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THE BALTIC REGION AS A 'GREY ZONE': BALANCING ON THE BRINK OF ARMED CONFLICT

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The article analyses the Baltic region as an arena of intensified Russia–West confrontation, applying the ‘grey zone’ concept understood as a domain where traditional military threats intersect with hybrid forms of influence. The authors examine the factors contributing to the escalation of tension in the region, including militarisation, economic sanctions, information pressure, and the use of proxy instruments. Particular attention is given to the geographical and legal conditions shaping strategic instability, as well as to historical precedents, most notably World War II, which, in the authors’ view, helps contextualise contemporary risks. The article outlines the methods used by NATO and the Baltic States in constructing the ‘grey zone’, including the expansion of military presence, the manipulation of legal frameworks, and the deployment of non-military instruments of pressure. The authors conclude that the Baltic region is approaching the threshold of open conflict, and Western policies are interpreted as efforts to constrain Russian influence without resorting to direct military engagement. The study employs comparative analysis, qualitative content analysis of key sources, and event analysis of the actions of EU and NATO member states to assess perceived threats and the dynamics of regional instability.

Keywords:

Baltic region, ‘grey zone’, armed conflict, NATO, EU, confrontation

Introduction

In recent years, the Baltic region has become a focal point of escalating geopolitical tension in relations between Russia and Western countries. This tension is driven by a combination of geographical and geopolitical factors, as well as by the efforts of NATO and its member states in the region — primarily the Baltic States and Poland, as well as Sweden and Finland — to create what is often described as a ‘zone of instability and uncertainty’ for Russia in the Baltic area. Following the onset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, the level of militarisation in the Baltic region increased significantly, which in turn heightened security concerns [1; 5].

According to Mearsheimer, the West seeks to render relations between the parties involved in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as well as between Russia and the Western coalition supporting Ukraine, ‘toxic’, thereby preventing any possibility of bringing the armed confrontation to an end. He also identifies several potential points of tension in Eastern Europe, including the Baltic States, Belarus, Kaliningrad, Moldova, and the Black Sea region, any of which could ‘explode before our eyes’. Three of these potential flashpoints highlighted by Mearsheimer — the Baltic States, Kaliningrad, and Belarus — are located within the wider Baltic region.

The European Union (EU), which includes all foreign states in the Baltic region, is pursuing an aggressive sanctions policy against Russia, calling for the complete isolation of the Russian economy and the introduction of secondary sanctions against Russia’s partner states. Since 2024, the EU has stepped up various instruments to build the capacity of the European military-industrial complex, create an integrated air and missile defence system, and strengthen coordination in the field of defence [2; 21]. Currently, NATO countries have intensified the build-up of their military presence and the development of military infrastructure in the region, increased the intensity and scale of military exercises, and changed their nature to a clearly aggressive one.

After February 24, 2024, the US, NATO, and the EU, as well as some Baltic states, changed their rhetoric and actions to openly confrontational ones, including declaring their readiness to deploy nuclear weapons on their territory.¹ Moreover,

¹ Hallituksen esitys Nato-jäsenyydestä: ei rajoituksia ydinaseille Suomessa, 2022, *Lauri Nurmi, Iltalehti*, 26.10.2022, URL: <https://www.iltalehti.fi/politiikka/a/79b81501-689d-4ad8-bf69-c6aabab71985> (accessed 07.04.2025) ; DCA-sopimus julki: Nämä 15 aluetta Suomi avaa Yhdysvaltain joukoille — puolustusministeri: “Kriisitilanteissa voidaan ryhtyä tositoimiin”, 2023, *Yle*, 14 Decembre, URL: <https://yle.fi/a/74-20065054> (accessed 07.04.2025) ; Zapytaliśmy Andrzeja Dudę, czy Polskę czeka wojna? Wprost powiedział, co myśli o słowach Tuska, 2024, *Fakt*, 22 kwietnia, URL: <https://www.fakt.pl/polityka/amerykanie-pytali-andrzej-dude-o-nuclear-sharing-zglosilem-nasza-gotowosc/g79lhxx> (accessed 07.04.2025) ; Nausėda branduolinio ginklo Lenkijoje idėją vadina “svarbiu atgrasymo veiksmu”, 2024, *LRT.lt*, April 26, URL: <https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/2260182/nauseda-nazyvaet-ideiu-o-iadernom-oruzhii-v-pol-she-vazhnym-faktorom-sderzhivaniia> (accessed 07.04.2025).

the most aggressive anti-Russian rhetoric in NATO and the EU, including calls for the use of military force to isolate Russia in the Baltic region, comes mainly from the Baltic states themselves—the Baltic Republics, Poland, Sweden, and Finland. Thus, we are talking not only about the use of economic and political pressure on Russia, but also military pressure, exerted through indirect military methods and means aimed at causing maximum damage to Russia, which in military theory has been termed ‘hybrid warfare’ [3; 4, p. 49; 9]. Such asymmetric actions, carried out by both states and non-state actors, are seen by them as a ‘cheap alternative to traditional warfare’ [5, p. 78].

According to the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, Valery Gerasimov, “the use of indirect asymmetric actions and methods of waging ‘hybrid wars’ makes it possible to deprive the opposing side of its actual sovereignty without seizing the territory of the state by military force” [6; 20]. As repeatedly stated by Russian President Putin and representatives of the Russian Foreign Ministry, the United States and its allies are waging a ‘hybrid war’ against Russia with all its components—military, economic, cultural, and media.¹

In our opinion, the actions of NATO and some member states in waging a ‘hybrid war’ against Russia have created the conditions for the formation of a ‘grey zone’ in the Baltic region as a theater of military operations, where traditional military force and the military threats arising from it serve as a military cover for political and economic means and methods of exerting pressure on the Russian Federation. This, in turn, poses direct threats to the national interests and security of the Russian Federation in the Baltic Sea region, to which it cannot fail to respond [7, p. 10].

