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# GEOPOLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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## THE PLACE AND ROLE OF THE BALTIC STATES IN U. S. TRANSATLANTIC POLICY

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*This article analyses the place and role of the Baltic States in the U.S. policy in the context of the transformation of transatlantic relations. The topic has received only fragmentary coverage in the academic literature, which underscores the relevance of this study. The article aims to identify the factors that have shaped the position of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in Washington’s strategy since the restoration of their independence, as well as to examine how the Baltic States have used interaction with the United States to strengthen their security and advance their national interests. Methodologically, the study relies on a comparative analysis of two principal dimensions of cooperation: the political-diplomatic and the military-political. The theoretical framework draws on alliance theory and scholarship on the foreign policy of small states, which emphasises their dual character — simultaneous dependence on great powers and the capacity to influence them. The findings demonstrate that the United States views the Baltic States as a “forward line of containment” vis-à-vis Russia, reinforcing its military presence and infrastructure in the subregion. At the same time, the Baltic States actively promote an anti-Russian agenda and seek expanded political and military support from Washington. Thus, the Baltic States are both instruments and autonomous actors within U. S. policy, a pattern consistent with theoretical interpretations of the role of small states in asymmetric alliances.*

### Keywords:

The United States, Baltic States, NATO, the EU, transatlantic relations

### Introduction

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The Baltic States occupy a special place in U.S. policy toward the post-Soviet space. The United States never recognised the incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into the Soviet Union. Against this backdrop, and in the con-

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text of mutual aspirations for rapprochement, Washington, following the demise of the USSR, pursued a policy aimed at integrating the Baltic States into the Euro-Atlantic space. As Vorotnikov aptly observes, “it is difficult to find, among the former Soviet republics, states that have so consistently and unwaveringly—often at the expense of their own economic development—sought a deliberate break with their past and a purposeful reorientation of their foreign policy and foreign economic relations towards the West” [1, p. 133].

At the same time, the United States, “owing less to its own ambitions than to the security concerns of its new NATO allies, characterised by a persistent perception of an inevitable ‘Russian revanche,’ gained the opportunity to become one of the principal actors in the Baltic region” [2, p. 5].

The significance of relations with the Baltic States for the U.S. substantially increased following the onset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, and subsequently in 2022 after the launch of Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine. The Baltic Sea region, and in particular the three former Soviet republics, came to be perceived as a potential arena for direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO. The Baltic States emerged as among the principal advocates for Ukraine and proponents of the strictest measures against Russia within the transatlantic community. Finally, within the U.S. foreign policy establishment, parallels are frequently drawn between the Baltic and Ukrainian cases, on the assumption that the United States will never recognise Russia’s incorporation of Crimea and the new Russian regions, just as it never recognised the annexation of the Baltic States by the USSR.<sup>1</sup> In Russian discourse, for this reason, they have often come to be regarded as small states entirely dependent on the United States. However, this raises several questions: what place did the United States assign to the Baltic States within the framework of Euro-Atlantic relations and the intensification of U.S.-Russia tensions? What role were they intended to play among European states? Finally, a counter-question arises: to what extent did the views and aspirations of the Baltic elites influence shifts in the U.S. foreign policy towards Europe and Russia?

The issue of relations between the United States and the Baltic States has been repeatedly addressed in the scholarly literature. At the same time, the number of studies specifically focused on this topic remains limited. Among these, particular attention may be drawn to the works of Banka [3; 4], Jakstaite [5], and Vargulis [6], which adopt a regional perspective. The topic has also been examined in broader studies of U.S. [2; 7] and NATO [8; 9] policy in the Baltic region, Russia’s relations with the Baltic states [10], the foreign policies of the Baltic states [11; 12], and their role within the European Union [13; 14]. However, comprehensive analyses that systematically assess changes in U.S. policy towards the Baltic States, particularly since 2022, remain lacking. The present study seeks to address this gap in the literature.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g.: Game-Changer: The Baltics Under Pressure, 2022, *Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe*, p. 5, URL: <https://www.csce.gov/hearings/game-changer/> (accessed 06.07.2025).

## **Theoretical and methodological framework of the study**

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From a methodological standpoint, the article is based on a comparative analysis of U.S.-Baltic States interactions across two key dimensions: political-diplomatic and military-political. This approach makes it possible to identify how, and under which factors, the place and role of the Baltic States in U.S. foreign policy have evolved.

In addition, the study draws on selected elements of alliance theory and approaches to analysing small states' foreign policy. Although the interaction between great and small powers does not constitute the primary focus of these theoretical frameworks, it nonetheless receives considerable attention within them. Thus, Walt, in *The Origins of Alliances*, develops Waltz's concepts of *balancing* and *bandwagoning*, arguing that small states tend to bandwagon with the most powerful state [15, p. 29–30]. In Rothstein's view, the key distinction between great and small powers lies in the latter's inability to "obtain security primarily by use of [their] own capabilities," and their consequent reliance on external support [16, p. 29].

