

MILITARY AND POLITICAL COOPERATION BETWEEN GERMANY AND LITHUANIA IN THE LATE 2010s TO EARLY 2020s

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Since the mid-2010s, Germany has significantly adjusted its approaches to the use of the Bundeswehr, pivoting its strategic focus from regions distant from the Euro-Atlantic community to those within or near it. This has underscored the pressing need to address issues related to securing steadfast allies in Eastern Europe and enhancing cooperation with them. This article aims to explore the current evolution of German-Lithuanian relations in both political and military domains. The approach of Germany to the factor of historical memory is demonstrated, along with its aspiration to position itself as the defender of Lithuanian national sovereignty. Yet, there was a notable lack of strategic focus from Germany towards Lithuania in the early 21st century, contributing to a decline in bilateral relations in 2014 and 2015. Amid the confrontation between the 'Western democracies' and Russia, Germany adopted a strategy of gradually but steadily increasing pressure on the opponent. The perception of this approach by Lithuanian elites has shifted from negative in the mid-2010s to increasingly positive as Germany has become more involved in deterrence of Russia. This article explores the process of the Bundeswehr troops' deployment and buildup up to having constituted the 'core' of a multinational brigade in Lithuania under NATO's mandate. The study focuses on the impact of military cooperation on political collaborations, as illustrated by the case of the B3 + 1 format, which has brought together high-ranking public officials from the three Baltic states and Germany since 2018. It is concluded that Germany has developed a dependence on Lithuania, driven by the increased desire of the former state to maintain the latter as a reliable junior partner.

Keywords:

Germany, Lithuania, Baltic states, historical memory, confrontation, NATO, Forward Presence Force, Bundeswehr, military presence, negotiation formats, interstate dialogue

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Germany has consistently pursued the goal of becoming a global power. However, by the early 2020s, this objective had not been achieved. During the decade spanning from 2014 to 2023,

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Germany underwent radical shifts in its foreign policy priorities, especially concerning its military engagement. Germany scaled back its strategic involvement outside the Euro-Atlantic community, particularly in regions of instability such as the Near and Middle East and North Africa. These areas had been focal points for Bundeswehr operations since the 2000s. Instead, Germany significantly increased its military presence within and around the community of 'Western democracies', primarily as a means of deterring Russia. This shift in focus involved heightened Bundeswehr activity in NATO's forward zone of responsibility, with particular emphasis on the Baltic states [1, p. 3–5]. The confrontation with Russia has become the key component of German participation in the deterrence of the most active non-Western powers in general (also China [2, p. 266–272] and Iran).

This shift in emphasis has entailed a reevaluation of tactics rather than a revision of the ultimate goal — the establishment of a global strategic presence. Since its creation in 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) has been a part of the community of 'Western democracies'. However, this longstanding affiliation took on new significance in the mid-2010s. Germany sought to compensate for the weakening of its positions outside the Western sphere of interest by bolstering ties with other NATO and EU member states, particularly in the context of deterring adversaries. Brexit and Trumpism in the latter half of the 2010s, along with negative consequences associated with these events [3; 4, p. 146–152], underscored the limitations within the Euro-Atlantic community for the realization of Germany's leadership ambitions. Additionally, the crisis in cooperation with France in the early 2020s [5], and the divergences in dialogue with Italy [6], Poland [7; 8], and Turkey further accentuated these constraints. In such a scenario, it became imperative for Germany to form partnerships with certain small and mid-sized states within the 'Western democracies' group [9]. These states are willing and capable of being reliable supporters of Germany, thereby bolstering its efforts to increase its presence and influence in Europe and beyond. Lithuania emerges as a standout partner for Germany.

The aim of the article is to examine the dynamics, challenges, and interim outcomes of the German-Lithuanian strategic dialogue at the current stage. This entails addressing several key objectives, including exploring the historical background of the relationship, identifying Germany's significant strategic interest in Lithuania in the current context, and analyzing the characteristics of their cooperation in the military sphere and political-diplomatic contacts, particularly within the B3+1 format. The article will primarily focus on cooperation from the perspective of Germany, given its considerably larger foreign policy resource base and its aspirations to assume the role of the senior partner in bilateral relations.

Foreign and Russian authors have explored German cooperation with the Baltic states and to a lesser extent directly with Lithuania since the end of the Cold War [10; 11]. However, the majority of research papers typically focused on the

early or mid-2010s as the upper chronological frame [12; 13], a period characterized by a decline in dialogue. Consequently, a sharp qualitative and quantitative increase in cooperation in security and defense since the end of the 2010s has not been extensively studied [14; 15]. This increase is often examined tangentially in the context of a general escalation of tensions in the Baltic region [16–19]. In the literature, experts have not devoted sufficient attention to the evolution of Germany's military presence in Lithuania and contacts within the B3 + 1 format, especially in the early 2020s, which were pivotal for the dialogue.

In this study, the author employs several methodological approaches. Firstly, comparative analysis is utilized, particularly in examining Germany's approaches to troop deployment in Lithuania across different stages of the confrontation between the West and Russia. Secondly, content analysis is applied to explore the texts of meeting documents within the B3 + 1 format. Lastly, the theory of armed forces building is utilized to examine armed forces as continually evolving organisms, where any significant change carries both military and political implications. The article provides a detailed analysis of the step-by-step reinforcement of the Bundeswehr's military presence in Lithuania, highlighting changes in its complexity principle alongside the evolution of Lithuanian land forces.