According to Bartosh, an important feature of the ‘grey zone’ strategy is a phased approach to its implementation, achieved by creating a series of small-scale events that increase in intensity and ultimately shape a new strategic reality [8; 25]. Under these circumstances, the Baltic region is teetering on the brink of open armed conflict. This situation necessitates clarification of the concept of the ‘grey zone’, as well as the analysis and assessment of the factors contributing to tensions in the Baltic region in the context of unfolding events associated with the growing threat of direct armed confrontation.

¹ See: Russian Foreign Ministry stated that a full-scale hybrid war has been declared against Russia. Lavrov: The US and its satellites have declared a global hybrid war on Russia, 2022, Gazeta.Ru, 28 March, URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/03/28/17487697.shtml> (accessed 10.02.2025) ; “A fight to the death”: Lavrov on the West’s hybrid war against Russia, Interview with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, 2023, Gazeta.RU, 10 March, URL: https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2023/02/15/19754143.shtml?utm_source=rnews&utm_medium=exchange&utm_campaign=news (accessed 10.02.2025) ; Putin declares hybrid war against Russia, Statement by Putin at the SCO meeting, 2023, RIA, 04.07.2023, URL: <https://ria.ru/20230704/rossiya-1882083450.html> (accessed 10.02.2025).

In this article, the authors do not set particularly complex philosophical and methodological tasks to attempt to discuss the specifics of war and peace at the present stage. From our point of view, the very formation of the 'grey zone' concept indicates that there are many transitional states between war and peace. A key element of operations in the 'grey zone' is that they remain below the threshold of direct armed aggression, which could trigger a legitimate military response (*jus ad bellum* — the right to war, or, more precisely, the right to wage war). Thus, conflict in the 'grey zone' may not only be an alternative to direct military confrontation, but also a way of preparing for it, or be one of the components of an armed confrontation that has already begun. From our perspective, both the first and the second options are possible in the Baltic region.

In this regard, the authors emphasise that the Baltic region should be viewed as an already established 'grey zone' of confrontation with the West. At the same time, an analysis of its geographical, historical, and strategic characteristics merely clarifies this concept in the existing geopolitical context, supplementing existing definitions. The purpose of this article is to provide a critical assessment of the Baltic region as a 'grey zone' in the context of the evolving confrontation between Russia and the collective West. To achieve this objective, the article examines approaches within academic and military –political discourse to the concept of the 'grey zone' and its terminological ambiguity; analyses the influence of geographical factors on the formation of a 'grey zone'; identifies and evaluates patterns characteristic of activities conducted within such a zone; and critically assesses the actions of NATO and selected member states in the Baltic region that are aimed at intensifying confrontation with the Russian Federation without escalating it into open armed conflict.

The methodology employed in this study is based on a comparative analysis of scholarly works by Russian and international authors, as well as on a content analysis of the qualitative characteristics of Russian and international analytical sources and selected NATO doctrinal documents addressing issues related to the 'grey zone'. To identify and classify patterns, means, and methods employed against the Russian Federation, event analysis was applied. In particular, the study examines NATO military exercises in the Baltic region, incidents involving submarine infrastructure in the Baltic Sea and the responses to them by representatives of NATO, the European Union, and regional states, as well as precedents of interaction between the Russian Federation and NATO and its member states in the Baltic region.

To achieve these goals, the article examines the conceptual foundations of the 'grey zone', the legal aspects of conflicts in the 'grey zone', the influence of the geographical space of the Baltic region, the significance of the region's geographical features in the context of the study, as well as the actions of the EU and NATO member states to increase the level of confrontation with the Russian Federation in the Baltic region.

The ‘grey zone’ and ‘hybrid warfare’: ambiguity of definitions and the scale of contemporary threats in the context of legal uncertainty

Currently, the term ‘grey zone’, as well as the terms ‘hybrid threats’ and ‘hybrid warfare’, has become widely used among politicians and military analysts both in Russia and worldwide. However, experts still lack a clear approach to defining and understanding these concepts, even though they are not new. What is new is the scale and methods of using old tools.

Of course, hybrid threats may be employed by parties to a conflict in any region, including those with a clearly defined legal regime that precludes arbitrary interpretation. However, it is precisely in ‘grey areas’ that the use of hybrid threats is facilitated, as recourse to international law becomes more difficult.

As a rule, all three terms describe actions taken by one party to a conflict against another (or by both parties against each other), without escalating to open armed conflict. According to Hoffman, one of the authors of the concept of ‘hybrid warfare’, this trend “blurs” the boundaries between previously known types of warfare [9]. The modern concept of ‘hybrid warfare’ is generally regarded as an adaptation of traditional methods of warfare to the current global situation, which, like warfare itself, can adapt quickly to political, economic, technological, and social changes [10, p. 10].

In 1948, Kennan, often described as the ‘architect’ of the Cold War, prepared a report for the US National Security Council on the initiation of what he termed “organised political warfare”, which he defined as “all means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives”. In this report, he argued that the United States could not afford to rely on improvised covert operations in the event of more serious political crises in the future [11, p. 253]. In effect, Kennan laid the conceptual foundations for the systematic planning of non-military operations by the United States.

In many ways, Kennan’s concept fits in with Nye’s concept of ‘smart power’, according to which the actions of the United States can range from exerting political influence to economic sanctions and coercive diplomacy. The scope of such actions is so broad that it can cover virtually all areas of the target state. At the same time, a distinctive feature of these actions is their influence on the political leadership of the target state [12, p. 64].