At the same time, as Keohane writes, "small states on the rim of the alliance wheel can pursue active, forceful and even obstreperous policies of their own," as well as "use alliances to influence American policy and alter American policy perspectives" [17, p. 162–163]. It is also worth noting Posen's approach, which observes that middle and small powers allied with the United States often resort to two strategies, "cheap riding" and "reckless behaviour," both aimed at manipulating their powerful ally.<sup>1</sup>

According to prevailing theoretical perspectives, great powers not only utilise small states for their own ends, but small states themselves also seek to influence their patrons and induce them to act in their interests. Smirnov most clearly captures this duality, arguing that small states function "as agents of the major player(s) with a specific functional specialisation aimed at securing resources, status, and guarantees from the 'empire' for the elites of the small state, which can then be leveraged for their own purposes." In his view, "this process does not always take the form of explicit agreements; however, this does not preclude the realisation of such exchanges, even when they occur tacitly through the implicit coordination between the 'empire' and its 'junior' partners." At the same time, he emphasises that "the elites of small states seek to exploit (and often stimulate) the assumption of specific commitments by great powers and the delegation of authority" [19, p. 138–139].

In this context, it is worth mentioning the concept of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, within which relations between the United States and the Baltic States have developed. Undoubtedly, the institutions that constitute this architecture — above all, NATO and the EU — are of considerable significance; however, for the present study, another aspect is more pertinent. The predominance of the United States within this framework, together with its selective and

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<sup>1</sup> The classification is provided by [18, p. 33–50]. The essence of "cheap riding" lies in states failing to exert sufficient efforts to ensure their own security, while "reckless behavior" consists in undertaking actions that may harm not only their own interests but also those of the United States.

exclusive character, creates conditions for competition among participating states for Washington's attention, in the hope of gaining access to key actors within the U.S. foreign policy establishment — and, with it, to certain material opportunities, preferential arrangements, and institutional advantages within this structure.

### **Political-diplomatic dimension**

In the early 1990s, following the declarations of independence by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the United States openly articulated its intention to facilitate their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. In 1994, the Baltic States became members of NATO's "Partnership for Peace" programme, launched at U.S. initiative, and just a decade later they acceded as full members of NATO and — albeit not without American support — of the European Union. In addition, the United States sought to maintain bilateral relations with the newly independent Baltic States. In 1998, President Clinton and the leaders of the three Baltic States signed the "Baltic Charter," which proclaimed the goal of building "special relations" between the U.S. and the Baltic States.<sup>1</sup>

In the history of U.S. — Baltic relations, two system-forming moments may be identified. First, beginning with President George H. W. Bush, the United States presented Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as emblematic examples of the success of its policies across multiple domains. In the 1990s and 2000s, the international system entered a unipolar phase accompanied by a new wave of democratisation. The Baltic States' successful transition to a Western model of market democracy was showcased as evidence of the superiority of American values, capitalism, and the emerging world order [20]. Second, during the first Trump administration, the President pressed NATO member states to increase their defence spending to 2 per cent of GDP. The Baltic States, having significantly raised their military budgets after 2014, joined the so-called "two per cent club" and were subsequently promoted as a model for other European countries [3, p. 167]. Second, the Baltic States themselves largely shaped their foreign policies around the need to attract the United States' attention. They wanted to earn American appreciation to provide greater U.S. involvement in guaranteeing their security. To this end, Baltic military personnel took an active part (relative to their capabilities) in U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq [21, p. 66]. This policy was pursued with the aim of gaining access to greater influence and opportunities to shape the Western agenda [4, p. 167]. Interestingly, American elites were well aware of the readiness of the Baltic States to do nearly anything for Washington's favour and made active use of this fact. Moreover, the pronounced pro-American stance of the Baltic elites was evaluated highly positively not only in official statements by U.S. officials but also in private conversations and confidential documents [4, p. 171 — 172].

It is also worth noting the domestic political linkages between the United States and the Baltic States. In Washington, there is an active Baltic-American community organised within the Joint Baltic American National Committee,

<sup>1</sup> The Baltic Charter, 1998, *U.S. Department of State*, URL: [https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/eur/ch\\_9801\\_baltic\\_charter.html](https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/eur/ch_9801_baltic_charter.html) (accessed 09.07.2025).

which compensates for its small numbers through close cooperation with other Central and Eastern European diaspora groups, primarily the Polish lobby [22, p. 883]. Their vigorous activity led in 1997 to the creation of the bipartisan Baltic Caucus in the U. S. Congress, which has since been engaged in ongoing legislative work.

