

Latvia and the US: Defense cooperation

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The focus of this chapter is US–Latvia defense cooperation. Although it has been generally assumed that the US plays an indispensable role in ensuring the security of Latvia and the Baltic States more broadly, it is not always fully appreciated how deep the defense cooperation between Latvia and the US runs. Indeed, a resurgent and more aggressive Russia has changed the security landscape in Eastern Europe. Its military aggression against Ukraine – first in 2014 and then again in 2022 – has called into question the security of the Baltic States as well. In the face of Russia’s imperial policies, the US has stepped up its commitment to Latvia’s security and defense, which has resulted in a substantial US military presence in Latvia, larger volumes of defense assistance, more and better military exercises in Latvia involving US troops, and a deepening of defense cooperation. As the recently updated Congressional Research Paper on US relations with the Baltic States concludes, “the Baltic states are likely to remain strong U.S. allies and important U.S. partners in Europe that will continue to look to the United States for leadership on foreign policy and security issues”. The report also states that since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, “such cooperation has taken on much greater urgency”.¹ Russia’s war against Ukraine has demonstrated once again the significance of military power in international politics and revealed Europe’s military weakness. US military assistance to Ukraine has exceeded that of European members of NATO by far, even though the war is taking place in Europe. This has not gone unnoticed in Latvia.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section explores the history of US–Latvia defense cooperation and lays out some of the challenges that the US–Latvia defense partnership faces. The second section looks at the current state of defense cooperation. And the third part of the chapter outlines the potential of US–Latvia defense cooperation in the

coming years. Although the focus of the chapter is on bilateral defense cooperation, the analysis at times looks at security more broadly and includes elements that apply in equal measure to the three Baltic States. The ensuing analysis is primarily based on secondary sources, but it also includes insights from interviews with a few high-ranking military officers in the Latvian national armed forces. The interviews were conducted to gain additional insights about the depth of US–Latvia military cooperation and the benefits to both sides that result from providing career courses in the US for Latvian military officers.

US–Latvia defense cooperation – past efforts

The story of the US–Latvia defense cooperation has two distinctive features: the US's ability to provide security without a heavy military presence in the Baltic region in the two decades after the break-up of the Soviet Union, and practical defense cooperation with the aim to strengthen the Latvian military and ensure a US military presence in Latvia. The US's role as a global superpower allowed it to have a significant impact on security in northeastern Europe without having extensive military infrastructure and boots on the ground. This strategy was about providing security without an actual military presence. After all, the US's rotational military presence in Central and Eastern Europe is a relatively recent phenomenon that resulted from Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Before then, there was seemingly little need for a substantial US military presence in the Baltics because Russia was too weak to challenge the unipolar order. Only when Russia openly challenged the security order in Europe did a US military presence become necessary. This, however, was not readily apparent to US policymakers, who first tried to reset relations with Russia early on during Barack Obama's first presidency. Since 2014, however, the US–Latvia defense partnership has intensified in response to the military threat posed by Russia.

Explaining the roots and remarkable staying power of pro-Americanism in the Baltics, Andris Banka claims that "Baltic Atlanticism flows from positive historical encounters with Washington, as well as the conviction among contemporary Baltic officials that, today, only the United States possesses an ample military shield and the willingness to

use it in defense of small states in a volatile neighborhood”.² Indeed, Latvia’s encounters with the US have been largely positive. The US pursued the policy of non-recognition of the incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union for five decades, thus making their re-emergence on the international stage more likely and easier after the Soviet Union imploded in 1991.³ In early 1990s, the US negotiated the withdrawal of Russian troops from Latvia. In retrospect, that was a truly remarkable achievement, because the continued presence of the Russian military in the Baltic States would have effectively negated their NATO membership.

In late-1997, when Latvia and Lithuania were not invited to begin accession negotiations with the EU (from the Baltic States, only Estonia was invited), American policymakers recognized that this represented a security problem for the Baltic States and signed the Baltic Charter in January 1998. The charter stated in unambiguous terms the US “interest in the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and security of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania”.⁴ Later, the US was the key advocate for the Baltics’ NATO membership.⁵ In the context of George H.W. Bush’s freedom agenda, the Baltic States were a prime example of what could be achieved with determination to return to Europe and with help from other like-minded states.⁶ It was also noted at the time that Latvia, alongside its Baltic neighbors, had become a security provider by supporting the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Baltic States, however, were not entirely pleased with the security arrangements after they joined NATO in 2004. At the time, the US was fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while Russia was not yet regarded as a major threat to the security of US allies in Europe. The most visible expression of Alliance solidarity was the Baltic Air Policing mission, but besides that there was little NATO military presence. Baltic defense plans, in turn, were only agreed upon after the Russia–Georgia war in 2008. Although NATO’s limited military presence in the Baltic region seemed appropriate at the time, the Baltic States saw this as being a potentially dire security problem, but it was a problem that could not be solved in the absence of strong US support for a more robust NATO presence in the Baltics. At the time, though, the US did not seem to be interested in taking a more active role.

