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Estonian Expectations on the Regional Security Arrangements after Russia's Aggression against Ukraine in 2022: Disillusionment with the EU and New Expectations from NATO

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Abstract: Russia's persistent aggression towards its neighbours has long been predicted. However, the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine proved to be a startling development. Even if Ukraine does not belong to NATO or the EU, the Kremlin, either through miscalculation or deliberate intent, ventured into uncharted territory. Similarly, Russia may decide to test NATO's cohesion. This shift has significantly altered the security landscape for the Baltic states. This article investigates Estonian ideas, plans, and actions aimed at mitigating the escalating risks. In the realm of collective defence, an anticipated transition from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial is underway. This transition coincides with a disillusionment with the European common defence policy. While the EU is envisioned to play a pivotal role in non-military domains, Estonia places its exclusive trust in NATO for military defence. Nonetheless, this collective defence approach is not without challenges. Most importantly, deterrence by denial may not be immediately applicable. Consequently, in terms of individual defence, it appears that alongside integrated defence, a total defence strategy is imperative.'

Keywords: Estonia's new security strategy, deterrence by denial, European common defence policy

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Introduction

The Russian Federation's 2022 full-scale aggression against Ukraine has changed the security landscape for the Baltic states. Despite the long-standing predictions of Russia's aggression by the Baltic states, the degree of irrationality of the attack came as a shock. Even if Ukraine does not belong to NATO or the EU, the Kremlin, either through a misjudgement of risk or deliberate intent, initiated the assault. This implies a substantial increase in security risks for the Baltic states, even with Finland's accession and Sweden's ongoing process of joining NATO. Consequently, this evolving security situation with the heightened risks requires a fresh mitigation strategy by the Baltic states.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022-2023 has laid bare the obsolescence of Estonia's and their allies' earlier security strategies, both in terms of strategic choices and their practical implementation. In this context, the aim of the article is to investigate the ideas and deeds of Estonia's security elite and community to address and mitigate those risks. Initially, the article will chart Estonia's perception of the transformed regional security situation since February 2022 and elucidate the changes that Estonia's political and military elites deem necessary in response. Subsequently, it will delve into the anticipated roles of the EU and NATO in providing credible deterrence within the new context. Lastly, the article will explore the inherent risks associated with achieving and implementing these changes in the security strategy and how to mitigate them.

The article outlines and discusses what could be called a two-level response that the Estonian security elite anticipates as an answer to the changed security situation. In terms of collective defence, there is a need for a switch from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial to respond to an aggressive Russia. However, this expected transformation faces significant impediments, its implementation contingent on the secure presence of a British brigade and the NATO promises articulated in the last two summits. The second risk emanates from the fact that the EU lacks serious military prowess, and within the NATO framework, Estonia's primary ally is the United States. However, if it transpires that the EU is deficient in both capabilities and will, the United States, while possessing capabilities, is

bound by domestic political issues that limit its ability to act. The potential victory of Trump in the presidential elections or the Trump Republicans' ability to constrain any other policy except isolationism raises concerns about the effective support to Estonia being jeopardised.

This implies, foremost, that Estonia cannot completely disregard the EU. Despite a profound disillusionment with the EU's strategic autonomy, the war in Ukraine underscores a vital role for the EU in terms of providing essential financial, economic, and other support to the war effort. Even though the EU has lost its standing as an independent military actor, the most readily realisable aspect of European support remains military, namely, the not yet existing readiness of the European defence industry to furnish the much-needed capabilities and capacities, encompassing both of arms and ammunition. Ultimately, and most importantly, the EU must forge a distinct geopolitical identity and emerge as an actor, at least within its neighbourhood. This imperative is essential for the EU to collaborate with the United States in upholding the global and regional order, but it is equally vital for securing Estonia's immediate security interests.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned circumstances entail challenges and risks at the collective defence level for Estonia. To alleviate these risks during the interim period, individual defence must act as a compensatory measure. In this context, alongside the integrated defence and drawing on insights from the Ukrainian experience, it becomes evident that the concept and implementation of total defence will resurface. Consequently, while confronting the challenges of the next 3-5 years, a dilemma, especially among the military leaders, has emerged: the choice between establishing a credible multilateral deterrence and fostering resilience grounded in the total defence model.

Hence, in 2024-5 and in the immediate aftermath, there is a pressing need for a short-term containment and risk reduction strategy. This imperative arises to prevent Russia, post its involvement in the war in Ukraine, from manifesting its aggression towards the Baltic states. Looking further ahead, a novel, sustainable national or trans-regional security strategy is essential. This strategy needs to be

economically viable, supported by NATO and EU allies, synchronised both internally and within the Baltic Sea region, all with the ultimate goal of establishing sufficient protection against potential Russia threats.

Methodologically, the current article relies on interviews with security experts in Estonia that focused on the allocation of roles between the EU and NATO for a small member state neighbouring Russia. In total, 19 individuals were contacted, 1 declined, and 6 did not respond. Nine interviews were held with Estonian nationals, and three were with experts from the United Kingdom working in Estonia. Interviewing experts from the United Kingdom offered a complementary viewpoint on events that could give more nuance to the views of Estonian security experts. In addition, the United Kingdom is linked to Estonia through enhanced security cooperation forums. The background of the experts varies. Some have worked in the Estonian Defence Forces, the Estonian Ministry of Defence, the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, institutions of the European Union, and the International Centre for Defence Studies (ICDS).

A focus group interview was also conducted in November 2023 with a group of colonels from NATO countries regarding the feasibility of attaining of the structures needed for deterrence by denial in Estonia. In addition to these interviews, public statements by the Estonian political and military leaders in years 2022-2023 formed supplementary sources for the article.

2. Theoretical Challenges: The Power-security Dilemma, the Credibility of Deterrence, Deterrence by Denial, and Total Defence

To assess Estonia's strategic choices, this chapter outlines the theoretical elements essential for both their comprehension and interpretation. The power-security dilemma will shed light on understanding Russia's posture and the complexity of the responses by the West and Estonia since 2022. Deterrence theory, especially the concepts of deterrence by punishment and denial, will be instrumental to analyse Estonia's strategic choices concerning collective defence. The applicability of credibility in deterrence models will be applied to scrutinise Estonia's choice of its strategic partners in providing collective defence. Finally, the concept of total

defence will provide insight into the dilemma faced by Estonia's security elite between prioritising collective and individual defence during the interim period.

Deterrence Theory and the Power–security Dilemma

Deterrence, succinctly summarised, entails a state attempting to persuade an adversary against the use military force (Von Hlatky, 2015). The fear of unaffordable consequences and the threat of the use of force aim to discourage the opponent(s), preventing or inhibiting actions they aspire to undertake (Keane, 2015; Zagare, 2013; Morgan, 2017). In this sense, deterrence emerges as a psychological phenomenon unfolding in the cognitive realms of the involved actors.

