# Europe's Unfinished Architecture: Who is Prepared for the Next Security Shock?

Vladimir Putin's frustration with Russia's setbacks in Ukraine has not overshadowed his long-standing interest in undermining NATO's cohesion. On the contrary, there are growing concerns that this may now be the moment Moscow finds suitable for a limited, ambiguous hostile act against a NATO member, designed to probe whether the Alliance would respond collectively. Such an operation could involve a small-scale, deniable military incident or a multi-domain provocation that generates sufficient violence and confusion to constitute an armed attack while preserving plausible deniability.

Yet Allied assessments of the likelihood that Russia will pursue such a course vary widely. In the Baltic states, policymakers and society treat the possibility of Russian aggression as high and actively prepare for it, discussing these risks openly in daily life. However, in much of southern and western Europe, the idea that Russia might attack a NATO country is viewed as unrealistic or overstated.

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Whether Russia might attempt to strike a NATO member to test the Alliance's credibility, and what would guide the Kremlin's calculus in deciding whether such a move is worth the risks, remain open questions. What shapes Putin's assessment of escalation and de-escalation remains one of the most contested debates in global security today. Some argue that accommodating Russia's demands in Ukraine will satisfy Putin's ambitions and

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turn him into a constructive player. Others maintain that only a clear Russian defeat in Ukraine can prevent further aggression in Europe.

The answer depends on which European and transatlantic decision-making structures are prepared to recognize that such an attack would require a decisive response. If analysts focus only on conventional invasions or missile strikes on European capitals, escalation by Russia may appear irrational at this moment. But if the attack scenario involves cross-domain pressure, calibrated ambiguity, and gradual escalation toward a military incident, the outcome instead depends on the clarity of Allied red lines, the strength of military and civil preparedness, the resilience of societies under psychological pressure, and the extent to which Europe completes its unfinished security architecture before the next security shock arrives.

We should, therefore, turn to recent history, be-

ginning with Russia's 2008 war against Georgia and its successive acts of aggression against Ukraine since 2014, as cases where deterrence failed to prevent the use of force and contrast them with the Baltic states, where deterrence has held so far. Taken together, these cases crystallize a central puzzle. Why did the Kremlin judge that it could attack Georgia and later Ukraine, yet refrain from similar action against Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania? If deterrence has worked in the Baltics to date, what has changed in the strategic and political environment that fuels growing fears of a possible Russian move against them?

## Europe's Unfinished Security Architecture

Europe's eastern flank is entering a strategic turning point. Russian aggression, both military and hybrid, has forced front-line states to reconsider

whether deterrence by punishment alone can still guarantee security, or whether the region now requires sustained, defense-centered deterrence by denial. The question is not only what Russia might do next, but what kind of European and transatlantic architecture will confront that challenge. Europe clearly needs readiness and resolve, yet the design of its future security structure remains unresolved.

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At the heart of this problem lies a deep strategic uncertainty. Every sound strategy rests on explicit and shared assumptions. In the European case, many of the most basic assumptions remain contested or undefined. Will the United States remain the central security guarantor for Europe in the coming decade? If yes, in what form and with what political and military commitments? If not, who will shape the new European security architecture and how? What exactly does European defense mean in institutional terms? Does it encompass only the European Union and its member states, or does it also include the United Kingdom and other non-EU Allies within a broader constellation of actors? Who is setting the principles and institutional frameworks of this emerging architecture, at which decision-making tables, and through which political processes?

As Russian aggression continues to evolve, frontline states must decide whether or not to rely primarily on the threat of overwhelming retaliation or to invest much more heavily in deterrence by denial; that is, in making their territories and societies extremely difficult to coerce or subdue. The answer depends on the interaction of military capability, political signaling, societal resilience, and alliance cohesion. To understand how these ele-

ments come together in practice, we should first examine the evolving posture in the Baltic region and the debate on European strategic autonomy within the broader Euro Atlantic framework; second, we can turn to the case of Georgia and ask what the failures of deterrence in 2008 can tell us about current vulnerabilities and options for Ukraine, the Baltic Sea region and for Europe as a whole.

## Posture and Decision-Making on the Baltic Frontline

Debates about the Baltic posture now unfold inside a transforming transatlantic context. The new United States National Security Strategy and the surrounding commentary mark a clear shift in how Washington conceives alliances. Clearly visible is the emphasis on sovereign power as the central organizing principle of foreign policy, and a deliberate reframing of Europe away from its long-standing supranational political project, up to and including an explicit disregard for or marginalization of the European Union as a strategic actor. These elements reveal a multilateral worldview centered on sovereign nation-states and transactional bilateralism, consciously detached from the normative and institutional frameworks that previously underpinned the liberal international order. For European allies, especially those on the eastern flank, this raises a fundamental problem. They can no longer assume that the United States' power will automatically anchor deterrence in the Baltic region as before.

