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The security and deterrence policy of the Baltic states in 2014-2024

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Abstract

Objectives: The full-scale annexation of Crimea and Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted the political elites of the Baltic states to devote even more attention to security problems and to update the defence plans of the Baltic region. The aim of the work is to analyze the development of the security and deterrence strategies of the Baltic states in the years 2014-2024 in the face of potential Russian threats on the border of the eastern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The starting point for the discussion is the hypothesis that the sense of threat from the Russian Federation contributes to the intensification of trilateral military cooperation between Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The theoretical basis for the empirical analysis is the adaptive strategy model (so-called grand strategy) developed by Colin Dueck.

Methods: case study

Results: After the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Baltic states were encouraged to tighten strategic trilateral cooperation and develop the potential of their armed forces to increase the ability to defend their own territory, while striving to strengthen collective defence and deterrence within NATO.

Conclusions: The Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in active investment in defense in the Baltic states. In Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, there is currently strong political will to continuously develop military potential, combined with increased public interest in state security issues.

Introduction

The concept of security and deterrence has dominated western strategic thought since the end of World War II. The classic concept of security and deterrence is quite simple. As Freedman notes, Deterrence occurs when A persuades B not to take a particular step by persuading B that whatever the expected gains, the likely costs will be higher. When A threatens, its effectiveness will depend on B's perception of what it might mean, as well as on A's intentions. If B does not take A's threat seriously and concludes that it can be safely ignored, then deterrence will fail. Or A may fail to deter through neglect. He knows that B needs to be deterred, but he doesn't realise what B is planning until it is too late, so he's caught off guard. When A needs to regain lost ground, deterrence becomes irrelevant. The tables may turn because B now discourages A from maintaining the new status quo. There is also no standard formula suitable for use in every situation where a deterrent effect is required. What may work when vested interests are at stake may not work when the stakes are low. A's stern threats may hit the mark when B is paying attention, but miss completely when B is distracted or if there is a lot of background noise. What worked last time may not work this time, not least because B knows what to expect. And since deterrence depends on maintaining the status quo, when little changes, can we be sure that it is because of a deterrent threat? Is that why B is held back? Perhaps no hostile action was ever intended. And if this did not happen, it may have been for reasons not related to deterrence. Deterrence is therefore simple in principle and a natural strategy to adopt, but it is not so simple when it comes to implementation. This presents both conceptual and practical challenges (Freedman, 2021).

The full-scale annexation of Crimea and Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted the political elites of the Baltic states to devote even more attention to security problems and to update the defence plans of the Baltic region. To this end, the Baltic states are increasing their defense spending, including: in order to accelerate the modernization of the armed forces and increase the potential of military -civilian and allied cooperation within NATO (Gritėnas, 2017; Vilson, 2015, Kojala and Ivanauskas, 2015; Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2017, 2023; Janeliūnas, 2021; Malužinas, 2023a; 2023b, 2022c). Moreover, the war in Ukraine has led to a real change in the perception of Russia as a threat to its own security and the security of the other countries on NATO's eastern flank.

The aim of the work is to analyze the development of the security and deterrence strategies of the Baltic states in the years 2014-2024 in the face of potential Russian threats on the border of the eastern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The starting point for the discussion is the hypothesis that the sense of threat from the Russian Federation contributes to the intensification of trilateral military cooperation between Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The theoretical basis for the empirical analysis is the adaptive strategy model (so-called grand strategy) developed by Colin Dueck . It is related to the implementation by countries of a new strategy of action, which results from both the ongoing changes in the environment and the perception of the external threat. According to Dueck, the international environment forces certain behavior on states (Dueck 2005: 198–199).

Analyzing the case of the Baltic states, their strategic adaptation involves increasing military spending, accelerating the modernization of the armed forces, developing military

and border infrastructure, building comprehensive national defense and adopting new diplomatic initiatives in the international arena. This analysis can be seen as a laboratory for model solutions for defence, military deterrence and resilience. The argument for taking up this topic is the timeliness and relevance from the point of view of the changes taking place in the security environment of the European region following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which forced the Baltic States to adopt certain political decisions and take applied measures.