In this regard, the authors consider relevant the statement by the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General of the Army Valery Gerasimov, who asserts that with the emergence of new areas of confrontation in modern conflicts, methods of struggle are increasingly shifting toward the comprehensive use of non-military measures implemented with the support of military force [13]. As Galeotti noted, Gerasimov expressed his conviction that the modern world is facing more complex, politically motivated forms of confrontation alongside traditional military actions [14, p. 27].

The NATO Security Review notes that hybrid conflicts involve multi-level efforts aimed at destabilising the state's functioning and polarising its society, since the state's population is the 'centre of gravity' in hybrid warfare. Therefore, the main goal is to influence the actions of key decision-makers through military and non-military operations [15].

In 2019, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg confirmed in his annual report that NATO's priority is not only the ability to counter hybrid threats, but also to enhance its capacity to conduct operations independently, including by increasing the number of exercises performed and the utilisation of support groups and centres. At the same time, the report notes that hostile states do not need to take to the battlefield to inflict damage on their opponents. They can gain political and strategic advantages through other means, such as disinformation, cyberattacks, deception, and sabotage. Such hybrid actions, or actions in 'grey zones', blur the line between peace and war and are used to destabilise and undermine the countries affected¹. They directly threaten the target state's ability to take timely action aimed at early detection and prevention of threats, as a large number of actions against the target state relate to areas traditionally considered outside the scope of direct armed conflict. According to Western analysts, one of the main characteristics of 'hybrid threats' is their use in the 'grey zone', the ambiguity of the aggressor state's strategic intent, with an emphasis on indirect methods and means of using force against the target state.²

The term 'grey zone' was first used in official documents in the US Department of Defence 2010 Quadrennial Review (QDR-2010). In this review, the 'grey zone' is described as deliberate, multifaceted, and hostile interstate activity that falls below the threshold for the use of armed forces³. At the same time, the sphere of interstate hostile actions is economic, political, social, informational, and geographical space, and the objects of influence are objects of political, financial, and social systems, informational, as well as material (resource, spatial-temporal) objects [16, p. 6].

However, the 'grey zone' does not appear in official NATO documents either as a concept of modern confrontation or as a potential theatre of military operations, although the Alliance considers it in the context of hybrid threats. At the same time, both NATO and its members see Russia as the main source

¹ The Secretary General's Annual Report 2019, 2019, NATO, 21 April, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_174399.htm (accessed 20.03.2025).

² Deterrence by Punishment as a way of Countering Hybrid Threats — Why we need to go 'beyond resilience' in the grey zone. Information Note, 2019, Multinational Capability Development Campaign (MCDC), March 2019, URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c7d01abe5274a3b858207fc/20190304-MCDC_CHW_Information_note_-_Deterrence_by_Punishment.pdf (accessed 13.02.2025).

³ U.S. Department of Defense, 2010, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 2010, URL: <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2010.pdf> (accessed 29.03.2025).

of hybrid threats. Therefore, NATO's main strategies are aimed at countering such methods by strengthening cyber defence and energy infrastructure, counter-propaganda measures, and deterring non-military threats.¹

Thus, non-military measures and means have become as effective as military ones, if not more so. Non-military measures and means have made it possible to achieve such objectives that were previously achieved through bloody wars. Although a major war is still possible, it now involves serious costs and risks, especially for states possessing nuclear weapons, so the risk of such a war breaking out is unlikely [17, p. 56].

Unlike traditional forms of warfare, aggressive state strategies with high stakes are implemented in the 'grey zone', in which each participant uses various instruments of influence and intimidation to achieve the ultimate goals of war through covert or overt means and methods, provocations, and conflicts [7, p. 26]. In such situations, states that do not have the capacity to achieve their strategic goals through conventional military means alone may resort to a combination of non-military methods and means. Similarly, states that have the necessary military means may achieve their strategic objectives with non-military methods. In both cases, the use of non-military methods is linked to avoiding direct military confrontation with the enemy. In this context, the 'grey zone' is particularly conducive to the achievement of strategic goals, since the objectives of any military campaign ultimately derive from political interests and aims.

Under these conditions, the role of military force remains unchanged and may even increase, although the use of non-military means, especially those of an informational and psychological nature, will be a key factor in waging a new type of war [18, p. 44]. At the same time, the principles of conducting military operations in the 'grey zone' will be completely different from the doctrine of large-scale warfare, which states that success depends on concentration, speed, and decisiveness. The main goal of campaigns in the 'grey zone' is to create new political realities that correspond to the interests of the aggressor state or coalition of such states.

¹ Strategic Concept, 2022, *NATO Official Website*, 29 June 2022, URL: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf (accessed 22.07.2025) ; Brussels Summit Community — Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021, 2021, *NATO Official Website*, 14 June 2021, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm (accessed 22.07.2025) ; NATO Cyber Defence, 2024, *NATO Official Website*, 30 July 2024, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_78170.htm (accessed 22.07.2025) ; NATO Countering hybrid threats, 2024, *NATO Official Website*, 07 May 2024, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm (accessed 22.07.2025) ; Russia's Information Influence Operations in the Nordic — Baltic Region, 2024, *STRATCOM*, Riga, November 2024, URL: <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-information-influence-operations-in-the-nordic-baltic-region/314> (accessed 22.07.2025).

In this study, the authors see the 'grey zone' to be the geographical space of conflict where the parties use non-military methods to achieve their political objectives, combining them with limited use of military force that does not escalate into open confrontation between them. In our opinion, the main difference between a 'grey zone' and 'hybrid warfare' is that a 'grey zone' involves actions by the parties to the conflict in a specific geographical area, while 'hybrid warfare' is a more general and, as a result, more abstract concept, since any war, regardless of its forms and methods, implies confrontation between the parties to the conflict as a state of their relations.