Historical and political contours of the dialogue by the end of the 2010s

The historic background of the relations between Germany and Lithuania is multidimensional. Lithuania has a long-standing experience of national statehood and wielded significant regional power from the mid-14th century to the late 15th century. During this period, Lithuanian foreign policy exhibited two primary tendencies. Firstly, there was an expansion to the east, whereby Lithuania emerged as a key competitor to the Moscow Principality in the pursuit of consolidating the lands of the collapsed Old Russian state. Secondly, there was a concerted effort to combat the Teutonic and Livonian Crusader Knights, who were predominantly German-speaking. The first trend underscored Lithuania's close dependence on the fluctuations in power across Belarusian, Ukrainian (Little Russian), and Russian territories, which formed part of the Lithuanian Principality. Historic memories of wars have influenced contemporary German-Lithuanian relations [20], though to a lesser degree compared to the dialogue between Germany and Poland. This disparity can be attributed to historical factors. From the 16th to the early 20th centuries, the Lithuanian territories, as part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and later the Russian Empire, were only marginally involved in military conflicts with Prussia (the German-Prussian state). However, in both the First and Second World Wars, Lithuania's territory (as part of the Russian Empire and later the USSR) became the target of offensive operations by the German army, leading to subsequent occupation. In May 1939, under intense pressure from the Third Reich, the Klaipeda (Memel) region was separated from the official possessions of Kaunas. In contrast, the USSR ensured the return of the Vilna

region to Lithuania in the fall of 1939, which had been forcibly incorporated into Poland in 1920. Against this backdrop, the Lithuanian Republic entered the USSR as a union in 1940.

Germany generally acknowledges its historical responsibility as the main aggressor in World War II. However, in practice, official Berlin has shown reduced readiness to fully bear this responsibility, particularly in the context of the deterrence of Russia. Specifically concerning Lithuania, Germany has sought to portray itself as a defender of national statehood, often by critiquing the USSR and Russia. Tactically, Germany initially attempted to present itself as a protector of Lithuanian independence towards the end of 1917–1918. In October 2017, German foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel solemnly handed over from the archives to Lithuanian foreign minister Linas Antanas Linkevičius a letter of February 16, 1918 from the Lithuanian Tariba to the Second Reich with a request to recognize the declaration of independence.¹ Naturally, the German Foreign Ministry did not emphasize the fact that the German Empire *de facto* ignored the document (along with another one dated December 11, 1917) and did not support the invitation of a Hohenzollern representative to the Lithuanian throne. As a result, official Berlin was reserved about the idea of granting Lithuania formal sovereignty, especially considering it was under German control, not to mention actual sovereignty, right up to the November Revolution in Germany in 1918.

Secondly, Germany emphasized its responsibility for the non-aggression pact with the USSR (signed on August 23, 1939), particularly its secret articles that assigned Lithuania to the sphere of interests of the Soviet Union. These articles were perceived by the post-Soviet establishment in Vilnius as a factor leading to the temporary loss of sovereignty. In this regard, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) has actively highlighted the fundamental differences from the Nazi regime in terms of its political nature and its attitude toward Lithuania.

At the end of the 1980s, official Bonn closely monitored the situation in the Baltic republics, particularly their declarations of sovereignty in 1988–1989 and their secession from the USSR in March–May 1990. However, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was not prepared to provide diplomatic support to the Baltic states until the German question was resolved according to Bonn's interests. The significance of the 2 + 4 agreement in September 1990, which finalized the reunification of Germany and the withdrawal of Soviet troops, along with the weakening of the influence of the central Soviet authorities after the activities of the State Emergency Committee, created the conditions for Germany's activation. This led to the declaration of the European Communities on August 27, 1991, expressing support for the independence of the Baltic republics and invit-

¹ Ausdruck der Freundschaft: Außenminister Gabriel übergibt bedeutendes Dokument zur Unabhängigkeit Litauens. 05.10.2017, *Auswärtiges Amt*, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/service/laender/litauen-node/171005-abkommen/300548> (accessed 07.11.2023).

ing their representatives to the next meeting of the foreign ministers of the European Communities.¹ Already August 28, 1991 Germany established diplomatic relations with each of the Baltic countries [10, p. 66–67]. Less than a week after the *de facto* secession of the Baltic states from the USSR (September 6, 1991), German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher visited the countries on September 11–12, 1991 [10, p. 70]. Following the “point of no return” in the separation of the Baltic states from the USSR, Germany began to assume the role of guiding them into the Euro-Atlantic community. Germany presented these actions as a practical response to the non-aggression pact with the USSR signed on August 23, 1939. Consequently, in the 1990s, Germany positioned itself in opposition to the USSR.

Symbolically, on the 45th anniversary of the signing of the non-aggression pact in 1939, on August 23, 1994, the B3 + 1 format (comprising the three Baltic states plus Germany) of foreign ministers’ meetings was established. These negotiations were intended to be held annually, signifying Germany’s commitment not to overlook the security concerns of Lithuania and the other Baltic republics. The choice of the date, August 23, 1994, holds additional significance. It fell before the completion of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Latvia, Estonia, and the new territories of Germany (the former German Democratic Republic) by September 1, 1994, and after the completion of the same process in Lithuania by September 1, 1993 [10, p. 71]. Official Bonn closely monitored the Kremlin’s (first under USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev, then Russian President Boris Yeltsin) commitments to withdraw troops from the former GDR. Despite facing difficulties [21], Germany contributed to a similar process in the Baltic republics and portrayed these steps as supporting their sovereignty.

In the 1990s, relations with the Baltic states had become rather important for Germany’s foreign policy, especially for its efforts to transform the post-socialist and post-Soviet spaces according to the interests of the Western democracies. Already inside the contacts with three Baltic republics, the dialogue with Lithuania had the greatest share. However, in absolute terms, there was another situation in the 2000s — early 2010s. Germany supported the accession of Lithuania and other Baltic republics to NATO and the EU (the countries became their member states in 2004).

