least £2 billion of fresh funding, in addition to £560 million earmarked in late 2022, towards replenishing war stocks). Some voices from the principal ally – the United States – warn that the UK risks losing the status of a top-tier power and might not be able to fight alongside the US as a peer in future wars.<sup>23</sup> In the British parliamentary debates, concerns have also been raised

about the UK’s future ability to fulfil its NATO obligations altogether; some serving, as well as recently retired, top military officials have acknowledged that the UK is barely able to maintain its influence in the Alliance as a result of cuts, especially in the British Army.<sup>24</sup> Some Estonian interlocutors interviewed for this study also suggested that if the UK goes ahead with its current plans, it might have to scale down its land-domain commitment in the region and focus on the maritime and air domains instead.

Although offset somewhat by the quality produced by advanced technology, this loss of quantity stands in stark contrast with the challenges of a large-scale protracted war, demonstrated by Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine. Deep strike capabilities – or a strategic method of “remote” warfare as some call it – emphasised by the IR2021 and reiterated in the IR2023 do not negate the role of and the need to maintain close combat capability, in which attrition rates can be massive and, therefore, the ability to reconstitute the lost capability would be essential.<sup>25</sup> Some assessments aired in the parliamentary hearings assert that the UK’s armed forces would last only five days in a major war.<sup>26</sup> As General Christopher Cavoli, NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, noted, the qualitative superiority that the British Army seeks could, indeed, defeat the quantitative edge that Russia relies on, but it would take time and might entail temporarily giving up space – something that frontline Allies such as Estonia have explicitly ruled

<sup>19</sup> Dov S. Zakheim, “[Britain remains a major military power – but for how long?](#),” *The Hill*, 3 February 2023.

<sup>20</sup> UK Ministry of Defence, [Defence in a Competitive Age. Corporate report](#) (London: the Secretary of State for Defence by Command of Her Majesty, March 2021), last modified 20 July 2021.

<sup>21</sup> “[Delays to Ajax armoured vehicles risk national security, MPs warn](#),” *The Guardian*, 3 June 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Simon Anglim, “[Global Britain, Global Army? The Review and Land Warfare](#),” in *The Integrated Review in Context: Defence and Security in Focus*, *The Centre for Defence Studies series*, Volume Two (King’s College London, 11 October 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Stewart Carr, “[US general warns British Army ‘is no longer regarded’ as a top-level fighting force and is ‘unable to protect the UK and our allies’](#),” *The Daily Mail*, 29 January 2023.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul Rathbone and George Parker, “[Failure to sustain defence spending would imperil Nato pledge, MPs warn](#),” *The Financial Times*, 6 March 2023; Dominic Nicholls, “[Britain ‘just holding on’ to Nato influence because Army is now too small, deputy commander warns](#),” *The Telegraph*, 20 June 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Anglim, “Global Britain, Global Army? The Review and Land Warfare,” Nicholas Drummond, “[What Does Russia’s Invasion Of Ukraine Mean For The UK’s Integrated Review And The British Army?](#),” *UK Land Power*, 5 April 2022.

<sup>26</sup> George Parker and John-Paul Rathbone, “[UK armed forces would last just ‘five days’ in a war, senior MP warns](#),” *The Financial Times*, 10 February 2023; By some estimates, should the British Army experience similar rates of equipment loss and munitions expenditure as witnessed in Ukraine, it would have lost its last MBT by day 173 and expended all of its artillery ammunition within two weeks or so. See: RLC Alex, “[The Army isn’t serious about War fighting](#),” *WavellRoom*, 24 August 2022.

out as an acceptable defence strategy against Russia's aggression.<sup>27</sup>

Fourth, **financial austerity and cuts also affected the readiness of various parts of the British armed forces.** In some cases, forces lack the experience of operating the systems or traversing terrains that would be essential to defend NATO's eastern or northern flanks,

*Financial austerity and cuts also affected the readiness of various parts of the British armed forces*

considering that exercises have been scaled back for cost reasons.<sup>28</sup> The eFP deployments and JEF exercises certainly help to mitigate this issue, but concerns over the actual readiness for fighting a war in the geographical and climatic conditions of the Nordic-Baltic region – in terms of skills, knowledge, and equipment maintenance – persist.

Fifth, as the UK's defence seeks to tap into the broader trends of **digitisation, robotisation, connectivity, and use of AI when envisaging the multi-domain battles of the future**, questions of timelines and technological uncertainty arise.<sup>29</sup> Many of the technologies the UK seeks to rely on in future capabilities are not yet fully tested, let alone scaled up and applied in real combat situations. As Lord Houghton, former Chief of Defence Staff, acknowledged in his testimony to the House of Commons Defence Committee, "in terms of whether or not all of this is going to work, this is a bit of a strategic bet."<sup>30</sup>

The IR2023 maintains the course of UK defence development towards the "armed forces that are networked and digitally-enabled, more lethal, and more capable in the newer domains of space and cyber," while also promising to

respond to the lessons from Ukraine in the land domain through the ongoing Army's Future Soldier programme.<sup>31</sup> The war in Ukraine demonstrates that such a force – even when enabled by cheap commercial off-the-shelf platforms and rapidly improvised digital solutions – can, indeed, be very effective against a quantitatively superior adversary.<sup>32</sup> Hence, the new generation capabilities that the UK is pursuing could eventually make its forces "sufficiently capable, resilient, deployable and adaptive to deter adversaries [...] and to win a conflict if deterrence fails."<sup>33</sup> They would also be closely aligned with the US' vision of multi-domain warfare and the flexible "360 degree" approach pursued by NATO. The question is, therefore, about timeframes: when will these capabilities be fully mature and available? And how will the gaps be filled until then?

*The UK government is facing two kinds of pressure: to cancel some of the announced cuts and replenish its stocks and to invest in new cutting-edge capabilities*

The UK government is thus facing two kinds of pressure. One is to cancel some of the announced cuts and replenish its stocks so as not to risk possible failure in the event of a Russian attack on NATO. The other is to invest in new cutting-edge capabilities to maintain its qualitative superiority.<sup>34</sup> As General Sir Richard Barrons (Ret) wrote, "the idea that cyber would make jets, tanks and guns obsolete was always a fantasy. Countries such as Britain that cut spending on conventional armed forces to pay for cyber programmes now see that the two are needed together."<sup>35</sup> This is a costly undertaking that will stretch the defence budget unless the UK spends significantly more on defence than

<sup>27</sup> Michael Peck, "[Losses in Ukraine are 'out of proportion' to what NATO has been planning for, the alliance's top general says](#)," *Business Insider*, 6 February 2023.

<sup>28</sup> "[The British Army has a new focus and outdated equipment](#)," *The Economist*, 11 July 2022.

<sup>29</sup> UK Ministry of Defence, *Integrated Operating Concept* (London: Ministry of Defence, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Integrated Review, Defence in a Competitive Age and the Defence and Security Industrial Strategy. Second Report of Session 2022–23* (London: House of Commons Defence Committee, 28 July 2022).

<sup>31</sup> UK Government Office, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 34–35.

<sup>32</sup> David Ignatius, "[How the algorithm tipped the balance in Ukraine](#)," *The Washington Post*, 19 December 2022; Sam Schechner and Daniel Michaels, "[Ukraine Has Digitized Its Fighting Forces on a Shoestring](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 January 2023.

<sup>33</sup> UK Government Office, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 34.

<sup>34</sup> Georgie Allison, "[Britain reconsidering cuts to the size of the Army](#)," *UK Defence Journal*, 3 November 2022.

<sup>35</sup> "[Sir Richard Barrons on how the characteristics of war are changing](#)," *The Economist*, 9 February 2023.

it currently does. That could mean even more than the 2.5% that the IR2023 aspires to and closer to the 3% of GDP threshold that was considered by the short-lived government of Liz Truss.<sup>36</sup>

However, given the present economic climate and legitimate competing priorities for public finances, there are realistically limited prospects for an influx of significant financial resources beyond what has already been pledged. Beyond the UK's partners, many of these concerns are echoed in London's security and defence circles, as well as in the Ministry of Defence itself. As three former senior officials – Will Jessett, Tom McKane, and Peter Watkins – conclude, “Given that the headline increases in UK defence spending announced so far are relatively modest, the DCPR [Defence Command Paper Refresh] will struggle to score high marks unless it offers a compelling narrative of capability reprioritisation, productivity and availability improvements and international engagement.”<sup>37</sup>

There is a possibility that the IR2023 and the upcoming new DCP will not be able to close the gap between what the UK can afford and what the security situation in the Euro-Atlantic area demands from such geopolitical heavyweights. Estonia and other Nordic-Baltic partners would do well to adjust their expectations accordingly, with a particular focus on managing risks associated with the UK's military contribution and leadership during the mid- to late 2020s.

