The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

Defensive Dominance and Deterrence in the Baltic (DDB)

A Warfighting Concept for NATO Frontline Forces

Mastering Military Change steering group

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Executive Summary

DDB is a tactical warfighting concept for NATO frontline forces in the Baltic, and in Lithuania specifically, realisable within three years. It is rooted in deterrence by denial and consistent with NATO's plans, but original in how it fights: a European hellscape on the border, a porcupine defence in depth and fires from depth, bound together by an AI-enabled targeting web and mission command.

The Stakes

European and Canadian forces in the Baltic states cannot currently defend against a Russian onslaught, infiltration or rapid land-grab. A lodgement of any size would let Moscow impose a fait accompli under nuclear threat and break Alliance cohesion. Russia is regenerating. Scandinavian intelligence assesses that a larger operation could be within reach in two to five years, a smaller incursion sooner. Russia does not currently take European and Canadian deterrence, capability or will to fight seriously.

The Window of Vulnerability

Europe lacks UAS, counter-UAS, ISR, electronic warfare, air defence, loitering munitions and deep precision strike at the scale and magazine depth required, and the AI-enabled command, control and targeting needed to cohere them. The conceptual gap compounds this: there is no agreed way for formations at Corps level and below to defeat an attack. Yet current technology favours the defender. Every system in DDB exists today or can be fielded at scale within three years. What is missing is the decision to buy, field and master these systems now.

The Character of the Battlefield

The battlefield will be nonlinear from the outset, with canalising forest and swamp, Kaliningrad threatening the rear, and special forces and proxies throughout the depth. It will be transparent, saturated by sensors and swept by long-range fires and massed precision attack: mass has returned. The electromagnetic spectrum will be fiercely contested and C2 frequently disconnected, so forces must fight decentralised, dispersed and disconnected. The air-ground littoral, crowded with drones and semi-detached from the higher airspace, will be decisive. Whoever holds it holds freedom of action on the ground.

The Enemy

Russia's likely aim is to link Kaliningrad to Russian-held territory, cut off reinforcement and encircle NATO forces. It would probably attack on three axes: west from Belarus bypassing Vilnius, southwest via Daugavpils bypassing Kaunas, and northeast from Kaliningrad. Infiltration, a limited land-grab or a surprise move on Vilnius are credible alternatives, and any could escalate. Sabotage, drone incursions, GPS denial and cyber attack would come first. Russian forces are combat-experienced, adept at integrating EW, massed drones and fires, tolerant of casualties, and backed by an industry that scales weapons such as the Geran and Lancet. But Russia is slow to institutionalise innovation, poorly served by its junior leadership and hobbled by centralised, politicised command. These weaknesses are exploitable only if NATO adapts faster.

Own Forces

Around 75,500 troops are in place: c.47,500 Lithuanian reserve, volunteer and militia forces, a Lithuanian regular army of c.23,000, and the c.5,000-strong German 45th Armoured Brigade. They will initially be outnumbered in personnel and traditional systems. Higher tactical command rests with Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin. Land is the supported domain. Air and Maritime support it, subject to early political commitment.

Scheme of Manoeuvre

The intent is to deny the enemy the space to mass, stop the initial punch or infiltration at the border, and deny the "hold" in his move-bite-hold tactics; then to blind his ISR, shatter his cohesion and defeat him in detail, buying time for reinforcement. DDB does this in three mutually reinforcing layers.

The hellscape. A dense kill zone along the border, built on the Baltic Defence Line and the Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative. Locally raised reservists fight from platoon strongpoints behind obstacle belts and smart mines, canalising the enemy into kill zones struck by short-range drones and cached loitering munitions. Brigade fires out to 100 km create forward fire dominance.

The porcupine. Behind the border, a layered, dispersed and fortified defence across the whole depth of Lithuania. Offensive micro-A2AD umbrellas, combining EW, air defence and counter-UAS with strike drones, suppress and destroy enemy drone attack and drone defence to win localised air-littoral superiority. Armour and mounted infantry move under these umbrellas to counter-penetrate and counter-stroke.

Fires from depth. Division-level fires at 100–500 km, together with uncrewed strike units, hit launchers, stockpiles, air defence, C2, logistics and the second echelon. Operational fires at 500–2,000 km target the war economy without crossing nuclear red lines, and act as an intra-war deterrent.

An AI-enabled targeting web binds the scheme together, building tailored targeting packages from fused sensor data, while air-gapped decision support at every echelon lets units fight when disconnected. Mission command, NATO's structural advantage over Russia, is the key enabler. Survival depends on deception, emission control, dispersion, and dispersed munitions storage: depots within 40 km of the line will not survive.

Decisions Required Now

European and Canadian governments must field these capabilities at scale and sustain production; put new systems in frontline hands now and iterate doctrine around them; embrace AI-enabled C2 and targeting; embed EW, air defence and counter-UAS at every echelon; out-adapt Russia; and decide faster politically, aligning commands around one concept before any crisis. **The window of vulnerability is a product of choice. It can be closed by choice.**

1. Issue and Scope of this Concept

European and Canadian forces in the Baltic states[1] cannot currently defend against a Russian onslaught or a quick landgrab geared towards destroying political cohesion in NATO and the EU.[2]

We do not yet have the right capabilities in place, and certainly not at the scale or depth of magazine required, especially regarding Uncrewed Aerial Systems (UAS), Counter-UAS, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), Electronic Warfare, Air Defence, Loitering Munitions, Deep Precision Strike assets at a variety of ranges, and the AI-enabled C2 and targeting needed to cohere this new mass. The lack of these systems and munitions will throttle the effectiveness of those capabilities that are currently fielded.

Nor, despite clear plans at the operational-strategic level developed by Allied Command Operations, do we have a credible plan or concept at the higher tactical level to effectively employ the necessary mixture of new and existing capabilities to be able to defeat and thus credibly deter a Russian attack.

Europe is in a process of rearmament, still largely focused on legacy systems,[3] that will take years to complete, and the US is engaged in a process of abrupt burden shifting, opening up deterrence gaps. At the same time, the character of warfare is changing rapidly, as militaries adapt to disruptive technological advancements.[4] This creates both a threat to the effectiveness of legacy plans, platforms and force structures, but also an opportunity to rapidly upgrade capability and combat power by embracing and mastering this transformational shift.[5]

Massive casualties in Ukraine notwithstanding, Russia is regenerating in terms of personnel, materiel, new force structure and bases (being built right across the border), with warnings from Scandinavian intelligence services[6] that a larger military operation could be in reach

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1 European and Canadian forces represent the vast majority of NATO forces in place in the Baltic states, including the forces of the three Baltic states themselves, as well as providing the framework nations for the three Frontline Forces (FLF) deployments: Germany is framework nation for Lithuania, Canada for the multinational brigade in Latvia and the UK for Estonia.

2 Clearly, the timing of any such scenario and the situation in Ukraine at that point, the commitment of Russian forces there, as well as the participation of allies in and the availability – in or close to theatre – of their capabilities are just some of the many operational conditions that will affect enemy and allied force effectiveness. The main purpose of this DDB concept is to spur and contribute to thinking and action on modern multi-domain defence, capability choices and force mix, and how to be prepared, in time, for the fight we may face but seek to deter, including a concerted Russian assault or a limited landgrab. In short, to regain our defensive agency and seize the initiative on deterrence regardless of circumstances beyond our control.

