

DANIĒLS KAULIŅŠ

THE RETURN OF THE DANISH AND SWEDISH ARMED FORCES TO THE BALTIC STATES



Center for
Geopolitical
Studies
Riga

327(474.3)
Ka883



The Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga is an independent research think-tank that is based in Latvia. It focuses on security dilemmas and geopolitical rivalries in the Baltic Sea region and beyond.

The Return of the Danish and Swedish Armed Forces to the Baltic States

This paper highlights the often-overlooked roles of Denmark and Sweden in bolstering the security of the Baltic States, particularly Latvia. Both countries have made significant contributions to establishing the armed forces of the Baltic States following their independence from the Soviet Union. Among various recent defence initiatives, Denmark was one of the first to actively engage in NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission and enhanced Forward Presence in Estonia and subsequently in Latvia. With Sweden's recent accession to NATO and the deployment of troops to Latvia, this study examines Danish and Swedish contributions to the defence of the Baltic States since the 1990s while also looking ahead to the future.

February 2025

Author: Daniels Kauliņš

Reviewer: Māris Andžāns

Cover and layout design: Mikus Čavarts

This report was made possible by:



ISBN 978-9934-9244-9-1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
1. Swedish and Danish Support for the Baltic States' Euro-Atlantic Integration.....	5
2. Role of Sweden and Denmark in Rebuilding the Baltic Armed Forces	12
3. Evolving Security Architecture of the Baltic Sea Region ...	20
4. Return of Swedish and Danish Soldiers to the Baltic States.....	28
5. Future Prospects for the Danish and Swedish Militaries' Role in the Baltics	39
Conclusion.....	50
Author Information	52

INTRODUCTION

The prolonged historical involvement of Sweden and Denmark in the Baltic Sea region have fostered deep connections with the Baltic States. This proved particularly crucial after the fall of the Soviet Union when Sweden and Denmark supported the Baltic States' accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Much of this support centred on the re-establishment of the Baltic States' national defence capabilities. Since then, support for close military collaboration between the Baltic States, Sweden and Denmark has only grown.

This cooperation has persisted through various phases of the security environment in the Baltic Sea region and is now stronger than ever. Denmark was among the first countries to participate in NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission and later joined NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP). The return of Swedish troops to the Baltic States in 2025 signifies another milestone in ending Sweden's neutrality. This shift, alongside Denmark's increasing involvement in regional security, presents a historic opportunity to bolster cooperation among the region's military forces.

Although cooperation over the past three decades has become increasingly extensive, there remains potential for further development. Denmark, Sweden, and the Baltic States have differed in their perceptions of the Russian threat in the region. However, Denmark and Sweden's geopolitical roles in Baltic

security – rooted in Cold War dynamics – have remained pivotal. Today, threat perceptions are more unified than ever, and the presence of Danish and Swedish soldiers in the Baltic States signifies the start of a new, strengthened collaboration between the Nordic and Baltic nations. The deployment of Danish and Swedish soldiers to NATO's eFP battlegroups in the Baltic States exemplifies the interconnectedness of Baltic-Nordic security.

1. SWEDISH AND DANISH SUPPORT FOR THE BALTIC STATES' EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

The end of the Cold War resulted in reduced attention to the Arctic and the Baltic Sea region. The Baltic States' efforts to reclaim independence and integrate into the Western-led international economic and security framework were frequently met with Western scepticism, stemming from concerns about provoking Russia. Notably, the Nordic countries, especially Denmark and Sweden, gradually focused considerable attention on the three small Baltic nations. From their perspective, it would have posed significant uncertainties and threats had the Baltic States remained in a "grey area."

Denmark's experience during World War II fostered strong support for NATO in the following decades. However, during the Cold War, it was believed that Sweden's accession to NATO or a deeper integration of Denmark and Norway into the Western military posture would have elevated Finland's strategic importance to the Soviet Union, potentially triggering escalation. Moreover, there was a robust desire, particularly in Sweden, to avoid "becoming a battlefield," especially during the initial stages of a potential nuclear war. These considerations led the Nordic

countries to maintain varying degrees of neutrality in their identities throughout the Cold War.¹

On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Denmark maintained strong emotional ties with the Baltic States. Denmark's then-Foreign Minister, Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, expressed hope as early as September 1990, in his address to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, that the Baltic States would soon be able to participate fully in international cooperation. Historical parallels between Denmark and the Baltic States' occupations in 1940 were crucial in fostering societal sympathy and support within Denmark for the Baltic States, even as the international community remained cautious.² For Denmark, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the independence of the Baltic States presented a new potential western border from which it could address and mitigate future challenges.

Similarly, there was significant support for Baltic independence in Sweden. In the early 1990s, Swedes organised the so-called Monday Meetings in the heart of Stockholm, which brought together politicians, notable public figures, and Baltic exiles. This support also spread to other cities. Over 76 consecutive weeks (from 19 March 1990 to 16 September 1991), demonstrations in approximately 50 towns reflected broad backing for Sweden's political and practical assistance in supporting the Baltic nations' independence.³

Sweden was also one of the first countries to re-establish diplomatic relations with the Baltic States, opening embassies shortly

¹ Dalsjö, R. (2014). *"The Hidden Rationality of Sweden's Policy of Neutrality during the Cold War."* Cold War History. 175-177.

² Kļaviņš, D. (2016). *"The Role of Denmark in the Renewal of Latvian Independence."* Embassy of Denmark to Latvia. https://www.liia.lv/upload/content/klavins_lowres_eng.pdf. 5-8.

³ Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *"30 years of restored Swedish-Baltic relations: making the strong bond even stronger."* <https://www.urm.lt/en/news/928/30-years-of-restored-swedish-baltic-relations-making-the-strong-bond-even-stronger:34727>



On 18 November 1996, Latvian soldiers celebrated Latvia's Independence Day while serving in the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Photo: Jānis Ovsjankovs. Source: Latvian War Museum.

after they regained independence. Furthermore, Sweden's then-Prime Minister, Carl Bildt, played a personal role in negotiations between the Baltic States and Russia on the withdrawal of Russian troops,⁴ which was completed by August 1994.

While the Swedish government recognised the potential threat posed by Russia, it was considered highly unlikely, resulting in a significant reduction in military resources. This approach was accompanied by increased international cooperation and participation in global operations. The 1990s marked a growing Europeanisation process for Sweden, which shaped its defence policy, aligning it with the European trend towards civilian and

⁴ Bildt, C. (1994). "The Baltic Litmus Test: Revealing Russia's True Colors." <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/baltics/1994-09-01/baltic-litmus-test-revealing-russias-true-colors>

humanitarian crisis management priorities. In response to rising threats such as terrorism, organised crime, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, Sweden chose to prioritise quality over quantity in its defence strategy. This shift was further emphasised by the abolition of conscription in 2010. Similarly, Denmark focused on expeditionary capacity and maintained high-readiness forces, emphasising airlift capability, fighter aircraft and submarines.⁵

During the Baltic struggle for independence, any support for the Baltic States from Sweden and Denmark provoked a negative reaction from Russia. When Denmark signed an interstate cooperation agreement with Latvia on 11 March 1991, which referenced the recognition of Latvia's independence, Russia's then-Deputy Foreign Minister, Yuli Kvitsinsky, delivered a protest note to Denmark's ambassador in Moscow.⁶

Despite Russian opposition, the Nordic countries demonstrated significant interest in bolstering the Baltic States by providing comprehensive political and military support. The groundwork for cooperation was established as early as 1989 when the Nordic Council first engaged with Baltic parliamentarians. This was further solidified in November 1991 when cooperation was officially initiated, as evidenced by the Nordic Council's attendance at the inaugural meeting of the Baltic Assembly in Tallinn.

In 1992, the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) was formalised through a cooperation agreement between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly. Since then, this platform has served as a framework for foreign policy and security dialogue among the eight Nordic-Baltic countries. The NB8 framework enabled the Nordic

⁵ Edström, H., Gyllensporre, D., Westberg, J. (2019). *Military Strategy of Small States: Responding to External Shocks of the 21st Century*. 1st ed. vol. 1. Oxford: Routledge. 75.

⁶ Kļaviņš, D. (2016). *The Role of Denmark in the Renewal of Latvian Independence*. Embassy of Denmark, Latvia. https://www.liia.lv/upload/content/klavins_lowres_eng.pdf. 8-9.

and Baltic States to engage in joint crisis management and defence exercises. Kęstutis Paulauskas notes that this framework has strengthened defence ties between the Nordic and Baltic regions. Sweden, Denmark, and Finland each took on specific roles in supporting the Baltic States' growing militaries: Sweden focused on Latvia, Denmark assisted Lithuania, and Finland provided expertise to Estonia. Consequently, the Swedish and Finnish concepts of total defence and self-sufficiency served as inspiration for the defence development plans of the Baltic States throughout the 1990s.⁷

In 1994, Sweden and Finland publicly strengthened their relations with NATO by signing the Partnership for Peace programme. The following year, both countries joined the EU. Meanwhile, Denmark, as a NATO member, emerged as one of the strongest advocates for deeper integration of the Baltic States into the alliance. Notably, non-NATO Nordic countries such as Sweden and Finland also contributed to this effort.