Things changed quickly after Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Troops from the 173rd Airborne Brigade arrived in Latvia in April 2014, barely

a month after the annexation of Crimea. Since then, there has been permanent rotational US military presence, which was reinforced after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. The increased role for the US military was accompanied by the decision of the Latvian government to increase defense expenditure considerably. Latvia's defense budget has more than doubled as a percentage of GDP, and it has tripled in real terms between 2015, when defense expenditure was 255 million EUR, and 2022, when defense spending had grown to 758 million EUR.⁷ Even the tumultuous four years while Donald Trump was in the White House did not have a negative effect on the defense partnership with the Baltic States, as US military assistance to Latvia remained high. Heeding the advice to reinstate conscription⁸ and jolted by the lessons learned from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Latvian government decided to reinstate conscription starting from 2023 to boost the pool of military reservists.⁹ Meanwhile, a substantive military presence has been ensured in Latvia with the help of the deployment of NATO's eFP battlegroup since 2017, with Canada as the framework nation. NATO member states decided during the Madrid summit in 2022 that the eFP battlegroups should "be scaled up from the existing battlegroups to brigade-sized units".¹⁰

Latvian and US soldiers have worked together on many occasions, and enduring partnerships have been formed, some of them dating back to the 1990s, such as the partnership between the Latvian National Guard and the Michigan National Guard.¹¹ The participation of Latvian troops in military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq undoubtedly strengthened the security partnership at the level of militaries. It is a testimony to the bravery and professionalism of Latvian troops that a recent movie, *The Outpost: A film about American heroism in Afghanistan*, features prominently the contribution of Latvian troops who fought alongside American soldiers in October 2009 in one of the longest and hardest battles in the history of the US war in Afghanistan.¹² Latvian troops have worked and fought shoulder-to-shoulder with American troops in other potentially dangerous situations. For example, six Latvian soldiers were at the military base in Iraq together with American troops in early 2020 when Iran struck the base with missiles in retaliation for the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani.¹³ All in all, strong ties have been built between Latvian and US defense officials and militaries over the past three decades.¹⁴ These ties have

been strengthened by shared values, common security interests, and the necessity to deter Russia in Eastern Europe. The Baltic States have also demonstrated in recent years considerable expertise on Russia, and there has been greater willingness in the US to take their views into consideration.

The current dynamics of US–Latvia defense cooperation

The US-Latvia partnership has primarily been about security and defense, and to lesser extent about economic ties – although those have also grown in recent years. With the US answering the call in the face of Russia’s revisionist policies, Latvia’s partnership with the US intensified. This has several components: the procurement of military equipment from the US, a greater US rotational military presence in Latvia, the participation of US military personnel in military exercises, and US military assistance to Latvia.

The need for a greater US military presence in Latvia largely stems from the asymmetry of power between Russia and the Baltic States. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania combined spend barely 3 billion EUR on defense, even though all three Baltic States have gone well-beyond the 2% NATO benchmark. Although Russia’s military has underperformed in Ukraine, the asymmetry in terms of military power is still largely in Russia’s favor. Thus, increasing defense spending would not necessarily provide a stronger deterrent against Russia, unless NATO allies step in to fill the void. The US’s contribution is especially significant in this respect, as it has been a long-time aim of Latvian policymakers and defense officials to ensure a permanent (or rotational) US military presence in Latvia.

Latvia has been a beneficiary of US government programs such as the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), the Baltic Security Initiative (BSI) and the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. EDI was first proposed in 2014 in response to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, and the program has been aimed at bolstering the “security and capacity” of US NATO allies and enhancing “the capability and readiness of U.S. forces, NATO Allies, and regional partners of the U.S. for a fast response to any aggression in Europe

and transnational threats by a regional adversary against a sovereign territory of NATO Allies". The EDI supports five lines of effort: increased presence; exercises and training; enhanced prepositioning; improved infrastructure; and building partnership capacity.¹⁵ In short, Latvia has benefited from increased the US military presence in Europe, which comes at an additional cost to US taxpayers.

