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June 2025

# The Future of NATO

*Lithuania as a pacesetter in terms of defense,  
determination and defiance against Russia*



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## Introduction and historical background

Lithuania's foreign policy and security policy have been deeply shaped by the country's historical experiences. It is because of these experiences that NATO lies at the heart of Lithuanian national security. The relationship between Lithuania and Russia has been historically fraught, marked by multiple wars since the fifteenth century, some of which extended over decades. When Russian expansionist policies intensified, Lithuania lost its independence in 1795, only to regain it after 123 years in 1918, during the First World War. After a brief period of independence, Lithuania was once again occupied and fell under the rule of the Soviet Union. Occupation and loss of independence have had a significant and extremely painful impact. Tsarist Russia imposed strict russification policies and mercilessly crushed any uprisings, for example. After the brutal Nazi occupation, the subsequent Soviet rule entailed multiple waves of deportations to Siberia (numbering hundreds of thousands), executions and the prosecution of any individuals showing signs of resistance, the loss of property, and the imposition of the strict Soviet ideology. Since the restoration of its independence in 1990, Lithuania has therefore made major political efforts aimed at Euro-Atlantic integration to safeguard its future. These efforts have included becoming a member of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), strategies that arguably provide the strongest possible guarantee in Lithuania's long history.

Geographically, Lithuania is precariously exposed, facing the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad in the West and Belarus in the East, while the capital city of Vilnius is only 40 kilometers from Belarusian territory – well within conventional artillery range. In the south, Lithuania is connected to Poland and the rest of Western Europe by the now-infamous Suwałki Gap – an 80-kilometer stretch of land between Russia and Belarus.

After becoming a member of both the EU and NATO in 2004, Lithuania sought to sever any remaining ties with Russia, such as its dependency on energy resources. A 2012 poll showed, for example, that 68 % of the population supported initiatives aimed at energy independence<sup>1</sup>. This popular mood intensified after Russia's illegal annexation of the Crimea and its incursion into Eastern Ukraine. In 2016, 67% of the population supported spending 2 % of GDP on defense, and 81% had a positive view of NATO membership<sup>2</sup>. In 2017, this number grew to 84 %, and at least 81%

supported the permanent stationing of allied troops on Lithuanian soil<sup>3</sup>. In 2024, 90 % supported Lithuania's NATO membership<sup>4</sup>. Such dynamics have also been reflected in defense spending. In 2014, Lithuania spent 0.78 % of its GDP on defense. As the Russian threat against Ukraine materialized, Lithuania's social democratic government initiated a significant increase in defense spending: 1.48 % of GDP was allocated to defense in 2016, 1.71% in 2017, 2 % in 2019, 2.45 % in 2022 (the year of Russia's full-scale invasion), and 3.11% in 2024<sup>5</sup>. During the first months of 2025, the social democratic government pledged to allocate 5–6 % of the country's GDP to defense. The Russian threat has been identified as an existential one, and the government has reacted accordingly.

These trends can also be observed in material terms, namely in the growth of the armed forces. In 2014, the number of professional soldiers was around 7,700, but by 2024 this figure had doubled to 15,000. In 2015, mandatory military service was introduced on an annual basis that produced around 4,000 soldiers for an active reserve. A wave of modernization began with the procurement of new light infantry equipment and weapons, the NASAMS air defense system, the Boxer infantry fighting vehicle, the Oshkosh tactical combat vehicle, and other equipment<sup>6</sup>. The majority of equipment was acquired either from Germany or the US.

## Russia as an existential threat

Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine and its increasingly hostile, revisionist, and expansionist foreign policy have fundamentally reshaped the security landscape of the Baltic Sea region. As one of the three Baltic states, Lithuania has felt the impact particularly acutely, especially given its historical experiences with Russian and Soviet occupations. Following the illegal occupation and subsequent annexation of the Crimea in 2014, Lithuanian decision-makers acknowledged a persistent and long-term threat to the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Moreover, Russia has not only engaged in conventional military threats but, since 2014, has also openly made use of a range of hybrid threats, including widespread disinformation and propaganda campaigns, cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructure, and large-scale offensive military exercises conducted near the Lithuanian border. Such actions are deliberately designed to destabilize society, weak-

1 'Spinter tyrimai: gyventojai iš naujosios valdžios tikisi strateginių energetikos projektų testinimo' (2012-11-15), 15min (News Website) Available at: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktu/lt/lt/spinter-tyrimai-gyventojai-is-naujosios-valdzios-tikisi-strateginiu-energetikos-projektu-testinimo-56-279181> (Accessed: 1 March 2025).

2 'Apklausa: lietuviai – už NATO ir stiprią kariuomenę', Delfi (News Website), (2016) 18 January. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/apklausa-lietuviai-uz-nato-ir-stipria-kariuomene-70275978> (Accessed: 1 April 2025).

3 'Apklausa: 8 iš 10 lietuvių teigiamai vertina narystę NATO', Delfi (News Website), (2016) 6 February. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/apklausa-8-is-10-lietuviu-teigiamai-vertina-naryste-nato-73576694> (Accessed: 1 April 2025).

