

Baltic Sea Region Security Architecture

Toward Fragmentation or Harmonisation?

Introduction

The security architecture in the Baltic Sea region underwent a profound transformation, accompanied by transformation processes in other spheres of political, economic, and social life. These parallel and partly overlapping changes intersect with transformations of the defence sectors, providing ground for different and sometimes conflicting aims and perspectives. Some developments were triggered by peaceful, others by threatening events. The region has been confronted with multiple overlapping transformation spaces that call for innovative solutions and continuous transformations to avoid severe disruptions of functioning structures, striving for more coherent approaches. This chapter reflects on two decades of transformational processes that have taken place in the Baltic Sea region's security architecture. Using the terms »fragmentation« and »harmonisation« as core conceptual touchstones, the following discusses the key processes and actors that have shaped the regional security landscape. During the 1990s, the Baltic Sea region was still considered an area of low tensions; however, Russia's growing assertiveness toward its neighbours began to challenge this perception.¹ After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its further aggression against Ukraine in 2022, countries in the region have reacted in a largely united manner and converged in their foreign and defence policies. What can be described as a previously fragmented approach to security among the littoral states, depending on the different threat perceptions and membership statuses in NATO, transformed into a more unified response with cooperative deterrence at its core. All democratic states in the region are now member states of NATO and cooperate closely in defence policy, for example, as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) and in conducting joint military exercises.

1 Ekengren, Magnus: A return to geopolitics? The future of the security community in the Baltic Sea Region, in: *Global Affairs* 4 (2018), No. 4, pp. 503–519, DOI: 10.1080/23340460.2018.1535250. (18.09.2024).

Moreover, a profound transformation relates to Germany's role as a security provider. While previously a reluctant regional power, its strong preferences for multilateral approaches are now complemented by an increased willingness in the German political establishment to take up a leadership role in regional defence. This transformation led to a convergence with the expectations of the Baltic political elite and public opinion that continuously asked for a more substantial German military presence. Harmonisation has also taken a more institutional form. Writing in 2017, Barbara Kunz observed that the security architecture remained fragmented since among the nine countries in the region, the three Baltic states, Poland, Germany, and Denmark, were protected by NATO's Article Five guarantees, while Sweden and Finland continued to pursue the policy of military non-alignment.² This is no longer the case. Not only have these two Nordic countries become full members of NATO, but Sweden has also deployed 500 troops to Latvia, thus further showcasing regional unity and commitment to collective approaches to defence.³ The regional landscape, however, remains fragmented in some respects, such as the incompatible military infrastructure and underdeveloped mobility. Consensus on the necessity of further harmonisation and integration of Baltic railways and road networks with the rest of Europe exists, but implementation is costly and remains a challenge for the future.

Constructing a Cooperative Deterrence Model

The security landscape of the Baltic Sea region has undergone fundamental changes. These transformation processes have not followed a linear trajectory but moved rather erratically. After a short phase of cooperation with Russia in the early 1990s, relations began to deteriorate after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and worsened considerably following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. These developments heightened mutual threat perceptions.⁴ The once hopeful vision of the Baltic Sea region, as defined by cultural exchange

2 Kunz, Barbara: Fragmentation of the security architecture in the Baltic, in: *Les Champs de Mars* 1, (2018), No. 29, pp. 83–107, shs.cairn.info/journal-les-champs-de-mars-2017-1-page-83?lang=en (11.03.2025).

3 NATO: Sweden joins Multinational Brigade in Latvia, 2024, www.mncne.nato.int/newsroom/news/2025/sweden-joins-multinational-brigade-in-latvia (11.03.2025).

4 Forsberg, Tuomas/Herd, Graeme: Russia and NATO: From Windows of Opportunities to Closed Doors, in: *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 23 (2015), No. 1, pp. 41–57, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2014.1001824. (08.07.2024).

and commerce, is now regularly discussed as a NATO lake where European states strategize how to deter and, if need be, defend themselves against Russia. These dynamics have brought back heated debates about deterrence, a concept reminiscent of the Cold War days. To use a standard definition, deterrence is the »use of a threat by one party in an attempt to convince another party to refrain from some action.«⁵ In this context, NATO has sought to adopt various measures—troop deployments, prepositioning of weaponry, military exercises, and regular high-level meetings to convince Moscow that aggression against any of the alliance members would be severely painful and simply not worth it.

Among these policies, forward-based troop deployments are the strongest expression of alliances' willingness to honour collective treaty obligations. Scholarly literature has treated allied troop placements as more credible signals of commitment than rhetorical pledges or arms transfers.⁶ The underlying assumption here is that if allied troops come under attack, this would generate strong incentives for further military action by the actor who has suffered casualties.⁷ With this signalling logic in mind, during the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit, the transatlantic alliance unveiled plans to station enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups in Poland and the three Baltic states. Although initially, these deployments were relatively small in troop numbers, at around 1500 in each country, what stood out about them was the sheer number of involved nations. For instance, the Canadian-led battlegroup in Latvia, which is the most multinational of all, consists of 13 different allied countries: Albania, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. The number of flags present in these missions serves as a symbolic expression of strong NATO unity. The setting up of these battlegroups also clearly signalled NATO's return to its original task of collective defence.⁸ First established in the Baltic Sea region, the multinational battlegroups turned out

5 Quackenbush, Stephen: *Understanding General Deterrence: Theory and Application*, New York 2015, p. 2.

6 Lim, Darren J./Cooper, Zack: *Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia*, in: *Security Studies* 24 (2015), No. 4, pp. 696–727, DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2015.1103130. (20.11.2015).

7 Musgrave, Paul/Ward, Steven: *The Tripwire Effect: Experimental Evidence Regarding U.S. Public Opinion*, in: *Foreign Policy Analysis* 19 (2023), No. 4, pp. 1–25: p. 2, DOI: 10.1093/fpa/orad017. (24.07.2023).