Snyder's approach to 'broad deterrence' introduces the political element of entanglement (see, e.g. Snyder 1961; Nye, 2017). The presence of various interdependencies implies that a successful attack may result in serious costs to both victim and attacker, which means that a potential adversary may not attack even in the absence of retaliation, etc. (see, Keohane and Nye, 2011). This interplay is closely related to cyber threats (see e.g. Jasper, 2015).

It is imperative to underscore the risk of misperceptions in this context. Following Jervis's perspective (1979), entanglement is sometimes called 'self-deterrence', where actors are deterred by figments of their own imagination. This form of self-deterrence also occurs when states exhibit excessive caution. According to Jervis, policymakers may hesitate to take action and avoid commitments if they fixate on implausible contingencies. In such instances, domestic institutional or political ends take precedence over overarching security goals (Jervis, 1982).

The power–security dilemma is related to deterrence theory and describes the inherent difficulty in identifying a motivation for an international actor's conduct. It is an essentially realist notion that presumes international anarchy and actors who take rational decisions as its premise. The motives and profiles of actors can be interpreted through the lenses of either offensiveness or defensiveness. However, the intricate nature of the anarchic environment complicates the determination of whether a state's action stems from the desire to augment its power within the

system (offensiveness) or merely seeks to counterbalance an external dynamic to safeguard its position (defensiveness) (Buzan, 1991).

In theoretical terms, a state's aggression against another can be construed as *defensive* if the motivation of the state is rooted in the desire to respond to the expansion of its perceived competitor(s). This action, in such cases, can be characterised as balancing. This logic could be seen as used by Putin in his speech celebrating the incorporation of Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporozhye into the Russian Federation (Putin, 2022). Conversely, the alternative view attributes a state's aggression to its unilateral pursuit of power, framing it as *offensive*. This desire may be attributed to the existence of a perceived security void that the offensively motivated state interprets as an opportunity to enhance its security. This aspect could be detected in the words of Medvedev (Medvedev, 2022). In this context, the underlying revisionist motives for a state also come to play. States are commonly seen as rising revisionists (Jervis, 1982), with growing economic and other powers aiming to advance their status in the international system. However, they could also be a falling revisionist, perceiving a decline in their political, economic, and military power and consequently seeking immediate action to secure whatever is still attainable, as observed in Russia's behaviour from 2022-2024.

The power–security dilemma also serves as a valuable tool in explaining the logic of escalation and de–escalation in a conflict. Namely, this dilemma describes a situation in which an offensive position can relatively easily be exchanged for a defensive one (Veebel 2019). This facet of the dilemma is observable, for example, when the behaviour of a state or a coalition, wary of prompting the enemy to adopt a defensive posture, avoids actions that could be perceived as additional escalatory steps (as will be argued about the West in its relations with Russia in 2022-2023 below). The question of whether to adopt a strategy of escalation or de-escalation in the conflict can also be explained from another angle. The pre-emptive escalation of the conflict may deter or halt opponents, particularly if they adhere to the tenets of offensive realism, positing that states must compete for power with survival as their paramount objective (Mearsheimer, 2001). However, the outcome could be just the opposite, should the opponent be motivated by the idea of balancing the existing imbalance (Levy, 2003). In such cases, the escalation of conflict is interpreted by the opponent as provocative and hostile, necessitating a response.

Forms of Deterrence: Deterrence by Punishment and Denial

The genesis of the concept and definitions of deterrence can be traced to the early years of the Cold War, a period marked by the initiation of discussions on nuclear deterrence among international actors. During 1950s and 1960s, most of the work on the formulation of the deterrence concept was undertaken. In the initial two decades of the nuclear age, the *US concept of deterrence was based on its strategic superiority, called 'massive retaliation'. Parity between US and Soviet nuclear forces was established only by the early 1970s, as both sides acknowledged the futility of prevailing in a nuclear war* (Vihmand-Veebel and Veebel, 2023; Lebow and Stein, 1995). The 'balance of terror' brought about an uncomfortable but potentially enduring peace. Termed *deterrence by punishment*, this kind of deterrence was assumed to work through the threat of severe consequences (Freedman 2021). However, 'the first two waves of deterrence theory made confident pronouncements about what would and would not deter an aggressor – without any clear foundation' (Mazarr, 2018).

Subsequently, as the concept underwent evolution, deterrence found expression in another approach – *deterrence by denial*. In its simplest form, *denial* is 'the immediate balance of forces in the contested territory' (Snyder, 1959). However, beyond presenting a credible threat, denial implies the flexibility and control to 'deny an opponent strategic option' (Freedman, 2004). Strategies rooted in denial seek to deter an action by rendering it impossible or unlikely to succeed, eroding a potential aggressor's confidence in achieving its objectives (Mazarr, 2018, p. 2). *Direct deterrence* involves efforts by a state to prevent attacks on its own territory, while *extended deterrence* encompasses discouraging attacks on third parties, such as allies or partners. By its nature, extended deterrence is more intricate than protecting one's own country. The undertaking of projecting of military force, spanning sometimes thousands of miles away and often much closer to the territory of the aggressor state, becomes more challenging when the attack is carried out in an area that is further away from the home country (Mazarr, 2020).

Consequently, two predominant forms of deterrence emerge: a state can attempt to dissuade an adversary not to use military force either by threatening retaliation – deterrence by punishment or retaliation – or by thwarting the adversary's

operational plans – deterrence by denial (von Hlatky, 2015). A dilemma arises in prioritising either strategic defences or deterrence. If deterrence is solely retaliatory, then its logic tends to preclude strategic defences, but if it incorporates denial, deploying strategic defences becomes a logical course of action (Buzan, 1987).

The Credibility of Deterrence

Taking the preceding discussion in consideration, the credibility of deterrence is contingent on specific circumstances. However, due to its controversial nature, assessment of when and under what circumstances deterrence becomes credible proves challenging. Essentially, we are examining a phenomenon that is not anticipated to occur. This presents several methodological challenges, such as the paradox where if deterrence is successful, there is no behaviour to be seen; on the other hand, if deterrence fails, behaviour does occur and can be observed. Deterrence theory encounters a conundrum when all the conditions for deterrence are in place, yet there is ‘no deterrence’ (Veebel, 2021), and so forth.

Several factors have been nevertheless suggested in the literature which could contribute to the credibility of deterrence. Paulauskas (2016) asserts with respect to NATO: ‘Alliance credibility can be pictured as a three-legged stool, comprising cohesion, capability and communication’. Capability refers to military capabilities, cohesion to the unity and solidarity of the Alliance, and communication to a clear and unambiguous communication strategy. In the context of the Ukraine war, the factor of capacity also emerges – in addition to capabilities, capacities are vital if the adversary can surpass you with its stockpiles of ammunition, potentially becoming a decisive condition.