3 See, for example, Guntram B. Wolff, Julian Binder, and Tariq Morgan, "Big Spending, Little Future: Germany Is Rearming Differently from Poland and the UK," Kiel Institute for the World Economy, May 12, 2026, https://www.kielinstitut.de/publications/news/big-spending-little-future-germany-is-rearming-differently-from-poland-and-the-uk/.

4 Particularly, though not only, the commodification of precision strike and precision sensing, and the deeper shifts underlying these changes towards AI, autonomy, robotics and software-defined systems, presaging a larger change to come. Together with the return of great power rivalry, these changes have contributed to the return of mass as a defining feature of the battlespace. For a broad-based assessment of political, military-strategic, technological, and moral developments affecting the character of war and warfare, see Tim Sweijs and Jeffrey H. Michaels, eds., *Beyond Ukraine: Debating the Future of War* (London: Hurst, 2024; Oxford University Press: 2025)

5 For examples of how this transformational shift creates opportunities for small and middle powers see e.g. Tim Sweijs, Saskia van Genugten, and Frans Osinga, eds. *Defence Planning for Small and Middle Powers: Rethinking Force Development in an Age of Disruption* (Routledge: 2025)

6 Swedish Armed Forces, Militära underrättelse- och säkerhetstjänstens årsöversikt 2025 [Military Intelligence and Security Service Annual Overview 2025] (Stockholm: Försvarsmakten, 2026), https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/globalassets/02-om-forsvarsmakten/myndighetsinformation/dokument/aktuellt/nyheter/must-ars-oversikt-2025.pdf.

in 2-5 years, and a smaller incursion or land grab operation to test Western cohesion even earlier. Russian hostility to NATO and to democratic Europe means that, irrespective of the state of the conflict in Ukraine, there is the possibility of armed conflict breaking out via miscalculation, an attempted grey zone incursion, an opportunistic 'bolt-from-the-blue' attack, or a deliberate onslaught drawing on re-armament and modernisation.

NATO forces must be ready to defeat an attack in each of these eventualities. Yet, as it stands, Russia does not necessarily take Euro-Canadian deterrence, capability, and our willingness to fight seriously and has the possibility to achieve local overmatches including because, as the aggressor, it would choose the point of attack. While the current constellation of military technology seems to favour defenders,[7] European forces presently lack these technologies (including in the systems noted above) at the scale required to realise this advantage as well as the concepts and means to cohere them effectively.

The key challenge regarding Europe's security is thus to close the "window of vulnerability"[8] as swiftly as possible; that is to equip ourselves, materially and conceptually, to prevent a land grab, *fait accompli,* armoured punch or large-scale attack, or the outbreak of a possibly long war of attrition with Russia. Russia's ability to endure sustained Ukrainian efforts to push them out and enforce war termination after many years of fighting and with enormous human, material and economic costs, serves as a warning.

Allies have agreed on the full and rapid implementation of the NATO Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), yet despite significant increases in defence spending Europe still lacks the depth of capabilities needed to deter or deny and defeat Russia should deterrence fail. The conceptual gap at the tactical level[9] compounds these capability gaps and in itself further weakens deterrence. There *is* harmony between the operational level plans – the Regional Plans – developed by the Joint Force Commands (with Domain Commanders in support) and the tactical level plans developed at the Corps level with Allies, but there is no clarity on how formations will block / blunt incursions in and over time, less the vision set out in Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative (EFDI). And EFDI is not yet a plan, but a distributed system of capabilities. The gap is one of tactical level execution at the Corps level and below, a challenge compounded by the paucity of relevant capability and its integration with still-lethal conventional systems.

This paper addresses that conceptual gap and, while it relies on the embrace of new technologies, every system it discusses exists today or could be fielded within the 0-3 year time frame the concept addresses. To field the necessary capabilities, Europeans and Canadians need to make the right procurement decisions *now*. Then resource and stick to them, while working with industry to ensure that supply can be sustained for the long fight. Moreover, they need to field these capabilities as soon as possible so that their war fighters can get used to them, explore their limits and possibilities, and iterate their doctrine and modes of employment and force structures to get the best out of them. Indeed it is that alignment of doctrine, tactical and operational concepts with new technologies that has always held the key to using new technologies to deliver military advantage.

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7 See, for example, Michael Kofman, Olivier Schmitt, and Amos Fox, discussion on The Revolution in Military Affairs Podcast, podcast audio, 2026, https://open.spotify.com/episode/7tijVJAwPJ8I2Z9gld5mp2.

8 See, for example, Frank Sauer, "How to Save Europe from More Nasty Surprises," Internationale Politik Quarterly, Summer 2025 (June 20, 2025), https://ip-quarterly.com/en/how-save-europe-more-nasty-surprises.

9 Notwithstanding the planning and development work that is ongoing at HQ Multinational Corps Northeast, HQ 1 German Netherlands Corps – and elsewhere – there is not a clear or mutually agreed upon concept for how frontline forces would fight at the tactical level that would integrate the key capabilities noted above at the scale required.

This warfighting concept[10] is for the defence of the Baltic theatre of operations, and Lithuania in particular, as this is one plausible point for a Russian attack particularly given the situation of Kaliningrad and the importance of the Suwałki gap, but nonetheless grapples with questions and challenges of broader relevance. Many of its proposals are likewise transferable to other situations, particularly along NATO's frontline, which will also be affected by the more general ongoing change in the character of warfare.[11]

The concept presented here is rooted in a deterrence by denial approach, based on a porcupine force in situ, whose forward edge would form a 'European hellscape' along the frontier that would deliver the defensive dominance needed to blunt a Russian attack, complemented by an offensive concept to push Russia out and recapture allied territory if that proves necessary. It advances a way of fighting that overcomes the numerical day-one-disadvantage of in-place forces, allows for/ buys time and space for reinforcement, and leads to the defeat of the enemy.

This concept aligns with NATO's Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) and assumptions set out in the related Family of Plans, including SACEUR's AOR-Wide Strategic Plan (SASP) and the Subordinate Strategic Plans (SSP), which guide Alliance peacetime deterrence activities, military responses in crisis to deter aggression, and military operations to defend all Allies at all levels of war.[12]

The concept also aligns with SACEUR's 'Theory of Victory' (ToV) and commander's intent which, as recently outlined in Warsaw in October,[13] asserts: "We will block the initial attack. If the attack persists, we will blunt it and prevent enemy advance. And, if required, we will break the enemy's forces and operational warfighting system." As SACEUR noted this helps "us focus our militaries on the key tasks we must accomplish in combat, and how we must demonstrate the ability to do these, in order to deter." So too, at the tactical level, does the concept presented here for Defensive Dominance in the Baltic (DDB).

In accordance with SACEUR's ToV and intent, DDB proposes ways NATO land forces can "move to dominate any enemy assault at the point of contact" and in the deep, "fix[ing] enemy formations and deny[ing] the seizure of Alliance territory" and "blunt[ing] any ongoing of follow-on actions … using advanced sensors, autonomous systems and multi-domain forces."