U.S. policymakers also played a significant role in shaping the foreign policies of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, particularly their pro-American orientation. It is indicative that, at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, all three Baltic presidents were émigrés from the United States. At the same time, members of the U. S. Congress actively assisted the Baltic States in formulating their Euro-Atlantic policies. The significance of this involvement is vividly illustrated by a remark from the Estonian ambassador in Washington, who once referred to the bipartisan NATO commission in Congress as “our governess” [22, p. 887].

Undoubtedly, one of the central issues in U.S.—Baltic relations concerns Russia. Before 2022, two distinct stages can be identified, each characterised by opposing tendencies. On the one hand, the United States sought to encourage constructive engagement between the Baltic States and Russia to mitigate the negative effects of the former’s integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. On the other hand, it worked to counter the expansion of Moscow’s influence in the region. During the first stage, from the 1990s to 2014, the former approach predominated in Washington, although it gradually gave way to the latter. Following the Ukrainian crisis of 2013—2014, the second approach ultimately prevailed, contributing to the transformation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia from “intermediaries” into “gatekeepers” and “missionaries”.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it is worth noting that even after 2014, within American expert and political circles remained advocates of maintaining dialogue between the Baltic States and Russia.<sup>2</sup>

Particular attention within this section merits the foreign policy niche of the “missionary,” actively exploited by the Baltic States. Following the escalation of tensions between Western countries and Russia, they successfully began to position themselves within the Euro-Atlantic community as Russia experts who possess and have always possessed a deeper understanding of Moscow’s actions and “have been warning [the West]... 20 years ago” about its allegedly planned aggressive moves.<sup>3</sup> This approach found fertile ground in the U.S. among Cold War veterans and neoconservatives with anti-Russian leanings. Thus, the anti-Russian discourse propagated by the Baltic States, along with other Central and Eastern European countries, partially contributed to the toughening of the American stance toward Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> The typology of foreign policy niches of small states is taken from [19, p. 138]. The term “intermediary” refers to a transit state that links spaces of different “empires.” “Gatekeeper” denotes an outpost that prevents other major powers from extending their influence into the “empire.” “Missionary” designates an advocate or expert on neighbouring countries who channels the “empire’s” influence onto them.

<sup>2</sup> U. S. Policy Toward the Baltic States, 2017, *U. S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs*, p. 8, URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhrg24752/pdf/CHRG-115hhrg24752.pdf> (accessed 21.08.2025).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* P. 40.

At the same time, during the period between 2014 and 2022, the Baltic elites were not entirely satisfied with the U.S. approach to Russia. Washington's rhetoric still "differed considerably from the confrontational approach favoured by Poland, the Baltic member states, and [NATO Secretary General] Rasmussen," as it did not portray Russia as "a threat to U.S. security" [23, p. 231].

This suggests that, prior to 2022, the Baltic States' influence on U.S. policy towards Russia remained limited, even when supported by several allies. It is also worth noting two additional modes of interaction between the United States and the Baltic States in the realm of foreign policy.

The first concerns the European dimension. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia act as a "wedge between Europe and Russia" and as "agents of influence" [of the United States] within the European Union [24, p. 21]. They may also be viewed as an instrument for "disciplining" NATO allies that are not always willing "...to allocate sufficient funds for defence needs" [2, p. 30]. For their part, Baltic elites seek to maintain a careful balance between economic interests tied to the EU and security interests linked to the United States.

The second direction, which has emerged in U.S.—Baltic relations only in the past decade, is the China factor. Initially, the Baltic States, along with other European transatlanticists, were reluctant to acknowledge the objective nature of America's "pivot to Asia" [13, p. 30]. Subsequently, however, they came to recognise that "inevitably, the U.S. will judge its European allies according to the level of support they offer in countering the rise of China" [4, p. 175]. Consequently, having identified yet another means of attracting Washington's attention, the Baltic States began pursuing an even tougher China policy than the United States itself. The most striking manifestation of this was Lithuania's stance. Vilnius first withdrew from the "17+1" format established by the PRC for engagement with Central and Eastern European states. It subsequently opened a Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius, thereby signalling alignment with U.S. policy and earning Washington's approval.

In Lust's view, one of the primary motivations behind this course of action was precisely the desire to demonstrate solidarity with the United States on the China issue [25]. It is therefore not surprising that Lithuania's *démarche* was interpreted in China as evidence of Vilnius's determination to closely align with U.S. policy [26, p. 386].

After 2022, the aforementioned trends in U.S.—Baltic relations have continued to evolve, leading to a further strengthening of ties between the parties. The geographical position of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia along the border with Russia has reinforced their status as "frontline states" and attracted increased attention from the U.S. foreign policy establishment. They have significantly increased their defence spending to 3–4 per cent of GDP and have transferred military and other equipment to Ukraine valued at approximately 1.2–1.5 per cent of GDP. This behaviour has elevated their standing as "model allies" and exemplars for other NATO members, a point repeatedly emphasised at the highest levels in the United States.