8 Dahl, Ann-Sofie: *Strategic Challenges in the Baltic Sea Region: Russia, Deterrence, and Reassurance*, Washington DC 2018.

to be a model that has later been adopted in other regions and is an example of innovation that emerges from transformation processes.

While exploring deterrence and how it functions has attracted substantial scholarly attention, the cooperative deterrence model implemented in the Baltic Sea region stands out due to the number of militarily deployed nations present on the ground. The arrival of a few thousand allied soldiers did little to alter the overall balance of power in the region. Even after catastrophic losses in Ukraine, the military balance still favours Russia.⁹ However, the fact that a diverse group of NATO countries are physically present across the whole of NATO's eastern flank increases the likelihood that in the event of an external attack on a frontline NATO country, other allied nations would be immediately drawn into a direct conflict.¹⁰ As explained by long-serving Estonian diplomat Jonatan Vseviiov, the format of this deployment is such that an external aggressor, by aiming at Estonia, would simultaneously aim at a British soldier or a French lieutenant.¹¹ In this sense, the risk is spread more equally among other NATO allies. A similar explanation has been provided by the British commander of the battlegroup in Estonia: »In order for Russia to get to Tallinn or Riga or Vilnius, it would have to go through a multinational NATO battlegroup, which would draw those NATO countries into a conflict«.¹²

On balance, it must be noted that some scholarly studies have cast doubt on the strategic utility of these types of limited-size multinational deployments. For instance, Blankenship and Lin-Greenberg's work¹³ questions the intrinsic strategic value of placing small contingents of foreign-deployed forces on allied territories. Likewise, Reiter and Poast have warned that undersized tripwire-force deployments, like the ones in the Baltics, do not necessarily

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- 9 Charap, Samuel/Priebe, Miranda: Will Putin Stop at Ukraine? That's the Wrong Question, in: *The Washington Quarterly* 47 (2024), No. 3, pp. 143–159; p. 145, DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2024.2398319. (18.09.2024).
 - 10 Luik, Jüri and Praks, Henrik: Boosting the Deterrent Effect of Allied Enhanced Forward Presence, International Centre for Defence and Security, 2017, p. 8, icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/ICDS_Policy_Paper_Boosting_the_Deterrent_Effect_of_Allied_eFP.pdf (11.03.2025).
 - 11 Vseviiov, Jonatan: Crossing North 5: An Army of One, in University of Washington, 22.02.2023 www.scandinavian.washington.edu/crossing-north-5-army-one (11.03.2025).
 - 12 Cliffe, Jeremy: The new Iron Curtain, in: *The New Statesman*, 30.03.2022, www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2022/03/how-europe-is-entering-a-dark-new-age-of-division?s=03 (10.03.2025).
 - 13 Blankenship, Brian/Lin-Greenberg, Eric: Trivial Tripwires? Military Capabilities and Alliance Reassurance. *Security Studies* 31 (2022), No. 1, pp. 92–117.

generate credible deterrence.¹⁴ However, given that allied governments would have had great difficulties convincing their populations about the need to replicate massive Cold War-era deployments in the Baltic region, the eFP concept presented a viable middle road between no forward-based forces at all and a massive build-up involving tens of thousands of troops.

This particular deployment model is favoured among host nation populations. For instance, according to a 2022 national survey conducted in Latvia, its residents felt most assured with multinational NATO forces in the country rather than deployments of individual national militaries.¹⁵ What is more, scholarly studies show that allied »boots on the ground« in the Baltics have a positive impact on citizens' willingness to fight and defend their country.¹⁶

That said, the multinational nature of these deployments has certainly posed some challenges for NATO's military planners, as deployed nations can differ significantly in terms of their equipment, strategic culture, and spoken language, risking fragmented answers to various tasks and challenges. NATO's own history of deploying multinational units suggests that various collective action problems can arise during such missions.¹⁷ One way to »iron them out« and reach a more harmonised approach is to engage in routine military exercises. While military drills serve multiple objectives, such as assuring a partner nation and deterring an adversary, they are also important platforms for sharpening interoperability. As one NATO commander explained the rationale behind allied military exercises: »We need to get familiar with each other. We need to know about each other's strengths and weaknesses.«¹⁸ Regarding the eFP deployments, military exercises have been organised regularly

14 Reiter, Dan/Poast, Paul: The Truth About Tripwires: Why Small Force Deployments Do Not Deter Aggression, in: Texas National Security Review 4 (2021), No. 3, pp. 33–53, DOI: 10.26153/tsw/13989. (02.06.2021).

15 Banka, Andris/Bussmann, Margit: Canada is a big deal here: The eFP battlegroup and host nation public opinion, in: International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis 79 (2024), No. 2, pp. 192–211: p. 207, DOI: 10.1177/00207020241255998. (23.05.2024).

16 Rostoks, Toms/Mieriņa, Inta: NATO's reassurance and the willingness to defend one's country: survey evidence from Latvia, in: European Security, (2024), pp. 1–22, DOI: 10.1080/09662839.2024.2434087. (30.12.2024).

17 Coops, Cees M./Szvircsev Tresch, Tibor: Cultural Challenges in Military Operations, Rome: NATO Defense College, 2007; Giegerich, Bastian/von Hlatky, Stéfanie: Experiences May Vary: NATO and Cultural Interoperability in Afghanistan, in: Armed Forces & Society 46 (2020), No. 3, pp. 495–516, DOI: 10.1177/0095327X19875. (08.07.2024).