The efficacy of the concept of deterrence hinges on the ability to shape the perceptions and risk calculations of adversaries and allies alike. It is a rationality-oriented dialogue between and among allies and adversaries, designed to persuade adversaries that the risks of conflict outweigh any potential benefits and to reassuring allies that this dialogue is safeguarding their core interests (Hersman, 2017). For deterrence to be credible, both allies and adversaries must share a common understanding of efficiency and rationality as encapsulated by this concept. It is imperative that they clearly comprehend what the other side of the

conversation articulates and anticipates, even when there is no shared understanding of rationality (Veebel and Ploom, 2023).

Addressing the Growing Risks: Total or Comprehensive Defence

The concept of Estonian total defence is not aligned to any NATO model or conceptual equivalent in the alliance; instead, it traces its roots back to some German and Soviet influences. Total defence is provided in terms of context rather than outcome. Accordingly, ‘Total defence is the permanent readiness of state’s civilian structures, local governments, the Defence Forces and Defence League, and the mental, physical, economic, and other potential of the whole nation to resolve crisis and coordinated and united action to prevent and deter a threat of an attack for nation’s survival’ (Veebel et al., 2020). While the term was widely used in the 1990s as a possible option for the state defence concept; it fell out of favour in the 2000s in favour of an integrated NATO defence and deterrence posture, reflecting the adoption a comprehensive approach.

In addition to the German and Soviet roots, Estonia, in its understanding of total defence, can be viewed as influenced by the Nordic countries such as Finland, Sweden, and Norway. The security policies of these countries in the post-Second World War era had been designed along the logic of total defence. While the concept saw total defence as territorial, an intriguing coexistence, if not amalgamation, of the two terms becomes evident. The central notion behind total defence is the mobilisation of resources of the whole society to defend the state in times of crisis and war (Zaleski et. al 2020).

The term ‘total’ defence is often confused with a comprehensive approach, but this conflation is doubtful due to the overall changing contexts. Initially, total defence emerged to mirror the qualities of modern conflicts, presuming a limited geographic and chronologically scope of ‘hot conflict.’ This allows society fully support its defence forces in a ‘total’ manner. However, modern hybrid conflicts do not allow such a concrete limitation of a conflict as they lack a clear limitation between of conflict and peace. In practice, the Estonian total defence concept leans more toward total societal efforts supporting the military in war than to a truly

interagency approach. This is accentuated as the concept of integrated defence appears to broaden the scope of total defence activity (Jermalavičius et al. 2014, p. 56), suggesting a theoretical difference between the two concepts.

3. Estonia's Evolving Security Landscape and Strategic Choices

This chapter delineates the evolved perception of the regional security situation in Estonia during 2022-2023. Initially, it explores Estonia's perspective on Russia's motives, discerning between offensive and defensive characteristics. This is followed by an examination of statements from Estonian political and military leaders, elucidating their expectations regarding a specific type of expected deterrence. Subsequently, the chapter addresses the reliance on organisations to provide the credible deterrence, juxtaposing the roles of the EU and NATO. In the eyes of Estonian security experts, assessing capability, capacity, cohesion, and communication, NATO emerges as the singular dependable military actor, while the EU is viewed as a significant potential supportive actor operating in the background.

Estonia's Assessment of Russia's Motives and Expectations for Credible Deterrence

The all-out war in Ukraine during 2022-2023 has radically altered the prevailing perception of the security situation in Estonia. Following the events in Crimea and Donbas, the slogan 'Is Narva next?' could be dismissed by emphasising that Estonia is a member of NATO. Presently, the dominant belief among the public is that if Russia triumphs in any way in Ukraine, Estonia could be its subsequent target (Herem, 2023). There is a growing conviction that Putin might intentionally target NATO territory, even without resorting to nuclear assets. The current prognosis, as articulated by Estonian CHOD Martin Herem, anticipates that if Russia is not defeated in Ukraine, an attack against the Baltic states will follow in the coming years (2024-2025). Consequently, Estonia is preparing for a potential full-scale conventional conflict with Russia (Herem, 2023).

The aforementioned perception of the situation aligns with the perception of Russia's motives. According to Estonian political and military elites, Russia is predominantly viewed as having offensive intentions (drawn from authors'

interviews). The notion that Russia is defensive against NATO in former Soviet republics is hardly mentioned, and when mentioned, it is often ridiculed. As will be argued, the divergence in overall perception between the West, particularly its behavior, and the prevailing perspective in Estonia presents challenges in transitioning to deterrence by denial.

Nevertheless, the perspective of Russia as offensive in Estonia is underlined by the fact that Estonia, as well as Russia's other neighbours, have their own individual identity separate from Russia's and therefore can exercise their own agency regarding their present and future allegiances. This understanding was present long before the outbreak of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This validation occurred in 2008, as the perception of Russia as offensive took firm hold in the minds of the elite. By 2014, following the events of Maidan, it solidified as the singular credible opinion.

For example, former President of Estonia Toomas Hendrik Ilves described Russia in terms of 'the violation of borders, aggression, [and] an anti-liberal ideology combined with religious conservatism' (...) 'It's all back'. (University of Columbia, 2014). The offensive intentions of Russia were also noted by other officials (see, e.g., Siseministerium, 2014). In 2016, then President Kaljulaid succinctly expressed: 'Russia is an aggressive state that does not recognise formal agreements' (Birrell, 2016).

Evidently, this topic acquired again prominence before Russia's aggression in 2022. For example, former Prime Minister Ratas deemed Russia aggressive (Riigikogu, 2021), a sentiment echoed by former CHOD General (ret.) Laaneots in collaboration with the then Minister of Defence Laanet, as well as individually (Laaneots and Laanet, 2021, Laaneots, 2021). The offensiveness of Russia was explained in detail by deputy CHOD General Veiko-Vello Palm (Palm, 2021), and Prime Minister Kaja Kallas articulated this perspective most prominently (Vasli, 2021). Notably, the references to the pursuits and motives of Russia solely revolve around the Kremlin's desire to restore the empire. As Kaja Kallas has asserted, 'NATO threatens Russia's imperialism, not its security' (Kossov, 2023).

This perspective is also reflected in Estonia's proactive stance in supporting Ukraine. Estonia anticipates that Russian losses will at least postpone if not abandon Russia's military plans against the Baltic States. Estonia also urges the West to do more (Veebel and Ploom 2023). To that end, Estonia stands among the leading per capita supporters of Ukraine, providing conventional and other assistance to restrain Russia within its borders (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2023).

Nonetheless, as will be argued, this perception of Russia as purely offensive is not uniformly shared by the West as a whole. Even Estonia's own position implicitly concedes to this ambiguity. This uncertainty implies that the West is cautious about taking a more active stance towards Russia, fearing an escalation the conflict beyond its current limits. It is crucial to acknowledge this, as it may serve as a critical and restrictive viewpoint for Estonia to achieve the desired level deterrence by denial. As argued, the West refrains from direct involvement in Ukraine, imposes conditionality on Western weapon deliveries to Ukraine, and provides insufficient weapons to Ukraine. These Western positions are underscored by concerns about Russia's potential for nuclear escalation.