Germany used the format B3 + 1 to discuss rather important security questions with the Baltic states. After the enlargement of NATO, these countries asked for guarantees from Germany. Already in 2004, Germany supported the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission,² Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG 1) and

¹ Erklärung der EG zu den baltischen Staaten, 27. August 1991, Deutsche Aussenpolitik nach der Einheit 1990–1993. Eine Dokumentation herausgegeben vom Auswärtigen Amt. 1993, Bonn, *Auswärtiges Amt*, S. 81.

² Baltic Air Policing — Allied Air Command. 2023, NATO, URL: <https://ac.nato.int/mis-sions/air-policing/baltics> (accessed 07.11.2023).

Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1 (SNMCG 1). The latter ones cruised in the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland for part of the calendar year. Germany has sent fighters, corvettes, and minesweepers to three missions on a rotational basis [15].

Germany's military contribution to these groupings rarely exceeded 0.2 thousand military personnel, and at times, it was non-existent. The three missions represented the sole instances of the Bundeswehr participation in Eastern Europe (since 2008, SNMG 2 and SNMCG 2 were also deployed to the southern region). NATO's rotation scheme for member states meant that after participating for 3 to 6 months, countries were free from sending troops until their next turn. However, the different scheduling for each mission meant that Germany sometimes did not allocate military forces to any of the three groupings for one or even several consecutive months. From 2004 to 2009, the Luftwaffe participated in the Baltic Air Policing mission only three times, totalling less than nine months out of a total duration of 69 months in this period.

During the mid-2000s and early 2010s, Germany deployed fewer than 200 troops in the Baltic states or their vicinity, while simultaneously committing approximately 7,000 military personnel to areas of instability in Asia and Africa, primarily in Afghanistan. [22, p. 8–11]. The deployment of each military unit in conflict zones in the Near and Middle East, as well as Africa north of the equator, where specialized infrastructure was scarce and the distance from Germany was significant, posed disproportionately greater challenges compared to operations in Eastern Europe. This stark difference in deployment volumes reflects Germany's priorities, which aimed to ensure presence beyond NATO's area of responsibility rather than at its forefront.

Germany's strategic attention to the Baltic republics can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, by the 1990s and early 2000s, the Baltic states had already undergone significant transformation and integration with the community of Western democracies. This integration, particularly in terms of NATO and EU membership, signaled a point of no return in their transition from post-Socialist (and for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, post-Soviet) spaces to fully integrated Western entities. Germany viewed this development as highly favourable and consequently utilized both military and political tools in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe more broadly. However, this approach stirred discontent among Lithuania and other regional players [10–12], with signs of increased irritation emerging even before 2014.

An illustrative reaction from Germany was the intensification of the Bundeswehr's participation in the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission. Since 2008, this participation has become annual, typically lasting for four months each year and based at the Šiauliai airfield (Table 1). However, while these steps by Germany were tactical in nature and significance, they were unable to address the underlying disconnect in general.

Table 1

The scheme of FRG's participation in the *Baltic Air Policing*

Dates	Duration, months	Number and type of aircraft allocated from the German Air Force	Airbase
30.06.2005 – 11.10.2005	3.5	4 fighters <i>F-4F Phantom II</i>	Šiauliai
30.06.2008 – 29.09.2008	3	4 fighters <i>F-4F Phantom II</i>	Šiauliai
01.09.2009 – 02.11.2009	2	4 fighters <i>Eurofighter Typhoon</i>	Šiauliai
03.11.2009 – 03.01.2010	2	4 fighters <i>F-4F Phantom II</i>	Šiauliai
05.01.2011 – 27.04.2011	4	6 fighters <i>F-4F Phantom II</i>	Šiauliai
04.01.2012 – 26.04.2012	4	6 fighters <i>F-4F Phantom II</i>	Šiauliai
01.09.2014 – 31.12.2014	4	1 fighter <i>Eurofighter Typhoon</i>	Ämari
25.08.2015 – 06.01.2016	4	4 fighters <i>Eurofighter Typhoon</i>	Ämari
31.08.2016 – 04.01.2017	4	4 fighters <i>Eurofighter Typhoon</i>	Ämari
05.01.2017 – 01.05.2017	4	4 fighters <i>Eurofighter Typhoon</i>	Ämari
30.08.2018 – 02.01.2019	4	4 fighters <i>Eurofighter Typhoon</i>	Ämari
15.07.2020 – 30.08.2020	1.5	1 fighter <i>Eurofighter Typhoon</i>	Šiauliai
31.08.2020 – 29.04.2021	8	6 fighters <i>Eurofighter Typhoon</i>	Ämari
01.08.2022 – 01.05.2023	9	4 fighters <i>Eurofighter Typhoon</i>	Ämari

Source: The Bundeswehr. *Bundeswehr*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de> (accessed 07.11.2023).

The 'crisis of confidence' phenomenon was particularly evident in Germany's relations with Lithuania, as well as Estonia and Latvia, during the initial stages of the confrontation between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia in 2014–2015. During this period, Germany's contribution to the significantly increased NATO military exercises near the borders of the Russian Federation was minimal. Additionally, until the spring of 2016, Germany opposed the idea of deploying NATO's land forces in Poland and the Baltic states. Furthermore, the Bundeswehr reduced its involvement even in the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission (see Table 1). Notably, in the joint statement issued by the foreign ministers of Germany and Lithuania in April 2015, the main emphasis was placed on cooperation in the fields of culture and education.¹ This indirectly but unequivocally confirmed the deterioration of dialogue in political and military spheres. Consequently, the Baltic states, for the first time, reduced their interest in utilizing the B3+1 format.

