



# NATO's New Center of Gravity

By Michael Miklaucic

“Russia considers the Baltic states to be the most vulnerable part of NATO....” This is the conclusion of a recent report by Estonia’s Foreign Intelligence Service.<sup>1</sup> The three small Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, have a 1,360-kilometer border with Russia and its client state Belarus. With a joint population of just over 6 million and 47,000 active-duty armed forces the Baltic states are on the frontline of any confrontation with Russia. Their vulnerability is keenly felt having all been under brutally oppres-

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Michael Miklaucic is a Senior Fellow at National Defense University and the Editor-in-Chief of PRISM.

sive Soviet occupation until quite recently; many still living recall that oppression that lasted until the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia's unprovoked February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has reminded Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians of the horrors of occupation, and rekindled fears of what until recently was considered unimaginable—a land war of territorial aggression in Europe—a contingency for which the Baltic states are urgently preparing.

Each of the Baltic states has adopted a national security posture based on the principle of total or comprehensive defense; a whole-of-nation approach to defending their respective homelands with all elements of society mobilized to protect their national sovereignty. In the words of Estonian Minister of Defense Hanno Pevkur, "Every bush shoots!"<sup>2</sup> The Baltic three are among the handful of NATO members that have exceeded NATO's 2 percent target of gross domestic product on defense spending with significant investments in new capabilities and dramatic increases in armed personnel. All three are acutely aware of Russian efforts to subvert social stability using its hybrid warfare toolbox, including influence campaigns, mis- and disinformation, cyberattacks, the weaponization of migration, and economic or energy dependencies. Through total or comprehensive defense Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been building up social resilience and preparing their respective populations to actively resist occupation.<sup>3</sup>

Since joining NATO in 2004 the Baltic states have pinned their security planning on the collective defense principle at the heart of the Alliance, with the expectation that in the case of a Russian attack Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty would be invoked thus bringing the full power of the Alliance to their defense. That is the basic promise of deterrence by punishment. The current war in Ukraine, however, shows that should the threat of deterrence by punishment fail, even if military victory is

ultimately achieved, the cost to the victim country can be catastrophic in terms of human lives, economic infrastructure, and cultural heritage.<sup>4</sup> During whatever period of time it would take Allied forces to defeat and repel a Russian invasion of the Baltics, the damage done would be devastating. Punishing the perpetrator may be too late for the victim.

To mitigate this risk Baltic leaders and others along the northern and eastern flanks have helped move NATO military thinking toward a more forward posture built upon the Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups to be upscaled to full combat-ready brigades if, "where and when required."<sup>5</sup> According to Latvian Minister of Defense Ināra Mūrniece though NATO is now committed to "defending all NATO territory from the very first centimeters and the very first seconds of a potential conflict," she adds "We need a more robust military presence on the eastern flank of NATO."<sup>6</sup> To further strengthen the Baltic defensive wall NATO could consider posting full brigades in their entirety to each of the three countries. In addition, NATO might pre-deploy more key weapons into these three states to reduce the time for reservists to fall in on their weapons. This would also help with mobility challenges (moving weapons forward) in times of crisis. For their part Baltic leaders are fully committed to robust though costly host nation support. Through these measures the Baltic states will be able to deny Russia the possibility of a quick military fait accompli that leaves it in possession of significant strategic gains.

Preparations for total or comprehensive defense throughout the region are being supplemented by enhanced regional collaboration, including joint planning, exercises, and procurement to take advantage of economies of scale. Along with Enhanced Forward Presence, the regional defense plans agreed at the recent NATO summit in Vilnius will further integrate the Baltic region into the NATO defense architecture.<sup>7</sup> The new NATO force model (with

regional strategies and specific requirements for each NATO nation), improving upon the NATO Response Force, “will resource and modernize the NATO Force Structure,” “will ensure reinforcement of any Ally on short notice,” and will “help to prevent any aggression against NATO territory by denying any potential adversary success in meeting its objectives.”<sup>8</sup>

Each of the Baltic states has taken a firm stance in support of Ukraine. Latvian Defense Minister Mūrniece says, “that Ukraine must win this war with Russia, and that Russia must suffer a strategic defeat. Without those two conditions there will be no peace in our part of the world.” According to Lithuanian Minister of Defense Arvydas Anušauskas Russia’s war against Ukraine “is a way of testing whether democracies will defend themselves.”<sup>9</sup> Estonian Defense Minister Pevkur says, “people must be held accountable for these criminal acts and the war crimes that have been committed,” and “When Putin goes to any country that is a member of the ICC they must accept the decision of the ICC and bring Putin under ICC jurisdiction.”

The Baltic states are making important efforts to adapt to threats not seen since the height of the Cold War. With Finland’s recent accession to NATO and Sweden’s accession imminent northern Europe will present Russia with daunting strategic choices. Other Allied and partner states and regions should carefully examine this strategic adaptation with an eye to their own security, stability, and sovereignty. These small states are hitting significantly above their weight class and setting standards for defense readiness that are worthy of emulation. Their collective prescience in recognizing the Russian threat early-on, and their resolute commitment to enhancing collective defense through building resilience, preparing for resistance, and intensive collaboration have transformed their region arguably into NATO’s new center of gravity. PRISM

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> International Security and Estonia 2023, Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, February 8, 2023, Tallinn, Estonia, <<https://raport.valisluureamet.ee/2023/en/>>.

<sup>2</sup> See interview with Estonian Minister of Defense Hanno Pevkur in this issue of PRISM.

<sup>3</sup> PRISM V.10,N.2, National Defense University Press, March 2023, Washington, D.C., <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/PRISM/PRISM-10-2/>>.

<sup>4</sup> Updated Ukraine Recovery and Reconstruction Needs Assessment, The World Bank, March 23, 2023, Washington, D.C., <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/03/23/updated-ukraine-recovery-and-reconstruction-needs-assessment>>.

<sup>5</sup> Madrid Summit Declaration, NATO, June 29, 2022, Madrid, Spain, <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_196951.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm)>.

<sup>6</sup> See interview with Latvian Minister of Defense Ināra Mūrniece in this issue of PRISM.

<sup>7</sup> Vilnius Summit Communique, NATO, July 11, 2023, Vilnius, Lithuania, <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_217320.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm)>.

<sup>8</sup> Madrid Summit Declaration, NATO, June 29, 2022, Madrid, Spain, <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_196951.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm)>.

<sup>9</sup> See interview with Lithuanian Minister of Defense Arvydas Anušauskas in this issue of PRISM.