Because of Russian aggression and obvious miscalculation with Ukraine, Estonia perceives that Russia's leaders are prone to reckless conduct and errors of judgement. Estonia may therefore become object of an attack (Palm, 2021). This caused a major shift in the preferred strategy. 'I no longer have faith in deterrence', said Estonia's CHOD General Herem to the Estonian Public Broadcasting in a groundbreaking interview. This was an inflection point that hitherto challenged common expectations regarding NATO's role in Estonia. As Herem argued, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was 'clearly insane, yet they still did it' (Turovski, 2022). In addition to Herem, Prime Minister Kaja Kallas was strikingly critical about the present NATO deterrence strategy. If Herem's interview was to invigorate debates within Estonia, Kallas' statements were aimed to influence those in the international arena. According to Kallas, 'Estonia would be wiped off the map and the historic centre of its capital city razed to the ground under current NATO plans to defend the country from any Russian attack'. The notion of liberating the three Baltic states after 180 days was deemed unacceptable (Milne, 2022). This sentiment was reiterated by the permanent undersecretary of the Ministry of Defence, Kusti Salm,

who emphasised the need for a new strategy against Russia's ambitions and a transition to deterrence by denial. (Vasli, 2022)

All the three messages from Estonia's top political, administrative, and defence specialist positions were timed to influence the NATO decision-making process at the Madrid summit in summer 2022. Latvia and Lithuania were also advocating for the replacement of the current strategy of NATO troops as tripwires by one in which NATO seeks to defend 'every inch of territory from the very first day' (Milne 2022). Before the summit, General Herem argued that the priority was training with allies, especially the rapid response capacity. He stated, '[w]e need to [see] the enemy met with a multinational division in Estonia... What we really want to achieve is people seeing allies ... who can arrive... in a matter of a few days' (Turovski, 2022).

Defence Minister Kalle Laanet also stressed the need for a sea change in NATO's deterrence and defence posture (Alas, 2022). Likewise, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence, Salm, emphasised that Estonia does not have a plan B or C alongside NATO. He stated unequivocally, 'To be absolutely clear – there is no alternative to NATO commitments' (Vasli, 2022).

In more specific terms, Prime Minister Kallas was asking for a division of troops, which she specified was between 20,000 and 25,000 NATO member state soldiers, to be stationed in each of the Baltic states, including a brigade of 3,000 to 5,000 foreign soldiers (Milne, 2022). Kallas underscored that the main idea was to assure that Estonia would be able 'to defend [itself] from the first day' (Milne, 2022).

'[For] NATO [to] create a more effective preparedness for the rapid defense of the Baltic states than before... the presence of permanently strengthened allied forces and military capabilities on land, sea and in the air in our region is necessary, as well as a functioning chain of command to control these forces and capabilities', Prime Minister Kallas explained (Alas, 2022). The prime minister insisted on strengthening of NATO battle groups and additional specific units that are ready for immediate action. (Alas, 2022)

Secretary General Stoltenberg clarified that strengthening deterrence and defence was one of the key decisions in Madrid. Other NATO officials added: 'We will adapt

the NATO force structure, with more forces at high readiness. We will also have more NATO forward-deployed combat formations, to strengthen battle groups in the east' (Milne, 2022). The NATO Secretary General told reporters that NATO will increase its rapid reaction forces from 40,000 to more than 300,000. In other words, these are soldiers who are ready to react in cases of necessity (Vasli, 2022).

At this juncture, it is reasonable to ask what has been done for December 2023, after 650 days of war in Ukraine. On the official front, the need to switch from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial has been rather well received by NATO. At the Madrid summit in 2022 the North Atlantic Council discussed the assets and structures required to prevent Russian aggression in the region and decided to deploy a division to each Baltic state, including a division headquarters. Estonia has also prioritised additional consultations on Allied assistance in the case of regional escalation. In terms of individual defence, an immediate need for mid-range air defence capability has been recognised. On an individual level, it is deemed relevant to enhance the readiness and size of the paramilitary national Defense League, increasing its active members from 10,000 to 20,000. To address these immediate needs for development, Estonia has approved extraordinary budgetary allocations to Defence Forces of 800 million to 1 billion euros, for new capabilities, building up ammunition reserves, and developing new structures.

Despite efforts, the shift to deterrence by denial faces challenges, with little progress achieved by the end of 2023. A crucial concern for Estonia is the absence of the British brigade, essential for the effectiveness of deterrence by denial. The British brigade is to be deployed only during the conflict and will not remain stationed in Estonia (Pulk, 2022). This absence of the British brigade introduces inherent risks.

However, there are more practical questions to be addressed. The establishment and staffing of the new command and control structure in the form of a division are still in progress in Estonia. Similarly, the issue of training grounds, as illustrated by the example of Nursipalu, demonstrates a considerable time investment. Furthermore, the example of Nursipalu demonstrates that it takes considerable time. Host nation support and logistics are likewise essential and require development.

However, broader problems have likewise surfaced in the effective implementation of NATO's deterrence by denial. The pre-positioning of weaponry and munitions in the Baltic states has not met the perceived threat level posed by Russia (Kelomees, 2023). As highlighted earlier, there is a risk that NATO allies may not deploy the needed equipment, ammunition, or troops to the Baltic states. As the most critical insight from the focus group interview, higher officers of NATO countries revealed a pessimism about locating their equipment in the Baltic states, as the potential surprise attack by Russia poses a significant threat of destruction (Focus group interview). Consequently, the primary option, at least in the short term and possibly for the upcoming years, remains individual defence. This issue will be further addressed in the next section.

EU and NATO as Military Providers

This section will critically examine the capacity of the EU and NATO to provide credible deterrence in the region following the Russian aggression of 2022, as assessed by security experts in Estonia. In total, 12 interviews with security analysts based in Estonia will be summarised. A clear division of roles between NATO and the EU emerged from the interviews with these security experts. As will be argued, this expert position implies certain risks. Although the United States commands global military superiority, the potential problems of a Trump election or the growing influence of his supporters may see the United States taking an isolationist position, weakening Estonia's ability to rely on the US security umbrella. In addition to the recognized role of the EU in offering non-military aid to its members, it is vital for EU states bordering Russia to concert their efforts in influencing the EU to adopt a more substantial geopolitical posture.

Regarding the results of the interviews, NATO was perceived as the only credible institution that could provide collective military security to Estonia, with the EU as only a supportive element. At the same time, while the EU's potential to provide collective military defence to Estonia was seen as almost inexistent, its role in securing the supportive aspects of a credible defence posture rose to the fore (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9 & 12).

