

A US Framework for Baltic Security and Russia Policy

ELDAR MAMEDOV

QUINCY
BRIEF
NO. 93
FEB. 2026



QUINCY INSTITUTE
FOR RESPONSIBLE
STATECRAFT

Executive Summary

Geographically exposed, politically hardline, and highly militarily dependent on the United States and other Western allies, the Baltic states are both a vulnerability and a potential trip wire in the relationship between NATO, America, and Russia. Understandable historical trauma from Soviet occupation — reinforced by Russia’s more recent aggression against Ukraine — fuels a maximalist anti-Russia stance in the Baltics. This posture pushes the countries’ leaders toward confrontational EU/NATO policies, which risk unintended escalation, including inflexible opposition toward efforts to end the war in Ukraine. The risk of confrontation is only increased by the prominent role that figures from the Baltics play in the leadership of the European Union.

The risk of a dangerous confrontation in the Baltic region diverts finite resources and strategic attention from higher US priorities: securing the homeland, managing challenges in the Western Hemisphere, and countering China — the United States’ sole peer competitor. This contradicts the central tenets of the new US National Security Strategy, which explicitly prioritizes achieving strategic stability with Russia and ending NATO expansion.

As documented in this brief, the conventional threat of a Russian invasion in the Baltic remains limited. However, the risks of escalation stemming from Baltic hardline policies — a resurgent Russian “war party” and continued war in Ukraine — are unacceptably high. To counteract these dynamics, the United States should begin shifting the burden for Baltic and broader European security to European members of NATO, while reaffirming the United States’ commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty’s Article 5 guarantees. Washington should also privately press Baltic leaders to moderate escalatory rhetoric and policies and to work pragmatically toward a negotiated end to the war in Ukraine.

As a corollary to these policies, the United States should begin building a genuinely inclusive European security architecture. Such an order would embed both Ukraine and Russia in a framework that removes, or at least substantially mitigates, the risk of another major war on the Continent. An inclusive security order that removes the Ukraine War as an open wound in Europe is, ultimately, the most stable framework to enhance Baltic security and accord with the Trump administration’s National Security Strategy. However, achieving a stable and inclusive European security architecture will require lowering the temperature in the Baltics.

Introduction

The Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — occupy a uniquely precarious position in US strategy toward Europe, Ukraine, and Russia. Geographically exposed, politically hardline, and militarily highly dependent on their allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, they are both a vulnerability and a potential escalator in NATO–Russia dynamics.

Their historical trauma from Soviet occupation, reinforced by Russia’s war in Ukraine, fuels a maximalist anti–Russia stance, often pushing for confrontational EU/NATO policies that risk unintended escalation. A Baltic crisis, whether through military miscalculation or hybrid warfare, could force the United States into a lose–lose scenario: intervene militarily, risking a major war, or abstain, shattering NATO’s credibility.

A prolonged war in Ukraine heightens the risk of dangerous spillover into the Baltic region while diverting finite resources and strategic attention from higher US priorities: securing the homeland, managing challenges in the Western Hemisphere, and, most critically, countering China — the United States’ sole peer competitor. This misallocation contradicts the central tenets of the 2025 National Security Strategy, which explicitly prioritizes achieving strategic stability with Russia and conclusively ending the cycle of NATO expansion.¹

A national interest–based US Baltic policy must therefore balance deterrence with de–escalation. This brief argues that, while the conventional threat of a Russian invasion remains limited, the risks of escalation stemming from the interplay of Baltic hardline policies, a resurgent Russian “war party,” and the continued war in Ukraine are unacceptably high.

The United States should reaffirm the North Atlantic Treaty’s Article 5 guarantees while progressively shifting the burden for Baltic and broader European security to European members of NATO.² Washington

should also privately press Baltic leaders to moderate escalatory rhetoric and policies and to work pragmatically toward a negotiated end to the war in Ukraine. Sustainable deterrence and de–escalation, not brinkmanship, constitute the path to both Baltic security and US strategic solvency.

In the longer term, the United States should fully align its posture with the logic of its own National Security Strategy. That means setting aside the framework inherited from the 1990s — one never seriously reexamined — which treated Russia as a strategically irrelevant declining power and its actions through the moralist binary of a struggle between “democracy and autocracy.”

The corollary of this shift is not a harder line but a more clear–eyed one: the beginning of work on a genuinely inclusive European security architecture. Such an order would embed both Ukraine and Russia in a framework that removes, or at least substantially mitigates, the risk of another major war on the continent. This is not concession; it is conflict prevention.

An inclusive security order that removes Ukraine as an open wound in Europe is, ultimately, the most stable framework that enhances Baltic security by avoiding the frozen conflict next door that could reignite at any moment, drawing the Baltics directly into a new war. The Trump administration’s efforts to end the war in Ukraine, whatever their tactical flaws, represent a necessary pivot toward this realist logic.

This strategy — immediate stabilization, détente–building, and long–term reform of the European security architecture — aims to secure the Baltics without fueling a NATO–Russia war.

1 “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” The White House, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

2 Article 5 refers to NATO’s collective defense.

The Baltic dilemma: Trauma, threat, and overreach

Threat perception and strategic reality

The Baltic states wield outsized influence in EU and NATO forums, leveraging historical trauma from Soviet occupation and geographic vulnerability to shape a hardline consensus on Russia. The Baltics' core narrative — that Russia will not stop at Ukraine; only its strategic defeat will prevent World War III — is a matter of domestic political consensus, articulated internationally most prominently by leaders like Kaja Kallas, Estonia's former prime minister and now the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, and Lithuania's former prime minister, now the EU Commissioner for Defence and Space, Andrius Kubilius.³

This perspective, driven by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, fuels policies such as lobbying for ever-increasing sanctions and refusing any negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin until maximalist Ukrainian victory conditions are met. Incidents that once would have been resolved through routine communication — like the alleged entry of Russian drones into Baltic airspace — are now inflated by rhetoric. This escalation was starkly illustrated in September 2025 by Dovilė Šakalienė, Lithuania's then-defense minister, who pointedly referenced

Türkiye's 2015 shooting down of a Russian aircraft, implicitly endorsing it as a model for future Baltic responses.⁴