*The Nordic-Baltic countries will need to find ways to enhance their own contribution to UK-led efforts while carefully calibrating their expectations and cultivating other military “heavyweights”*

That is the critical period when some of the UK's “sunset capabilities” will be stagnating or in decline, while the “sunrise capabilities” will likely not yet be in place or fail to compensate for the further loss of quantity.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Chuter, “[Britain revises its defense plans in light of Russia's war](#),” *Defense News*, 21 September 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Will Jessett CBE et al., “How Refreshing?”

<sup>38</sup> Ben Barry, “[Can the British Army still march to the sound of the guns?](#),” *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 6 February 2023.

Nordic-Baltic countries will need to find ways to enhance their own contribution to UK-led efforts and frameworks, while carefully calibrating their expectations for a greater role of the UK in northern Europe and perhaps investing more into cultivating other military “heavyweights” – both current and emerging ones.

## 2. HEAVYWEIGHTS IN THE REGION

The UK is not the only major European security actor involved in the Nordic-Baltic area, with other NATO Allies actively shaping the region's dynamics. It is thus legitimate to consider how other resourceful or geographically closer Allies could, alongside the UK, carry a greater burden and be effective in orchestrating cooperative endeavours.

Although not a European actor, all the countries of the Nordic-Baltic region seek to maintain strong relations with **the United States**. Likewise, Washington can rely on a very strong Atlanticist sentiment among all of the Nordic-Baltic countries that value the US commitment to their security (in part through NATO's Article 5), as well as the opportunities that flow from a partnership with the most capable and technologically advanced military power in the world. Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014-15 prompted Washington to provide greater reassurance to its Nordic-Baltic partners and Poland. However, Washington preferred not to place too many assets to the north of the Suwalki corridor – i.e., in the Baltic states. Following the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the US stepped up its efforts: in the closing months of 2022, the White House announced a transition from episodic deployments to a persistent, though still rather symbolic,



rotational presence in the Baltic states.<sup>39</sup> The US attention, presence, and support will remain precious commodities in the Nordic-Baltic security space, yet contingent on Washington's other global priorities – especially in the Indo-Pacific – and resource constraints. Thus, opportunities arise for other European Allies to add significant value and exercise reassuring influence to make up for a possible “US deficit” in the region.

*The US attention, presence, and support will remain precious commodities in the Nordic-Baltic security space, yet contingent on Washington's other global priorities*

By many parameters, **Germany** is well positioned to play a key security role. It is the largest economy in the EU and has been one of the major investors in the Nordic-Baltic region, with a strong vested interest in maintaining its security. Most of the Nordic-Baltic countries have long expected that Germany would eventually increase its role and involvement in almost every geographical subregion and every operational domain.<sup>40</sup> Berlin stepped up to support its Allies by, for instance, undertaking to lead the eFP battlegroup in Lithuania. However, aside from the plans for the Baltic Maritime Component Command (BMCC) and some pan-European frameworks that involve almost all of the Nordic-Baltic countries (e.g., the European Sky Shield Initiative), Germany has neither initiated nor led any unilateral Nordic-Baltic security and cooperation formats,

showing limited interest to act as an organising force in the region itself.<sup>41</sup>

In the wake of the transformation of Germany's security and defence policy, often referred to as the *Zeitenwende*, in response to Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, those expectations were bound to grow.<sup>42</sup> Berlin's determination to turn Germany into a leading military power in Europe fostered hope that it would also become willing to take a much stronger leadership role in the Nordic-Baltic area and beyond – something that it has long eschewed, partly due to its deep-seated sensitivities about the potential reaction from Russia. Germany's quick agreement with Lithuania in the summer of 2022 and commitment to bolster the eFP by designating a full brigade, sending an additional battalion for frequent exercises, and forward-deploying a staff element were positive signs of Berlin boosting its contribution. The message was further reinforced by German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius, who stated, during his visit to Vilnius in June 2023, that Berlin was ready to permanently deploy a full brigade if certain prerequisites, such as the necessary infrastructure and “flexible compatibility with NATO plans,” were met.<sup>43</sup> Berlin frames it as standing up – in the spirit of *Zeitenwende* – to meet its obligations (as a member of NATO and

<sup>39</sup> The US pledged to keep an armoured battalion and artillery battery in Lithuania, deploy an infantry company and a HIMARS platoon to Estonia, and artillery as well as aviation assets to Latvia. See: Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, “[Enhancements to Persistent U.S. Force Presence in Lithuania](#),” Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, 7 December 2022; Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Estonia, “[Statement on U.S. Rotational Presence in Estonia](#),” Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Estonia, 8 December 2022; Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, “[U.S. military presence to be strengthened in Latvia](#),” Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, 8 December 2022.

<sup>40</sup> “[Germany's approach to Baltic Sea security: Stepping up, but not enough?](#),” Danish Institute for International Studies, 10 November 2020.

<sup>41</sup> On the European Sky Shield Initiative, see Sean Monaghan and John Christianson, *[Making the Most of the European Sky Shield Initiative](#)* (Washington, DC: Center of International and Strategic Studies, 2023). After Denmark and Sweden joined the original 15 participants in February 2023, all Nordic-Baltic countries, except Iceland, are now part of this cooperation framework that also includes, in addition to Germany itself as a lead nation, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and the UK.

<sup>42</sup> Christian Mölling and Torben Schütz, “[Zeitenwende in der Verteidigungspolitik](#) [A Turning Point in Defence Policy],” *DGAP Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik* [German Society for Foreign Relations] Brief No. 16 (May 2022); Olaf Scholz, “[The Global Zeitenwende How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, 5 December 2022; Tony Lawrence, “[Bravo, Herr Bundeskanzler! Germany and the Security of the Baltic States: Postscript](#),” *ICDS Commentary*, 1 March 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Verteidigungsministerium [Federal Ministry of Defence] (@BMVg\_Bundeswehr), “[Deutschland ist bereit, eine robuste Brigade dauerhaft in #Litauen zu stationieren](#) [Germany is ready to station a robust brigade permanently in #Lithuania],” Twitter, 26 June 2023; “[Germany to station 4,000 troops in Lithuania](#),” *DW*, 26 June 2023.

the largest economy in Europe) to collective defence of the Allies on the eastern perimeter of the Alliance.<sup>44</sup>

Yet Germany's military support to Ukraine has been widely criticised for being limited and reluctant – something that did not begin to change until over a year into the war.<sup>45</sup> There are also discouraging signs that the *Zeitenwende* may falter before it takes off: the promised additional defence spending has been slow to materialise, and concrete steps to address severe capability issues are being delayed.<sup>46</sup> Berlin also misread some of the initial expectations concerning forward defence posture in the Baltics: the Lithuanian domestic political debate over what was promised and what would, in fact, be delivered became a major source of bilateral misunderstandings. It prompted the German ambassador in Vilnius to conclude that “Germany seems to have lost a certain amount of trust over the last few years.”<sup>47</sup> Even its ability to deliver on the promise to permanently deploy a “robust brigade” has caused some doubts – including in Germany itself, where the land capabilities have been hollowed out perhaps even more than in the UK and where the Armed Forces have opposed such a move but seem to have been blindsided by the minister's recent pledge.<sup>48</sup>

Germany's first National Security Strategy, published in June 2023, declares the country's commitment to contribute more to security on the European continent, expand its military presence in Allied territories, and strengthen

its ability to act as a “framework nation.”<sup>49</sup> However, the document only singles out France as a key European partner and fails to mention the importance of improving relations with either Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) or Nordic-Baltic states. Albeit seeking to establish credibility – both in the larger picture of war and containing Russia and in regional cooperation – Germany may lack the necessary political capital, interest and desire to lead, as well as the right strategic culture to assume a leadership role in the Nordic-Baltic area in the short- or even medium-term.<sup>50</sup>

*Germany may lack the necessary political capital, interest and desire to lead, as well as the right strategic culture to assume a leadership role in the Nordic-Baltic area*

Although even farther away than Germany, **France** has both reasons and opportunities to increase its role in Nordic-Baltic security, not least because it is now the EU's pre-eminent military power. Paris has been cultivating partnerships with the region's countries, through both the EU's defence cooperation initiatives and its own European Intervention Initiative (E2I) – a framework that encompasses all Nordic-Baltic countries except Lithuania and Latvia.<sup>51</sup> Tallinn has been particularly active in engaging Paris. It made militarily small but politically important contributions to the French-led military operations in Africa at a time when no other EU and NATO country did so, which earned the gratitude and facilitated French participation in the UK-led eFP.

