

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Dangerous allies? Small states and great power entrapment risks

Andris Banka 

The Interdisciplinary Centre for Baltic Sea Region Research (IFZO), University of Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany  
Email: [banka.andris@gmail.com](mailto:banka.andris@gmail.com)

(Received 24 October 2024; revised 27 February 2025; accepted 10 April 2025)

## Abstract

Security alliances are often portrayed as vital tools for advancing US national objectives. Yet alliance networks, critics charge, also carry some undesirable side effects and risks. The so-called problem of moral hazard is one of them. In this context, US Baltic allies have long been spotlighted as prime suspects that may one day rope their superpower patron into an unwanted conflict. With Washington having their backs at all times, the argument goes, the Baltic republics are free to pursue ill-advised policies and press their claims against Russia. While the charge of alliance entrapment via Tallinn, Vilnius, and Riga has been routinely evoked, it has not been rigorously examined. This study addresses this gap in the literature. The material presented speaks to the fact that the narrative of the Baltic countries as recklessly minded US allies does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. Structural factors, namely power disparity with the potential adversary, push against the logic of the Baltics undertaking provocative moves. That said, the paper concedes a half-point, namely that the US role in securing the Baltic region is not entirely risk-free and that Washington has assumed greater burdens than it anticipated during the initial alliance formation stage.

**Keywords:** alliance entrapment; moral hazard; NATO; Russia; US–Baltic alliance

## Introduction

Security alliances are often portrayed as vital tools for advancing US national objectives. They are credited for deterring adversaries, extending Washington's diplomatic and economic reach, and serving as a foundational block for the current US-led international order. Yet critics argue that alliances also carry some undesirable side effects and risks. Among them is the so-called problem of moral hazard. The logic underpinning this alliance-related pathology can be summed up as follows: by committing firmly to an ally's defence, a security patron incentivises the protected state to behave boldly and assume more significant risks during crisis events. Thus, while alliance formation and pledges of military support may work towards deterring a common adversary, that same commitment, somewhat paradoxically, may also encourage belligerent behaviour or offensive actions by the protected alliance member.<sup>1</sup>

The question of whether formal alliance guarantees incentivise alliance members to undertake provocative moves towards a third party has attracted notable scholarly interest. While some of the most authoritative work suggests that alliance entrapment is an exceedingly rare phenomenon, others insist that its demise has been exaggerated as scholars have simply been 'digging in the

<sup>1</sup>Brett V. Benson, *Constructing International Security Alliances, Deterrence, and Moral Hazard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 43–7.

wrong place.<sup>2</sup> Entrapment-related critiques have, in particular, been levied against US junior allies. According to one prominent scholar, upon receiving Washington's extravagant security insurance, small states tend to behave recklessly and pursue narrow national interests that run counter to those of their security guarantor.<sup>3</sup>

In this regard, the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been spotlighted as prime suspects that could one day rope their superpower patron into unwanted conflict. With the United States having their backs at all times, the argument goes, the Baltic governments feel emboldened to undertake overly hawkish policies. Equipped with the knowledge that the great power ally would bail them out no matter what, they needle the Russian bear, thus creating an entrapment hazard for Washington. Under this reasoning, Baltic republics, one critic claims, are part of the 'escalation and expansion' caucus against Russia.<sup>4</sup> With Moscow waging a bloody war in Ukraine, another policy commentator ominously predicts: 'These countries [Baltics] now are pressing for war with Moscow. And NATO is listening to them.'<sup>5</sup> Echoing this sentiment, another policy commentator submits that small states like Estonia are essentially toying with World War III.<sup>6</sup>

This line of argument has not been confined only to scholarly and analytical commentary. Small-state alliance entrapment concerns have had some purchase among the governing elites in the United States. For instance, during his first term in office, US president Donald Trump appeared particularly concerned about Washington's exposure to freelancing junior allies. In a 2018 interview, Trump questioned the wisdom of protecting vulnerable European allies and laid out the following hypothetical scenario: 'Montenegro is a tiny country with very strong people. They're very aggressive people. They may get aggressive, and congratulations, you're in World War III.'<sup>7</sup> These statements prompted the then-Latvian foreign minister to play down the prospects of such an alliance-related scenario. 'Latvia has no intent through any provocative behavior to launch World War III. We should dispute those kinds of fears and worries that some people have about smaller nations getting larger nations into World War III, whether it be Latvia, Montenegro, or Luxembourg', he attempted to reassure.<sup>8</sup>

Set against this backdrop, this paper seeks to appraise America's risk of alliance entrapment in the Baltics. As such, the analysis is guided by the following key questions: Is there any validity to claims that depict the Baltics as disobedient allies willing to provoke Russia? How have leaders in Tallinn, Vilnius, and Riga behaved during instances of heightened tensions? What is the likelihood of Washington being embroiled in a Baltic-triggered military crisis? While the charge of alliance entrapment via the Baltics has been routinely evoked, it has never been rigorously examined. This paper addresses this gap in the literature. By grounding the study in rich empirical material and scholarly arguments, the presented analysis seeks to go beyond simple caricatures and ascertain the risk of alliance entrapment for the United States in the Baltics.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Beckley, 'The myth of entangling alliances reassessing the security risks of U.S. defense pacts', *International Security*, 39:4 (2015), pp 7–48; available at: [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00197](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00197); Tudor A. Onea, 'How to entrap your protector: Reassessing entrapment in light of the Crimean War crisis', *Review of International Studies* (2025), pp. 1–24, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000731>.

<sup>3</sup>Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 35.

<sup>4</sup>Justin Logan, 'D.C. symposium: Future of European security in the wake of the Ukraine War', *Institute for Peace & Diplomacy* (17 April 2023), available at: <https://peacediplomacy.org/2023/03/27/in-person-symposium-the-future-of-european-security-in-the-wake-of-the-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>5</sup>Doug Bandow, 'Are the U.S. and Russia destined for war over Ukraine?', *CATO* (13 May 2022), available at: <https://www.cato.org/commentary/are-us-russia-destined-war-over-ukraine?s=03#>.

<sup>6</sup>Bradley Devlin, 'Estonia toys with World War III', *The American Conservative* (15 March 2022), available at: <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/estonia-toys-with-world-war-iii/>.

<sup>7</sup>'Very aggressive': Trump suggests Montenegro could cause World War Three', *The Guardian* (19 July 2018), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/19/very-aggressive-trump-suggests-montenegro-could-cause-world-war-three>.

<sup>8</sup>Richard Milne, 'Latvian foreign minister urges bigger defence spend', *Financial Times* (22 July 2018), available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/20fc6a4e-8be6-11e8-b18d-0181731a0340>.

The presented argument unfolds as follows. First, the paper discusses the theoretical underpinnings of alliance entrapment and identifies measures actors can take to mitigate the risks of this alliance-related phenomenon. After that, the presented material catalogues claims made by policy analysts and commentators that suggest that the Baltics, as formal US allies, are particularly worrisome concerning the entrapment risks that they pose. The following sections then proceed to assess Baltic behaviour during crisis situations. The material presented speaks to the fact that the narrative of the Baltic countries as recklessly minded US allies does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. On the contrary, escalation avoidance has characterised their behaviour during moments of heightened tension. Structural reasons, namely power disparity with the potential adversary, push against the logic of the Baltics undertaking provocative moves. That said, the paper concedes that critics have correctly observed that the US role in securing the Baltic region is not entirely risk-free and that Washington's assumed security burdens over the last two decades have only gradually increased. While entrapment risks have been overblown, the likelihood of US entanglement into a regional conflict may, in fact, have increased.