The Baltic Caucus also significantly intensified its activities. From 2022 to 2025, its membership grew from 73 U.S. congressmen and 14 senators to 106 and

21, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Members of the caucus developed a series of bills, including the Baltic Defence and Deterrence Act, the Baltic Reassurance Act, and the Baltic Security Initiative Act. These envisioned increased support for the Baltic States through funding, infrastructure modernisation, and enhanced joint military capabilities within NATO and bilateral programmes. However, none of these bills was eventually passed, vividly illustrating the limits of the Baltic lobby's influence.

The significance of the Baltic States as “experts on Russia” and as sources of intelligence on developments along NATO's borders, as well as in Ukraine, has increased markedly. Moreover, they have begun to provide more frequent opportunities for U.S. reconnaissance aircraft and UAVs to operate in close proximity to Russia's borders [27]. Their role within the European community has also evolved. Whereas major EU states such as Germany and France were previously more inclined towards cooperation with Moscow, it is now the perspective of Central and Eastern European countries, including the Baltic States, on relations with Russia that has become increasingly prominent in European discourse [28, p. 544].

The Baltic States have gained additional influence within Europe through the appointment of their representatives — Kaja Kallas, Andrius Kubilius, and Valdis Dombrovskis — to key positions in the European Commission: High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Commissioner for Defence, and Commissioner for the Economy, respectively. This development can be interpreted as a continuation of Washington's strategy of driving a “wedge” between Russia and Europe.

On the other hand, the Baltic allies of the United States were not entirely satisfied with what they perceived as the excessively cautious policy of the Biden administration toward the Ukrainian crisis, aimed at preventing escalation in Russian-American relations. Official representatives refrained from publicly expressing disagreement with one another to avoid undermining transatlantic unity. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, however, President Biden had to put pressure on his Baltic allies due to their excessively anti-Russian rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> Representatives of the political elites of the Baltic States and other Central and Eastern European countries ventured to bring the emerging disagreements into the public domain only in September 2024. They published an open letter to President Biden, where they warned that the American president would “stain his legacy” unless he lifted restrictions on the use of Western weapons by the Ukrainian armed forces. Eastern European elites urged him to transfer 300 Abrams tanks and 1,000 Bradley IFVs to Ukraine. They also supported the NATO membership of Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and “any other democratic country.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Baltic Caucus, 2025, *The Joint Baltic American National Committee*, URL: <https://jbanc.org/baltic-caucus/> (accessed 02.10.2025).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas, K., Pancevski, B. 2023, President Biden Discusses Ukraine Strategy With Germany's Olaf Scholz, 04.03.2023, *The Wall Street Journal*, URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/president-biden-discusses-ukraine-strategy-with-germanys-olaf-scholz-2c940a7f> (accessed 13.07.2025).

<sup>3</sup> Dupuis, O. 2024, Open letter: President Biden, this is how you can uphold your legacy by supporting Ukraine, 27.09.2024, *The Kyiv Independent*, URL: <https://kyivindependent.com/open-letter-president-biden-this-is-how-you-can-uphold-your-legacy-by-supporting-ukraine/> (accessed 13.07.2025).

The inclusion of the final point in the letter, concerning Indo-Pacific countries, may have been driven by two reasons. On the one hand, it represents the development of previous trends, whereby the Baltic States shifted toward an anti-China policy as part of a strategy to attract U.S. attention. In August 2022, Latvia and Estonia followed Lithuania's example and withdrew from the "16+1" format, earning Washington's approval. Tellingly, Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis accused China of attempting to "replace Pax Americana with Pax Sinica," a new world order governed by the "might is right" principle, in which the Baltic States would evidently feel far less secure.<sup>1</sup> The other reason, which also echoes American rhetoric, is the intensified Russia—China cooperation amid the special military operation, perceived in the Baltic States as a direct threat to their own security.

Thus, the United States and the Baltic States actively sought to leverage one another in pursuit of their respective interests. However, the relationship was asymmetrical: while the Baltic States were generally willing to comply with Washington's expectations and assume the roles assigned to them, the reciprocal dynamic proved less effective. The United States was often reluctant to follow the lead of the Baltic States and other Central and Eastern European countries, as doing so was seen as risking a serious deterioration in relations with Russia and, consequently, instability in Europe. Such outcomes could divert U.S. attention from other strategic priorities, including the "pivot to Asia." At the same time, Baltic States' narratives on Russia found receptive audiences in Washington among a range of policymakers and experts, thereby gradually influencing the evolution of U.S. policy towards Russia.

