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## **The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept Implications for the Baltics: Correcting the Course, but Still Missing the Point**

Adam Potočňák

**Adapt** Long Read

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## **Author**

Adam Potočňák

PhD student at the Faculty of Social Science, Masaryk University in Brno and Research Fellow at the Centre for Security and Military Strategic Studies at the University of Defence in Brno  
Adapt Institute Associated Research Fellow

## **Editor**

Matúš Jevčák

Editor-in-Chief at Adapt Institute

## **Expert Consultant**

Jamie Shea

Professor at Exeter University and former NATO Deputy Under-Secretary-General for Emerging Security Threats

# **THE NATO 2022 STRATEGIC CONCEPT IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BALTICS: CORRECTING THE COURSE, BUT STILL MISSING THE POINT**

*Adam Potočnýák*

## **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The 2022 NATO Madrid Summit rightfully claims the title of a historic and enlargement summit as it adopted a new Strategic Concept and opened the door for the admission of Sweden and Finland.
- However, the newly adopted NATO defence posture leaves Baltic countries with significantly less security than they initially required just after Russia invaded Ukraine.
- Successful implementation of new defence measures in the Baltics hinges on the Alliance's ability to enhance regional infrastructure, improve military mobility capabilities, generate sufficient manpower and firepower for the new force model of the NATO Reaction Forces (NRF), and integrate defence systems and strategies of the High North with those of the Baltics.
- Apart from the threat of full-scale conventional aggression, the NATO Baltic defence posture cannot neglect other potential threats of a non-conventional nature – the hybrid and nuclear ones.

## **INTRODUCTION**

After over a decade, 30 NATO member states adopted a new Strategic Concept (further in the text only “Concept”) at the Madrid Summit on 28-30th June 2022. The Alliance’s top strategic document has set its strategy, outlined its political and military adaptation and summarised its fundamental purpose, security tasks, challenges to be faced and provided opportunities ever since the adoption of the first Concept in 1949. During the Cold War, there were four strictly classified strategic concepts with a prevailing focus on defence and deterrence, but another three strategic concepts adopted since the end of the Cold War (in 1991, 1999 and 2010) were all issued in the form of public and far more policy-oriented documents (NATO 2022b). The latest iteration from June 2022 is in line with this “post-Cold War style”; however, it differs from the previous three in its strong emphasis on defining the global security environment characterised predominantly by an intensifying great power competition and confrontation (NATO 2022a).

Summarising the Alliance's purposes, principles, and strategic environment perception, the current Concept reiterates NATO’s core tasks - (collective) deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security. It also reacts to the recent trends in Euro-Atlantic security and envisions NATO’s strategic direction in the upcoming decade. Unsurprisingly, the 2022 Concept is, in this regard, heavily influenced by Russian unprovoked and heinous military aggression against Ukraine, to which the allies responded by stating that “the Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace” (NATO 2022a, 3), identifying Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in Euro-Atlantic Area" (NATO 2022a, 4). The threat of an aggressive and imperialistic Russia further underlines its proclaimed strategic partnership with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which “runs counter to Alliance’s value and interests” (NATO 2022a, 5). Within the list of threats and challenges, just after Russia and terrorism, the PRC was mentioned for the first time in the Concept as its “ambitions and coercive policies challenge Alliance's values, security and interests” (NATO 2022a, 5). The list of threats then follows

with those emanating from space, cyberspace and disruptive technologies environment, as all of these threats, risks and challenges might qualify as triggers for invoking Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Finally, the Concept defines an unfortunate state of arms control regimes erosion and identifies climate change as a “crisis and threat multiplier” (NATO 2022a, 6). Thanks to the new Concept adoption and invitation for Sweden and Finland to join the Alliance, the Madrid Summit rightfully claims the halo of one of the historic NATO summits.