As France is now pivoting its military strategy towards building up capabilities for high-intensity large-scale conventional war (a welcome development from a Baltic perspective), its weight in collective defence and deterrence will only grow.<sup>52</sup> However, France has traditionally been more focused on the threats to the southern and south-eastern

<sup>44</sup> Laura Pitel and Henry Foy, “Germany plans ‘permanent’ force in Lithuania to strengthen Nato's eastern flank,” *The Financial Times*, 26 June 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Liana Fix, “On the Ukraine War, Germany Has a Leadership Problem. Here's Why,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 14 October 2022; “Germany Announces Biggest Military Aid Package Yet for Ukraine,” *The New York Times*, 13 May 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Luck, “Does ‘Zeitenwende’ Represent a Flash in the Pan or Renewal for the German Military?,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 27 June 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Dainora Pankūnė, “Iš Vokietijos – pavojingi signalai Lietuvai: ar ambasadoriaus užuominos buvo tik pradžia [Dangerous signals for Lithuania from Germany: were the ambassador's hints just the beginning],” *DELFI/BNS*, 22 December 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Thorsten Jungholt, “Das unhaltbare Versprechen des deutschen Verteidigungsministers [The unfulfillable promise of the German defense minister],” *Die Welt*, 26 June 2023.

<sup>49</sup> The Federal Government, *Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany. National Security Strategy* (Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, June 2023).

<sup>50</sup> Liana Fix, “On the Ukraine War, Germany Has a Leadership Problem.”

<sup>51</sup> Alice Billon-Galland and Martin Quencez, “A Military Workshop,” *Berlin Foreign Policy Journal*, 30 October 2018.

<sup>52</sup> “France is preparing for a new kind of war,” *The Economist*, 10 November 2022.

flanks, and its current efforts to bolster NATO's deterrence in light of Russia's war on Ukraine are mostly concentrated in the south-eastern part of the Alliance. This points to a certain geographic division of labour in the Alliance, even though, in the wake of Russia's attack on Ukraine, Paris has also increased its contribution to the eFP in Estonia (thus making it "heel-and-toe" – i.e., without windows between rotations) and Lithuania, as well as to NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission.<sup>53</sup>

Nordic and Baltic countries often have differences with France over transatlantic relations, the US' role in European security, the importance of EU defence cooperation, or even priority threats to Europe. In the context of the invasion of Ukraine, some of President Emmanuel Macron's statements about Russia's place in the post-war European security order rekindled suspicions about France's instincts, motives, and priorities. President Macron has recently signalled a fundamental overhaul of the country's approach to the security concerns of the Allies and partners in northern, central, and eastern Europe, especially pertaining to Russia's threat and future security architecture in Europe – including the prospects of Ukraine's membership in NATO.<sup>54</sup> Such a shift – and the recognition of past French shortcomings – has been broadly welcomed by regional partners.

*Continued practical and persistent French engagement will be required in order to substantiate the new rhetoric and to overcome distrust in French policy*

Continued practical and persistent French engagement will be required in order to substantiate the new rhetoric and to overcome distrust in French policy, therefore unlocking France's regional leadership potential.

There are, of course, other important players that may potentially step in or become more active in the Nordic-Baltic region. **Poland** is certainly one of them, given its rapidly expanding military capabilities, firm stand on Russia, and strong support for Ukraine. If

<sup>53</sup> Elise Vincent, "[French military strengthens position on Europe's eastern flank](#)," *Le Monde*, 12 October 2022.

<sup>54</sup> "[Globsec summit in Bratislava. Closing speech by the President of the French Republic](#)," Elysée, 31 May 2023.

the planned defence investments yield the expected outcomes, Warsaw is set to become a major land power on the continent.<sup>55</sup> It has already turned into a major hub of the US military involvement in Europe and has been cultivating close relations with the UK. The Baltic states are also keen to expand their defence relations with Warsaw.<sup>56</sup> However, Poland lacks some of the critical capabilities (e.g., maritime) and competencies (e.g., in the matters of the High North) that it would need in order to lead in the entire Nordic-Baltic region. More importantly, Warsaw has not, thus far, shown any particular desire for such leadership, especially for the Nordic side of it. Its strategic focus is mostly on the defence of its own territory against the threat of a direct attack from the east, while its involvement to the north of the Suwalki corridor remains largely symbolic.

### 3. FROM MADRID SUMMIT TO VILNIUS SUMMIT

As NATO is shifting its strategy and posture to respond to the Russian threat, countries in the Nordic-Baltic region are bolstering their own capabilities, as well as raising expectations of what the Alliance should deliver in order to enhance deterrence and defence in their region. Given its strong commitment to NATO and its lead role in eFP in Estonia, the UK has a special role to play in the Alliance's response, which took shape at the Madrid summit and will continue evolving at the Vilnius summit. What London is able and willing to deliver will significantly impact NATO's ability to ensure successful deterrence and robust collective defence.

<sup>55</sup> Matthew Karnitschnig and Wojciech Kosci, "[Meet Europe's coming military superpower: Poland](#)," *Politico*, 21 November 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia, "[Reinsalu together with Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish foreign ministers established a cooperation platform for the four countries](#)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia, 31 January 2023.

### 3.1. NEW CONSTRUCT OF FORWARD DEFENCE

NATO's Madrid summit in June 2022 – convened just a few months after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – was a transformational moment for the Alliance. For Estonia and the other Baltic states, it marked a much-awaited moment of transition to the posture of forward defence, whereby the Alliance's territory would be defended from the very first moment of military aggression. The Baltic states long sought to replace a "deterrence by punishment" logic with a "deterrence by denial" posture. The summit's declaration stated that "NATO will continue to protect our populations and defend every inch of Allied territory at all times." Hence, the objective is to ensure that Allies have a much more substantial presence in the region, with the necessary combat forces, enablers, prepositioned equipment and stocks, and new permanent command structures.<sup>57</sup>

At that time, NATO still lacked detailed and specific defence plans for the region – a gap it set out to rectify after Madrid – and thus the challenge of how to implement this new posture inevitably fell mostly on the eFP lead and host nations. This entailed difficult negotiations, occasionally marked by mutual frustrations, misunderstandings, and misreading of expectations. Estonia, for instance, signalled the need for a NATO division "consisting of Estonia's own and allied units and a command structure," as well as stronger air defence.<sup>58</sup> In the defence debate in Estonia and other Baltic states, it was widely assumed that NATO would need to enlarge its allied presence from a battlegroup to a full brigade-size in order to meet this level of ambition, even though the Madrid summit declaration clearly stipulated that such scaling up would only occur "where and when required."<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, [Madrid Summit Declaration](#) (Madrid: NATO Heads of State and Government, 29 June 2022).

<sup>58</sup> Government of the Republic of Estonia, "[Kallas at NATO summit: Estonia needs NATO division and air defence](#)," Government of the Republic of Estonia, 24 March 2022.

<sup>59</sup> NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, [Madrid Summit Declaration](#).

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania preferred a more substantive footprint in the form of a larger and more capable force, as both a political and a military necessity for turning the forward defence posture into reality. The Baltic interpretation of this posture is clearly "here and now." Yet the practical implementation of the new construct of forward defence had to reconcile the expectations of host nations

*Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania preferred a more substantive footprint in the form of a larger and more capable force, as both a political and a military necessity for turning the forward defence posture into reality*

with the perspectives and capacity of the lead nations. London, in particular, sought to retain flexibility in responding to various contingencies and requirements – not just in the Nordic-Baltic region but along the entire eastern flank of NATO – without establishing a costly and inflexible BAOR-type of presence in Estonia. Delivering the deterrent effects rather than focusing on headcount has been the main principle adopted by the UK (and echoed, to some extent, by the German approach in Lithuania – at least until the most recent pledge that seems to have caught London off-guard).

The deployment of the additional British battlegroup to Estonia in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, nevertheless, led to some misunderstandings. Although the December 2022 end date for this surge had been clearly established in a joint statement by the two prime ministers, the political optics of the withdrawal were perceived negatively in Estonia, as it seemed to contrast with the rhetoric of the upcoming much larger allied presence.<sup>60</sup> Eventually, the additional battlegroup's withdrawal proved less controversial than the media hype suggested, and the focus shifted to establishing a more ambitious framework for integrating the allied presence – i.e., a division.

<sup>60</sup> Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the Prime Minister of Estonia, [Joint Leaders Statement](#) (London: Prime Minister's Office and The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, 6 June 2022).

### 3.2. DELIVERING ON COMMITMENTS

Moving on from the battlegroup withdrawal misunderstanding – and to chart a clearer way forward – in November 2022, Estonia and the UK signed a Defence Roadmap. Announced in a joint statement of the ministers of defence, the roadmap outlined the main elements of the new construct, such as:<sup>61</sup>

- The UK will **enhance the effectiveness of its permanently based eFP battlegroup** by maintaining division-level assets (short-range air defence and multiple launch rocket systems) in Estonia and augmenting these with periodic deployments of additional capabilities and enablers, including Apache and Chinook helicopters.
- The UK will also **hold the balance of a brigade at high readiness in the UK**, ready to reinforce Estonia and the Baltics at a time of need. To ensure this brigade is fully interoperable and integrated with Estonia's national defence plan, the UK will regularly exercise the reinforcement of UK forces in Estonia up to the brigade level. (The first such deployment took place in late April and early May 2023 as part of the Spring Storm exercise.)<sup>62</sup>
- **Estonia will start developing a warfighting division** that will command in-place national and allied forces, as well as possible reinforcement units, to ensure the seamless use of all national and allied capabilities.
- **The UK will also support the development of the divisional headquarters**, providing training and mentoring through a bespoke advisory team, and fostering closer links with the 3rd (UK) Division.
- **Estonia will improve its host nation support** for the UK surge forces and reinforcement training by building additional accommodation and other necessary support facilities as well as developing a new additional Reception Staging Onward Movement (RSOM) assembly area.