### **Military-political dimension**

Another facet of our analysis concerns the military-political interaction between the United States and the Baltic States. Returning to the 1990s, it should be noted that the U. S. Department of Defence (DoD) initially opposed the rapid admission of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to NATO. The Pentagon had been disappointed with the military capabilities of the larger and more industrially developed Hungary and the Czech Republic, which had been admitted to the Alliance earlier [22, p. 22]. Under these circumstances, the reluctance of American military leaders to assume responsibility for the Baltic States appears understandable. Nevertheless, the political decision to expand NATO was ultimately taken, and the objections of the military were set aside.

The apprehensions of the Department of Defence proved well-founded: owing to economic difficulties in the early years of independence, the Baltic States required substantial external support. The United States predictably assumed a pivotal role in this process, providing assistance through the Foreign Military Fi-

<sup>1</sup> Varadarajan, T. 2023, Little Lithuania Stands Tall Against Russia and China, 05.05.2023, *The Wall Street Journal*, URL: <https://www.wsj.com/world/lithuania-stands-against-russia-and-china-landsbergis-taiwan-ukraine-war-362976d3> (accessed 14.07.2025).

nancing (FMF) programme. It primarily covered the training of military personnel as well as the supply of military equipment and hardware. Additionally, the U.S. transferred obsolete or up-to-be-upgraded military equipment to the Baltic States free of charge [29, p. 11].

Over time, funding for these programmes inevitably declined. At the same time, the strictly military dimension of U.S.—Baltic interaction intensified. As disclosed in 2010 through diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, NATO — at the urging of the United States and Germany — adopted a secret military plan, Eagle Protector, designed to defend Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in the event of military aggression. Notably, in this instance, the initiative for developing the plan originated from military authorities, whereas U.S. diplomats expressed concern that it might create “unnecessary tensions” in relations with Russia. Initially, Poland alone was designated as the object of protection under the plan; the Baltic States were included only after repeatedly requesting more substantial security guarantees in the form of concrete defence arrangements.<sup>1</sup>

Following the onset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, defence cooperation between the U.S. and the Baltic States, both bilaterally and within NATO, sharpened considerably. Primarily, the institutional and legal framework for military collaboration underwent significant modernisation. The first initiative in this domain was the U.S.—Baltic Dialogue launched in 2016. It addressed various regional security issues and aimed to bolster defence cooperation between the U.S. and the Baltic States.

In 2017, Washington signed agreements on defence cooperation with the Baltic States. These represented uniform documents granting U.S. armed forces extensive operational capabilities across the territories of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The agreements were designed to ensure unrestricted U.S. access to designated military facilities, the right to pre-position and store military equipment, conduct exercises, and construct infrastructure with minimal restrictions imposed by the host countries. In effect, these documents established the legal foundation for a long-term U.S. military presence in the region, affording American personnel and equipment extensive legal privileges and freedom of movement. Collectively, the agreements transformed the Baltic States into a forward U.S. military base along Russia’s borders, enabling the rapid deployment of forces and execution of operations.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, in a similar bilateral format, the U.S. and the Baltic States signed security cooperation roadmaps in 2019. These documents were somewhat more limited in scope and were intended to highlight specific priorities on this matter.

<sup>1</sup> Traynor, I. 2010, WikiLeaks cables reveal secret Nato plans to defend Baltics from Russia, 06.12.2010, *The Guardian*, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/06/wikileaks-cables-nato-russia-baltics> (accessed 05.08.2025).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g.: Lithuania (17–227) — Agreement on Defense Cooperation, 2017, U.S. Department of State, 05.04.2017, URL: <https://www.state.gov/17-227/> (accessed 03.10.2025).

These included maintaining a U.S. military presence in the subregion, supporting the Baltic States in strengthening their military capabilities, conducting regular exercises and exchanges of expertise, and cooperating in the field of cybersecurity.<sup>1</sup>

Military cooperation between the U.S. and the Baltic States also took concrete financial form. From 2015 to 2021, the U.S. allocated the following funds to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia:

- \$ 250 million under the FMF programme;
- approximately \$ 25 million through the International Military Education and Training programme;
- \$ 605.5 million under Title 10-funded train and equip programmes.

Over the same period, the Baltic States procured defence products and services from the United States, totalling \$ 503.9 million under the Foreign Military Sales program, as well as \$ 346.3 million under the Direct Commercial Sales programme.<sup>2</sup> Notably, the amounts allocated and the funds spent on arms procurement are nearly identical — \$ 880 million and \$ 850 million, respectively. This is unsurprising, given that U.S. grants and loans are typically earmarked for purchases from American suppliers. Thus, the resources transferred were not dissipated but effectively recirculated into the U.S. economy.

In addition, in 2020, the DoD established the Baltic Security Initiative (BSI). Under this initiative, \$ 169 million was allocated to the Baltic States for FY2021, primarily for the development of air defence systems, ground forces, and maritime domain awareness.<sup>3</sup> Thereby, the Baltic States became firmly tied to the U.S. as a small but steady market for defence products.