What were the reasons for this approach of Germany in the mid-2010s? Germany tried to prevent an uncontrolled escalation of tensions with the Russian Federation at the earliest stages of confrontation when new rules of strategic behaviour were just being developed. Lithuania perceives this tactic as a sign of weakness towards the opponent. However, in practice, Germany, as part of the Euro-Atlantic community, has consistently participated in deterring Russia but

¹ Gemeinsame Erklärung des litauischen und des deutschen Außenministers. 16.04.2023, *Auswärtiges Amt*, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/150416-bm-erklaerung-litauen/270916> (accessed 07.11.2023).

prefers a gradual approach to the process. This stance was first articulated by Chancellor Angela Merkel as early as March 2014.¹ The German establishment believes that this approach offers significant advantages, including control over the development of the confrontation, the ability to exert pressure on the opponent gradually and sensibly, and the flexibility to adapt to emerging circumstances. Additionally, the Bundeswehr itself operates with inertia; German military forces require time to shift their focus from the Near and Middle East and Africa to Eastern Europe and to ramp up their presence. Consequently, Germany noticeably lags behind Lithuania and other regional players in this regard.

This strategy of confrontation enjoyed consensus within the German establishment during the tenure of Chancellor Angela Merkel and continued after her, even with the establishment of the government under Olaf Scholz.² This approach contributed to the deterioration of dialogue with the Baltic states in the mid-2010s. However, it also held the potential not only to address the crisis of confidence but also to foster significant reconciliation. Over the medium and long term, Germany gradually augmented its contribution to deterring Russia. The renewed buildup of the Bundeswehr possessed greater potential than the expansion of the armed forces of any Eastern European state due to differences in the volume of national resource bases.

Reasons for Lithuania's increased strategic value for Germany

The elites of the Baltic states and Poland aimed to position their countries as potential hosts for a larger ground military force under NATO command, primarily comprising troops from 'old' NATO member states. For these states, the scale, forms, and geographic placement of troop deployment in NATO's forward area of responsibility became crucial criteria for strategic effectiveness. These aspects were particularly significant for Germany, emerging as a prominent power among the Western democracies. Berlin needed to identify the primary partner in Eastern Europe capable of accommodating the growing deployment of the Bundeswehr effectively. Lithuania emerged as the preferred choice for Germany due to several advantages it offered over the Republic of Poland (RP) and the other Baltic republics.

Between 2014 and 2015, there was a notable deterioration in the dialogue between Germany and the four states in the northern part of Eastern Europe. This degradation persisted in German-Polish relations throughout the second half of the 2010s and into the early 2020s [23]. Officially, Warsaw sought to assume the role of senior partner, a stance that was met with criticism from Berlin. This ten-

¹ Rede von Dr. Angela Merkel, Bundeskanzlerin. Zum Treffen der Staatsund Regierungschefs der Europäischen Union zur Lage in der Ukraine am 6. März 2014. 2014, *Deutscher Bundestag*, 18. Wahlperiode. Plenarprotokoll 18/20. 13. März. S. 1518B—1522A.

² Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz. 27.02.2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356> (accessed 07.11.2023).

sion was particularly pronounced during the tenure of Poland's "Law and Justice" party, which secured victories in the presidential elections of 2015 and 2020, as well as the Seimas elections of 2015 and 2019 [24]. Throughout Donald Trump's presidency, Poland actively supported efforts to exert pressure on Germany, aiming to undermine its influence in Europe and globally [3; 25, p. 20–21]. While Joe Biden's administration ushered in a noticeable thaw in U.S.-German relations, the White House continued to seek to assert its influence over Germany, albeit through different means. Consequently, Poland maintained its close alliance with Washington, consistently positioning itself as a more favourable partner than Germany for the United States. Emphasizing its status as the largest Western democracy in NATO's forward area of responsibility, Poland underscored its strategic importance to Washington. Against this backdrop, Germany's alignment with Lithuania in its dialogue with Poland assumed significance. This alignment was equally consequential for Vilnius, particularly given the challenges in Lithuanian-Polish relations [26].

Lithuania offers several advantages over the other two Baltic republics for Germany. *Firstly*, Lithuania's larger territory allows for the deployment of NATO troops at a relatively significant distance from the borders of the Russian Federation. This not only reduces the provocative nature of such measures but also provides greater freedom of maneuver in the use of military groupings. This flexibility is particularly important for ensuring a significant advantage over potential adversaries by mobilizing troops from the depths of the country. Modern tactics of the Bundeswehr's usage prioritize this ability to deploy forces effectively from strategic depths. Unlike the previous Cold War, Germany was no longer located on the front line, but in the depth of NATO's zone of responsibility. The Bundeswehr has contributed to the key military groupings of the Alliance, which should promote from the depths of the area of responsibility. They were NATO Response Force (NRF) and Very High Readiness Task Force (VJTF) as the key parts of NRF. NRF and VJTF became the core of the New NATO Force Model (NNFM). NNFM was declared for establishment in July 2022.¹ The first two first categories of NNFM were to consist of 300 thousand troops,² with 35 thousand military personnel as the Bundeswehr's contribution. Olaf Scholz announced this decision after the NATO summit in Vilnius (July 11, 2023),³ and also the growing contribution to NATO Forward Presence Force.

¹ NATO Response Force. 2023, *NATO*, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49755.htm (accessed 07.11.2023).

