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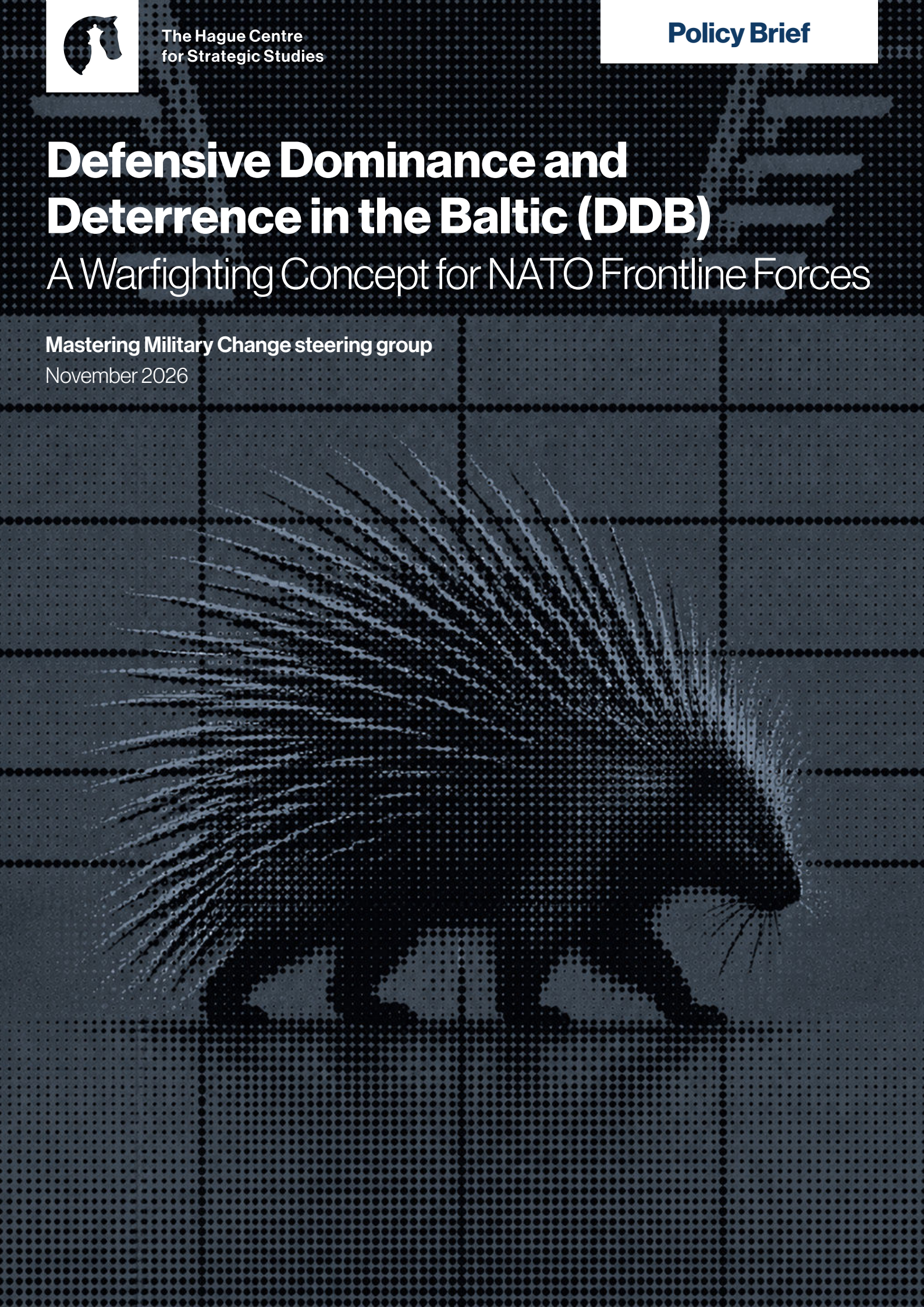
Policy Brief

Defensive Dominance and Deterrence in the Baltic (DDB)

A Warfighting Concept for NATO Frontline Forces

Mastering Military Change steering group

November 2026





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Defensive Dominance and Deterrence in the Baltic (DDB)

A Warfighting Concept for NATO Frontline Forces

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November 2026

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*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.