<sup>61</sup> United Kingdom Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Estonia, [Joint Statement between the UK MOD and the Estonian MOD](#) (London: Ministry of Defence and The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, 8 November 2022).

<sup>62</sup> [“UK troops test rapid reinforcement of NATO battlegroup in Estonia,”](#) NATO, 19 May 2023.

London argues that this commitment is greater and more impactful than simply keeping the second forward-deployed battlegroup in Estonia and insists that the UK is fully capable of delivering this package of commitments. Tallinn's palpable frustration, felt in the autumn of 2022, that other lead nations (especially Germany in Lithuania) were moving faster than the UK to establish a new construct has been replaced by a mutual sense that the UK is strongly committed to increasing its footprint in Estonia and the region. The sentiment in London is that the package agreed on post-Madrid (as broadly outlined above) is demanding and credible enough, especially given the UK's resource constraints (as discussed in the first chapter). Therefore, in this view, fully delivering the package highlights the credibility of both the UK's commitment to NATO and its role in the region. Arguably, the yardstick of success should remain whether the eFP accomplishes the collectively desired end-state (deterrence by denial, in this case).

The November 2022 UK-Estonia Defence Roadmap highlights several other important aspects regarding the UK's future role in defence and deterrence in the region, as well as its security relations with Estonia. First, despite the tighter integration of the command structures and the enhanced interoperability that flow from having a designated brigade and establishing a divisional HQ, **effective forward defence remains highly dependent on sufficient early warning – along with an assessment that this early warning is serious and credible – and rapid deployment of the designated units and additional assets to the theatre.** In this regard, it represents a “Warsaw Plus” – or a somewhat boosted, better plugged in, diversified, and more dynamic version of eFP designed after the Warsaw summit of 2016 – rather than a significantly enlarged number of combat-ready allied troops and assets constantly on the ground prepared to counter aggression from the very first moment (“forward defence” as envisaged by the Baltic states).

Second, this means that secure maritime, land, and air access to Estonia and the other Baltic states will remain essential, yet again underscoring **the importance of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), military mobility, deployable capabilities, and**

**ability to counter anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities of the adversary.** Finland's new NATO membership and Sweden's pending one are of great significance in this regard. Land-domain-focused Estonia and its two Baltic neighbours may concentrate on counting the "boots on the ground," but other domains will

In addition to greater financial resources, infrastructure, and manpower requirements, this will entail a great deal of learning how to operate a division. This, in turn, highlights the continued role of the UK as a coach, mentor, and technical assistance provider in building Estonia's required capabilities.

*Land-domain-focused Estonia and its two Baltic neighbours may concentrate on counting the "boots on the ground," but other domains will be just as important in ensuring that forward defence works*

be just as important in ensuring that forward defence works. This is where the UK and other Allies will need to compensate for the lack of capabilities on the Baltic side, potentially with the enhanced role of the JEF as part of such an effort. In this regard, it is understandable that the UK wishes to keep the Nordic-Baltic area as a single theatre under a unified joint command. The UK made some proposals to bring the three Baltic states and all the Nordic countries (assuming Sweden will join the Alliance soon) under a new NATO Joint Force Command North in Norfolk.<sup>63</sup> However, the only way to weave this all into a coherent picture will be through NATO's regional defence plan prepared in the run-up to the Vilnius summit – a factor that may require some modifications to the agreements reached between Estonia and the UK. The absence of such plans has been a major source of concern – among UK officials as well – that the tracks are being laid ahead of the train that has already left the station.

Finally, the November 2022 UK-Estonia agreement underlines the fact that **the host nation, Estonia, must bear most of the burden in creating the necessary conditions for successful reinforcements and their integration into the division-level structure.**

London and Tallinn do have prior experience of this type of mentor-apprentice relationship. Yet the UK will need to consider more substantive and extensive involvement in Estonia's professional military education and training, doctrine development, and perhaps defence acquisition

structures and processes to make its support more effective and sustainable in the long run. At the same time, by shifting the terms of the discussion to a division-level formation – a level where the concept of multi-domain operations becomes more relevant – Tallinn has also opened the door to asking for a more diverse set of inputs from London than what typically accompanies a brigade-size unit.

### 3.3. TOWARDS VILNIUS AND BEYOND

As the Alliance leaders prepare to gather in Vilnius in July 2023 for their next summit, they have been taking stock of the progress made in the implementation of the new construct of forward defence in the course of a year since the Madrid summit. UK officials argued that they were heading to Vilnius with concrete results, having delivered or being on track to delivering most of their eFP commitments. In the region, however, some of the Allies (e.g., the Baltic states) view all the work undertaken on the basis of bilateral agreements – rather than new NATO regional plans – differently. They see it as a stepping stone in a longer journey to build credible forward defence – rather than the final destination.

Tallinn and London both understand that it will take time before a full allied brigade can be hosted whenever necessary and required by the circumstances, as articulated in the Madrid summit's communique. But if the fierce debate in Lithuania is anything to go by, there will be continuous and growing domestic pressure in the Baltic nations – Estonia included

<sup>63</sup> Finland is currently assigned to the JFC Brunssum, together with the Baltic states and Poland. Yet there is a strong preference by Finland to be under the same command as Norway, the UK, and, once the accession is completed, Sweden. In such a case, NATO's command structure would keep the Nordics and Baltics as separate areas of responsibility, with the potential implication that the UK's involvement will evolve towards playing a more prominent role in relation to the former, while Germany's and Poland's (both under the JFC Brunssum) – in relation to the latter. See: "[Finland joins Nato's Brunssum HQ in the Netherlands](#)," *YLE News*, 24 May 2023.

– to eventually forward-deploy a full allied brigade in each country as part of the division framework.<sup>64</sup> Many key regional stakeholders are convinced that Russia’s military threat is not diminishing despite its massive losses in Ukraine. Therefore, once the “homework” for the requisite host nation support has been completed, they are almost certain to insist that the designated brigades, currently kept at home in the UK, Canada, or Germany, should be brought to the Baltic states in their entirety and full-time for a “heel-and-toe” (uninterrupted) presence as part of a robust deterrence by denial posture – something that Germany has already promised to Lithuania.<sup>65</sup> The flexibility

*The flexibility preferred by the UK does not fully convince public opinion in Estonia, where the “boots on the ground” approach resonates much more*

preferred by the UK does not fully convince public opinion in Estonia, where the “boots on the ground” approach resonates much more with the people and many political players. Despite public assurances from Estonian defence officials – that Tallinn is fully satisfied with the model put in place by the bilateral roadmap with the UK and that Germany’s new pledge to Lithuania does not provide impetus to necessitate a change – there will almost certainly be some behind-the-scenes pressure from Tallinn to eventually match this step.<sup>66</sup>

Yet, there will be some resistance from the providing (and lead) nations – especially the UK – related not only to their understanding of how forward defence should work but also to their

other – sometimes competing – priorities, commitments, and, most importantly, available resources. A “heel-and-toe” rotational presence of an entire brigade, for instance, would mean tying up three brigades, or an entire division, for the defence of just one Ally. London is cautious not to over-promise and over-extend, especially once the Madrid commitments and the measures envisaged in the joint statement have been achieved ahead of the Vilnius summit in July 2023. London’s stated ambition is to ensure the swift and sustained delivery of its commitments, and the UK has been quite aligned (at least until the German defence minister’s statement in Vilnius that promised permanent deployment of a full brigade) with fellow eFP leads

Canada and Germany with whom it regularly meets in 3+3 formats.<sup>67</sup> Thus, policymakers in London are heading to this summit with the majority of their commitments either fulfilled or about to be fulfilled, and not aiming to commit additional resources either to NATO or individual Allies (beyond delivering on the current commitments). Further expectations from Estonia, other Nordic-Baltic countries, or NATO planners for the UK’s contribution to forward defence will have to contend with the fiscal and capability development realities discussed in Chapter 1. This could prove a challenge to the UK’s standing and leadership

*Further expectations from Estonia, other Nordic-Baltic countries, or NATO planners for the UK’s contribution to forward defence will have to contend with the fiscal and capability development realities*

within the Alliance going forward, especially if the security environment further deteriorates as the war in Ukraine continues.