4 Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania (2025) 'Public opinion poll: Lithuania trusts the Armed Forces, our Allies and would take part in armed defence of the country', 23 February. Available at: <https://kam.lt/en/public-opinion-poll-lithuania-trusts-the-armed-forces-our-allies-and-would-take-part-in-armed-defence-of-the-country/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

5 Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania (n.d.) 'Gynybos biudžetas'. Available at: <https://kam.lt/faktai-ir-skaiciai/gynybos-biudzetas/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

6 Bankauskaitė, D. and Šlekys, D. (2023) 'Lithuania's Total Defense Review', PRISM, 10(2), pp. 54–77. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48718173> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

en public trust in democratic institutions, and engender discontent among both the political elite and the general population.

Over time, and especially after the Russian occupation of the Crimea in 2014, a political, academic, and societal consensus on the Russian threat has gradually materialized. The debate has not questioned whether Russia poses a threat – there has been no doubt or disagreement on this whatsoever – but rather how to address this threat effectively. All major political parties agree on the necessity of strengthening defensive capabilities and recognizing the multifaceted threat posed by Russia. In 2014, in response to mounting security concerns, Lithuanian political parties signed an important agreement on national security aimed at fortifying the country's defensive stance and enhancing cooperation with NATO allies<sup>7</sup>. Today, Russia is officially identified as an “existential threat” in key national security documents, including the 2021 National Security Strategy<sup>8</sup>, the Law on the Fundamentals of National Security, and annual reports from state intelligence services.

Russia's draft treaties presented to the US and NATO in December 2021 – essentially seen as ultimatums – demanded a drastic rollback of NATO's presence in Eastern Europe, and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 reinforced existing fears in Lithuania. Lithuanian decision-makers interpreted the Russian ultimatum as a clear indication that Russian ambitions stretched far beyond Ukraine, as Russian demands constituted an attempt to push NATO out of Eastern Europe<sup>9</sup>.

As the war progressed and the initial optimism caused by the poor performance of the Russian troops vanished, discussions centered on the speed with which Russia was able to reconstitute its forces, having suffered heavy losses in terms of both personnel and equipment. Defense Minister Dovilė Šakalienė stated that Lithuania had calculated a threefold increase in Russian military personnel and operational capacity since the beginning of the war<sup>10</sup>. The current

Foreign Minister, Kęstutis Budrys, then serving as chief security advisor to the President, warned that Russia's reconstitution was progressing much faster than previously anticipated and could potentially achieve relevant results before 2030<sup>11</sup>. The chief of the state intelligence service, Darius Jauniškis, emphasized the long-term nature of the Russian threat, stating: “[w]e need to be ready for a prolonged confrontation, as soon as Russia reconstitutes its capabilities”<sup>12</sup>.

By 2023, it had become evident that Russian forces were not collapsing in Ukraine and were making steady progress. The prolonged nature of the war, coupled with Russia's ability to sustain large-scale military operations, underscored the urgent need for European states to reassess their security policies. “We have to wake up from stagnation and take a new look at the Russian threat”, commented Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis<sup>13</sup>. European states – most notably Lithuania – raised the alarm about what Russia might do next<sup>14</sup>. Landsbergis cautioned that if Ukraine failed to stop Russia, the latter would likely continue its aggression against the Baltic states<sup>15</sup>. Such trends were exacerbated by numerous acts of alleged sabotage, such as arson attacks in Lithuania or the cutting of vital communication cables in the Baltic Sea. In the eyes of Lithuanian decision-makers, the main goal of these sabotage efforts was to punish states supporting Ukraine and to trigger panic among the public. Lithuanian discussions focused on mounting a credible deterrence to acts of sabotage<sup>16</sup>. It has been recognized that NATO does not have adequate deterrence mechanisms against actions in the “grey” zone, which are hard to attribute and remained below the “threshold of Article 5”<sup>17</sup>. Additionally, it has been stated that the West should impose stricter sanctions on Russia's so-called “shadow fleet,” which has been instrumental in circumventing existing restrictions on oil exports and sustaining the Russian war effort.

Decision-makers and experts alike remain deeply skeptical about the possibility of an effective engagement strategy with Russia as long as Russia pursues its aggressive foreign

7 Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania (2017) 'National Security Strategy'. Available at: <https://www.lrs.lt/docs2/QEFCHPVC.PDF> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

8 Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania (2022) 'Dėl Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo 2002 m. gegužės 28 d. nutarimo Nr. IX-907 “Dėl Nacionalinio saugumo strategijos patvirtinimo” pakeitimo’. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAP/ae4a9f05bf111ecb2fe9975f8a9e52e> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

9 'Putino ultimatumai kelia dvi versijas: realesnė žinia yra kur kas liūdnėsnė', Delfi (News Website), (2022) 20 December. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/putino-ultimatumai-kelia-dvi-versijas-realesne-zinia-yra-kur-kas-liudnesne-88997773> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

10 'Šakalienė: Rusijos kariniai pajėgumai dabar tris kartus didesni nei prasidėjus invazijai', LRT (National Broadcaster), (2025) 4 April. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2482972/sakaliene-rusijos-kariniai-pajegumai-dabar-tris-kartus-didesni-nei-prasidejus-invazijai> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