The BSI, in turn, is a US government program that bolsters the defense capabilities of the Baltic States. As pointed out in a recent report by the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), US military assistance has been matched by a marked increase of financial contributions by Baltic States' themselves.¹⁶ Thus, the Baltic States have rightly positioned themselves as responsible allies who are doing their part while also expecting increased contributions by their NATO allies. The Baltic States have received sizable military assistance through the BSI. A recent report mentions that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were provided 169 million USD in FY 2021 and 180 million USD in FY 2022. Also, the Baltic Defense and Deterrence Act has been introduced in the US Congress. If signed into law, it would codify the BSI and authorize 250 million USD annually from the Department of Defense from 2023 through 2027.¹⁷

US defense assistance to Latvia should be considered in two related contexts. First, the Baltic States are among the leading donors to Ukraine. The Kiel Institute for the World Economy estimates that Latvia is one of only two states (the other is Estonia) that have provided military and economic assistance to Ukraine upwards of 0.75% of GDP. Latvia has provided Ukraine with bilateral aid worth about 0.9% of GDP;¹⁸ and that includes military aid approximately worth 300 million EUR.¹⁹ The amount of military support that Latvia has provided to Ukraine is remarkable as it represents almost 40% of its annual defense budget. Providing such a large part of its military stocks means that these will have to be replenished in the coming years. Although ammunition and military systems will not be procured only from the US, it is noteworthy the Baltic States have combined for approximately 2 billion USD in proposed purchases of defense systems and services since 2015.²⁰ Thus, the Baltic States have increasingly turned to the US for defense equipment – not just because their defense expenditures have increased, but also because of the considerable amount of military assistance that they have supplied to Ukraine. Latvia's reliance

on military equipment supplies from the US may increase in the coming years with the purchase of HIMARS artillery rocket systems.²¹ The US military already brought one HIMARS system to Latvia in 2021 to demonstrate its ability to deploy this system at short notice, but the outstanding performance of long-range rocket artillery systems in Ukraine has convinced the Baltic governments to acquire these systems because they provide the capability to target the adversary's supply lines and command and control centers.

The US–Latvian defense partnership is usually looked at through some of its most visible aspects, such as the US military presence in Latvia, high-level meetings between American policymakers and their Baltic counterparts, joint military exercises in the Baltic region, and highly visible acquisitions of military equipment (such as Black Hawk helicopters). There is, however, another highly relevant aspect of the US–Latvia defense partnership, namely, the participation of Latvian military officers and specialists in US government-funded military education programs. The Latvian military has benefitted from the IMET program since the 1990s and continues to do so almost two decades after joining NATO. US financial support has provided Latvian officers and specialists with a military education in US military institutions. For example, Chief of Defense of the Latvian National Armed Forces Leonids Kalnins is a graduate of the Army Command and General Staff College.

Participation in the IMET program has benefited the Latvian military by ensuring direct military-to-military contacts with the US military. As evidenced by participants themselves, the opportunity to attend a year-long course at US military education institutions has provided them with a high-quality education and has helped them to gain a fuller understanding of the US military, politics, and society.²² These education programs are well-funded and well-resourced. As a consequence, they provide participants with a multinational learning environment in leading US military education institutions. The study process, as characterized by the grateful beneficiaries, is well-organized and offers opportunities to learn from leading practitioners (active and retired) under the supervision of qualified academic personnel. Graduates of the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, the US Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and the US Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas,

admit that the study process is challenging, but also inspirational, as it usually provides the intellectual foundation for the next step in a military career. Participation in career courses in the US also demonstrates the value of a quality education in the military profession. This is not insignificant, because the Latvian participants are involved with the military education system in Latvia in one way or another.

Although most of the benefits from participating in the IMET program accrue to Latvian officers, there are considerable benefits for the US participants as well because the presence of international participants allows US officers to gain insights into how various challenges to international security are seen by officers from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. As the American military retains a global presence through its sprawling network of military bases around the world, US officers are likely to be deployed abroad at some point in their career. Having had first-hand experience studying and working together with officers from other nations thus provides critically important professional and personal experience. All in all, US government-funded programs have made a lasting contribution to the Latvian military, and they demonstrate the significance of the military-to-military partnership.

The outlook for US–Latvia defense cooperation

What is the outlook for US–Latvia defense cooperation? Overall, the partnership is very likely to endure, and there are several factors that ensure close defense cooperation. The US and Latvia are treaty allies, and the intensity of military and other threats posed by Russia to frontline states such as Latvia has increased considerably in the past years. Despite America’s European allies’ ambitions to proceed with further defense integration and to pursue strategic autonomy, European allies underperform militarily. This may change in coming decades, but for now the US plays an indispensable role in Europe’s security. Efforts to counter Russia’s aggression against Ukraine have once again underscored the significance of America’s military leadership.