In 2024, Kallas, while still the Estonian prime minister, framed Russia's invasion as an existential threat and called for Russia's dismemberment along ethnic lines.⁵ Advocating for Russia's strategic defeat and dismissing any attempts to find a diplomatic settlement to the war as akin to the Munich Agreement's surrender of Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany in 1938 are common in Baltic domestic political discourse.⁶

This narrative is amplified institutionally on the international level. Rather than moderating her stance to build a European consensus, Kallas has used her EU office to institutionalize a confrontational posture as the union's default setting.⁷ This is evident in her opposition to any peace plan not predicated on the increasingly untenable notion that Ukraine is winning the war and Russia is nearing economic collapse.⁸

Kubilius is similarly advocating for a new, confrontational European grand strategy. He summarized his vision, which he terms a "Pax Europaea," as a four-point doctrine: "Europe up, with enhanced defense capabilities; Russia down, diminished materially and politically; United States

-
- 3 "Kallas: Russia Defeat in Ukraine Necessary to Avoid World War III," EER, March 21, 2024, <https://news.err.ee/1609288809>; Andrius Kubilius, "On Peace in Ukraine and EU Military Support to Ukraine," official website, Nov. 18, 2024, <https://andriuskubilius.lt/en/on-peace-in-ukraine-and-eu-military-support-to-ukraine/>.
 - 4 Dovilė Šakalienė (@DSakaliene), "Three Russian fighter jets over Tallinn is more hard proof that #EasternSentry is long due," X, Sept. 19, 2025, <https://x.com/dsakaliene/status/1969060416954208294>.
 - 5 Mariska den Eelden (@eeldenden), "There are many different nations in Russia'. Kaja Kallas says holding the line is not enough," X, May 21, 2024, <https://x.com/eeldenden/status/1792880764498935872>.
 - 6 Gabrielius Landsbergis, "Russia's Defeat in Ukraine: Why It Is Crucial and How to Achieve It," European Policy Centre, March 18, 2024, <https://www.epc.eu/events/Russias-defeat-in-Ukraine-Why-it-is-58c690>.
 - 7 The confrontational posture includes apparent attempts at historical revisionism, with Kaja Kallas disputing the role the Soviet Union played in defeating Nazism in World War II. See, for example, Eldar Mamedov, "Kaja Kallas' Shocking Lack of Historical Literacy," *Responsible Statecraft*, Sept. 9, 2025, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/kaja-kallas-history>.
 - 8 Elena Sánchez Nicolás, "Kallas: Russia's Defeat Crucial to Avoid Third World War," *EUobserver*, March 21, 2024, <https://euobserver.com/15642>.

out, preparing for a strategic withdrawal; and Ukraine in, fast-tracked for integration into European defense structures.”⁹

This idea of Russia’s “strategic defeat” is also propagated on other institutional levels, such as the Committees on Foreign Affairs and Security & Defence in the European Parliament and, more consequentially, in the Council of the European Union, a platform for EU member states (not to be confused with the Council of Europe, which predates the Union). The Baltic states drive hawkish policies, while other member states play along as they prioritize intra-union solidarity and the image of unity. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where radical positions dominate discourse while pragmatic voices disengage. The price of that disengagement, however, is rhetorical and political entrapment, which makes it hard for moderate forces to escape unless they are prepared to spend political capital countering accusations of betrayal of “European unity” and “appeasing Putin.”¹⁰

However, this position is no longer monolithic. As the Ukraine war grinds on into its fifth year, European pragmatism is resurfacing as seen in French President Emmanuel Macron’s discreet outreach to Moscow and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz’s softening rhetoric.¹¹ As a result, even Latvian Prime Minister Evika Silina and Estonian President Alar Karis have broken with Kallas’s line to support appointing an EU special envoy for Russia talks — a move that acknowledges the stalemate and the need for diplomacy, even if opposed by hardliners.¹²

Sober reassessment of the Russian threat to the Baltics

While the emotional and political drivers of Baltic policy are understandable, a realistic evaluation of the conventional military threat reveals a significant gap between perception and current reality. The scenario of a Russian invasion is not a credible near-term threat due to prohibitive Russian losses and fundamental strategic imbalances illustrated by the following data:

- **Degradation of Russia’s conventional forces:** Russia’s military has been degraded in Ukraine.¹³ The specific forces once positioned to threaten the Baltics, notably the Kaliningrad-based 11th Army Corps, were largely destroyed in the early phases of the war. Although Russia can rebuild and eventually pose an even more formidable challenge, Jennifer Kavanagh and Jeremy Shapiro argue that reconstitution will take at least “five to 10 years after the end of the Ukraine war.”¹⁴ The Baltic states and their allies must use that time to develop their defense capability while exploring options for diplomatic outreach to Moscow.
- **NATO’s overwhelming superiority:** Any Russian action against the Baltic states would trigger a full NATO response, including:

9 Andrius Kubilius (@Kubilius), “Pax Europaea in short,” X, May 29, 2025, <https://x.com/KubiliusA/status/1928165743222243835>.

10 A revealing conversation I had illustrates this dynamic. A prominent center-right French member of the European Parliament, or MEP, from a Gaullist party (i.e., following the late President Charles de Gaulle, a staunch defender of French strategic sovereignty and détente with Moscow) privately admitted to me that Western colleagues often “outsource” Russia/Ukraine policy to Baltic and Polish MEPs simply because they “care more and mobilize relentlessly.” Author interview with French MEP, 2022.

11 Philippe Ricard, “Macron Sends His Diplomatic Advisor to Moscow,” *Le Monde*, Feb. 5, 2026, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2026/02/05/macron-sends-his-diplomatic-advisor-to-moscow_6750175_4.html; Friederike Heine, “Germany’s Merz Says EU Willing to Talk to Russia, but Will Not Hold ‘Parallel’ Talks,” Reuters, Feb. 6, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/germanys-merz-says-eu-willing-talk-russia-will-not-hold-parallel-talks-2026-02-06>.

12 Jorge Liboreiro and Maria Tadeo, “Latvian PM and Estonian President Back Special EU Envoy for Russia-Ukraine Talks,” *Euronews*, Feb. 4, 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/02/04/exclusive-latvian-pm-and-estonian-president-call-for-direct-talks-with-russia>.

13 Seth G. Jones and Riley McCabe, “Russia’s Battlefield Woes in Ukraine,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 3, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-battlefield-woes-ukraine>.