11 'Rusija karinius pajėgumus gali atkurti greičiau nei manyta anksčiau – K. Budrys', 15min (News Website), (2025) 4 April. Available at: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/rusija-karinius-pajegumus-gali-atkurti-greiciau-nei-manyta-anksčiau-k-budrys-56-2120976> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

12 'Jauniškis: turime ruoštis ilgam konfliktui', Delfi (News Website), (2025) 4 April. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/jauniskis-turime-ruostis-ilgam-konfliktui-120082389> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

13 'Landsbergis prakalbo apie dramatiškus pokyčius pasaulyje: laiko turime nedaug, Lietuva turi permąstyti saugumo koncepciją', LRT (National Broadcaster) (National Broadcaster) (National Broadcaster), (2025) 4 April. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2128405/landsbergis-prakalbo-apie-dramatiskus-pokycius-pasaulyje-laiko-turime-nedaug-lietuva-turi-permastyti-saugumo-koncepcija> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

14 Goryashko, S. (2024) 'Will Putin attack NATO? No chance, says Lithuanian general', Politico, 25 January. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/lithuania-nato-putin-ukraine-russia-war/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025). Landsbergis, G. (2022) 'The end of naivete: How NATO must boost Baltic defenses', Politico, 11 May. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-baltic-defence-ukraine-russia-war/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

15 Goryashko, 2024

16 Pikelytė (2025) 'Budrys dėl incidento Baltijos jūroje tikisi veiksnių iš ES ir NATO, siūlo sankcijas šešėliniam laivynui', Delfi (News Website), 4 April. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/budrys-del-incidento-baltijos-juroje-tikisi-veiksniu-is-es-ir-nato-siulo-sankcijas-seseeliniam-laivynui-120074832> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

17 Datkūnas (2025) 'Kasčiūnas: Vakarai turi turėti algoritmą, kaip bausti už sabotazo aktus', LRT, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2420441/kasciunas-vakarai-turi-tureti-algoritma-kaip-bausti-uz-sabotazo-aktus> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

policy and continues to occupy Ukrainian territory. As Tomas Janeliūnas argues, “[t]he era of liberal globalization, at least in the context of cooperation with Russia, is effectively over.”<sup>18</sup> A revisionist Russia, driven by imperial nostalgia and expansionist ambitions, will likely seek to exploit any weaknesses to gain the upper hand. Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda has repeatedly expressed a similar view, asserting that Russia should be isolated and held accountable for its crimes until it fully withdraws from Ukrainian territory<sup>19</sup>. According to the President, the international community must remain resolute in its stance, ensuring that Russia faces consequences for its aggression. No cooperation – from technological collaboration to cultural exchange – with the aggressor state should be envisaged until Russia is effectively punished for beginning the war of aggression. Furthermore, Lithuania maintains that NATO should not only focus on “trip wire” deterrence but also actively enhance its defense capabilities, ensuring that the eastern flank remains fully resilient against potential Russian aggression.

## Response to Russia

Scholars agree that Lithuania, together with the other Baltic states and Poland, has been highly effective in employing diplomacy to push NATO to strengthen the eastern flank. The Baltic states successfully lobbied for the permanent stationing of NATO troops in the region, which was agreed at the 2016 Warsaw Summit with the establishment of the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), with Germany acting as the leading state in Lithuania<sup>20</sup>. Lithuania also sought to complement NATO’s presence by establishing a bilateral agreement with the US for the stationing of two battalions in 2019. This allied military presence was intended to serve as a “tripwire” deterrent, which, in theory, would react to any Russian aggression. After initial contact, NATO forces would be expected to come to the rescue and liberate any occupied area.

However, the sheer speed and brutality with which Russian troops occupied Ukrainian territories, especially after the discoveries of mass execution sites in Bucha and Irpin,

posed a dilemma for the Lithuanian public: it was no longer viable to think that there would be anything left to liberate. The Lithuanian public and political leadership quickly realized that any occupied territory would likely be completely destroyed before liberation could occur<sup>21</sup>. These fears were influenced by Russia’s growing presence (both military and political) in Belarus, from where Russia also launched its attacks on Ukraine. The absorption of Belarus into the Russian decision-making orbit has led to Belarus being regarded as a satellite of Russia. Both the Lithuanian public and the country’s political leadership called for a new defensive approach that would defend Lithuania “from the first centimeter,” rather than relying on a NATO response that could be delayed<sup>22</sup>. Essentially, the idea was to have as many allied troops as possible on the ground in Lithuania.

The decision to implement the new NATO Force Model (NFM) marked a significant shift in NATO’s approach to defense. It strengthened Lithuania’s defenses by upgrading eFP battalions to the brigade level, designating Russia as the main threat in the NATO Strategic Concept adopted in Madrid<sup>23</sup>, and confirming new defense plans during the Vilnius Summit. These decisions, especially those taken in Madrid in 2022, were met with strong approval in Lithuania<sup>24</sup>.