A defining characteristic of campaigns conducted in the 'grey zone', as distinct from 'hybrid threats', is the associated legal dilemma. Any operation in the 'grey zone' entails a departure from the norms of international law, which, to an even greater extent than the laws of armed conflict, constrain the defending state's right to use force in response, thereby creating legal uncertainty. This specific feature of the 'grey zone' is underscored by a statement by General Votel, then Commander of US Army Special Operations Forces, who noted that "in the 'grey zone', states face uncertainty, making it difficult to define the nature of the conflict, the status of the parties involved, and the legal validity of political claims" [19].

In particular, the provision enshrined in Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter prohibiting the use or threat of use of force by Member States does not contain a definition of 'war'.¹ Furthermore, the term 'force' is used to denote a wide range of forms of conflict; however, its prevailing interpretation is largely reduced to 'military force', which is characteristic of armed conflict. At the same time, the imperative of this article of the UN Charter does not apply to non-state actors, unless there is a close connection between states and non-state actors, which boils down to support for a non-state actor or consent to its aggressive actions [20, p. 53].

The UN Charter does not contain any mandatory provisions prohibiting other forms and methods of aggressive actions (political, economic, informational, etc.) and deriving benefits from their use. Such forms and methods may potentially be equated with the unlawful use of force if they cause significant harm to the target state or compel it to take actions that violate its sovereignty [21, p. 73]. However, it is practically impossible to prove the use of non-military forms and methods as 'military force'. Thus, the impossibility of applying standards based on international law and the inconsistency of the 'grey zone' with traditional forms and methods of conflict and the use of force create legal uncertainty in determining the existence of aggression and the participation of specific states in it. At the international level, this creates a misleading assumption that the target state is unaware or insufficiently aware of the actions of the aggressor state. However, this assumption is incorrect, and the target state is in fact usually aware of the enemy's actions but is limited in its ability to respond.

¹ United Nations, 1945. Charter of the United Nations, 1 UNTS XVI, 2025, *UN Charter | United Nations*, URL: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter> (accessed 30.03.2025).

Legal uncertainty allows adversaries to use a comprehensive set of methods and means in the 'grey zone' to achieve their strategic goals without crossing the threshold of open military conflict. At the same time, states can use proxy forces to increase their own military power and deny their involvement in aggressive actions. In other words, legal uncertainty and the ability to deny involvement in a conflict allow an aggressor state (or coalition of such states) to use its armed forces to a limited extent to exert pressure on the target state.

Limited use of armed forces involves, for example, deploying them near the target state's territory, conducting large-scale exercises, and carrying out covert military operations (sabotage, acts of sabotage, etc.) using special operations forces. The use of armed forces is not as important as the threat of military force, which should force the leadership of the target state to reconsider the risk of open armed confrontation. In other words, the initiators of conflicts in the 'grey zone' may have military superiority, which is sometimes crucial in deterring the target state from responding to provocations with military force [22, p. 190].

We can conclude that any actions taken by opposing parties in the 'grey zone' are accompanied by the use of armed forces (including proxies) to achieve maximum effect from the use of other, non-military methods and means to achieve the ultimate goal, as well as contrary to the norms of international law, violating both their own and international fundamental documents. At the same time, economic, political, humanitarian, and other methods and means, used in the 'grey zone' cannot be implemented successfully without a military component, as there is a risk of a direct armed response to actions that infringe on the sovereignty of the state.

The geographical space factor in the concept of the 'grey zone'

The current transformation in global politics and economics is accompanied by a revision of the principles of regional division. Unlike previous trends, where geo-economic regionalisation played a key role, new borders are now being based on the military-political and geographical factors [23].

The main instruments of this process are not economic ties, but forceful methods and natural geographical barriers that ensure the security and protection of territories. Thus, geopolitics and military strategy are replacing geo-economics as the main driver of spatial integration. The logic of economic expediency, open markets, and free trade has been disavowed by the elites of those countries that, not without reason, accused the USSR of ideological monopolism and isolationism.

Until the onset of Russia's open confrontation with the Baltic states, conditions for mutually beneficial cooperation had been established; however, this cooperation was characterised by complex dynamics shaped by historical, political, and economic factors. The period up to 2014 was one of transformation, during which the previous political division gave way to new, predominantly

economic, forms of interaction. Nevertheless, Russia's full integration into regional processes remained incomplete, while the states of the region became fully integrated into Western structures [24].

One of the main contemporary geographical features of the Baltic region is that it consists solely of states that are systematically hostile to the Russian Federation. After the end of the Cold War and up until 2022, tensions in the region steadily increased, and buffer and neutral states renounced their status [25, p. 177].

In addition, during the Cold War, a balance of power was maintained in the region, supported by parity between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. However, after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, all states in the region became members of NATO, which in turn led to a change in the military-political balance of power in the region and contributed to a gradual weakening of relations between Russia and the states in the region [7; 8; 26]. In this regard, for historical and geographical reasons, the Baltic region is characterised by a stable maintenance of a situation that is typical of 'grey zones' and is called a situation of "neither peace nor war". In these conditions, there is complexity and uncertainty in controlling the space, which applies to both territories and water areas. As the authors have already noted, one of the main characteristics of the 'grey zone' is precisely the control of geographical space.

Clark and Pfaff, drawing attention to the geographical features of the Baltic region, point to the possibility of concentrating NATO forces to weaken Russia's military superiority in the area [27, p. xiv], while Klein and his co-authors state that it is necessary to take into account that half of Russia's maritime cargo passes through the Baltic Sea, thereby providing NATO and its partners with leverage to exert economic pressure on Russia. In this regard, they believe that NATO should deprive Russia of access to the North Atlantic and further to the Barents Sea [28]. The significant importance of this characteristic of the 'grey zone' is the assumption that conflicts in such a zone, as in a separate geographical space, can be started and stopped relatively easily [29].