The analysis and views contained in the warfighting concept are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect those of Helsing or any other institution. In addition to the authors listed above, the warfighting concept benefited from input from Dr. Jean-François Belanger, Brig. (ret.) Ben Barry, Gabrielius Landsbergis, Dr. Olivier Schmitt, Dr. Ruben Stewart, and attendees at a series of workshops organised by the Mastering Military Change project between September 2025 and September 2026 in Berlin, Munich, London, Farnborough, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Prague and Vilnius. While grateful for this generous input, which greatly improved the paper, the authors acknowledge that all errors remain their own.

**AI was used to assist with brainstorming, structuring ideas, reviewing arguments, identifying blind spots, and/or improving clarity. Core analytical tasks such as literature review, conceptual development, substantive judgement and final writing remain human led. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity of the work.

European and Canadian forces cannot currently defend the Baltic states against a Russian onslaught, infiltration or rapid land-grab intended to fracture political cohesion within NATO and the EU.[1] Despite massive casualties in Ukraine, Russia is regenerating its forces, with new bases being built right across the border. Scandinavian intelligence services warn that a larger Russian military operation could be within reach in two to five years, and a smaller incursion to test Western cohesion even sooner.[2] Conflict could break out through miscalculation, a grey-zone incursion, an opportunistic 'bolt-from-the-blue' attack, or a deliberate large-scale offensive.

NATO forces must be ready to defeat each of these, but as it stands they are not. Rearmament remains largely focused on legacy systems that will take years to field, while US burden-shifting is opening up deterrence gaps.[3]

European and Canadian forces, which make up the majority of NATO troops in the Baltic states, lack the right capabilities at the scale and with the depth of magazine required: uncrewed aerial systems (UAS), counter-UAS, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), electronic warfare (EW), air defence, loitering munition systems (LMS) and deep precision strike (DPS), and the AI-enabled command, control and targeting needed to cohere this new mass. Without them, even the traditional capabilities already fielded will be throttled.

The capability gap is matched by a conceptual one. NATO's operational-level Regional Plans are harmonised with Corps-level tactical plans, but there is no clarity on how formations would actually block and blunt an incursion: how they would combine new and existing capabilities at the scale and tempo needed to defeat, and therefore deter, a Russian attack. The gap lies in tactical execution at Corps level and below.[4]

Currently, Russia does not necessarily take European and Canadian deterrence, capability or willingness to fight seriously, and as the aggressor it can choose where to attack and achieve local overmatch.

The central challenge is therefore to close this "window of vulnerability" as swiftly as possible: to equip European and Canadian forces, materially and conceptually, to prevent a land-grab,

1 The timing of any such scenario, the situation in Ukraine at that point and the commitment of Russian forces there, and the participation of Allies and the availability of their capabilities in or close to theatre are just some of the many operational conditions that will affect enemy and Allied force effectiveness. The main purpose of the concept summarised here is to spur and contribute to thinking and action on modern multi-domain defence, capability choices and force mix, and on how to be prepared, in time, for the fight NATO may face but seeks to deter, whether a concerted Russian assault or a limited land-grab. In short, it seeks to regain Euro-Canadian defensive agency and seize the initiative on deterrence regardless of circumstances beyond our control. The concept presented here is a summary of a more detailed technical concept paper available at https://hcss.nl/report/defensive-dominance-and-deterrence-in-the-baltic/. Both have been written, independently, by a group of retired senior commanders and leading military experts, convened by Helsing's 'Mastering Military Change' initiative.

2 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.

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 Notwithstanding the planning and development work ongoing at HQ Multinational Corps Northeast, HQ 1 German-Netherlands Corps and elsewhere, there is no clear or mutually agreed concept for how frontline forces would fight at the tactical level that integrates the key capabilities noted above at the scale required. The Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative (EFDI) sets out a vision but is not yet a plan; rather, it is a distributed system of capabilities. The challenge is compounded by the paucity of relevant capability in Europe.

a fait accompli, an armoured punch or a large-scale assault. Ukraine's experience warns that any of these could become a long war of attrition with a Russia that has proved able to endure enormous costs.[5]

Yet the window of vulnerability *can* be closed, and quickly. The current constellation of military technology favours the defender.[6] Commodified precision strike and sensing, autonomy, robotics and software-defined systems let a smaller, well-prepared force inflict disproportionate attrition on a larger attacker.[7] Every system the concept discusses exists today or can be fielded at scale within three years.