## **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

There exists a consensus among the expert community that the 2022 Concept is clear and correct in terms of threat perception, using a proper “360-degree approach” that enables allies to perceive security across all domains, from and to all directions, and address various sorts of threats (Atlantic Council 2022). The list of threats to the Euroatlantic security environment and the changing perceptions of these threats distinguishes the Madrid 2022 Strategic Concept from its 2010 Lisbon predecessor in the most significant regard. The document symbolically ends the era of crisis management operations in countries outside the Euroatlantic region, bringing the Alliance back to its origins with the primacy of collective deterrence and defence (Arnold 2022). Gone is also the era that strived to develop “a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia” (NATO 2010, 29) as a part of the then-pursued strategic “reset” between the geopolitical West and Russia. Instead, the 2022 Concept ushers in a new era of sharpened political, economic, technological, information and value confrontation with the Sino-Russian tandem, the most significant long-term challenge to the rules-based international order. Even though the Alliance offers both Russia and China tangible platforms and channels for future communication and constructive cooperation (provided Moscow halts its aggressive behaviour), it no less convincingly insists on strengthening its capacities for deterrence, defence, resilience and cooperation against any adversarial coercion, interference or aggression (NATO 2022a, 4). The process has already started with the USA strengthening their military forces in Europe by 20 000 troops (reaching the level of 100 000 boots) in reaction to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Later, in Madrid, President Biden committed to deploy two more F-35 squadrons to the UK, two more destroyers to Spain, one more US brigade combat team to Romania, and significantly strengthen the air defence in Germany and Italy (McLeary 2022). The UK and Denmark also strengthened their respective forces deployed to Estonia and Latvia in reaction to Russia's attack on Ukraine (Milevski 2022b).

## **ANALYSIS AND POLICY OPTIONS**

President Zelenskyy of Ukraine, who addressed the Madrid Summit via a televised speech, urged the Alliance's leaders not only to "find a place for Ukraine" in Europe but also encouraged them to be "extremely bold" while crafting its new security architecture (President of Ukraine 2022). Unfortunately, when it comes to the three Baltic republics, states that are (together with Poland) the most exposed to the Russian threat, Zelenskyy's word did not fall on fertile ground. Both Summit and Concept were rather parsimonious on how to develop their future security, defence and deterrence potential - so far, we only know that the US Army V Corps HQ and field support battalion shall be located in Poznan, Poland (McLeary 2022). However, it does not go far enough in addressing all the security concerns of the Baltic republics, the most vocal advocates of a higher allied military presence on their territories. Considering the scale of destruction and brutality of atrocities Russian forces committed in Ukraine, Baltic governments preferred the abandonment of the current NATO "tripwire" defence strategy and pleaded for a military posture sufficient to defend their territories without a need to cede, even if temporarily, no inch of their territories to Russia (Emmott, Sytas 2022). During the weeks leading to the Summit, Baltic republics requested upgrading the currently present multinational battalion-size battlegroups within the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) to all-army brigades supplemented by additional air defence and maritime defence capabilities - Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas even demanded the deployment of an all-army division to each of the three Baltic republics (Financial Times 2022a). The author of this paper spent the last days of June in Latvia discussing officials from the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Justice, and Members of Parliament. They all

agreed that after 24th February, deterring Russia is just not enough to ensure regional security and that the Alliance must be able to defend the territories of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania against outright military invasion.

Unfortunately, the Madrid Summit failed to heed the Baltics' requests as key allies like Germany, UK and USA prefer a more "elastic" regional defence. Therefore, the Concept approved the "German approach" to the issue (Financial Times 2022b) and decided only to increase the volume of weapons, ammunition and equipment permanently stored in the Eastern flank countries, including the Baltics. The additional NATO rapid reaction forces would rush to reinforce the already deployed NATO multinational battlegroups up to the strength of an all-army brigade only in the case of crisis (Monaghan, Morcos, Wall 2022). The decision immediately became the prey of criticism for its weakness and indecisiveness within the NATO member states and beyond (Hoffer 2022), as its practical implementation puts increased demands on the Alliance's weakest spot in the region - insufficient infrastructure (Emmott, Sytas 2022). The idea of reinforcing allied forces already deployed to the Baltics only when a crisis occurs should be thus approached with serious scepticism as any troops moving in and out of the region will have enormous requirements for logistical and infrastructure support, let alone doing so in a time of an imminent threat or unfolding enemy offensive of any kind (Milevski 2022b). The Baltic countries find themselves trapped far away from the allies' strategic "centre of gravity" as they share 1630-kilometres long borders with Russia or Belarus, and their only ground link to the rest of the Eastern flank is the notorious Suwalki corridor between Poland and Lithuania, a 65-kilometres thin artery providing one railway and two motorway connections. A mere storing of all weapons, ammunition and equipment, the Madrid Summit pledged to pre-position in the Baltics - let alone actual deployment of combat forces - will require enormous investments into the military mobility capabilities and infrastructure connecting the Baltics with the rest of Europe. If member states desire to fulfil their Baltic defence and deterrence pledges, they will have to demonstrate a tremendous political will and resolve to overcome inevitable political and societal pressures to

save any salvageable sources. Especially now, when covid-damaged economies are taking further blows from skyrocketing inflation.