Latvia has demonstrated that it is a responsible ally. Although the rhetoric of Latvia’s policymakers towards Russia has hardened over time, it has been proportionate to the threat that Russia poses to its

neighbors. As Andris Banka remarks, Latvia has been neither reckless nor a free rider.²³ Thus, Latvia has not taken any steps that would be indicative of the moral hazard problem in the US–Latvia security and defense relationship. Also, Latvia has taken important steps to strengthen its defense. Latvia has systematically increased defense spending since 2014, having reached the 2% of GDP threshold in 2018, and it has plans to increase defense expenditure further. The Latvian government has agreed to hike defense spending to 2.5% until 2025. If the Latvian government proceeds with a more ambitious version of conscription and acquires some expensive military systems (medium-range air defense, coastal defense, long-range rocket artillery systems) then it is likely that this would necessitate increasing defense spending to almost 3% of GDP. In this regard, continued US financial support will be needed because procuring these systems in sufficient quantities may be out of reach for the Latvian government.

There are reasons to be optimistic about the US-Latvia security and defense partnership, not just because of the necessity to counter threats posed by Russia in Europe, but also because Latvia has taken US interests and security priorities seriously. Historically, Latvia has supported the US invasion of Iraq, and Latvian troops have been deployed to both Afghanistan and Iraq. Latvia increasingly recognizes the systemic challenge posed by China. Although Lithuania has been the most outspoken of the three Baltic States in criticizing China's policies, Latvia also recognizes the challenges posed by greater Chinese economic and military influence in Europe and is willing to counter China's influence.

Importantly, support for a defense partnership with Latvia runs deep in the US political system, with both Republicans and Democrats expressing support for their Baltic allies. The Baltic lobby in Washington works with both parties to ensure bipartisan support for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. There are strong military-to-military ties between the US and Latvian militaries, which are the result of joint participation in US-led operations and contacts established during studies in American military education institutions. Broad-based cooperation and three decades of defense cooperation ensure support for the US-Latvia defense partnership on all levels.

Finally, in the same way that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 lent urgency to the US-Latvia defense partnership, the outcome of that war

will leave a lasting impact on European security, including that of the Baltic States. The extent of the US's military presence in Europe will depend on the outcome of the war, and this logic applies to Latvia's defense policy. It may be fashionable to claim that Latvia should pursue an ambitious defense policy and discount the twists and turns in Russian domestic politics in favor of military preparedness in case Russia retains revisionist ambitions. It is unlikely, however, that a weaker Russia would elicit the same forceful response from NATO as a militarily strong and revisionist Russia. Although the war is likely to continue well into 2023 and it is hard to predict how it might end, Ukraine will likely retain its sovereignty and independence. Also, the war will leave a lasting imprint on Russia's politics and society. By now, Putin's continued rule in Russia is all but assured. Although one should not be overly optimistic about the potential for democratic change in Russian politics and society, Russia's war of aggression may result in a decisive break from its past imperialist policies. If this happens, Russia would follow in the footsteps of other great powers that were not willing to relinquish their respective empires. In other words, a different (and less belligerent) Russia is possible,²⁴ and the shape of Russia that will emerge from the war with Ukraine will also affect the extent and depth of the US-Latvia defense partnership.

Conclusions

What policy recommendations could then be offered for those interested in the US–Latvia defense partnership? The formula for success is already well-known, and it includes a constant nurturing of the security partnership between the two nations. This would involve constant dialogue between both partners and a willingness to listen to each other. This would also require working across the aisle in the US, where politics have become increasingly polarized and both political parties find it difficult to agree on almost anything. The Latvian government would, in turn, do well to address the dormant anti-Americanism that is particularly visible among the Latvian Russophones. Finally, it is imperative to ensure that contacts between the US and Latvia are not limited to politicians and government officials, because it is the grass-roots support for the strategic partnership that has made it