The whole-of-alliance terms of the debate have also been shifting rapidly in the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine, especially on the issue of inadequate munition stocks across the Alliance and the degraded industrial

<sup>64</sup> Modesta Gaučaitė-Znutienė, “[Kas pas jus ten vyksta?: nepasitenkinimo aidas jau atskamba iš Berlyno, o Landsbergi ragina nedalinti nurodymų Scholzui](#) [What’s going on with you there?: Discontent is already echoing from Berlin, and Landsberg is being urged not to give instructions to Scholz],” *LRT*, 2 January 2023; “[Konservatorių lyderiai su kariuomenės vadu suderino poziciją dėl vokiečių brigados](#) [Conservative leaders agreed with the army commander on the position regarding the German brigade],” *BNS* via *IG*, 17 November 2022; “[All agree to seek German brigade’s full deployment in Lithuania – chief of defence](#),” *BNS* via *LRT*, 17 November 2022.

<sup>65</sup> “[EDF intelligence chief: Russia still has long-term offensive capabilities](#),” *ERR*, 9 December 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Joakim Klementi, “[Decision to station Bundeswehr brigade in Lithuania no change for Estonia](#),” *ERR*, 28 June 2023.

<sup>67</sup> Department of National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces, [Joint Declaration of the Defence Ministers of Canada, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and the United Kingdom](#) (Brussels: Ministry of National Defence Government of Canada, 15 February 2022).

production capacity.<sup>68</sup> Further discussions are needed on capability gaps in the Baltic region, such as medium- and long-range air and missile defence, which will bring to the fore the question of how to bridge them. A rotational model for ground-based air defence, agreed upon during the NATO defence ministerial meeting in June 2023, is a major step in this direction. It will likely raise new expectations for the UK to exceed what it currently contributes to the BAP or in the framework of the bilateral roadmap with Estonia.<sup>69</sup>

These issues, along with ways to bring Ukraine closer to NATO membership, will dominate the agenda in Vilnius. New avenues will open for further enhancing the UK's contribution to regional security – especially amidst Finland's recent and Sweden's upcoming accession to NATO – and for bilateral or minilateral cooperation (e.g., in munitions production). At the same time, new lines of quiet discord could potentially emerge between London and the Baltic capitals (e.g., on Ukraine's NATO membership, where the UK is less forward-leaning, and on objectives for the new Defence Investment Pledge, where Estonia is very ambitious) – even if their impact on the bilateral relations will most likely remain limited in the near future. The new regional collective defence plans, with the assigned forces, will also stress-test the arrangements put in place by the eFP lead and host nations. If the Alliance's planners find that they are falling short, those nations – including the UK – will face new challenges regarding their capabilities, enhanced readiness, and commitments. Those plans will, however, need to better reflect the UK's contribution through another major vehicle of presence in the wider North and Baltic area – i.e., the Joint Expeditionary Force.

<sup>68</sup> [“Salm: NATO allies’ low ammunition stocks result of ‘irresponsible’ neglect,”](#) *ERR*, 2 December 2022; [“The West is struggling to forge a new arsenal of democracy,”](#) *The Economist*, 19 February, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, [“NATO Defence Ministers have agreed on a rotational model for air defence, says A. Anušauskas,”](#) Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, 16 June 2023.

## 4. NORDIC-BALTIC MINILATERAL FRAMEWORKS

The multi-layered and complex security architecture of Northern Europe is undergoing a certain consolidation around NATO and EU memberships as a result of Finland's recent accession to NATO and Sweden's pending membership ratification, as well as Denmark's decision to abandon its opt-out from the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This evolution, however, is unlikely to make minilateral regional formats redundant, even though concerns persist that they might encourage excessive regionalisation, which would be detrimental to the whole-of-alliance approach to security. Such formats serve not only as sources of ideas and initiatives for NATO or the EU but also as platforms to address specific regional issues, enhance responsiveness, and achieve greater synergies in capabilities and actions. The UK has been a leading actor in some of those minilateral groupings, whose added value must be re-examined and re-asserted in the context of the ongoing changes in the security environment and the evolution of the security architecture in the region.

### 4.1. MINILATERAL FORMATS

First on the list is **the Northern Group**, a forum consisting of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and the UK. Its members gather informally – at the defence minister level – to discuss and cooperate on security and defence issues relevant to Northern European countries, with the objective of pushing for further integration of their armed forces.<sup>70</sup> Recent Northern Group meetings have focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the capabilities and readiness of members' armed forces (May 2020) and the implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for Northern Europe, including Finnish and

<sup>70</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski and Alicia Prager, [“Northern Group aims to step up regional security cooperation,”](#) *Euractiv*, 26 June 2019.



Swedish applications to NATO and protection of critical infrastructure (November 2022).<sup>71</sup>

From a British perspective, the Northern Group started as a mostly political framework in the early 2010s. It was underpinned by the idea that the UK had neglected its traditional and natural allies in the North and needed to re-engage with them in a more meaningful and structured way. Since 2016 and the Brexit vote, the UK government's approach to foreign and defence policy engagement with Europe has prioritised flexibility and informal minilateralism, aiming to bypass EU-UK tensions and engage European partners directly.

Additionally, in the regional formats that the UK is not a member of, London has made a conscious effort to participate as a third state or "interested outsider," when and where relevant. In particular, London has contributed to frameworks such as **the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO)** between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden; **the Baltic Three (B3)** between Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; and **the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8)** made of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden – via the NB8+UK format in particular.<sup>72</sup> In parallel, civil society frameworks such as the **Aurora Forum** bring together security experts and officials from the United Kingdom and Nordic-Baltic countries for regular meetings and networking.<sup>73</sup> This forum was launched in 2017 with financial support from the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, to deepen the links between like-minded partners post-Brexit.

The regional minilateral groupings preferred by the UK depend on political motivations to

widen the agenda with like-minded European partners – beyond EU-centric formats – but they can also boil down to ministerial preference. For instance, former Foreign Secretary (and later Prime Minister) Liz Truss was close to her Baltic counterparts and rather enthusiastic about the B3 format, even hosting a B3+UK meeting at Chevening in October 2021.<sup>74</sup> As stated in the joint declaration following the meeting, the ministers did not limit themselves to defence issues but discussed economic opportunities, technological cooperation, and climate ambitions.<sup>75</sup>

Such political attention and active engagement through minilateral formats are certainly appreciated by the Baltic capitals. British officials and their Nordic-Baltic counterparts frame it as a way to strengthen NATO and Euro-Atlantic security as a whole by deepening the alignment of strategic cultures and increasing familiarity and interoperability between like-minded countries. However, it is not meant to replace bilateral security ties, some of which have taken shape over decades and continue to boost the UK's involvement across the region. Its defence cooperation with Estonia is a good example of that (see Chapter 5).

## 4.2. THE JOINT EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

Even though the UK takes part in regional security formats to engage its partners, the only framework with a clear sense of British ownership – where the UK takes a particular leading role – is the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). It is a UK-led format consisting of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Germany and Poland (who, like the United Kingdom, are part of the Northern Group) are not in the JEF, even though Warsaw at one point informally explored the possibility of joining.

<sup>71</sup> Defence Ministers of The Northern Group, *Joint Statement of The Northern Group of Defence Ministers* (London: Ministry of Defence and The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, 20 May 2020); Ministry of Defence of the Kingdom of Sweden, *Joint Statement by the Ministers of Defence of the Northern Group* (Stockholm: Government Offices of Sweden, 23 November 2022).

<sup>72</sup> "About NORDEFECO," Nordic Defence Cooperation, accessed in June 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia, "Nordic-Baltic Cooperation (NB8)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia, last modified on 31 January 2023; The Bucharest Nine (B9) and Three Seas Initiatives are more about Central and Baltic security than Nordic-Baltic security.

<sup>73</sup> "About," Aurora Forum, accessed in June 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and The Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP, "Foreign Secretary to back Baltic countries to challenge the threat posed by Russia, Belarus and China," Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 11 October 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, *Communique by foreign ministers of the United Kingdom, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, 11 October 2021* (London: Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 11 October 2021).

The format is a way for the UK to make the most of its alignment with regional like-minded countries who share a common threat assessment (particularly vis-à-vis Russia) and have worked together before (e.g., during operations in Afghanistan). Since Iceland joined the format, the group's composition has been rather stable, with no perspective candidates seeking to join – even though some voices in the UK domestic debate (e.g., Tobias Ellwood MP, chair of the Defence Committee in the House of Commons) argue in favour of inviting Ukraine to join.<sup>76</sup>

The JEF was launched at the 2014 NATO Wales summit as the British counterpart to the German (and Italian) Framework Nation Concept (FNC). As the format was conceptualised in 2012 – when NATO was deeply involved in out-of-area crisis management operations – it was initially unclear exactly where the JEF would be deployed. Despite some earlier expectations that the JEF would have no regional specialisation, its initial actions were confined mainly to the Baltic region. Since then, the JEF has been active in the North Atlantic, the High North, and the wider Baltic area, thereby responding to the degradation of the regional strategic environment and the prime national security concerns of its member states.