As much as these decisions were welcomed, concerns remained as to their feasibility and execution<sup>25</sup>. The Lithuanian strategic community acknowledged that it was highly unlikely for NATO to produce a 300,000-strong rapid reaction force during peacetime, given the current size of member states’ armed forces and limitations in defense spending. Now, discussions in Lithuania are advocating for an increase in defense spending to 5% or even 6%. As the security situation continues to deteriorate, 2% will no longer be adequate. Giedrius Česnakas, a senior advisor to the Minister of National Defense, argued in a piece for the Geopolitics and Security Studies Center that it is essential to understand that if Russia were to succeed in occupying Lithuanian territory, the consequences would be no different from those that have been seen in Ukraine<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, prioritizing welfare spending while facing the direct threat of physical destruction is not an adequate strategy<sup>27</sup>.

18 Janeliūnas, T. (2025) ‘Karas, kuris užbaigia epochą’, 15min, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/komentarai/tomas-janeliunas-karas-kuris-uzbaigia-epocha-500-2014158> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

19 ‘G. Nausėda Miuncheno saugumo konferencijoje pasiūlė Rusijos sulaikymo strategiją’, Infa (News Website), (2025) 4 April. Available at: <https://infa.lt/102879/g-nauseda-miuncheno-saugumo-konferencijoje-pasiule-rusijos-sulaikymo-strategija/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

20 Bankauskaitė, D. and Šlekys, D. (2023) ‘Lithuania’s Total Defense Review’, PRISM, 10(2), pp. 54–77. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48718173> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

21 Landsbergis, G. (2022) ‘The end of naivete: How NATO must boost Baltic defenses’, Politico, 11 May. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-baltic-defence-ukraine-russia-war/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

22 Ministry of National Defense of Lithuania (2025) ‘A. Anušauskas: Daugiau pajėgų Baltijos šalyse ant žemės ir stipri priešakinė gynyba yra vienintelė Rusijai suprantama atgrasymo kalba’, Ministry of National Defense of Lithuania, 4 April. Available at: <https://kam.lt/a-anusauskas-daugiau-pajegu-baltijos-salyse-ant-zemes-ir-stipri-priesakine-gynyba-yra-vienintele-rusijai-suprantama-atgrasymo-kalba/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

23 Bakaitė (2025) ‘NATO susitikimas Madride: kodėl jis vadinamas svarbiausiu nuo Sovietų Sąjungos griūties ir ką turėtų parvežti Lietuva’, LRT, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1728170/nato-susitikimas-madride-kodel-jis-vadinamas-svarbiausiu-nuo-sovietu-sajungos-griuties-ir-ka-turetu-parvezti-lietuva> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

24 Andrukaitytė (2025) ‘Prezidento patarėjas: neabejojame, kad iš NATO susitikimo parsivešime siektą rezultatą’, LRT, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1728323/prezidento-patarejas-%20%20neabejojame-kad-is-nato-susitikimo-parsivesime-siekta-rezultata> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

25 Kojala, L. (2025) ‘Deklaracija svarbu, bet dar svarbiau – įgyvendinimas’, Delfi, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lt/linas-kojala-deklaracija-svarbu-bet-dar-svarbiau-igyvendinimas-90634119> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

26 GSSC (2025) ‘Išlaisdos gynybai: ar šuolis pateisins lūkesčius?’, GSSC, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.gssc.lt/publikacija/islaisdos-gynybai-ar-suolis-pateisins-lukescius> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

27 GSSC, 2025

Such a financial burden is expected to significantly strengthen the Lithuanian Armed Forces (LAF). There have been heated discussions on the future structure of the LAF: should it focus on light infantry, or should Lithuania develop mechanized/heavy forces<sup>28</sup>? Additionally, there have been debates on the optimal organizational framework for these forces<sup>29</sup>. In the end, the decision was made to develop a national division-level unit by 2030, which experts and decision-makers have viewed as a natural step forward in strengthening the armed forces and the command-and-control (C2) ladder in NATO's operational planning. Amid these heated discussions<sup>30</sup>, the decision was taken to procure up to one battalion of Leopard 2A8 tanks, along with HIMARS and ATACMS long-range strike components. To build the future division, Lithuania expanded its conscription format. Moreover, a large portion of the defense budget will go toward building prepositioned infrastructure for allies, such as NATO-standard ammunition depots and new exercise grounds to host allied troops.

Furthermore, with this budget, Lithuania is set to complete an infrastructure project for the German brigade – a project of the utmost priority for Lithuania. However, there have been intense political debates on the deployment model for the German brigade<sup>31</sup>. The Ministry of National Defense suggested that it would be viable to host only the brigade's headquarters in Lithuania, with the rest of the forces ready to be deployed within 10 days if necessary – an option that would be more cost-effective and convenient for Germany. Members of parliament, however, argued that this solution was inadequate, as the brigade should be permanently deployed in Lithuania to bolster deterrence, train in the local environment, and, if necessary, defend the country immediately. After extensive negotiations, Lithuania and Germany reached an agreement on the permanent stationing of a full brigade by 2027.