When considering control over geographical space, it should be noted that the relatively limited land and maritime area of the Baltic region is combined with a high potential for threats which, if control is established over key positions, can be projected onto distant strategic territories. A striking illustration of this logic is encapsulated in the formula "Gogland is the key to Kotlin, and Kotlin is the key to Leningrad". As noted in contemporary assessments, "for the first time since 1941, the enemy is threatening us with a military blockade in the Baltic, and not merely an economic one. Gogland Island is being compelled to regain its status as a military facility—something that has not occurred since Khrushchev demilitarised military installations in the Gulf of Finland" [30, p. 13].

According to the authors, when analysing contemporary problems in the Baltic Sea region's 'grey zone', it is essential to take into account the events of World War II, considering the possibilities, means, and methods of modern weapons and how to combat them. In particular, minefields laid in the Gulf of

Finland in 1941 — 1943 by the Germans and Finns caused major problems for the USSR during the war. The Red Banner Baltic Fleet suffered its heaviest losses off Cape Yuminda when the Germans laid more than 93 km of minefields along the southern shore of the gulf, while the northern and central parts of the gulf were shelled by Finnish coastal artillery [31, p. 71]. These barriers were never overcome by the Soviet Navy during the war, and had to be bypassed through waters directly adjacent to Finland. In this situation, the Baltic Fleet, which was significantly stronger than the Finnish Navy and German support ships, was unable to realise its advantage. At the same time, as of June 22, 1941, the Finnish navy acted as a proxy force for the Germans, carrying out mining operations without declaring war. The islands of the Gulf of Finland also deserve special attention. Except for Kotlin Island, they belonged to Finland until 1940, which gave it control over a vast area of the Gulf of Finland. However, since 1940, the situation has changed, and now the islands of Gogland, Moshchny, Bolshoy Tyuters, and Maly Tyuters, which are located far to the west, belong to Russia.

The strategic role of the islands in the Gulf of Finland is obvious, as they effectively separate the southern and northern flanks of a potential maritime theatre of war. Occupying these islands would allow the enemy not only to control the Gulf of Finland shipping lane approaching the mouth of the Neva River, but also to effectively “lock” the ships of the Baltic Fleet in the Kronstadt roadstead, which would give it the ability to control the airspace from St. Petersburg to Kaliningrad [31, p. 62]. History shows that control of the Gulf of Finland is of critical importance for the security of St. Petersburg. This was the case a hundred years ago, until the USSR solved the problem of Leningrad’s strategic vulnerability in 1939. In this regard, it is necessary to mention American military analysts Herdt and Zublic, who believe that in the Baltic region, the US Navy and NATO allies should use the extensive capabilities of Finland and Sweden for sea mining in the event of a possible conflict with Russia, which would threaten the deployment of the Russian Navy and its commercial shipping [32, p. 5 — 7].

The main islands of the Baltic Sea — Bornholm and Gotland — are of no less strategic importance. The former can be used as a barrier against Russia to deny its military ships and civilian vessels access to the Danish straits, while the latter can serve as a location for intelligence gathering and air defence or anti-ship defence systems [33].

A striking example of the geographical factor in determining the boundaries and characteristics of the ‘grey zone’ is an incident that occurred in Lithuania: the sinking of an American heavy armoured vehicle in a swamp near the Belarusian border. The vehicle did not simply get stuck in the swamp, although this is already impossible in Germany; it sank completely, so that it could not be found for a week, and a government commission was set up to recover it, involving up to ten units of heavy special equipment. This event preceded the deployment of

a Bundeswehr armoured brigade in this very area and in these natural conditions. Southern and Eastern Lithuania and Latgale are potential theatres of military operations in the Baltic region, particularly with the issues related to the 'grey zone' and new risks.

Not only the political but also the military leadership of the Baltic states has a poor understanding of their own territories. For more than forty years, mapping and, even more so, topographic surveying of their own territories have not been a priority for the governments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. However, such complex, costly, and long-term tasks have not been a priority for Russia and Belarus either.

One of the authors of this article was a member of the Russian group involved in negotiations with the Republic of Estonia on establishing the state border on the ground. This work was carried out from 1995 to the end of 1997. The work did not include political issues, but only research, linking the existing border line on the map to the terrain, and proposals for corrections. The work was based on Soviet maps of the General Staff, which, for several decades, had been outdated. The research showed that these maps were completely unapplicable. Old roads had disappeared, and new ones had appeared. Forests had been replaced by farmland, and farmland by forests. The geography of the lake shorelines had changed, as had the river beds, and the location of upland and lowland marshes also did not correspond to the maps. In the event of hostilities, the existing maps would be useless. For example, the impassable swamps that once blocked access to the Siminae Heights from Ust-Narva to Narva no longer exist. Whereas there used to be only one road from the border to Tallinn, there are now three.

A similar situation is developing on the border with Finland. Finnish national mythology associated with the Mannerheim Line does not take into account the fact that such a system of fortifications, which cost Finland a third of its average annual budget [34, p. 63], cannot be built, partly because its length would now have to be 2.8 times greater. Whereas in 1939 there were three more or less passable roads running from southeast to northwest between Ladoga and the Gulf of Finland, there are now at least six in the narrowest part.

Another important factor is the definition and legal consolidation of state borders in the region. In particular, the state borders of the Russian Federation with Lithuania and Latvia are defined both on the ground and in state treaties. In contrast, although the state border with the Republic of Estonia is defined on the ground, it is not enshrined in a state treaty, and the border zones are poorly described.

Thus, the authors conclude that in the Baltic region, geographical space plays a key role in the formation of a 'grey zone' where military-political factors have come to prevail over the benefits of economic cooperation. In the context of the 'grey zone', control over the waters of the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea, as well as their key islands, is of strategic importance, as confirmed by historical experience. In addition, contemporary changes in the geographical landscape and

political uncertainty regarding borders complicate the assessment of emerging threats. In this regard, the militarisation of the region creates risks of intentional or unintentional escalation. Thus, the geographical features of the Baltic region make it vulnerable to potential conflict, in which control over space will be a key instrument.

