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Russia's aerial incursions in the Baltic: A rehearsal for war

Maria Martisiute

INTRODUCTION

Russia's repeated violations of NATO airspace in the Baltic region and Romania in September 2025 mark a shift towards a more offensive posture. These strategic moves follow Russian President Vladimir Putin's diplomatic and military successes at the Alaska Summit¹ and ZAPAD-2025 exercises.²

The instantaneous reversal of the US position on Ukraine ceasefire and sanctions – central demands of Europe and the *raison d'être* of the Alaska summit – convinced Putin that he has more leverage over US President Donald Trump than Europe does. The joint ZAPAD-2025³ military exercises with Belarus, although reduced in scope, battle-tested Russian warfighting readiness against NATO's eastern flank. The use of drones and nuclear-capable Oreshnik missiles, scheduled for deployment to Belarus later this year, confirmed for Russia that it could expand its military presence on NATO's borders and fight its war in Ukraine at the same time.⁴

NATO should back calls from Czechia, Poland and Sweden and announce a clear, alliance-wide decision to adapt its rules of engagement on the shoot down of aerial intruders.

Moscow has wasted no time probing NATO's military preparedness and political resolve. This is deeply concerning given cuts in US support to the Baltic states⁵ and Europe more broadly,⁶ and warnings that Russia may attack NATO before 2030.⁷ NATO responded by scrambling forces and launching the Eastern Sentry activity, while the European Commission put forward the "drone wall" initiative to bolster eastern defences.

Against the backdrop of Russia's repeated airspace violations, NATO faces pressing choices. Its room for manoeuvre – legal, political and military – is now under discussion in both NATO and the EU. This policy brief argues that unless NATO and the EU take composed but forceful action, Russian aerial violations in the Baltic region risk escalation – with possible fatalities.⁸

BACKGROUND: EVENTS AND FIRST RESPONSES

NATO allied forces intercepted Russian drones and warplanes over Poland and Estonia in September 2025. In response, NATO and the EU launched the Eastern Sentry⁹ and the EU put forward its "drone wall"¹⁰ proposal, both designed to bolster Europe's defences, particularly NATO's eastern flank.

Eastern Sentry is a multi-domain activity that merges conventional capabilities with emerging technologies, involving contributions from allies including the UK and France and others. The EU's "drone wall" initiative, drawing on Ukraine's battlefield experience, aims to establish a multi-layered drone defence system integrating radars, sensors, cameras, radio-frequency detectors and other technologies along the EU's eastern borders.¹¹

With significant gaps persisting in NATO's deterrence and defence, these steps are long overdue.¹² For more than three years, NATO's eastern borders have been exposed to Russia's war in Ukraine, with occasional spillover into allied territory since 2022.¹³

Divided reactions among allies

Following Estonia's request for allied consultations under Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, NATO condemned Russia's actions as "reckless," described its response as "quick and decisive" and pledged to use "all necessary military and non-military tools" to defend the alliance.¹⁴

Behind the joint statement, however, divisions persist over the appropriate response. Poland,¹⁵ Czechia¹⁶ and Sweden¹⁷ advocate the shootdown of Russian objects entering their airspace, with or without warning. Warsaw went a step further, amending a national law to permit strikes on Russian objects over Ukraine to prevent entry into Polish territory.¹⁸ Germany, in contrast, urges restraint,¹⁹ while Spain declined to authorise its fighters to strike Russian aircrafts in Lithuania.²⁰ Finnish President Alexander Stubb advised "not to overreact but be firm, because the only thing Russia understands is power."²¹

Divergences in allied viewpoints are as old as NATO itself, but in the face of a common adversary, it makes the alliance appear feeble and exposes the eastern flank to greater pressure. If NATO is to change Russia's behaviour, it may ultimately need to align more closely with the eastern flank's calls for shootdowns. As Edward Lucas observed in the context of recent incursions into Estonia, "if I stamp on your toe, I have not attacked your toe, I attacked you."²²

NATO must prevent a drone swarm by preparing the legal and operational basis for strikes on origin nodes. For instance, the alliance could strike "Russia-linked ships" in the Baltic Sea or nodes in Belarus if evidence shows imminent launches.

STATE OF PLAY

NATO Rules of Engagement

NATO's position to Russian aerial incursions is guided by its confidential Rules of Engagement (RoE), which follow an escalation ladder: radio warnings, visual cues, escort and the use of force – a last resort except in cases of self-defence. These parameters allow NATO to assess situations in real time and calibrate its response in proportion to the threat, intent, and risk involved.²³

The rules are agreed by consensus and are implemented under the authority of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).²⁴ However, they do not prevent national armed forces acting independently.²⁵ This explains why some, notably Poland,²⁶ have opted to tighten their national rules and act bilaterally rather than wait for NATO to adapt.

Fear of Escalation vs. Forceful Action

It is compelling to see why some allies urge caution, warning that Russian aerial incursions are provocations designed to lure NATO into Russia's "escalation trap."²⁷ With a full-scale war in Europe, the risks of miscalculation are high, and fears of confrontation run deep. From this perspective, restraint seems prudent.