## China – risks and threats

In Lithuania, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is regarded in a somewhat hostile manner. The decision to open a Taiwanese office in 2021 was met with a severe backlash from China, which cut bilateral trade, recalled

its ambassador, imposed a number of sanctions, and pressurized other countries not to do business with Lithuania<sup>32</sup>. A younger generation of politicians from various political parties, perceives the threat of China seriously and voices it openly, often highlighting the country's authoritarian nature and hostility toward democracy. In expert and academic circles, the prevailing trends are similar. In a recent report by the state intelligence service, China has been assessed as a hostile state toward Lithuania – not only due to its strict stance against Lithuania but also because of its role in facilitating Russia's aggression against Ukraine<sup>33</sup>.

In terms of de-risking, Lithuanians perceive themselves as an integral part of the European Union rather than as a unitary actor, although some decisions were taken to limit Chinese exposure to the domestic market on a purely national level<sup>34</sup>. Given its own unique yet harsh experience, Lithuania would prefer to see a stronger EU initiative aimed at “decoupling”, or at the very least “de-risking”, from China. Among experts and policymakers, China is perceived as an actor that will use economic, technological, and cultural ties (among others) to forcefully advance its geopolitical interests.

In a paper for the GSSC, Ragirdas Boruta outlined the West's dependency on Chinese rare earth minerals and emphasized the necessity for Europeans to start planning de-risking strategies, as nearly 90% of rare earth minerals are processed in China<sup>35</sup>. Furthermore, in another GSSC study, Konstantinas Andrijauskas et al. noted that the Baltic population, including that of Lithuania, is highly susceptible to economic narratives, such as the idea that Lithuania should have good relations with the PRC because it benefits the Lithuanian economy<sup>36</sup>. This paper also underlined the deficiencies in the government's strategic communication, emphasizing that it needs to explain its policy choices to the wider public more effectively. For instance, surveys conducted in 2022 showed that while 57% of Lithuanians viewed China unfavorably, 60% did not support Lithuania's foreign policy toward China<sup>37</sup>. At this point, even with a change of government, Lithuania is unlikely to make any major changes in its stance since the future of bilateral relations depends on China's actions.

28 'Lietuvos atsargos pulkininkas apie kritikuojamą sprendimą įsigyti tankų: obuolių su apelsiniais – niekas nemašo', TV3 (News Website), (2024) 4 April. Available at: <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/video/lietuvos-atsargos-pulkininkas-apie-kritikuojama-sprendima-isigyti-tanku-obuoliu-su-apelsiniais-niekas-nemaiso-n1252516> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

29 Jakubauskas (2025) 'Kas yra divizija ir ko trūksta Lietuvai? Eksperto ir ministro vertinimai', 15min, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/kas-yra-divizija-ir-ko-truksta-lietuvai-eksperto-ir-ministro-vertinimai-56-2051000> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

30 Narkūnas (2025) 'Nuo šiol kariausime kitaip: ar tikrai tankai tapo atgyvena, o mūšius laimės tik dronai?', LRT, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2312065/nuo-siol-kariausime-kitaip-ar-tikrai-tankai-tapo-atgyvena-o-musius-laimes-tik-dronai> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

31 Brunalas (2025) 'Kasčiūnas stebisi Anušausko pozicija dėl Vokietijos brigados', Delfi, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/kasciunas-stebisi-anusausko-pozicija-del-vokietijos-brigados-91443917> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

32 Kojala (2025) 'Lithuania's political shift', Policy Commons, 4 April. Available at: <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/17909229/lithuanias-political-shift/18805085/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

33 VSD (2025) 2025 Lithuanian Security Report. Available at: <https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-LT.pdf> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

34 Boruta, Pinelytė (2025) 'Kinijos informacinė įtaka Baltijos šalims: rizika ir stiprybės', GSSC, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.gssc.lt/publikacija/kinijos-informacine-itaka-baltijos-salims-rizika-ir-stiprybes/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

35 Boruta (2025) 'Retųjų žemių elementai: Vakarų strateginio atsako į Kinijos dominavimą beieskant', GSSC, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.gssc.lt/publikacija/retuju-zemiu-elementai-vakaru-strateginio-atsako-i-kinijos-dominavima-beieskant/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

36 Andrijauskas et al. (2025) 'Kinijos informacinė įtaka Baltijos šalims: rizika ir stiprybės', GSSC, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.gssc.lt/publikacija/kinijos-informacine-itaka-baltijos-salims-rizika-ir-stiprybes/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

37 Beniušis (2025) 'Apklausa: dauguma Lietuvos gyventojų nepritaria politikai Kinijos atžvilgiu', 15min, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/apklausa-dauguma-lietuvos-gyventuju-nepitaria-politikai-kinijos-atzvilgiu-56-1626212> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

The US pivot to Asia is being watched closely in Lithuania<sup>38</sup>. Numerous voices have expressed concerns that as the US devotes more attention to Asia, Europe's security will diminish<sup>39</sup>. Many have noted that there have been no radical changes in policy between the first Donald Trump administration and the Joe Biden administration, as the main trajectory of US foreign policy has remained clearly oriented toward Asia<sup>40</sup>. In this context, regardless of which administration forms the government in the US, Lithuania should begin considering European security without wholly relying on the US as a backstop, as the US could potentially shift its interests away from defending Europe. At the same time, it should seek to engage the US in maintaining its presence in the region for as long as possible.

