INFO SHEET · WARFIGHTING CONCEPT FOR NATO'S FRONTLINE · REALISABLE IN 0-3 YEARS

Defensive Dominance and Deterrence in the Baltic

A Tech-Enabled Warfighting Concept for NATO Frontline Forces

2-5 yrs
until a larger Russian operation could be within reach; a smaller land-grab sooner

0-3 yrs
every system in the concept exists today or can be fielded in this window

10 days
of critical supplies in Kaliningrad if Russia fails to link up and win sea control

September 2027
NATO states agreed to be ready to 'fight tonight' by Sept 2027

THE STAKES: A WINDOW OF VULNERABILITY

The European and Canadian forces in the Baltic, that make up the majority of NATO's frontline presence in the region, cannot currently defeat a Russian onslaught or a rapid land-grab designed to break NATO cohesion. Russia is regenerating its forces and building new bases across the border. A lodgement of any size could let Moscow impose a **fait accompli** backed by nuclear threats.

European and Canadian forces lack UAS, counter-UAS, ISR, EW, air defence, loitering munitions and deep precision strike, and above all the **munitions**, at the scale and magazine depth required, as well as the **AI-enabled C2 and targeting** to cohere them. Rearmament is still focused on legacy systems while US burden-shifting opens deterrence gaps.

Russia does not necessarily take European deterrence seriously. But today's technology favours the defender — and the window of vulnerability can be closed now, if we decide now.

There is also a **conceptual** gap: a lack of clarity on how formations at Corps level and below would block and blunt an attack. DDB fills it for Lithuania and the Suwałki Gap. SACEUR's Theory of Victory sets out what must be done; **DDB** shows how:

Rapidly fieldable new tech can help ready us to fight tonight, accelerate doctrinal evolution, and shift the balance of deterrence in the mid-term.

BLOCK
the initial punch or infiltration
European hellscape · Baltic Defence Line · obstacle belts & smart mines · drones & LMS ⩽100 km · forward fire dominance · air-littoral superiority

BLUNT
deny the "hold", stop the advance & counter
Porcupine in depth · micro-A2AD umbrellas · air-littoral superiority (SEDA/SEDD) · armour counter-penetration

BREAK
destroy the capacity to fight
Fires from depth: 100–500 km vs launchers, AD, C2, logistics, 2nd echelon · Long-range fires 500–2,000 km vs the war economy, as an intrawar deterrent

Deterrence by denial and AI-enabled mission command run across all three.

FIVE IDEAS THAT DEFINE THE CONCEPT

1 · Deterrence by denial

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

2 · Porcupine defence BLOCK BLUNT

A layered, dispersed, fortified, tech-saturated defence across Lithuania's depth, delivering fire dominance at all ranges to block, blunt and bleed an attacker.

3 · European hellscape BLOCK

A dense, AI-enabled kill zone of loitering munitions, drones, mines and fires on the Baltic Defence Line, giving tactical form to the EFDI capability approach.

4 · Air-littoral superiority BLUNT

Localised control of the drone-crowded airspace just above the battlefield, won by suppressing enemy drone attack (SEDA) and drone defence (SEDD).

5 · AI-enabled mission command

Rehearsed plans, clear intent and air-gapped AI decision support at every echelon, so units fight on when dispersed and disconnected.

Winning the air littoral

SEDA/DEDA
kill & jam their attack drones ⊗ ⊗

SEDD/DEDD
suppress their drone defences → our drones get through

THE THREAT: THREE AXES

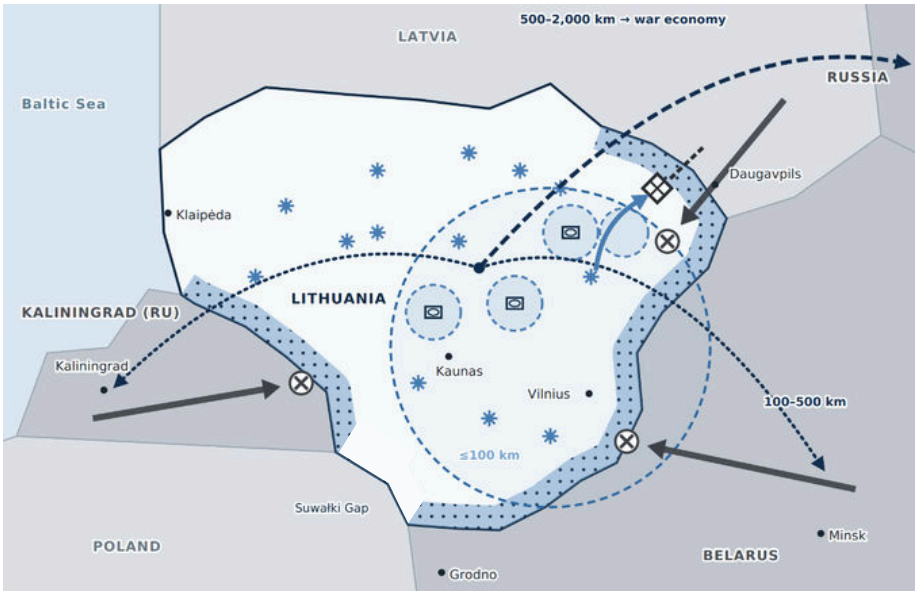
After a hard-to-attribute campaign of sabotage, arson, drone incursions and GPS denial, a large-scale Russian attack would probably come on **three axes** (see map overleaf): west from Belarus bypassing Vilnius, southwest via Daugavpils bypassing Kaunas, and northeast from Kaliningrad, to link up across the Suwałki Gap and encircle NATO forces.