Analysis of NATO and EU military and non-military actions in the Baltic region

The methods and means used by NATO, the EU, and their individual member states to achieve their strategic goals in the Baltic region can be divided into military and non-military (political-diplomatic, economic, informational-psychological). However, a common feature of their use is the geographical space, namely the geographical features of the region, which, according to Western military and non-military analysts, are considered to be “Russia’s weaknesses in the region”.¹ First and foremost, this is the exclave position of the Kaliningrad region and its dependence on supplies from mainland Russia, its narrow coastline on the Baltic Sea, and the narrow fairways in the neutral waters of the Gulf of Finland. In military-strategic terms, this is the concentration of Baltic Fleet ships and vessels at two naval bases in Baltiysk and Kronstadt, the limited military resources of the Kaliningrad region, and the proximity of key Russian regions to the border with NATO member states.

Taking into account these ‘geographical pain points’, the leaders of NATO, the EU, and the states of the region are planning and carrying out actions aimed at destabilising the military-political situation in the Baltic region, often justifying them with ‘Russia’s aggressive policy’.

Military methods and means primarily include the militarisation of the Baltic region. This involves NATO expansion (the admission of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance in 2023–2024), an increase in the military presence of other NATO countries (the US, Germany, and the UK) and Alliance forces in the region, and the deployment of NATO forces in the Baltic states. Finland and Sweden, increasing the military presence of other NATO countries (the US, Germany, and the UK) and collective Alliance forces in the region, building up and modernising the armed forces of NATO member countries in the region (with Poland and Germany at the forefront), and the construction and modernisation of military infrastructure.

¹ Russia’s Military Modernisation: A Challenge for NATO, 2017, London, *Chatham House*, URL: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/2016-03-russia-new-tools-giles.pdf> (accessed 30.03.2025) ; Filling NATO’s Baltic gap, 2016, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), URL: https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2016/ICDS_Report-Closing_NATO_s_Baltic_Gap-RUS.pdf (accessed 30.03.2025).

Here are a few examples of recent military activity by NATO and its member states in the Baltic region. These actions are clearly demonstrative, provocative, and aggressive in nature.¹

In particular, the United States has formed a Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF) on German territory, which will begin conducting occasional deployments of new Typhon medium- and short-range ground-based missile systems in 2026. MDTF on German territory, which will begin conducting occasional deployments of new Typhon medium- and short-range ground-based missile systems with Standard SM-6 (with a range of up to 500 km) and Tomahawk (with a range of up to 1,800 km) multi-purpose missiles, medium-range Dark Eagle missiles (with a range of up to 2,700 km), and promising missiles with hypersonic warheads in a non-nuclear version, which are part of the US military doctrine of a 'global disarming strike'. Since 2022, the number of US military personnel stationed in Poland has doubled, reaching approximately 10,000. The United States has established a permanent US Army garrison (USAG-P) in Poland, opened a missile defence base (in Redzikowo), and a long-term storage and maintenance facility for military equipment (in Powidz). The US also began a military presence at the Reedo base (Estonia), located 45 km from the Russian border.

In Mikkeli (Finland), 300 km from St. Petersburg, the headquarters of NATO's Multi-Corps Land Component Command (MCLCC) is being established. In addition, the United States has been granted unhindered access to 15 military facilities in Finland, some of which are located in close proximity to the Russian border, as well as to 17 facilities in Sweden.

On May 22, 2025, for the first time in the history of the Bundeswehr, Germany began to deploy a military contingent abroad permanently — the 45th Tank Brigade, stationed in Lithuania. In July 2025, the United Kingdom placed its 4th Brigade Combat Team on high alert for further deployment to Estonia. In July 2024, NATO's Multinational Battle Group in Latvia, led by Canadian command, was transformed into NATO's Multinational Brigade Latvia, with almost double the number of personnel and equipment.

To manage NATO operations in the Baltic Sea, the CTF Baltic regional naval headquarters was established in Rostock, Germany, in October 2024. In January 2025, NATO launched Operation Baltic Sentry to protect critical underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. In fact, this operation is being conducted by NATO's multinational forces to combat Russia's "shadow oil and gas fleet" and organise a possible blockade of the Gulf of Finland for Russian ships.

In addition to expanding military infrastructure in the Baltic region, large-scale NATO exercises and multinational exercises led by the US command in Europe are regularly held, such as DEFENDER-Europe, BALTOPS, Steadfast Defender, Anakonda, Dragon, Thunder Storm, Brave Griffin, Griffin Lightning, and others. The number and scale of exercises have increased significantly since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022. At the same

¹ See: [2].

time, their number near the Russian border has reached 40 per year,¹ and the concept and scenarios of the exercises are clearly offensive in nature, contrary to NATO representatives' statements about the "defensive nature of the exercises". In particular, the exercises involve the transfer of additional forces and equipment to NATO's eastern flank in the Baltic region, conducting offensive operations, launching missile and bomb strikes on the Kaliningrad region, landing air and sea assaults, laying sea mines, blocking the Russian Baltic Fleet and Russian shipping in the Baltic Sea, etc.

Aircraft from NATO countries (primarily the US, UK, Germany, France, and Sweden) are actively conducting radio-technical and radio-electronic reconnaissance in the Baltic Sea, studying potential theatres of military operations in the Kaliningrad and Leningrad regions and the Baltic Sea.