The U.S. also adeptly seized the opportunity to bolster its direct military presence along Russia's borders. Conservative analysts to immediately proceed with a permanent deployment of U.S. troops on NATO's eastern flank in contravention of the NATO—Russia Founding Act.<sup>4</sup> However, despite these calls, the DoD stationed military units in the Baltic States on a rotational basis. The largest initiative of this kind was Operation Atlantic Resolve, funded through the European Deterrence Initiative. The funds allocated for it steadily increased, reaching a peak of \$ 6.5 billion at the end of Trump's first administration, before

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g.: U.S., Lithuania Detail Roadmap for Cooperation Through 2024, 2019, U.S. Department of Defense, URL: <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1803578/us-lithuania-detail-roadmap-for-cooperation-through-2024/> (accessed 03.10.2025).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Security Cooperation With the Baltic States, 2021, *U.S. Department of State*, URL: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-baltic-states/> (accessed 06.08.2025).

<sup>3</sup> Congressional Record, 2020, vol. 166, № 218, Part 3, *Library of Congress*, p. H8279, URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2020-12-21/pdf/CREC-2020-12-21-house-bk3.pdf> (accessed 03.10.2025).

<sup>4</sup> Coffee, L., Kochis, D. 2015, The Baltic States: The United States Must Be Prepared to Fulfill Its NATO Treaty Obligations, *The Heritage Foundation*, URL: <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-baltic-states-the-united-states-must-be-prepared-fulfill-its-nato-treaty> (accessed 06.08.2025).

beginning to decline gradually. The Pentagon attributed this reduction in funding to the completion of most construction and infrastructure projects [30, p. 13]. At the same time, it can also be linked to the routinization of the “Russian threat” in Western discourse.

Forces deployed to the Baltic States under this operation remained modest. Initially, each country hosted one reinforced company (100–200 personnel). However, from 2019 onwards, company-sized units were replaced by battalion-sized formations (600–800 personnel). Together with multinational NATO battalion-sized battlegroups stationed in the Baltic States under the Enhanced Forward Presence programme since 2016, they were intended to function as a form of “tripwire.” These units were designed less to engage in combat with an aggressor than to deter potential aggression through their mere presence. At the same time, concerns persisted in the West regarding the possible reluctance of the United States to become embroiled in a conflict with Russia over the Baltic States. Experts doubted that “any U.S. president would trade Washington for Riga merely to defend the credibility of the Alliance” [31, p. 40].

The issue of missile defence merits separate consideration. In August 2014, Poland and the Baltic States—against the backdrop of the development of the U.S. European missile defence system—appealed to NATO with requests to redirect it towards Russia. However, the Alliance leadership rejected such proposals, evidently unwilling to provoke Moscow excessively in the missile and nuclear domain [7, p. 52–53].

Joint military exercises, both bilateral and within the NATO framework, also emerged as an important instrument for bolstering U.S. military influence in the Baltic region. Among the most significant and largest ones, one can name the BALTOPS naval exercise, conducted under U.S. leadership in the Baltic Sea since 1971, as well as the Saber Strike and Spring Storm land exercises. It is interesting to trace the evolution of these exercises in the contemporary period. Thus, whereas in the early 2000s Russia regularly participated in BALTOPS, and Saber Strike was intended to train Baltic personnel preparing for deployment to Afghanistan, since 2014, the exercises have acquired a distinctly anti-Russian orientation [32].

With the beginning of the special military operation in Ukraine, defence cooperation between the U.S. and the Baltic States reached a new level. U.S. Army battalion battle groups stationed in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were substantially reinforced. President Biden announced this as early as 22 February 2022, in response to Russia’s recognition of the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. Despite this, by the summer of 2022, the Baltic States were calling for an increase in the NATO military presence on their territory to tens of thousands of personnel, a scale that, at the time, only the United States was capable of providing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Birnbaum, M., Ryan, M. 2022, Splits open at NATO about how to boost presence in Eastern Europe, *The Washington Post*, URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/05/17/nato-troops-europe-russia-ukraine/> (accessed 07.08.2025).

Two main factors explain the United States' reluctance to take such a step. First, a sharp increase in NATO personnel along Russia's borders risked escalating the Russia—West confrontation, an outcome Washington sought to avoid. Second, practical constraints were significant: the Baltic States lacked — and were unlikely in the near term to develop — the infrastructure required to host such large troop contingents. Accordingly, a decision was taken in Brussels to expand only the multinational NATO units in the Baltic States on a gradual basis, to develop them into full brigades over time. This reflects a shift from a “forward presence” to a “forward defence”, in which the objective is no longer limited to deterrence but extends to active defence against potential aggression.