At the same time, relations between Russia and NATO were significantly normalised. This mutual understanding was advanced by establishing a permanent joint council in 1997. Within this framework, Russia and NATO committed to enhancing cooperation and security. A key provision in the founding act of the Russia-NATO Council emphasised both parties' commitment not to deploy permanent and substantial forces near each other's borders.⁸

NATO enlargement gained momentum following the events of 11 September 2001, when the United States (US) emphasised the need to "finish the job" on enlargement to enable a focus on

⁷ Paulauskas, K. (2013). *"The Baltic Quest to the West: From Total Defence to 'Smart Defence' (and Back?)"* 55-56.

⁸ NATO. (1997). *"Founding Act."* https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm

emerging challenges in the Middle East.⁹ This also contributed to Russia's relatively accommodating position on Baltic accession, as Russia aimed to collaborate with the US in tackling emerging global threats.

For both Sweden and Denmark, the EU's eastward expansion in 2004 was regarded as a victory for European unity and stability. While Sweden was not a NATO member, it welcomed NATO's expansion into these countries, believing it would enhance collective security in Europe and contribute to a stable post-Cold War environment. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Baltic States in both NATO and the EU paved the way for improved cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic regions through the NB8 framework.

If the Baltic States had not joined the EU and NATO, their fate might have suffered the same destruction that Russia now seeks to impose upon Ukraine. Conversely, the Baltic States' accession to NATO and the EU revitalised and even strengthened the Nordic geopolitical role in a potential NATO-Russia confrontation scenario over the Baltic Sea. This role was evident even during the Cold War when NATO's conventional forces were inadequate to counter the Soviet numerical advantage in Central Europe. Sweden's location provided crucial flight routes, enabling, for example, Norwegian tactical bombers to bypass heavily fortified Soviet defences and thereby minimise losses in the event of military action.¹⁰

Since Sweden and Finland joined NATO, one could argue that the adaptation of regional security to the Russian threat has truly begun to take the correct course. The air and land routes through Sweden and Finland are pivotal for NATO's reinforcement logistics to the Baltic States, especially given the heavy

⁹ Dahl, A., Järvenpää, P. (2014). *Northern Security and Global Politics: Nordic-Baltic Strategic Influence in a Post-Unipolar World.* 1st ed. Routledge. 76.

¹⁰ Dalsjö, R. (2014). *The Hidden Rationality of Sweden's Policy of Neutrality during the Cold War.* Cold War History. 185.

reliance on the Suwałki Gap, which remains susceptible to disruption. Consequently, the strategic value of Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO, along with their enhanced role in the defence of the Baltic States, lies less in their military capabilities and more in their geographical positioning.

2. ROLE OF SWEDEN AND DENMARK IN REBUILDING THE BALTIC ARMED FORCES

The re-establishment of the Baltic States' armed forces would have been a far more difficult and prolonged process without external support. While numerous Western countries have aided in this process, Sweden and Denmark warrant special recognition for their significant role in fostering collaboration when increased involvement from other Western nations in the region was feared due to potential escalation from Russia. Their efforts to assist in rebuilding the Baltic States' armed forces from the ground up contributed to shaping their current military cultures and laid the groundwork for future cooperation.

The trilateral military cooperation model truly began with the launch of the Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT) in 1995. The Battalion was established through a memorandum signed in Visby, Sweden, between the Baltic and Nordic countries. Denmark led the project, managing both the steering and military working groups. One of the Baltics' closest allies, the United Kingdom (UK), was prepared to take a leading role in the Baltic States' forthcoming project; however, such a move would have likely escalated tensions between Russia and the West. Consequently, the assistance provided to the Baltic States' military forces in developing peacekeeping

capabilities with the Nordic countries was more acceptable to Russia.¹¹

This initiative revitalised the Baltic armed forces, which were subsequently prepared to participate in several peacekeeping operations. Approximately 1,200¹² soldiers from BALTBAT were deployed to Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of a Danish contingent supporting NATO's Implementation Force (IFOR) and Stabilisation Force (SFOR) missions, as well as alongside Norwegian peacekeeping forces in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) mission. Denmark not only served as the framework nation for the Baltic States' forces within the operation but also contributed to their training and preparation during the pre-mission period.¹³ Notably, at the time, Sweden also took part in this NATO-led military operation. Throughout the initiative, all the Baltic States enhanced their cooperation and integrated Western practices. Furthermore, the Baltic States' early participation in international operations enabled them to emerge on the global stage as "both producers and consumers of security."¹⁴

Due to a lack of political willingness and insufficient funding, BALTBAT never deployed its full battalion on any international mission during its eight years of existence. The project also suffered from a shortage of human resources, and in 2003, the Battalion was formally disbanded. Another frequently cited reason for disbanding the initiative was the Baltic States' accession to NATO.

¹¹ Dilāns, A. (2015). "Baltijas miera uzturēšanas spēku bataljonam 20 gadi: ieguvumi no šī projekta." Sargs.lv. <https://www.sargs.lv/lv/musdienu-ves-ture/2015-02-10/baltijas-miera-uzturesanas-speku-bataljonam-20-gadi-ieguvumi-no-si>

¹² Ito, P. (2013). "Baltic Military Cooperative Projects: a Record of Success." In: Apprenticeship, Partnership, Membership: Twenty Years of Defence Development in the Baltic States, eds. T. Lawrence, T. Jermalavičius. Tallinn: International Centre for Defence Studies. 269.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁴ Asmus, R. D., Nurick, R. (1995). "NATO Enlargement and the Baltic States." RAND. 131.

Throughout its existence, the initiative provided the Baltic States with the opportunity to westernise their armed forces and expand cooperation with technical and financial support.¹⁵

Military exercises in collaboration with the Danish and Swedish armed forces also contributed to the knowledge and skills of Baltic States' soldiers, who, over the following years, passed on their expertise to their subordinates. The exercises included both pre-mission periods within the framework of BALTBAT and general exercises both in Sweden and Denmark. For instance, the Baltic States were invited to participate in the annual Nordic Peace 1998 exercise held on the island of Gotland, Sweden.¹⁶

Several weapons systems that Baltic troops became familiar with in the 1990s and early 2000s were later acquired and are still in use by their armed forces today. For instance, the Baltic States widely introduced infantry weaponry, such as the Swedish-made AK-4 and the still widely used recoilless rifle Carl Gustaf. Over time, the Latvian Land Forces also acquired Swedish-made military vehicles, such as the tracked articulated Bandvagn 206. A large portion of the deliveries consisted of outdated equipment, which was not suitable for warfighting. However, it made a significant contribution, as the Baltic States did not even possess the necessary equipment to train their own personnel.¹⁷

With assistance from Sweden and Germany, Latvia's newly established Naval Forces in 1992 expanded, acquiring eight coast

¹⁵ Andžāns, M., Kažociņš, J. (2024). *Three Decades of Baltic Military Cooperation and the Way Ahead.* Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga. <https://www.geopolitics.center/outputs/three-decades-of-baltic-military-cooperation-and-the-way-ahead>. 15-16.

¹⁶ Von Sydow, B. (1999). *Sweden's Security in the 21st Century.* The Ministry of Defence in Sweden. 16.

¹⁷ Latvijas Vēstnesis. (2000). *Drošāki ar Zviedrijas militāro palīdzību.* <https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/11812>



A group of Latvian soldiers from the BALTBAT Latvian company on a Swedish Army Sisu XA-180 armoured personnel carrier. The soldiers wear Swedish Army field uniforms featuring a "Latvia" patch and the Latvian flag on their left sleeve. Some of the soldiers don the BALTBAT Latvian company's distinctive black berets. They are equipped with Swedish AK-5 assault rifles and the Swedish-made Carl Gustav M3 84mm anti-tank grenade launcher.

Photo: Jānis Ovsjankovs. Source: Latvian War Museum.

guard vessels and boats, as well as two special-purpose vessels.¹⁸ Furthermore, in the late 1990s, Latvia received 18 L70 anti-aircraft guns from Sweden, and in the early 2000s, Latvia received additional equipment for its Air Defence Battalion, including air defence weapons such as AAA-48, radars like PS-70 and a fire

¹⁸ Hartmanis, J. (2019). *"Latvijas Republikas Nacionālie Bruņotie Spēki: 1991–1994–2019."* Rīga: Latvijas Republikas Aizsardzības ministrijas Nacionālo bruņoto spēku Apvienotais štābs. 156.

control system CIG-790.¹⁹ In 2003, Latvia acquired the RBS-70 air defence system.²⁰ This is merely a sample of the wide array of Nordic weapons that have arrived in the Baltic States over the past three decades. Simultaneously, Sweden actively supported the Baltic States in mine-hunting operations, including those in Latvia's territorial waters.²¹

Among the various initiatives in trilateral cooperation between the Baltic States, Sweden played a crucial role in establishing the Baltic Defence College (BALTDEFCOL), founded in 1999 in Tartu, Estonia. Sweden was the primary external contributor to this project. Additionally, Denmark's involvement can be traced through its Commandant, Michael Clemmesen, who ran the College and remained a commandant until the Baltics joined NATO.²²

BALTDEFCOL played a crucial role in preparing the new officers of the steadily expanding Baltic armed forces. At the start of the initiative, these officers were prepared with assistance from Western countries, often at little or no cost to the Baltic States.²³ The project became the primary contributor to the education of armed forces and civil servants in the Baltic States, with which the Baltics remain mutually dependent to this day.