Thus, as Lithuania has sought to strengthen its strategic ties with the US and ensure continued American engagement in the region, it has also looked to diversify its partnerships. Recognizing the shifting geopolitical landscape, the last Lithuanian government sought to establish links with states in the Indo-Pacific, such as South Korea and Taiwan, key allies of the US<sup>41</sup>. The aim, as the government argued, was to build alternative economic partnerships with democracies in the Indo-Pacific region and expand a security dialogue (especially on building resilience and defense cooperation and capabilities) with Taiwan, South Korea and others, consolidating the rules-based international order.

## Ukraine's future (one way or another) is in NATO

The war against Ukraine is seen in Lithuania as a major tectonic shift of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the eyes of Lithuanians, Russia has not changed since the Soviet Union and is still

set on a collision course against the West<sup>42</sup>. As President Gitanas Nausėda stated in 2023: "Russian imperialism has not vanished"<sup>43</sup>. This war is seen as an imperialistic war of aggression, intended to reinstate Russia as a great power and diminish Ukraine's chances of maintaining its independent statehood<sup>44</sup>. By initiating such a war, Russia has potentially opened a Pandora's box, as other global actors might now perceive war as an effective instrument for coercing others into achieving their political aims. A dictator should not be able to seize a democratic country whenever he or she wishes.

By launching the war against Ukraine, Russia has undermined the entire European security architecture. The prevailing view is that Russia has created instability, escalated tensions with the West, and, in the longer run, seeks direct confrontation with NATO<sup>45</sup>. As a result, Europe's pre-2022 security order has been dismantled, leaving NATO's eastern flank states dangerously exposed. The discourse on the possibility of war in Lithuania is grim, as various experts and politicians warn about the increasing likelihood of a war in the near future, especially with the US pivoting to Asia and leaving Europe more vulnerable<sup>46</sup>.

In order to prevent further Russian aggression, Lithuanian decision-makers and expert circles agree that Ukraine must prevail<sup>47</sup>. At the beginning of the war, more radical ideas were considered, such as the potential fall of Russia<sup>48</sup>. Over time, however, the Lithuanian position focused on advocating Ukraine's liberation of all occupied territories within its 1991 borders, which was viewed as a just and hence uncompromising goal<sup>49</sup>. Another crucial aspect that has been discussed is Ukraine's security guarantees, primarily through NATO and EU membership<sup>50</sup>. Lithuanians view these memberships as the best mechanisms for ensuring Ukraine's stability and deterring any future conventional or hybrid attacks against

38 Kojala (2025) 'Linus Kojala: "Sudie, Amerika. Yra tik vienas būdas žinoti, kas tavo draugai" II dalis', Delfi, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lit/linas-kojala-sudie-amerika-yra-tik-vienas-budas-zinoti-kas-tavo-draugai-ii-dalis-81482309> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

39 Paškevičius (2025) 'Amerikos politika suksis į Rytų Aziją pasibaigus Miuncheno konferencijai: Europa jaudinasi dėl saugumo', LRT, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/pasaulyje/6/2198285/amerikos-politika-suksis-i-rytu-azija-pasibaigus-miuncheno-konferencijai-europa-jaudinasi-del-saugumo> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

40 Kojala (2025) 'Trumpas ir Bidenas turi kai ką bendro', Delfi, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lit/linas-kojala-trumpas-ir-bidenas-turi-kai-ka-bendro-85813271> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

41 Landsbergis, G. (2024) 'G. Landsbergis Pietų Korėją vadina esmine partnere Indijos ir Ramiojo vandenyno regione', Kauno diena, 26 April. Available at: <https://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/politika/g-landsbergis-pietu-koreja-vadina-esmine-partnere-indijos-ir-ramiojo-vandenyno-regione-1171482> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

42 Žukas (2025) 'Kodėl Rusija pradėjo karą?', Bernardinai.lt, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.bernardinai.lt/kodel-rusija-pradejo-kara/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

43 Skėrytė (2025) 'G. Nausėda: nebūtų kuo džiaugtis, jei ne išmintingi sprendimai nepriklausomybės pradžioje', Bernardinai.lt, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.bernardinai.lt/g-nauseda-nebutu-kuo-dziaugtis-jei-ne-izvalgus-sprendimai-nepriklausomybes-pradzioje/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

44 Mažeikis (2025) 'G. Nausėda: nebūtų kuo džiaugtis, jei ne išmintingi sprendimai nepriklausomybės pradžioje', Bernardinai.lt, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.bernardinai.lt/g-nauseda-nebutu-kuo-dziaugtis-jei-ne-izvalgus-sprendimai-nepriklausomybes-pradzioje/> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

45 Ketlerienė (2025) 'Budrys: jei mes norėsime būti nepriklausoma valstybė, saugumas turės būti kietas ir tvirtas', LRT.lt, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1876232/budrys-jeigu-mes-noresime-buti-nepriklausoma-valstybe-saugumas-tures-buti-kietas-ir-tvirtas> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