18 Von Sandrart, Jürgen-Joachim: Baltic Bullwork: Ready and Reinforced, in: Globsec, 07.06.2023, www.globsec.org/what-we-do/podcasts/twitter-space-baltic-bullwork-ready-and-reinforced (11.03.2025).

to ensure adequate »gelling« of the various nations.¹⁹ While the eFP concept had at first been tailored solely for the needs of the Baltic Sea region, it is notable that after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO decided to replicate it in other allied territories. Four additional multinational battlegroups have been set up in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. Thus, one can argue that a »multinational experiment«, first tried out in the Baltic Sea region, underlines the innovative character of transformation and was seen as good enough to be instituted elsewhere.

Germany: Strengthening Its Baltic Presence

Another development that supports the greater regional harmonisation thesis is Germany's growing involvement in the Baltic Sea region security landscape. Germany has participated in the military exercises in the region and also stepped up its involvement in the number of exercises held in the region, as did the other eFP lead nations (see Graph 1). While the »light« multinational troop presence was initially seen as a sufficient deterrent, Russia's gruelling war in Ukraine, with its emphasis on mass in the armed forces,²⁰ required a rethinking of this assumption. In light of this, political leaders of the so-called eastern flank countries pleaded for urgent augmentation of NATO troop presence. Speaking before an audience in Berlin in 2022, then-Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas argued that NATO's posture in the Baltic Sea region needed a substantial change, with significantly more combat-ready troops stationed.²¹ Latvian and Lithuanian political leadership reiterated the same

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- 19 Rostoks, Toms/Lanoszka, Alexander: Success Assured? Appraising the Canadian-Led Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup in Latvia, Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 2024, p. 17, macdonaldlaurier.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/20240314_Canada-in-Latvia-RostoksLanoszka_PAPER-v5-FINAL.pdf (11.03.2025); Banka, Andris/Bussmann, Margit: Uncomfortable neighbors: NATO, Russia and the shifting logic of military exercises in the Baltics, in: *Defence Studies*, 23 (2023), No. 1, pp. 1–24, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2022.2089657> (10.03.2025).
- 20 Bury, Patrick: The End of the All-Volunteer Force: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying about Recruitment and Love Selective Conscription, in: *The RUSI Journal* 169 (2024), No.7, pp. 1–9, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2024.2432820> (10.03.2025).
- 21 Kallas, Kaja: 16th Berlin Speech on Freedom by Kaja Kallas, Prime Minister of Estonia, Republic of Estonia Government, 25.04.2022, www.valitsus.ee/en/news/16th-berlin-speech-freedom-kaja-kallas-prime-minister-estonia?s=03 (11.03.2025).

message.²² These calls were answered during the 2022 NATO Madrid Summit. The declaration of the summit promised the scaling up of allied presence. The multinational battle groups deployed in Poland and the Baltic states were promised to be gradually turned into brigade-sized formations, thus reaching around 5,000 troops in each country.²³

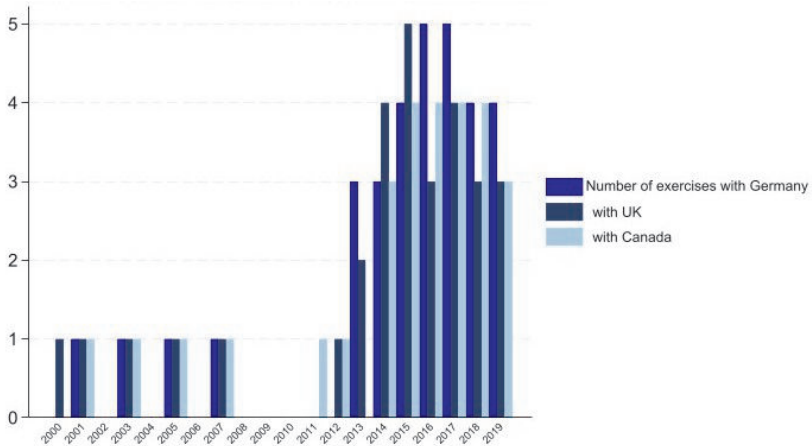


Figure 1: NATO exercises with eFP lead nations.

Among eFP framework nations deployed in the Baltics, Germany has led the way, delivering on its promise to increase its regional military footprint significantly. Initially, German officials had signalled that some of the assigned troops for its Lithuania mission would be primarily based in Germany, with the option of swift movement of forces in times of crisis. However, after intense intra-alliance bargaining with the Lithuanian government, Berlin committed to permanently deploying around 5000 Bundeswehr troops. This decision marked a historic milestone, representing the first permanent deployment of German troops beyond the country's borders since World War II. As expressed by then-Lithuania's foreign minister, this deployment is a unique undertaking for both sides. »It is a change for them. In the post-war era,

22 Grady, John: Baltic Presidents: »Forward Defense« Needed to Deter Russia, in: USNI News, 30.03.2022, www.news.usni.org/2022/03/30/baltic-presidents-forward-defense-needed-to-deter-russia (11.03.2025).

23 NATO: Madrid Summit Declaration, 29. 06. 2022, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm (03.05.2025).

Germany has never had a permanent presence outside its country. It is a change for us. We never had a contingent of that size in Lithuania. It is a big thing», he acknowledged.²⁴ German officials have similarly emphasised the historic nature of this deployment.²⁵ According to the state secretary at Germany's Federal Ministry of Defence, military presence in Lithuania »brings the German *Zeitenwende* into life«.²⁶ The permanence of this deployment, as opposed to a rotational one, introduces its own set of challenges but also offers opportunities to deepen and significantly expand German-Lithuanian ties. It is estimated that around a third of the soldiers intend to arrive with families. This means the Lithuanian state must ensure supporting infrastructure like German-speaking kindergartens, schools, and medical facilities to meet their needs. The German-Lithuanian agreement, signed in September 2024, notes that Lithuania will ensure the establishment of a military postal service, a German radio station, driving schools, and military medical facilities.²⁷ The construction needs for both military and civilian infrastructure remain substantial. This will likely lead to many debates about cost-sharing arrangements between Berlin and Vilnius.