### Alliances and entrapment concerns

The United States extends its security guarantees to allied governments for various reasons: to aggregate power, to gain basing rights in contested geopolitical spaces, and to better protect global economic commons, to name just a few examples.<sup>9</sup> Sceptics, however, have cautioned that this globe-spanning web of alliances may one day turn into 'transmission belts for war'.<sup>10</sup> Proponents of this notion have long identified a particular moral hazard problem inherent in security alliances. A good starting point for discussion here is Glenn Snyder's seminal work on alliances, in which he captured the two principal alliance-related pathologies. On the one side of the alliance dilemma horn, he contends, allies worry about entrapment, namely being dragged into conflicts due to treaty commitments or partner governments' recklessly pursued policies. On the other side stands abandonment, the fear that the security partner might abrogate its treaty commitments and not come to the ally's aid.<sup>11</sup> These two dynamics are seen as interrelated. When a security provider is holding a robust security umbrella over an ally, the benefactor may be emboldened and undertake riskier moves than it otherwise would and, as such, contribute to escalatory dynamics or even spark a war. That said, a weaker alliance commitment, in the name of minimising entrapment risks, may give rise to fears of abandonment.<sup>12</sup> Simply put, trying to lessen the risk of entrapment will likely increase the risk of abandonment and vice versa.<sup>13</sup>

While all allies, big and small, can be exposed to entrapment, great power sponsors have traditionally been more preoccupied with the likelihood of being pulled into allied-initiated conflict, while junior allies are more on guard concerning the likelihood of abandonment.<sup>14</sup> As elaborated by Victor Cha, large powers are more concerned about 'compulsive overdependent pathologies by small allies, while small allies are more concerned about undercommitment pathologies by big

<sup>9</sup>Stephen G. Brooks, John G. Ikenberry and William C. Wohlforth, 'Don't come home, America: The case against retrenchment', *International Security*, 37:3 (2013), pp. 7–51, available at: [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00107](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00107).

<sup>10</sup>Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 169.

<sup>11</sup>Glenn H. Snyder, 'The security dilemma in alliance politics', *World Politics*, 36:4 (1984), pp. 461–95, available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010183>.

<sup>12</sup>Alexander Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), p. 9.

<sup>13</sup>Galia Press-Barnathan, 'Managing the hegemon: NATO under unipolarity', *Security Studies*, 15:2 (2006), pp. 271–309 (p. 280), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410600829554>.

<sup>14</sup>Bruno Tertrais, 'Entangling alliances? Europe, the United States, Asia, and the risk of a new 1914', *The Atlantic Council* (27 June 2002), available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/entangling-alliances-europe-the-united-states-asia-and-the-risk-of-a-new-1914/>.

allies'.<sup>15</sup> Thus, by design, asymmetric alliances will likely magnify great power fear of entrapment.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the scholarly literature has tended to treat America's small-state allies as particularly prone to adventurist behaviour. Once safely under the protective US nuclear umbrella, Barry Posen submits, junior allies feel free to indulge their worst impulses and turn into 'reckless drivers'.<sup>17</sup> Such behaviour then risks 'roping the United States into conflicts over strategically marginal territory'.<sup>18</sup> By framing security alliances as insurance contracts, Benson et al. unpack the logic of entrapment: 'Just as insured motorists may exercise less caution in their driving, states insured by alliance treaties have an incentive to behave more aggressively in negotiating with other states.'<sup>19</sup>

That said, numerous scholars have pushed back against this reasoning and counselled against overstating entrapment risks. After all, there are mitigation strategies that great powers can pursue to minimise the likelihood of this phenomenon. One such remedy presents itself at the alliance design stage. Here, the record indicates that when it comes to potentially problematic allies located in contested regions, the US government has sought to deliberately insert certain loopholes or escape clauses in the alliance contracts, just in case the 'insured' ally would one day decide to undertake provocative moves and push Washington into an undesirable war. The careful language in which security pacts are crafted thus may offer the United States a way out of a situation where an alliance partner seeks to pull it into a crisis of its own making.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, a body of scholarship demonstrates that the terms of security alliances are often purposefully spelled out with a degree of ambiguity and conditionality, thus allowing the involved parties some room for manoeuvre.<sup>21</sup>

Another dimension that could come into play is regime type. Democratic nations tend to be more dependable alliance partners, and security alliances formed between democratic states enjoy greater longevity.<sup>22</sup> That being said, the work by Chiba et al. further suggests that while 'democracies may be more likely to fulfill their commitments', they are more selective during the alliance formation stage, seeking to avoid obligating themselves to participate in 'conflicts in which they may not have an interest'.<sup>23</sup> Probing this issue from the public opinion angle, Justwan and Berejikian further find that if a US ally, in their examined case South Korea, were to be the instigator of a military crisis, this would somewhat reduce American support for the government in Seoul, but only 'for certain types of military operations (cruise missile and nuclear strikes) but not others'.<sup>24</sup> The study concluded that the US population remained largely interested in defending South Korea, irrespective of how the conflict had originally unfolded.

Even after the formation stage, great powers have some tools at their disposal to rein in an overly bellicose ally. For instance, a partner government can privately convey its dissatisfaction with

<sup>15</sup>Victor D. Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 45.

<sup>16</sup>Daniel Sobelman, 'Restraining an ally: Israel, the United States, and Iran's nuclear program, 2011–2012', *Texas National Security Review*, 1:4 (2018), p. 13, available at: <https://doi.org/10.15781/T23T9DS99>

<sup>17</sup>Posen, *Restraint*, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup>Barry R. Posen, 'Pull back: The case for a less activist foreign policy', *Foreign Affairs*, 92:1 (2013), pp. 116–128 (p. 122), available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-01-01/pull-back>

<sup>19</sup>Brett V. Benson, Adam Meierowitz and Kristopher W. Ramsay, 'Inducing deterrence through moral hazard in alliance contracts', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58:2 (2014), pp. 307–335 (p. 308), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002712467936>.

<sup>20</sup>Mira Rapp-Hooper, *Shields of the Republic: The Triumph and Peril of America's Alliances* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), p. 74.

<sup>21</sup>Michaela Mattes, 'Reputation, symmetry, and alliance design', *International Organization*, 66:4 (2012), pp. 679–707, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081831200029X>; Joshua C. Fjelstul and Dan Reiter, 'Explaining incompleteness and conditionality in alliance agreements', *International Interactions*, 45:6 (2019), pp. 976–1002, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2019.1647838>.

<sup>22</sup>Scott D. Bennett, 'Testing alternative models of alliance duration, 1816–1984', *American Journal of Political Science*, 41:3 (1997), pp. 846–78, available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111677>.

<sup>23</sup>Daina Chiba, Jesse C. Johnson, and Brett Ashley Leeds, 'Careful commitments: Democratic states and alliance design', *Journal of Politics*, 77:4 (2015), pp. 968–982 (p. 980), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1086/682074>.