In this concept, Land is the supported domain, with Maritime and Air supporting and the concept recognises the importance of both of the latter as well as the potential of the Air domain, in particular, to deliver asymmetric advantage, should sufficient mass and magazine

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10 "A warfighting concept is a description in general terms of the application of military art and science within a defined set of parameters. Warfighting concepts provide an approach to a potential military problem and articulate a working hypothesis for solving that problem. They provide a framework for how a military force intends to conduct warfare and achieve its objectives by outlining the principles, tactics, strategies, and operational methods that guide the military in preparing for and executing various types of military operations." Davis Ellison and Tim Sweijs, Breaking Patterns: Multi-Domain Operations and Contemporary Warfare (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, September 2023), 14, https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Breaking-Patterns-HCSS-2023.pdf.

11 While it is likely that any conflict that starts in the Baltic would widen and thus play out across other theatres, that is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on the scenario *in* the Baltic as part of its contribution to the Blunt and Block elements of the theory of victory in particular.

12 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), "Deterrence and Defence," NATO Topic Page, accessed October 4, 2026, https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/deterrence-and-defence.

13 Alexus G. Grynkewich, "SACEUR's Remarks at the Warsaw Security Forum," Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (NATO), 12 October 2026, https://shape.nato.int/page11283634/speeches-and-transcripts/saceurs-remarks-at-the-warsaw-security-forum.aspx.

depth (especially of specialised SEAD/DEAD assets) be brought to bear.[14] Nonetheless the focus on land is because, in the attack scenarios noted above, it is on land that a decision will primarily be sought, contested and enforced. Moreover, assuring territorial integrity is the political centre of gravity of NATO and so maintaining this will be essential to maintaining alliance cohesion – a task that again falls predominantly on the land domain.

The concept will be enabled at the operational-strategic level by cyber, space, special operations forces and the reinforcement and sustainment network. Overarching strategic and political questions beyond this level of analysis – such as how to force war termination on Russia – are outside the scope of this concept, which nonetheless notes and is informed in its deeper strike elements by the 'break' aspect of SACEUR's ToV. However, as noted below, the political response to the Russian threat in terms of rapidly committing forces to the allied effort will be key and political views will have to be taken at the strategic level of a ToV which sits above SACEUR's ToV. Logistical, sustainment, and force generation questions are also beyond the scope of this paper but are being developed elsewhere. The time horizon is 0 to 3 years.

2. Situation and Context

Prior to 'hostilities' and continuing throughout, the enemy will accelerate activities to undermine national and Alliance coherence, domestic resolve, and disrupt the deployment of Allied forces. This activity will frequently be non-attributable, and NATO should expect constant manipulation of the information environment, espionage, sabotage, assassination, airspace incursions by aircraft and UAS, incursions into territorial waters, GPS denial and increasingly brazen cyber-attacks and sabotage of transnational and national lines of communication, government and military command and logistic nodes, and critical national infrastructure (CNI) including energy networks, shaping the battlefield for combat operations.

The covert phase of operations sets the political pre-conditions for the conventional aggression: test allied solidarity, identify cracks and fissures in the alliance to exploit. However, Moscow is bad at judging European political behaviour and crisis dynamics. Overestimation of its own capabilities, colonial arrogance towards subjects of formerly occupied states, hubris, error, and misjudgement may quickly lead to a situation where the Kremlin sees further escalation as the best way to prevent humiliation and preserve initiative and status.

Escalation is likely to accelerate, with Russia probing NATO response. First direct hostilities may well be space-based, with no loss of life and ostensibly deniable, yet leading to a degradation & denial of Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS) / SATCOM. This puts a premium on systems that are capable of effective operation in highly contested and highly-denied environments.

Once hostilities commence, NATO land forces will initially have to fight outnumbered against an enemy who will have the initiative at the outset and thus the ability to concentrate force at a place of his choosing.

[14] Toward the end of the timeframe covered by this concept it is expected that Uncrewed Combat Air Vehicles (UCAVs) will start to come into service at a scale that could alter the SEAD/DEAD and air-delivered strike equation as they will bring autonomous, affordable mass to the air domain.

The character of the battlefield will:

- Require early political decisions to activate deployment plans and cross border operations – thus credible indicators and warnings will be important.
- Be nonlinear – initial battle lines will be indistinct, given the complicated and canalising nature of the forested and swampy terrain, potential attacks to the rear from Kaliningrad, and asymmetric threats throughout the theatre (recognising there will be seasonal variations that have a bearing on the going, foliage and atmospheric conditions, the latter two of which will affect some UAS operations).
- Initially require NATO forces to fight outnumbered in terms of both personnel and traditional systems.
- Be dominated by pervasive and wide-ranging human and tech-based surveillance, target acquisition systems and sensors – it will be transparent to a greater degree than NATO forces have experienced previously.
- Involve a fierce competition for control and use of the electromagnetic spectrum.
- See multiple lethal systems in all Domains – long-range fires and massed precision attack and manifest the return of massed systems.
- Require uncommitted forces to disperse to provide some level of protection and establish effective micro A2AD zones at both the higher and lower tactical levels to enable mobility, emission/transmission and fire.
- Show that artificial intelligence, robotics and autonomy are the critical technologies – including in enabling traditional capabilities to remain competitive.
- Lead to command, control and communications being frequently disconnected, requiring dispersed forces to carry organic decision-support capability and be adept at mission command.
- See the air-ground littoral (AGL) being a key battlespace, cluttered with uncrewed systems, semi-detached from the higher-air space thus questioning traditional definitions of air superiority, and significantly affecting freedom of action on the land.
- See asymmetric threats featuring throughout the depth of the battlespace, including enemy special forces, fifth columnists and proxy actors.

3. **Enemy**

- Russia's force build up will be in plain sight, including with the intention to use the build-up itself as a source of leverage and, subject to political decisions, should provide the incentive and opportunity for NATO forces to mobilise.

- Once combat operations commence, the enemy will fight a Joint campaign seeking to exercise control of the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland to deny NATO sea lines of communication, or at least significantly disrupt NATO shipping by exercising area denial effects short of sea control, while maintaining his own access to Kaliningrad and the approaches to Saint Petersburg.

- The enemy will seek to suppress NATO air defences initially, limiting NATO counter air and freedom of action, though its own air activity will mainly be focused on supporting land forces and attempting to break the morale and cohesion of NATO states through terror and infrastructure attacks. Russia will attempt to limit, potentially through special operations and cyber activities, NATO deep precision strike, space and offensive counter air (OCA) assets before they can be employed.

- The likely main objective of Russian land forces will be to link the Kaliningrad exclave to other Russian held territory, preventing NATO reinforcement and thus enabling the encirclement of NATO forces in the Baltic states.

- They will probably attack on three axes reflecting the main objective and both natural and infrastructural canalisation between Russian bases and the objective: **west** from Belarus towards but bypassing Vilnius; **southwest** through Latvia via Daugavpils towards but bypassing Kaunas; and **northeast** from Kaliningrad, with the aims of: linking up these forces, fixing and overwhelming NATO forces in place and seizing territory where possible.

- Alternatively, the enemy may simply seek to grab a piece of Lithuanian territory either through infiltration or a limited landgrab attack, or to invest Vilnius in a bolt from the blue attack. Any such action could easily morph into a more generalised onslaught.