14 Jennifer Kavanagh and Jeremy Shapiro, “The Bear in the Baltic: Reassessing the Russian Threat in Estonia,” European Council on Foreign Relations, Dec. 18, 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-bear-in-the-baltics-reassessing-the-russian-threat-in-estonia>.

Air dominance: NATO outnumbers Russian tactical aircraft in Europe 10:1 and holds a vast qualitative lead in pilot training and integrated operations.

Naval dominance: With the accession of Sweden and Finland, NATO controls the entire Baltic Sea coastline, turning it into a NATO-dominated lake. The Russian Baltic Fleet is vulnerable and would be rapidly neutralized.¹⁵

- **“Baltic blitzkrieg” assumptions:** The idea of a rapid Russian seizure of the Baltic capitals ignores the reality of urban warfare, as demonstrated in Ukraine. Battlegroups from the Baltic national forces and NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence, the EFP, are designed to fall back and defend cities like Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius, turning them into fortified bastions. Furthermore, the EFP serves as a strategic trip wire; an attack would guarantee immediate casualties among US, UK, Canadian, and German troops, making an Article 5 response from NATO politically unavoidable.

There are no credible indicators that Russia is contemplating a deliberate attack on NATO.¹⁶ Russian leadership has made no statements suggesting such intent; in fact, President Putin has explicitly dismissed the notion as “nonsense” and has expressed a willingness to formalize this principle in a legal document.¹⁷

While verbal assurances from any leader require verification, the strategic reality is that Russia’s

conventional military capabilities are insufficient to sustain a successful offensive against the NATO alliance. While many in the European political commentariat predict Russia will move to test NATO as soon as 2027 or 2028, such assessments are notably contradicted by Estonian intelligence, which align more with Kavanagh and Shapiro’s analysis that Russia does not possess such capabilities in the near future.¹⁸

A large-scale conventional Russian invasion of the Baltic states is implausible in the current and medium-term strategic environment. Focus must pivot from this improbable scenario toward the real and persistent threat of hybrid warfare and an unplanned spiral of escalation, which would be exacerbated if the Ukraine war remains unresolved.

The persistent hybrid challenge

Russia is employing a range of hybrid tactics to test European resilience and raise the political and economic costs of supporting Ukraine.¹⁹ The Baltic region, due to its geography, is a primary focus of these efforts. While this pattern exists, it is important to note that not every suspected incident’s Russian authorship has been conclusively proven. Some — like the initial attribution to Russia of GPS jamming in order to disrupt European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s August 2025 flight from Sofia, Bulgaria — have been debunked.²⁰

Notwithstanding these ambiguities, the trend is illustrated by several developments:

- **An increase in disruptive incidents:** There has been a notable pattern in disruptive

15 George Beebe, Mark Episkopos, and Anatol Lieven, “Right-Sizing the Russian Threat to Europe,” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, July 8, 2024, <https://quincyinst.org/research/right-sizing-the-russian-threat-to-europe>.

16 Anatol Lieven, “Mark Rutte’s Rhetoric Is Paranoid, Not Prudent,” *UnHerd*, Dec. 13, 2025, <https://unherd.com/newsroom/mark-ruttes-russia-rhetoric-is-paranoid-not-prudent>.

17 Pjotr Sauer, “Putin Dismisses Fears that Moscow Plans to Attack NATO as ‘Nonsense,’” *The Guardian*, Oct. 2, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/02/vladimir-putin-dismisses-fears-moscow-plans-attack-nato>; Alastair McCready, “Putin Says He Is Ready to Guarantee in Writing No Russian Attack on Europe,” *Al Jazeera*, Nov. 28, 2025, <https://aje.io/vqf7sn>.

18 See, for example, Simon Saradzhyan, “Would Russia Attack NATO, If So, When?” *Russia Matters*, June 5, 2025, <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/would-russia-attack-nato-and-if-so-when>; Kaupo Rosin, “Russia Has No Intention to Militarily Attack Estonia or NATO This or Next Year,” *EER*, Feb. 10, 2026, <https://news.err.ee/1609935905>.

19 “Russian Sabotage Attacks Surged across Europe in 2024,” *The Economist*, July 22, 2025, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2025/07/22/russian-sabotage-attacks-surged-across-europe-in-2024>.

20 Antoaneta Roussi, Tommaso Lecca, and Mathieu Pollet, “Von der Leyen’s GPS Scare Gripped Europe. The Russia Allegations are Starting to Unravel,” *Politico*, Sept. 2, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/gps-jamming-ursula-von-der-leyen-bulgaria-bulgaria-europe/>.

activities widely attributed to Russian actors, including interference with critical undersea data cables in the Baltic Sea and targeting of telecommunications infrastructure.²¹

- **Evolving operational methods:** Following the expulsion of many intelligence officers, Russia appears to be adapting its methods. Reports suggest an increased reliance on criminal networks and mercenary groups, creating a layer of deniability for hostile actions.
- **Targeting systemic vulnerabilities:** These tactics effectively exploit underinvestment in resilient civilian infrastructure. This is a dual-purpose threat: since an estimated 90 percent of NATO’s military logistics rely on civilian networks, such disruptions can impact

both daily life and alliance readiness. Specific examples include persistent GPS jamming affecting Baltic airspace.²²

This persistent hybrid pressure is a direct consequence of the ongoing war in Ukraine. The conflict provides the primary impetus for Russia to test and strain NATO’s eastern flank. Consequently, the Baltics’ vulnerability to these unconventional attacks gives them a paramount interest in advocating for a resolution to the war. The continuation of hostilities only increases the likelihood and intensity of these hybrid threats, while a credible end to the conflict would remove the core rationale for this campaign. Therefore, a stable security environment in the Baltic region is inextricably linked to achieving a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine.

How Baltic maximalism undermines Baltic security

Baltic concerns are legitimate. But their policy responses often fuel overreach, empower Moscow’s hardliners, and risk alienating allies.

The push for tanker seizures

A prime example is the Baltic-led initiative to move beyond sanctions and begin the large-scale seizure of Russian oil tankers transiting the Baltic Sea. Justified on grounds of environmental protection and countering sabotage (following the 2024 severing of the Estlink 2 power cable by a tanker), their goal is to cripple Russia’s oil-export lifeline.²³

However, this is a risky gambit. Seizing vessels in international waters on novel legal grounds could be challenged as a violation of innocent passage.²⁴ More critically, it could provoke a direct military response, with Moscow potentially dispatching its navy to escort tankers, creating a high-risk standoff between NATO and Russian warships.