Yet fears of escalation are hardly new. Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling has shaped Western Europe's military aid policy since 2022, evident in the hesitation to send tanks, F-16 fighter jets, Patriots, or long-range missiles to Ukraine.²⁸ Russian threats proved hollow with each delivery of a higher-grade weapon to Ukraine. Today, as Russian assets test NATO airspace, the Kremlin threatens war if its aircraft is shot down.²⁹

But as Admiral Rob Bauer, former Chair of NATO Military Committee, noted at the event of the EPC, "fear cannot be a strategy."³⁰ Indeed, failing to act decisively today risks emboldening Moscow further in at least five ways:

- 1. Impunity invites repetition.** If Russia faces no consequences for aerial incursions, what is the incentive for the Kremlin to stop them? Indeed, it seems that aerial incursions in Poland and Estonia are only the tip of the iceberg, with similar incidents reported in Denmark,³¹ Norway,³² Germany,³³ Alaska,³⁴ near Latvia.³⁵
- 2. NATO's eastern flank faces major gaps** in air defence and counter-drone capacities.³⁶ In recent incidents, NATO used multimillion-euro weapons systems to shoot down cheap Russian drones over Poland³⁷ – a disparity that Moscow is keen to exploit. Neither can NATO realistically intercept or inspect every object if Russia floods its airspace, risking mass casualties.³⁸
- 3. Russia's war against Ukraine continues unabated,** with military reconstitution,³⁹ new recruits since July 2025,⁴⁰ and one of the highest conscription drives in years in autumn 2025.⁴¹ Moscow openly describes itself as at war with the West⁴² – a view that reflects its foreign policy thinking.⁴³ As former US Ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder describes, Europe's inaction and failure to make Russian aggression costly on Russia is a mistake.⁴⁴
- 4. The Alaska summit emboldened Putin.** As Daalder,⁴⁵ James Sherr, Honorary Fellow at the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS)

in Tallinn and Associate Fellow at Chatham House,⁴⁶ and others⁴⁷ argue, Putin's red-carpet welcome to America as a partner and friend was a win for Putin and snub to Europe. This likely reinforced Moscow's confidence that Trump would undermine Europe's collective defence.

5. Russia's ZAPAD-2025 exercises tested warfighting capacity acquired in Ukraine in pursuit of its broader goal of dismantling the post-Cold War security order.⁴⁸ Although the exercise was smaller in scale than previous iterations, analysts at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) observed that the scaled-down format reflects tactical adaptation, enabling Russia to maintain a protracted war.⁴⁹

POLICY PROSPECTS: FOUR AREAS FOR ACTION

An emboldened Russia will keep intimidating the alliance unless NATO's deterrence is restored to the point that Moscow begins to respect NATO's red lines. NATO and the EU must stay calm but take risks in four areas before Russia's conduct risks fatalities on NATO soil.⁵⁰ NATO itself has warned that Russian hybrid attacks could cause "substantial" casualties.⁵¹

First – restore NATO credibility by pairing deterrence with warfighting readiness on Nordic, Baltic and Arctic frontlines

Many in Moscow read the Alaska summit as a weakening of NATO deterrence, with Trump in effect conceding Europe to Russia. ZAPAD-2025 gave Russia a better idea of what is required to sustain operations on two fronts – in Ukraine and the Baltic. NATO should treat aerial breaches as rehearsals for war and pair deterrence with higher warfighting readiness on the Nordic, Baltic and Arctic frontlines.⁵² Upgrading NATO Baltic Air Policing⁵³ into a NATO Air Defence Mission with warfighting capability, is one possibility. Developing Baltic air defences or integrating them into a Baltic-Nordic air force would be another first step.

Second – adapt NATO rules of engagement on shoot-down of aerial intruders

NATO should back calls from Czechia,⁵⁴ Poland⁵⁵ and Sweden⁵⁶ and announce a clear, alliance-wide decision to adapt rules of engagement so that NATO will shoot down flying intruders. A forceful, principled allied position would strengthen deterrence. After a period of indifference to airspace violations,⁵⁷ Trump signalled support in the margins of the September 2025 UN General Assembly for shootdown options.⁵⁸ Although Trump is notorious for changing his mind, the US position was immediately noted in Poland⁵⁹ and may encourage allies to align. Locking in a trigger would send Moscow an unambiguous message. Russia respects strength and exploits weakness; firm boundaries would restore NATO's credibility and force the Kremlin to calculate

costs differently. As Jaanika Merilo, Visiting Lecturer at the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences put it, "each hostile act should trigger a penalty."⁶⁰

Shootdown also makes sense in light of the escalation ladder. Russia clearly breached international rules in Estonia, where armed MiG-31s jets violated airspace for 12 minutes in radio silence⁶¹ – a clear escalation of threat.