That said, a permanent German presence in the country also allows Lithuania to draw itself closer to Europe's leading economic power. Indeed, Lithuanian officials have argued that this military deployment opens up numerous avenues to strengthen links with Germany in areas such as business, education, science, and culture. In the words of the former Lithuanian foreign minister, Germany's troop presence »paves the way for Lithuania-Germany to take relations to a qualitatively new level—that of a strategic partnership.«²⁸ Some of the developments attest that this is indeed where this relationship might be headed. According to the German ambassador to Lithuania, the

24 Landsbergis, Gabrieliū: Will the Baltics be next?, in: Monocle: The Foreign Desk Podcast, Episode 541, 11.05.2024, www.monocle.com/radio/shows/the-foreign-desk/541/ (11.03.2025).

25 Pistorius, Boris: Steadfast, Capable, and Ready: Germany's Security Renaissance and Transatlantic Defense, in: American-German Institute, 13.05.2024, www.americangerman.institute/events/2024/05/steadfast-capable-and-ready-germanys-security-renaissance-and-t-ransatlantic-defense/ (11.03.2025).

26 Zilonaitė, Greta/Venckūnas, Vilmantas: »Historic moment«: Lithuania starts construction for hosting German brigade, in: LRT, 19.08.2024, www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2341766/historic-moment-lithuania-starts-construction-for-hosting-german-brigade (11.03.2025).

27 Bundeswehr: Bundeswehrbrigade in Litauen: Fragen und Antworten, 11.01.2024, www.bundeswehr.de/de/aktuelles/meldungen/bundeswehrbrigade-litauen-fragen-antworten-5725804?s=03 (10.03.2025); Stankevičius, Augustas: Vilnius, Berlin sign pact on German brigade troops' rights in Lithuania, in: LRT, 13.09.2024, www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2359447/vilnius-berlin-sign-pact-on-german-brigade-troops-rights-in-lithuania (11.03.2025).

28 Landsbergis, Gabrieliū, Will the Baltics be next?

German-Baltic Chamber of Commerce has already added 40 new members in 2024²⁹. Some of Germany's largest companies, like Commerzbank and Rheinmetall, have set up shop mainly due to increased German military presence in the country.³⁰ While a more nuanced study of this topic is in order, these dynamics appear to fit the scholarly literature, which argues that foreign troop deployments boost trade and economic growth in the host state.³¹

Germany's more assertive security role appears to be appreciated by the Baltic public. In 2020, Lithuanian residents were asked to name Lithuania's most important strategic partners. The US and Germany came on top of this polling.³² A similar survey carried out by a Lithuanian opinion research company in late 2022 revealed that Lithuanians had the most favourable opinion of Poland (90 %), followed by Germany (82 %).³³ Moreover, Germany's regional presence is also seen as benefiting neighbouring Latvia. According to Latvia's President, German deployment to Lithuania has also improved Latvia's security outlook.³⁴ The Latvian public is also appreciative and hopeful regarding Germany's future role in the region. While Berlin has received much criticism internationally, a nationally representative survey in late 2022 revealed that Latvians rank Germany as the most important European securi-

29 Beniusis, Vaidots: German Ambassador: We Must be ready because Putin will definitely not give us extra time, in: 15 Min, 21.01.2025, www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/vokietijos-ambasadorius-turime-buti-pasiruose-nes-putinas-tikrai-nesuteiks-papildomo-laiko-56-2380496 (10.03.2025).

30 BNS: Commerzbank opens representative office in Vilnius, in: LRT, 17.12.2024, www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2441202/commerzbank-opens-representative-office-in-vilnius (10.03.2025); Gosselin-Malo, Elisabeth: Rheinmetall to ramp up Baltic presence with Lithuania munitions plant, in: Defense News, 17.04.2024, www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/04/17/rheinmetall-to-ramp-up-baltic-presence-with-lithuania-munitions-plant/ (11.03.2025).

31 Jones, Garrett/Kane, Tim: US troops and foreign economic growth, in: Defence and Peace Economics 23 (2012), pp. 225–249, DOI: 10.1080/10242694.2011.585043. (08.07.2024); Heo, Uk/Ye, Min: U.S. Military Deployment and Host-Nation Economic Growth, in: Armed Forces & Society 45(2017), No. 2, pp. 234–267, DOI: 10.1177/0095327X177382. (08.07.2024).

32 Ministry of National Defence of Lithuania: Poll reveals a growing trust in the Lithuanian Armed Forces and professional service and a particularly firm support to NATO membership, 25.01.2020, www.kam.lt/en/poll-reveals-a-growing-trust-in-the-lithuanian-armed-forces-and-professional-service-and-a-particularly-firm-support-to-nato-membership/ (11.03.2025).

33 Pankūnas, Gytis: Survey shows Lithuanians have abysmal opinion of Russia, favour Poland and Germany, in: LRT, 02.01.2023, www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1856830/survey-shows-lithuanians-have-abysmal-opinion-of-russia-favour-poland-and-germany (11.03.2025).

34 Fritz, Philipp: Müssen einsehen, dass unsere Asylpolitik aus den 50er- und 60er-Jahren stammt, in: Welt, 05.10.2023, www.welt.de/politik/ausland/plus247790692/EU-Muessen-ein-sehen-dass-unsere-Asylpolitik-aus-den-50er-und-60er-Jahren-stammt.html (11.03.2025).

ty partner and would like it to assume more of a leadership role in security matters, but the public also appreciates a political and economic relationship with Germany.³⁵

Institutional Harmonisation: Adding the Nordic Link

Over the years, the Baltic Sea region has undergone extensive institutional transformations whereby countries sought to join or stay out of organisations like the EU and NATO. One glaring institutional fragmentation in the geopolitical map of the Baltic Sea region was Finland's and Sweden's non-aligned status. As argued by Ann-Sofie Dahl, Finland and Sweden being outside of NATO complicated the alliance's Baltic Sea regional contingency planning.³⁶ However, it must also be emphasised that as NATO non-members, these two Nordic nations went a long way in streamlining their militaries to be in sync with NATO procedures and standards. They routinely participated in NATO-led exercises, which, over the years, grew in operational and command complexity.³⁷ A key function of exercises is to intensify military-to-military links and sharpen interoperability.³⁸ While nominally non-aligned, Helsinki and Stockholm purposefully sought to become highly interoperable with NATO nations.