² New NATO Force Model. 08.07.2022, *NATO*, URL: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-infographic-new-nato-force-model.pdf (accessed 07.11.2023).

³ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz zum Gipfeltreffen der NATO am 12. Juli 2023 in Wilna. 12.07.2023, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-zum-gipfeltreffen-der-nato-am-12-juli-2023-2202034> (accessed 07.11.2023).

Secondly, strategically deploying the Bundeswehr's forces in Lithuania allows Germany to participate in the deterrence not only of Russia but also of Belarus. Unlike the other two Baltic countries, Lithuania shares a border not with the vast main part of Russia but only with the Kaliningrad region, which is a semi-enclave. This geographical situation theoretically makes it less challenging for Germany to exert pressure on Russia. However, in practice, the situation is the opposite due to the strengthening of Russia's military presence in the Kaliningrad region [27].

Thirdly, the population of Lithuania (2,8 million people) was bigger than that of Latvia (1,9 million) and Estonia (1,3 million). That is why Lithuania has larger armed forces, which have been growing gradually (Table 2).

Table 2

**The dynamics of military personnel
of the Baltic states and Germany, thousand troops**

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Germany	178.8	177.2	177.9	179.8	181.5	183.8	183.9	184.8	188.5	192.2
Latvia	4.6	4.8	5.2	5.5	5.9	6.0	6.4	6.6	7.5	7.6
Lithuania	8.6	11.8	11.8	13.5	14.3	14.9	15.1	15.2	17.2	17.8
Estonia	6.3	6.0	6.1	6.0	6.2	6.3	6.7	6.8	6.9	6.9

Source: Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2023), 07.07.2023. 2023, Brussels, NATO, p. 12.

In 2014–2023, the Lithuanian armed forces experienced significant growth, more than doubling in size (by 107%). This expansion was particularly notable in the number of land forces, the primary branch of the armed forces, which saw the establishment of a new brigade named 'Žemaitija' (also known as 'Griffin'), in addition to the already existing 'Iron Wolf' brigade. Additionally, the 'Aukštaitija' brigade was reorganized. In May 2023, these three brigades came under the control of division headquarters. To provide context for comparison, the Estonian armed forces grew by 10%, while the Latvian armed forces experienced a growth of up to 65% (Table 2). The Estonian armed forces saw the addition of a new cropped brigade (in addition to the existing personnel brigade) and the establishment of a division headquarters. However, no new brigades were created in the Latvian armed forces. Consequently, by 2023, the Lithuanian armed forces had a larger personnel count than those of Latvia and Estonia combined. Additionally, the number of brigades and division headquarters in the Lithuanian army equalled the total number in Latvia and Estonia.

This development significantly increased the strategic attractiveness of Lithuania to Germany. Germany announced plans to increase the number of brigades in its army to between 8 and 10 (up from the existing 7.5 brigades) and to add three new divisions to the existing three by the mid-2030s.¹ However, in practice,

¹ Bundeswehr-Pläne: Heer soll drei neue Divisionen bekommen. 19.04.2017, DBWV, URL: <https://www.dbwv.de/aktuelle-themen/politik-verband/beitrag/news/bundeswehr-plaene-heer-soll-drei-volle-divisionen-bekommen/> (accessed 07.11.2023).

no new brigade (and especially division) had been created by 2024; only separate units were established. This makes Lithuanian armed forces attractive to Germany as a source of experience in creating new military units.

Fourthly, the disparity in economic potentials and military budgets between Lithuania and Latvia, Estonia (Table 3) has given Lithuania an advantage in its ability to purchase foreign weapons and military equipment (W&M), thereby facilitating the modernization of its armed forces through imports.

Table 3

The dynamics of military budgets of the Baltic states, ml dollars (2015)

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Latvia	246	282	401	459	618	620	646	649	664	731
Lithuania	357	471	628	759	905	962	996	1005	1285	1324
Estonia	431	463	488	501	520	549	612	581	614	766

Source: Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2023), 07.07.2023. 2023, Brussels, NATO, p. 8.

The significance of this partnership for Germany cannot be overstated. With its economy traditionally geared towards exporting technological industrial products [28], including military equipment, Germany's interest in expanding its presence in Lithuania presented an opportunity for collaboration. In this context, Lithuania could leverage Germany's interest in the export of weapons and military equipment to support the growth of the Bundeswehr's presence in the region.

Military cooperation in the late 2010s – early 2020s

An axiom for interstate dialogue is the predominance of political aspects over military ones. But in German-Lithuanian relations, both groups of questions had commensurate significance. Military considerations had a noticeable direct and indirect impact on political dynamics. In the context of deterring Russia, Lithuania viewed the presence of the Bundeswehr and its increasing dynamics as key indicators of Germany's acknowledgement of Lithuanian security and defence concerns.

At the Warsaw summit (July 8–9, 2016) NATO member states decided to create land Forward Presence Force in the northern part of Eastern Europe. The military units were effectively permanent in existence and operated on a rotational staffing basis. The US brigade was deployed in Poland and the Baltic states, with each country hosting a multinational tactical battalion group as part of the Forward Presence (FP) initiative, led by a framework nation. A framework nation assumes overall leadership for the multinational grouping and makes the largest contribution to it [29]. In three instances, Anglo-Saxon states acted as framework nations: the USA for the battle group in Poland, the UK for the unit in Estonia,

and Canada for the unit in Latvia. For the tactical battalion group in Lithuania, Germany assumed the role as the sole continental European framework nation. As time progresses from the outset of the confrontation with the Russian Federation, Germany has increased its contribution to deterrence efforts, particularly in the forward part of NATO's area of responsibility. This demonstrates Berlin's commitment to fostering comprehensive cooperation and rebuilding trust in its relations with Lithuania and other Baltic states.