The JEF was conceived as complementary to NATO and its regional security toolkit.<sup>77</sup> For instance, it maintains close cooperation with the Alliance by taking part in BALTOPS exercises. Furthermore, its members are the very nations at the forefront of strengthening NATO's overall defence posture on the eastern flank. The JEF has been beneficial to the overarching military and policy framework designed to bring non-NATO Sweden and Finland closer to Alliance, which will change once the two have become full-fledged members.

The JEF is highly valued for its flexibility when addressing the concerns of the participating nations. This “flexilateralism” constitutes an

<sup>76</sup> Tobias Ellwood, “[Britain needs to do much more than provide tanks to end the war in Ukraine](#),” *i Newspaper*, 22 January 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Sean Monaghan and Ed Arnold, “[Indispensable: NATO's Framework Nations Concept beyond Madrid](#),” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 27 June 2022.

important selling point for the format.<sup>78</sup> Unlike NATO, the JEF does not require consensus and thus can act quickly – especially as a first responder to sub-threshold threats. It provides a platform for enhancing interoperability,

*Unlike NATO, the JEF does not require consensus and thus can act quickly – especially as a first responder to sub-threshold threats*

increasing the speed of reaction to adverse events, and demonstrating political solidarity among its members. The JEF has successfully integrated into the region's overall defence construct and thus offered an additional option for policymakers. Since JEF members are not obliged to participate in all initiatives or contribute to all missions, they can prioritise specific sub-theatres and operations according to their national priorities and capacity. Although the UK's Standing Joint Force Headquarters provide command and control (C2), there are no dedicated forces for JEF in either the British or partner armed forces.

The JEF has already demonstrated its utility – both in supporting routine activities (e.g., Denmark has recently used it to support the rotation of its contingent to Estonia) and in extraordinary circumstances (e.g., deployment to the Baltic Sea in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and employment of the JEF framework to generate contributions to the training of Ukrainian personnel in the UK). All member states want the JEF to remain a go-to format for quick use before the thresholds of NATO's Articles 4 and 5 have been reached – in particular, regarding hybrid threats and grey zone activities. The June 2023 JEF Defence Ministers meeting in Amsterdam highlighted the format's growing focus on hybrid challenges, especially towards critical undersea and offshore infrastructure, building on NATO's own renewed efforts in that field.<sup>79</sup> However, in the recent case of the

<sup>78</sup> The term was coined by Norwegian analysts Kristin Haugevik and Øyvind Svendsen, see: Kristin M Haugevik and Øyvind Svendsen, “[‘Global Britain’ and security in the near abroad. Leadership through flexilateralism?](#),” *Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt Research Paper 3* (March 2022).

<sup>79</sup> UK Ministry of Defence and The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, [Joint statement by Joint Expeditionary Force ministers](#) (Amsterdam: Ministry of Defence, 13 June 2023).

Nordstream I & II pipeline explosions, the JEF was constrained by the exclusion of the crucial regional power – i.e., Germany.

The UK's role sets the JEF apart from other regional formats that bring together the Nordic and Baltic partners but lack a "natural leader." In contrast, the JEF appears as a pivotal format for regional partners to engage a top-tier military power in order to learn, develop, and maintain interoperability. The format has been instrumental in enabling London to contribute to Baltic security, thus deepening regional integration.

All partners have high expectations for the JEF, and these have only increased since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. JEF member states – both under the format's umbrella and individually – have demonstrated a strong level of political cohesion and leadership by providing assistance to Ukraine, as well as support and reassurances to both Finland and Sweden. Beyond the operational dimension, the JEF has acquired a growing political and strategic function, as illustrated by recent table-top exercises and now-regular JEF Leaders Summits (bringing together the heads of state and government of JEF states).<sup>80</sup> This development has increased the JEF's visibility and potential as a platform to facilitate joint actions. Since February 2022 and as the centre of gravity of European security has been moving north- and eastwards, the frequency of contacts between JEF heads of state and government has also intensified. The objective is to coordinate communication, thereby sending a stronger message to Russia.<sup>81</sup>

Under Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the format emerged as an instrument to demonstrate the UK's continued commitment to European security by showcasing the UK's post-Brexit leadership in action – alongside the

eFP in Estonia.<sup>82</sup> Under his successor Liz Truss, there were suggestions to broaden the scope by adding a "foreign minister" angle to the JEF (in addition to the levels of defence ministers and heads of state and government). Yet other branches of the British government – especially the Ministry of Defence – are rather sceptical about a thematic expansion of the format.

The JEF has evolved and will continue to evolve. Its role and added value are being recalibrated in the context of NATO's new defence posture and of Sweden and Finland's accession to

*Role and added value of the JEF are being recalibrated in the context of NATO's new defence posture and Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO*

NATO. Based on the decisions made at the 2022 Madrid summit, regional partners now expect a more robust NATO presence on the eastern flank. Due to NATO's nature and constraints, its constructs are unlikely to match the JEF's flexibility and speed unless the Alliance builds a much more automatic response into its posture and C2 arrangements. The JEF will therefore remain an important avenue to provide an extra insurance and diversification strategy for regional partners who may be sceptical about the implementation and reliability of NATO's current plans, capabilities, and decision-making.

Moreover, as per the latest Strategic Concept and despite Finnish and pending Swedish membership, NATO's focus and posture in the High North are likely to remain limited. Therefore, the JEF will continue to play a critical role in Northern security architecture in particular.<sup>83</sup> For the Nordic-Baltic countries, security in the High North is a fundamental issue – and one being tested by Russia's and even China's assertive pursuit of strategic interests in an increasingly accessible (due to climate change) and resource-rich geographical space. Both the DCP 2021 and the recently updated Arctic defence strategy acknowledge the growing strategic importance

<sup>80</sup> Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia, "[Heads of State and Government of the Joint Expeditionary Force agree on further support to Ukraine and enhanced security cooperation](#)," Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia, 19 December 2022.

<sup>81</sup> President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "[Volodymyr Zelenskyy at a meeting of the Joint Expeditionary Force leaders presented his vision of how to stop Russian aggression](#)," President of Ukraine, 15 March 2022.

<sup>82</sup> Sean Monaghan, "[The Joint Expeditionary Force: Global Britain in Northern Europe?](#)" *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 25 March 2022.

<sup>83</sup> NATO Heads of State and Government, [NATO 2022 Strategic Concept](#) (Madrid: NATO, 29 June 2022).

of the High North. It is natural to expect that the instruments of the UK's influence and power projection will be directed to address challenges in this area, while recognising that it is "contiguous with the North Atlantic and cannot be isolated from UK interests in adjacent regions, including Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea region, and the rest of the world."<sup>84</sup> The JEF gives its members that have usually been disengaged from High North security issues (such as Estonia) an opportunity to become more involved. It allows them to contribute to common actions, especially if they are willing to invest in maritime assets. As a mutual support vehicle, the format has potential that can be unlocked if its members commit to developing the relevant capabilities.

Finally, the JEF can be utilised to shape future common concepts. For that, the UK will need to plan how to maintain the interoperability of its new cutting-edge capabilities with Allies and how to plug them into its Digital Backbone (i.e., the technology, people, and processes that will allow the Ministry of Defence to support integration, platform interoperability, and operational speed).<sup>85</sup> The UK's capacity to be a framework nation would be jeopardised if the envisaged "open architecture" of this "backbone" turned out to be less effective in bringing other Allies on board. Many interoperability issues will be addressed in the framework of NATO, where efforts are being made to set new standards for applying emerging technologies in military capabilities. However, the UK's cooperation

*The JEF could become a platform to develop and experiment with new concepts for "digitalised battlespace," thus anticipating and mitigating potential interoperability issues*

with like-minded Nordic-Baltic partners and the Netherlands, which are among the most digitalised societies in the world, will be of high importance in this regard. The JEF could become a platform to develop and experiment

<sup>84</sup> UK Ministry of Defence, *The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North* (London: Ministry of Defence, 29 March 2022).

<sup>85</sup> UK Ministry of Defence, *Digital Strategy for Defence* (London: Ministry of Defence, 27 May 2021); House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, *The Defence Digital Strategy* (London: House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 3 February 2023).

with new concepts for "digitalised battlespace," thus anticipating and mitigating potential interoperability issues. If successful, such efforts would result in common multinational rather than siloed national capability solutions.

## 5. UK-ESTONIA COOPERATION

The UK's military cooperation with Estonia has historical roots that go back to the Estonian War of Independence.<sup>86</sup> However, the first significant Estonian engagement with the UK in modern times was, undoubtedly, NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan, in which the Estonian contingent was part of the British-led force in Helmand Province. This entailed close cooperation in pre-mission training, sustainment, task execution, intelligence-sharing, and other aspects of the operation.<sup>87</sup> The professionalism of the Estonian troops and Tallinn's decision to remove some national caveats on their use (such limitations had been a major impediment to smooth cooperation between various national forces in the ISAF mission) earned respect from British counterparts.<sup>88</sup> This cooperation built mutual trust and interoperability between the two militaries while enhancing Estonia's visibility in London – benefits that the two sides continue to build upon in the present strategic context.