What is missing is the decision to get these systems to our warfighters at scale, so they can learn their limits and possibilities and accelerate the doctrine and tactics, techniques and procedures needed to get the best out of them.

Closing the window requires decisions now: to procure the right capabilities and stick to that commitment, to work with industry to sustain supply for the long fight, and to support our forces through change by deciding what to cut and stop doing, as well as what to support and see through.

Conceptualising Defensive Dominance and Deterrence

Defensive Dominance and Deterrence in the Baltic (DDB) is a warfighting concept[8] for the defence of the Baltic theatre, and of Lithuania in particular, to underpin and ensure deterrence there given the position of Kaliningrad and the importance of the Suwałki Gap. Many of its proposals are transferable to other parts of NATO's frontline, which are also affected by the general, underlying shift in the character of warfare.[9]

DDB is rooted in **deterrence by denial**. Its centrepiece is an in-place **"porcupine" defence**: a force so dense with sensors, uncrewed systems, fires, obstacles and electronic warfare that any attack would be too costly to succeed. In the border zone, this creates a **'European hellscape'** that gives tactical form to the capability approach of the Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative (EFDI).[10] It is complemented by an offensive concept to recapture Allied territory if necessary. It overcomes the numerical disadvantage in-place forces face on day one and buys time and space for reinforcement.

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5 Cf. 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.

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

7 Cf. Tim Sweijs and Jeffrey H. Michaels, eds., *Beyond Ukraine: Debating the Future of War* (London: Hurst, 2024; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025). On how this shift creates opportunities for small and middle powers, see Tim Sweijs, Saskia van Genugten, and Frans Osinga, eds., *Defence Planning for Small and Middle Powers: Rethinking Force Development in an Age of Disruption* (London: Routledge, 2025).

8 "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." 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.

9 While any conflict that starts in the Baltic would likely widen and play out across other theatres, that is beyond the scope of the concept, which focuses on the scenario *in* the Baltic as a contribution to the "block" and "blunt" elements of SACEUR's Theory of Victory in particular.

10 On EFDI see https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/What-We-Do/EFDI/.

The concept is aligned with NATO's Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) and its family of plans.[11] It also translates SACEUR's "Theory of Victory" to the tactical level: *"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."* SACEUR has outlined *what* must be done. DDB shows *how* in-place NATO land forces can "dominate any enemy assault at the point of contact" using "advanced sensors, autonomous systems and multi-domain forces."[12]

Land is the supported domain, with Air and Maritime in support, because a decision will primarily be sought and enforced on land, and territorial integrity is NATO's political centre of gravity. The time horizon is zero to three years.

Five Key Ideas That Define the Concept

Deterrence by denial. Russia is deterred not by the promise of later retaliation, but by the visible certainty that an attack would fail at the point of contact and be prohibitively costly.

The porcupine defence. A layered, dispersed, fortified and technology-saturated defence across the depth of Lithuania, delivering fire dominance at all ranges to block, blunt and bleed an attacker.

A European hellscape. A dense, AI-enabled kill zone of loitering munitions, drones, mines, fires and the fortifications of the Baltic Defence Line along the frontier, exploiting forests, swamps and chokepoints and adapting the logic US Indo-Pacific Command has applied to the Taiwan Strait.[13]

Air-littoral superiority. Control of the drone-crowded, low-altitude airspace above the battlefield, which shapes freedom of action on the ground.[14] It is won by suppressing and destroying enemy drone attack (SEDA/DEDA) and drone defence (SEDD/DEDD), enabling counter-penetration and counter-offensive manoeuvre.

AI-enabled mission command. Leveraging NATO's structural advantage in decentralised decision-making and delegated action through clear, remorselessly rehearsed plans and AI decision support, including air-gapped systems that keep working when units are dispersed and disconnected.

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11 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Deterrence and Defence," NATO topic page, accessed October 4, 2026, https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/deterrence-and-defence.