<sup>24</sup>Florian Justwan and Jeffrey D. Berejikian, 'Conditional assistance: Entrapment concerns and individual-level support for US alliance partners', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 8:3 (2023), p. 15, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogad017>.

allied behaviour, apply bilateral diplomatic pressure, or seek to publicise its complaints.<sup>25</sup> Another factor that may work towards alleviating the risk of entrapment is the notion of tight alliance relations.<sup>26</sup> Scholars such as Press-Barnathan have advanced the argument that ‘institutionalized channels of communication, consultations, and decision-making and operational procedures can allow members in the alliance to exert influence on other members, to restrain them from unilaterally pursuing undesired policies.’<sup>27</sup> A similar point is put forward by Pressman, who notes that close alliances facilitate the exchange of information and enable close monitoring of partners, thus ameliorating risks of alliance entrapment. In such instances, withholding information from one’s ally becomes very problematic.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Tierney posits that alliance ties enable ‘consultation, giving doves an opportunity to point out the pitfalls of reckless military action and highlight alternative paths to achieving policy goals.’<sup>29</sup>

For these reasons, scholars, while not writing off the possibility of alliance entrapment entirely, have maintained that the issue is less severe than one might generally anticipate.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, often-cited work by Michael Beckley finds that clear-cut cases of this alliance-related phenomenon are rare.<sup>31</sup> Yet, despite the rarity of such instances, Beckley, at the same time, reasons that the Baltic republics, as America’s forward-most allies, belong to a riskier category. ‘I do think the risk is higher there [in the Baltics] than for the vast majority of US alliances. The most risky alliances are those where the states in question are strong enough to get in trouble or to start a war, but they are too weak to finish the fight by themselves. They would be dependent on the US,’ Beckley noted.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, while entrapment appears to be a relatively rare alliance phenomenon, detractors insist that its risks are actually underappreciated.<sup>33</sup> In recent work, Tudor Onea underscores that despite sceptics’ pronouncement of classic entrapment as a ‘boogeyman,’ it ‘remains highly relevant to present world politics.’<sup>34</sup> In his view, Taiwan could serve as a prime example of Washington being manipulated by its junior ally into unwanted intervention. The discussion that follows suggests that the three Baltic countries are also considered prime suspects of this alliance pathology.

### Troublesome allies?

The Baltic states are America’s allies in the strictest sense of this term. They share a formal treaty that the US Congress has ratified. While, again, the terms of NATO’s Article 5 are rather vaguely crafted, in principle, the involved parties are committed to mutual defence. With this ‘golden’ security insurance in hand, sceptics charge, the Baltic leaders are emboldened to press claims against their much larger neighbour to the East. As such, it has become rather commonplace to hear that these small states carry notable entrapment risks for the United States. Such critiques can generally be categorised into two camps. For one, policy commentators and scholars have sought to

<sup>25</sup>Jeremy Pressman, *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 6; Cha, *Powerplay*, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup>Lanoszka, *Military Alliances*, p. 57.

<sup>27</sup>Press-Barnathan, ‘Managing the hegemon,’ p. 283.

<sup>28</sup>Pressman, *Warring Friends*, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup>Dominic Tierney, ‘Does chain-ganging cause the outbreak of war?’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 55:2 (2011), pp. 285–304 (p. 291), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00650.x>.

<sup>30</sup>Hal Brands and Peter D. Feaver, ‘What are America’s alliances good for?’, *Parameters*, 47:2 (2017), pp. 15–30 (p. 19), available at: <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2928>.

<sup>31</sup>Beckley, ‘The myth.’

<sup>32</sup>Michael Beckley, ‘Myth of entangling alliances: Michael Beckley on international security author chats’, *Belfer Center* (22 July 2015), available at: <https://soundcloud.com/belfercenter/myth-of-entangling-alliances-michael-beckley-on-international-security-author-chats>.

<sup>33</sup>David M. Edelstein and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, ‘It’s a trap! Security commitments and the risks of entrapment’, in A. Trevor Thrall and Benjamin H. Friedman (eds), *US Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: The Case for Restraint* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 40–76.

<sup>34</sup>Onea, ‘How to entrap,’ p. 2.

highlight the deep-seated neuralgia that the Baltics supposedly hold against their former occupiers. The entrapment risks, some assert, spring from these countries' profound animosity towards Russia and their historical grievances.<sup>35</sup> These supposed vengeful passions, combined with the US military ensuring their safety, induce them to pursue reckless and uncompromising policies vis-à-vis Moscow. Such ill-advised and hawkish moves then create the risk of snaring their great power patron into escalation spirals or, even worse, unwanted war. In the view of Sumantra Maitra, 'never in recent memory have there been more hawkish and reckless protectorates'.<sup>36</sup>

Coming at this issue from a different angle, scholars have argued that these frontline states' geography and size make them worrisome partners. Joshua Shiffrin, for instance, has argued that there is a fundamental difference between NATO enlargement in 1999 and 2004, the latter of which placed the Baltics into the transatlantic alliance. In his view, states adjacent to Russia pose real escalation risks for the United States. It is in this region that NATO is most likely to be drawn into 'some kind of kerfuffle with post-Cold War Russia'.<sup>37</sup> Echoing this sentiment, Samuel Charap and Miranda Priebe maintain that during the currently heightened political tensions, 'some eastern flank allies might act independently' and 'opt for early escalation' vis-à-vis Moscow regardless of Washington's preferences.<sup>38</sup>

Here, it is worth noting that there is an overlap between those concerned with alliance entrapment and those opposing NATO eastward enlargement in the first place. During the 1990s, the question of Baltic NATO membership emerged as a highly contentious topic, with a chorus of critics arguing that extending US security over small and militarily exposed states was a cardinal error and deleterious to US relations with Russia. Michael Mandelbaum depicted NATO expansion as the 'Titanic of American foreign policy' and suggested that 'the iceberg on which it will founder is Baltic membership'.<sup>39</sup> Another prominent figure, Henry Kissinger, likewise shared the view that the US would be making an egregious error by allowing these nations into the world's premier security alliance. In his view, stretching the US security umbrella over countries like Estonia would prove to be too inflammatory for the Kremlin.<sup>40</sup> This highlights that some of the alliance entanglement and entrapment concerns were already raised during the US-Baltic alliance formation stage.

Concerns of alliance entrapment via the Baltics have been further raised and amplified by various Western leaders. In a rather curious way, such fears have revealed themselves within the context of national leaders vying for NATO's top position. As speculation swirled about who would assume the institutional reins of the transatlantic alliance, several voices in Washington and across European capitals cautioned against selecting someone from the Baltics. Such a move was viewed as too provocative towards Moscow.<sup>41</sup> Oana Lungescu, until recently the longest-serving NATO spokesperson, portrayed alliance backroom dynamics as follows: 'Washington and Berlin remain cautious about anything that may give Russia the smallest pretext for escalation, so they could find

<sup>35</sup> Robert Clarke, 'Why are the Baltic states reckless drivers in NATO?', *The John Quincy Adams Society*, Marcellus Policy Analysis (7 June 2023), available at: <https://jqas.org/why-are-the-baltic-states-reckless-drivers-in-nato-marcellus-policy-analysis/>; Ted Galen Carpenter, 'NATO security dependents are not useful allies', *The National Interest* (8 January 2022), available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/nato-security-dependents-are-not-useful-allies-198953>.