President Putin described such prospective actions as “piracy” and promised a stern Russian response.²⁵ Alexei Zhuravlev, the deputy chairman of the Russian State Duma’s Defense Committee, stated that “any attack on our carriers can be regarded as an attack

21 Victor Jack, Lucia Mackenzie, and Sam Clark, “Europe’s New War with Russia: Deep Sea Sabotage,” *Politico*, April 7, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-sabotage-undersea-cables-baltic-sea-europe-war>.

22 Linus Höller, “Researchers Home In on Origins of Russia’s GPS Jamming,” *Defense News*, July 2, 2025, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/07/02/researchers-home-in-on-origins-of-russias-baltic-gps-jamming>.

23 Victor Jack and Gabriel Gavin, “Inside the New Plan to Seize Russia’s Shadowy Fleet,” *Politico*, Feb. 10, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-shadow-fleet-finnish-bay-snow-eagle-s-december-oil-baltic-sea-europe-waves-europe-kremlin>.

24 Innocent passage refers to the right of foreign vessels to transit through the territorial waters of another state.

25 “Russia to Consider Measures against Ships Helping Ukraine with Piracy — Putin,” TASS, Dec. 2, 2025, <https://tass.com/politics/2052519>.

on our territory,” threatening immediate military retaliation, including reciprocal boarding of Western ships and “active measures” from the Baltic Fleet.²⁶ This frames the issue as a *casus belli*, dramatically raising the stakes. The inherent danger lies not in the veracity of the threat but in the escalation it risks. To call the bluff is to gamble on a chain of events that may spiral beyond control.

The inherent logic of any such escalation points to a direct NATO–Russia conflict. Faced with Russian retaliation, the affected Baltic states would be compelled to invoke Article 5. This action would transform the conflict, irrevocably drawing in the United States and setting the stage for a direct military confrontation with Russia — the very risk that currently serves as the primary deterrent against full-scale war.

Maximalist diplomacy that precludes compromise

The diplomatic stance of the Baltic states and their Nordic allies effectively closes the door to a negotiated settlement in Ukraine. When the Trump administration attempts to pursue a diplomatic dialogue with Russia, the Baltics demand not diplomacy but, in effect, to present Moscow with terms for surrender.²⁷ The shift toward a more hawkish posture in the Nordic states, manifest in Sweden and Finland joining NATO during the Biden administration, has emboldened such a position.

This perspective is exemplified by a “30–point peace plan” unveiled by Eerik Kross, a prominent Estonian MP, former intelligence minister, and now the General Rapporteur on “Russian Democratic Forces” for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of

Europe.²⁸ Kross has proposed a framework that, in its demands for Moscow, is so extensive that it appears predicated on total Russian military defeat and political capitulation. While Kross no longer holds executive power and his Council of Europe position may lose relevance if and when the peace agreement in Ukraine is signed, his views reflect a significant underlying strand of thought among Baltic policymakers.²⁹

By anchoring their strategy to an unattainable outcome, the Baltics have boxed themselves in domestically: any perceived softening triggers nationalist backlash, as Latvian Prime Minister Evika Siliņa discovered when her suggestion of an EU diplomatic envoy to Moscow provoked outcry from a nationalist opposition party.³⁰

This internal pressure will constrain Baltic leaders’ ability to support the inevitable concessions required for any future settlement, such as sanction relief on Russia in the European Council.

The consequence is a self-inflicted long-term vulnerability: Even as the United States and core European states eventually settle into a wary coexistence with Russia, the Baltics risk remaining in a state of perpetual confrontation. This predicament underscores a broader failure of strategic vision — an inability to forge a sustainable *modus vivendi* that acknowledges inescapable geographic realities.

Alienating Washington

The Baltic approach to the United States under the second Trump presidency has been counterproductive. At the 2025 Munich Security Conference, Kallas reportedly attempted to lecture

26 Victor Jack, “Russia Lashes Out at EU Plans to Seize Its ‘Shadow Fleet’ in the Baltic Sea,” *Politico*, Feb. 11, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-lashes-out-against-eu-plans-to-seize-its-shadow-fleet-in-the-baltic-sea>.

27 “Joint Statement of the leaders of the Nordic Baltic Eight on Ukraine,” Government Offices of Sweden, Aug. 16, 2025, <https://www.government.se/statements/2025/08/joint-statement-of-the-leaders-of-the-nordic-baltic-eight-on-ukraine>.

28 Eerik N Kross (@EerikNKross), “The 30[–]point plan. This is what a legally grounded and just European peace framework should look like,” X, Nov. 27, 2025, <https://x.com/EerikNKross/status/1994180542716064003>.

29 Andrew Gray, “EU’s Kallas to Propose Concessions Europe Should Demand from Russia,” Reuters, Feb. 10, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-propose-list-concessions-demand-russia-part-ukraine-peace-deal-says-eus-2026-02-10>.

30 For example, see this tweet from a Latvian MEP: Rihards Kols (@RihardsKols), “Latvijas ārpolitikas pamatā līdz šim ir bijusi maksimāla Krievijas izolācija un sankciju spiediens līdz pilnīgai agresora sakāvei” [“Latvia’s foreign policy has so far been based on maximum isolation of Russia and sanctions pressure until the aggressor’s complete defeat”], X, Feb. 4, 2026, <https://x.com/RihardsKols/status/2019076389945680306>.

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth on Russia — a move that predictably backfired.³¹ During her subsequent visit to Washington, Secretary of State Marco Rubio pointedly cancelled their meeting at the last minute.³² In a display of diplomatic amateurism, Kallas then used her platform at an event at the hawkish Hudson Institute to ask, “If you can’t defeat Russia, then how can you defeat China?”³³

The next day, following a failed White House meeting between Trump and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine, Kallas declared that the “free world needs a new leader,” in an obvious jab at the American president.³⁴ And when Trump promised to sell European-funded weapons to Ukraine, she demanded the United States commit to full involvement, further straining the relationship.³⁵

The consequence of this uncompromising approach has been Kallas’s marginalization from the central diplomatic track. When Trump presented his 28-point plan in Nov. 2025, the subsequent meeting in Geneva to discuss its details between Ukrainian, American, British, French, German and EU officials notably excluded Kallas, despite her being the EU high representative. That underscored the cost of her strained relationship with Washington — already illustrated by her difficulty in securing meetings with her American counterpart — and the European Union’s weakness.³⁶

Eroding European unity

The Baltic states’ perceived intransigence is beginning to backfire within the European Union, their most vital political arena. Privately, EU diplomats from major member states fret over the Baltics’ inflexibility on issues critical to forging a common strategic path. On debates over the use of frozen Russian assets or the fast-tracking of Ukraine’s EU membership, Baltic maximalism is increasingly viewed not as principled resolve but as an obstacle to pragmatic solutions that can maintain a fragile consensus.