Additionally, it should be noted that other NATO member states have largely assumed responsibility for strengthening the military presence in the Baltic States. Alongside the aforementioned multinational NATO brigades, in which the United States does not participate, one may also highlight operations such as Baltic Air Policing, which patrols the region's airspace.<sup>1</sup> Later, it was accompanied by Baltic Sentry (protection of critical underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea) and Eastern Sentry (reinforcement of NATO's military presence along the eastern flank following the detection of unidentified drones over the territory of Alliance member states) operations. Nevertheless, the U.S. experts notice that while NATO's guarantees appear ironclad on paper, implementing the new plans in practice will take years to implement.<sup>2</sup>

U.S. military funding for the Baltic States also intensified, albeit unevenly. In FY2022, disbursements under the FMF programme reached \$ 426 million — nearly double the total for the entire 2015—2021 period — before declining sharply to \$ 59 million in FY2023 and \$ 29.25 million in both FY2024 and FY2025. This clearly indicates a downward trend in funding, most likely driven by the need to redirect resources towards support for Ukraine.

Assistance under the BSI grew more steadily, increasing from \$ 169 million in FY2021 to \$ 225 million in FY2025. However, as noted by Senator Chris Coons, the leading Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defence, in July 2025, the majority of funds requested for FY2026 under this heading are, in practice, expected to be reallocated to Ukraine assistance.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the significance of the BSI for enhancing the Baltic States' defence capabilities appears highly ambiguous.

With the help of both American and domestic funding, the Baltic States increased their procurement of armaments from the U.S. (Table).

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<sup>1</sup> Budginaite-Froehly, J. 2024, NATO Air Defense Systems to Secure Baltic Skies, *CEPA*, URL: <https://cepa.org/article/nato-air-defense-systems-to-secure-baltic-skies/> (accessed 31.10.2025).

<sup>2</sup> Kepe, M. 2024, From Forward Presence to Forward Defense: NATO's Defense of the Baltics, Freyr Trade & Services.

<sup>3</sup> Zengerle, P. 2025, US Senate committee backs more Ukraine funding, following Trump shift on aid, 31.07.2025, *Reuters*, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-senate-committee-backs-more-ukraine-funding-following-trump-shift-aid-2025-07-31/> (accessed 07.08.2025).

### Procurement of heavy weapons by the Baltic States from the U. S., 2022 – 2025

Country	Type of weapons	Total cost
Lithuania	M142 HIMARS multiple rocket launchers (8 units) + ammunition ATAMCS (18 missiles) AMRAAM for NASAMS air defence systems (36 missiles)	\$ 595 million
Latvia	M142 HIMARS multiple rocket launchers (6 units) + ammunition ATAMCS (10 missiles) NSM CDS anti-ship systems (presumably 1 battery = 3 units) <sup>1</sup> + ammunition	\$ 330 million
Estonia	M142 HIMARS multiple rocket launchers (6 units) + ammunition ATAMCS (18 missiles)	\$ 500 million

Compiled based on data from the Defence Security Cooperation Agency, U.S. Department of Defence.

The actual volume of armaments procured by the Baltic States from the United States remains relatively modest. However, it should not be overlooked that the subregion in question is geographically compact, meaning that even such quantities of U.S. multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) could pose a serious threat. On the other hand, most of the equipment ordered has yet to be delivered to the region. Given the prioritisation of arms supplies to Ukraine, as well as the heavy workload of U.S. defence industry production facilities, driven by demand from both Ukraine and the U.S. armed forces, the Baltic States are unlikely to receive prompt or large-scale deliveries.

The number and scale of military exercises conducted by the Baltic States within NATO have also increased substantially. The year 2024 proved most indicative in this regard, as the Alliance carried out the largest BALTOPS naval manoeuvres in decades (over 50 ships from 20 countries), and the Steadfast Defender multidomain exercise (90.000 personnel from 32 countries). Although the latter was conducted on a Europe-wide scale, a series of smaller-scale exercises took place under its umbrella directly in the Baltic States, including Saber Strike, Crystal Arrow, Spring Storm, and Swift Response.

It is therefore pertinent to examine how the Baltic States perceive the balance between U.S. and European security guarantees. During the 2000s and 2010s, they unequivocally prioritised NATO and, in particular, the United States as the primary guarantor of their security, while viewing the EU and its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as secondary. A key role in shaping this perception was played by the stance of major continental powers such as France and Germany, which favoured pragmatic engagement with Russia [14, p. 114]. However, developments during President Trump's first administration — a perceived

<sup>1</sup> The DSCA website does not specify the exact number of ordered installations. Based on indirect data obtained by comparing Latvia's order (\$ 110 million) with Romania's 2021 order for similar systems (two batteries for \$ 286 million), it can be inferred that Latvia ordered only one battery.

decline in U.S. engagement in Central and Eastern Europe and Europe more broadly, Brexit, and the consolidation of the Franco-German tandem — prompted a moderation of the Baltic States' position towards European defence initiatives, including the CSDP and PESCO [1, p. 130; 13, p. 32].