1. Evolution of the Security and defense policy of the Baltic States in 2014-2024

The fears of the Baltic states about Russian revisionism and reincorporation into the Russian sphere of influence resulted in a change in the perception of potential threats. Political and military elites and experts began to present Russia as a direct threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Baltic states. In response to Russian actions, the Baltic states intensified their efforts to increase their own military potential and strive for the permanent presence of NATO forces on their territory. Against the background of growing instability around Ukraine and, as a result, the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014, the Baltic states decided to make profound changes to their military forces.

Even though the Baltic states have little military potential and are unable to defend themselves, as evidenced by the small number and poor equipment of their military forces, it¹ was decided to increase defense spending. In 2014, Lithuania and Latvia committed to gradually increase defence spending to 2% of GDP in 2020. Estonia, on the other hand, has maintained the financing of its military forces at the level of 2% of GDP recommended by NATO since 2012 (Media backgrounder , 2015).

However, due to changes in international structures, including: Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Baltic states have decided to strive to allocate 3% of their GDP to armaments. The Latvian military budget for 2023 reached EUR 1.1 billion. In turn, in March 2023, Estonia decided to increase its defence budget by almost EUR 476 million euros. Moreover, Estonia is allocating 8-6 million to build society's capacity to cope with a crisis situation. Meanwhile, Lithuania's defence budget in 2023 amounted to EUR 2.06 billion, or 2.71% GDP, including EUR 134.8 million of temporary solidarity contributions paid by banks (wnp.pl, 2024). However, in 2024, defence budgets reached EUR 2.092 billion - Lithuania, EUR 1.128 billion (2.54 GDP) - Latvia (2.27 GDP) and EUR 1.3 billion Estonia (2.73) (see Fig. 1).

¹The main type of armed forces of the Baltic states are land forces (in each country their core is an infantry brigade), with limited anti-tank and anti-aircraft defense capabilities.

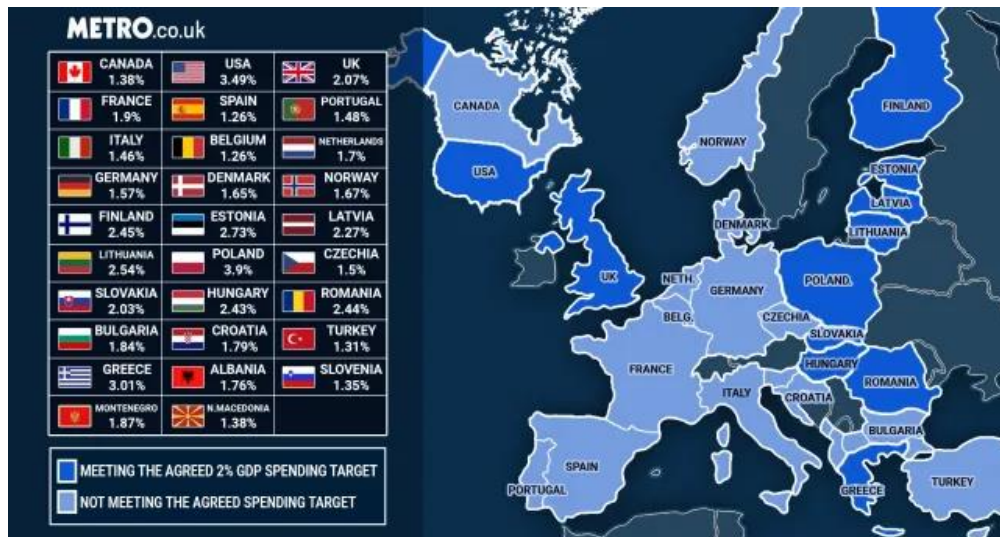


Fig. 1: Defence spending of NATO countries in 2024.
 Source: 300 Gospodarka.pl (2024)

These data show that only one third of NATO members (including the Baltic states) achieved the 2% of GDP target for military spending. When considering the issue of developing the military potential of the B3 countries, it is worth noting that the analysed countries, including Poland, do not coordinate their military purchases and acquire various types of military equipment, which may be of great importance in the field of common foreign and defence policy (wilno.tvp.pl, 2024).