Moreover, the Madrid Summit adopted the so-called “New Force Model”, a massive extension of the NRF from their current strength of 40,000 troops up to 800,000 boots divided into three tiers with a 100,000-strong Tier 1 force expected to be ready for deployment within 10 days, 200,000 Tier 2 troops with 10 to 30 days of readiness, and 500,000 soldiers of Tier 3 that should be ready for deployment within 180 days (Albers 2022, Major, Swistek 2022). The increase of the NRF numbers can be evaluated positively; nevertheless, reasonable doubts about the plan’s feasibility occurred immediately upon its announcement, as European allies might arguably face problems in generating sufficient man- and firepower (Barnes 2022). Moreover, to activate any of the three NRF tiers, a unanimous vote in the North Atlantic Council (NAC) will be required. Thus, their deployment depends not only on the NAC’s decision-making process swiftness but also on the common threat perception of all its 30 (hopefully, soon 32) members. Therefore, the Alliance urgently needs to develop a comprehensive step-by-step plan to build, equip, train, deploy and sustain those NRF. There are expectations that such a plan should occur in 2023 (Albers 2022). The sooner it happens, the sooner the mist of uncertainty can be lifted. Last but not least, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine reshapes the European security environment, NATO needs to develop a new single theatre-wide strategic plan. One that would envisage the full integration of not only forwarded units with local forces (Shea 2022) but now considering the transfer and deployment of “forwarded brigades” as well.

## **WHAT TO DO TO ENHANCE BALTIC REGIONAL DEFENSE**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine incentivised profound changes in security environment assessments and threat perceptions within the Baltic. The prevailing conviction that the three republics need several “mores” - more robust deterrence and defence posture, more forwarded weapons, ammunitions and other equipment stored on their territories, more

exercises with the allies and more infrastructure to enhance military mobility within the entire region. There are several ways to constructively address these issues, some of which have already started to be implemented.

First, the detrimental changes to the Baltic security environment have already triggered endeavours to adjust the defence posture and procurement priorities of all three republics. The military planning in their relatively minuscule armed forces must also ponder the worst-case scenario of responding to the potential Russian aggression alone or only with assistance from yet currently deployed eFP forces. The preliminary lessons learned from Ukraine have already influenced their procurement and armament priorities as Vilnius, Riga, and Tallinn are all interested in procuring HIMARS multiple rocket launchers, with the anti-ship weapons, mid-range air defence systems, self-propelled artillery systems, infantry fighting vehicles and unmanned aerial vehicles also topping the extensive lists of the procurement agenda. In other words, Baltic states demand the weapons and equipment necessary for fighting full-scale conventional warfare with territorial defence as a primary core task. They are correct to do so and should be provided with all necessary or desired assistance from other allies. Beyond that, Latvia expects to reintroduce conscriptions from 2023 with an ultimate goal of being able to call to arms at least 7,000 persons per year from 2026 (Milevski 2022b, Olech, Matiaszczyk 2022).

What pertains to the infrastructure, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a revolutionary idea to significantly enhance allies' (not only military) mobility capabilities in the region while simultaneously aggravating Russia's ones appeared in the form of a suggestion to transform rail networks of all three Baltic countries from the Russian (1,520 mm wide) to the European (1,435 mm wide) standards. Considering how heavily the Russian military depends on railways for its logistics, the measure would bear double benefits as it would significantly slow down any hypothetical Russian advance while simultaneously bringing the advantage to NATO logistics and mobility in the region (Milevski 2022a). The project would require enormous investments; however, there probably will not be a more appropriate time to launch it any time soon. Since the

issue is truly strategic, NATO Security Investment Program (NSIP) could provide some resources, and so should the EU's military mobility initiative, including the USA, Canada, and Norway. Its budget for 2021-2027 was slashed from a proposed 6.5 billion EUR to 1.7 billion in April 2021 (Hamilton 2022); nevertheless, February 2022 provided all valid arguments to remedy this gross mistake.