¹⁹ Latvian National Armed Forces. "Pretgaisa aizsardzības divizionā vesture." <https://www.mil.lv/lv/vienibas/gaisa-speki/gaisa-speku-vesture/pretgaisa-aizsardzibas-divizionā-vesture>

²⁰ Bērziņa, I., Krūmiņš, G., Pleps, J., Siliņš, J. (2022). "Latvijas valsts ideja un aizsardzība: no dibināšanas līdz mūsdienām." https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/Latvijas%20valsts%20ideja%20un%20aizsardz%C4%ABba%20no%20dibin%C4%81%C5%A1anas%20l%C4%ABdz%20m%C5%ABdien%C4%81m_1.pdf. 202.

²¹ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2005). "Latvijas Republikas Aizsardzības ministrijas 2005. gada publiskais pārskats." https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/2004_gadaparskats_0.pdf. 21.

²² Andžāns, M., Kažociņš, J. (2024). "Three Decades of Baltic Military Cooperation and the Way Ahead." Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga. <https://www.geopolitics.center/outputs/three-decades-of-baltic-military-cooperation-and-the-way-ahead>. 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 22.

Māris Andžāns and Jānis Kažociņš, in their study on trilateral cooperation among the Baltic States, conclude that BALTDEFCOL could be one of the most successful initiatives in Baltic military collaboration. It has strengthened the mutual connections between Baltic officers, civil servants, and experts, which could play a significant role in times of uncertainty.²⁴

In 1999, Latvia and Sweden signed a cooperation agreement under the joint project for setting up a registration and management system for persons subject to military service (BALTPERS). This project was initiated in 1966 and co-funded by Sweden, which provided significant funding to establish a system for managing and organising personnel structures during both peacetime and wartime. Estonia and Lithuania later joined the agreement. The project was completed in 2002.²⁵

At the start of the 21st century, Sweden continued to provide Latvia with training and military-technical assistance and even helped restore military base infrastructure at the largest armed forces base in Ādaži.²⁶ Additionally, other Nordic countries supported the Baltic States. For instance, Finland substantially assisted Estonia in enhancing its border control and air defence capabilities.²⁷

In a similar manner to Sweden, Denmark also contributed to the training of Latvian officers by providing educational

²⁴ Andžāns, M., Kažociņš, J. (2024). *Three Decades of Baltic Military Cooperation and the Way Ahead.* Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga. <https://www.geopolitics.center/outputs/three-decades-of-baltic-military-cooperation-and-the-way-ahead>. 23.

²⁵ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2004). *PĀRSKATS PAR VALSTS AIZSARDZĪBAS POLITIKU UN NACIONĀLO BRUŅOTO SPĒKU ATTĪSTĪBU.* https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/2003_gadaparskats.pdf. 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁷ Nurick, R., Nordenman, M. (2011). *Nordic-Baltic Security in the 21st Century: The Regional Agenda and the Global Role.* <https://atlantkommitten.se/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Karlisnordiska.pdf>. 4.

opportunities at Denmark's Naval and Air Force military academies, as well as offering advice on establishing an instructor training centre for the Latvian Armed Forces.²⁸ Since the year 2000, a representative from the Danish Armed Forces served as an advisor in the Strategic Planning Department of the Latvian National Armed Forces Headquarters.

In bilateral cooperation with Denmark, between 2004 and 2010, Latvia, along with the other Baltic States, laid the groundwork for establishing brigade-level units under the so-called Brigade Project. The Danish Advisory and Training Staff were stationed in Riga, and their primary task was to contribute to the military capacity building of the Baltic States.²⁹ In Latvia, the Mechanised Infantry Brigade, which at that time was still an infantry brigade, has since become the central fighting force of the National Armed Forces. In collaboration with representatives from Denmark and BALTEFCOL, a doctrine for the land forces of the Baltic States was also established during this period.³⁰

With the restoration of independence in the Baltic States, National Guard units were established in each country, primarily tasked with maintaining internal security. These units, akin to the Home Guard in Denmark and Sweden, were formed on a voluntary basis, offering opportunities for individuals, including those conscripted for mandatory military service, to serve.

Cooperation between Denmark's and Sweden's Home Guard and the Baltic States' volunteer military units began in the 1990s

²⁸ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2003). *"Latvijas Republikas Aizsardzības ministrijas 2002. gada publiskais pārskats."* https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/2002_gadaparskats.pdf. 19.

²⁹ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2004). *"PĀRSKATS PAR VALSTS AIZSARDZĪBAS POLITIKU UN NACIONĀLO BRUNOTO SPĒKU ATTĪSTĪBU."* https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/2003_gadaparskats.pdf. 53.

³⁰ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2006). *"Latvijas Republikas Aizsardzības ministrijas 2005. gada publiskais pārskats."* https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/2005_gadaparskats.pdf. 22.

but became more comprehensive and robust in the 2000s. In 2015, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania signed the Policy Guidance, which established the priorities for this collaboration. Currently, cooperation between these force structures focuses on capacity building, organisational development, education, training, and exercises in both Denmark and the Baltic States. Similar cooperation can also be observed between Sweden and the Baltic States. In 2024, for example, Latvian soldiers, including some wearing Latvian National Guard badges, participated in training at Sweden's Jaeger Medical School (K3) in Karlsborg. The course, led by Sweden as a NATO member state, aimed at enhancing Latvia's medical support capabilities by training personnel to deliver ROLE-1 and ROLE-2 level medical assistance under diverse conditions.³¹

Denmark and Sweden played a significant role in the development of the Baltic States' armed forces and defence strategies. The similar climatic conditions shared by these countries have enabled the Baltic States to cultivate new military capabilities from the ground up in an environment well suited to their needs. Moreover, the equipment and vehicles acquired over time have been appropriately suited to the topographical features of the Baltic region. For these reasons, Denmark and Sweden's ongoing involvement in Baltic security, as well as tight coordination between their military forces, may seem a natural progression during the next two decades.

³¹ Latvian National Armed Forces. (2024). *"Military Exercises."* <https://www.mil.lv/en/military-training>

3. EVOLVING SECURITY ARCHITECTURE OF THE BALTIC SEA REGION

Following NATO's 2004 enlargement with seven new members, including the three Baltic States, a period of euphoria over the achievement of strategic goals became apparent. In the Baltic States, as well as in Sweden and Denmark, security threats to the region no longer appeared to be a notable concern. However, the increasing strategic importance of the Baltic Sea, coupled with the rising relevance of the Arctic and Russia's revisionist actions in 2008 and 2014, garnered renewed attention. The stability in the region, which had seemingly persisted even during the Cold War, gradually deteriorated. Until 2022, the relevance of Russia's threat remained a topic of debate due to ongoing uncertainties. Regional security became the top priority in the Baltic States and Nordic countries only after decades of strategic neglect towards Russia and its decision to commence a full-scale war in Ukraine.

In the early 2000s, conflicts in the Middle East and US-led interventions significantly transformed both the demand for certain military capabilities and the relationships within NATO. Sweden distanced itself from US-led military interventions, reaffirming its neutrality and a preference for multilateral diplomatic solutions. At that time, Sweden, unlike Denmark, regarded the EU as

a crucial platform for ensuring security. Sweden was committed to EU integration in foreign and defence policy (Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP), perceiving the EU as a mechanism to promote stability in the Baltic Sea region and beyond.

At the same time, Denmark, in contrast to Sweden, grounded its security and defence policy on a strong belief in the North Atlantic Alliance as the key component of Europe's security architecture. Denmark remained outside the EU's CSDP until 2022, which precluded Danish participation in the EU's military affairs.³²

For the Baltic States, the interventions in the Middle East presented an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to their Allies. Although the success of operations in Afghanistan and the legitimacy of the *casus belli* for the second invasion of Iraq have been widely debated, the Baltic States gained invaluable experience and solidified ties with NATO units from other nations. Through sacrifices, including the loss of soldiers' lives, these efforts reinforced transatlantic ties and enabled the armed forces to develop lasting capabilities, such as Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) training.

With a significant reduction in Sweden's armed forces after the Cold War, the renewal of defence equipment and conscription were halted. Defence spending decreased from 2.8% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 1988 to 1.1% in 2019, according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) calculations.³³ This highlighted the overall trend of the Swedish government in reducing its threat assessment. Similarly, Denmark perceived that following Germany's reunification, there appeared

³² Parliament of Denmark. (2022). *"The Danish opt-outs from EU cooperation."* <https://www.thedanishparliament.dk/en/eu-information-centre/the-danish-opt-outs-from-eu-cooperation>

³³ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (2020). *"Military expenditure by country as percentage of gross domestic product, 1988-2019."* <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932019%20as%20a%20share%20of%20GDP.pdf>. 6-13.

to be little reason to sustain robust conventional armed forces. Consequently, Denmark significantly reduced its defence spending, decreasing it from 2.1% of GDP in 1988 to 1.3% in 2019.³⁴ In both countries, the focus shifted towards developing expeditionary forces for crisis management overseas. Similar trends are observable in the Baltic States. Today, the consequences of these decisions are backfiring, as seen in concerns regarding their readiness to deter Russia's ambitions.