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

13 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.

14 On the air littoral, see, for example, 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/.

The Russian Threat

Before any open hostilities, Russia will intensify a difficult-to-attribute campaign of information manipulation, sabotage, arson, drone incursions, GPS denial and attacks on critical infrastructure, probing for national weaknesses and cracks in Allied solidarity. Moscow is poor at judging European political behaviour, and hubris may lead the Kremlin to see escalation as the only way to avoid humiliation, or as an opportunity. The first direct hostilities may well be in space: deniable and bloodless, but degrading satellite navigation and communications.

Russia's build-up will take place in plain sight, giving NATO the opportunity to mobilise, but only if political leaders see through Russian ambiguity and decide fast enough. In a large-scale onslaught, Russia would contest the Baltic Sea through area denial, try to suppress NATO air defences and destroy NATO air power on the ground, and use special forces and cyber attacks against NATO's deep strike assets. An infiltration or opportunistic raid would see some of these measures; escalation through miscalculation would put all of them in play.

In a large-scale attack, Russia's likely main objective would be to link Kaliningrad with Russian-held territory, cutting off reinforcement and encircling NATO forces in the Baltic states, attacking on three axes: west from Belarus, bypassing Vilnius; southwest via Daugavpils, bypassing Kaunas; and northeast from Kaliningrad. Alternatively, Russia might seize Lithuanian territory through infiltration, or move on Vilnius in a surprise attack, either of which could quickly escalate.

A lodgement of any size would see Moscow attempt to impose a fait accompli backed by nuclear threats, risking annexation and the collapse of Alliance cohesion.[15] Conversely, if Russia fails to reach its objective within ten days, and fails to secure sea control, Kaliningrad will run short of critical supplies and the route for NATO reinforcement stays open.[16] **The first ten days are crucial, and they will be fought largely with the forces and stocks already in place.**

Enemy Strengths and Weaknesses

Russia's strengths are real. Its forces are combat-experienced, adept at integrating EW, massed UAS and concentrated fires, and willing to absorb heavy casualties, which makes them hard to exhaust. Russia can shift its main effort, as from Kyiv to the Donbas in 2022, and has fought coherent campaigns over extended periods.[17] Its economy now produces and iterates new weapons at scale despite sanctions: the mass introduction of the Geran one-way attack drone and the Lancet loitering munition shows how dangerous Russia becomes when given time to scale, and sets a pace NATO must at least match.[18] Russia is also willing to use

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.

17 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/.

18 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.

violence, including terror strikes on civilians and infrastructure from a large and growing magazine of strike weapons, and to sustain it at great cost unless met with decisive strength.

Its weaknesses are equally notable. Russia innovates tactically, within the limits of a rigid command culture, but institutionalises slowly: adaptations proven on one axis take months to spread, though once adopted they reach significant scale.[19] Its tolerance of losses slows learning and squanders industrial effort. It suffers from poor junior leadership, centralised command and political interference, and its long-range aviation and air-defence-suppression capabilities lag well behind NATO's. These weaknesses can only be exploited if NATO adapts measurably faster than Russia, and far faster than its support to Ukraine has been.

The Battlefield NATO Must Prepare For

The battlefield will be nonlinear from the outset. Forested, swampy terrain will canalise movement, with seasonal changes in ground, foliage and weather affecting manoeuvre and drone operations. Kaliningrad will threaten the rear, and special forces, fifth columnists and proxies will operate throughout the theatre. NATO forces will initially fight outnumbered in personnel and traditional systems, against an enemy holding the attacker's initiative.

It will be more transparent than anything NATO forces have experienced, saturated by sensors and swept by long-range fires and massed precision attack: mass has returned to the battlefield. A fiercely contested electromagnetic spectrum puts a premium on systems that work in highly denied environments. Uncommitted forces must disperse and create micro anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) zones to move, emit and fire. With communications frequently cut, forces must carry organic decision support and fight decentralised, dispersed and disconnected (D3). AI, robotics and autonomy will be the critical technologies, including in keeping legacy capabilities competitive.