Since January 2017, Germany has deployed 500–550 troops near the town of Rukla in Kaunas County, located in the central part of Lithuania, forming the 'core' of a multinational tactical battalion group. From 2017 to 2021, troops from the 10th Armoured Division were sent to Rukla on a rotational basis, with the 37th Motorized Infantry Brigade of the 10th Armoured Division playing a key role. During this period, approximately 7,000 troop rotations occurred, with some soldiers and officers serving two or more terms there.

The choice of Rukla for the deployment of the tactical battalion group of eFP was determined by the fact that it was the location of the "Iron Wolf" brigade. Before the early 2020s, this brigade was the only one and then the most combat-ready brigade of the Lithuanian army. During each rotation, the battle group, with the Bundeswehr playing a key role, began to actively conduct joint exercises with the Iron Wolf brigade. These exercises were part of larger multinational manoeuvres and also involved training with only two units. The goal was to achieve tactical compatibility, which meant effectively uniting two components: the national (Lithuanian) and multinational (NATO) units. The majority of units in the 37th motorized infantry brigade gained experience through these exercises. The COVID-19 pandemic only had a short-term, mainly limited effect on this military cooperation during the spring-autumn of 2020.

In January 2021, Germany announced its decision to transfer the responsibility for completing the ground component, serving as an axial element, of its contribution to the Forward Presence from the 10th Armoured Division to the 1st Armoured Division. At that time, there were three divisions in the Bundeswehr, two of which were primarily intended for use within the NATO area of responsibility: the 1st Armoured Division (with three brigades) and the 10th Armoured Division (originally with 3.5 brigades, reduced to 2.5 brigades since 2023). In comparison with the 10th Armoured Division, the 1st Armoured Division was more combat-ready and became the key platform for the creation of new military units in the Bundeswehr. From the mid-2010s to 2021, the 1st Armoured Division was responsible for the German contribution to the NATO Response Force.¹ The reassignment of the 1st Armoured Division for use in the eFP reflects the evolution of priorities for the Bundeswehr. It is now being utilized more actively not only in the depths of the Alliance's zone of responsibility but also in the forward part, especially in Lithuania. The timing of this decision in 2021 coincided with a

¹ Panzerdivision, 2023, *Bundeswehr*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/heer/organisation/1-panzerdivision> (accessed 07.11.2023).

‘change of milestones’ in Germany, as Angela Merkel announced her decision not to run for the post of chancellor in the 2021 elections. This decision reaffirmed the high degree of continuity in German foreign policy. Moreover, it marked a significant step in preparing for a greater contribution to the deterrence of Russia, occurring at least one year before the start of the Special Military Operation (SMO).

Even before it, Germany has strengthened its military presence in Lithuania by 0,2 thousand military personnel and most importantly about 100 armoured and special vehicles.¹ After the beginning of the SMO, Germany expanded the network of contingents in Eastern Europe. In March 2022, the Bundeswehr sent troops to the newly created multinational tactical battalion group of NATO in Slovakia.² In July 2023, the possibility of deploying German troops in Romania was announced. However, the most significant focus of the Bundeswehr’s deployment remained in Lithuania. On July 7, 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared plans for the gradual reorganization of the battalion group in the country into a brigade. Unlike the establishment of multinational tactical battalion groups in 2016, Germany was not just one of the initiators in 2022 but the first to declare its intentions before other NATO member states. This underscores Germany’s readiness and capability to increase its presence, particularly in Eastern Europe, with special attention to Lithuania.

After the NATO summit in Madrid (June 28—30, 2022), where the new strategic concept and a new NATO Force Model were agreed upon, Olaf Scholz announced the commitment of a division (3 brigades, 15,000 troops), 60 aircraft, and 15 warships as rotational contributions to the Forward Presence. The step-by-step creation of the ‘core’ of the multinational brigade also signifies Germany’s readiness to increase its contribution to SNMG 1, SNMCG 1, and the Baltic Air Policing mission. In the latter half of the 2010s, the Luftwaffe resumed its annual participation in Baltic Air Policing, whereas in the early 2020s, it was conducted once every two years, but with the duration doubled from 4 to 8—9 months (see Table 1). Additionally, the German Navy has been participating in the annual sea exercises BALTOPS.³

In September 2022, Germany dispatched its initial supplementary units to Lithuania. Following this, in November 2023, Germany’s Defence Minister announced a pivotal decision to establish the foundation of a brigade in Lith-

¹ Alarmierung und Marsch der Enhanced Forward Presence Kräfte abgeschlossen. 18.02.2022, *Bundeswehr*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/einsaetze-bundeswehr/anerkannte-missionen/efp-enhanced-forward-presence/alarmierung-marsch-enhanced-forward-presence-kraefte-litauen-5357426> (accessed 07.11.2023).

² Truppenbesuch in der Slowakei. 29.04.2022, *Bundeswehr*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/einsaetze-bundeswehr/anerkannte-missionen/slowakei-enhanced-vigilance-activities/steinmeier-truppenbesuch-slowakei-5402514> (accessed 07.11.2023).