In the longer term, the modernization of the armed forces accelerated. In 2014–2015, the Baltic states purchased heavy equipment: Estonia acquired infantry combat vehicles from the Netherlands, Latvia purchased, among others, armoured vehicles from Great Britain, and a set of TPS-77 MRR medium-range multi-function radars from the USA, while Lithuania, among others, self-propelled howitzer guns from Germany and GROM portable anti-aircraft missile systems from Poland. In the following years, the Baltic states made joint purchases of M142 HIMARS artillery missile systems: Lithuania bought 8 launchers and ammunition for USD 495 million, Latvia bought 6 launchers and ammunition for USD 180 million) and Estonia bought 6 launchers and ammunition for USD 200 million, which a significant part of the costs was covered by the administration of the US President. In 2021, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Sweden signed a long-term joint agreement on the purchase of Carl Gustaff anti-tank ammunition. Lithuania allocates approximately 52 million for this type of anti-tank ammunition. euros. Orders for this ammunition are renewed every year (kam.lt, 2023).

Moreover, in 2023, the Baltic states made a joint purchase of M57 ballistic missile launchers with a range of up to 300 km, which will enable them to hit military facilities. In the same year, Latvia and Estonia also started joint purchases of 3,000 logistics vehicles of various models and classes. Veho Trucks, the Scandinavian representative of Mercedes-Benz, is to provide vehicles weighing up to 5 tons, while trucks with higher load capacities will be provided by Volvo Eesti and Scania Eesti, with the value of the framework contract being

EUR 700 million. It is worth mentioning that in 2022, Estonia and Lithuania jointly purchased extended loads, necessary for sappers to carry out passages in minefields, the value of which was EUR 200 million. Cooperation in joint arms purchases is intended to ensure interoperability between the armies of the Baltic states, facilitating their defence, and reducing costs (forsal.pl, 2024). From 2023, Lithuania and Latvia are conducting negotiations on the possible joint purchase of patrol boats and equipment. The initial value of the Lithuanian purchase is approximately PLN 20 million. Euro (kam.lt, 2023).

Next, the Baltic states decided to change the size, structure, and training of their armed forces. Due to the staff shortage in many units in Lithuania and Latvia, a decision was made to increase the number of soldiers. In 2016, compulsory military conscription was reintroduced in Lithuania, while in Latvia in 2023. After regaining independence, Estonia never waived conscription. It is a flexible model modeled partly on the system in force in Finland. The Ministry of Defence assumed that the changes will result in an increase in the number of defence forces to 51,000 by 2028. people in case of war (in active military service - 14 thousand, in Zemessarda - 16 thousand, in the reserve - 20 thousand) (Szymański, 2015; i.pl, 2023). It should be noted that the Russian invasion of Ukraine (02.202) and the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus or the stationing of some Wagner Group mercenaries in this country in 2023 prompted the authorities of Latvian countries to resume conscription. Moreover, from 2022, the Baltic states updated their military exercise scenarios.

Table 1. Dynamics of the armed forces of the Baltic states in 2014-2024

Country	Lithuania	Latvia	Estonia
number of professional forces in 2014	7.9 thousand	5.31 thousand	3.25 thousand
number of professional forces in 2024	23 thousand	17.25 thousand	7.7 thousand

Source: own study based on globalfirepower.com (2024).

2. Baltic defense line

The strategy of the Baltic states also includes plans to develop military infrastructure. The Baltic states increased investments in the development of military infrastructure and logistics (with the support of NATO, mainly the US). An important issue, with the intensification of Russian and Belarusian disinformation and propaganda activities aimed at eastern NATO countries, was also the development of the border infrastructure of the Baltic states. The most visible example is the ongoing attacks by the Belarusian border services on the border infrastructure of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia and the manipulation of migrants, which is a factor of destabilisation activities in 2021-2024 (Terlikowski, Dyner, 2023).