successful in the past. People-to-people, military-to-military, academic, think-tank, economic, and cultural contacts are key for the strategic partnership to endure as we move into the second century of US–Latvia relations.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Mix, D. E. 29.09.2022. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania: Background on U.S.–Baltic Relations. *Congressional Research Service*. Available at: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R46139.pdf>
- ² Banka, A. 2022. The Roots and Resilience of Pro-Americanism in the Baltics. *The Washington Quarterly*, 45:2, 169–183.
- ³ For detailed accounts of the US non-recognition policy and the functioning of the Latvian diplomatic mission in Washington, see: Auers, D. 2008. *Latvia and the USA: From Captive Nation to Strategic Partner*. Riga: Academic Press of the University of Latvia.
- ⁴ U.S. Department of State. 16.01.1998. *A Charter of Partnership Among the United States of America and the Republic of Estonia, Republic of Latvia, and Republic of Lithuania*. Available at: https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/eur/ch_9801_baltic_charter.html#:~:text=As%20part%20of%20a%20common,%2C%20security%2C%20and%20defense%20institutions.
- ⁵ It is important to keep in mind, though, that the alleged “NATO expansion” at the turn of the century was as much the product of the Baltic States and other states in Central and Eastern Europe pursuing consistent Atlanticist policies as it was the product of pull factors, that is, the interest of NATO member states to expand the Alliance eastwards. For a more detailed analysis of the Baltic States’ agency in the process of NATO enlargement, see: Kasekamp, A. 2020. An Uncertain Journey to the Promised Land: The Baltic States’ Road to NATO Membership. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 43:6–7, 869–896.
- ⁶ In his speech in Riga on 7 May 2005, George W. Bush emphasized the achievements of the Baltic states by stating that “the Baltic countries have seen one of the most dramatic transformations in modern history, from captive nations to NATO allies and EU members in little more than a decade. The Latvian, Estonian, and Lithuanian people showed that the love of liberty is stronger than the will of an empire. And today you’re standing for liberty beyond your borders, so that others do not suffer the injustices you have known. The American people admire your moral courage in the cause of freedom.” President discusses freedom and democracy in Latvia. The White House. 07.05.2005. Available at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/05/20050507-8.html>
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- ⁸ Hooker, R. D. Jr. 2019. How to Defend the Baltic States. *The Jamestown Foundation*.
- ⁹ Aizsardzības ministra A.Pabrika preses konference. 05.07.2022. *Preses konferencē informē par jauna poligona izveidi un valsts aizsardzības sistēmas pilnveidošanu*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWtM5f4r3fU&t=13s>

- ¹⁰ NATO. 29.06.2022. *Madrid Summit Declaration: Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Madrid*. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm
- ¹¹ Two decades of defense cooperation between Latvia and U.S. have been given extensive treatment by Airis Rikveilis who describes it as a “success story”. For example, Latvian military has benefited tremendously from the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, as between 1992 and 2011 U.S. had provided assistance worth more than 15 million U.S. dollars through the IMET program. Rikveilis, A. 2012. Twenty Years of Latvian-American Defense Cooperation: From a Cautious Beginning to Strategic Partnership and Beyond. In: Indāns, I., eds. *Latvia and the United States: A New Chapter in the Partnership*. Riga: Centre for East European Policy Studies, 71–92.
- ¹² Brāle, S. 09.10.2019. ASV prezentē filmu par Kītingas kauju, kurā piedalījās arī Latvijas karavīri. In: *Nacionālie bruņotie spēki*. Available at: <https://www.mil.lv/lv/zinas/asv-prezente-filmu-par-kitingas-kauju-kura-piedalijas-ari-latvijas-karaviri>
- ¹³ Amoliņš, G. and Smiltnieks, A. 08.01.2020. Irāna ar raķetēm apšaudījusi ASV Irākā izmantotās aviobāzes; vienā no tām atradušies arī Latvijas karavīri. In: *LSM*. Available at: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/arzemes/irana-ar-raketem-apsaudijusi-asv-iraka-izmantotas-aviobazes-viena-no-tam-atradusies-ari-latvijas-karaviri.a344057/>
- ¹⁴ Two sitting U.S. presidents have visited Latvia. Bill Clinton visited Latvia in 1994, and George W. Bush visited Latvia twice in 2005 and then in 2006 he was in Riga for the NATO summit. U.S. Vice-president Joe Biden was in Riga in 2016. Also, Baltic states' presidents and other high-ranking officials have visited U.S. frequently and have had bilateral or quadrilateral (Baltic-U.S.) meeting with high-ranking U.S. officials during NATO summits and on other occasions.
- ¹⁵ “The FY 2023 EDI request supports an average strength of 10,518 active, reserve, and guard personnel in USEUCOM, including 9,452 Army, 1,023 Air Force, and 43 Navy personnel.” Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller). 2022. *European Deterrence Initiative: Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year (FY) 2023*. Available at: https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2023/FY2023_EDI_JBook.pdf
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