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At the same time, Russia is not a static or permanently weakened actor. The war in Ukraine has imposed severe costs but has also driven a large-scale mobilization of resources and the militarization of the economy. The Russian budget for 2025 envisioned military spending accounting for approximately 40% of total state expenditure, a historically high level. The same 40% is true for the 2026 state budget. Most assessments suggest that Moscow intends to rebuild and modernize its armed forces by 2030, drawing on combat experience, large-scale production of drones and missiles, and lessons from high-intensity warfare. If Russia can stabilize the front in Ukraine on terms it deems acceptable and then return a reconstituted, battle-tested army to the eastern flank, the risk picture for the Baltic region will look very different from the assumption that Russia is too weak to threaten NATO territory.

These trends intersect with an ambitious but still incomplete European adaptation. The White Paper for European Defense and the Readiness Roadmap 2030 outline plans to move the European pillar from chronic underinvestment to a posture of genuine readiness. The White Paper presents a once-in-a-generation surge in defense investment under the ReArm Europe plan, aimed at closing critical capability gaps, rebuilding ammunition stocks, and establishing a strong and sufficient European defense posture by 2030, explicitly linked to support for Ukraine and the credibility of the transatlantic bargain. The Readiness Roadmap translates this into concrete flagship projects, such as the Eastern Flank Watch, the European Drone Defense Initiative, the European Air Shield, and the European Space Shield, all intended to strengthen situational awareness, air and missile defense, and the resilience of critical infrastructure, with particular relevance for the Baltic region.

Yet, these documents also expose the central dilemma of European strategic autonomy. If the

United States remains engaged in Europe with substantial conventional and nuclear forces, these initiatives reinforce NATO and provide better burden sharing. If the United States' conventional presence is reduced or redirected, the same initiatives would have to serve as substitutes, at least in part, for the United States' strategic capabilities. That would mean Europeans not only spending more on national forces, but also assuming responsibility for long-range strikes, high-end air power, strategic transport, theatre missile defense, large-scale command and control, and the industrial base required to sustain a prolonged crisis in the Baltic area.

For the Baltic states, the practical question, therefore, is not abstract support for "more Europe" but whether the evolving European architecture can produce real capabilities, credible planning, and timely decision-making. The new roadmaps and white papers show that Brussels recognizes the scale of the challenge and is trying to inject coherence into defense industrial policy, procurement, and readiness. At the same time, foreign and security policy inside the European Union remains largely consensus-based with complex procedures and national veto points. As the failed deterrence in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrates, in a cross-domain crisis involving calibrated Russian pressure against the Baltic region, when the aggressor moves at lightning speed, slow and contested decision-making would itself become a major vulnerability.

These variables and uncertainties compel the Baltic states to invest all available resources in comprehensive defense strategies that extend beyond traditional military planning. In addition to strengthening hard capabilities, Baltic governments are developing programs that integrate societal preparedness into national defense. This involves preparing societies to defend their countries if necessary, communicating existing threats clearly so that public opinion is adequately in-

formed and fostering citizen willingness to support sustained investment in defense arrangements. A recent example of this approach is Latvia's ambition to become a drone powerhouse in Europe. The initiative aims not only to expand national and regional unmanned aerial capabilities but also to develop education, industrial partnerships, workforce training, and civic engagement in technology and defense innovation. This reflects a broader understanding that modern deterrence and defense require both advanced capabilities and resilient societies prepared to respond collectively to an increasingly complex security environment.

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In this setting, the debate about a European army functions as a proxy for deeper questions rather than as an immediate institutional project. A fully unified army would require pooling sovereignty over the use of force to a degree that few member states currently accept, even on the frontline. In practice, given the scarcity of material and human resources, the likely path for the Baltic region is more incremental and more hybrid. It will rely on denser integration of national forces, framework nation concepts, forward-deployed units, and joint projects funded through European instruments, all nested within NATO planning. Whether this will be enough to deter a Russia that has rebuilt its forces and faces a more fragmented NATO and a transactional United States is precisely the uncertainty that raises the stakes and motivates a comparison with the cases of Georgia and Ukraine.

## The Georgian Case of Failed Deterrence

The war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 was the first major test for Western deterrence and resolve after the Cold War and it revealed how quickly uncertainty, indecision, and unpreparedness can be turned into an opportunity for aggression. For Moscow, the conflict demonstrated that a calibrated use of force could alter borders, establish new facts on the ground, and still avoid a decisive Western military response. For Georgia, it marked a painful demonstration that political assurances without clear and credible guarantees do not deter a determined adversary.

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The August war did not appear out of nowhere. It arose from a prolonged period of tension over the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Abkhazia, combined with Russia's growing discomfort with Georgia's westward orientation. In the months before the conflict, Russia increased its presence in and around the separatist regions, conducted large exercises close to Georgian territory, and used strong rhetoric to frame Tbilisi as the source of instability.

A central turning point was the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008. Allies agreed that Georgia and Ukraine would become members in the future, but could not agree on a Membership Action Plan. The result was an ambiguous formula that signaled political support while withholding a concrete path or security guarantees. From Moscow's perspective, this mixture of promises and hesitation suggested that Georgia was important enough to provoke political debate, but not important enough to

trigger a firm and unified response if Russia used force. That impression, combined with unresolved conflicts on the ground, limited Georgian military capacity, and total absence of societal mobilization and engagement practices, encouraged the belief that a short, sharp intervention would be manageable.