According to Anna Wieslander, a Swedish political scientist, over the last decade, Sweden's armed forces, anticipating that public opinion may one day shift in favour of seeking NATO membership, had actively sought ways to become compatible with allied militaries. »Sweden streamlined its air force, switching terminology from Swedish to English all the way through the ranks and changing altitude measurements from metric to the imperial system«, she accounted for some of the implemented policies.³⁹

35 Banka, Andris et al.: *Allies That Matter: Elite versus Public Opinion in Latvia*, in: *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 21 (2023), pp. 207–214, DOI: 10.47459/lasr.2023.21.7. (10.03.2025).

36 Dahl, Ann-Sofie: *Strategic Challenges*.

37 Elgin Kjellström, Katherine/Lanoszka, Alexander: *Sweden, Finland, and the Meaning of Alliance Membership*, in: *Texas National Security Review* 6 (2023), No. 2, pp. 33–56; p. 45, DOI: 10.26153/tsw/46144. (18.09.2024).

38 Wolfley, Kyle J.: *Military Statecraft and the Use of Multinational Exercises in World Politics*, in: *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17 (2021), No. 2, pp. 1–24, DOI: 10.1093/fpa/oraa022. (29.01.2021).

39 Rasmussen, Sune: *Sweden, Finland's About-Face on NATO Membership Was Years in the Making*, in: *The Wall Street Journal*, 08.06.2023, www.wsj.com/articles/sweden-finlands-about-face-on-nato-membership-was-years-in-the-making-8b86c324 (11.03.2025).

Indeed, our collected data on NATO military exercises in the Baltic Sea and in the Baltic states, 2001–2019,⁴⁰ illustrate just how frequently Finland and Sweden participated in NATO military manoeuvres (Graph 1). The two Nordic neutrals have been part of NATO drills long before the threat from Russia re-emerged to centre stage, and the size and frequency of exercises increased in 2014. Both joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program as early as it was established in 1994, which provided both countries with the opportunity to develop interoperability with NATO forces. What is more, both countries participated in NATO missions in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan.⁴¹ However, they do not always participate in tandem. While Finland participated on a regular basis, Sweden did not join exercises in the region during most of the 2000s, with the exception of the Baltops exercises.

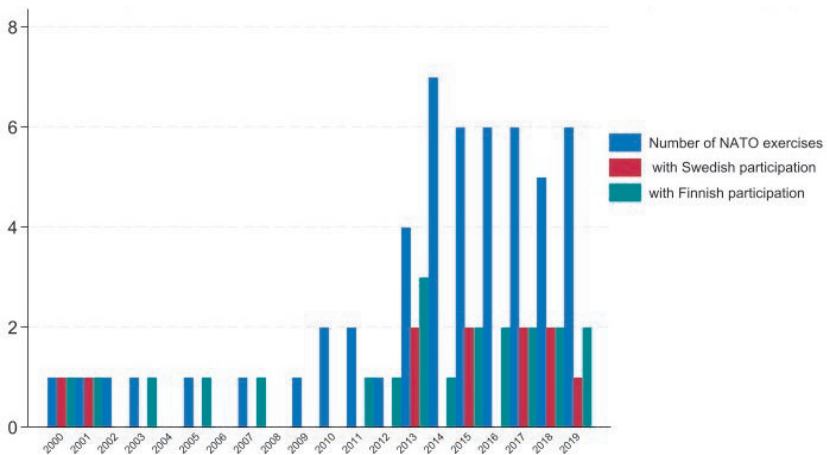


Figure 2: NATO exercises in the Baltic states and the Baltic Sea (without Baltops)

The Baltops is an annual maritime exercise in the Baltic Sea that has been led by the US since 1971 and which includes non-NATO countries. For many years, Russia was a regular participant and Baltops was one of the rare venues for confidence-building where NATO and Russian navies practiced side by side. Since 2014, Baltops, like other NATO exercise series, has moved again

40 Banka/Bussmann: Uncomfortable neighbors.

41 Von Hlatky, Stefanie/Fortmann, Michel: NATO enlargement and the failure of the cooperative security mindset, in: *International Politics* 57, (2020), pp. 554–572, DOI: 10.1057/s41311-020-00240-w. (30.12.2024).

towards a logic of deterrence and assurance of the Baltic allies.⁴² Scrutinising the participants of Baltops provides us with additional interesting insights regarding the transformation of the security landscape. In Table 1, we list, in addition to participating NATO members, the non-NATO participants since 2001. Taking part in exercises prior facilitated NATO accession for the three Baltic states and even more so for the two Nordic countries. Although non-aligned, their intense links and interactions with NATO reach far back and years of joint exercises have enhanced interoperability.