As the experts underscored, defence is and should remain a national responsibility. Therefore, there is not much that the EU as a supranational political union can do in that arena, whereas NATO's intergovernmental model is built precisely on the logic of combining national defence efforts. To be sure, the EU's CSDP also functions within the aegis of an intergovernmental logic, but in a form that would merely duplicate NATO in the sphere of defence. As the EU's supranational DNA lingers in the background, the more cautious member states harbor an inherent scepticism regarding the EU's efficacy in collective defence matters. There is a prevailing belief that defense remains a national responsibility, and the reluctance to transfer authority to the EU's command structures is a deliberate choice (Interview 7 & 10). Small states prefer to maintain the status quo (Interview 8), aligning with Wivel's (2005) small state security identity, which is challenged when Europe aspires to become a power that might challenge transatlantic relations.

Concerning the EU assuming a more significant role, a consensus among experts points to the root causes of limited cooperation: a lack of political will (Interviews 2, 3, 6, 7 & 9), divergent threat perceptions, and inadequate defense funding (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 7, 9 & 10). At the core of this challenge lies a paradox: while member states require common standards to address disharmony, they simultaneously seek to preserve their autonomy in negotiating favorable deals elsewhere, perpetuating the status quo within the EU.

However, the Russo-Ukrainian War has starkly exposed another dimension of the problem. While the primary issue of the EU CSDP was perceived as a lack of political will before the war, the conflict revealed deficiencies in capabilities and capacities. European defence is characterised by shortcomings such as broken equipment, limited stockpiles, and a weak industrial base, hindering the ability to send materiel to the frontlines (Interviews 2, 9 & 10; Ministry of Defence 2023). Europe's prolonged enjoyment of peace dividends and variations in threat perceptions have contributed to insufficient investment (Interview 2). Differences in threat perceptions have also led to a lack of investment (Interview 6). There are two noteworthy trajectories among the Western nations, one for the short term and one for the long term. 80% of NATO defence spending comes from outside the EU: US, UK, and Turkey (Interviews 10 & 11), and since the Ukraine war, the eastern part of the alliance has stepped up more than the western (Interview 7). EU

member states have regularly missed the targets they have set for themselves. However, for a small country like Estonia, member states must start investing in defence (Interview 10). This underscores that, for a small member state, the actual defense potential resides within NATO.

Nevertheless, according to the insights from interviews, the EU is perceived to hold substantial potential in non-military realms. In this context, the supranational element takes on a decidedly positive aspect. The Union's strength lies in its capacity to act collectively on behalf of all member states, fostering cohesion. The EU's varied perspectives could be harmonised through the establishment of standards and guidelines for political actions. Consequently, experts view the EU primarily as a coordinating entity (e.g., Interview 12).

The opportunities for EU involvement are seen in the material dimension: the security of supply and the enhancement of military mobility (Interviews 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9 & 12). These opportunities have a clear neo-functional logic because of their insolvability on a national level (Costa & Brack, 2018). The Clingendael Report (Zandee, Deen, Kruijver, & Stoteman, 2020) highlighted that 'bolstering the supply chains' is vital for greater self-sufficiency, which many experts shared. The proposed solutions require regional cooperation for effectiveness and like-mindedness in threat perceptions. Hence, this also affects the political dimension.

The task of developing the defence industry and aligning stockpiles with practical needs is described as a complex problem that requires a collective response, suggesting a neo-functional solution. All progress in this sector is desired because it reduces uncertainty for smaller states. (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 7, 9 & 10) However, the EU's role, tied to coordination and enabling cooperation, still follows an intergovernmental logic. Thus far, there is no explicit plan on how to reimagine Europe's defence industry and ensure secure supply chains, potentially leading to new individual contracts and bilateral agreements.

In addressing the many issues of ensuring supply security, numerous concerns arise. For example, the EU has 17 different types of armoured vehicles, while the US has only one. However, addressing this is difficult because most countries have their

preferred or even national companies for investment, often creating a captured market for defence equipment. Selling Bradleys to Sweden, for example, is challenging as they already have their CV90s. On a broader scale, one can see multiple captured markets across the EU (Interview 10). A proposed solution is for the EU to negotiate joint procurement contracts with the defence industry to reduce the number of platforms in use.

Examining the military mobility initiative, this necessitates a European-level approach. As highlighted in the interviews, there is only a point in granting mobility between Estonia and Latvia if there is greater connectivity to Latvia, Lithuania, and beyond. The principle extends to tunnels and bridges, where every tank and vehicle should be able to access all corners of Europe. Here, greater cooperation can be seen. For example, the completion of Rail Baltica would be crucial to augment mobility between the Baltic States.

Delving into the direct military aspect of CSDP, the discourse on a possible EU Quick Reaction Force (QRF) emphasises its use and relation to NATO. NATO will remain the first response in territorial defence, with the EU QRF viewed as a tool to buy time for deciding on alternative solutions. Secondly, the EU QRF is not seen as complementary to NATO. Instead, it needs to be integrated into existing command structures. Thirdly, it was acknowledged that employing these forces allows member states to decide their preferred aegis, expanding the EU's options for crisis response. However, it is unclear how well they will be harmonised with NATO, impacting the willingness to deploy them.

Reflecting on the foregoing, there is a hazard in implementing deterrence by denial that arises due to the perception that the EU lacks credibility as a serious military actor. Within the NATO framework, the main trusted ally for Estonia is the United States, given its substantial capabilities. However, concerns arise due to the domestic political landscape of the United States, which might impact its will to act, especially if Trump regains power or if Trump Republicans manage to push US foreign policy to isolationism; in such a situation, effective support to Estonia would be in jeopardy. Consequently, dismissing the EU entirely is not an option, aligning with the perspectives of the experts.

4. Discussion

In the preceding theoretical chapter, we outlined the logic of deterrence, the power–security dilemma, the credibility of deterrence, and total defence. Within this conceptual framework, the forthcoming analysis will engage with the expert’s perspectives. Thus, this chapter will discuss Estonia’s assessment of Russia’s profile, the effectiveness and credibility of EU and NATO deterrence, and the dilemma between collective and individual defence.

The Impact of Russia's Imperialist Profile: A De-Escalatory Analysis

In summary, Estonia characterises Russia as offensive. Opting for deterrence by denial over deterrence by punishment in order to achieve collective defence, Estonia relies on NATO, and particularly on the United States. The EU is perceived as playing a secondary, supportive role. Still, tangible deliveries fall short of what was promised and what is needed to effectively counter an offensive Russia. In that regard, the key concerns revolve around the absence of the British brigade during peacetime and the yet-to-be-delivered air-defence platforms, highlighting critical gaps in Estonia’s deterrence capabilities.

This section brings out the foundational aspects of Western risk-avoidance, examining it through the power-security dilemma inherent in an anarchic international environment (Buzan, 1991). This distinction between perceiving Russia as offensive or defensive becomes critical, as Western caution towards Russia, especially if it is potentially seen as defensive, could hinder the provision of necessary deterrence measures for Estonia and the Baltic states. Indeed, the subsequent analysis will demonstrate that this perception translates into a model of the escalation ladder in which the West climbs with great caution.

