

Guiding Principles for the DOD's Upcoming Assessment of Baltic Military Requirements to Deter Russia

Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Baltic region is one of the most complex NATO must defend, and the U.S. government should put in place durable, robust measures to deter Russian aggression.

The Baltic states are staunch defenders of economic freedom, liberal democracy, and human rights, and are unshakable U.S. allies who understand the Russian threat.

It is in America's and NATO's interests to deepen the U.S.-Baltic defense and security relationship, seeking new areas of cooperation and strengthening old ties.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 requires the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State to “jointly conduct a comprehensive, multilateral assessment of the military requirements of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to deter and resist aggression by Russia.”¹ Since Russia’s 2014 takeover of Ukraine’s Crimea peninsula, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO’s) ability to respond effectively to a contingency in the Baltic region has been a concern. The Baltic region is one of the most complex regions that the alliance is obligated to defend. The U.S. government should use this assessment to think strategically about putting in place durable, robust measures to deter Russian aggression in the region.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5032>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

A Complex Region

While small in size and population, the Baltic states represent something much bigger geopolitically: They are staunch defenders of economic freedom, liberal democracy, and human rights. They experienced Russian treachery during more than five decades of Soviet occupation in ways that few other countries ever did. This horrific experience means that the Baltic states do not take for granted the democracy, liberty, and security they enjoy today.

The Baltic region presents unique military and political difficulties that NATO needs to overcome. These challenges include:

- **The Baltic states' geographical isolation.** Militarily speaking, the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—are isolated from other NATO members. To the north of the Baltic states are non-NATO, but friendly, Finland and Sweden. To the south and east are Russia and Belarus. To the west, Lithuania shares a border with the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. Only Lithuania shares a land border with another non-Baltic NATO member—a tiny 65-mile border with Poland, to the southwest between Kaliningrad and Belarus, known as the Suwalki Gap.
- **The Baltic states' small size.** The Baltic states are small in population and size. Combined, the three have roughly the same geographic size and population as Missouri. The Baltic region is probably the only region inside NATO that is too small to depend on rapid reaction forces based elsewhere for its defense.
- **The Baltic states' ability to reinforce.** Key to any potential liberation of the Baltic states would be the swift arrival of robust reinforcements and equipment to the region. However, contested airspace, especially in light of Russia's A2/AD capabilities in the region, would make reinforcing the region difficult—if not initially impossible. Even NATO's Joint Air Power Strategy cautions that “the future operating environment may be one in which air superiority can neither be assured at the onset of operations nor, once obtained, be an enduring condition.”²
- **NATO's critical dependence on non-NATO countries.** While not impossible, it would be extremely difficult for NATO to respond to an incident in the Baltic region without the acquiescence of non-NATO Finland and Sweden.

U.S. Assistance to the Baltics

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea, the Obama Administration announced the creation of the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) in 2014 to reassure wary American allies that the U.S. would live up to its security commitments and to bolster the U.S. presence in Europe, which had deteriorated steadily in the previous years.

Under President Donald Trump, the U.S. has remained committed to supporting European allies. Funding for the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI, renamed from ERI) has expanded greatly from the \$3.4 billion enacted in fiscal year (FY) 2017, the final year of the Obama Administration. The EDI was funded for \$6.5 billion FY 2019, with the FY 2020 request coming at \$5.9 billion, a 10 percent reduction from the year prior.³ In FY 2020, over \$2 billion will support increases in U.S. rotational presence in Europe. A further \$2.3 billion will support enhanced prepositioning of equipment in Europe, and the remaining EDI funds will support exercises, training, building partnership capacity, and improving infrastructure in the European theater.⁴

The EDI continues to be funded through the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Account.⁵ However, there are several drawbacks to funding the EDI through OCO.⁶ Additional support for the Baltic states contained within the FY 2020 National Defense Authorization Act includes \$125 million earmarked for developing Baltic security cooperation,⁷ as well as an additional \$50 million to improve Baltic air defense.⁸

In addition to robust funding for security initiatives in Europe, the Trump Administration has continued significant U.S. troop rotations to the continent, including a heel-to-toe armored brigade combat team, an aviation brigade combat team, and a 900-strong Sustainment Task Force. In Poland, the U.S. continues to serve as the framework nation for NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence multinational battalion. In June 2019, President Trump and Polish President Andrzej Duda signed an agreement strengthening security cooperation, laying the groundwork for an additional rotational deployment of 1,000 American troops to Poland.⁹

The U.S. has beefed up its presence in Norway as well, with continuous rotations of 700 Marines to the country beginning in October 2018.¹⁰ The U.S. continues regular exercises with European allies: The U.S. Army recently announced it will host Defender 2020, "the U.S. Army's largest exercise in Europe in 25 years, ranging across ten countries and involving 37,000 troops from at least 18 countries, of which 20,000 soldiers will be deployed from the United States to Europe."¹¹

Permanence and Air Defense Needed

At the Warsaw Summit in 2016, NATO announced the creation of an Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP): four multinational battalions stationed in Poland and the Baltic states. So far, the EDF has been a success. The U.S. serves as the framework nation for the battle group in Poland; the United Kingdom is in Estonia, Canada is in Latvia, and Germany in Lithuania. EFP troops are under NATO command and control; a multinational divisional headquarters located in Elblag, Poland, coordinates the four battalions.

One issue that remains controversial inside the alliance is the question of permanently stationing NATO troops in the Baltic states. The only way to guarantee the security of the Baltic states against a conventional Russian military threat is by having robust troops and military capabilities on the ground. The Baltic states are too small to rely on a strategy of defensive depth that could buy NATO enough time to mobilize and deploy a sizable force to the region.