Crucially, the **air-ground littoral**, the low-altitude airspace immediately above the battlefield, will be a key battlespace, cluttered with uncrewed systems. Semi-detached from the higher airspace where traditional air power operates, it calls traditional definitions of air superiority into question.[20] Whoever controls the air littoral controls freedom of action on the ground.

The Porcupine Defence: Hellscape, Disruption, Destruction and Counter-Attack

The concept's intent is to deter by demonstrating a credible denial defence, and by imposing costs on Russia's pre-conflict campaign of subversion and sabotage. If deterrence fails, NATO forces will deny Russia the space to mass, block any armoured punch or infiltration, then fracture the enemy's timetable, blind his ISR, shatter his cohesion and defeat him in detail. **The overall goal of in-place NATO forces is to prevent the loss of ground where possible, recover it where necessary, and inflict the massive attrition required to destroy the enemy's offensive power, and ultimately to defeat him.**

The in-place force is substantial: around 47,500 Lithuanian reserve, volunteer and militia troops, a Lithuanian regular army of around 23,000, and the c.5,000-strong German 45th

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

20 Gady, "Air Battle That Could Decide the Russia-Ukraine War."

Armoured Brigade.[21] Together they will secure the rear against hybrid threats and conduct an active, layered defence across the country's depth, giving the attacker no respite.

High-readiness forward troops, drawn from locally raised forces who know the terrain, will direct a technology-enabled defence of the frontier, in line with EFDI and using the Baltic Defence Line to create a **'European hellscape'** in the border zone.[22] Defenders will fortify the ground, pre-position munitions and exploit forests and towns for all-domain ambushes, while denying key infrastructure accentuates natural canalisation into kill zones. Beyond organic fires, the hellscape is serviced by an AI-enabled digital targeting web directing massed precision strike, joint fires from depth and smart counter-mobility: loitering munitions, uncrewed ground and air systems at scale, smart mines, EW and battlefield cyber. Elements of the web are held at unit level and air-gapped, providing decision support when disconnected and allowing reconstitution when degraded.

The cumulative porcupine effect *blocks* any initial infiltration or armoured punch and *blunts* the attacker's ability to take ground. It then disrupts Russia's fallback tactic of "move, bite, hold, repeat". Creating temporary micro-A2AD umbrellas for fire and movement, the porcupine denies the "hold" and pushes Russian forces off any gains. An attacker who cannot hold ground cannot sustain an advance, and one that falls behind schedule risks losing the race against the ten-day clock.

Each arm plays a defined role, and fighting instructions for reservist and militia forces must be simple, clear and executable by disconnected units:[23]

Dismounted infantry will fight from dispersed platoon strongpoints. With **combat engineers**, they will build obstacle belts in the border forests that funnel the enemy into killing areas, to be destroyed by short-range drones, direct-fire weapons, cached loitering munitions and fires from depth, with uncrewed systems shaping the fight to bring mortars to bear. Engineers will also harden command posts and logistics nodes.

Mounted infantry and armour, operating as combined arms, will move from concealed positions under micro-A2AD umbrellas, using deception to earn the right to manoeuvre,[24] and conduct counter-penetration and counter-stroke operations to stop the enemy holding ground. New systems (UAS, counter-UAS, air defence and EW integrated at lower echelons) will get legacy platforms into the fight and keep them there.

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21 For these planned force 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).

22 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/. In a widened conflict, Poland's 'East Shield' initiative (see https://tarczawschod.wp.mil.pl/en/) would also come into play, notably on the Polish border with Kaliningrad.

23 Taking account of both the local and terrain knowledge of these high-readiness forces and the more limited training they will have received as reservists, volunteers and militia, compared to the Lithuanian regular army and the German brigade, they are charged with the forward-presence component of the "block" on enemy committed forces.

24 See, for example, 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.

Field and deep artillery, working with EW, will suppress enemy direct-fire forces, conduct counter-battery fire and lay scatterable mines, using very rapid shoot-and-scoot and relying on uncrewed systems, EW and air defence to earn windows to fire. Concentrating fire from dispersed guns, rockets and drones demands tailored targeting packages and organic AI targeting at tactical level.