Sweden's and Finland's accession to the Alliance will catalyse a brand-new strategic approach to the entire Baltic security as both countries are expected to strengthen the Alliance not only in terms of military capacities and capabilities but also in terms of strategic culture and geostrategic outlook. Their defence industries excel in producing specific weapons, vehicles, and equipment; both countries also possess extensive and well-structured systems of nationwide mobilisation and total defence posture, which have already inspired similarly shaped systems in all three Baltic countries (Kepe, Osburg 2017). Upon Sweden's and Finland's accession to the Alliance, the Baltic Sea will turn into the "NATO lake", which should similarly swiftly turn into a "Russian-no-go-zone" in case of conflict. On the other hand, the newcomers will have to meet the required levels of interoperability, readiness, and resilience - to achieve this, an increased number, scope, and frequency of multinational military exercises within the Alliance, especially in their native regions - the High North and the Baltic Sea - will have to occur. These efforts will create additional demands on infrastructure, logistics, equipment, weaponry, and tactics (Deni 2022, Hamilton 2022); nonetheless, they also offer a unique opportunity to fundamentally integrate the defence of the Scandinavian countries into those of the Baltics.

Last but not least, a threat of full-scale conventional attack is not, and by far not the most probable, security threat the Baltic states collectively face. Russian non-conventional (or hybrid) interferences gradually became the norm within not only the Baltics but the entire NATO and geopolitical West with many and various actions conducted by Russia - from elections meddling through 24/7 information and influence operations to the manufactured refugee crisis, critical infrastructure disruptions or (in)discriminate deadly attacks on civilians. When facing those

interferences and threats, all three Baltic states demonstrate good records on societal and institutional resilience building and promotion (Sprūds, Bērzina-Čerenkova, Broka 2022), which should be maintained and further promoted. Some specific lessons should also be learned from the current war in Ukraine (e. g. mobile networks protection and adaptation to the wartime conditions, see Milevski 2022a). Unfortunately, the hybrid threats are not the only non-conventional threats the Baltic states and entire NATO face. Many Russian media outlets and political figures have regularly threatened the Alliance and its respective member states with nuclear attacks ever since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, placing alleged doubts on American willingness to risk a nuclear war with Russia for cities like Riga or Vilnius. The Baltic countries should thus be among the most vocal advocates of a quick and thorough revision of the Alliance's nuclear deterrence posture to confront the utmost irresponsible, shameless, and unacceptable Russian nuclear sabre rattling with an unequivocal, ironclad, and steadfast complex collective deterrence - conventional as well as cyber, space and nuclear (Binnendijk, Koster 2022).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The paper introduced the NATO Madrid Summit and the newly adopted Strategic Concept via the lens of the Baltic regional defence. It concludes that the Madrid Summit failed to provide three Baltic republics with the sufficient and previously expected strengthening of allied military presence on their territories. The author of the text perceives the situation as a missed opportunity and wrong decision; however, he also suggests several measures to implement as practical steps to enhance further Baltic regional defence and deterrence, not only against conventional threats posed by aggressive Russia. These measures are now provided in the form of brief, policy-oriented recommendations:

- NATO's North Atlantic Council and Military Committee should further reconsider the current, as well as recently adopted enhanced Baltic defence posture, especially as Sweden and Finland are expected to enter the Alliance in the foreseeable future.

- Regarding mentioned developments, the Alliance's military planners should work out a comprehensive strategy for regional infrastructure development, military mobility enhancements and NRF deployments. Once those strategies exist, responsible authorities should reconsider strengthening the ground forces in all three Baltic republics to the level of an all-army brigade with additional air, maritime and cyber defence capabilities.
- Together with developing strategies for the defence of Sweden and Finland as new Alliance members, as well as plans of their contribution to the collective defence, the defence planning, developments, and actual troop deployments in the Baltics and the High North, should strive for further integration, ideally up to the level of emergence of a new, robust, and multidomain Nordic-Baltic defence posture
- Apart from conventional, NATO must also strengthen its nuclear posture and deterrence, as well as enhance its resilience against various hybrid threats and specific interferences. The Alliance's nuclear doctrine thus should be updated accordingly with nuclear exercises and capability planning bound more tightly to the conventional, cyber and space capacities and capabilities.
- An appropriate and binding financial framework based on a long-term and sustainable planning process for enhancing allied infrastructure, deterrence and defence within the entire Eastern flank must emerge. Beyond that, all countries of the Eastern flank need a rapid increase in their defence expenditures, with 2% of GDP (and 20% of that amount dedicated to equipment modernization) being not the desired ceiling but a bare and undisputable minimum. The Baltic states and Poland (pledging to increase its defence spending first to 3% of its GDP in 2023 and possibly up to 5% later – see Tilles 2022) should be examples to follow.

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# Adapt Institute

■ Na vršku 8  
811 01 Bratislava  
Slovak Republic

■ [office@adaptinstitute.org](mailto:office@adaptinstitute.org)  
■ +421 908 327 491  
■ [www.adaptinstitute.org](http://www.adaptinstitute.org)