Eventually, Sweden continued to move away from its policy of neutrality. The 2004 security strategy explicitly stated: "It is hard to imagine that Sweden would remain neutral in the event of an armed attack against another EU member state."³⁵ Although this shift began during the Cold War, when Sweden recognised that neutrality alone might not deter Soviet aggression, it was never publicly acknowledged. During this period, Sweden secretly collaborated with Denmark, Norway, and the US, discreetly preparing its military for cooperation with Western powers in the event of conflict and maintaining covert intelligence-sharing agreements.³⁶ During the 2000s, Sweden's security policy evolved into what Swedish experts have defined as a policy of solidarity. In practice, this meant that Sweden, much like during the Cold War, prepared its armed forces to provide and receive military assistance.³⁷

³⁴ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (2020). "Military expenditure by country as percentage of gross domestic product, 1988-2019." <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932019%20as%20a%20share%20of%20GDP.pdf>. 6-13.

³⁵ Gotkowska, J. (2013). "Sitting on the Fence: Swedish Defence Policy and the Baltic Sea Region." Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW). https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/163820/PW_33_Szwecja_ANG_net.pdf. 13.

³⁶ Dalsjö, R. (2014). "The Hidden Rationality of Sweden's Policy of Neutrality during the Cold War." *Cold War History*. 176.

³⁷ Westberg, J. (2016). "Säkerhet utan alliansfrihet. Svenska alliansstrategiers teori och praktik, *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift*." 412-413.



An infantry platoon from the Latvian National Guard (Zemessardze) 4th Brigade, integrated into a Danish Armed Forces company, undertook defence tasks during the "Northern Strike" exercises in the United States from 27 July to 14 August 2017.

Photo: H el ene Mogensen de Monl eon. Source: Latvian Ministry of Defence.³⁸

In 2009, the Nordic countries established the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) with the aim of coordinating defence planning and cost-effective procurement among the five Nordic nations. Sweden's and Finland's increasing cooperation with NATO partners, including Norway and Denmark, facilitated their rapprochement with the Alliance. However, the framework did not introduce any mutual obligations for collective defence.³⁹

³⁸ Latvian National Armed Forces. (2017). "Latvijas zemessargi ASV tren ejas kop a ar D anijas rotu." https://www.flickr.com/photos/latvijas_armija/36301267516

³⁹ Petersson, M. (2018). "The Allied Partner: Sweden and NATO through the Realist-Idealist Lens in The European Neutrals and NATO - Non-alignment, Partnership, Membership?" ed., A. Cottey, in *New Security Challenges*, series ed., G. Christou. 87.

For over a decade, deeper cooperation between the Baltic States and NORDEFECO was obstructed by diverging threat perceptions regarding Russia.⁴⁰ Finland's reluctance to seek deeper military integration with the Baltic States until 2022 arose from its historically neutral relations with Russia, following decades of "Finlandization" policy.

Over time, the underestimation of threats and neglect of military capabilities led to a shock for Swedish society in 2013, when two Russian Tu-22M3 bombers simulated strikes on targets in southern Sweden and near Stockholm. The Russian warplanes could be intercepted only with the support of Danish F-16 jets from a Lithuanian air base.⁴¹ Later, in October 2014, what was believed to be a Russian submarine (based on various clues, including an intercepted distress signal, historical precedents, and credible civilian sightings) entered the Stockholm archipelago, evoking a sense reminiscent of the Cold War when the Soviet Navy conducted a series of aggressive submarine operations in Sweden's coastal waters. Despite a week-long search involving naval vessels, aircraft, and ground forces, Sweden could not ascertain the precise nature or origin of the underwater presence activity.⁴² Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia heightened tensions in Eastern Europe, prompting a strategic wake-up call.

The evolving security situation prompted Sweden to re-establish a military presence on Gotland. Following military exercises

⁴⁰ Vanaga, N. (2016). *"Baltic Military Cooperation: Seeking a Common Response."* Strategic Review No 11. National Defence Academy of Latvia, Center for Security and Strategic Research. https://www.naa.mil.lv/sites/naa/files/document/SA_11_BS.pdf. 3

⁴¹ The Copenhagen Post. (2013). *"Danish F-16s Confronted Russian Fighter Jets Approaching Sweden."* <https://cphpost.dk/2013-04-23/general/danish-f-16s-confronted-russian-fighter-jets-approaching-sweden/>

⁴² Groll, E. (2014). *"Surprise! That Russian Submarine in Stockholm Got Away From the Swedish Navy."* Foreign Policy (blog). <https://foreign-policy.com/2014/10/24/surprise-that-russian-submarine-in-stockholm-got-away-from-the-swedish-navy/>

in 2015, the Supreme Commander of Sweden's Armed Forces ordered a rifle battalion of 150 troops to remain on the island permanently. This decision was noteworthy because Gotland was demilitarized in 2005.⁴³ Sweden focused on national anti-invasion defence, rearmament, and reinstating conscription as part of the Hultqvist Doctrine, which was in effect at the time.

From the perspective of the Baltic States, it was evident that if Russia were to initiate any aggression towards NATO territory, the territories and infrastructure of Sweden and Finland could play a crucial strategic role in the Alliance's response. Recognising this, Estonia identified as early as 2016 that Sweden and Finland might be included on Russia's target list despite their non-NATO status.⁴⁴ Although this perspective has always been present, particularly in light of the historical experience of the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939, Russia's readiness to challenge NATO and pose threats to the strategically significant territories of Finland and Sweden was not always fully understood.

Denmark's geographical location also contributes to its strategic importance. The 2018 Danish Defence Agreement recognised that Denmark's position at the gateway to the Baltic Sea would play a vital role in NATO operations within the Baltic Sea region. While Denmark may not become the next battlefield in a potential confrontation, "Danish Defence plays a crucial role in protecting [Danish] security, including in a crisis where the majority of Danish troops are deployed abroad, and NATO reinforcements need to use Denmark as a staging area."⁴⁵ Moreover,

⁴³ Sveriges Radio. (2016). "Permanent Troops Now in Force on Gotland." Radio Sweden. <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/6516454>

⁴⁴ Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service. (2016). "International Security and Estonia." <https://www.valisluureamet.ee/doc/raport/2016-en.pdf>. 16.

⁴⁵ Danish Ministry of Defence. (2018). "DEFENCE AGREEMENT 2018 – 2023." <https://www.fmn.dk/globalassets/fmn/dokumenter/forlig/-danish-defence-agreement-2018-2023-pdf-a-2018.pdf>. 3.

Denmark's control of the Baltic Sea's exit offers a significant strategic advantage in the region. From a broader European standpoint, Greenland is critically important as it is the shortest route for American reinforcements to arrive in Europe. Like Denmark, Sweden encounters a minimal risk of ground invasion, with the only potential threat originating from the north through Finland. Therefore, Sweden must ready its military for operations in that region.

Since Sweden joined NATO, Göteborg has the potential to become one of the most significant ports in the region. Its strategic location now positions it as a hub and custodian for two major operational theatres: the High North and the Baltic region.⁴⁶ Sweden's role in securing reinforcements for the Baltic States was previously evident in the US-led exercise "Defender Europe 2020." Although the exercise had to be scaled down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the scenario involved Sweden controlling the air and sea domains to facilitate the US military's deployment of forces from the Benelux region to Poland and the Baltic States.⁴⁷

Many observers may have found Russia's reaction to Finland and Sweden joining NATO unusually moderate. However, various acts of sabotage or provocations remain a significant threat that NATO member states must address collectively. This also calls for increased cooperation among regional partners. For over a year, Russia has intensified attacks on infrastructure linking the Baltic States with Finland and Sweden, highlighting the seabed as a new front in hybrid warfare. The sabotage of this critical infrastructure threatens to overload alternative routes, as satellite systems, while essential for communication, cannot match the capacity of

⁴⁶ Andžāns, M., Kažociņš, J. (2024). *Three Decades of Baltic Military Cooperation and the Way Ahead.* Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga. <https://www.geopolitics.center/outputs/three-decades-of-baltic-military-cooperation-and-the-way-ahead>. 46.

⁴⁷ Nikers, O., Tabuns, O. (2021). *Baltic Sea Security: Regional and Sectoral Perspectives.* Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation. 30-31.

undersea cables. Moreover, Russia has increasingly disrupted GPS signals in the Baltic Sea region, with severe incidents in late 2023 affecting southern Sweden, eastern Germany, and Poland and subsequent interruptions impacting maritime and aviation traffic. These developments underscore the need for comprehensive regional cooperation, including enhanced naval capabilities and advanced technological solutions like maritime drones.

4. RETURN OF SWEDISH AND DANISH SOLDIERS TO THE BALTIC STATES

Military cooperation between Sweden, Denmark, and Latvia, as well as other Baltic nations, has steadily grown over the past three decades and has been consistently reinforced through joint activities. With the deployment of NATO's Multinational Battlegroups in the Baltic States, the involvement of various allies in regional security has significantly increased. In Latvia, under Canada's leadership, the most multinational NATO military unit has been established, with 13 contributing nations.⁴⁸ Naturally, the expertise of the armed forces of the Baltic States has also grown significantly, and both Denmark and Sweden are now reaping the benefits of their increased daily participation in multinational exercises hosted by Latvia and the other Baltic States.

Denmark was among the first countries to take part as a leading nation in NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission over the Baltic States and has continued to supply equipment to the Latvian Naval Forces, including for communication and rescue operations.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Latvian Ministry of Defence. "NATO Multinational Brigade in Latvia." <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/nato/nato-capabilities/nato-multinational-brigade-latvia>

⁴⁹ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2005). "Latvijas Republikas Aizsardzības ministrijas 2004. gada publiskais pārskats." https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/2004_gadaparskats_0.pdf. 19.