Uncrewed air vehicle units (30–500 km) will create fire dominance for forward units facing infiltration, a land-grab or an armoured punch, using loitering capabilities for concentrated effect. They will strike enemy flanks, rear and second echelon, raid beyond the forward line, and complement ground cavalry in reconnaissance.

Air defence and EW units will protect forward forces and critical facilities from drones, aircraft and helicopters, forcing Russian reconnaissance-strike drones to evade rather than observe, and will jam drones, command links, radars and guidance systems to blind Russian ISR and targeting.

Force protection depends on deception that defeats AI-assisted target recognition as well as human eyes, strict electromagnetic discipline and maximum dispersion and mobility, with hardening reserved for what cannot move.

Winning the Air Littoral

The concept's defining operational idea is that joint fires and effects must be cohered into **offensive micro-A2AD umbrellas**: EW, air defence and counter-UAS combined with offensive UAS and other strike capabilities. These deliver precision mass in and over time to suppress and destroy enemy drone attack (SEDA/DEDA) and drone defence (SEDD/DEDD), destroy enemy ISR, and take down the enemy's tactical targeting web and command nodes.[25] The aim is localised, temporary **air-littoral superiority**: windows in which NATO drones, artillery, infantry and armour can move, emit and fire while Russian drones and sensors cannot. This demands **embedded EW, air defence and counter-UAS** at every echelon, not held back as scarce high-level assets.

The concept also identifies a **paradox of air control**. Even if NATO's fifth-generation aircraft win a favourable air situation at altitude, Russia will still launch masses of missiles, FPV, fibre-optic and bomber drones and one-way effectors, and retain localised A2AD effects.[26] NATO forces will therefore need a mass of ground-based air defence against every threat class: a rapid increase in fire units and interceptors, especially low-cost, software-defined systems, cohered by **AI-enabled threat evaluation and weapon assignment (TEWA)** at each echelon to defend forces, populations and critical infrastructure effectively and affordably.[27]

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25 On the "ISTAR war," see Kaushal and Cranny-Evans, *Evolution of Russia's Precision Strike*.

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

27 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 threat. These must also be sufficiently low-cost to win the economy-of-force battle, so software-defined solutions will be preferred. To cohere the new mass of effectors and ensure militarily and economically optimised use, AI-enabled TEWA tools will be essential at each echelon.

Fire Dominance at Every Range: Uncrewed Mass and Deep Precision Strike

The concept calls for **quickly fieldable, scalable fires** at every range, with **extensive use of uncrewed systems**:

- **Short range (up to 100 km).** Uncrewed systems and smart loitering munitions provide indirect fire at brigade level, alongside rocket and tube artillery.
- **Medium range (100–500 km).** Fires organic at division level, delegable to brigades, which together with uncrewed air vehicle units strike launchers, munition stockpiles, air defences, command, logistics and second-echelon forces, preventing the enemy from exploiting any penetration.
- **Long range (500–2,000 km).** Operational-level fires to degrade the Russian war economy without crossing nuclear red lines. Subject to political decision, they are also an intra-war deterrent, exploiting Russia's fear of "aerospace attack":[28] holding targets around Moscow and St Petersburg at risk helps deter Russian strikes on Berlin or Stockholm.[29]

This is the window of vulnerability in microcosm: the means to close it exist, are affordable, and can be fielded now.[30]

Mass precision brings its own demands. A porcupine defence consumes munitions and drones at rates NATO planning factors do not yet reflect, and centralised depots within 40 km of the line will not survive. Dispersed storage, in-theatre production and magazine depth at every range will be essential, both for deterrence and for a sustained fight, as will medical evacuation at unprecedented rates.

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28 On ongoing Russian fear of "aerospace attack," see Kaushal and Cranny-Evans, *Evolution of Russia's Precision Strike*. For its historical continuity, see, for example, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Office of Net Assessment, "B-1 DSARC [Defense Systems Acquisition Review Council] III Decision," memorandum, 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 Modern American Defense Strategy* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 130–32, Kindle.

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

30 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.

AI-Enabled Mission Command

The concept makes **AI-enabled decision support and targeting** the connective tissue of the porcupine, generating real-time, tailored targeting packages from fused sensor data at each echelon so that dispersed artillery, loitering munitions and drones can concentrate fire rapidly and close the kill chain fast.