Consider the plan to seize frozen Russian assets in order to help Ukraine. The Baltic states were pushing for it, as the estimated €183 billion of Russian sovereign funds would be a massive windfall for financing Ukrainian defense efforts. However, the plan faltered because Belgium, where most of those assets are held, objected over the legal precedent it would set, potentially undermining Brussels’s credibility as a global financial hub, as well as the prospect of Russian retaliatory strikes on Belgian interests worldwide. Instead, the European Union agreed to further support Ukraine with the member states’ own funds (€90 billion) rather than the frozen Russian ones.³⁷

Yet instead of seeking a solution that accommodated Belgium’s legitimate concerns, Kallas chose to publicly lecture the Belgian government.³⁸ This fueled a perception of Baltic inflexibility not only toward

31 Robbie Gamer, Eric Bazail-Eimil, and Daniel Lippman, “Munich’s about to Get Spicy,” *Politico*, Feb. 13, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2025/02/13/munichs-about-to-get-spicy-00195922>.

32 Jorge Liboreiro, “Kaja Kallas Meeting with Rubio Cancelled Due to Scheduling Issues,” *Euronews*, Feb. 26, 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/02/26/kaja-kallas-meeting-with-marco-rubio-cancelled-due-to-scheduling-issues>.

33 “Fireside Chat: Kaja Kallas on the US–EU Relationship,” Hudson Institute, Feb. 27, 2025, <https://www.hudson.org/events/kaja-kallas-high-representative-european-union-foreign-affairs-security-policy-peter-rough>.

34 Nadeem Badshah, “‘Free World Needs a New Leader,’ Says EU Foreign Policy Chief after Trump Zelenskyy Row,” *The Guardian*, Feb. 28, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/28/european-leaders-throw-support-behind-zelenskyy-after-heated-trump-meeting>.

35 Rosie Birchard, “EU Backs Trump Ukraine U–Turn but Wants US to ‘Share Burden,’” *DW*, July 15, 2025, <https://p.dw.com/p/4xWIB>.

36 “US Secretary of State Declines Meeting with Kaja Kallas,” *Baltic Times*, Nov. 26, 2025, https://www.baltictimes.com/us_secretary_of_state_declines_meeting_with_kaja_kallas.

37 “European Council, 18 December 2025, Ukraine,” European Council, Dec. 19, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/12/19/european-council-18-december-2025-ukraine/>.

38 Eddy Wax, “Kallas Asks: What’s Belgium’s Problem?” *Euractiv*, Nov. 26, 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/news/rapporteur-kallas-asks-whats-belgiums-problem>.

Moscow but also within the European Union. As one Belgian official highlighted, drawing a crucial distinction, “Belgians are more pro–Ukrainian than they are anti–Russian.”³⁹

The attempt to fast-track Ukrainian EU membership, championed by the Baltics, is not performing much better. While European Council President António Costa attempted at an informal EU summit in Copenhagen in September 2025 to change the rules for voting on opening negotiations for the Union’s enlargement, proposing a qualified majority of member states instead of unanimity, as required, the move was blocked by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.⁴⁰ While Orbán provided the public “no” vote, he was merely giving political cover for a chorus of objections to Ukraine’s membership, including from France, the Netherlands and, just days after the summit, the newly elected government in the Czech Republic. Addressing the issue, the winner of those elections, then–President Elect Andrej Babiš, said Ukraine is “not prepared for [the] EU. They have to end the war first.”⁴¹

This friction occurs against a backdrop of palpable war fatigue and the steady rise of a European “peace bloc.” This bloc is no longer confined to the predictable voices of Hungary’s Orbán or Slovakia’s Robert Fico. It now includes new forces: Babiš in the Czech Republic, the surging anti-war left and right in France, and the Alternative for Germany, or AfD (for the German Alternative für Deutschland), which consistently polls as a top party.⁴² In this shifting political landscape, the more pragmatic Baltic

leaders increasingly realize that a refusal to countenance any form of diplomacy or compromise is a strategic liability.

Alienating Russian-speaking minorities

Domestically, restrictive policies toward Russian-speaking minorities in Latvia (35 percent of the population) and Estonia (27 percent) create a long-term vulnerability.⁴³ Following the restoration of their independence in 1991, both states opted to restore legal continuity with their pre–Soviet republics. This meant automatic citizenship for descendants of pre–1940 citizens, while others, primarily Russian speakers, had to undergo naturalization.⁴⁴

While arguably a redress for Soviet-era demographic engineering, this policy has failed to foster a sense of belonging among a significant number of Russian speakers, leaving integration incomplete. It also violates promises made by Baltic leaders to the Russian government under Boris Yeltsin before independence in 1991, as well as Latvia’s and Estonia’s commitments to minority rights as part of the EU accession process. This record is the key reason why Russia does not trust the European Union to guarantee Russian speakers’ minority rights in Ukraine as part of a future Ukrainian EU accession process.

A 2025 Council of Europe resolution on Latvia highlights serious concerns, urging the country to broaden its integration approach beyond promoting

39 Author interview with a senior retired Belgian official.

40 Nicholas Vinocur and Gabriel Gavin, “Costa Seeks to Bypass Orbán’s Veto on Ukraine’s EU Membership Bid,” *Político*, Sept. 29, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/antonio-costa-seeks-bypass-viktor-orban-veto-ukraine-eu-membership-bid-copenhagen-summit>.

41 Quoted in, Nina Byzantina (@NinaByzantina), “More trouble in the EU paradise,” X, Oct. 4, 2025, <https://x.com/NinaByzantina/status/1974573443959140531>.