Denmark's Air Force continued to actively contribute to the Baltic Air Policing mission, participating in nine rotations until 2022 with its F-16 fighter jets, operating from Ämari Air Base in Estonia and Šiauliai Air Base in Lithuania.⁵⁰ The Danish military contribution typically comprises four fighter aircraft,⁵¹ and the current plan is to further support the mission once the new F-35 jet fighters have been integrated into the Danish Air Force.⁵²

In the early 2000s, Sweden upheld its policy of non-alignment. During this time, it did not directly participate in NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission, although it contributed to enhancing air defence capabilities in the Baltic States by providing training in air defence operations.⁵³ In light of increasing Russian military activities in the Arctic and the Baltic Sea since 2008, there were growing incentives for deeper cooperation in the region's surveillance. In 2012, the Baltic States, along with Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, and Germany, signed a technical arrangement on Sea Surveillance Cooperation (SUCBAS).⁵⁴

In 2013, the Swedish Armed Forces contributed military assets, including air and naval forces, as well as personnel, to NATO's "Steadfast Jazz" exercise, which focused on a collective

⁵⁰ Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2023). "*Defence and Security.*" <https://estland.um.dk/en/denmark-and-estonia/menu-1>

⁵¹ Danish Ministry of Defence. "*Air Policing in the Baltic States.*" <https://www.fmn.dk/en/topics/operations/ongoing-operations/airpolicing/>

⁵² Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "*Defence Cooperation.*" <https://litauen.um.dk/en/about-us/defence-department>

⁵³ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2004). "*PĀRSKATS PAR VALSTS AIZSARDZĪBAS POLITIKU UN NACIONĀLO BRUŅOTO SPĒKU ATTĪSTĪBU.*" https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/2003_gadaparskats.pdf. 54.

⁵⁴ Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence. (2012). "*Sea Surveillance Cooperation Baltic Sea (SUCBAS).*" <https://kam.lt/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Techninis-susitarimas-del-juros-stebejimo-ir-bendradarbiavimo-Baltijos-juroje-operacines-fazes.pdf>. 2.

defence scenario involving a hypothetical Article 5 activation.⁵⁵ In 2014, Sweden formed an individual partnership with NATO, acquiring the status of an Enhanced Opportunities Partner (EOP), alongside Finland and other countries.⁵⁶ This resulted in enhanced cooperation between Sweden and NATO during various exercises, including air policing operations.⁵⁷

During this period, cooperation among the Baltic States was particularly significant. In 2009, the “Baltic Eagle” exercise was conducted at the Ādaži Military Base, bringing together the three Baltic nations. Representatives from Denmark were also involved, providing advisory and training support. Denmark’s participation was natural, given its historical role in the military training of the Baltic Land Forces. The exercise, which included around a thousand soldiers, evaluated readiness for the NATO Response Force (NRF).⁵⁸ This collaboration subsequently evolved into a collective contribution to the NRF in both 2010 and 2016.⁵⁹

In bilateral cooperation, Denmark supported Latvia’s Ministry of Defence in areas such as defence planning, personnel management and training, NATO’s Security Investment Programme, and other fields. In 2012, an agreement was reached for the affiliation of Latvia’s Land Forces Brigade with Denmark’s division, further

⁵⁵ NATO. (2013). “Sweden to join NATO Response Force and exercise Steadfast Jazz.” https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_104086.htm

⁵⁶ Swedish Government Offices. (2024). “Historical relations between Sweden and NATO.” <https://www.government.se/government-policy/sweden-in-nato/history-of-sweden-and-nato/>

⁵⁷ Swedish Armed Forces. (2014). “Baltic Region Training Event.” <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/sv/aktuellt/2014/04/baltic-region-training-event/>

⁵⁸ Lithuanian Armed Forces. (2009). “BALTBAT evaluation exercise began in Latvia.” <https://www.kariuomene.lt/en/newsevents/baltbat-evalutaion-exercise-began-in-latvia/1108>

⁵⁹ Andžāns, M., Kažociņš, J. (2024). “Three Decades of Baltic Military Cooperation and the Way Ahead.” Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga. <https://www.geopolitics.center/outputs/three-decades-of-baltic-military-cooperation-and-the-way-ahead.18>



Danish soldiers participated in the annual military parade on 18 November 2022, commemorating the 104th anniversary of the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia. Photo: Armins Janiks. Source: Latvian Ministry of Defence.⁶⁰

enhancing the exchange of experience and fostering mutual understanding contacts.⁶¹ Denmark also continued to invest in the Baltic States' capabilities for participating in peacekeeping operations, including the involvement of Latvia's Land Forces Infantry Brigade in the Danish division's cooperation project "Knight."⁶²

Joint activities extended beyond exercises alone. The Baltic States continued to deploy their troops in various allied operations.

⁶⁰ Latvian National Armed Forces. (2022). "*Latvijas un sabiedroto bruņoto spēku valsts svētku militārā parāde.*" https://www.flickr.com/photos/latvijas_armija/52508729709/in/album-72177720303809598

⁶¹ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2012). "*Latvijas Republikas Aizsardzības ministrijas 2011. gada publiskais pārskats.*" https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/2011_gadaparskats_0.pdf. 55.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 68.

In Afghanistan, for instance, Latvian troops were deployed as part of the Swedish-led Nordic-Baltic Transition Support Unit until 2014.⁶³ In 2016, Latvian soldiers were deployed to Iraq as part of Operation “Inherent Resolve,” where they worked alongside Danish troops to train Iraqi security forces.⁶⁴

Russian aggression in 2014 against Ukraine prompted the historic decision in 2016 to deploy NATO’s eFP battlegroups. In 2017, Germany, Canada, and the UK assumed the role of framework nations to strengthen the defence of the Baltic States and to deploy NATO’s first battlegroups in the region. These battalion-level units have served as a “tripwire” element within NATO’s broader defence and deterrence strategy. Following the resolutions of the 2022 Madrid Summit to progressively enhance NATO’s defensive posture, discussions arose regarding the timeline and necessity of deploying brigade-level units in the Baltic States.

In 2023, a consensus was reached to extend the presence of Allied troops in the Baltic States and to scale up the eFP to brigade-level units in Latvia and Lithuania. On the other hand, Estonia still has not yet obtained a comparable commitment from its eFP framework nation owing to a lack of available military personnel in the overstretched armed forces of the UK. However, it has secured an agreement for additional pre-positioned equipment in Estonia, and thousands of high readiness troops from the British Army’s 4th Brigade, stationed in the UK.⁶⁵

⁶³ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2014). “*Latvijas Republikas Aizsardzības ministrijas 2013. gada publiskais pārskats.*” https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/am_publiskais_parskats_2013.pdf. 25.

⁶⁴ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2017). “*Latvijas Republikas Aizsardzības ministrijas 2016. gada publiskais pārskats.*” https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/AM%20publiskais%20parskats_2016.pdf. 24.

⁶⁵ Government of the United Kingdom. (2024). “*Britain bolsters NATO’s eastern flank with new pact with Estonia and new cooperation on missile defence.*” <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/britain-bolsters-natos-eastern-flank-with-new-pact-with-estonia-and-new-cooperation-on-missile-defence>

In 2014, seven NATO member countries, including the Baltic States and Denmark, established the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). This concept was initially introduced in 2012 and broadened in 2017 to include Sweden and Finland. The primary geographical area of interest for the JEF is identified as the North, the North Atlantic, and the Baltic Sea region, with the capacity to engage in a diverse range of activities, from deterrence to full-scale military escalation. The JEF's rapid response capability enables the deployment of additional personnel to the Baltic States within 12 hours. Unlike NATO, the JEF does not require consensus among its members to initiate an operation.⁶⁶ With the capacity to unite both NATO and non-NATO regional partners, this format was considered essential to the Baltic States' security.

Among the most significant exercises conducted under this framework are the "BALTIC PROTECTOR" manoeuvres in 2019, held in the Baltic Sea region. These exercises involved 17 military ships and a force of 3,000 personnel. In 2021, the JEF format featured "Operation EXPONE", which focused on maritime security in the southern Baltic Sea region and included naval ships from the three Baltic States.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, in 2022, the JEF format hosted one of NATO's largest exercises, "Hedgehog," held in the Baltic region. These manoeuvres involved approximately 15,000 troops in Estonia. Additionally, in May 2022, the UK's command headquarters was deployed to Lithuania and Latvia to further strengthen the JEF. Even after Sweden and Finland joined NATO, this format continues to play a crucial role in regional security due to its capacity to respond swiftly and decisively. From the perspective of the Baltic States, further development of the JEF format would be significant, especially if Poland became a member.

⁶⁶ Latvian National Armed Forces. (2022). *"The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)."* https://www.mil.lv/sites/mil/files/document/JEF%20Brochure%20Apr_2022.pdf. 9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

At the NATO summit in Brussels in 2018, Latvia, Estonia, and Denmark signed a letter of intent to establish NATO's Multinational Division Headquarters North. The division headquarters was established at the Latvian National Armed Forces' Ādaži base in March 2019. Additional components of the headquarters are also based in Karup, Denmark. Four years later, it successfully met NATO's Combat Readiness Evaluation (CREVAL) requirements and became part of NATO's force structure. By 2023, it had achieved full combat readiness.