<sup>36</sup> Sumantra Maitra, 'The U.S. may need to maneuver around NATO Article 5' (16 March 2024), *The American Conservative*, available at: <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/what-do-you-mean-we-kemosabe/>.

<sup>37</sup> Joshua Shiffrin, 'Evaluating NATO enlargement: From Cold War victory to the Russia-Ukraine war', *Defense Priorities* (26 April 2023), available at: <https://www.defensepriorities.org/events/evaluating-nato-enlargement>.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel Charap and Miranda Priebe, 'Will Putin stop at Ukraine? That's the wrong question', *The Washington Quarterly*, 47:3 (2024), pp. 143–159 (p. 151), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2398319>.

<sup>39</sup> Helle Bering-Dale, 'The newer, bigger NATO: Fears v. facts', *Hoover Institution* (1 April 2021), available at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/newer-bigger-nato-fears-v-facts>.

<sup>40</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 34.

<sup>41</sup> Estonian PM Kallas signals interest in top NATO job – Politico, Reuters (15 November 2023), available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/estonian-pm-kallas-signals-interest-top-nato-job-politico-2023-11-15/>.

it hard to opt for a Baltic leader who may follow a national agenda over alliance consensus.<sup>42</sup> Dutch politician Frans Timmermans explained that naming a Baltic head of NATO would be an overly destabilising move.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, the material presented illustrates that the fear of alliance entrapment via the Baltics has a long pedigree. A view has taken root in analytical circles and among some Western political elites that Tallinn, Vilnius, and Riga, as treaty allies, are willing to take on excessive risks. As Shiffrinson puts it, the Balts have engaged in 'reckless driving due to the extra margin of security provided by NATO membership.'<sup>44</sup> This paper puts this supposition to the empirical test.

### Evaluating entrapment: Definition, methods, and sources

Before proceeding to the empirical investigation, some methodological clarifications are in order. In public discourse and commentary, terms such as entrapment, entanglement, roping in, and chain-ganging are often used interchangeably. Particularly, analysts have tended to conflate entanglement with entrapment.<sup>45</sup> For the purposes of this research, it is essential to define and delineate between these terms. In this context, the scholarly work by Tongfi Kim is often used in the literature as a conceptual anchor point. In essence, Kim revised Glenn Snyder's earliest definition of entrapment by arguing that entrapment is a narrower subcategory of the entanglement phenomenon. In a key explanatory part, Kim writes: 'I define entanglement as the process whereby a state is compelled to aid an ally in a costly and unprofitable enterprise because of the alliance. Entrapment is a form of undesirable entanglement in which the entangling state adopts a risky or offensive policy not specified in the alliance agreement.'<sup>46</sup> This definition of entrapment thus puts the onus squarely on an alliance member's provocative and disobedient behaviour.

Relatedly, a valuable conceptual clarification is made by Michael Beckley, who uses a practical example to distinguish between entanglement and entrapment: 'If Taiwan made no moves toward independence, but China attacked it anyway and the United States defended Taiwan to uphold the Taiwan Relations Act, such a case would constitute entanglement but not entrapment.'<sup>47</sup> Put differently, to invoke the charge of alliance entrapment, the client state, in this case, Taiwan, would need to be the one that 'lit the match' and exhibited provocative behaviour towards an adversary. Examples of such policies may, for instance, include 'taking provocative actions aimed at extracting concessions from an adversary, refusing to compromise over a dispute, and even initiating a war.'<sup>48</sup> This paper follows Tongfi Kim's definition of entrapment.

With that clarified, this paper proceeds with an examination of the behaviours of the three Baltic states as US treaty allies. To that end, the paper draws out episodes of heightened regional tensions and process-traces decision-making by Baltic political elites. The logic of case selection is directly related to claims by critics who have suggested that, in these particular instances, Baltic lawmakers reacted rashly, and the likelihood of alliance entrapment loomed large. The analysis relies upon a wide variety of empirical material to substantiate the arguments. When scrutinising the behaviour of the Baltic governments, the study marshalls evidence from official statements,

<sup>42</sup>Oana Lungescu, 'NATO leadership: What next?', *RUSI* (30 November 2023), available at: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/nato-leadership-what-next>.

<sup>43</sup>Rutte faces competition for NATO leadership as Estonian PM Kallas declares interest', *NLTimes* (5 November 2023), available at: [https://nltimes.nl/2023/11/15/rutte-faces-competition-nato-leadership-estonian-pm-kallas-declares-interest?fbclid=IwAR1B3Ep-zu-Kw1UUMhqM1dTknsS0w\\_yTNIFtpMo0n\\_T-DeaD48I0fsLK4&s=03](https://nltimes.nl/2023/11/15/rutte-faces-competition-nato-leadership-estonian-pm-kallas-declares-interest?fbclid=IwAR1B3Ep-zu-Kw1UUMhqM1dTknsS0w_yTNIFtpMo0n_T-DeaD48I0fsLK4&s=03).

<sup>44</sup>Joshua Shiffrinson, 'Has NATO enlargement enhanced US national security?', *American Diplomacy* (1 August 2024), available at: <https://americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu/2024/08/has-nato-enlargement-enhanced-us-national-security/>.

<sup>45</sup>Miranda Priebe, Bryan Rooney, Caitlin McCulloch, and Zachary Burdette, *Do Alliances and Partnerships Entangle the United States in Conflict?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), p. 10.

<sup>46</sup>Tongfi Kim, 'Why alliances entangle but seldom entrap states', *Security Studies*, 20:3 (2011), pp. 350–377 (p. 255), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2011.599201>.

<sup>47</sup>Beckley, *The Myth*, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup>Priebe et al., *Do Alliances*, p. 11.

strategic documents, declassified US State Department documents, leaked diplomatic cables, and other open-source materials.

### Military accidents spiralling upwards

Among the pathways of how the Baltics could end up entrapping Washington in a war with Russia, scholars have underscored the dangers of inadvertent military accidents. An accident-triggered crisis, for instance, in the Baltic skies, may set in motion a spiral of escalation. Scholars like Ralph Clem have advanced the point that in the Baltic region, military exercises conducted by both NATO and Russia operating close to each other carry the risk of grave regional destabilisation.<sup>49</sup> John Mearsheimer foresees the following scenario: US and Russian fighter jets, which have come into close contact over the Baltic Sea, accidentally collide. Such an incident could easily escalate, given the high levels of fear on both sides, the lack of communication, and the mutual demonisation.<sup>50</sup> The outlined ingredients of narrow geography and mutual suspicion create a set-up in which badly gone military manoeuvres initiate the first flame. With their deep animosity and distrust of Russia, US junior allies, according to sceptics, would be tempted to demand allied intervention on their behalf, thus causing the crises to spiral upwards.

Yet empirical evidence speaks against this chain of dynamics. Those concerned with the purported hawkishness of the Baltic officials appear unaware that actual military-related accidents have already transpired in the Baltic region. Simply put, we already have empirical data points concerning Baltic behaviour during such seemingly ominous events. The most noteworthy took place in September 2005, when Russian fighter jet Su-27, en route from St Petersburg to Kaliningrad, crashed in the territory of Lithuania. The initial days witnessed its fair share of bluster and blame game. Reacting to the jet's crash, Lithuanian state officials framed it as a clear and deliberate violation of its sovereignty and outright military provocation.<sup>51</sup> Vilnius further insisted that it needed to first investigate the incident before contemplating handing over the surviving Russian pilot, whose fighter jet crashed in its territory, to Moscow.