46 'Sakalienė: JAV žinutė – jos nesitraukia, bet Europa turi pasitempti', LRT, 29 March. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2486791/sakaliene-jav-zinute-jos-nesitraukia-bet-europa-turi-pasitempti> (Accessed: 6 April 2025). Šlekys, D. (2025) 'Karo lažybos', LRT.lt, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/nuomones/3/2213110/deividas-slekys-karo-lazybos> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

47 Landsbergis, G. (2023) 'Landsbergis: jei Ukraina nelaimės, tai kainuos brangiau visiems', LRT, 19 September. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/pasaulyje/6/2066639/landsbergis-jei-ukraina-nelaimes-tai-kainuos-brangiau-visiems> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

48 'Estijos ekspertė: Putinas neišgyvens pralaimėjimo Ukrainoje, bet Rusijos režimas nežlugs', LRT.lt (National Broadcaster), (2025), 4 April. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/pasaulyje/6/1870865/estijos-eksperte-putinas-neisgyvens-pralaimejimo-ukrainoje-bet-rusijos-rezimas-nezlugs> (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

49 Landsbergis, G. (2024) 'Landsbergis Briuselyje: „Turime pasitikėti Ukraina ir sudaryti visas sąlygas jos pergalei“, Užsienio reikalų ministerija, 30 August. Available at: <https://www.urm.lt/naujienos/141/landsbergis-briuselyje-turime-pasitiketi-ukraina-ir-sudaryti-visas-salygas-jos-pergalei-43003> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

50 Landsbergis, G. (2024) 'Landsbergis Briuselyje: „Turime pasitikėti Ukraina ir sudaryti visas sąlygas jos pergalei“, Užsienio reikalų ministerija, 30 August. Available at: <https://www.urm.lt/naujienos/141/landsbergis-briuselyje-turime-pasitiketi-ukraina-ir-sudaryti-visas-salygas-jos-pergalei-43003> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

the country from Russia<sup>51</sup>. From the Lithuanian perspective, Ukraine's accession to NATO is seen as the simplest and most effective mechanism for achieving long-term peace. After all, previous security guarantees have failed.

By 2023–2024, as it became evident that Ukraine's path to NATO membership was still far off, Lithuanian discourse began to emphasize that if Ukraine was not granted a place in the Alliance, the West should provide strong and binding security guarantees. The reasoning was simple: Russia would likely violate any peace deal, just as it did with Minsk I and Minsk II, as long as it retained political influence over Ukraine. From Lithuania's perspective, these guarantees should first be provided by nuclear-armed states (such as the US, UK, and France), but also by others, with the possible deployment of European troops to Ukraine, effectively creating a "tripwire" deterrence model. In other words, even if Ukraine is not formally part of NATO, it would, in effect, be integrated into the Alliance's security structures<sup>52</sup>.

Until such a framework is in place, Ukraine must receive the maximum possible military aid to sustain its defense. The decision to continue or end the war should remain solely in the hands of Ukraine, to be made under circumstances of its choosing. In Lithuanian discourse, concerns have been raised time and again that some Allies might pressure Ukraine into prematurely ending the war under unfavorable conditions. Such fears partially materialized in February and early March 2025, when the Trump administration applied inappropriate pressure on Ukraine. Lithuanians have argued that the shifting position of the US administration and the potentially permanent severance of American aid should serve as a clear call to action for Europeans to immediately increase defense spending to compensate for lost US support for Ukraine and ideally fill any capability gaps within NATO. This radical shift in US policy was met with strong disapproval in Lithuania, with both the nation's experts and public alike fearing the potential unraveling of transatlantic relations as we know them.

## The future of NATO and the nuclear domain

The war against Ukraine has revived discussions on nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence. Lithuania views nuclear issues primarily through the lens of deterrence against

Russia's aggressive foreign policy. Throughout the war, Russia has continuously engaged in nuclear blackmail, seeking to deter Western states from supplying aid to Ukraine. Both Lithuanian experts and the nation's public have interpreted Russian threats as being directed at EU and NATO member states, notably in Western Europe. However, Lithuanians have not seen a realistic chance of nuclear use by Russia – and even if this were to occur, a devastating response would be expected from allies. Some experts have warned that Lithuania's narrative on nuclear weapons should be more careful, as the risk of crossing the nuclear threshold is low, but never zero<sup>53</sup>. Similarly, the new Russian nuclear doctrine has not been interpreted as a major departure from existing Russian thinking on deterrence. Furthermore, while the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus was primarily intended as a signal to Western Europe, it did little to alter the regional balance.

In any case, Lithuanian decision-makers would like to see a stronger nuclear deterrence on NATO's eastern flank. Consequently, Poland's pledge to join NATO's nuclear sharing – including stationing nuclear weapons on Polish territory – was met with enthusiasm, although it was seen as unrealistic<sup>54</sup>. US nuclear weapons stationed in Poland would clearly benefit Lithuanian national security. This follows the rationale of US President Ronald Reagan's proposition of "peace through strength" by adopting the strongest possible stance to deter Russia. Involving Poland in nuclear sharing should contribute to establishing a deterrence against Russia as much as possible<sup>55</sup>.