Division Headquarters functions under the command of Headquarters Multinational Corps Northeast, which was also co-founded by Denmark, Germany, and Poland. Currently, this is the highest NATO Command Structure body in the region, based in Poland.⁶⁸ The initial aim of the Division Headquarters at the Ādaži Military Base was to enhance the defence of the Baltic States and strengthen NATO's collective deterrence and defence. It served as both a political and military signal to Russia's military planners. Before its establishment, there were no division-level headquarters in the Baltic States, and consequently, the region lacked the capability to coordinate rotational units at the division level.

For Denmark, this initiative has presented an opportunity to enhance its own security and that of the Baltic Sea region. This was emphasised by the then Danish Defence Minister, Claus Hjort Frederiksen, who stated in 2017 that Danish security, much like that of the entire NATO alliance, begins in the Baltic States.⁶⁹ Similar remarks have also been made over time, such as

⁶⁸ NATO. "Multinational Divisions." <https://mncne.nato.int/forces/divisions>

⁶⁹ Danish Ministry of Defence. (2017). "Claus Hjort Frederiksen: Vores sikkerhed begynder i Baltikum." <https://www.fmn.dk/da/nyheder/2017/2017/clus-hjort-frederiksen-vores-sikkerhed-begynder-i-baltikum/>

those by the commander of Multinational Division North, Jette Albinus, in 2024.⁷⁰

Danish soldiers have also had the opportunity to collaborate closely with the military forces of the Baltic States. The headquarters aids in the planning and executing of military operations, commands units, organises and carries out military exercises, and undertakes other national and collective defence duties. Sweden, along with twelve other nations, is currently represented at NATO's Multinational Division North headquarters. In 2024, this headquarters integrated the newly formed NATO Multinational Brigade in Latvia, further enhancing the region's collective military capabilities.

Sweden participated in the Baltic States' efforts to establish the Baltic Special Operations Forces Intelligence Element, which commenced operations in March 2020. The centre is located in Lithuania and includes specialists from Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, as well as the US, Germany, and Sweden.⁷¹

With the increasing threats to the Baltic States, Denmark also commenced its contributions to NATO's eFP battlegroups in both Estonia and Latvia. In 2018, Denmark deployed up to 200 troops to the British-led eFP in Estonia. Each rotation involved similarly sized units. Denmark sustained its contribution in 2020 and 2022 while expanding cooperation with the 1st Estonian Infantry Brigade.⁷² Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Denmark further demonstrated its commitment by allocating

⁷⁰ Sargs.lv. (2024). "NATO daudz nacionālās divīzijas štābam "Ziemeļi" pievienojas jauna Dānijas bruņoto spēku brigāde." <https://www.sargs.lv/lv/nato/2024-06-27/nato-daudznacionalas-divizijas-stabam-ziemeli-pievienojas-jauna-danijas-brunoto>

⁷¹ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2021). "Latvijas Republikas Aizsardzības ministrijas 2020. gada publiskais pārskats." <https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/AM%202020.%20gada%20publiskais%20gada%20p%C4%81rskats.pdf>. 20.

⁷² Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2023). "Defence and Security." <https://estland.um.dk/en/denmark-and-estonia/menu-1>

approximately 1,000 troops, who were deployed to Latvia from May 2022 to May 2023.

Additionally, the Danish Parliament approved a range of military contributions to NATO. These included the deployment of a frigate, provision of air military assets such as surveillance aircraft and radar systems, and authorisation of an adapted use-of-force mandate for the Danish forces already stationed as part of NATO's battlegroup in Estonia. The approval also encompassed Denmark's ongoing contributions to NATO's international staff and headquarters.⁷³

In August 2024, Denmark continued its contributions by deploying an additional battalion of approximately 800 soldiers to Latvia, who were integrated into the NATO battlegroup until December 2024.⁷⁴ The battalion consisted of a staff, a staff company, an armoured infantry company, a mechanised infantry company, a tank squadron, and a fire support element. To support its mission, the combat battalion was reinforced with additional units, including an armoured engineer company and artillery units.⁷⁵ In 2025, this rotation alternated with the Swedish 71st mechanised battalion from the South Skåne Regiment.⁷⁶

The first Swedish six-month rotation is well-equipped, featuring CV90 infantry fighting vehicles, APC360 armoured personnel carriers, and Stridsvagn 122 battle tanks. This marks a historic

⁷³ Danish Ministry of Defence. (2022). *"Danmark stiller yderligere militære bidrag til rådighed for NATO."* <https://www.fmn.dk/da/nyheder/2022/danmark-stiller-yderligere-militare-bidrag-til-radighed-for-nato/>

⁷⁴ LSM.LV. (2024). *"Dānijas bataljons pievienojas NATO spēku grupai Latvijā."* <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/17.08.2024-danijas-bataljons-pievienojas-nato-speku-grupai-latvija.a565428/>

⁷⁵ Danish Armed Forces. (2024). *"Letland – sikring af NATO's østlige flanke."* <https://www.forsvaret.dk/da/opsaver/internationale-opsaver/letland--sikring-af-natos-ostlige-flanke/>

⁷⁶ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2024). *"Danish Battalion integrates NATO Multinational Brigade in Latvia."* <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/news/danish-battalion-integrates-nato-multinational-brigade-latvia>



On 18 January 2025, the Swedish Mechanised Infantry Battalion from the South Skåne Regiment arrived in Rīga to join NATO's multinational brigade in Latvia, under the command of NATO's Multinational Division North.

Photo: Armīns Janīks. Source: Latvian Ministry of Defence.⁷⁷

moment for Sweden, as it is the first time Sweden has contributed to NATO's collective defence efforts with more than 500 soldiers. As a new member of the Alliance, Sweden (and Finland) must develop plans for crisis scenarios in which Sweden will not only fulfil its role as a host nation but also deploy forces abroad. This includes the capability to conduct combat operations beyond its borders and to provide logistical solutions for the large-scale movement of troops and equipment.

The Swedish Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence now have to transition from bilateral cooperation to multilateral collaboration within NATO. Simultaneously, it presents an opportunity to continue exchanging experiences not only with

⁷⁷ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2025). "Zviedrijas Mehanizētā kājnieku bataljona ierašanās Rīgā." https://www.flickr.com/photos/aizsardzibas_ministrija/54272975098/in/album-72177720323261628

the Latvian Armed Forces but also with the militaries of other nations serving within the NATO's eFP. A significant portion of the Swedish Armed Forces is arguably better suited for operations in climates resembling those of the Baltic States rather than in the High North, where the weather conditions are harsher. This may bolster the case for advocating greater permanent Swedish military involvement alongside Denmark in the Baltic States.

Sweden's accession to NATO has also led to an increased US presence in the region. In 2024, a Defence Cooperation Agreement with the US took effect, which "enables more continuous cooperation by regulating the conditions for American forces to operate in Sweden. This includes issues such as the legal status of American military personnel, access to basing areas, advance storage of equipment, and rules on taxes and customs."⁷⁸ In practice, this signifies that the US has access to 17 military sites in Sweden (and 15 in Finland).⁷⁹ Although the US presence in the region is not explicitly aimed at defending the Baltic States, heightened American involvement bolsters the overall defence posture.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the Baltic States' accession to NATO, both Denmark and Sweden have emerged as the most significant Nordic allies of the Baltic States. Denmark has made considerable contributions, participating in NATO's Baltic Air Policing, providing troops to NATO's battlegroups in the Baltic States, and assisting in establishing NATO's Multinational Division Headquarters North. Sweden's inclusion in the NATO battlegroup in Latvia since 2025 increases the number of participating nations and, more importantly, paves the way for discussions on the deeper involvement of other Nordic countries in NATO-led missions in the Baltic States.

⁷⁸ Swedish Government Office. (2024). *Defense cooperation agreement with the United States.* <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/militart-forsvar/avtal-om-forsvarssamarbete-med-usa-dca/>

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

5. FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR THE DANISH AND SWEDISH MILITARIES' ROLE IN THE BALTICS

Even after Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO, there remains significant scope for improvement in regional security. Although conventional aggression from Russia against any NATO member in the near future seems unlikely, numerous unconventional tools of aggression persist. Uncertainties remain regarding the future dynamics between Russia and NATO once a ceasefire or a peace agreement is reached in Ukraine. While Ukraine is currently making tremendous sacrifices, it is fighting not only for its own independence but also buying time for Europe to restore its defence capabilities. This necessitates deepening cooperation between regional partners, which could help address the long-standing concerns of the Baltic States.

Given that Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO has significantly heightened their importance in NATO's reinforcement operations in the Baltic States, their integration into NATO's east-oriented Brunssum Command in the Netherlands would be highly advantageous for the Baltic States. This strategy would be more appropriate than assigning them to the US-based Joint Force Command in Norfolk, which primarily focuses on the High North



In March 2023, a live-fire demonstration by the Latvian National Armed Forces and NATO allies took place at the Ādaži training ground, marking the conclusion of the military exercise “Crystal Arrow 2023.” The image shows a Danish Armed Forces CV90 infantry fighting vehicle manoeuvring during the demonstration. Photo: Ēriks Kukutis. Source: Latvian Ministry of Defence.⁸⁰

and the North Atlantic. Under NATO’s current command structure, both Sweden and Finland, alongside Norway and Denmark, have been allocated to Joint Force Command Norfolk,⁸¹ while the Baltic States remain under the Joint Force Command Brunssum.