Because networks will be degraded, and every emission is a target, the concept insists on **air-gapped, organically embedded AI decision support at every echelon**, linked by self-healing mesh networks. Fusing data at lower tactical levels reduces dependence on higher headquarters and the need to push data up and down the chain, letting small units act quickly and, if necessary, in isolation.

This turns NATO's greatest structural advantage over Russia, **mission command**, into a decisive one. NATO's decentralised decision-making and delegated action can exploit Russia's centralised command, but only if C2 empowers rather than constrains them, with clear commander's intent set in advance at every level and across the joint force. **Multinational Corps Northeast, which holds higher tactical command for northern Poland and Lithuania, and its partner commands must be aligned around a shared tactical warfighting concept before hostilities break out.**

Air and Maritime Components

Both supporting components depend on fast political decisions by Allies to commit assets, with escalation management in mind. NATO's low-observable aircraft, such as the F-35, together with special forces and land- and sea-launched deep precision strike, would attack Russian air defences, missile launch sites and long-range aviation. With enough aircraft and munitions, NATO could win a favourable air situation relatively quickly; without them, suppressing enemy air defences will lean far more heavily on land-based fires. Success depends on early commitment; on operating from dispersed bases, with air-to-air refuelling for stand-off operations; on munition stockpiles and effective air command and tasking; and on surviving initial Russian missile strikes. Allies must also balance homeland air defence against commitment to the Baltic, a further reason to build ground-based air defence at scale. If decisions are made now, uncrewed combat air vehicles could considerably augment air mass by the end of the concept's horizon.[31]

At sea, NATO would deny Russian resupply while keeping Allied sea lines open: countering mining of chokepoints such as the Skagerrak, through which reinforcements flow; exploiting its near-insurmountable regional submarine advantage against missile-carrying vessels; securing offshore territory such as Gotland before Russia can use it to extend its air defences; and adding missile-armed corvettes to the strike complex.

[31] Toward the end of the timeframe covered by this concept, uncrewed combat air vehicles (UCAVs) are expected to start entering service at a scale that could alter the SEAD/DEAD and air-delivered strike equation, bringing autonomous, affordable mass to the air domain and helping to defend the homeland and augment the NATO air component simultaneously. Mass, dispersal and agile combat employment could also be bolstered in this way.

Closing the Window: Decision Time

The window of vulnerability is a product of choice, and it can be closed by choice. Turning DDB into deterrence requires European and Canadian governments to act on six fronts now:

Field at scale. Introduce UAS, loitering munitions, counter-UAS, EW, low-cost air defence and deep precision strike in the quantities and magazine depth a porcupine defence requires. Fast-track competitive procurement, then resource these programmes and stick to them.

Iterate concepts and technology in practice. Put new systems in frontline hands immediately, so soldiers can explore their possibilities and limits, drive upgrades, and adapt doctrine, tactics and force structures.

Embrace AI-enabled C2 and targeting. Field AI decision support, targeting webs and TEWA, including air-gapped systems at every echelon, to cohere mass and leverage our mission command advantage.

Embed protection in the force. Integrate EW, air defence and counter-UAS down to the lowest practical echelon to win the air littoral and earn the right to manoeuvre.

Out-adapt Russia. Make NATO's adaptation cycle measurably faster than Russia's, learning honestly from Ukraine, with procurement and fielding that deliver at speed and scale and cut obsolete programmes to free up budget to reallocate to effective capabilities.

Decide faster politically. Prepare to cut through Russian ambiguity, commit air and maritime assets early, and align NATO's commands around a shared warfighting concept before any crisis.

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.

The analysis and views contained in the warfighting concept are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect those of Helsing or any other institution. In addition to the authors listed above, the warfighting concept benefited from input from Dr. Jean-François Belanger, Brig. (ret.) Ben Barry, Gabrielius Landsbergis, Dr. Olivier Schmitt, Dr. Ruben Stewart, and attendees at a series of workshops organised by the Mastering Military Change project between September 2025 and September 2026 in Berlin, Munich, London, Farnborough, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Prague and Vilnius. While grateful for this generous input, which greatly improved the paper, the authors acknowledge that all errors remain their own.

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