Following the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022 and amid the strengthening of EU—NATO cooperation, a further intensification of Baltic participation in European defence initiatives can be expected, albeit strictly within the framework of reinforcing NATO's European pillar. Such measures include enhanced cooperation with Poland and the Nordic countries, as well as participation in the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, the escalation in the frequency and scale of exercises, as well as the deployment of U.S. Army units in the Baltic States, pursued a dual objective. On the one hand, these measures served as instruments of moral support for the republics, “flag demonstrations”, and deterrence against potential “aggression” from the eastern neighbour. On the other hand, the involvement of diverse military units enhanced the quality of interoperability among personnel from various countries, while improving their familiarity with the theatre of operations and the likely adversary. Finally, the potentially provocative nature of such activities cannot be discounted, as they may have been intended to elicit an inadequate response from Moscow. All this indicates that the United States was preparing to employ Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as a springboard for a prospective military conflict with Russia. In this context, the foreign policy conduct of the Baltic States evinced their fervent readiness to assume this role, in anticipation of support from Brussels and Washington. At the same time, certain U.S. actions — such as the partial reduction in military funding for the Baltic States and the eschewal of excessive reinforcement of the military presence along the Russian border — suggest that the United States has no intention of yielding to anti-Russian radicals in Europe and seeks to maintain control over the situation along the Russian-Baltic frontier.

## **Conclusion**

The conducted research demonstrates that the place and role of the Baltic States in U.S. transatlantic policy are determined primarily by their ability to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Washington actively leveraged the Baltic States in its interests as a tool for pressuring uncooperative European countries or as a battering ram in matters of military or economic security pertaining to Russia and China. In turn, despite their limited resources, the Baltic States adeptly capitalised on their status as among the most loyal U.S. allies, transforming it into a means of bolstering their own security and augmenting their political weight.

The United States also had to contend with several instances of “reckless behaviour” on the part of the Baltic States, aimed at compelling Washington to undertake more radical actions vis-à-vis Moscow. Consequently, they could operate

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<sup>1</sup> Bajarūnas, E. 2025, *The Baltics Adapt to Trump*, *Center for European Policy Analysis*, URL: <https://cepa.org/article/the-baltics-adapt-to-trump/> (accessed 10.08.2025).

only within the parameters set by American leadership, which underscores their strategic dependence and subordination to U.S. foreign policy. At the same time, it should be noted that such constraints existed primarily at the strategic level, whereas at the tactical level, the Baltic States enjoyed relative autonomy.

In conclusion, a number of changes may be anticipated in U.S. — Baltic relations following Donald Trump's return to the White House. Although the Baltics undoubtedly anticipated a victory for Kamala Harris, they were compelled to alter course after the Republicans' triumph, asserting that their priority lies in engaging both parties. However, Trump's readiness to negotiate with Russia, Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth's inability to unconditionally affirm the continued U.S. troop presence in the Baltic States, and doubts regarding the efficacy of the entire Euro-Atlantic security architecture have begun to engender serious concerns among them.

The new administration is sending mixed signals regarding the Baltic States. On one hand, Estonia has substantially expanded its procurement of U.S. armaments totalling \$ 4.73 billion.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, U.S. leadership has announced plans to reduce the scale of military assistance provided to the Baltic States.<sup>2</sup> All this aligns with the second Trump administration's policy of cost reduction and increasing NATO allies' self-reliance. This situation, however, fully conforms to the previously noted trend of expanding Baltic participation in EU defence initiatives as part of bolstering NATO's European pillar.

For Russia, this situation appears highly ambiguous. The United States formally sells substantial quantities of armaments to the Baltic States, yet now the latter must purchase them with their own or European funds. Moreover, given the high workload of U.S. defence factories, it remains uncertain when these deliveries will reach the buyers. Conceivably, such a policy is also employed by Washington as an instrument of pressure on Moscow. Under these circumstances, Russia should avoid overreacting to the prevailing situation, while bearing in mind that the Baltic States' role as Europe's anti-Russian vanguard has remained unchanged under the Trump administration.

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<sup>1</sup> Raufoglu, A. 2025, Baltic Shield: Estonia Secures Massive US Long-Range Strike Capability in Wake of Russian Air Breaches, *Kyiv Post*, URL: <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/61185> (accessed 05.11.2025).

<sup>2</sup> Slattery, G. 2025, After diplomatic blitz on Ukraine and Gaza, Trump moves to passenger seat, *Reuters*, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/after-diplomatic-blitz-ukraine-gaza-trump-moves-passenger-seat-2025-09-20/> (accessed 05.11.2025).

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