In addition, high-ranking military officials from NATO countries have repeatedly made threats against the Kaliningrad region. In particular, the commander of the Polish Land Forces, General Skrzypczak, has repeatedly stated the need to "take Kaliningrad back by force" and "destroy the Russian outpost in Europe".² In July 2025, General Donahue, commander of the US Army in Europe and Africa, publicly stated that modern allied capabilities could "take that [Kaliningrad] down from the ground faster than ever before".³ Statements by representatives of the Baltic states regarding a military solution to the issue of the Kaliningrad region and Russian maritime shipping in the Baltic Sea are made with such frequency that the authors consider it inappropriate to mention them in this article.

The authors believe that the collective West is openly demonstrating its power, which indicates that a potential adversary is shifting from a concept of deterrence to a concept of intimidation. In fact, this involves the limited use of armed forces against the interests and security of the Russian Federation. The show of force, in turn, serves as a military cover for the use of political and economic means and methods against Russia, while the presence of large numbers of NATO and NATO-member armed forces in the Baltic region limits Russia's ability to respond symmetrically to external pressure with military force or the threat of its use.

In addition to military methods, the Western coalition also actively uses political and diplomatic methods and means. Direct methods include effectively

¹ Gerasimov: Number of NATO exercises near Russian borders reaches 40 per year, 2024, *TASS*, December 18, URL: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/22703753> (accessed 20.04.2025).

² Wojsko wzmacnia granice z Białorusią i Rosją. Gen. Skrzypczak: To nie ma nic wspólnego z fortyfikacją, 2024, *Rzecz Pospolita*, 06.02.2024, URL: <https://www.rp.pl/wojsko/art39791601-wojsko-wzmacnia-granice-z-bialorusia-i-rosja-gen-skrzypczak-to-nie-ma-nic-wspolnego-z-fortyfikacja> (accessed 22.07.2025).

³ Judson Jen. Army Europe chief unveils NATO eastern flank defense plan, 2025, *Defense News*, Jul 17, URL: <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2025/07/16/army-europe-chief-unveils-nato-eastern-flank-defense-plan/> (accessed 23.07.2025).

“squeezing” the Russian Federation out of international organisations such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Nordic Council, the Union of Baltic Cities, etc., suspending the work of the Russia-NATO Council, attempting to challenge the authority of the Russian delegation to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, etc.

Indirect political and diplomatic measures include downgrading Russia’s diplomatic relations with Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, closing Russian consulates in Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states, and expelling Russian diplomats from all countries in the region. In addition, Poland and the Baltic states have banned Russian citizens with valid Schengen visas from entering their countries since September 19, 2022, and have also stopped issuing visas to them. Finland closed its border to Russian tourists on September 30, 2022. Private vehicles registered in Russia are not permitted to enter EU countries, and even in the case of private travel, such vehicles may be subject to confiscation. Moreover, there have been numerous instances in which Russian citizens have been denied entry at EU borders without any stated explanation. In addition, indirect political and diplomatic methods of pressure on Russia include increased discrimination against the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states, Western support for the non-systemic Russian opposition that fled Russia (Vilnius and Warsaw have become some of its main centers abroad), as well as threats to “close” the Baltic Sea or the Gulf of Finland to Russia, voiced, for example, by Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs¹ and Commander of the Estonian Armed Forces, Andrus Merilo.²

Economic methods and means of exerting pressure on Russia include sanctions policies aimed at isolating Russia economically and creating economic problems for it, which, according to the authors of the sanctions, should lead to political destabilisation and, ideally for them, a change of political power in Russia. At the same time, all the Baltic countries that are members of the European Union not only participate in the EU sanctions against Russia, but are also their main initiators.

In addition, since the summer of 2022, the European Union and Lithuania have restricted land freight transit from mainland Russia to the Kaliningrad region and back [35, p. 47]. At the same time, Russian freight transport by road to the European Union, the entry of ships flying the Russian flag into EU ports, as well as ships flying foreign flags carrying Russian oil, will be completely banned (exceptions apply to medical, food, energy, and humanitarian purposes).

¹ The Kremlin responded to Latvia’s threats to close the Baltic Sea to Russia, 2023, *RIA Novosti*, 23.10.2023, URL: <https://ria.ru/20231023/more-1904635928.html> (accessed 20.04.2025).

² The Foreign Ministry assessed the possible closure of the Gulf of Finland to Russian ships, 2024, *RBK*, 01.10.2024, URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/01/10/2024/66fb7fd89a7947886759efe6> (accessed 20.04.2025).

We believe that sabotage of the Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines should be considered a method of direct economic pressure on Russia in the Baltic region. According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, this was “most likely done by the Americans or someone acting on their behalf”.¹ However, in our view, the most striking example of the creation of economic threats to the Russian Federation is the attempts to seize oil tankers used in Russia’s interests and sailing in the Baltic Sea under foreign flags (in Western terminology, “Russia’s shadow fleet”),² as well as organising acts of sabotage against them.³

The main feature of informational and psychological methods and tools, in our opinion, is their indirect influence on the overall situation in the region. The targets of these methods are both the Russian population, which Western media outlets, with the direct involvement of Western special services, seek to misinform and turn against the existing government, and the residents of the Baltic region countries that are members of the EU and NATO. In the second case, disinformation and propaganda are aimed at constructing an ‘enemy image’ of Russia and promoting the narrative of a ‘Russian threat’, thereby enabling the governments of these states to secure public support for both their own militarisation and the broader militarisation of the Baltic region. In addition, disinformation and propaganda about the ‘threat from the east’ also allow for the manipulation of civil society in these countries in the interests of anti-Russian, pro-globalist elites.

At the forefront of these activities are both information and psychological warfare centres located outside the Baltic region and centres deployed within the region itself. Among the latter are the NATO Centre of Excellence for Cooperative Cyber Defence (Estonia), the NATO Centre of Excellence for Energy Security (Lithuania), the NATO Centre of Excellence for Strategic Communications (Latvia), and the European Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats (Finland).