While assigning Sweden and Finland under Command Norfolk is understandable, given their proximity to the Arctic and close cooperation with the US, this decision overlooks the distinct

⁸⁰ Latvian National Armed Forces. (2023). “*Militārās mācības ‘Kristāla Bulta 2023’*.” https://www.flickr.com/photos/latvijas_armija/52779913743/in/album-72177720307094152

⁸¹ Reuters. (2024). “*Finland will host a NATO land command and troops.*” <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finland-will-host-nato-land-command-troops-2024-06-14/>

geographical ties between the Baltic and Nordic countries. Dividing the Nordic-Baltic countries into a separate command establishes a clear boundary across the Baltic Sea, isolating the command structure of the Baltic States from that of the Nordic countries. This shift will necessitate substantial adaptation and enhanced cooperation between these two NATO command structures.

In both the Baltic States and in Sweden and Denmark, there are significant shortcomings across various military dimensions. While the Baltic States have developed professional and capable infantry forces, their limited resources do not allow for substantial advancements in the air and maritime domains. In contrast, Sweden possesses a substantial naval fleet, including modern corvette-class warships and Blekinge-class diesel submarines. Its robust defence industry further enhances its capabilities, particularly in producing submarines and combat aircraft. Notably, Sweden manufactures different models of the JAS 39 Gripen, a highly adaptable multi-role fighter aircraft.

Additionally, the Swedish Air Force operates various transport and surveillance aircraft, including the Swedish-made ASC 890. While it is smaller than NATO's traditional E-3A airborne early warning and control system (AWACS) fleet, it can provide airborne command and air surveillance over extensive areas, including the Baltic Sea.⁸² Since Sweden joined NATO, these capabilities, alongside those of the Finnish Air Force, have already been integrated into NATO's air policing through NATO's Combined Air Operations Centre in Uedem, Germany.⁸³ The Swedish Air Force will continue to strengthen its surveillance capabilities with the acquisition of additional next-generation GlobalEye AWACS

⁸² NATO. (2024). "NATO AWACS ENHANCES INTEROPERABILITY WITH SWEDISH AIR FORCE." https://ac.nato.int/archive/2024/NATO_AWACS_SWE_jets

⁸³ NATO. (2024). "Finland, Sweden Vigilant and closely integrated into NATO Air Policing on Baltic Sea." https://ac.nato.int/archive/2024/FIN_SWE_intercept_Baltic_Sea

aircraft. The GlobalEye system features the Erieye Extended Range radar, which has a range exceeding 550 kilometres.⁸⁴ Moreover, the Swedish Armed Forces are also developing additional surveillance and communications capabilities with the launch of their first military communications satellite in August 2024. Supplementary surveillance satellites are expected to be launched in the future, including in cooperation with Denmark.⁸⁵

The integration of Nordic countries into NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence has significantly enhanced overall early warning and air defence readiness. This also revives the discussion on whether the Nordic countries could take on a more significant role in bolstering the Baltic States' airspace. In a 2021 paper, Olevs Nikers and Otto Tabuns advocated for deeper regional air force cooperation involving both the Nordic and the Baltic countries.⁸⁶

Sweden, along with Denmark and other Nordic countries, has the opportunity to initiate the transformation of the Baltic Air Policing mission into one capable of countering Russia's air forces in the Baltic region. The Nordic countries operate over 250 fighter aircraft⁸⁷ and have already significantly enhanced their air force collaboration. In 2023, the air forces of Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark signed a letter of intent to establish a Nordic air operations concept. This initiative aims to integrate command and control, coordinate operational planning, and facilitate joint air force deployments while maintaining shared situational

⁸⁴ Saab. (2024). "Saab signs contract with Swedish FMV for a third GlobalEye." <https://www.saab.com/newsroom/press-releases/2024/saab-signs-contract-with-swedish-fmv-for-a-third-globaleye>

⁸⁵ Swedish Government Office. (2025). "Sweden's first military satellite now launched into space." <https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2025/01/sveriges-forsta-militara-satellit-nu-uppskjuten-i-rymden/>

⁸⁶ Nikers, O., Tabuns, O. (2021). "Baltic Sea Security: Regional and Sectoral Perspectives." Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation. 108-109.

⁸⁷ Danish Ministry of Defence. (2024). "A new era for Nordic defence cooperation." <https://www.fmn.dk/en/news/2024/a-new-era-for-nordic-defence-cooperation/>

awareness.⁸⁸ Similarly, this initiative could be broadened to encompass the Baltic States, establishing a cooperative air defence space where the Nordic fighter fleet would be directly integrated into the Baltic region's defence.

The Baltic States have taken the appropriate measures to tackle the threats arising from their insufficient air defence capabilities. Both Estonia and Latvia are now awaiting deliveries of the IRIS-T (InfraRed Imaging System Tail/Thrust vector-controlled) medium-range air defence missile systems, which were jointly procured under the "umbrella agreement" with Germany. Meanwhile, Lithuania previously opted for alternative medium-range air defence systems and has been operating NASAMS (Norwegian Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System) since 2020;⁸⁹ it has also declared its intention to acquire IRIS-T systems.⁹⁰ In 2024, Lithuania announced plans to acquire additional NASAMS.⁹¹

Nevertheless, the Baltic States currently lack the resources to acquire long-range air defence capabilities. Somewhat similarly, Sweden and Denmark face similar limitations. Sweden operates only four Patriot long-range air defence systems.⁹² However, if stationed along the coast or on the island of Gotland, they could intercept targets over the Baltic Sea. Nonetheless, these concerns

⁸⁸ Danish Armed Forces. (2023). "Nordic air chiefs: We must have one unified air defense." <https://www.forsvaret.dk/da/nyheder/2023/nordiske-air-chiefs-vi-skal-have-et-samlet-luftforsvar/>

⁸⁹ LRT.LT. (2023). "Baltics split on air defence purchases." <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2079213/lithuania-sticks-with-nasams-even-as-other-baltics-opt-for-german-defence-systems-mod>

⁹⁰ BNS. (2024). "Lithuania eyes acquisition of German IRIS-T air defence systems – minister." <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2278825/lithuania-eyes-acquisition-of-german-iris-t-air-defence-system-minister>

⁹¹ Kongsberg. (2024). "Lithuania acquires more NASAMS air defence from KONGSBERG." <https://www.kongsberg.com/newsroom/news-archive/2024/NASAMS/>

⁹² Swedish Defence Materiel Administration. "Air defense system 103 – Patriot." <https://www.fmv.se/projekt/luftvarnssystem-103/>

will persist, given the broader challenges NATO faces in securing adequate weapons systems within a short timeframe.

Furthermore, the Baltic States have also worked to enhance their firepower through the joint procurement of M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (M142 HIMARS), with Estonia being the first to receive these deliveries in 2025.⁹³ The three Baltic States have ordered a total of 20 M142 HIMARS systems,⁹⁴ but the number of these artillery systems in the region could increase in the coming years. Estonia⁹⁵ and Lithuania⁹⁶ have also procured CAESAR 155mm self-propelled howitzers, while Latvia has signed an agreement to acquire 42 ASCOD (Austrian Spanish Cooperation Development) infantry fighting vehicles.⁹⁷ Lithuania has taken a step further by signing an agreement to procure 44 Leopard 2A8 tanks.⁹⁸ However, these capabilities are inadequate without the ability to achieve air superiority.

⁹³ ERR.EE. (2025). *"US-made HIMARS set to arrive in Estonia by summer."* <https://news.err.ee/1609582586/us-made-himars-set-to-arrive-in-estonia-by-summer>

⁹⁴ Mil.in.ua. (2024). *"Three Baltic states agreed on joint use of HIMARS rocket systems."* <https://mil.in.ua/en/news/three-baltic-states-agreed-on-joint-use-of-himars-rocket-systems/>

⁹⁵ ERR.EE. (2024). *"Estonia buys Caesar self-propelled howitzers from France."* <https://news.err.ee/1609375864/estonia-buys-caesar-self-propelled-howitzers-from-france>

⁹⁶ The Defense Post. (2022). *"Lithuania Buys 18 Next-Gen Caesar Howitzers: Report."* <https://thedefensepost.com/2022/12/19/lithuania-next-gen-caesar-howitzers/>

⁹⁷ LSM.LV. (2025). *"Latvia to buy 42 ASCOD infantry fighting vehicles."* <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defense/30.01.2025-latvia-to-buy-42-ascod-infantry-fighting-vehicles.a585784/>

⁹⁸ Adamowski, J. (2024). *"Lithuania pushes Leopard 2A8 tank acquisition under new government."* <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/12/17/lithuania-pushes-leopard-2a8-tank-acquisition-under-new-government/>

In line with NATO's broader defence strategy, all three Baltic States are presently enacting plans to strengthen their borders with various anti-mobility measures as part of the Baltic Defence Line initiative. The construction of the Baltic Defence Line is closely coordinated among the Baltic States, yet it is funded independently. This initiative is anticipated to significantly bolster military preparedness, thus deterring Russia from carrying out any potential rapid military incursion.⁹⁹ To improve allied accommodation, all Baltic nations are investing in the development of their military infrastructure. Lithuania is building new facilities in the Rūdninkai Training Area,¹⁰⁰ while Latvia is establishing its largest-ever military site in the Aizkraukle and Jēkabpils counties (the Selonia Military Training Area).¹⁰¹