While initially apologising for the incident and signalling a willingness to compensate Lithuania for damages, the Russian side soon began to dial up its official rhetoric. Seemingly unconcerned about the escalation ladder, Russian Air Force Chief General Vladimir Mikhailov proceeded to mock the slow NATO response to the Russian fighter jet intrusion. 'Such a big airplane was flying over such a small country and nobody saw it. This is what I find surprising. The organization of air defense [in Lithuania] is deficient, although much-praised German pilots were on duty. They were probably drinking beer or doing something else', he ridiculed NATO on the Russian news channel.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, Russia's minister of defence Sergei Ivanov suggested that the pilot should receive a medal upon returning to the homeland. What made this incident appear more sinister is that the Russian jet turned out to have been fully armed with four missiles as though it was prepared for a combat mission, a point that Russians initially had refused to concede.<sup>53</sup>

Throughout this time, Lithuanian authorities kept close contact with US representatives. Describing first interactions with the Lithuanian side, US diplomats in internal memos noted that the incident would likely complicate Lithuanian–Russian relations while equally reporting that 'the

<sup>49</sup> Ralph Clem, 'Military exercises as geopolitical messaging in the NATO–Russia dynamic: Reassurance, deterrence, and (in)stability', *Texas National Security Review*, 2:1 (2018), pp. 131–43, available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/865>.

<sup>50</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'Playing with fire in Ukraine: The underappreciated risks of catastrophic escalation', *Foreign Affairs* (17 August 2022), available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/playing-fire-ukraine?s=03>.

<sup>51</sup> V. Trojanovas imituodavo oro erdvės pažeidėją, Delfi (20 September 2005), available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/crime/vtrojanovas-imituodavo-oro-erdves-pazeideja-7521492>

<sup>52</sup> Russian general ridicules NATO over Lithuanian incident, Radio Free Europe, (26 September 2005), available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1061687.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Russian jet jangles Baltic nerves, BBC (20 September 2005), available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4264010.stm>.

Lithuanians also appear to be handling the Russians without allowing the situation to escalate.<sup>54</sup> A week after the jet crash, Vilnius was undertaking several de-escalation measures. While discussing this issue with the US ambassador, the president of Lithuania insisted that he wanted to see the pilot released as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the Lithuanian Armed Forces commander personally met with the Russian pilot and his wife to empathise with an individual caught in a rather unusual situation.<sup>55</sup>

Describing Lithuania's actions, the US internal correspondence further noted that Vilnius was working quietly off-camera with NATO allies to complete the investigation of the crash. 'Today's more amicable public line reflects [Lithuania's] hope for a concomitant cooling of rhetoric from Russia', US officials observed.<sup>56</sup> Another US diplomatic memo a few days later pointed out that Lithuanian leadership, in hopes of improving the atmosphere with Moscow, continued to take a softer public line on the issue, no longer claiming that this had been a deliberate provocation by the Kremlin.<sup>57</sup> It is worth adding that while Lithuania played down the incident, as a loyal NATO ally, it equally secretly offered Washington to 'exploit items of technical interest from the wreckage', which Lithuanian authorities were holding in a secure location.<sup>58</sup>

In the end, the Lithuanian commission concluded that the Russian jet's crash had essentially been an accident that had resulted 'from a combination of errors based on organizational, technical and human factors.'<sup>59</sup> Throughout the process, Russian officers were allowed to witness various stages of the investigation. Subsequently, Lithuanian authorities lifted all the charges against the pilot and transferred him to Russia. The Lithuanian president publicly declared that the tensions caused by the crash of a Russian Su-27 fighter bomber would not affect bilateral relations going forward.<sup>60</sup> On his part, the US ambassador to Lithuania applauded the Lithuanian authorities for their 'professionalism and calm response' in resolving this matter.<sup>61</sup> In sum, this episode speaks to the fact that Baltic authorities, contrary to the conjured-up image of trigger-happy actors, demonstrated the opposite: staying level-headed during heightened tensions. The Lithuanian government did not seek to draw NATO into a collision course with Russia. Vilnius followed the letter of the law, eased the language surrounding the incident, and engaged Moscow diplomatically.

Of course, one might reasonably object that this military accident occurred in a different geopolitical climate, one that was characterised by a relatively benign threat environment. By contrast, today, there is a major land war in Europe. Considering this, some analysts maintain that all too eager small-state allies, sparked by an accident, may draw Washington and NATO into direct conflict with Moscow.<sup>62</sup> Recent developments, however, do not support this thesis. In September 2024, a Russian Shahed-type drone, which was equipped with explosives, fell deep into the territory of

<sup>54</sup>US Embassy Lithuania, 'Russian Su-27 crashes in rural Lithuania; no injuries reported', *WikiLeaks* (16 September 2005), available at: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05VILNIUS977\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05VILNIUS977_a.html).

<sup>55</sup>US Embassy Lithuania, 'Su-27 crash: Lithuania taking decisions on black boxes, pilot', *WikiLeaks* (23 September 2005), available at: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05VILNIUS1012\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05VILNIUS1012_a.html).

<sup>56</sup>US Embassy Lithuania, 'Su-27 crash'.

<sup>57</sup>US Embassy Lithuania, 'Update on Su-27 crash investigation', *WikiLeaks* (26 September 2005), available at: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05VILNIUS1017\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05VILNIUS1017_a.html).

<sup>58</sup>US Embassy Lithuania, 'SU-27: Three action requests', *WikiLeaks* (1 September 2005), available at: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05VILNIUS993\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05VILNIUS993_a.html).

<sup>59</sup>Lithuanian delegation to NATO, 'Interdepartmental Commission completed the investigation of Russian fighter crash in Lithuania', (24 January 2005), available at: <https://www.urm.lt/nato/en/news/interdepartmental-commission-completed-the-investigation-of-russian-fighter-crash-in-lithuania>.

<sup>60</sup>'All eyes turn to the Su-27's black box', *Baltic Times* (28 September 2005), available at: <https://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/13662/>.

<sup>61</sup>BNS, 'S. Mullas: Lietuva ne viena katastrofos akivaizdoje', *Delfi* (23 September 2005), available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/smullas-lietuva-ne-viena-katastrofos-akivaizdoje.d?id=7555153>.

<sup>62</sup>Emma Ashford and Joshua Shiffrinson, 'How the war in Ukraine could get much worse', *Foreign Affairs* (8 March 2022), available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-03-08/how-war-ukraine-could-get-much-worse>.

Latvia.<sup>63</sup> According to detractors, precisely this type of incident would prod the Baltic leadership to ‘lean too far over their skis’ and start pressing claims against Russia. Yet, instead of seeking to aggravate tensions with Moscow, Riga chose to play the incident down. If anything, the Latvian Defence Ministry’s response was criticised as overly passive, with one senior representative clumsily asserting that the flying Russian object had no ‘hostile intentions.’<sup>64</sup>

This episode further refutes the allegations that the Baltic states, sheltering under the US protective umbrella, are just waiting for the right moment to take a significant step up the escalatory ladder vis-à-vis Moscow. Their behaviour does not bear this out. In this context, Lanoszka relatedly observes that countries like Poland and Romania, despite often being depicted as ‘hawkish’ after Russian-related military incidents, acted restrainedly. ‘Presumably, a genuinely hawkish government could have used those sorts of occasions to escalate some sort of confrontation with Russia,’ he underscored.<sup>65</sup> The same can be said about the three Baltic states.