In this context, Lithuania strongly supports NATO's nuclear modernization efforts. As discussions of a European nuclear deterrent, possibly under French leadership, have emerged, Lithuania could consider joining such a strategy<sup>56</sup>. However, it remains skeptical about the viability of this alternative to the American nuclear umbrella, given the lack of a unified European strategic culture, limited capabilities, and the credibility that US nuclear weapons provide<sup>57</sup>.

In Lithuania, the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency has raised concerns about NATO's internal stability and the future of transatlantic relations. The Trump administration's rhetoric, which questions NATO's value and takes an aggressive stance toward some allies, suggests potential shifts in US engagement. As mentioned above,

51 'Budrys Kyjive: realios saugumo garantijos pirmiausia yra Ukrainos narystė NATO', LRT (National Broadcaster), (2022) 20 December. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/pasaulyje/6/2443906/budrys-kyjive-realios-saugumo-garantijos-pirmiausia-yra-ukrainos-naryste-nato> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

52 'Budrys neatmeta galimybės Lietuvai įsitraukti į taikos operaciją Ukrainoje', TV3.lt (News Website), (2025) 1 March. Available at: <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/lietuva/budrys-neatmeta-galimybes-lietuvai-isisitraukti-i-taikos-operacija-ukrainoje-n1401558> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

53 Kojala, L. (2024) 'L. Kojala paaiškino, ką reikia žinoti apie Rusijos keičiamą branduolinę doktriną', 15min, 5 March. Available at: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/pasaulis/l-kojala-paaiskino-ka-reikia-zinoti-apie-rusijos-keiciama-branduoline-doktrina-57-2345732> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

54 'G. Nausėda idėja dėl branduolinio ginklo Lenkijoje vadina reikšmingu atgrasymo veiksniu', Verslo žinios (News Website), (2024) 26 April. Available at: <https://www.vz.lt/verslo-aplinka/2024/04/26/g-nauseda-ideja-del-branduolinio-ginklo-lenkijoje-vadina-reiksmingu-atgrasymo-veiksniu> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

55 Delfi (2024) 'Lenkija – branduolinė valstybė: kas iš to būtų Lietuvai?', Delfi, 25 April. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/lenkija-branduoline-valstybe-kas-is-to-butu-lietuvai-95893313> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

56 Kojala, L. (2024) 'L. Kojala atsako: kiek reali Prancūzijos branduolinio atgrasymo idėja?', 15min, 18 March. Available at: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/pasaulis/l-kojala-atsako-kiek-reali-prancuzijos-branduolinio-atgrasymo-ideja-57-2408014> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

57 'Prancūzijos branduolinis skėtis: G.Nausėda ir S.Skvernelis – už, G.Paluckas – skeptiškas, R.Žemaitaitis – prieš', 15min.lt (News Website), (2025) 10 March. Available at: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/prancuzijos-branduolinis-skėtis-g-nauseda-ir-s-skvernelis-uz-g-paluckas-ir-r-zemaitaitis-pries-56-2409746> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

there are fears about the viability of a future European security framework without the presence or interest of the US.

However, this does not mean that Europe, in Lithuania's view, should remain a spectator. Lithuania acknowledges the necessity of increasing European defense capabilities, particularly by boosting defense investments and strengthening the military industry<sup>58</sup>. However, at the moment, Lithuania still strongly believes in maintaining NATO as the cornerstone of European security rather than shifting entirely toward EU defense structures, as no European nation can provide the same capabilities as the US. Significantly strengthening NATO's European pillar – while keeping transatlantic relations intact – is seen the only viable approach.

In terms of NATO's decision-making, Lithuania has had difficult experiences, such as Turkey's veto of Sweden's and Finland's respective applications to join NATO and its blocking of the Baltic defense plans in 2020, which were of critical importance for Lithuania. From Lithuania's perspective, matters crucial to the security of NATO members should not be overshadowed by national interests that would significantly harm the interests of other allies, as all NATO states have an equal voice. There should not, therefore, be a "two-speed" NATO, where stronger and more influential states override the positions of others. To strengthen its voice as a small country and present a unified regional position, Lithuania participates in various programs, such as the Bucharest Nine, a Central European initiative to strengthen NATO's eastern flank, and the Nordic-Baltic Eight, a Northern European initiative.

Democracy is at the core of Lithuania's discussions on NATO, representing the precise reason why NATO is so important for Lithuania, protecting its way of life, democratic values, and political system. But NATO's primary task should not be the promotion of democracy, as it is first and foremost a military alliance focused on deterring potential aggressors. Lithuania welcomes NATO initiatives to close gender gaps in the military and implement environmentally friendly policies. Similarly, these should not become the Alliance's main focus, as its key objective remains that of ensuring collective defense.

<sup>58</sup> 'Sakaliene: JAV žinutė – jos nesitraukia, bet Europa turi pasitempti', LRT, 29 March. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/2486791/sakaliene-jav-zinute-jos-nesitraukia-bet-europa-turi-pasitempti> (Accessed: 6 April 2025).

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## About the author

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## The Future of NATO – Country Report Lithuania

NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 3 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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