42 “French Polls Show Far-Right Leader Bardella Winning Presidential Election,” Reuters, Nov. 25, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/french-poll-shows-far-right-leader-bardella-winning-presidential-election-2025-11-25>; Joakim Scheffer, “AfD Extends Lead Over CDU in First 2026 Poll,” *Hungarian Conservative*, Jan. 7, 2026, <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/afd-poll-lead-cdu-germany-state-elections>.

43 Since 2001, Lithuania’s Russian-speaking population has shrunk to only 5 percent of Lithuania’s total population. See “Population of Russians, Poles Shrinks in Lithuania,” *LRT English*, Dec. 20, 2022, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1849286/population-of-russians-poles-shrinks-in-lithuania>.

44 David J. Trimbach, “Estonian Citizenship Policy: The Restoration of a Country Leads to Statelessness for Some,” Migration Policy Institute, June 1, 2017, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/estonian-citizenship-policy-restoration-country-leads-to-statelessness-some>.

the Latvian language and to support minority-language education and media.⁴⁵

Estonia, meanwhile, has shifted from relatively liberal policies, such as allowing its large cohort of non-citizens to vote in local elections, to revoking that right based on the claims of “national security.”⁴⁶

These measures are expanding. Following the invasion of Ukraine, Latvia amended its Immigration Law, requiring thousands of Russian nationals living in the country to apply for EU long-term residency status, demonstrate Latvian proficiency, and pass security checks by June 2025 in order to remain. The immediate result was that some 2,600 Russians left voluntarily and another 841 individuals were ordered deported by mid-October for noncompliance.⁴⁷ The supposed security threat posed by the Russian-speaking demographic — often elderly, isolated, and without family ties to Russia — is hardly commensurate with the rules adopted. Such alienating policies have drawn criticism from even traditionally sympathetic international voices like *The Economist*.⁴⁸

This shift, if not reversed or at least recalibrated, provides the Kremlin with leverage to destabilize Baltic societies from within, undermining their long-term resilience and cohesion in NATO.

The Moscow “war party” and the escalatory feedback loop

Danger to the Baltics is compounded by the existence of a “war party” in Russia, which perceives incidents like drone sightings or aircraft incursions

in NATO and EU airspace as opportunities to raise the stakes. This faction, whose most vocal public spokesperson is Dmitry Medvedev, a former president and current deputy chair of the Security Council, promotes the idea of organizing a “Cuban Missile Crisis 2.0.”⁴⁹ The concept is to deliberately maneuver to the brink of nuclear war with NATO and then present an ultimatum, confident that the West will back down and accept all of Moscow’s conditions.

This creates a perilous feedback loop:

- On one side, the Western war party (including Baltic hawks) argues that the United States should not fear a harsh confrontation — up to a direct military clash — because the Kremlin is bluffing and will ultimately back down rather than use nuclear weapons.
- On the other side, the Moscow war party argues that Russia should not fear raising the stakes to the nuclear threshold, because the West will inevitably capitulate.

So far, the political leadership in both Washington and Moscow has refrained from crossing the line into direct conflict. But when forces on both sides are actively interested in escalation, the risk multiplies.

The Kaliningrad flashpoint: Geography as a *casus belli*

This feedback loop is not merely theoretical. It has a geographic epicenter: the 65-mile stretch of land between Russian-allied Belarus and Russia’s

45 “Resolution on the Implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by Latvia,” CM/ResCMN(2025)3, adopted by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, April 2, 2025, <https://search.coe.int/>.

46 “Estonia’s Parliament Bans Local Voting for Non-Europeans, Targeting Russians,” *Le Monde*, March 26, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/russia/article/2025/03/26/estonia-s-parliament-bans-local-voting-for-non-europeans-targeting-russians_6739540_140.html; Grzegorz Szymanowski, “Estonia Bans Non-EU Citizens From Voting in Local Elections,” DW, Oct. 18, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/estonia-bans-non-eu-citizens-from-voting-in-local-elections/video-74413062>.

47 Giedrė Peseckytė, “Latvia Orders More than 800 Russian Citizens to Leave by Mid-October,” *Politico*, Oct. 10, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/latvia-orders-800-russian-citizens-out-mid-october>.

48 “Latvia Is Needlessly Alienating Its Russian-Speakers,” *The Economist*, Jan. 8, 2026, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2026/01/08/latvia-is-needlessly-alienating-its-russian-speakers>.

49 Sergei Karaganov, “Russia Will Nuke Germany and the UK If the War in Ukraine Continues,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Jan. 16, 2026, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russia-will-nuke-karaganov-carlson>. For more on Medvedev, see Shaun Walker, “I Hate Them: Dmitry Medvedev’s Journey from Liberal to Anti-Western Hawk,” *The Guardian*, Aug. 1, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/01/dmitry-medvedev-journey-liberal-anti-west-hawk-russia>; Mansur Mirovalev, “Russia’s Medvedev: From Failed Kremlin Reformer to Trump’s Boogeyman,” *Al Jazeera*, Aug. 5, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/5/dmitry-medvedev-from-failed-kremlin-reformer-to-trumps-boogeyman>.

Kaliningrad exclave — a vulnerability that, if exploited, would collapse the distinction between hybrid pressure and existential threat.⁵⁰

Sandwiched on the Baltic coast between NATO members Poland and Lithuania, and now entirely surrounded by the alliance following Sweden’s and Finland’s accession, Kaliningrad’s precarious geography generates a deep strategic neurosis in Moscow. This anxiety unites Russian moderates and hawks in a rare consensus: any credible threat to cut the exclave’s overland transit would be viewed as an existential challenge requiring a military response, potentially nuclear.⁵¹

In June 2022, Lithuania briefly restricted the transit of EU-sanctioned goods to Kaliningrad via rail, citing Brussels’s legal framework. Moscow’s reaction was immediate and severe, with the head of Russia’s Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, stating that

“appropriate measures” would be taken, which would “have a serious negative impact on the population of Lithuania.”⁵²

The crisis de-escalated only after the European Union intervened, clarifying that sanctions did not apply to transit itself, merely to certain goods.⁵³ However, the underlying issue never disappeared. In October 2025, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Kęstutis Budrys publicly revived the threat, stating that Lithuania “retain[s] the possibility to close transit if it is needed to ensure our security,” though stressing such a move would require EU coordination.⁵⁴

This triggered genuine alarm in Moscow. Both Russian moderates, who dread such a scenario, and hawks, who desire it to “get Europe back to its senses” agree on one point: a transit cutoff backed by NATO’s conventional superiority would leave Moscow with no face-saving option except nuclear brinkmanship.⁵⁵

A US strategy for balanced security and restraint

To secure the Baltics without hurtling toward a direct, and potentially catastrophic, NATO–Russia conflict, the United States should adopt a strategy grounded in realism and restraint. The objective is not to weaken the alliance but to build sustainable deterrence — a posture credible enough to reassure allies yet disciplined enough to avoid unnecessary escalation.