Alternatively, Russia could make a smaller infiltration to grab territory or move on Vilnius by surprise; either could quickly escalate. A lodgement of any size invites a nuclear-backed fait accompli. **The opening battle will be fought largely with the forces and stocks already in place.**

Russian strengths: combat-hardened; adept at integrating EW, massed drones and fires; can shift its main effort; tolerant of casualties; produces and iterates weapons such as the Geran and Lancet at scale; willing to terrorise civilians.

Russian weaknesses: slow to institutionalise innovation; losses squander industrial effort; poor junior leadership; centralised command. **These can only be exploited if NATO adapts measurably faster.**

LAND SCHEME OF MANOEUVRE: THE HELLSCAPE, THE PORCUPINE AND FIRES FROM DEPTH



Schematic, not to scale or a plan of deployment. Ring shows ~100 km reach of short-range fires from a forward area; arrows show indicative fires from depth.

BLOCK · European hellscape

Border kill zone on the Baltic Defence Line: obstacle belts, smart mines, platoon strongpoints, short-range drones and cached LMS, plus fires ⩽100 km ◯.

BLUNT · Porcupine in depth

✳ Dispersed, fortified positions across Lithuania deny the "hold". Armour moves under micro A2AD umbrellas (EW + AD + C-UAS) to counter-penetrate, as SEDA/SEDD win air-littoral superiority.

BREAK · Fires from depth

⇢ 100–500 km: launchers, stockpiles, AD, C2, logistics and the second echelon. ⇢ 500–2,000 km: long-range fires against the war economy, deterring strikes on European capitals, never crossing nuclear red lines.

Russian axes

→ Move–bite–hold, halted at the hellscape ⊗.
→ Counter-penetration protected by micro-A2/AD umbrella.

Dismounted infantry & engineers BLOCK	Locally raised reservists in dispersed platoon strongpoints; with engineers, build forest obstacle belts that canalise the enemy into kill zones struck by drones, cached LMS and fires from depth. Instructions simple enough for disconnected units.
Mounted infantry & armour BLUNT	Move from concealed positions under micro-A2AD umbrellas, using deception to earn the right to manoeuvre; counter-penetrate and counter-stroke to deny the "hold". Embedded UAS, C-UAS and EW keep legacy platforms in the fight.
Field & deep artillery BLOCK BLUNT BREAK	Rapid shoot-and-scoot suppression, counter-battery and scatterable mines; LMS and missiles at 30–100 km to win the air littoral; mid-range fires on the second echelon, with organic AI targeting packages.
Uncrewed air units (30-500 km) BLOCK BREAK	Fire dominance for forward units against infiltration, land-grab or armoured punch; strike flanks, rear and second echelon; complement ground cavalry in reconnaissance and screening.
Air defence, EW & force protection BLUNT	Defeat drones, aircraft and helicopters; jam links, radars and guidance to blind Russian ISR; survive through deception against AI target recognition, emission discipline and dispersal

DRIVERS

Autonomous Mass & Scalable Fires

- Maximum use of uncrewed systems in defence and attack
- Quickly fieldable loitering munitions at scale, plus mid- and long-range deep precision strike
- Magazine depth, dispersed storage and in-theatre production: depots within 40 km won't survive

AI-enabled mission command

- AI targeting web generating real-time, tailored targeting packages
- Air-gapped, organic AI at every echelon so units can fight decentralised, dispersed and disconnected
- Leverages NATO's edge in delegated command over Russia's centralised C2

Embedded EW, AD & C-UAS

- Integrated down to the lowest echelons, not held back as scarce assets
- Massive interceptor magazine depth: low-cost, software-defined, cohered by AI threat evaluation and weapon assignment (TEWA)
- Earn the right to fire and move on a transparent battlefield

Air & maritime in support: Air – a favourable air situation would be an immense advantage but depends on early political commitment of aircraft and munitions, survivable basing and air C2, balanced against the needs of homeland defence (UCAVs could add mass by c.2029–30). If enemy IADS is degraded and a degree of air control is achieved, the battlespace will open to 4G air assets. **Maritime –** deny Russian resupply, keep sea lines open, exploit the regional submarine advantage, provide naval fires to support land action and help degrade IADS.

CLOSING THE WINDOW: DECISIONS REQUIRED NOW

- → **Field at scale** — UAS, LMS, C-UAS, EW, low-cost AD & deep strike; fast-track procurement, then fund it and stick to it.
- → **Embrace AI-enabled C2 & targeting** — air-gapped decision support at every echelon to cohere mass.
- → **Out-adapt Russia** — procurement & fielding at speed & scale, learning honestly from Ukraine and transforming lessons to theatre needs, and cutting obsolete programmes.
- → **Iterate in practice** — get systems to frontline units now so doctrine, tactics and force structures evolve around them.
- → **Embed protection** — EW, AD and C-UAS at the lowest practical echelon to win the air littoral.
- → **Decide faster politically** — cut through ambiguity, commit air and maritime assets early, align commands around one concept.

The window of vulnerability is a product of choice — and it can be closed by choice. The technology favours the defender, the concept and capabilities exist, and the costs are affordable. Now we must choose to act.

Based on Defensive Dominance and Deterrence in the Baltic, a warfighting concept written independently by senior retired commanders and experts convened through the Mastering Military Change initiative; its views are the authors' own.