According to the prevailing view in the West, the Russian Federation is perceived as having an offensive posture, the utmost signs of which reflected in the Kremlin’s ultimatums to the West in December 2021 before launching its attack against Ukraine and the international order in February 2022. However, these very demands also allow for an interpretation of Russia as a defensive power responding to lost areas of influence that it controlled during the Cold War to the gradual expansion

of NATO (e.g., Mearsheimer, 2022). The crucial aspect lies in how to interpret Russia's active pursuit of its imperialist legacy. Russia's ruling elite apparently continues to adhere to a mindset rooted in spheres of influence. In the Baltic states, and especially in Estonia, there is scant belief that Russia is defensive (see, e.g., Chapter 3). This interpretation is strongly related to the moral objection to the concept of spheres of influence. Regarding Russia as defensive presumes that it is a *de facto* empire with aspirations to recover the territories once under its historical control. From a Baltic perspective, the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin wall marked the end of occupation and therefore the beginning of true independence. Consequently, Russia's self-perception as an empire is an aberration – an anachronistic identity incompatible with the 21st-century Europe.

Therefore, in Estonia, a substantial majority perceives Russia's motives as offensive. This viewpoint implies two potential scenarios for Russia's actions in Ukraine: either it is an opportunistic offensive power reacting to external events and misreading the Western indecisiveness over Ukraine, or it is reacting to its inner trends, reflecting a diminishing power opts for an immediate attack rather than aspiring to grow its power in the future. From the latter standpoint, Russia may be seen as losing its relative strength in the future in economic, demographic, and political terms, leading to diminishing military capacities and capabilities. In this regard, if Russia is a revisionist state, it is acting as a declining revisionist.

Nevertheless, the practical behaviour of the West, and to some degree also Estonia, diverges from this perception. Namely, the West exercises caution regarding Russia and at least entertains the possibility of its defensive posture. Consequently, the power-security dilemma remains a relevant analytical tool in grasping this essential ambiguity in interpreting Russia's posture.

A more nuanced examination of Western and Estonian behaviours of the West as well as Estonia reveals intriguing indications of perceiving Russia as potentially defensive. Evidently, this is manifested in the desire to avoid escalation and maintain a reactive or moderate stance. This pattern is clearly discernible from the Western behaviour in at least three respects. Firstly, from the beginning of the 2022 aggression, the general Western position has been to refrain from getting directly involved in the war in Ukraine. Secondly, Ukraine is constrained by the conditionality of Western weapon deliveries, limiting its response to counterattacks

within the Ukrainian territory. Thirdly, the provision of weapons to Ukraine is insufficient, potentially undermining its chances of a decisive victory. This position of the West is most obviously underlined by the apprehension of Russian nuclear escalation. Of course, nuclear escalation is not unambivalent in its meaning. It may well be a part of a chicken game to deter potential interlopers. However, as the war has unfolded, Putin's initial mad man strategy exhausted its potential of surprise, and the persistent fear of nuclear escalation is even more strongly related to the interpretation of Russia's posture as defensive. The prospect of a nuclear attack is seen as a desperate last resort in defence, and Western avoidance of any such possible escalation speaks explicitly of the tacit belief that Russia may be compelled take a defensive position. This nuanced perspective suggests that, to a certain extent, the West (including Estonia) acts as though Ukraine is considered a legitimate sphere of interest for Russia, implicitly recognising a defensive stance.

Similarly, Estonia's elite also exercises self-constraint, both in the sense that it perceives that the conflict should be confined within the territory of Ukraine and Russia should not be given any reasons to think that its legitimate territory is threatened. Notably, Estonia's elite is also cognizant of the possibility of too much escalation *within* Ukraine, as evidenced by the reluctance to deliver fighter jets in 2022. This underscores the operation of the power-security dilemma in Estonia as well. While the elite predominantly views Russia as offensive, the recognition that Russia could potentially adopt a defensive stance is not entirely dismissed. The specific concern is prevent Russia from using its nuclear weapons. In essence, while Estonia's elite may not seriously entertain this possibility (given the predominantly offensive view of Russia), it is not completely excluded (acknowledging the potential for Russia to become defensive).

Nevertheless, crucial disparities exist in risk perceptions between Estonia and the West regarding deterrence. The Estonian elite appears to perceive Russia's position as being much more offensive way than their Western colleagues do. Consequently, the Estonian elite accepts a much higher degree of risk in supplying Ukraine with the essential weaponry needed to achieve an advantage over Russia. This stance also underscores a pointed critique directed at the West.

However, this Western interpretation does not imply that Russia is or even would become defensive. Western behaviour itself can be seen as inadvertently inviting an opportunistic and offensive Russia to attack Ukraine. As Oto et al argue (2023), Western policymakers have an entrenched tendency to 'buy down risk' and avoid escalation. In this regard, they argue that analysts and policymakers in the West may have facilitated some of President Putin's objectives. Russia's nuclear capability was stressed by the White House, and the United States reiterated that no US troops would get involved in the conflict. It also announced that military support to Ukraine would be limited to certain types of weapons to avoid an escalatory response from the Kremlin. Thus, long-standing, de-escalatory, and cautious responses to Russian provocations along its periphery and in the grey zone may have unintentionally created conditions conducive to Putin's adventurism in Ukraine (Oto et al., 2023).

At the same time, Russia's posture can also be reconsidered from an alternative perspective of deterrence theory. Namely, the prevalent view in Estonia relies on an assumption that Russia was properly deterred by the West from getting involved in Ukraine. However, this assumption itself can, at least logically, be questioned. For one, Bettina Renz stresses that Western deterrence never clearly extended to Ukraine (Renz, 2023). One could argue further that a kind of security vacuum was unintentionally created. The earlier notion of the Western tendency to 'buy down the risk' (Oto et al., 2023) becomes relevant here. It could be interpreted as a sort of invitation to the Kremlin to test its luck. Nonetheless, NATO deterrence, in its current state, still holds against Russia concerning the countries it covers. Consequently, Russia is still less likely to attempt an attack on any NATO member states. This interpretation views Russia as an opportunist offensive actor, justifying Estonia's reaction to Russian aggression in Ukraine by building much stronger defences.

Regardless of the diagnosis of Russia by applying the dilemma, the current structure of the US-European security apparatus appears inadequate to generate timely and credible resolve. This deficiency either signifies the perception that Putin is considered defensive or a failure to sufficiently heighten Putin's perception of risk to abandon an invasion if he were indeed offensive. In the latter scenario, well-

intentioned tendencies toward de-escalation and risk-aversion might inadvertently foster more serious challenges.

As a corollary, the entrenched Western risk-aversion may pose a threat to the swift and decisive establishment of deterrence by denial in the Baltic states.

Challenges to Achieving Deterrence by Denial in Estonia

There still exist other reasons why the transition from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial might not be swiftly possible in the Baltic states, independent of Russia's strategic posture. Three key impediments are elucidated herein: the absence of a fully developed geopolitical identity for Europe, isolationist leanings within the US including Trump's potential presidency, and enduring financial orthodoxies.