### Hybrid warfare and Article 5

Russian-directed hybrid warfare further provides rich empirical material to test the assumption of the Baltics acting as ‘reckless drivers.’ In the context of the Baltic region, Moscow has, on numerous occasions, resorted to warfare methods that fall below the conventional conflict, or what is loosely termed as hybrid warfare. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have experienced an avalanche of Moscow-orchestrated hybrid attempts ranging from disinformation campaigns and cyber attacks to sabotage of critical infrastructure and weaponisation of migration. The Baltic has routinely served as a testing ground for the Kremlin’s ‘dark arts’ statecraft. Perhaps most prominently, in 2007, Estonia became the first state actor to experience massive cyber offences that were later traced back to Moscow. The *New York Times* called it a watershed moment: ‘The first war in cyberspace.’<sup>66</sup> The magnitude of the breach was unprecedented, collapsing the work of various Estonian government agencies and public institutions. Yet Estonian authorities did not seek to spin this episode into something that required invoking NATO’s collective defence clause.

Another noteworthy and rather daring provocation occurred in September 2015 when Russian special services on Estonian soil kidnaped an Estonian senior intelligence officer and subsequently dragged him by force to Russia.<sup>67</sup> He was later paraded on Russian TV channels. As a symbolic backdrop, US president Barack Obama had visited Tallinn just two days before and, during a speech, vowed to defend the territorial integrity of every single ally. The snatching of an Estonian state agent on NATO soil was a rather brazen move. Yet, contrary to those anticipating some escalatory scenario, Estonian authorities handled the situation with patience and back-channel diplomacy. Away from the public eye, the Estonian officials proceeded to negotiate directly with Moscow, in the end managing to complete a prisoner swap and bring the abducted Estonian official home.<sup>68</sup>

As NATO’s frontline states, the Baltics have faced numerous Russian hybrid intrusions and are likely to face many more in the future. In 2024, Tallinn announced that the ‘fingerprints’ of the Russian special services were all over the incident involving the vandalism of an Estonian

<sup>63</sup> ‘Russian drone that fell in Latvia had explosives attached’, LSM (9 September 2024), available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defense/09.09.2024-russian-drone-that-fell-in-latvia-had-explosives-attached.a568090/>.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Russian drone that entered from Belarus crashes in Latvia’, ERR (8 September 2024), available at: <https://news.err.ee/1609447271/russian-drone-that-entered-from-belarus-crashes-in-latvia>.

<sup>65</sup> Alexander Lanoszka, ‘NATO’s next Secretary-General: Embrace the East’, *Council on Geostrategy* (30 April 2024), available at: <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/britains-world/natos-next-secretary-general-embrace-the-east/>.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Landler and John Markoff, ‘In Estonia, what may be the first war in cyberspace’, *New York Times* (28 May 2007), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/28/business/worldbusiness/28iht-cyberwar.4.5901141.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Higgins, ‘Tensions surge in Estonia amid a Russian replay of Cold War tactics’, *New York Times* (5 October 2014), available at: [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/06/world/europe/estonia-russia-cold-war-eston-kohver-border.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/06/world/europe/estonia-russia-cold-war-eston-kohver-border.html?_r=0).

<sup>68</sup> ‘Kohver released and back in Estonia’, ERR (26 September 2015), available at: <https://news.err.ee/116833/kohver-released-and-back-in-estonia>.

minister's car.<sup>69</sup> While they are treated with great seriousness, Baltic officials have not sought to overreact either. As the Estonian Defence Force Commander explained: 'We have to stay calm because all the hybrid warfare is not a threat to our existence, to the existence of Estonian independence. It may harm, but it will not kill. So we can manage this.'<sup>70</sup> In sum, the discussed material cuts sharply against the image of the Baltics as actors that would automatically assume escalatory knee-jerk policies when facing danger.

### Ethnic minorities and entrapment risks

Another aspect that critics have posited carries with it alliance entrapment risks has to do with the sizeable ethnic Russian minorities in the Baltics. Patrick Porter, for instance, contends that in 'Eastern Europe, the cast-iron guarantee built into NATO could lead states to miscalculate and behave recklessly against Russian minorities in their territory, quickly fomenting a cross-border crisis.'<sup>71</sup> Other analysts have similarly drawn up disturbing scenarios that focus on the supposed mistreatment of Russian-speaking ethnic groups. The RAND Corporation analysts, for instance, put forward the following hypothetical scenario: 'If a Baltic state took steps to repress their ethnic Russian populations at the outset of a crisis, Russia might escalate the conflict by sending in special operations forces to defend these populations. In this situation, allies might still feel compelled to come to the Baltic state's aid even though it had adopted a provocative policy without the consent of other allies.'<sup>72</sup> Echoing this, Ted Galen Carpenter from the CATO Institute has repeatedly cautioned that US security guarantees to the Baltics are extremely dicey since Russian speakers in countries like Estonia are routinely discriminated against. One day, Carpenter forecasts, the Kremlin may tire of this blatant discrimination and come to their protection. In this script, he further posits that it would be very hard for Washington 'to refrain from coming to the aid of a treaty ally, even if a Baltic government provoked the incident.'<sup>73</sup>

Scenarios of this type, however, are hard to square with the actual Baltic track record vis-à-vis the treatment of minorities. In a rather self-contradictory manner, the CATO Institute's own 'in-house' measured human freedom index, by taking into account various personal freedom aspects, placed Estonia in fifth place in the world in 2023. All three Baltic states in this evaluation are ranked higher than the United States.<sup>74</sup> The World Justice Project, which assesses how the rule of law worldwide is implemented in individual countries, likewise ranks Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania among the top 25 nations, again ahead of the United States.<sup>75</sup> Freedom House's analysis, often seen as the gold standard for measuring the level of democratic governance, also categorises these small states as highly advanced and mature democracies.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>69</sup>'ISS: Russian special services behind attack on Estonian minister's car', ERR (20 February 2024), available at: <https://news.err.ee/1609258853/iss-russian-special-services-behind-attack-on-estonian-minister-s-car>.

<sup>70</sup>'EDF chief: We have to stay calm in face of hybrid threats', ERR (5 February 2024), available at: <https://news.err.ee/1609243584/edf-chief-we-have-to-stay-calm-in-face-of-hybrid-threats>.

<sup>71</sup>Patrick Porter, 'Advice for a Dark Age: Managing great power competition', *The Washington Quarterly*, 42:1 (2019), pp. 7-25 (p. 17), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1590079>.

<sup>72</sup>Anika Binnendijk and Miranda Priebe, *An Attack against Them All? Drivers of Decisions to Contribute to NATO Collective Defense* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), p. 23.

<sup>73</sup>Ted Galen Carpenter, 'America's Baltic time bomb', *CATO* (24 May 2007), available at: <https://www.cato.org/commentary/americas-baltic-time-bomb#>; Ted Galen Carpenter, 'How rigid alliances have locked us into unwanted conflicts', *The American Conservative* (22 January 2018), available at: <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/how-rigid-alliances-have-locked-us-into-unwanted-conflicts/>.