Recalibrate deterrence and bolster hybrid defense

Right-size the military mission: The United States should clearly and unambiguously reaffirm the validity of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, conveying its resolve to defend the Baltic states. This commitment is the foundation of sustainable

50 Stephen Hall, “Ukraine War: All Eyes on Lithuania as Sanctions Close Russian Land Access to Kaliningrad,” *The Conversation*, June 23, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.dd57wmn37>.

51 Hall, “Ukraine War.”

52 Quoted in Daniel Boffey, “Russia Threatens ‘Serious Consequences’ as Lithuania Blocks Rail Goods,” *The Guardian*, June 21, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/21/kaliningrad-russia-threatens-serious-consequences-as-lithuania-blocks-rail-goods>.

53 Ausra Park, “Lithuania and Russia’s Kaliningrad: Analyzing the Most Recent ‘Crisis’ That Shook the EU,” *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, Aug. 11, 2022, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook>.

54 Quoted in Baltic News Service, “Lithuania Could Stop Russia’s Kaliningrad Transit Scheme ‘to Ensure Security’ — FM,” *LRT*, Oct. 28, 2025, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2728076/lithuania-could-stop-russia-s-kaliningrad-transit-scheme-to-ensure-security-fm>.

55 Sergei Karaganov, in “Breaking News: Russia Will Nuke Germany & the UK If Ukraine War Continues, Warns Top Putin Advisor,” interviewed on the *Tucker Carlson Show*, posted Jan. 14, 2026, by Tucker Carlson, <https://youtu.be/zK4ghWXs-U>.

deterrence. Publicly and privately, the United States should base its posture on a realistic threat assessment.

The mission of NATO forces in the Baltics is not to fight off a nonexistent Russian blitzkrieg but to serve as an undeniable trip wire and contribute to defense against hybrid threats. Resources should be shifted from symbolic reinforcements to enhancing the resilience of the critical civilian infrastructure (power grids, data cables, and telecoms) that military logistics depend on.

Quiet, robust assurance: Maintain and modernize pre-positioned equipment and rotational forces but avoid public, provocative deployments that feed escalation narratives and security dilemmas. Invest in defensive capabilities like integrated air defense. This is deterrence without escalation — preserving capability while reducing the risk of miscalculation.

Manage the alliance and de-escalate crises

Private pressure on Baltic leaders: The United States should privately urge Baltic and other hawkish European leaders to moderate escalatory rhetoric and policies. This includes using US influence to block initiatives that present an unacceptable risk of military confrontation between NATO and Russia — such as the large-scale seizure of Russian tankers, shooting down Russian planes, or blockading Kaliningrad — without the explicit consent of the US administration. This is not an abdication of leadership but an exercise of it: preserving allied unity through strategic discipline.

Urge Baltic leaders to refrain from interfering in US debates: Washington should privately but firmly caution Baltic leaders against attempts to influence US domestic foreign policy debates. While Baltic states' security concerns are legitimate, their interests are not always congruent with the shifting priorities of the United States — particularly with the rising influence of "America First"/realist factions in the Republican Party, which prioritize strategic

focus. Framing the Ukraine conflict in absolute moral terms (e.g., "democracy vs. autocracy"), as the Biden administration did and the traditional hawkish establishment in both main parties continues to do, is a counterproductive strategy that risks alienating key political constituencies in the United States and undermining Baltic states' own long-term diplomatic goals.

Caution Baltic leaders against "NATO-like" security guarantees for Ukraine: Credible security arrangements for Ukraine are essential to any durable settlement. However, the United States should unequivocally avoid any talk of "NATO-like guarantees" and privately caution Baltic leaders against advancing such language.

Russia will remain a strategic threat to Ukraine even after a framework peace agreement. Yet the war has demonstrated that neither the United States nor European NATO member states are prepared to fully commit to Ukraine's defense — precisely because doing so would risk direct military confrontation with a nuclear-armed Russia. Any suggestion of Article 5-type guarantees for Ukraine would therefore lack credibility from the outset.

Worse, such rhetoric risks undermining the very Article 5 guarantee that the Baltics depend on. By blurring the line between NATO's core commitment and a nonmember arrangement, it invites Moscow to probe the distinction — testing whether the alliance's resolve has been diluted.

As Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen has put it, there must be a clear "firewall" between NATO's mutual defense clause and any security guarantees extended to Ukraine.⁵⁶ That a key Nordic ally draws this line should ease Washington's task in convincing the Baltics that conflating the two serves neither Ukraine's interests nor their own.

Promote minority integration: While nation-building and socially engineering other societies are not the job of the US government, the marginalization of the Russian-speaking minorities in Latvia and Estonia represents a clear long-term security threat. The United States should quietly support the recommendations of bodies like the Council of

56 Nahal Toosi and Paul McLeary, "Don't Mention 'Article 5,' Finland Warns US on Ukraine," *Politico*, Feb. 4, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/02/04/dont-mention-article-5-finland-warns-us-on-ukraine-00766043>.

Europe, encouraging Latvia and Estonia to balance language promotion with minority rights. Fostering the integration of Russian-speaking populations is a critical long-term security measure that deprives the Kremlin of a potential fifth column.

Strengthen European responsibility and strategic autonomy

Encourage the Europeanization of Baltic security strategy:

To avoid the strategic pitfalls of uncritical alignment, the Baltics must actively Europeanize their security posture. Reflexively endorsing every US policy shift is counterproductive, as it risks alienating European allies whose role as security providers will only grow amid America's long-term retrenchment. An overly public reliance on Washington undermines the very European solidarity the Baltics increasingly need. This should be framed to Baltic leaders as responsible burden-sharing: a stronger Europe is what makes a sustainable US commitment possible.