The relationship that emerged since then – and has been given additional impetus by Russia's war against Ukraine – focuses mostly on bolstering the defence of Estonia through the eFP. Yet this may occasionally obscure other important strands, both within the context of NATO and outside. For instance, upstream from the operational involvement in NATO's BAP mission and eFP, the UK has also been an active participant in NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE), hosted and led by

<sup>86</sup> Operation Red Trek – as the Royal Navy's involvement in supporting the Estonian and Latvian forces fighting against the Russians in 1918–19 is formally known – is one of the briefing items to every UK defence minister preparing for a visit to the Baltic region.

<sup>87</sup> "International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)," Institute for the Study of War, accessed in June 2023.

<sup>88</sup> Regeena Kingsley, "#38 ISAF National Caveats in Afghanistan: Summary of Research Findings & Future Implications," Military Caveats, 11 August 2021.

Estonia. In this way, the UK has made its significant expertise in the cyber domain available to other Allies and partners involved in the centre. Building upon this experience of cooperation with the host nation and the ecosystem around the CCDCOE – and in full appreciation of Estonia’s growing competence in certain emerging disruptive technologies and its openness to innovation – London also partnered with Tallinn in successfully bidding to co-host the European headquarters of NATO’s Defence Innovation Accelerator North Atlantic (DIANA).<sup>89</sup> Thus, moving in sync with the adaptation of the Alliance, the UK-Estonia tandem is finding new opportunities for structural bilateral cooperation that advance NATO’s aims of strengthening collective defence and deterrence, securing a technological edge, and enhancing resilience.

*Moving in sync with the adaptation of the Alliance, the UK-Estonia tandem is finding new opportunities for structural bilateral cooperation that advance NATO’s aims*

Bilateral defence cooperation also extends into areas such as intelligence, materiel, training, and education. As part of this cooperation, Estonian cadets join the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, whereas senior officers and civil servants attend courses at the Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS). The UK has been an important contributor to the faculty, student body, and curricula at the Baltic Defence College (BALTDEFCOL). The contribution, however, has become minimal in recent years, while recent plans to resume participation have not borne fruit due to staffing shortages. Specialist training (e.g., military medics) has also been part of the bilateral cooperation agenda and always remained critical to developing Estonia’s capabilities – especially as new sophisticated weapons systems are being purchased.

The UK is an important source of defence equipment for Estonia. The Estonian Navy operates three refurbished and modernised Sandown-class MCM (mine countermeasures)

<sup>89</sup> Embassy of the Republic of Estonia to the United Kingdom, “[The UK will partner with Estonia on the Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic \(DIANA\) programme to maintain NATO’s technological edge](#),” Embassy of the Republic of Estonia, London, 6 April 2022.

ships that constitute the core of its naval capability. However, Estonia adheres to an open procurement policy, whereby priorities in strategic partnerships do not determine choices in conducting procurement. This makes it difficult to pursue structured long-term armament cooperation between the two countries. Nonetheless, some coordination is needed so that Estonian procurement plans and the UK’s capability contributions to defence and deterrence complement each other.

The UK could potentially become an important partner for Estonia in building up its more traditional industrial base for military materiel production, and especially ammunition (given that stock levels have proven to be of particular significance in high-intensity conventional warfighting).<sup>90</sup> The UK possesses the expertise and technology that Estonia would be interested in as part of its plans for ammunition production.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, concrete plans are currently being designed at the EU level and will exclude non-members (except those that have association agreements with the EU). Since the UK is no longer a member of the EU, such cooperation would require bringing the UK back into the EU’s defence industrial cooperation framework.<sup>92</sup> The latest efforts to agree on enhanced security and defence cooperation between the EU and the UK give reasons for optimism that this will eventually be achieved.<sup>93</sup>

The UK is particularly attracted by Estonia’s openness to experimentation with new technologies such as ground robotics and is keen on exploring the potential for greater cooperation in this area. Both capitals regard AI for defence as one of the priorities of cooperation, along with robotics/autonomy and cyberspace. Partners such as the UK who

<sup>90</sup> Julia Mueller, “[NATO chief calls on members to ramp up ammunition production for Ukraine](#),” *The Hill*, 14 February 2023.

<sup>91</sup> Liisu Lass, “[Estonia urges European countries to multiply ammunition production](#),” *ERR*, 15 February 2023.

<sup>92</sup> Daniel Boffey, “[UK will miss out on EU’s ‘massive’ increase in arms spending for Ukraine](#),” *The Guardian*, 7 March 2023; Jacopo Barigazzi, “[EU woos outside countries for joint ammo-buying scheme](#),” *Politico*, 4 March 2023.

<sup>93</sup> Henry Foy and George Parker, “[EU and UK ramp up talks on defence co-operation](#),” *The Financial Times*, 27 March 2023.

are better resourced and have reached critical mass in science, technology, and engineering are valued in Estonia. They allow the country to stay on the same learning curve, avoid making similar mistakes, and maintain interoperability, as well as a common understanding of various operational domains (including the new ones, such as cyber and space).

*The UK is particularly attracted by Estonia's openness to experimentation with new technologies and is keen on exploring the potential for greater cooperation*

Lately, support to Ukraine has become a prominent item on the bilateral agenda. The UK has emerged as one of the most committed and substantial providers of military assistance by training and equipping the Armed Forces of Ukraine for their fight against Russia's full-scale invasion. In terms of per capita contribution, Estonia has also been at the top of the list of nations involved in this endeavour. London has assembled its own minilateral coalition to train the Ukrainian troops, and Estonia is one of the contributors. As both nations see eye to eye on the importance of Ukraine prevailing in the war, this opens further space for their collaborative action pursuing the aims laid out in the Tallinn Pledge signed by the UK, the Baltic states, Denmark, the Netherlands, Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia in January 2023.<sup>94</sup>

British stakeholders argue that cooperation with Estonia is not a one-way street that only benefits Tallinn. The UK sees many opportunities to learn from Estonia and its approach to resilience, whole-of-society approach to security and defence, and digital solutions. This is pursued through involvement in field and table-top exercises, concept development and experimentation, R&D projects, diplomatic networking, and cooperation in military education. Estonian annual exercises, such as Spring Storm and Hedgehog, offer unique insights for British planners into how synergies between the armed forces, reserve units, voluntary paramilitary organisations, and allied forces can be built for greater military effect. In this regard, the relationship is viewed as

balanced and equitable, even though some in London wish to expand the bilateral security partnership beyond defence and the relatively narrow focus on Russia.

Likewise, Estonian officials are considering the prospects for deeper mutual military integration and cooperation, such as seconding staff to the UK's command structures and sending Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) units for exercises in the UK or even embedding them into the UK's force structure. Interestingly, there is also some desire to re-engage with the UK by sending Estonian troops on expeditionary operations – with recent capacity following the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan. A practical example is Tallinn's recent decision to significantly enhance its contribution to the US-led Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq: part of the contribution consists of a national support element – staff officers and NCOs – at the operation's UK-led battalion-level headquarters in Erbil and division-level headquarters in Baghdad. There is also tentative interest in exploring new horizons for partnership, even in such theatres as the Indo-Pacific, which would also contribute to the UK's global agenda.

Such expeditionary considerations will, nevertheless, remain secondary, as the defence of the Alliance's territory will be the paramount concern for both countries in the foreseeable future. London and Tallinn are rightly focusing on the practical challenges of implementing the post-Madrid compromise solution and delivering the expected strategic effect – which is likely to eventually require going above and beyond what was laid out in their Joint Declaration of June 2022, with a new bilateral agreement between the two countries expected at the end of the summer of 2023.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The IR2023 has set the stage for a new period of British regional leadership in northern Europe, including in the Nordic-Baltic region. The "refresh" highlights the importance of the region to the UK's interests and London's political intention to remain a major organising

<sup>94</sup> UK Ministry of Defence and The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, *Joint Statement – The Tallinn Pledge* (London: Ministry of Defence, 19 January 2023), last modified on 2 February 2023.

power for common responses to the severely degraded security environment. Today, in the Nordic-Baltic region, all eyes are on the upcoming decisions in London regarding its future defence capability priorities – and, particularly for the Baltics, the potential rebalancing towards the land warfare domain that may place more emphasis on rebuilding heavy armoured manoeuvre and fire support capabilities (as well as large stocks of munitions). Overall, as regional partners praise the UK's track record of delivering on its promises, the expectations are high that London will show the way forward in building credible capabilities for the worst-case scenario of a large-scale war in Europe. This will be a major challenge for the UK, given its budgetary constraints, capability gaps, and other global ambitions; therefore, London will need to manage those expectations very carefully. The upcoming DCP23 will have to strike a balance between the high ambition expected of the UK and what can realistically be achieved within the existing timeframe and resources.