The absent geopolitical profile of Europe could obviously be imputed to the indirect manner that the European nations are impacted by the conflict. The perception that the conflict is peripheral hampers a collective European response. Paradoxically, the European Union would be ideally placed to act in the general European interest, strategically positioned, yet it lacks the authority to act for all in the matters of security and defence. It appears that the wider European public, as well as many elites, are oblivious to the stakes in Ukraine. The preservation of a rule-based security and economic order is imperiled, not only regionally but globally. The dwindling economic prosperity hinges on the fragile peace and stability that sustain the functionality of globalized value and supply chains. The current geopolitical turmoil poses a direct challenge to the foundations of international economic well-being.

The well-known European propensity to thrive on peace dividends is the most conspicuous culprit. As Howorth asserts, a tacit consensus emerged in since the end of the Cold War that considered interstate war as a nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon that had become unthinkable in the twenty-first century, a sentiment that became intertwined with the EU's self-perception as a 'normative power' (Howorth, 2023). The European mindset avoids thinking in geopolitical terms. Biscop has illustrated (Biscop, 2013, 2023a, 2023b) how collaborate defence

efforts would make Europe stronger and more reliable for its partners in the region as well as globally. This geopolitical approach could be extended to relationships with Russia, Turkey, Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and China (Biscop, 2023a). Europe faces a critical decision – whether it is preparing for peace or war (Howorth, 2023). Immediately after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the EU approved its Strategic Compass, promising significant advancements in the EU's security and defence policy. Despite its sharpened focus, i.e., a pledge for substantial increase in defence spending, it is uncertain whether it will entail a greater capacity to act, more strategic autonomy, or effective spending (Koenig, 2022).

Regarding the second issue, effective support to Ukraine, and implicitly to Estonia, may be in danger should a Trumpist victory be the result of the 2024 elections. Trump is well known for his unpredictable behaviour in his first term. He also showed a measured contempt towards his European allies. He has never been a staunch supporter of NATO and seems to reduce the transatlantic security collaboration to a simple 'pay for the service' logic. He has also deliberately undermined international trade agreements. However, the issue relates not only to Trump, but about to isolationist tendencies that characterise recent US international posture (Dodson & Brooks 2021). The difficult experiences from Afghanistan and Iraq that contributed to the rise of ISIS brought about measured fatigue in US foreign policy thinking. However, apart from that, isolationism is a recurring phenomenon in US foreign and security policy. Nevertheless, its repercussions could be existential for a country like Estonia, which shares a border with a revisionist Russia.

This potential issue with Trump, or more broadly, isolationism in the United States, underscores the importance of the EU for Estonia. Despite a notable disillusionment with the EU's strategic autonomy, the war in Ukraine has highlighted the EU's role in providing relevant financial, economic, and other support to the war effort. The most immediate aspect of European support that could be readily realised is military assistance, particularly leveraging the yet-to-be-established readiness of the European defence industry to provide the much-needed capabilities and capacities, both of arms and ammunition. While Estonia has this far relied mainly on third country arms production, EU capacities could prove highly relevant. Altogether, despite the bleak situation in European defence,

the opportunities are there, and most important of all, the need for common action is simply inescapable.

For the EU to maintain the rule-based security order in the region and globally, the member states must acknowledge their obligation of not allowing an economic lightweight like Russia to dominate the EU and the West as global economic heavyweights in military terms. The normative power of Europe does not seem to influence Russia. Therefore, the only viable option is to collectively ensure sufficient levels of weaponry and ammunition, complementing competent militaries. This approach could be effective if common standards are established, and common tenders are issued. Building on examples such as PESCO are crucial (Biscop, 2023). Small states industries could be included (Ploom et al., 2022). In conclusion, the EU and NATO should align their efforts. There is neither need nor time for divisions. The recent ambitious Military Strategy for Ukraine's Victory and Russia's Defeat demonstrates how Estonia's heightened awareness and leadership capabilities, emphasising the urgent need for joint action in the West, particularly in Europe (Ministry of Defence, 2023).

The third challenge is related to dominant financial thinking. In democracies, politicians, reliant on public support for re-election, may face resistance to allocating significantly larger portions of public budgets to defence. This predicament is exacerbated by dominant financial thinking. Europe has long preferred balanced budgets and has resorted to organising the European financial system around private financial markets. Likewise, the separation of the European Central Bank and national treasuries from their fiscal capacities complicated solving the Euro-crisis. Reinert and Kattel describe the system in terms of 'a single currency but segmented sovereign and private capital markets, no uniform deposit guarantee scheme and the absence of a real lender of last resort' (2013, p. 4). The commercial banking-centric system additionally has an inherent tendency to magnify the economic cycles (Bell, 2003). During booms, it tends to put an inflationary pressure on the economy, and during depressions, it pushes for austerity measures. Consequently, the current European financial system hinders the easy adoption of a counter-cyclical policy option, contributing to a self-constraining mindset that

does not allow an easy reallocation of budgetary priorities. Also, the solution of the Eurozone crisis can be said to have weakened the European cohesion (Ploom, 2014).

This section has elucidated additional impediments to the swift implementation of Estonia's chosen strategy or the challenges in bringing it to fruition. The ultimate security provider for Estonia has always been the United States, and while it must continue as the primary partner, potential issues may arise due to the mindset of its administration or a general weariness in international engagements. The alternative lies in Europe, but mobilising its defence industries has proven to be an immensely challenging task. Even if eventually successful, a European solution will unfold over long term. Therefore, Estonia must navigate and mitigate the risks associated with implementing the collective defence measures effectively.

Total Defence's Role in Mitigating Risks in Collective Defence

The aforementioned challenges indicate that the collective defense framework presents problems and risks for Estonia. Consequently, to offset these risks during the interim period, individual defence becomes crucial. Drawing from the Ukrainian experience, it becomes apparent that the concept and implementation of total defence will also be returning. Faced with the next 3-5 years and operating under the current financial limits and possible economic downturns, Estonia confronts a dilemma between securing its hoped-for collective deterrence by denial and the attempting to ensure some robust defence capabilities and capacities immediately by way of individual defence. Whereas individual defence can never fully substitute collective defence, the postponement of appropriate collective defense measures for Estonia, even by a couple of years, creates a security void.

Given the circumstances, the most prudent choice is to dedicate all available resources to independent defence, without compromising the development of collective defence enablers. Following the logic of the Ukraine war, however, a comprehensive approach is not the sole viable option. Due to the totality of war in Ukraine and its predominantly military character, a resurgence in the practice of total defence has occurred. Total defence will be oriented towards providing direct support to the military effort. Importantly, what makes the re-adoption of total defence affordable for Estonia is the inherent bias of Estonia's integrated defence

towards total defence, as evidenced by its previous defence strategy (Veebel and Ploom, 2018). Estonia's national strategic concept (*Julgeolekupuoliitika alused*) and its defence strategy (*Riigikaitse arengukava*) has remained strongly focused on military defence. The ratio between military and non-military expenses during the last 5-year period is one of 99:1 in favour of military expenses (RKAK, 2022).