- If the enemy seizes a lodgement of any size, this will cause severe political difficulties for NATO,[15] as it would allow Moscow to impose a political fait accompli, underpinning it with threats of nuclear escalation, raising the possibility of annexing territory in the Baltic states and breaking alliance cohesion.

- At the same time, a Russian failure to achieve the main objective within ten days along with a concurrent failure to achieve sea control in the Baltic would create difficulties for the Kaliningrad exclave, which will begin to run out of critical supplies, while also keeping open the possibility of reinforcement for NATO forces.[16]

- Subsidiary objectives will likely be to threaten Tallinn and Riga without investing them.

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15 See, for example, Carlo Masala, If Russia Wins: A Scenario (London: Atlantic Books, 2024), https://atlantic-books.co.uk/book/if-russia-wins/.

16 Russian attempts to pre-stock Kaliningrad with key supplies may be seen as an indicator that an attack is more likely. If successful, such efforts would complicate attempts to rapidly deny Russian objectives.

- Strengths. They are combat experienced, and highly adept at the integration of EW, massed uncrewed air systems and concentrated fires. They are willing to take significant casualties and are thus difficult to exhaust. Russia has also demonstrated its political resolve in using violent action to pursue its interests and sustaining this over time, at cost, if not met with decisive strength. In addition, Russia has learned to adapt its economy and produce and iterate new weapons platforms at scale,[17] including by diversifying supply chains and improving resilience to sanctions and trade restrictions. The mass introductions of systems such as the Geran in its various iterations and the Lancet loitering munition system, as well as adaption of Russian force structures and tactics to these systems shows the danger if they are allowed the time to introduce, iterate and scale – and in these cases also shows a pace that NATO forces would need to at least match. Russia has shown the ability to change its concentration of effort, including from Kyiv to Donbas in 2022, and to support that shift with massed fires, air defence and electronic warfare. Although less evident recently, Russian forces have shown the ability to fight effective, coherent campaigns over extended periods.[18]

- Weaknesses. Russia innovates tactically but in ways confined by its other limitations (especially lack of delegated authority) and 'strengths' (casualty tolerance) but institutionalises innovations slowly; adaptations proven on one axis take months to propagate – although, as above, when they do adapt to the introduction of new systems, they are able to achieve significant scale and effect.[19] Tolerance of losses of both equipment and personnel slows adaptation and exacerbates industrial burdens/ wastes industrial advantage. Russia remains hobbled by poor junior leadership, highly centralised C2 and political interference/ control of military decisions. Their long-range aviation capabilities and doctrine for Suppression/Destruction of Enemy Air Defences (SEAD/DEAD), strike, interdiction and Defensive Counter Air (DCA), remain at a significant disadvantage to NATO air assets.

- These weaknesses are exploitable only if NATO's own adaptation cycle is measurably faster and political will is manifest in speed of decision-making and military resolve. In short NATO states will need to drastically accelerate their processes and move much faster than they have for Ukraine – and will need an honest appraisal of what has worked and what has not for Ukrainian forces in their own innovation cycles. Turning NATO industrial strength into an advantage relies on fielding the right kind of capabilities, with the right kind of weapons design philosophy, producible at scale and sustainable over time as well as the procurement systems and fielding processes to deliver at speed as well as scale. These issues are beyond the scope of this paper but aspects of them will be dealt with in follow-on work.

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17 The rapid growth in deployment of the Lancet loitering munition system is an example of Russia's ability to field and employ new systems at scale – see Sidharth Kaushal and Sam Cranny-Evans, *The Evolution of Russia's Precision Strike: Adopting Mass Precision*, RUSI Research Paper (London: Royal United Services Institute, August 2026), https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/research-papers/evolution-russias-precision-strike-adopting-mass-precision.

18 As demonstrated in Amos C. Fox, "Winning in the Donbas: What Russia's 2014–2015 Campaign Reveals About Modern War," War on the Rocks, 2026, https://warontherocks.com/winning-in-the-donbas-what-russias-2014-2015-campaign-reveals-about-modern-war/.

19 Kaushal and Cranny-Evans, *Evolution of Russia's Precision Strike (ibid.)*

4. Joint Forces

Intent

To deter the enemy by demonstrating a credible plan for a capable denial defence, and by imposing cost on his pre-conflict campaign of subversion, sabotage, disinformation and cyber. If conflict becomes necessary, be prepared to defeat his attack by denying him the physical space to mass for an attack, disrupting his advance, fracturing his timetable by blocking a major armoured punch or landgrab infiltration, preventing the hold element of his 'move-bite-hold' sequence in subsequent engagement, blinding his ISR, shattering his cohesion, and then defeating him in detail by destroying his capacity to fight. Preventing a rapid Russian victory by denying the achievement of the enemy's objectives creates the conditions for reinforcement by NATO and for the destruction of his capacity to fight.

The concept is prepared also with the intent to achieve NATO forces' objectives while avoiding escalation to the point of nuclear use, in keeping with SACEUR's theory of victory of block, blunt, break. It is in essence a theory of area-denial and defence. The concept avoids crossing known Russian thresholds for nuclear escalation such as attacking Russia's nuclear forces, command structure and leadership, and does not threaten the existence of the Russian Federation. Conventional deep strike capabilities are used to complement NATO's nuclear deterrence. Parts of the conventional deep strike arsenal of European states will be reserved for answering Russian horizontal escalation. The concept also de-emphasises dual capable strike assets for the deep strike role and highlights the role of dedicated non-nuclear means to reach the Russian rear in order to clarify intent and purpose of strikes as non-nuclear.

Execution

General Outline

The overall goal of in-place NATO forces is to prevent the loss of ground where possible, recover ground where necessary, and inflict the attrition required to destroy the enemy's armoured forces and infantry, and ultimately, defeat him.

NATO state governments, especially those with forces in place, will need to be able to overcome the ambiguity that Russia will aim to create ahead of any conflict phase (see above) in order to act and authorise action fast enough in the event of hostilities. Moreover, these NATO states should ensure that other NATO states – particularly those upon which they would rely to provide air and maritime assets, and for reinforcement of the land component – are similarly clear, prepared and ready.

Once hostilities commence, in support of and supported by Alliance multi-domain operations conducted at the operational and strategic levels throughout the Baltic Theatre, in-place NATO forces[20] in Lithuania will secure the rear area against hybrid threats. Furthermore, in-place

[20] In-place NATO forces are seen as national forces (standing and reserve) in their own countries, reinforced by troops stationed there under NATO Frontline Forces (FLF), including those formerly designated as the 'Enhanced Forward Presence' (EFP). By 2027 on public estimates, this would total around 75,500 people of which the German brigade would be 5,000, the Lithuanian regular army 23,000 (incl. 5,500 conscripts), and Lithuanian reserve, volunteer and militia forces around 47,500, each with varying levels of equipment, training and readiness. For these planned force structure baselines, see Erlend Bjørtvedt et al., *Europe's Choice: Military and Economic Scenarios for the War in Ukraine*, Corisk Report Series No. 12 (Oslo: Corisk / NUPI, 2025); German Federal Ministry of Defence (BMVg), *Action Plan for the Deployment of Panzerbrigade 45 in Lithuania*, Berlin/Vilnius (December 2023); and Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, *Krašto apsaugos sistemos stiprinimo ir plėtros programa* [National Defence System Strengthening and Development Programme], Resolution No. XIV-2505 (Vilnius: Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania).

