Northern Europe, particularly the Baltic Sea region, is at the forefront of a new competition between NATO and a revanchist Russia capable and willing to use military force to alter the European security order. Since 2014, both the United States and NATO have responded to the changing security environment in northern Europe with a bolstered exercise program more focused on high-end warfighting and the introduction of NATO’s enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. These efforts provide a foundation, and the beginnings of a deterrence force, for NATO and the region's continued work to build effective and sustainable defense and deterrence in northern Europe. They are, however, in themselves insufficient without additional enablers, sufficient forward logistics, robust command and control, reinforcement arrangements, and planning and capabilities for the air and maritime domain. In this regard, establishing integrated and robust air defense for the Baltic Sea region is the next logical step in protecting NATO’s forward presence, pre-positioned equipment, and the United States’ and NATO’s ability to access and operate in the broader region during a potential crisis or conflict.

Effective air defense in northern Europe must start with a thick sensor network and then rely on both ground-based assets and aviation, along with robust command and control, all exercised in a joint setting. No single nation is able to provide all of these elements by itself; therefore, building effective and integrated air defense must be both a NATO and regional effort, supported by contributions from Alliance members. In this context, the Baltic States face a particular challenge given their geography and role as frontline states, and also because of the modest defense resources available and the need to balance investments among many important priorities in building their national defense capacities. However, with an approach that is integrated with the air defense efforts currently underway in the region, and within NATO, the Baltic States could make valuable contributions to their own defense and to the Alliance’s ability to reinforce the periphery if required.

The Threat in and from the Air Domain
The air domain is contested in ways that the United States and its NATO allies have not seen since the end of the Cold War. After nearly three
decades during which NATO air power enjoyed air supremacy and could operate in relative safety, and NATO member forces on the ground did not have to be concerned with attacks from the air. The pendulum is swinging in the other direction. Potential adversaries now field modern and sophisticated air forces, along with long-range strike weapons that can be delivered by either air or ground platforms. As NATO once again focuses on collective defense and deterrence for its members, particularly in Northern Europe, the Alliance must once again tackle airborne threats and to advance NATO’s ability to operate in the air domain. While this is an Alliance-wide concern, it has particular urgency for Northern Europe and the Baltic States.

A Russian attack on the Baltic States would very likely include an initial phase of major air and long-range strike operations attack to cut off NATO and national forces. A Russian attack on the Baltic States would very likely include an initial phase of major air and long-range strike operations attack to cut off NATO and national forces.

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Toward Effective Air Defense in Northern Europe


and Estonia, as well as across the broader region. By 2020, the Baltic region is expected to spend some $2 billion on defense, with a significant amount going toward investments in new capabilities.

Given these strategic and resource considerations, the Baltic States and NATO should consider the following recommendations:

**Alliance-Wide**

Transform the NATO Air Policing Mission into an Air Defense Mission. NATO’s Air Policing mission over the Baltic States has served the region and NATO well since 2004. However, given the new circumstances in the region and NATO’s return to collective defense and deterrence, it is now time to transition this effort to an air defense mission instead. This would include the increased presence of NATO-member fighter jets and airborne surveillance assets, bolstered command and control functions, and new rules of engagement for the units deployed in the mission to deter and defend against aggression in the region.

Add an Air Defense Element to the eFP Groups. Many of the nations leading and participating in the eFP groups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland have their own national surface-based air defense capabilities, ranging from short to long range assets. These national capabilities could be leveraged for exercises in the region, and could initially build familiarity and interoperability with the operational environment.

Consider the Baltic Sea Maritime Domain for Air Defense. The Baltic States themselves offer little in the way of strategic depth. Sea-based air defense assets in the Baltic Sea would offer an opportunity for deepening the air defense network in the region during a crisis. This would require exercises to ensure integration and interoperability, as well as a forward naval presence on a rotational basis in the Baltic Sea by NATO-member sea-based air defense assets.

**Baltic Cooperation and Integration**

Create a Regional Approach for Baltic Air Defense. The Baltic States are small nations with limited means. Many of the national capabilities could be leveraged for exercises in the region, and NATO members could also contribute additional sea- and air-based defenses.

Contribute to Air Domain Awareness. As part of a joint Baltic approach to air defense, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania should consider how they can contribute to better air domain awareness, which is key to effective air defense. Adding additional sensors in the Baltic States, and sharing the resulting air picture with NATO and other nations in the broader region, would do much to help thicken the sensor network in the region. NATO members could also contribute additional sea- and air-based defenses.

Link NATO Air Defense Mission to Baltic Ground-Based Air Defense. Effective air defense for the Baltic States would require closer integration between NATO’s Air Defense mission and the ground-based air defense systems currently in the region. This could be done by linking the sensors supporting national air defense systems with the command and control nodes supporting the Baltic Air Defense mission.

Consider a Baltic Contribution to EPAA. Building national capabilities for defense against ballistic missiles would be cost-prohibitive for the Baltic States, even when considering the increased availability of defense resources in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. However, the Baltic States should consider a national contribution to the overall EPAA effort currently underway. Baltic sensor systems could contribute to the EPAA sensor network to enhance early warning capacities, for example. EPAA sensors could also contribute information to a Baltic air defense network.

The Way Ahead for Air Defense in Northern Europe

Air defense currently constitutes a weak link in the emerging defense and deterrence construct in northern Europe and the Baltic Sea region. The Russian challenge, from and through the air, is very real and continues to evolve. New capabilities, in terms of manned and unmanned systems as well as precision strike systems, will make this challenge tougher over time. NATO and the region, however, are not without capabilities, capacities, and possibilities that could be combined into a coherent air defense construct for northern Europe.

To meet the challenge, northern Europe requires interoperable and integrated systems that together offer a layered air defense capability. Some of these components can be delivered by EPAA or by the national capabilities of major NATO allies, but there are important roles that the Baltic States can play as well. This is increasingly possible given the growing availability of defense resources in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, as well as across the broader region. By 2020, the Baltic region is expected to spend some $2 billion on defense, with a significant amount going toward investments in new capabilities.

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From a broader perspective, it is important to note that the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) is proceeding apace, including with installations in Poland. While intended for the threat of ballistic missiles from rogue nations, the system also has applicability to a broader range of challenges.

This renewed focus on air defense capabilities and capacities in northern Europe is happening within a broader context of increased interest in air defense across NATO. The Black Sea region is facing similar challenges to those found in the Baltic Sea region, and Romania, for example, recently announced the procurement of its own Patriot system.
Conclusion and the US Role

NATO has taken important steps to increase defense and deterrence in northern Europe, but more work remains to be done. One of the most urgent requirements is integrated air defense, an effort that will require investments at the national and NATO levels. This will necessitate close coordination to ensure that sensors, shooters, and command and control systems are available and aligned to provide layered air defense. The United States has a role to play as a leader of the transatlantic alliance, with air defense capabilities and capacities that are unrivaled. The United States can also help energize regional cooperation through participation in exercises, planning, and capabilities development in the region. Early US leadership in regional exercises is key to catalyzing investments and cooperation, which could later be transitioned to NATO.

The air defense challenge in northern Europe, particularly in the Baltic States, is considerable. But it can be overcome through careful and coordinated investments and cooperation. This will require political will, resources, but most importantly strong leadership.

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