Table 1. Participating states in the annual Baltops exercises

Year	NATO participants	Non-NATO participants
2001	Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, UK	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, Russia
2002	Denmark, Germany, Poland, UK, US	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, Russia
2003	Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, Poland, UK, US	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, Russia
2004	Canada, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, US	Sweden, Russia
2005	Denmark, Germany, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, UK, US	Finland, Sweden, Russia
2006	Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, US, UK	Finland, Sweden, Russia
2007	Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Lithuania, Latvia, France, Poland, US, UK	Sweden, Russia
2008	Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, UK, US	Finland, Sweden, Russia
2009	Denmark, Germany, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Netherlands, US, UK	Finland, Sweden
2010	Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, US	Finland, Sweden, Russia
2011	Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, US	Sweden, Russia, Georgia
2012	Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, US,	Sweden, Russia, Georgia,
2013	Estonia, Denmark, Latvia, Poland, Lithuania, Netherlands, France, Germany, US	Finland, Sweden, Russia, Georgia
2014	Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, UK, US	Finland, Sweden, Georgia
2015	Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Turkey, UK, US	Sweden, Georgia
2016	Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, UK, US	Finland, Sweden

⁴² Banka/Bussmann: Uncomfortable neighbors.

Year	NATO participants	Non-NATO participants
2017	Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, UK, US	Finland, Sweden
2018	Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Turkey, UK, US	Finland, Sweden
2019	Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Turkey, UK, US	Finland, Sweden

This suggests that in both Finland and Sweden, political and military elites deliberately maintained flexibility by keeping all options open. Especially since 2014, Sweden and Finland increased efforts to tighten links with NATO through agreements that provide a legal framework for NATO deployment and participation in a program that allows for an accelerated NATO accession if needed.⁴³ Throughout the post-Cold War period, Finnish public opinion had been stable in its opposition to joining NATO, and even right before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, most Finns still favoured military nonalignment. This stance transformed literally overnight to a large majority in favour of NATO membership. Public opinion was now in line with the foreign policy elite that had been advocating accession for quite some time. The transformed opinion polls facilitated the application process for the government.⁴⁴ Years of intensive training with NATO allies enabled Helsinki and Stockholm to transition to full NATO member status swiftly. As one retired Swedish chief of joint operations noted, »Swedish public likely didn't understand the full depth of the country's relationship with NATO.«⁴⁵ Similarly, the former Finnish chief of defence underscored: »When the decision to apply for membership was made, I think the public, and also the political leadership, was surprised that Finland was so ready.«⁴⁶ According to Tuomas Forsberg, the outcome was a logical consequence of their closely developed ties with NATO in the post-Cold War era.⁴⁷

43 Von Hlatky/Fortmann: NATO enlargement.

44 Forsberg, Tuomas: Bottom-up foreign policy? Finland, NATO and public opinion, in: *Scandinavian Political Studies* 47 (2024), No. 3, pp. 283–307, DOI: 10.1111/1467-9477.12273. (08.07.2024). Pesu, Matti/Iso-Markku, Tuomas: Insufficiency of informal alignment: Why did Finland choose formal NATO membership?, in: *International Affairs* 100 (2024), No. 2, pp. 569–588, DOI: 10.1093/ia/iaae006. (04.03.2024).

45 Rasmussen, Sune: Sweden, Finland's About-Face on NATO Was Years in the Making.

46 *ibid.*

47 Forsberg, Tuomas: Finland and Sweden's Road to NATO, in: *Current History* 122 (2023), No. 842, pp. 89–94, DOI: 10.1525/curh.2023.122.842.89. (01.03.2023).

Finnish and Swedish NATO accession and thus further harmonisation in the security architecture certainly improve the defensibility outlook of the three Baltic countries. Due to their geographic location, these Nordic nations are well-placed to become essential regional security contributors. As Estonia's defence forces commander articulated, Finnish and Swedish NATO membership has given Estonia a »new angle« to solve its security questions.⁴⁸ Commenting on this development, another senior Estonian diplomat explained that Finnish and Swedish non-alignment meant there was always a question mark about their reaction during a possible militarised crisis. As he put it: »Military plans can hardly be built on what-if caveats.«⁴⁹ This has now changed. »Swedish and Finnish NATO membership,« he further explains, »opened new doors and new channels to coordinate the planning and execution of military operations.« In sum, their membership undoubtedly redraws the security map in ways that favour NATO's smallest states, the three Baltic countries.⁵⁰

The two NATO newcomers have wasted no time in making active contributions to regional defence. After recurrent suspected sabotage of undersea cables, Finland and Sweden, for instance, have stepped up ship monitoring in the Baltic Sea. These types of hybrid attacks have further prompted the intensification of minilateral groupings within NATO. In January 2025, the Heads of State or Governments of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden met in Helsinki to address growing threats to pipelines and undersea cables in the Baltic Sea.⁵¹ Afterward, NATO launched a new military initiative called »Baltic Sentry«, which committed more allied assets such as frigates, maritime patrol aircraft, and naval drones to monitor the Baltic waters.⁵² Initiatives of this nature attest that the countries

48 Bath, Alison: Russia looms large as NATO allies meet for major Baltic naval exercise, in: Stars and Stripes, 05.06.2023, www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2023-06-05/russia-nato-finl-and-baltops-10331886.html (10.03.2025).

49 Prikk, Kristjan: NATO at 75: Estonia's Perspective, in: The Eastern Front Podcast, 21.05.2024, www.aei.org/podcast/nato-at-75-estonias-perspective-with-amb-kristjan-prikk/ (11.03.2025).

50 Banka, Andris: Asmus strategic vision makes a comeback: Finnish-Swedish role in defending the Baltics, in: Nordic Review of International Studies 3 (2024), pp. 72–80: p. 75, nris.journal.fi/article/view/144599 (23.05.2024).

51 President of the Republic of Finland: Joint Statement of the Baltic Sea NATO Allies Summit, 14.01.2025, www.presidentti.fi/en/joint-statement-of-the-baltic-sea-nato-allies-summit/ (11.03.2025).

52 NATO: NATO launches 'Baltic Sentry' to increase critical infrastructure security, 14.01.2025, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_232122.htm (11.03.2025).

in the Baltic Sea region, working under NATO's flag, are tightening their security relations even further. In this context, another noteworthy event has been the Swedish deployment of 600 troops to join the Canadian-led multinational brigade in Latvia, its first-ever deployment to another NATO member state.⁵³ The discussed material attests that NATO's newest members, Finland and Sweden, are already actively contributing to regional and the alliance's collective defence.