It needs to be emphasised that comprehensive defence remains a necessity in the Baltic states, a lesson underscored by the Ukrainian experience. The intricacies of modern societies and economies render them exceptionally vulnerable. If the Baltic states aim to preserve even a portion of their territories pending the arrival of substantial allied forces, the resilience of their socio-economic structures becomes paramount. This involves, primarily, robust domestic energy production, reliable supplies and safeguarding critical infrastructure. Externally, vital seabed lines of communication – including information and energy – must be secured, along with the protection of essential economic routes.

However, the Russian war against Ukraine has underscored the imperative for elements of total defence. While comprehensive defence takes an all-encompassing view of security, attempting to provide for the availability and resilience of vital infrastructure and services for society, total defence envisions the entire society united behind the military's war effort (Veebel and Ploom, 2018). The tangible outcomes of these efforts and effects are evident in Ukraine.

Concerning terminological debates, comprehensive defence and territorial defence modes have been extensively debated and understood. There are also discussions regarding how defence models contribute to the NATO deterrence posture. Total defence, once viewed as an obsolete and unsuccessful concept from the 1930-1940s, was considered not due to its perceived costliness and inefficacy. Resilience, however, draws inspiration from total defence, with the reliance on quick and effective NATO deployments when necessary as e.g., at Defender 2020 exercise (Ploom et al., 2020).

Internal changes have introduced significant shifts in the outcomes of defense and deterrence activities. Notably, the local Russian-speaking population has witnessed

increased polarisation, with a significant faction still supporting Putin's imperialistic goals. Furthermore, all the Baltic states are currently hosting approximately 200,000 Ukrainian refugees, with Estonia alone receiving around 80,000. This influx brings added tensions, costs, and unpredictability. From the total defence perspective, it is important to quickly understand the identities of those individuals and what can be expected from them in a conflict situation and areas. Accordingly, internal security and integration assume a heightened role for regional stability and security.

Significant external changes are underway, with Finland already having joined NATO and Sweden moving closer to gaining membership. This development alleviates some pressure on Estonia and the other the Baltic states. Moreover, it facilitates a more intense and detailed exchange of information and knowledge between Estonia and Finland, extending to areas such as total defence. Finnish NATO membership has more than doubled the NATO-Russia border, adding 1,300 kilometres. This necessitates Russia to relocate a considerable share of its remaining military capabilities to the 'new NATO border'. Simultaneously, Finnish defence forces contribute significantly to NATO capabilities in the region, enhancing security the Baltic sky and expediting the deployment of naval and land-force capabilities if needed.

The swift developments regarding Nordic NATO accession have outpaced the adaptation of security strategies in the Baltic states. Two primary considerations emerge. First, the question arises as to whether Finnish membership will push Russia into a defensive position in the region, potentially prompting it to take desperate measures, or if it will mitigate Russia's offensive posture by filling the Nordic security vacuum with NATO presence of. Second, the integration of military capabilities in the Baltic states (national and eFP) and Finland forms a completely novel force package with its strengths and gains, accompanied by specific needs. Until Sweden has fully joined NATO, the Baltic Sea has yet to transform into a 'NATO lake' and A2/AD area. However, when such a transformation does occur, Russian reactions could also be anticipated.

Numerous unanswered questions loom over the concept total defence in the Baltic operational area, prompting contemplation about its benefits, sufficiency for the Baltic states, and the requisite political will and consensus. The path forward introduces further considerations: utilizing existing and realistic resources, or

establishing new budgetary limits? Clarification is needed regarding the expectations and contributions of different participants. The issue of social resilience emerges, prompting reflection on pursuing total defence individually or collaboratively with Baltic neighbors, Poland, and Finland. In the strategic landscape of 2023, is total defence a viable option for Estonia, and if so, does it stand alone or complement a credible multilateral deterrence posture? Crafting a security and defence strategy entails an internal balancing act, weighing the Defense League against regular units. Even within a total defence model, the need for coalition partners arises, prompting reflection on whether these partnerships should be multilateral or bilateral, supranational, or intergovernmental.

Regarding financial limits, Estonia's current allocation of 2.5% from GDP to defence may fall short of meeting both current and short-term needs. As highlighted above, little has been saved or invested for comprehensive defence needs. Accordingly, transitioning to a total defence model requires a social consensus about additional costs and commitments.

5. Conclusions

The Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022-2023 has rendered the earlier security strategies of the Baltic states outdated and obsolete, in terms of both strategic choices and actual implementation. The statements from Estonia's political and military elite underscore the inadequacy of the deterrence by punishment approach, which was once a cornerstone of Baltic security strategy. Faced with evolving risks and threats, existing capabilities are deemed insufficient for success. This dynamic security landscape necessitates the exploration of new solutions and the revitalisation of old alternatives in both internal and external dimensions.

The empirical evidence presented in this article highlights the perception by the Estonian security elite, which characterises Russia as offensive. This perception necessitates a replacement of previously effective deterrence by punishment to a deterrence by denial model. In terms of organisational reliance, NATO, and

implicitly the United States, emerge as a key players, while the EU is viewed with disillusionment as a military actor. Despite this, a supportive role is still foreseen for the EU. However, the article reveals a discrepancy between promised support and actual deliveries by allies. Notably, concerns arise over the British brigade's non-residence in Estonia during peacetime, necessitating deployment during conflict, and an inadequacy of sufficient of air-defence platforms.

The choices and challenges in applying the new strategy are intricately tied to various factors shaping the geopolitical landscape. The risk-avoiding mentality of the West plays a pivotal role, and the article delves into the underlying reasons. The actual behaviour of the West can be explained through a dilemma whereby Russia is not treated as an offensive actor but potentially a defensive one. Several considerations were engaged with to confirm this assertion. However, there are also other conditions that limit the application of deterrence by denial in Estonia, including the absent geopolitical profile of the EU, as it has relied on peace dividends and on normative power, the isolationist tendencies in the United States and the potential risk of Trump administration, and entrenched financial orthodoxies especially in Europe that further limit decisive the ability to swiftly allocate substantial resources for defence from national budgets to respond to an evolving situation.

The need for Europe to step into a more significant geopolitical role is evident, especially considering the potential challenges associated with sole reliance on the United States. Estonia may find itself in a position where it has to advocate for a more active European role, overcoming the fears of supranationalism in the pursuit of collective effort. In the short term, this involves catalysing European defence industries to produce essential resources for Ukraine.

While Europe's readiness to become a military actor may still be in development, the dilemma between collective and individual defence becomes more pronounced. In the absence of immediate collective defence solutions, individual defence emerges as a potential solution. Along these lines, the value of total defence as an alternative option is also brought into consideration. This strategic flexibility becomes all the more crucial as Estonia navigates the complex landscape of shifting geopolitical dynamics.

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