In order to better protect NATO's pre-positioned equipment, rotational troops, and key infrastructure and transport nodes required for rapid reinforcements in the Baltic region, NATO needs to develop a strategy promoting air defense, not just air policing. Air defense would require a robust fast-jet and airborne surveillance presence in addition to air defense assets.

The Trump Administration has sent positive messages about the possibility of deploying Patriot missiles to the region. In July 2017, as part of the Tobruk Legacy exercise, the U.S. even temporarily deployed a Patriot missile battery to Siauliai air base in Lithuania, the first time the U.S. has deployed ground-based air defense to a Baltic country.¹²

Despite positive discussions and aspirational talk, NATO has not agreed on a common position for Baltic Air Defense.

Meeting the Challenge of the Baltic Region

When the U.S. State Department and Department of Defense conduct its assessment, it should consider the following:

- **Preparing to reinforce the Baltic region quickly.** The U.S. and NATO should continue holding exercises focused on quickly deploying a large number of troops to the Baltic region on short notice. Also, the U.S. should ensure that the Baltic states have the infrastructure and ability to receive large numbers of forces and their equipment.

- **Establishing a permanent military presence in the Baltic region.** The deployment of four rotational battalions to the region is a good start, but more needs to be done. The threat from Russia will remain for the foreseeable future. The U.S. and NATO need to show an enduring commitment to the region by permanently stationing armed forces in the Baltics.
- **Moving enduring activities to the base budget.** The EDI was created as an important, immediately visible mechanism to help push back against Russian aggression. Nonetheless, it sends a mixed message that all European missions can be funded through the EDI and that the mission is temporary due to its OCO funding. For military planning and geopolitical signaling, the United States would be better served if EDI funding were merged into the DOD base budget.
- **Acknowledging the importance of a Baltic Air Defense mission.** While the Baltic Air Police has been useful for policing the region's airspace, more needs to be done. A robust Baltic Air Defense mission is needed to ensure that the region can be defended on the ground, in the air, and at sea.
- **Thinking creatively about which framework would work the best for Baltic Air Defense.** At first glance, NATO might seem the best framework for implementing a Baltic Air Defense program, but Finland and Sweden—essential countries for a Baltic Air Defense—are not in NATO. The European Union is out of the question due to internal divisions on defense matters. Therefore, the U.S. should push for a multilateral regional approach that includes both NATO and individual EU members and is led by Washington.
- **Working with the non-NATO Nordic countries to improve the air defense of the Baltic.** Due to their geographical location, non-NATO Finland and Sweden would form an important part of any Baltic Air Defense strategy. Washington should work closely with Helsinki and Stockholm to ensure regional coordination and cooperation.

Conclusion

Any action that NATO takes to reinforce the Baltic region would be a responsible defensive measure designed to defend the alliance, not to

provoke a war with Russia. Defending the Baltic states and deterring Russian aggression will be far easier and cheaper than liberating them. The U.S. should deepen the U.S.–Baltic defense and security relationship by proactively seeking new areas of cooperation and building on old ties. It is in America’s and NATO’s interests to do so.

Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. **Daniel Kochis** is Senior Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Davis Institute.

Endnotes

1. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Public Law No: 116-92, § 1246.
2. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO's Joint Air Power Strategy," June 26, 2018, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_06/20180626_20180626-joint-air-power-strategy.pdf (accessed June 28, 2018).
3. David Welna, "Under Trump, NATO Nations Get More U.S. Troops and Military Spending," NPR, December 3, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/03/784444270/under-trump-nato-nations-get-more-u-s-troops-and-military-spending> (accessed January 22, 2020).
4. U.S. European Command, "FY 2020 European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) Fact Sheet," Public Affairs Office, <https://www.eucom.mil/> (accessed January 22, 2020).
5. U.S. Department of Defense, "Defense Budget Overview," March 2019, p. 6-1, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2020/fy2020_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf (accessed January 22, 2020).
6. Frederico Bartels and Daniel Kochis, "Congress Should Transform the European Deterrence Initiative into an Enduring Commitment," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3319, May 29, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/congress-should-transform-the-european-deterrence-initiative-enduring-commitment>.
7. News release, "U.S. Defense Budget to Allocate 175 Million to Baltic Countries," Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Defence, December 23, 2019, <https://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/en/news/us-defense-budget-allocate-175-million-baltic-countries> (accessed January 22, 2020).
8. "U.S. Defense Budget to Allocate \$50 Million to Baltic Air Defense," ERR News, December 17, 2019, <https://news.err.ee/1014803/us-defense-budget-to-allocate-50-million-to-baltic-air-defense> (accessed January 22, 2020).
9. Daniel Kochis, "Vice President Pence's Visit to Poland Is a Chance to Reaffirm Strong Ties," The Daily Signal, August 30, 2019, <https://www.dailysignal.com/2019/08/30/vice-president-pences-visit-to-poland-is-a-chance-to-reaffirm-strong-ties/>.
10. The Heritage Foundation, *2018 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2018).
11. Andrew A. Michta, "Without the U.S., European Defense Will Fall to Pieces," *The American Interest*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/10/23/without-the-us-european-defense-will-fall-to-pieces/> (accessed January 22, 2020).
12. "U.S. Deploys Advanced Anti-Aircraft Missiles in Baltics for First Time," Reuters, July 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-baltics-patriot/u-s-deploys-advanced-anti-aircraft-missiles-in-baltics-for-first-time-idUSKBNI9V28A> (accessed July 2, 2017).