But the political and military risks are considerable. NATO is a consensus-based intergovernmental organisation; any change in rules of engagement requires North Atlantic Council agreement based on military advice.⁶² Moreover, the shootdown carries risks for allied forces, civilians and infrastructure. It could also prompt Russia to retaliate by opening-fire, a security crisis that could spiral into open conflict.

Proportionality also matters, particularly when using lethal force. MiG-31s were not engaged in Estonia because they posed no immediate threat⁶³ and complied once escorted by Italian F-35s.⁶⁴ Responsibility for using lethal force lies with the national authority whose aircraft are involved⁶⁵ – raising questions about allied unity if Russia retaliates directly against that state.

Despite these risks, the alliance cannot afford ambiguity. Declaring that its borders will be defended, and acting assertively, is the surest way to deter further incursions.

Third – prevent a drone swarm by preparing legal and operational basis for strike on origin nodes

NATO must prevent a scenario in which Russia overwhelms Eastern Sentry with massed swarms of drones and other lethal objects and reach Berlin, Paris and Brussels. If hundreds of lethal objects were to cross the eastern flank, it is unlikely that NATO could intercept or inspect every object. This could lead to fatalities on NATO soil.

To forestall such a scenario, the alliance should assess the political, military and legal feasibility of striking launch nodes and bases that reliably originate lethal assets as an act of self-defence under narrow conditions. NATO's senior military leadership has flagged this logic: As Admiral Rob Bauer described at an EPC event in November 2024, "it is smarter not only to shoot the arrows, but also to attack the archer."⁶⁶

International law permits anticipatory measures if the threat is "instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means and no moment for deliberation."⁶⁷ Michael Walz's just war theory likewise emphasises "an obvious intention to do injury; active preparations that turn that intention into a positive danger; and a situation in which the risk of defeat will be greatly increased if the fight was delayed."⁶⁸ This means that if there was evidence of an imminent attack, the alliance may preemptively strike targets in self-defence. Of course, any strike in self-defence must meet the legal tests of necessity and proportionality:

“Self-defence would warrant only measures which are proportional to the armed attack and necessary to respond to it.”⁶⁹

Operationally, the option is becoming more conceivable. NATO is acquiring deeper precision-strike capabilities.⁷⁰ For instance, the alliance could strike “Russia-linked ships”⁷¹ in the Baltic Sea if intelligence indicated that an unusually high number of drones was about to be launched against NATO. It could also strike nodes in Belarus⁷² if evidence showed imminent launches from Belarusian military bases towards NATO. Seeing its assets or an ally’s military bases taken out by NATO would shift Russia’s calculus.

But the risks are acute. First, there is no guarantee that such strikes would deter Russia rather than escalate. Belarus’s security treaty ties to Russia⁷³ complicate this political-military calculus. Second, even lawful acts of self-defence can be perceived as aggression, as historical cases show: For instance, Israel was first to use force against Egypt in the Six Day War of 1967 and appeared to be the aggressor despite high-level threats from Egypt.⁷⁴ Third, achieving the North Atlantic Council consensus required for such actions will be difficult.

Fourth - deepen NATO and EU defence integration with Ukraine

It is in NATO’s and the EU’s interest to deepen defence integration with Ukraine. Kyiv’s decision to grant Poland access to Ukrainian systems that track incoming drones⁷⁵ offers a practical blueprint for deploying NATO’s integrated air and missile defence systems (IAMD)⁷⁶ in Western Ukraine. This data and systems sharing would allow interception of Russian aerial assets over Ukraine, speed allied responses to attacks on NATO and strengthen Ukraine.

The bloc must turbocharge the European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB), scrap lengthy processes and integrate Ukraine’s defence industry in priority areas such as air defence, electronic warfare and deep strike - conditional on Kyiv making agreed reforms.

The EU should also treat the crisis as a national and European emergency. It is untenable that the EU’s defence instruments such as Security Action for Europe (SAFE) and the European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP) take so long to implement in wartime conditions. The bloc must turbocharge the European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB), scrap lengthy processes and integrate Ukraine’s defence industry in priority areas such as air defence, electronic warfare and deep strike – conditional on Kyiv making agreed reforms. Co-production with Ukraine’s battle-tested manufacturers is already in demand: a dozen of EU member-states are exploring joint procurement under the EU’s instrument of Security Action for Europe (SAFE), the eastern flank plans to build a “drone alliance” with Ukraine,⁷⁷ while Denmark is preparing to host Ukrainian production on its own soil as soon as December 2025.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

NATO and the EU are only as strong as their ability to stay firm and united in the face of an adversary. Russia’s incursions into European airspace add a fresh escalation to its already dangerous war of aggression against Ukraine.

The alliance must reinforce the eastern defences and make clear to emboldened Russia that violations of airspace carry consequences. NATO and the EU must refuse to compromise allied security, integrate with Ukraine and adapt policy so it meets the moment of rising threats.

If NATO fails to act forcefully now, when will it?

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