The fighting lasted only a few days, yet the strategic effects have been long-lasting. Russian forces pushed Georgian units out of the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, advanced into other parts of Georgia, and paralyzed key elements of its defense infrastructure. Shortly after the ceasefire, Russia recognized Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia as independent states and entrenched its military presence there. For Georgia, this meant a permanent loss of control over parts of its territory and a constant security pressure along new dividing lines.

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Equally important were the political signals. The absence of any meaningful response from NATO and the European Union confirmed to Moscow that the costs of this operation would remain limited. Western governments condemned the intervention and launched symbolic diplomatic and economic measures. Still, the basic structure of the European security order insulated this clear act of military aggression as an isolated incident between the two neighbors. But the message the Kremlin received was loud and clear: limited use of force, combined with psychological warfare and sowing uncertainty through strong narratives about protecting compatriots and restoring order, could reshape the security environment without provoking a united and decisive response from the Euro-Atlantic community.

## From Georgia to Ukraine and Beyond

The failure to deter Russia in Georgia became a stepping stone to the next phase of its strategy. Six years later, in 2014, Russia seized Crimea and fueled war in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Once again, it used a blend of covert action, rapid military moves, and political narratives to present its intervention as a response to local grievances and Western encroachment. The pattern that had worked in Georgia was adapted to a much larger and more complex target.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represented another qualitative leap. It showed that the Kremlin was willing to gamble on a major war in Europe to reassert its influence in its neighborhood. At each stage, the prior failure of deterrence lowered the perceived risks of the next step and encouraged raising the stakes even further. Georgia demonstrated that a limited war on the periphery could be tolerated. The attack on Ukraine in 2014 showed that salami tactics and ambiguous forces could be managed. The attack on Ukraine in 2022 tested whether a much larger use of force would still elicit a fragmented response.

The same logic underpins concerns about the future. If Russia concludes that it can secure gains in Ukraine, or at least avoid a clear defeat, the next rational step in its strategy is to test NATO's credibility. Such a test is unlikely to begin with tanks rolling openly into a Baltic capital. It is far more plausible that it would start with a cross-domain scenario in a border region with a large Rus-

sian-speaking population, combining disinformation, internal unrest, cyberattacks, pressure on infrastructure, and a staged incident involving unidentified armed groups or limited strikes on Allied territory. In other words, something very similar to the scenarios successfully rehearsed in Georgia and Ukraine.

## Lessons for European Deterrence

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The Georgian case and its lead into Ukraine speak directly to the Baltic context. It shows that political ambiguity, hesitant decision-making, and incomplete preparedness invite probing and escalation. It illustrates that declarations of eventual support are insufficient unless they are backed by actionable security guarantees that include visible forces, integrated planning, and clear strategic communication. It also demonstrates that once an adversary learns that aggression carries manageable costs, it is likely to apply the same method again in new forms and against new targets.

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For the Baltic states, the central question is whether they can avoid repeating the sequence experienced by Georgia and Ukraine. Membership in NATO and the European Union provides formal guarantees that Georgia lacked. Yet, the underlying variables that shaped Moscow's choices in 2008 and later in Ukraine remain: perceptions of allied cohesion, clarity of red lines, readiness

of national forces, and resilience of societies under pressure. The lesson from Georgia and from the path that led from Georgia to Ukraine is that deterrence cannot tolerate prolonged uncertainty and hesitation. If Russia emerges victorious in Ukraine, or even manages to save face and find an off-ramp without paying a clear price for its aggression, the next arena for testing the Euro-Atlantic architecture will almost certainly be the regions where that architecture is most exposed, which makes the entire Eastern frontline central to any serious discussion of Europe's unfinished security architecture.

The lesson from Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 is that Russia advances when deterrence hesitates, when allies disagree on red lines, and when societies are unprepared for the political, informational, and military pressures that precede open conflict. At every stage, Moscow has acted not out of overwhelming strength but out of confidence that the response to its aggression would be fragmented, delayed, or constrained by ambiguity.

Whether or not such a test succeeds against NATO depends on the choices made now. The Baltic region is preparing with urgency, building comprehensive defense models that integrate societal resilience, territorial defense, and forward posture. Europe is reshaping its defense industrial and organizational landscape, albeit too slowly. The United States remains indispensable, yet increasingly unpredictable in its long-term commitments. Meanwhile, Russia, far from being permanently weakened, is rebuilding its forces, production lines, and ambitions for the coming decade.

History shows that the Kremlin exploits the moments when the West is uncertain about itself. The question that hangs over Europe today is simple. When the next security shock arrives, whether through a staged incident, a hybrid strike, or an escalation that tests NATO's credibility, will Eu-

rope respond with clarity, unity, and force, or will it relive the pattern that began in the Caucasus and expanded across the Black Sea? The answer will determine not only Russia's behavior but also whether Europe's unfinished security architecture can withstand the pressures already gathering on its eastern horizon ■