<sup>74</sup>Ian Vásquez, Fred McMahon, Ryan Murphy, and Guillermina Sutter Schneider, 'The Human Freedom Index', Cato Institute and the Fraser Institute (2023), p. 5, available at: <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/2023-12/human-freedom-index-2023-full-revised.pdf>.

<sup>75</sup>World Justice Project, 'WJP Rule of Law Index' (2023), available at: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global>.

<sup>76</sup>Freedom House, 'Global Freedom Status' (2023), available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2023>.

This is not to argue that ethnic relations in the Baltics are always perfectly harmonious. Some societal cleavages undoubtedly exist, particularly in Estonia and Latvia.<sup>77</sup> Threat perceptions in such ethnically diverse societies vary notably depending on people's ethnic identities or spoken languages.<sup>78</sup> Until the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a large proportion of Latvia's Russian speakers, for example, actively consumed news from official Russian-controlled state media sources.<sup>79</sup>

However, the drawn hypothetical scenarios that envisage some widespread toxic nationalism and rounding up of ethnic minorities stretch the argument well beyond reason. Even some of the sharpest critics of NATO enlargement, such as Anatol Lieven from the Quincy Institute, acknowledge that the Baltics have not given Moscow 'any excuse to invade because ethnic relations there, though sometimes tense, have always been overwhelmingly peaceful'.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, while ethnic relations at various inflection points have been strained, the Baltic countries do not have any notable territorial disputes with Russia today. While in May 2024 Russia did attempt to remove some of the border markings with Estonia on the Narva River,<sup>81</sup> this move by Moscow did not escalate further.

In this context, it is worth circling back to the US–Baltic alliance formation stage, as this process enabled Washington to weed out any future problems and minimise entrapment risks. During the mid-1990s, before issuing its seal of approval for alliance formation, the United States government pressed the Baltics to implement substantial domestic reforms, including those concerning Russian minorities. As the scholarly work by Tongfi Kim suggests, when potential security guarantors have concerns about future entrapment, their bargaining position strengthens and alliance formation is possible 'if the other state is willing to make some concessions to reduce the risk of entrapment'.<sup>82</sup> Democracies, in particular, tend to screen their potential future allies thoroughly.<sup>83</sup> Washington certainly monitored the Baltic nations closely before assuming the security guarantor role. Before extending security guarantees, it ensured that democracy took root.

Declassified US diplomatic cables speak directly to this point. During the 1990s, US president Bill Clinton personally promised Russian president Boris Yeltsin that in his interactions with the Balts, he would urge them to work on minority issues continuously.<sup>84</sup> Visiting Latvia in October 1993, US secretary of state Warren Christopher had pleaded with the governments of Latvia and Estonia to 'act generously' towards ethnic Russian minorities and added that the US would dispatch an American official to lead a human rights observer mission in Latvia.<sup>85</sup> Once their NATO membership prospects became more realistic, Washington strongly urged Estonia and Latvia to bring their legislatures in line with European Union (EU) and Organization for Security

<sup>77</sup> Salamah Magnuson, Morgan Keay, and Kimberly Metcalf, 'Countering hybrid warfare: Mapping social contracts to reinforce societal resiliency in Estonia and beyond', *Texas National Security Review*, 5:2 (2022), pp. 28–52, available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/24028>.

<sup>78</sup> Juris Pupcenoks, Toms Rostoks, and Inta Mieriņa, 'Microfoundations of threat and security perceptions in ethnically diverse states: Lessons from Russia's "near abroad"', *Nationalities Papers*, 52:1 (2022), pp. 120–45, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2022.109>.

<sup>79</sup> Toms Rostoks and Inta Mieriņa, 'NATO's reassurance and the willingness to defend one's country: Survey evidence from Latvia', *European Security* (2024), p. 2, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2024.2434087>.

<sup>80</sup> Anatol Lieven, 'Congress wants to put even more troops in Russia's backyard', *Responsible Statecraft* (21 September 2021), available at: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/09/21/congress-wants-to-put-even-more-troops-in-russias-backyard/>.

<sup>81</sup> George Wright, 'Russia's removal of border markers "unacceptable" – EU', BBC (24 May 2024), available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c899844ypj20>.

<sup>82</sup> Kim, 'Why alliances', p. 359.

<sup>83</sup> Chiba et al., 'Careful commitments'.

<sup>84</sup> White House, 'Memorandum of conversation: Memcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia', National Security Archive (10 July 1993), available at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30385-document-10-memorandum-conversation-subject-memcon-president-boris-yeltsin-russia>.

<sup>85</sup> Elaine Sciolino, 'Christopher, in Latvia, presses for Russian pullout', *New York Times* (28 October 1993), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/28/world/christopher-in-latvia-presses-for-russian-pullout.html>.

and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) norms. The US government wanted to see clear guardrails in place that would institutionalise the protection of minorities.

A US policy memo written in 1996 emphasised that if the Baltics wanted to be seen as serious alliance contenders, they ought to ‘create facts of integration politically’.<sup>86</sup> At times, this push by the US even balanced on infringing upon the sovereign political processes of these nations. During a conversation with the Latvian foreign minister in 1998, Strobe Talbott, Clinton’s deputy secretary of state, told him that the US was ‘extremely careful to respect Latvia’s sovereignty’ while at the same time conveying the importance of meeting OSCE’s laid-out standards, as this would serve as the best defence against Russian accusations of mistreatment of minorities.<sup>87</sup> A few months later, US secretary of state Madeleine Albright had penned a personal letter to the Latvian prime minister. Her counsel to the Latvian leadership was rather direct: ‘Mr. Prime Minister, I wish to be crystal clear concerning the American view of this process. We believe it is vitally important that the Saeima [the Latvian parliament] complete legislative action on the government’s proposed amendments to the citizenship law, which would be consistent with OSCE recommendations, at the earliest possible time.’<sup>88</sup>

These declassified diplomatic cables speak to the fact that the US government was rather careful about the selection of its allies. Before stretching its security umbrella over Eastern Europe, it made sure that these countries had consolidated democratic rule and would not one day turn against their own ethnic minorities. As the US deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs later acknowledged, US officials had told all aspirant countries that joining NATO would be ‘an intrusive process, that as allies we would need to know everything about each other’.<sup>89</sup> During this arduous process, he further explained, the US government asked difficult questions about the treatment of minorities and other related matters. Echoing this point, Heather Conley, who at the time was responsible for US bilateral relations with Northern and Central Europe, notes that the alliance formation stage was rather inquisitive, as Washington closely monitored the extent to which the Baltics measured up to Western democratic standards.<sup>90</sup> In sum, this material illustrates that during the alliance formation phase, the US government sought to offset entrapment risks by standing firm on the democratic standards it desired to see implemented by its prospective treaty allies.