Recent tensions over Greenland between the United States and Denmark, a key Nordic ally, served as an early test case for this complex dynamic. The Baltics appeared unprepared, reduced to urging both sides to resolve their dispute within NATO.⁵⁷ While the immediate crisis has subsided, it highlighted the challenge of navigating a post-"transatlantic unity" world.

It also underscored the need for a more mature partnership — one in which the Baltics consider US strategic constraints not as a betrayal but as a feature of any durable alliance. Latvia's upcoming term on the UN Security Council will further test this diplomatic nimbleness, potentially forcing difficult choices between American and European positions.

Respect Baltic-EU alignment as inevitable:

Washington, whose strategic interest lies in a capable and coherent Europe, should recognize that the Baltics' interest will often be to side with their EU allies — even when it contradicts US preferences. The optimal US strategy is not to pressure the Baltics but to work toward aligning the entire European

Union with its goals. Where this proves impossible on deeply divisive issues (e.g., the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), the United States should understand that a stronger, more strategically autonomous Europe is ultimately in America's interest: it would allow for a managed US rebalancing while ensuring robust regional security, including in the Baltics.

Open technical channels: The United States should back EU-Russia technical agreements on nonpolitical issues like Kaliningrad transit and Baltic Sea environmental protection. These serve as vital confidence-building measures and keep lines of communication open.

Pursue diplomacy to end the war in Ukraine

Recalibrate war aims: The most effective way to prevent the Baltic crisis from dragging in the United States — and to protect the Baltic states and their populations themselves — is to stop it at its source, the war in Ukraine. The United States must resist maximalist frameworks that make negotiation impossible. Washington should keep pursuing a strategy of diplomatic engagement, exploring potential off-ramps and ceasefires, even as it maintains support for Ukraine's defensive capabilities.⁵⁸ This involves recalibrating the goals from an unattainable "strategic defeat" of Russia to a sustainable security arrangement for Europe.

Prepare for a post-settlement adversarial relationship: Even if/when a framework agreement for peace in Ukraine is signed, the relationship between Russia and Europe will likely remain adversarial for the near future. The positions taken by the Baltics — rooted in genuine historical trauma but expressed as maximalist moral clarity — risk becoming a liability in this new phase. Absent strategic adjustment, their posture could escalate localized tensions or undermine the very stability a negotiated settlement is meant to achieve.

Preserve Article 5 credibility through strategic discipline: Here a critical distinction must be made.

57 "How Do the Baltics Feel About Plans for a US 'Acquisition' of Greenland?" DW, YouTube, Jan. 7, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qTPRYD6U8c>.

58 George Beebe and Anatol Lieven, "A US Peace Plan for Ukraine," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, May 21, 2025, <https://quincyinst.org/research/a-u-s-peace-plan-for-ukraine>.

The Article 5 guarantee itself is unconditional. If a Baltic state is invaded, the United States will defend it.

But the credibility of that guarantee — the daily work of reassurance that convinces both allies and adversaries that it will be honored in a crisis — is not static. It requires maintenance. And that maintenance depends in part on Baltic actions that make the guarantee politically sustainable and operationally plausible. When Baltic leaders adopt escalatory rhetoric, pursue unilateral actions, or frame every confrontation as an existential

test of Western resolve, they do not strengthen the commitment. Instead, they strain the political foundations that its long-term credibility rests upon.

Washington should therefore treat reassurance as an ongoing diplomatic project. The goal is not to condition the Article 5 guarantee but to ensure it never needs to be tested. Aligning Baltic threat perception with US strategic priorities is not a price that the Baltics should pay for security; it is how mature allies ensure that security endures across administrations and decades.



Conclusion

The Baltic states are a focal point of 21st-century great-power competition. Their security is vital, but their preferred policies are often counterproductively escalatory. A sober US strategy must acknowledge the real hybrid threat from Russia while dismissing the inflated threat of a conventional invasion. By reaffirming deterrence through resilience, actively working to de-escalate crises, and vetoing provocations, the United States can uphold its NATO commitments without being dragged into a catastrophic, potentially nuclear, war with Russia. This is the essence of sustainable deterrence: a commitment made credible not through brinkmanship but through strategic discipline and de-escalation.

About the Author

ELDAR MAMEDOV is a non-resident fellow at the Quincy Institute and a member of the Pugwash Council on Science & World Affairs, a Nobel Peace Prize-winning Track II diplomacy organization committed to pursuing a world free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

Eldar has more than 30 years of professional foreign policy experience. As a Latvian diplomat from 1994–2003, he served in his country’s embassies in Washington D.C. and Madrid, Spain, where he focused on Latvia’s integration to NATO and the EU.

From 2007–2024, Eldar served as a foreign policy adviser in the European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium and Strasbourg, France, where he accrued deep expertise in the EU’s relations with Iran and countries in the Persian Gulf and South Caucasus. During this time, Eldar drafted and negotiated parliamentary motions on relations with these countries, organized multiple missions to Iran and the Persian Gulf, and participated in backchannel diplomacy.

Eldar is a regular contributor to *Responsible Statecraft*, *The American Conservative*, and [Eurasianet.org](https://www.eurasianet.org), where he writes on EU foreign policy and the Middle East. Eldar has also produced publications for *The National Interest*, the Stimson Center, and Amwaj.media and has provided his expertise to CNN International, *Politico*, Al Jazeera, El Pais, Deutsche Welle and other international outlets.

Eldar is fluent in English, Spanish, Russian, and Latvian.



For the full report and citations,
scan this code.

About the Quincy Institute

The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft believes that efforts to maintain unilateral U.S. dominance around the world through coercive force are neither possible nor desirable.

2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
7th floor
Washington, DC 20006

+1 202-800-4662
info@quincyinst.org
www.quincyinst.org

A transpartisan, action-oriented research institution, QI promotes ideas that move U.S. foreign policy away from endless war and towards vigorous diplomacy in pursuit of international peace. We connect and mobilize a network of policy experts and academics who are dedicated to a vision of American foreign policy based on military restraint rather than domination. We help increase and amplify their output, and give them a voice in Washington and in the media.

Since its establishment in 2019, QI has been committed to improving standards for think tank transparency and producing unbiased research. QI's conflict-of-interest policy can be viewed at www.quincyinst.org/coi/ and its list of donors at www.quincyinst.org/about.

© 2026 by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.
All rights reserved.



QUINCY INSTITUTE
FOR RESPONSIBLE
STATECRAFT