The recent accession of Finland and the upcoming accession of Sweden to NATO – possibly in the course of 2023 – are strongly supported by both London and regional partners. This may lead the UK to slightly rethink its involvement in the region, maximise the use of its own assets, and enhance the role of formats such as the JEF (which will, by then, consist entirely of NATO states). However, it is unlikely that the flexible multilateralism that has served the UK and the NB8 countries so well will wither away. It will be adapted to reinforce and support NATO's regional plans and deterrence posture but will, nonetheless, continue providing instruments for action where NATO as a whole is not involved (e.g., in the High North and the Arctic) and for enhancing military interoperability. In its role as a political and strategic forum, the JEF will also serve as a framework for the alignment of security assessments, planning, and coordination among the participating nations.

The UK will continue playing a crucial role in strengthening defence and deterrence in the northern and north-eastern flank. It is, of course, not a monopoly role: most successful

endeavours are those that involve close coordination and cooperation not only with the Nordic-Baltic partners but also with other key players such as the US, Poland, Germany,

*The UK will continue playing a crucial role in strengthening defence and deterrence in the northern and north-eastern flank*

or France. In some aspects, one or more of the region's countries can deliver more credible and capable leadership than anyone from outside (e.g., Sweden when it comes to maritime defence and deterrence in the Baltic Sea or an agreement by four Nordic countries to combine their combat air power).<sup>95</sup> Yet even here, the UK can offer a suitable format – the Northern Group – for coordination and cooperation that could be expanded by including such stakeholders of regional security as France, a fellow eFP participant in Estonia, or Canada, a lead nation in Latvia.

*The UK itself will gain many benefits from widening its engagement in the Nordic-Baltic region*

The UK itself will gain many benefits from widening its engagement in the Nordic-Baltic region. This is not only a chance to showcase its regional leadership at a time of dire need and to have more weight in Europe and across the Atlantic in strategic debates about the continent's future security architecture. It is also an opportunity to learn from a cluster of highly innovative nations. These countries champion many of the best practices in a whole-of-society approach to resilience and possess advanced technologies in fields such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, 5G, space technology, and robotics. Building its future cutting-edge capabilities and integrating them across various domains, the UK can count on a cluster of eager partners ready to support those endeavours with their own ideas and innovative solutions. To be able to act together in the future, within the JEF and other formats, the UK would benefit from deepening cooperation.

<sup>95</sup> Gareth Jennings, "[Nordic countries combine combat air power](#)," *Janes*, 24 March 2023.

For Estonia, the decision to implement a division structure in its defence forces opened new opportunities for enhanced cooperation with the UK – an important mentor as well as provider of some key enabling capabilities. The main political challenge for Tallinn is to manage potential expectations in the domestic debate related to a more substantive forward presence by the UK (especially if and when the allied presence in Latvia and especially in Lithuania becomes visibly larger). Key to this will be the requirements of NATO’s defence plans for the region and the outcome of a force generation process to implement them, whereby the UK’s current and future contribution will acquire a clearer context and guiding direction. It is, however, obvious that Estonia will remain a hub of the UK’s involvement in the region and will continue providing multiple benefits in terms of enhancing the British forces’ readiness to counter Russia’s military threat.

Estonia should also consider how to increase its participation in the JEF, especially in the maritime domain, and how to partner with the UK in “out-of-area” activities and operations to support London’s global role. Similarly, Estonia’s growing interest in the security developments in the Indo-Pacific – due to the multiple linkages with security in the Euro-Atlantic area – can be cultivated by London to that end. Some major new opportunities will also arise in the common pursuit of cutting-edge technologies, where Estonia’s openness to innovation and some niche areas of technological excellence match the UK’s interest in developing future capabilities. While tackling the severe security challenges of today, both countries should also continue working closely together to shape their capacity for common action of tomorrow, within and outside the Nordic-Baltic region.

The UK and Estonia should:

- **Manage mutual expectations.** Both countries need to continue open and clear communication regarding what they can commit to and expect from each other. In this regard, it is important to start discussions early on concerning pre-positioning some of the equipment and supplies (e.g., fuels and ammunition) for a full British brigade (to be deployed “when needed”) and determine the “art of the possible,” given the constraints that the UK faces.

- **Cooperate on keeping NATO alert.** The effectiveness of forward defence posture will strongly depend on whether the Alliance as a whole will be able to recognise, in a timely manner, the seriousness of early warning indicators about Russia’s intent, so Estonian and British security communities – especially intelligence services but also defence policymakers and strategic communication structures – should continue working closely together to ensure that those indicators are well appreciated and heeded by the Allies outside the Nordic-Baltic region.
- **Push for higher defence spending in NATO.** As both countries have committed to staying above the existing 2% of GDP benchmark, they should jointly advocate to fellow Allies – many of whom are yet to meet the existing benchmark – an ambitious delivery of the renewed Defence Investment Pledge (with 2% as a floor) to be agreed at the Vilnius summit.
- **Engage Sweden and Finland on regional security issues.** Finland’s and soon Sweden’s accession to NATO open new opportunities for cooperation in the Baltic Sea – particularly in ensuring better maritime situational awareness and response to threats in the maritime space between Estonia, Finland, and Sweden. A mini-Quad of these countries plus the UK could add value to NATO’s deterrence efforts and collective defence plans, as well as to JEF activities in this part of the Baltic Sea.
- **Deepen trilateral consultations with France at the strategic level,** building on the good operational cooperation in the eFP, France’s increased interest and engagement in the region, and the three countries’ presence in the French-led European Intervention Initiative (E2I).
- **Broaden UK-Estonia bilateral defence partnership** by seeking to develop more industrial cooperation (e.g., between British and Estonian companies in novel technologies for their own armed forces as well as for export) and deepening mutual understanding of their respective strategic and political cultures through enhancing links not only between the professional military education establishments but also between universities, think-tanks, and civil society organisations involved in building whole-of-society approach to security and



defence. These elements should be part of the upcoming bilateral defence agreement, expected in the autumn.

The UK should:

- **Develop a coherent and comprehensive strategy** for the UK involvement in the Nordic-Baltic region, bringing together various strands of this involvement in sub-regions (Baltic, High North, etc.) and subordinating them to clear goals as well as identifying the necessary means. This would be helpful in managing the expectations of various partners in the region.
- **Rebuild credibility in the land domain** for the scenario of a high-intensity protracted conventional war in Europe by reconsidering cuts in the British Army equipment and personnel, while rebuilding the stocks of munitions.
- **Invest more into logistical enablers for rapid reinforcement**, which is at the heart of the new forward defence posture – due to the need to maintain flexibility and resource constraints faced by the UK and other large Allies.
- **Consider greater rotational maritime, air, air defence, and ISR presence in the Nordic-Baltic region**, especially in the context of NATO's new defence plans and in addition to the existing bilateral commitments to Estonia.
- **Revitalise the Northern Group as a political-military consultation forum and invite important external stakeholders (e.g., France and Canada)** to join it, while also engaging players interested in the regional dynamics (e.g., Japan) as observers.
- **Align the JEF's new focus on hybrid threats with the EU's work in the field**, in complementarity with NATO's, thus enabling the JEF as a platform for practical NATO-EU cooperation in countering hybrid threats in the Nordic-Baltic region and the High North.
- **Consider expanding the activities of the JEF "upstream" from the operations** by providing a framework for coordination and cooperation on aspects such as armaments or training and education. The JEF could be used as a framework for future capabilities development through common work (e.g., concept development and experimentation) on adopting same

or similar digital platforms, AI-enabled capabilities, unmanned systems, and other cutting-edge technological solutions, thus ensuring future technical and doctrinal interoperability. It could be useful to mirror the NORDEFECO working group structure in this endeavour, thus enabling seamless switching between the formats if and when necessary.

- **Involve Estonia in discussions about common military activities in the Indo-Pacific** as a means to provide Tallinn with an additional framework for engaging in the region and thus continuing bilateral military cooperation in operations outside the Euro-Atlantic area.

Estonia should:

- **Continue delivering on the commitments for increased host nation support** necessary for hosting the Allied forces by providing the required training infrastructure, logistical support, and other aspects needed to enable credible and effective forward defence posture.
- **Consider some niche capabilities for maritime operations in the High North** that would increase Estonia's relevance in and contribution to JEF activities in this area.
- **Draw upon the UK competence and support** in strengthening the national defence innovation system and capacity for technology absorption in the Defence Forces.
- **Leverage bilateral relations with the UK** to prompt the UK to renew its involvement in the Baltic Defence College as a regional hub through which the UK's military competence can most effectively contribute to the development of future generations of senior staff officers and defence civil servants in the Baltic states.
- **Continue investing efforts into engaging with other military heavyweights** (such as France, Poland, and Germany) as part of diversifying defence partnerships beyond the UK (and the US).
- **Communicate to the Estonian public and stakeholders** the tenets of the current rapid reinforcement model – as well as the Allies' limited capacity – in order to appropriately manage expectations regarding a stronger military footprint in the country, while still providing reassurance.

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ISSN 2228-0529  
ISBN 978-9916-709-16-0 (PDF)