Still Fragmented: Military Infrastructure

Previous material attests that the transformation spaces and processes in the Baltic Sea region have trended towards more harmonisation. Transnational cooperation and harmonisation have also considerably advanced with regard to critical infrastructure in the energy sector and its security implications (see Chapter Kalis/Becker). With greater convergence of threat perceptions among NATO partners, they have undertaken various initiatives to strengthen their defence posture. However, one area where we can still observe a great deal of fragmentation is in relation to military infrastructure. Differences run along the line between states once part of the Soviet Union and those in the West. Although two decades have already passed since the Baltic countries joined the EU and NATO, their roads and railway lines remain generally incompatible with those of other alliance partners. Budginaite-Froehly bluntly states the facts when she writes that this part of Europe today is »better connected to Russia and Belarus through their railway infrastructure than to their Western allies.«⁵⁴ As such, they have not managed to fully reverse 50 years of the Soviet era, during which infrastructure was tailored to match standards used in the rest of the Soviet states. The most visible element of incompatibility relates to the railway gauge, which fits the Russian standard but cannot be reconciled with the one in use in Europe.

During more peaceful times in the early 2000s, when relations with Moscow were reasonably stable, the Baltic governments even boasted about their excellent railway connections with Russia and Central Asian republics.

53 Swedish Armed Forces: Historic Swedish force arrives in Latvia, 18.01.2025, www.forsvarsmahten.se/en/news/2025/01/historic-swedish-force-arrives-in-latvia/ (11.03.2025).

54 Budginaite-Froehly, Justina: Baltic Defense: Getting New Rail Links Back on Track, in: CEPA, 16.07.2024, www.cepa.org/article/baltic-defense-getting-new-rail-links-back-on-track/ (10.03.2025).

Western states used the route that started at Riga Port via Russia to supply NATO and US forces in Afghanistan.⁵⁵ As relations with Russia deteriorated, those same railway connections were now viewed in an entirely different light, not as nodes ensuring greater commerce but as structures that could assist external actors to swiftly make territorial inroads during militarised crises. While military infrastructure in the Baltic Sea region encompasses many different elements, such as roads, bridges, airports, ports, and other critical infrastructure, in the view of military planners, the railroad remains key in ensuring the swift movement of military hardware and personnel. According to historian Hal Brands, a network of railways in this part of the world has historically been the decisive factor in battlefield victories and geopolitical revolutions.⁵⁶ The Russian 2022 war in Ukraine was a stark reminder of this fact. Following Moscow's war of aggression, Ukraine's national railway company assumed immense strategic importance. As Edwards writes, the railroad enabled the nation at war to »ferry troops to the front lines and refugees away from them. It transported hundreds of diplomatic delegations to Kyiv.«⁵⁷

This fact has not been lost on the Baltic governments, who acknowledged the inadequacy of the current military infrastructure. On a political level, all three Baltic nations have committed to improving mobility, framing it as a strategic necessity. In this context, one of the most promising projects has been *Rail Baltica*. This multi-billion initiative, connecting the Baltics with their Western partners, is by far the largest rail infrastructure project in the history of the Baltic states. While serving civilian needs, the project has been pitched with a clear military dimension in mind. As the implementing body of this extensive project notes: »Military mobility, the rapid and efficient movement of troops and equipment, is crucial for the region's defence readiness. *Rail Baltica's* high-speed rail infrastructure is planned to accommodate heavy military equipment, such as tanks and armoured vehicles, which are difficult

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- 55 Kuchins, A. C./Sanderson, T. M.: The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2010, p. 17, [csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/091229_Kuchins_NDNandAfghan_Web.pdf](https://www.csis.org/website-prod/s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/091229_Kuchins_NDNandAfghan_Web.pdf) (11.03.2025).
 - 56 Brands, Hal: *The Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars, and the Making of the Modern World*, New York 2025, p. 25.
 - 57 Edwards, Maxim: Ukraine Lays Its Tracks to Europe, in: *Foreign Policy*, 04.07.2024, www.foreignpolicy.com/2024/07/04/ukraine-trains-railways-transit-war-russia-europe/ (11.03.2025).

to transport by road.«⁵⁸ Opinion polls conducted in all three Baltic countries further indicate that citizens recognise the military value that this project would add. In Lithuania, 78 % agree that *Rail Baltica* is essential for the conduct of effective NATO operations, while in Latvia and Estonia, around 60 % of people share this view.⁵⁹

Despite the high importance accorded to this project, implementation has been hindered by political controversies, rising inflation, and accusations of project mismanagement. As a result, it has been postponed by years, with some even questioning whether the Baltic states can carry it through. A former US Army commander in Europe, Ben Hodges, who has been one of the most vocal voices in advocating the need for improved military mobility in the region, has harshly criticised Baltic governments. »I am really surprised that *Rail Baltica* is still unfinished,« he said in an interview.⁶⁰ In his view, while some aspects of military mobility have improved, it would still take weeks for ground forces to arrive in the Baltic region from Western Europe. »Moving forces in a short time from Bavaria to Lithuania, for example, is still a challenge,« he added. European Commission, which is involved in funding the construction of this project, has sternly warned lawmakers that the project needs to be finalised by 2030.⁶¹ Criticism has also come from Poland, whose media have warned that the slow Baltic countries' implementation of mobility projects endangers NATO's collective security.⁶² Currently, the West-East logistical connections remain poor and largely incompatible, thus hampering Allied ability to swiftly transport military equipment and personnel to NATO's eastern flank.⁶³

58 Rail Baltica: Rail Baltica plays a crucial role in enhancing military mobility across the Baltics, 20.08.2024, www.railbaltica.org/rail-baltica-plays-a-crucial-role-in-enhancing-military-mobility-across-the-baltics/ (11.03.2025).