NATO forces will conduct an active, layered defence across the depth of the country. The layers are provided by Lithuanian reserves, volunteer and militia forces (around 47,500 troops in total), the Lithuanian regular army (around 23,000 including 5,500 conscripts), and the c.5,000 troops of the German 45th armoured brigade stationed in country.

The layered defence is designed to give the attacker no respite by inflicting maximum casualties and systems destruction. At the same time, in-place NATO forces will prevent, and if necessary, contain, enemy attempts at penetration, denying him the space and the achievement of his objectives.

A small number of troops held at high-readiness, deployed forward will control and direct a robust, tech-enabled tactical defence of the front line, in accordance with the EFDI, and the Baltic Defence Line.[21] This is done by establishing enhanced situational awareness and maximizing the use of responsive joint fires, and modern counter-mobility capabilities, to include next generation military ordnance such as AI-enabled loitering munition systems. Smart technology will also be part of the counter-mobility package, which includes unmanned ground and air systems and loitering munitions at scale, electronic warfare, battlefield cyber, and smart mines.

Knowledge of the ground will allow defending forces to fortify the terrain, amplifying the effect of the Baltic Defence Line, pre-position logistics, conduct all-domain ambushes, and exploit both urban and forested areas to fracture his timetable, and destroy the enemy. Denying the enemy key infrastructure will reduce his freedom of movement and accentuate natural canalisation, creating kill zones which can be exploited by the defender using a comprehensive AI-enabled, digital targeting web and massed precision strike weapons. In the border zone, this combination of fortified terrain, smart obstacles, uncrewed systems, loitering munitions and fires cued by the targeting web would create a **'European hellscape'**[22]: a dense, layered kill zone that adapts to the Baltic's forests, swamps and chokepoints to the logic US Indo-Pacific Command has applied to the defence of the Taiwan Strait. This gives tactical form to the type of distributed capabilities envisaged by EFDI, amplified by the Baltic Defence Line.

Elements of the targeting web will be held at unit level and be able to be reconstituted when the overall web is degraded. Cumulatively, this will create a **'porcupine'** effect which 'blocks' any initial infiltration or (armoured) punch, and "blunts" the attacker's ability to take ground and in turn denies him the ability to convert his 'move and bite' tactics into 'hold' thus disrupting his advance, fracturing his timetable and, combined with blinding his ISR, contributing to his overall defeat.

Joint Fires and effects will be cohered to create offensive Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) umbrellas, including Electronic Warfare (EW), Air Defence (AD), Counter-UAS, with offensive UAS and other strike capabilities providing precision mass in and over time including for the suppression and destruction of enemy drone attack (SEDA/DEDA), suppression and

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21 In a widened conflict, the 'East Shield' initiative in Poland (see https://tarczawschod.wp.mil.pl/en/) would also come into play, notably in this scenario on the Polish border with Kaliningrad. For a detailed description and analysis of the Baltic Defence Line, see Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, ed., Baltic Defence Line, IES Policy Papers (Lublin: Institute of Central Europe, 2025), https://ies.lublin.pl/en/policy-papers/baltic-defence-line/.

22 On the US "hellscape" concept for the Taiwan Strait, see Josh Rogin, "The U.S. Military Plans a 'Hellscape' to Deter China from Attacking Taiwan," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2024. Stacie Pettyjohn, Becca Wasser, and Molly Campbell, *A "Hellscape" for Taiwan: How the U.S. Military Can Deter and Defeat a Chinese Invasion* (Center for a New American Security, May 2024), https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/hellscape-for-taiwan.

destruction of enemy drone defence (SEDD/DEDD) and destruction of ISR assets,[23] with the aim of achieving localised, temporary 'air-littoral superiority'.[24]

This will allow the joint force to continuously target and wear down the enemy, dislocating his efforts to establish air control, air littoral dominance, and countering all-domain forces operating at scale seeking to punch through and seize ground at speed, or those attempting to secure ground through 'Move – Bite – Hold – Repeat', while simultaneously blinding his ISR and countering his ground forces moving in depth. Simultaneously, Allied forces must destroy or deny the enemy's ability to contest the air and maritime environments.

Maximum use will be made of uncrewed systems in the defence and attack, with NATO ground forces investing maximum effort into remaining undetected and disguised, utilizing deception to confuse until employed. When employed, NATO forces will make extensive use of decoy fires and shaping effects, as well as multispectral camouflage, modifiable silhouettes of combat vehicles to deceive object recognition systems, and decoys to remain hidden when static. Electronic countermeasures, counter-UAS systems and active protection systems (APS) will be used to protect own forces in defence or, when concentrated, to defeat enemy forces.

Air Component

Subject to agile political decision-making, the availability and willingness of NATO states to commit air assets, and taking account of the escalatory potential of doing so, bringing NATO's Air Component into the fight as early as possible is one of the key joint tasks.[25] NATO air forces still enjoy a capability advantage over their Russian counterparts, predominantly in low-observable and survivable platforms (e.g. F-35). These assets are designed to operate within the enemy Integrated Air Defence System (IADS), which they will aim to suppress or destroy (SEAD/DEAD). Achieving a favourable air situation (FAS) will depend, to considerable degree, on these assets being committed to the fight early by political decision makers, on the ability to sustain their employment from dispersed air bases, on air munition stockpiles, and on European and Canadian forces' ability to exercise effective air C2, targeting and tasking – as well as to withstand any initial Russian attack on these facilities, platforms and capabilities, including through the use of ballistic and hypersonic missiles. Operating the assets from a safe range draws increased reliance on air-to-air refuelling assets.

Together with special operations forces and in-place NATO land and maritime deep precision strike (mid-range), and deep precision strike held at operational level (long-range), NATO air assets will be employed to conduct offensive counter air (OCA) operations to deny Russian air attack, missile launch sites and long-range aviation. Although losses are to be expected, should sufficient air assets[26] be committed to the fight with sufficient munitions stocks to draw on, NATO's Air advantage would likely see a FAS achieved relatively quickly.

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23 On the 'ISTAR war' see Kaushal and Cranny-Evans, *Evolution of Russia's Precision Strike (ibid.)*

24 On the Air Littoral, see e.g. Franz-Stefan Gady, "The Air Battle That Could Decide the Russia-Ukraine War," *Foreign Policy*, July 23, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/07/23/ukraine-war-drone-air-battle-russia-technology-tactics/.

25 Toward the end of this concept horizon – i.e. 2029-2030 – integration of uncrewed combat air vehicles (UCAVs) into European air forces can be expected to bolster NATO air capabilities in Europe. As they would only come into operation at that late stage they are not considered in this paper, but will be dealt with elsewhere.

26 Specifically, the introduction of UCAVs, en masse, would alleviate NATO's SEAD/DEAD challenge but is unlikely to happen in the time horizon of this concept.