Denmark and Sweden, like the Baltic States, face challenges with military personnel shortages, which create difficulties for both the Baltic and Nordic countries. Currently, all armed forces lack the necessary infrastructure and a sufficiently large command structure to rapidly expand their forces in the short term. At the same time, the salary levels for military personnel and the defence industry's capacity to compete with the commercial market are crucial factors in this discussion. This issue also pertains to social awareness of potential threats, which is still developing gradually. Since Latvia reintroduced conscription in 2023 after a 16-year hiatus, all Baltic States have been fortifying their personnel reserves. By 2028, Latvia aims to achieve

⁹⁹ Latvian Ministry of Defence. (2024). *"Border Fortification."* <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/border-fortification>

¹⁰⁰ Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence. (2024). *"Constructions of a military campus for German Allies about to kick off at Rūdninkai Training Area."* <https://kam.lt/en/constructions-of-a-military-campus-for-german-allies-about-to-kick-off-at-rudninkai-training-area/>

¹⁰¹ Latvian Ministry of Defence. *"Selonia Military Training Area."* <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/selonia-military-training-area>

an annual conscription level of 4,000 citizens, aligning with the current yearly intake in Estonia and Lithuania.¹⁰²

Cooperation among the armed forces of Sweden, Denmark, and the Baltic States remains vital for regional security. The deployment of Swedish and Danish troops to Latvia could serve as a strong foundation for deeper Nordic engagement in the Baltic region, building on the existing collaboration between Denmark and Latvia. Greater cohesion among Baltic and Nordic armed forces would be particularly beneficial given the shared challenges of harsh winter conditions. The Baltic States could further reinforce their commitment to regional cooperation by deploying a battalion to the upcoming eFP in Finland, which will be led by Sweden.

In a scenario where deterrence fails, Lithuania is unlikely to receive substantial military reinforcement from Estonia or Latvia, as both nations (along with NATO forces stationed there) would be engaged within their own areas of responsibility. Meanwhile, Estonia, being the furthest from the Suwałki Gap, must prioritise strong cooperation with its Nordic neighbours, particularly Finland, as a key reinforcement route. Similarly, Finland would depend on logistical supply lines running through Sweden. Maintaining high-readiness NATO allied forces in the Nordics would greatly increase the credibility of potential rapid reinforcement operations for the Baltic States, which could come from two main support routes.

Russia's precision strike and air defence capabilities could present the first significant challenge to national and allied troops, as well as the equipment stationed in the Baltic States. This would also be the main challenge for NATO allies in maintaining secure

¹⁰² Sargs.lv. (2023). "Sprūds: Latvijas aizsardzības spējas tiks stiprinātas gan kvalitatīvi, gan kvantitatīvi." <https://www.sargs.lv/lv/viedoklis/2023-11-14/spruds-latvijas-aizsardzibas-spejas-tiks-stiprinatas-gan-kvalitativi-gan>



Royal Danish Army soldiers operate a radio during exercise "Resolute Warrior 2024" in Ādaži, Latvia, on 6 November 2024. They carried out defensive operations alongside over 3,500 troops from 13 NATO Allies as part of a brigade-level exercise. Source: NATO.¹⁰³

supply chains and reinforcement routes.¹⁰⁴ Unlike Ukraine, the Baltic States lack strategic depth, necessitating the dispersal of their military reserves in locations that are difficult to identify. One possible "safe haven" for these reserves, as well as for conscript training, could be in the Nordic region countries.

Much of future defence capabilities will rely on advanced technologies, particularly unmanned aerial, maritime, and ground vehicles. Finland and Latvia have already established robust industrial cooperation through the co-production of PATRIA

¹⁰³ NATO. (2024). "Danish troops join Multinational Brigade Latvia for exercise Resolute Warrior 24." https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/photos_230583.htm

¹⁰⁴ Lanoszka, A., Hunzeker, A., M. (2016). "Confronting the Anti-Access/Area Denial and Precision Strike Challenge in the Baltic Region." *The RUSI Journal*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2016.1253367>. 16-17.

6x6 armoured personnel carriers, setting a precedent for similar projects between the Baltic States and the Nordic countries. The Baltic and Nordic countries could further collaborate on the development of unmanned aerial and naval drones capable of conducting reconnaissance and disrupting the Russian fleet in the Baltic Sea. Joint naval drone and mine operations to enhance readiness for blockade scenarios, counter Russian naval threats, and secure open reinforcement routes would represent a substantial step towards strengthening the region's security.

Financial resources will continue to present challenges. Currently, the Baltic States are among the leaders in defence spending relative to their GDP (in 2024, Estonia and Latvia exceeded 3% of GDP on defence, while Lithuania allocated 2.85% of GDP).¹⁰⁵ In 2025, Lithuania also surpassed 3% of GDP,¹⁰⁶ and the Baltic States are currently debating increasing defence spending to as much as 5% in the coming years. However, tax increases or public sector cuts alone cannot cover the costs. For this reason, Estonia advocates amending the Maastricht criteria to permit borrowing for defence, arguing that such expenditure should be excluded from deficit calculations.¹⁰⁷ Denmark (2.37% of GDP in

¹⁰⁵ NATO. (2024). *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*.
https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf. 9.

¹⁰⁶ Euronews. (2025). *Lithuania vows to raise defence spending to 5-6% of GDP to combat threat from Russia*.
<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/17/lithuania-vows-to-raise-defence-spending-to-5-6-of-gdp-to-combat-threat-from-russia>

¹⁰⁷ ERR.EE. (2025). *Estonian government calls for Maastricht criteria change to help increase defense spending*.
<https://news.err.ee/1609584953/estonian-government-calls-for-maastricht-criteria-change-to-help-increase-defense-spending>

2024)¹⁰⁸ and Sweden (2.14% of GDP)¹⁰⁹ should take inspiration from the Baltic example by rapidly increasing defence spending, as all these countries will need to contemplate even more significant investments to ensure their security needs.

Although the security of the Baltic States has significantly improved over the years, key challenges remain. The Baltic States have long advocated for a permanent allied presence in the region, which would require greater commitment from partner nations. Nevertheless, the Baltic States could contribute to covering part of the costs for such deployments. That said, immediate priorities, such as expanding personnel and enhancing the capabilities of the Baltic and Nordic armed forces, understandably take precedence. The evolving security situation in the region now requires a re-assessment of previously established international agreements and regulations. One of the most significant is the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which restricts the permanent deployment of large allied forces. Similarly, the demilitarized status of the strategically important Åland Islands no longer aligns with the current long-term security challenges in the region.

¹⁰⁸ NATO. (2024). "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)." https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf. 9.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

Sweden and Denmark's contribution to the defence of the Baltic States since the fall of the Soviet Union has been invaluable. The recent accession of Sweden (and Finland) to NATO marks a historic shift for the Nordic and Baltic regions, reducing the strategic significance of Russia's Kaliningrad in the Baltic Sea and enabling NATO to incorporate Nordic reinforcement routes into its logistics. The deployment of Danish and Swedish soldiers as part of NATO's eFP is a highly practical and welcome contribution to Baltic security. While this presents new opportunities, significant challenges remain. Although a direct Russian military aggression against a Baltic State appears unlikely in the near term, the transformation of regional security must continue to adapt to the threats posed by Russia to maintain credibility and deterrence.

Sweden's historically uncertain strategy towards its European allies, shaped by its policy of solidarity and non-alignment until 2022, exposed the absence of a coherent Baltic Sea security strategy. However, its accession to NATO and deeper involvement in Baltic defence present an opportunity to solidify its strategic direction. As the Baltic Sea region once again becomes a geopolitical focal point, new and potentially more significant crises could emerge, given that the threats posed by Russia remain a long-term concern.

As the threat perceptions of Sweden and other Nordic countries increasingly align with those of the Baltic States, this moment presents an opportunity to deepen Baltic-Nordic defence cooperation, creating a more cohesive and resilient regional security framework. Building on over three decades of cooperation between Denmark, Sweden, and the Baltic States, this paper calls for further strengthening and expanding the existing collaboration.

As Sweden and Denmark, alongside other Nordic countries, integrate their air forces, they now possess the potential to expand NATO's Air Policing mission beyond its traditional role, thereby enhancing its capacity to counter airborne threats. Furthermore, joint maritime operations would bolster regional readiness by reinforcing the ability to deny freedom of movement to Russia's Baltic Fleet. Expanding cooperation within the regional defence industry could further facilitate technological advancements in the Nordic and Baltic armed forces, fostering innovation and interoperability. Enhancing the presence of allied troops in the Baltic States remains a key priority, while consistently testing reinforcement routes through the Nordic countries should become standard practice.

The Baltic States are already among NATO's leading defence spenders relative to their GDP. However, their security needs will inevitably require further increases. Continued investment in military capabilities, infrastructure, and strategic mobility will be essential to counter evolving threats and ensure regional stability. If Sweden and Denmark intend to maintain deterrence as the primary function of their armed forces in the region, they will inevitably need to follow the Baltic example in ramping up defence spending to address these growing security challenges.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Daniels Kauliņš is a researcher at the Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga. He holds a bachelor's degree in International Relations, and his areas of interest include defence studies of the Baltic region. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in War and Defence at the Swedish Defence University.