The overarching objective of the methods and instruments employed by NATO, the EU, and their individual member states in the Baltic region is to weaken Russia’s position in the region in the long run, to undermine the Russian

¹ Putin suggested that the Americans blew up the Nord Stream pipelines, 2023, *TASS*, 14 December, URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/19539217> (accessed 20.04.2025).

² Tanker bound for Russia detained in Estonia, 2025, *RBK*, 11.04.2025, URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/04/2025/67f900a79a7947de6c98260c> (accessed 20.04.2025).

³ “Pure sabotage”: experts discuss possible causes of emergency on Koala tanker, 2025, *Moscow Komsomolets*, 10.02.2025, URL: <https://www.mk.ru/incident/2025/02/10/diversiya-v-chistom-vide-eksperty-rasskazali-o-vozmozhnykh-prichinakh-chp-na-tankere-koala.html> (accessed 20.04.2025).

economy (more than half of Russia's maritime oil exports go through the Baltic),¹ to damage the international image of the Russian Federation, and to create economic difficulties for the Kaliningrad exclave with the aim of reducing its ties with mainland Russia. Another goal is to force the Russian Federation to build up and 'stretch' its armed forces along its western border, and, in essence, to divert part of its forces and resources during the special military operation.

Hence, the authors conclude that NATO and the European Union are systematically employing both military and non-military methods against the Russian Federation to create a 'grey zone' in the Baltic region aimed at undermining its economic and political sovereignty. At the same time, military methods, such as the militarisation of the region and an increase in the number and scale of exercises, which are clearly demonstrative in nature, are combined with non-military methods and, in some cases, serve as their basis or supplement.

These actions against Russia in the Baltic region indicate the Western coalition's intention to provoke the Russian Federation into an asymmetrical military response, which would, in turn, enable it to accuse Russia of deliberate aggression, portray it as an aggressor in the eyes of the international community, and subsequently employ more coercive political and economic measures against it, including military ones.

Conclusion

The study identified key trends in NATO and EU strategy in the Baltic region aimed at creating a 'grey zone', i. e., an area of instability combining military and non-military methods of political and economic pressure on Russia. The analysis showed that the actions of NATO, the EU, and their member states are systematic and comprehensive in nature, including the militarisation of the region, economic sanctions, political and diplomatic isolation, and informational and psychological influence.

The Baltic region has now become one of the key battlegrounds in the confrontation between Russia and the collective West. NATO's expansion to include Finland and Sweden has shifted the balance of power in the region and created a continuous belt of Alliance territory along Russia's borders.

In the Baltic region, a combination of measures that remain below the threshold of open military conflict yet systematically undermine Russia's security effectively operationalises the concept of a 'grey zone'. The defining feature of this strategy is its phased nature: the build-up of military presence, economic 'strangulation', and information warfare are collectively shaping a

¹ They want to close the Baltic Sea to tankers carrying Russian oil, 2025, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, February 11, URL: <https://rg.ru/2025/02/11/tankeram-s-rossijskoj-neftiu-hotiat-zakryt-baltijskoe-more.html> (accessed 25.03.2025) ; Denmark could block Russian oil tankers from reaching markets, 2023, *Financial Times*, November 15, URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/6409ed38-73f4-46b3-b0f1-649c5e5b79db> (accessed 25.03.2025).

new political reality in which Russia is compelled to operate under conditions of permanent crisis. At the same time, all of these methods and instruments are implemented in a context marked by violations of, or non-compliance with, international law.

The military component of pressure includes not only the build-up of NATO contingents in Poland and the Baltic States, but also regular exercises simulating offensive operations, including in the Kaliningrad region, and blocking Russia's access to the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland.

Demonstrations of force, such as flights by reconnaissance aircraft and B-52H strategic bombers near Russia's borders, serve as a tool of intimidation, reinforcing non-military methods of influence. At the same time, legal uncertainty allows the West to avoid direct responsibility while retaining the ability to deny aggressive intentions.

Political and diplomatic methods are aimed at isolating Russia by pushing it out of regional organisations, severing consular ties, discriminating against the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states, and altering historical memory.

Economic sanctions, including the blockade of Kaliningrad transit and sabotage against energy infrastructure, aim to destabilise Russian regions by increasing social and political tensions.

The information and psychological warfare coordinated through NATO centres in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania aims to manipulate public opinion both in Russia and in Alliance countries, shaping the image of Russia as an "aggressor" posing an existential threat to the 'civilised' West.

At the same time, geography plays a key role in the confrontation between Russia and the West. In particular, control over the Baltic Sea islands, such as Hiiumaa and Gotland, Russia's short coastline on the Baltic Sea, and Finland and Estonia's control of the entrance to the Gulf of Finland have historically proven their importance, as NATO's current plans to use the Scandinavian countries for a naval blockade repeat the scenarios of World War II.

The legal uncertainty of the 'grey zone' complicates Russia's response, as traditional norms of international law do not take hybrid threats into account. The lack of clear criteria for aggression in cyberspace, economic coercion, or information attacks allows the West to act with impunity. However, as the analysis shows, military force remains an integral part of this strategy, creating a backdrop for non-military pressure.

The Baltic region today is a classic example of a 'grey zone' where conflict exists in a sub-threshold format but carries the risk of escalation. There is no doubt that NATO and EU actions are aimed at weakening Russia in the long term, and their effectiveness largely depends on Moscow's ability not only to adapt to hybrid challenges but also to apply asymmetric countermeasures.

Given historical experience and current trends, we can expect the confrontation to intensify further, with military force becoming increasingly intertwined with economic, political, and informational measures. In these circumstances, Russia

needs to develop comprehensive countermeasures combining military deterrence, legal counteraction, and the strengthening of regional stability and security, especially in the Kaliningrad region.

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