³ BALTOPS 23: Fazit und wichtigste Teilübungen. 20.06.2023, *Bundeswehr*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/marine/aktuelles/baltops-23-fazit-5639390> (accessed 07.11.2023).

uania. This establishment excluded the multinational tactical battalion group and instead emphasized a permanent rather than rotational presence. The Bundeswehr intends to deploy not just a majority, but the vast majority of troops for this purpose. Designated and numbered as part of the Bundeswehr (42nd Armoured Brigade), rather than under NATO's designation, this new brigade is set to comprise the armoured (203rd) and motorized infantry (122nd) battalions by the end of 2024. These units, totalling three including the multinational tactical battalion group, constitute half of the brigade. Furthermore, the brigade's headquarters will be established. Upon full establishment, likely by 2026, the 42nd Armoured Brigade will encompass 4,800 troops and 200 civil servants. Germany's explicit detailing of its plans addressed concerns among several representatives of the Lithuanian leadership, ensuring that the brigade would not become a 'Schrödinger's brigade' — an entity with uncertain visibility akin to Schrödinger's cat. Notably, Germany's transition to the brigade level of presence and its permanence immediately constituted two violations of the Russia-NATO Founding Act (1997). Nonetheless, Official Vilnius offered full support for both initiatives.

An illustration of this support was seen in 2017 when Germany's military presence was first established. There was a sharp increase in German exports of weapons and military equipment to Lithuania (contracts were concluded somewhat earlier). The country purchased 21 self-propelled artillery vehicles *Panzerhaubitze* 2000, a batch of armoured personnel carriers, and components for armoured vehicles for a staggering 492.6 million euros. This partly unified the military equipment of the two countries, making it easier to achieve tactical compatibility between the Lithuanian army and the Bundeswehr contingent in the country.

The foundation of the dialogue between Germany and Lithuania primarily lies in their collaboration within NATO, where their cooperation is extensive and multifaceted. However, their engagement within the European Union (EU) is also noteworthy, albeit on a comparatively smaller scale. This cooperation within the EU is exemplified by their joint participation in initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which encompasses various endeavours like the Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and support to Operations, Military Mobility, and the Common Hub for Governmental Imagery (CoHGI).¹ Furthermore, there are concrete instances of collaboration between Germany and Lithuania within the EU, such as Lithuanian instructors contributing to the training of Ukrainian armed forces under the EUMAM EU mission, which is based in Germany and Poland. This exemplifies their joint efforts to deter Russia, particularly in the context of Ukraine. Additionally, both nations have cooperated in

¹ Projects. 2023, PESCO, URL: <https://www.pesco.europa.eu/#projects> (accessed 02.11.2023).

supplying weapons and military equipment to Ukraine, utilizing the ‘Ramstein’ format, thus demonstrating solidarity and support from NATO member states to deter Russia [30, p. 8, 34–35].

Contacts at the highest level: the case of the B3 + 1 format

Chancellor Angela Merkel made official visits to Lithuania in 2008, 2010, 2013, and then again in 2018. The five-year gap between her visits in 2013 and 2018 was not solely due to a decline in dialogue during 2014–2015. Another significant factor was the necessity of progress, indicating a renewed vigour in dialogue and an advancement to a higher level of cooperation. The Council of the Baltic Sea States played a supportive role in this process, with the B3 + 1 format, involving Germany and the three Baltic states, playing a pivotal role.

The decision to resume high-level negotiations was officially endorsed during a meeting of German and Baltic states’ foreign ministers in the Lithuanian city of Palanga on May 10, 2018, thereby formalizing the B3 + 1 format.¹ German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas arrived promptly after he visited Moscow, addressing partners’ concerns about the warming relations between Germany and Russia.

On September 14, 2018, Angela Merkel held bilateral negotiations in Vilnius with President Dalia Grybauskaitė, followed by quadrilateral negotiations at the highest level in the B3 + 1 format. Later, the Chancellor visited German troops stationed in Rukla². Four countries, including the Baltic states, supported Germany’s push to grant the EU more global influence, which aligns with Germany’s leadership aspirations within the EU. The absence of any mention of US President Donald Trump during the press conference suggests that the Baltic states did not endorse the pressure exerted by the Trump administration on Germany regarding this matter.³ As a consequence, Germany has effectively leveraged the expansion of its military presence in Lithuania and other Baltic countries to foster enhanced political engagement. This has led to a spill-over effect, resulting in the deepening of cooperation beyond the military domain into the realm of politics.

¹ Außenminister Maas reist nach Litauen. 09.05.2018, *Auswärtiges Amt*, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/maas-litauen/2075686> (accessed 02.11.2023).

² Statement von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel vor deutschen Soldatinnen und Soldaten der NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group Litauen in Rukla. 14.09.2018, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv/statement-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-vor-deutschen-soldatinnen-und-soldaten-der-nato-enhanced-forward-presence-battle-group-litauen-1525324> (accessed 02.11.2023).

³ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel, der litauischen Präsidentin Dalia Grybauskaitė, dem lettischen Ministerpräsidenten Māris Kučinskis und dem estnischen Ministerpräsidenten Jüri Ratas in Vilnius. 14.09.2018, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-der-litauischen-praesidentin-dalia-grybauskait%C4%97-dem-lettischen-ministerpraesidenten-m%C4%81ris-ku%C4%8Dinskis-und-dem-estnischen-ministerpraesidenten-jueri-ratas-1525322> (accessed 02.11.2023).

Since its inception in 1994, the B3+1 format has operated at a high level, primarily involving foreign ministers. However, since 2018, it has further evolved to include participation at the highest level, with heads of state and government also engaging in discussions.

Germany noticeably strengthened its strategic presence in the Baltic states and clearly outlined the growing share of this vector in its foreign policy. As Germany's dependence on its partners increased, it became more inclined to address their concerns and accommodate their needs. This approach was crucial to avoid prolonged interruptions in negotiations within the B3+1 format, which could have resulted in significant reputational costs for Germany. Therefore, it was logical for Berlin to take steps to prevent such scenarios from occurring.