If the enemy IADS is degraded and a necessary degree of air control is achieved, the battlespace will open to traditional air assets (4th Gen, ISR, etc) that will contribute to the joint fight. If FAS is achieved, the air component will conduct persistent ISR throughout the enemy's depth, involving continuous hunting for C2 nodes, logistic centres, and key lines of communication; suppression of mobile SAM and IADs; air interdiction and rapid kill chain closure, coordinated with long range fires, reducing the enemy's ability to concentrate combat power.

Notwithstanding this degree of air control, under which the enemy cannot survive or operate its traditional air assets, friction will likely remain, where they can still employ a huge mass of cruise and ballistic missiles, as well as uncrewed systems (FPV, fibre-optic and bomber drones, one-way-effectors [OWE] and including loitering munitions systems, etc). These systems are not easily defeated by traditional air (including DCA) assets, and thus the enemy will likely retain some freedom of action in this aspect. Moreover, degrading the traditionally understood components of the enemy large-scale Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) complex will likely not prevent Russian forces from achieving localised/ micro A2 and especially AD effects, again underlining the importance of the air littoral to freedom of action, particularly on the ground.[27]

This friction in achieving air control will likely lead to surface-based NATO forces needing to employ and maintain a mass of capable air defence against cruise and ballistic missiles and uncrewed systems. Not all of these threats will be defendable, especially at NATO's European strategic depth, because of a lack of fire units and interceptors, which will require difficult political and military decisions about which assets to defend, especially over a longer-term horizon.

As with other assets, choices will need to be made regarding allocation of air assets between other defence activity, especially homeland defence, and allocation to the Baltic theatre. This again shows the importance of political decision making in allied capitals for the air component and for the overall campaign, as well as the need to build up ground-based air defence assets at scale and with economy of force in mind.

In addition, if the right decisions are made now, then toward the end of the 3-year time horizon for this concept, Uncrewed Combat Air Vehicles (UCAVs), will be able to considerably augment air mass. This would add to the ability to both defend the Homeland, and augment the NATO air component simultaneously.

Ground-based air defence remains crucial and rapid increase of the mass of fire platforms and interceptors, especially low-cost (and thus, increasingly software-defined) systems for all threat classes should be a priority. Similarly, introducing effective AI enabled decision-making, particularly with regard to threat assessment and weapon assignment (TEWA) would increase the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness and resilience of air defence for population, critical national infrastructure (CNI), and force protection.

If FAS is achieved and air assets are available, NATO air forces will be able to operate with relative freedom to attack Russian land forces and can do so using low-cost mass munitions, where they are available (a priority for increasing magazine depth). Depending on where Russian forces have been able to move to, this could lead to Russian land forces dispersing and operating in the cover of the urban environment amidst the civilian population. The Baltic

[27] See, for example, Ruben Stewart, "Beyond the Bubble: Russia's Baltic Theatre Denial Problem," Military Balance Blog, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), August 2026, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2026/08/beyond-the-bubble-russias-baltic-theatre-denial-problem2/.

Defence Line and canalisation efforts, as well as the tactical land fight should seek to deny this cover to the Russian forces.

The longstanding Russian fear of "aerospace attack" (air and missile strike) provides a point of leverage that will affect deterrence.[28] Fielding and demonstrating the willingness to use allied long-range strike assets capable of holding critical Russian assets (e.g. in and around Moscow and St Petersburg) at risk, will contribute to deterring Russian long-range strike against similar targets in e.g. Berlin or Stockholm, which would be aimed at undermining political cohesion and the will of NATO states to enter, commit assets to, or stay in the fight.[29] This will again be conducted with escalation management also in mind.

The ability of NATO forces to maintain 'aerospace attack' capability will positively affect deterrence. In a state of general war Russia would be likely to seek to eliminate as much of this capability as possible in initial strikes, using significant numbers of high-effect, high-cost strike assets (e.g. ballistic missiles). Increasing the mass of air assets would aid both survivability and flexibility of NATO forces. Dispersal of NATO strike assets, including air assets – and having sufficient numbers of platforms capable of achieving agile combat employment (ACE) – would thus likely serve to bolster deterrence.[30]

Maritime Component

The entry of NATO maritime assets into the fight, beyond those from countries directly involved in the fight in Lithuania, will depend on similar swift political decision-making and coalition activation as for air assets. If those efforts are successful, the Maritime Component will focus on two core objectives: denying Russian maritime resupply and reinforcement, while simultaneously keeping our own Baltic Sea lines of communication (SLOC) open.

The maritime component will thus have to serve several functions. First, it would need to prevent Russian attempts to mine key chokepoints such as the Skagerrak and Gothenburg through which allied reinforcement of both the Baltics and (in the case of Gothenburg) the north will flow.

Second, there will be a requirement for the maritime component to sink missile carrying vessels operating from Kaliningrad and St Petersburg. While this can be achieved by joint means, sinking low value vessels which will be covered by the Kaliningrad IADS will be a poor use of PGMs. By contrast NATO has an almost insurmountable local advantage in subsurface assets within the Baltic given the large number of capable diesel submarines operated by regional allies and there will likely be pressure to use this advantage to effect.

Third, securing offshore territory such as Gotland will likely be a function of NATO amphibious forces, since the early seizure of these features could allow Russia to extend its IADS while in allied hands they could act as launch points for ground launched strike. Maritime platforms

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28 On ongoing Russian fear of 'Aerospace Attack', See Kaushal and Cranny-Evans, *Evolution of Russia's Precision Strike (ibid.)* and for its historical continuity, see for example OSD/NA memorandum, "B-1 DSARC [Defense Systems Acquisition Review Council] III Decision," 1976; and the wider debate around the fielding of the B-1 bomber, for example in Andrew F. Krepinevich and Barry D. Watts "The Last Warrior: Andrew Marshall and the Shaping of American Strategy", pages 130-32, Kindle edition.

29 If Russia is not deterred from undertaking a significant strike campaign against NATO states across the depth of the alliance, then defending against this would consume a significant proportion of alliance air assets in point defence and the above assumptions about air component contribution to the joint fight would need to be revisited. This would likely assume a higher level of escalation and a state of general war rather than a theatre-limited fight.

30 Again, toward the end of the concept horizon period mass, dispersal and ACE could also be bolstered by fielding autonomous air mass (UCAVs), but this is outside the scope of the current concept.

equipped with surface-to-surface capabilities including smaller missile equipped Swedish and Finnish corvette sized vessels originally designed for A2AD can support the land fight by providing an additional means of striking high value targets from a different vector.

Finally, a distant blockade of Russian oil flows from ports like Ust Luga- enforced at the Skaggerrak- would impose pressure on the Russian economy. Equally, securing SLOCs through the Gulf of Bothnia- through which much of Europe's iron flows- would be critical as would resupplying the Baltic states.

At the same time, NATO maritime assets will need to ensure freedom of action for NATO shipping in the Baltic under the threat of Kaliningrad-based coastal defence cruise missiles and other fires in the Kaliningrad A2/AD complex as well as mining and attack by UAVs and USVs, while also protecting undersea infrastructure.

Land Component Scheme of Manoeuvre

The tactical objective is to deny Russian forces the chance to seize territory by preventing infiltration, blocking any initial punch and then by disrupting the enemy's ability to move, bite, hold and move again to prevent a landgrab or investment of Vilnius, preclude Russia achieving control of the Suwałki Gap, effecting a link up with Kaliningrad and encircling NATO forces in place, taking lodgements for political leverage, or in extremis effecting occupation of the Baltic states.