59 LSM: Survey: Baltic residents see Rail Baltica's military importance, in: LSM, 01.02.2025, eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/transport/31.01.2025-survey-baltic-residents-see-rail-balticas-military-importance.a585939/ (11.03.2025).

60 BNS: Former force commander discusses Rail Baltica from military perspective, 04.11.2024, www.balticnews.com/former-force-commander-discusses-rail-baltica-from-military-perspective/ (10.03.2025).

61 ERR: European Commission: Rail Baltica must be ready by 2030, 08.02.2024, news.err.ee/1609246662/european-commission-rail-baltica-must-be-ready-by-2030 (11.03.2025).

62 Vilikanskytė, Milda: »Endangering NATO security: Poland slams Baltics' slow modernisation of Via Baltica, 10.08.2024, www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2379017/endangering-nato-security-poland-slams-baltics-slow-modernisation-of-via-baltica (11.03.2025).

63 Hodges, Ben et al.: Until Something Moves: Reinforcing the Baltic Region in Crisis and War, in: International Centre for Defence and Security, www.icds.ee/until-something-moves-reinforcing-the-baltic-region-in-crisis-and-war/ (11.03.2025).

Beyond the Baltic states, another layer of complications relates to the fact that a diverging set of mobility rules guides individual countries in the region. EU officials have often invoked the concept of »military Schengen« to advocate simplifying regulations when allied militaries cross national borders. Given the heightened tensions in the region, some improvements have been made. In January 2024, Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland signed an agreement to create a military transport corridor connecting their countries.⁶⁴ In late November 2024, Nordic nations—Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland—followed suit and signed a letter of intent to create military mobility corridors.⁶⁵ While encouraging, these initiatives alone still do not ensure smooth military mobility to all relevant actors. According to one French general, considerable administrative red tape keeps cross-border troop movement relatively slow. »There’s a war in Ukraine, but customs officials explain that you don’t have the right tonnage per axle and that your tanks aren’t allowed to cross Germany,« the General publicly raised his objections.⁶⁶ On the highest political level, the European Council has reiterated the salience of military mobility for European security and defence.⁶⁷ Improvements, however, have been slow and fragmented.⁶⁸ On this issue, the European continent has not yet achieved cross-border movement harmonisation.

Conclusion

The countries in the Baltic Sea region experienced multiple, fragmented transformation processes that eventually led to a more cohesive security landscape. Despite the complex historical and geopolitical context and the escalation of the threat situation, the region has moved towards more harmonisation. The external threat from Russia led to more internal coherence among the

64 Vohra, Anchal: The »Military Schengen« Era Is Here, in: Foreign Policy, 04.03.2024, www.foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/04/europe-military-autonomy-nato-schengen/ (11.03.2025).

65 Wass, Sanne: Nordic Nations Agree to Establish Military Mobility Corridors, in: Bloomberg, 21.11.2024, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-11-21/nordic-nations-agree-to-establish-military-mobility-corridors (11.03.2025).

66 Kayali, Laura: Europe’s ability to deter Putin hampered by ‘unbelievable’ red tape: French general, in: Politico, 05.08.2024, www.politico.eu/article/french-general-army-mobility-military-troop-movements-exercise-red-tape-russia-ukraine-war/ (11.03.2025).

67 Council of the European Union: Council Conclusions on EU Security and Defence, 2024, p. 19, data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9225-2024-INIT/en/pdf (11.03.2025).

68 Hartmann, Jannik: Military Mobility, in: DGAP Policy Brief 10, German Council on Foreign Relations, 2024, DOI: 10.60823/DGAP-24-40850-en. (19.06.2024).

democratic littoral states in terms of threat perception as well as policy approaches. The countries responded largely in a unified manner to the Russian aggression, relying on deterrence through cooperation as a core element. An intensified cooperation in joint military exercises and NATO's deployment of multilateral battlegroups is an expression of this strategy of cooperative deterrence. Expectations towards Germany as a more active security provider also converge with the new role and responsibility it assumes in the region, especially with its commitment to establish a permanent military base in Lithuania. The most vivid expressions of harmonisation are Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO, which means that all democratic littoral states in the region are now members of the transatlantic alliance and the European Union. As Oliver Moody contends in his book on the Baltic Sea region, this geopolitical area has incrementally transformed from being once a »sea of confusion« into one of the most coherent parts of Europe.⁶⁹

While generally we can observe, to a large extent, a harmonisation in the security architecture, a better integration of fragmented critical infrastructures remains a costly challenge for the future. Connecting the Baltic states further to their Western and Northern neighbours is important with regard to better military defence strategies as well as for fostering closer economic ties. Here, we see the important potential for collaboration between the EU and NATO. While the European Union is responsible for allocating funds and implementing laws to modernize infrastructure and enhance its compatibility, NATO officials should also actively contribute their expertise on specific military requirements. Military mobility could therefore serve as a key bridging issue between the EU and NATO, encouraging closer collaboration between these two large organisations.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that another important element of uncertainty has to do with the future role of the United States. Most countries in the Baltic Sea region take a position that is highly favourable to a strong transatlantic presence rather than striving for an alternative European security architecture. But what happens if Washington suddenly seeks to significantly reduce its commitments in Europe, or even exit the transatlantic alliance altogether? Such a scenario could place significant strain on the broader EU and potentially reignite processes of fragmentation. In other words, the transformational processes in the Baltic Sea region never grind to a halt but

69 Moody, Oliver: *Baltic: The Future of Europe*, London 2025, p. 6.

are continuously facing new challenges, evolving, and adapting. Only time will reveal the direction the Baltic Sea region will take.

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