For this reason, since 2017, Lithuania has built a 45-kilometer-long two-meter-high fence equipped with an electronic monitoring system along the border with Russia. In 2022, works related to the installation of a fence along a length of approximately 550 km on the border with Belarus were completed. In spring 2023, Lithuania completed the installation of electronic monitoring systems on the border with Belarus. (Gudavičius , 2017). In Latvia, in 2023, two stages of the construction of the fence on the border between Latvia and Belarus were finalized, with a total length of 149.7 km. The entire investment is to be completed by the end of 2024. The barrier on the Latvian-Russian border is under construction. In the previous stage (until 2019), patrol roads were built on 230 km of the border and 90 km of fencing was built. The next stage of construction is planned for 2025, which will cover the remaining 180 km of fencing and 53 km of patrol roads (Chmielewski, Tarociński , 2023). Meanwhile, Estonia officially decided to build the Russian section from 2021, which is to be 135.6 km long. The construction project is divided into three basic stages, in which approximately 115 km of barrier will first be built. The first test section (23.5 km) was completed in 2022, and the second (approx. 40 km) in 2023. Work on the third section, approximately 50 km long, is planned for 2024 (Chmielewski, Tarociski, 2023).



Fig. 3: Status of development of border barriers in the Baltic states
 Source: (Chmielewski, Tarociński, 2023)

The most strategic example of cooperation between the Baltic states is the plan to jointly build a line of fortifications along the border with Russia and Belarus, announced at the beginning of 2024. The consensus assumes the construction of various defence structures aimed at deterring and protecting against military threats on NATO's eastern flank. For this

purpose, Estonia declared the construction of a defence line on its eastern border consisting of about 600 concrete bunkers, Lithuania decided to build shelters and change the construction law, while Latvia in this context has not yet revealed its plans (Respublika.lt , 2024). However, the case of Lithuania is important, where in February 2024, Minister of Internal Affairs Agnė Bilotaitė declared to the public that over the last year, a network of over 3.3 thousand people had been created based on activities aimed at strengthening citizens' preparedness for potential threats. shelters. According to the minister, "The goal is for 60% of the inhabitants of the urban commune and 40% of the inhabitants of the poviat commune to find safe shelter in such a shelter. 12 municipalities have already achieved this government-set target. Ensuring the development of the shelter network is our common goal” (wilno.tvp.pl, 2024).



Fig. 4: Military infrastructure in the Baltic states (Lithuania and Estonia)
Source: (Szymański, 2015)

As Aleksandra Kuczyńska Zonik notes , the development of the system of non-military capabilities of the Baltic states concerns four key elements:

- building civic trust in state institutions and bodies through strategic communication and emphasis on monitoring the media space on security issues, coordinating and planning communication activities, as well as informing the public about the threat of disinformation and limiting its impact on society,
- close cooperation between the public and non-governmental sectors is intended to increase the state's ability to function in crisis situations. Local associations and churches will play this role by supporting the mental resilience of community members. Practical examples include: training conducted for the Latvian Hunting Association, during which rescue skills were improved, strengthening the importance of civil self-defence by increasing financing and expanding the competences of the Lithuanian Rifle Association, and the international military exercise " Namejs 2022" in Latvia, in which rescue services also took part medical,
- dispersion and decentralization of responsibility, which means the division of responsibilities within the framework of crisis management between relevant ministries in the sphere of their activity and the delegation of their implementation to local institutions,
- strengthening civic resilience by creating a responsible attitude towards states and the nation, developing a sense of belonging and national identity, improving critical thinking and civic awareness, and the ability to function in conditions of increased physical and mental stress. Lithuania is currently preparing a plan to develop society's capacity for resistance, also covering citizens living abroad. However, in Latvia, it is planned to include the subject of national defense in the state education system from 2024 (Kuczyńska- Zonik , 2023).

Conclusions

After the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Baltic states were encouraged to tighten strategic trilateral cooperation and develop the potential of their armed forces to increase the ability to defend their own territory, while striving to strengthen collective defence and deterrence within NATO. The main goal of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia is to further increase military spending, accelerate the modernisation of the armed forces, develop military and border infrastructure, build comprehensive national defence, and actively seek a greater military presence of European NATO members, including the USA and Germany. This last element further involves the creation of a NATO brigade in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the expansion of which is at various stages.

Even though the Baltic states have little military potential and are unable to defend themselves, they will probably develop their security and deterrence policy in the long run, which confirms the hypothesis of this work. However, the dynamics of changes in military forces will depend in the long run on the economic situation of countries, which determines the size of defence budgets. Another important element are unfavorable demographic changes (progressive depopulation process), which limit the potential to fill staff shortages.

Nevertheless, the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in active investment in defense in the Baltic states. In Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, there is currently strong political will to continuously develop military potential, combined with increased public interest in state security issues.

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