Drawn from the Joint campaign, and based on the destructive firepower that independent wargaming[31] has shown to be necessary to alter the military balance in the Baltics and which would leverage the defenders' advantage in the current constellation of military technology, the initial phase of shaping and deterrence involves preparation and shaping for the crisis response and deterrence phase that follows, and the combat operations phase thereafter:

- In-place forces, formed from locally raised very high readiness units,[32] will engage the enemy's committed forces, exploiting complex terrain to fight a 'porcupine' defence, facilitated by pre-positioned munitions and prepared fortifications, with very short-range uncrewed systems and short-range fires (30-100km) such as smart loitering munition systems providing indirect fire support at the brigade level.

- Medium-range fires (100-500km), organic to the divisional level (able to be delegated to brigade level) and at the higher tactical level, will target the enemy's long range strike capabilities including launchers (where possible given available NATO targeting capabilities), munition and supply stockpiles including when in transit or when being transported, air defences, key C2 and logistic capabilities, and uncommitted forces, to create the conditions for decisive operational level manoeuvre by NATO 2nd Echelon forces – reinforcements to be brought in as part of the operational level plan.

- Long-range fires (500-2000km) to be employed at the operational level to disrupt and degrade the Russian war economy without crossing nuclear red-lines. Subject to political

31 See Oliver Moody, "How Russia Could Invade Lithuania on Three Fronts," *The Times*, May 27, 2026, https://www.thetimes.com/world/europe/article/how-russia-could-invade-lithuania-on-three-fronts-sm7cjpg26.

32 Taking account of both the local and terrain knowledge of these high-readiness forces but also the more limited training they will have received as reservists, volunteers and militia, compared to the Lithuanian regular army troops and the German brigade, they are charged with the forward presence component of the 'block' on enemy committed forces. Tactical level plans and fighting instructions must be simple, clear and capable of being implemented by disconnected irregular forces.

decision-making, they also constitute an intra-war deterrent, providing a counterstrike capability that allows NATO to threaten Russian high-value targets at strategic depth and to check or, if necessary, respond in kind to Russian vertical or horizontal escalation via deep-strike.

- Combat operations will require mobile land forces operating under A2AD umbrellas, consisting of AD, counter-drone, and counter cyber and EW, which may only be able to be sustained for short periods, in localised areas, but which will nonetheless be vital.

A porcupine defence consumes munitions and drones at rates NATO planning factors do not yet reflect, and centralised depots inside 40km of the line will not survive. There is, therefore, likely to be a requirement for dispersed, survivable storage and in-theatre production. Developing sufficient magazine depth at each range of strike capability would bolster pre-war as well as intra-war deterrence and, if necessary, the prosecution of a strike campaign over a sustained period.

Ensuring that NATO forces in place, as well as at the operational level and across the land, air and maritime components have access to the necessary ISR, situational awareness, decision-making and targeting tools to cohere a complex, mass strike campaign effectively and cost-effectively will be essential.

Similarly, the kind of munition heavy warfare prompted by the use of mass precision is also likely to involve casualty rates and thus medevac in excess of what NATO forces are used to. Follow on work needs to be conducted on the necessary logistical, enablement and force generation aspects needed to resource and sustain this concept.

Scheme of Manoeuvre by Arm

- Dismounted Infantry composed of high readiness reserve soldiers, fighting from decentralised and dispersed platoon-sized strongpoints in conjunction with combat engineers, will create obstacle belts within forests along the borders to canalise the enemy into killing areas where they can be defeated in anti-armour and anti-personnel ambushes utilising organic short-range drones and direct fire weapons, creating clogged lines of communication and pockets of congestion that can be destroyed with joint strike, short and mid-range precision fires, prepositioned and cached shorter range drones and loitering munitions systems, and mounted infantry and armour. Uncrewed systems will be used to shape the tactical battle to get mortars and other fires held at this level into the fight.

- Mounted Infantry and Armour including Main Battle Tanks (MBTs), Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFVs) and Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), operating as combined arms will advance from dispersed and concealed locations, using or generating micro-A2AD umbrellas and thoroughgoing deception to earn the possibility of mobility.[33] They will conduct counter penetration and counter stroke operations seeking to prevent the enemy from holding ground and to defeat enemy forces that permeate forward

[33] See e.g. Jack Watling, *Emergent Approaches to Combined Arms Manoeuvre in Ukraine*, RUSI Insights Paper (London: Royal United Services Institute, October 23, 2025), https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/insights-papers/emergent-approaches-combined-arms-manoeuvre-ukraine and Andrew Goode, *Earning the Right to Manoeuvre: How Forces Create Windows of Opacity on the Modern Battlefield*, Insight Paper, September 2026, https://adgconsultnz.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/ADG-Insight-Paper-Earning-the-Right-to-Manoeuvre-September-2026.pdf.

positions. New systems, including UAS, counter UAS, air defence and EW, including systems integrated at lower echelon levels, will be crucial in getting older systems into the fight and keeping them there effectively.

- Field and deep artillery in conjunction with EW forces, in the close, deep and rear battles:

  - Will support the close battle by suppressing enemy direct fire forces, using both rocket and tube artillery, attacking enemy artillery and mortars, and delivering scatterable mines to isolate and to interdict enemy forces. Rocket and tube artillery will operate under the assumption of very rapid shoot and scoot times and using uncrewed systems, EW and air defence support to earn windows for fire and movement. As with mortars, uncrewed systems will need to be used to get rocket and tube artillery into the fight and to act in complement to these more traditional fires. The ability to coordinate and concentrate fire from dispersed artillery and uncrewed assets will be invaluable and points to the need for tailored targeting packages and rapid kill chain closure as well as air-gapped and organic AI-targeting and decision-support held at the tactical level.

  - Will deliver loitering munitions, missiles and UAS (ranged at 30-100km) to delay and disrupt enemy forces in depth, blind ISR and suppress air defence, drone defence (SEDD/DEDD) and offensive drone systems (SEDA/DEDA) to dominate the air littoral, allowing greater freedom of action for own force uncrewed air vehicles, air systems, mounted and dismounted infantry and armour.

  - Will engage in the suppression and destruction of enemy tactical targeting web, C2 nodes and network.

  - Mid-range fires (100-500km) held at this level and in coordination with those held by non-organic uncrewed systems units, will attack the enemy's uncommitted forces and second echelon, mitigating the risk of exploitation of penetration and further degrading enemy C2 and targeting.

- Air defence units will provide forward forces with security and protection from enemy air attack by destroying or driving off enemy uncrewed air vehicles, close air support aircraft and helicopters. Their fires will degrade the effectiveness of enemy reconnaissance-strike uncrewed air vehicles by forcing them to evade air defences. They will secure critical facilities, such as command posts, logistic installations, and ammunition supply points.[34]

- Combat engineers will predominantly perform counter mobility and survivability tasks in support of forward forces. These operations will limit the advance of enemy forces and enhance the effectiveness of fires. They will improve survivability by hardening command and control facilities and key logistic installations and by fortifying battle positions.