In August 2019, Angela Merkel held negotiations in Berlin with newly elected President Gitanas Nausėda. Chancellor Merkel specifically addressed Lithuanian concerns regarding the construction of a nuclear power plant in Ostrovet, Belarus, which is located in close proximity to Lithuania.¹ However, during the Belarusian events from August to October 2020, Germany's stance was more balanced compared to Lithuania's [14; 19]. This factor, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, played a significant role in the decline of high-level contacts between the two countries at the turn of the decade. Contrary to diplomatic practice, Germany did not publish any specific materials on Gitanas Nausėda's visit to Berlin on September 16, 2021.² At the same time, the invitation of the Lithuanian president (prior to Angela Merkel's planned return visit after 2019) illustrates Germany's interest in preventing a prolonged decline in dialogue and the interruption in the use of the B3+1 format at the highest level.

The new negotiations were held in Berlin with the participation of Olaf Scholz on February 10, 2022, just two weeks before the start of the Special Military Operation. Germany encouraged the Baltic states to hold the new meeting by increasing German troops in *eFP* and further implementing such measures.³

¹ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und dem Präsidenten der Republik Litauen, Gitanas Nausėda in Berlin. 14.08.2019, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-und-dem-praesidenten-der-republik-litauen-gitanas-naus%C4%97da-1659520> (accessed 02.11.2023).

² Staatsbesuch im Bundeskanzleramt: Merkel trifft litauischen Präsidenten Nausėda. 16.09.2021, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv/alt-inhalte/staatsbesuch-im-bundeskanzleramt-merkel-trifft-litauischen-praesidenten-nausėda-1958778> (accessed 02.11.2023).

³ Pressestatements von Bundeskanzler Scholz, dem Präsidenten von Litauen Nausėda, der Ministerpräsidentin von Estland Kallas und dem Ministerpräsidenten von Lettland Kariņš am 10. Februar 2022 in Berlin. 10.02.2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-dem-praesidenten-von-litauen-nausėda-der-ministerpraesidentin-von-estland-kallas-und-dem-ministerpraesidenten-von-lettland-kariņš-am-10-februar-2022-in-berlin-2004436> (accessed 02.11.2023).

Berlin's decision to transform the battalion group in Lithuania into a brigade became the key point of negotiations in the B3 + 1 format in Vilnius on June 7, 2022. As in 2018, the Chancellor visited the Bundeswehr's troops.¹ The latest high-level negotiations in the format were concluded in Tallinn on May 26, 2023. Despite the gradual build-up of the German contingent in Lithuania, which was not hastened, Olaf Scholz highlighted broader figures. These encompassed 17 thousand soldiers designated for rotational deployment in NATO's Forward Presence military groups across Eastern Europe, with a particular emphasis on Lithuania. The discussions underscored the importance of reinforcing the strategically significant 'Suwalki corridor', with the Bundeswehr contingent slated for primarily supporting this objective.

Before the NATO summit in Vilnius (July 11–12, 2023), there was no specific high-level meeting between Germany and Lithuania. One reason for this was the prior discussion of key issues during the negotiations on May 26, 2023. Lithuania subtly signalled its dissatisfaction with the slow pace of building up the Bundeswehr's presence in the country. In response, Germany clarified its plans to deploy the permanent 42nd armoured brigade in November 2023.

* * *

Since the latter half of the 2010s, Germany has markedly adjusted its approach to establishing a global strategic presence, although this process remains ongoing. Berlin has increasingly prioritized bolstering the Bundeswehr's footprint in the forward areas of NATO's responsibility, particularly in Lithuania. Concurrently, Lithuania has asserted itself as a pivotal hub in Eastern Europe from a military-strategic standpoint, particularly within the Baltic region. These developments, alongside considerations of each nation's resource capacities and historical memory perceptions among their leadership, have laid the groundwork for substantial bilateral cooperation in security and defence. Official Vilnius has been receptive to positioning Berlin as a senior partner in these dialogues, contingent upon full acknowledgement of Lithuanian interests and concerns, particularly in military affairs. Following the downturn in dialogue during 2014–2015, Germany actively endeavoured to address the crisis, strengthen relations, and prevent similar situations from arising anew.

The Baltic states have urged Germany to announce or implement new measures to increase the Bundeswehr's presence in Lithuania through the "B3 + 1" format at the highest level, as was initiated in 2018 and continued with each subsequent meeting in 2022–2023. The dynamics of these relations highlight a

¹ Pressestatement von Bundeskanzler Scholz zum Rundgang des Camps Adrian Rohn in Litauen am 7. Juni 2022 in Pabradė. 07.06.2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/pressestatement-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-zum-rundgang-des-camps-adrian-rohn-in-litauen-am-7-juni-2022-2048480> (accessed 02.11.2023).

strong connection between Lithuania and Germany, which limits Germany's opportunities in other areas, particularly in the utilization of the expanding Bundeswehr (Table 2), as well as its potential role in the future normalization of relations between the West and Russia. Overcoming this dependence is challenging for Germany, as its dialogue with Lithuania remains a key element in its relations with the Baltic states as a whole. This is evident in the location of all key meetings in the B3 + 1 format in either Vilnius or Berlin, as well as the absence of land Bundeswehr units in Latvia and Estonia.

The deployment of the 42nd armoured brigade in Lithuania, comprising 4,800 troops, including contingents from allies, is essentially positioned by Germany as a reinforced vanguard of the main forces of the Bundeswehr and a formidable deterrent against both Russia and Belarus. Additionally, this presence should encourage further defense cooperation between Russia and Belarus.

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