- Non-Organic Uncrewed Air Vehicle units – short [30-100km) and mid-range (100-500km) will provide highly manoeuvrable anti-armour, -infantry, -C2, -EW, -AD, -logistics firepower as well as strike capability against larger targets [e.g. production facilities]. They are to be used particularly:

[34] As with the other munitions on which this scheme of manoeuvre relies, allied forces require massive increases in magazine depth of interceptors against all classes of threats. Moreover, these munitions must also be sufficiently low cost to win the economy of force battle and, therefore, software defined solutions will be preferred. To cohere the new mass of effectors, and ensure militarily as well as economically optimised use, AI-enabled Threat Evaluation and Weapon Assignment (TEWA) tools will be essential at each echelon.

- In situations in which rapid reaction time is important or terrain restricts ground forces.

- To create fire dominance for forward units defending against an infiltration attack, a rapid landgrab or an armoured punch, including by using loitering capabilities to create concentrated effect.

- To disrupt the enemy's tactical move, bite, hold, move again rhythm.

- To provide overwatch and protection for ground forces; they attack the flanks and rear of attacking or withdrawing enemy formations; they counter-attack enemy penetrations; they conduct raids beyond the FLOT to disrupt enemy uncommitted forces; they dominate key terrain by fires for ground manoeuvre forces.

- In the reconnaissance role, they perform the same missions of reconnaissance and security/ screening as ground cavalry and are therefore complementary parts of the wider cavalry system. Because of their greater mobility, uncrewed systems can reconnoitre and maintain surveillance over a much larger area in a shorter period than their ground counterpart and can thus provide an effective complement to ground cavalry elements.

- In the combat support role to act like field artillery (though longer-range and more survivable) giving dismounted infantry and ground anti-tank units greater tactical mobility, moving them rapidly to the enemy's flanks or rear or repositioning them rapidly in the defence.

- To attack the enemy's uncommitted forces and second echelon with mass mid-range systems (100-500km) cohered through AI-enabled targeting packages.

• Electronic Warfare will detect enemy communications and intercept traffic to provide intelligence. It will direct electronic countermeasures, primarily jamming, against enemy uncrewed air vehicles, fire direction and command and control communications, air defence radar, and electronic guidance systems. It will seek to blind enemy ISR and target acquisition.

• Force Protection will require a steep learning curve and a new and institutionalised approach to adapt land forces to the modern, largely transparent battlefield. This includes old and new techniques of deception, including new forms of camouflage to deceive AI-assisted automated target recognition (ATR) systems, strict electromagnetic discipline, and the highest possible levels of dispersion and mobility to complicate enemy targeting. This rests on three mutually reinforcing aspects.

- First, deception in old and new forms, such as multispectral camouflage, thermal masking and credible decoys designed to defeat not only the human observer but AI-assisted automated target recognition. AI-enabled ATR classifies targets by shape, signature and pattern of behaviour, and can therefore be deceived by corrupting precisely those signatures, while decoys absorb munitions and sensing capacity that would otherwise fall on real targets.

- Second, strict electromagnetic discipline. Where every emission is a targetable signature, emission control becomes a command responsibility at every echelon, enforced through training rather than left to individual habit.

- Third, the highest possible levels of dispersion and mobility, with hardening reserved for what cannot move. Formations should routinely observe themselves with their own ISR and electronic warfare sensors to see what the enemy sees, making signature management a measurable and exercisable standard.

Command and Control

Command and Control (C2) in the AOR of Northern Poland and Lithuania will be exercised by Multinational Corps Northeast (MNC NE) in Szczecin, Poland with critical linkages to 1 German-Netherlands Corps (1GNC) in Latvia (with command authority for Latvia and Estonia)", and to US V Corps in Poland. In turn these linkages show the importance of the role at operational-strategic level for NATO's Multi-Corps Land Component Command Centre in Wiesbaden and Joint Force Command Brunssum. These commands must be aligned around a tactical warfighting concept, as well as operational concepts, in advance of any hostilities and the need for this alignment again highlights the importance of political support and timely political decision-making as well as commitment of the assets to resource the fight.

Nonetheless, in the Lithuania scenarios described above, higher tactical C2 responsibility will fall primarily on MNC Northeast which will need to be capable of fighting a deep and a close battle, utilising the full panoply of capabilities noted above, as well as protecting the force throughout its depth. Although the terms 'deep' and 'close' suggest a geographic focus, their real purpose is to allocate effort to separating the enemy's committed forces from his uncommitted forces, or first from second echelons. Significantly increased weapon ranges and advanced ISR will have a bearing on planning yardsticks for areas of influence and action for each level and echelon.

Where possible, C2 will make use of AI-enabled targeting and effector allocation, including the generation of real-time tailored targeting packages based on sensor and data fusion. At the same time, C2 will place a premium on creating the conditions for the forces under its command to be able to fight decentralised, dispersed and disconnected (D3). This will make use of air-gapped and organically embedded AI decision support systems at each echelon, able to make use of available sensors and effectors, together with maximum use of self-healing mesh networks allied to battle management systems, while recognising there will be serious degradation and that the emissions required by such networks are themselves a source of danger. Thus, C2 emphasises preparation, readiness and rehearsal of concepts and plans – all of which also play to deterrence – as well as mission command.

Organic AI capabilities to fuse data on lower tactical levels reduce the dependence on higher echelon staffs for situational awareness. Coupled with independent ISR and strike capabilities organically-held C2 and decision support systems reduce the necessity to shift data up and down the chain of command (and expose emitters) and enables lower levels to act fast, independently, and if necessary even in isolation to fulfil their mission.

Mission command is the key enabler in a D3 battle and a key structural advantage of NATO forces over Russia, if unleashed through effective preparation, capabilities, as well as concepts and C2 that foster it. At the heart of mission command is the importance of understanding the higher commander's intent at every level and one's place within it, for this enables subordinates to both react effectively and seize fleeting opportunities in battle without recourse to further orders.

Thus, establishing in advance clear commander's intent, at each level and in each arm and component across the joint force, will be essential. One aim of this warfighting concept is to allow for the development of clear commander's intent and clearly understood roles for each arm to be able to thus play its part even in the event of a D3 battlespace quickly emerging and enduring.

The C2 challenge makes clear the intersection of the political, technological, conceptual and cultural aspects of readiness – which, if trained, also present the primary opportunity for NATO forces in the Baltic to close the window of vulnerability, develop, the ability to defeat a Russian attack and, thus, ensure deterrence. To do so, NATO C2 must empower rather than constrain our structural advantage over Russia in decentralised decision making and delegated action through mission command.

This warfighting concept was independently developed and jointly written by a group of military leaders and leading military experts as part of the 'Mastering Military Change' initiative. The initiative aims to advance doctrine, concepts and force structures that enable armed forces to make the best use of new technologies, deliver real military advantage and strengthen deterrence. The initiative is supported by Helsing.

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- **Dr. Kate Bondar,** Senior Fellow with the Wadhwani AI Center at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington D.C.
- **Franz Stefan Gady,** independent military analyst, Adjunct Senior Fellow, Center for a New American Security (CNAS), fmr. Senior Fellow, International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- **Dr. Fabian Hoffmann,** Senior Research Fellow at the Ukraine and Full Spectrum Threats Program at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies**,** author of the *Missile Matters* substack**.**
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