### This is not a blockade

Another episode that sparked heated debates regarding alliance entrapment occurred in June 2022, when the Lithuanian government temporarily restricted the passage of select Russian goods sanctioned by the EU via its territory. Russia had used the Lithuanian land corridor to transit various goods to its Kaliningrad exclave. The adoption of this policy precipitated a wave of criticism against the Lithuanian authorities.<sup>91</sup> Emma Ashford, while acknowledging that Lithuania had the sovereign right to take such a stance, still argued that it constituted an escalatory move by a US ally.<sup>92</sup> In her assessment, Vilnius’ actions fit the category of classic alliance entrapment. ‘There’s

<sup>86</sup>Daniel Fried, ‘Baltic states: “Baltic action plan” and NATO enlargement’, US National Security Council (17 September 1996), Clinton Digital Library, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101137>

<sup>87</sup>Deputy Secretary’s April 24 meeting with Latvia’s Foreign Minister Birkavš, US Department of State (28 April 1998), Case No. F-2017-13804, Doc. No. C06704049

<sup>88</sup>Madeleine Albright, ‘Acting Secretary’s letter to PM Krasts on citizenship legislation’ (13 June 1998), US Department of State, Case No. F-2017-13804, Doc. No. C06722339.

<sup>89</sup>Robert A. Bradtke, *NATO Enlargement: Qualifications and Contributions – Parts I–IV, Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2003).

<sup>90</sup>Heather Conley, ‘The future of NATO and European relations under the Trump administration’, World Affairs Council (9 May 2018).

<sup>91</sup>Doug Bandow, ‘Does Lithuania want to start a war with Russia?’, CATO (30 June 2022), available at: <https://www.cato.org/commentary/does-lithuania-want-start-war-russia#>.

<sup>92</sup>Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig, ‘Will the Kaliningrad crisis lead to war?’, *Foreign Policy Magazine* (24 June 2022), available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/24/kaliningrad-russia-lithuania-crisis-lead-to-war/>.

been a lively scholarly debate on the question of entrapment and whether it happens frequently, but this seems like an excellent real-world example of a state that appears to be more risk-tolerant and willing to see conflict than some of its allies', she asserted.

In reaction to the measures introduced by Vilnius, the Russian authorities did not hold back and threatened retaliation if the policy was not swiftly reversed. President Putin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, informed the media that the situation was unprecedented and framed the Lithuanian-implemented restrictions as 'an element of a blockade'.<sup>93</sup> Nikolai Patrushev, the head of the Kremlin's Security Council, equally scolded their Baltic neighbour and warned that Moscow would not hesitate to respond to such a confrontational move.<sup>94</sup> Taking a cue from the Kremlin, the Russian media subsequently promulgated the language of a 'blockade' being carried out by the Lithuanian government against Kaliningrad.<sup>95</sup> For its part, the US State Department came out in full support of its NATO treaty ally. Referring to Lithuania as a 'stalwart partner', US State Department spokesperson Ned Price assured that Washington had its back politically and militarily.<sup>96</sup>

Given the charges against Lithuania, did this episode reveal that the Baltics are prone to escalation and ill-advised behaviour? To answer the question, it is first worthwhile to establish whether the measures taken by Vilnius amounted to anything resembling a blockade. While the term was regularly invoked by the Russian media, the transit of goods was in fact never halted. Only certain items sanctioned by Brussels were banned from crossing Lithuanian territory. Russia was still able to transport goods by sea and air undisturbed. Moreover, passengers could travel freely to and from Kaliningrad by train. What is more, Russian authorities in 2002 had explicitly signed off on the point that the Republic of Lithuania has the sovereign right 'to exercise the necessary controls and to refuse entry into its territory'.<sup>97</sup>

As such, it was neither a blockade nor was it unilaterally imposed by the Lithuanian authorities. The EU's chief diplomat Josep Borrell concurred that Lithuania had acted by the book and merely instituted sanctions as recommended by the European Commission.<sup>98</sup> Behind the scenes, the EU's larger powers, above all Berlin, sought to defuse tensions and prodded Brussels to release clear guidance on this matter.<sup>99</sup> Subsequently, on 13 July, the European Commission updated its guidelines and allowed Russia to transit previously sanctioned civilian-use goods by rail. The Lithuanian side did not object to the EU's new guidelines, and Washington welcomed the resolution of this dispute.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>93</sup>'Kremlin reveals when to expect response to Lithuanian "blockade" of Kaliningrad', TASS (20 June 2022), available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1468603>.

<sup>94</sup>Andrew Higgins, 'A sleepy Baltic rail line gets a geopolitical wakeup call', *New York Times* (24 June 2022), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/world/europe/kaliningrad-russia-rail-sanctions.html>.

<sup>95</sup>Olegas Golovarenko and Maksimas Omelčenko, 'LRT FACTS: Russian propaganda targets Lithuania – Kaliningrad "blockade" and betrayal', LRT (11 July 2022), available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1736701/lrt-facts-russian-propaganda-targets-lithuania-kaliningrad-blockade-and-betrayal>

<sup>96</sup>Ned Price, 'Department press briefing: June 21, 2022' (21 June 2022), US Department of State, available at: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-june-21-2022/#post-353881-RUSSIALITHUANIA>.

<sup>97</sup>'Joint statement of European Union and the Russian Federation on transit between Kaliningrad region and the rest of the Russian Federation', European Council (1 November 2022), available at: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/74447.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/74447.pdf). p.1.

<sup>98</sup>Alexandra Brzozowski, 'EU says Lithuania acted "by the book" in Kaliningrad standoff with Russia', Euractiv (21 June 2022), available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/eu-says-lithuania-acted-by-the-book-in-kaliningrad-standoff-with-russia/>.

<sup>99</sup>Bojan Pancevski, Laurence Norman, and Drew Hinshaw, 'Europe moves to defuse tension with Moscow over Russian exclave Kaliningrad', *Wall Street Journal* (30 June 2022), available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/europe-moves-to-defuse-tension-with-moscow-over-russian-exclave-kaliningrad-11656591866>.

<sup>100</sup>Ned Price, 'EU sanctions on Russia and shipments to and from Kaliningrad', US Department of State (13 July 2022), available at: <https://www.state.gov/eu-sanctions-on-russia-and-shipments-to-and-from-kaliningrad>.

## With Paris into the fire?

Another noteworthy instance that tests the entrapment charge is related to the French-proposed NATO troop deployment to Ukraine. In 2024, French president Emmanuel Macron hinted at the need to dispatch allied troops to Ukraine. This proposal created a split among NATO members. The Biden administration, on numerous occasions, disavowed this initiative. On the very day that Russia began to rain down rockets on Kyiv, on 24 February 2022, US President Joe Biden, addressing the nation, assured: 'Our forces are not and will not be engaged in the conflict with Russia in Ukraine.'<sup>101</sup> Since then, the United States government has provided substantial military assistance to Ukraine but has remained adamant about not deploying American troops to this war-torn country. Other major allies like Germany and the UK have taken the same policy stance.

Baltic lawmakers, however, assumed a fence-sitter position on this matter. On the one hand, they have applauded Macron's 'outside-the-box' thinking and his willingness to push back against Russia's imposed red lines.<sup>102</sup> 'The strength of Macron's suggestion is that it has started to create strategic ambiguity for Russia', Latvia's prime minister at the time commented on the French proposal.<sup>103</sup> A common line repeated by Baltic political elites has been that nothing can be ruled out entirely. On the face of it, the willingness to entertain the deployment of NATO soldiers in an active combat zone may give the impression that small powers are moving towards entrapping the dominant alliance partner. Yet closer scrutiny of this episode reveals that the Baltic officials know that Washington's stance remains crucial in this equation. Discussing behind-the-scenes deliberations, former commander of the Estonian Defence Forces and current politician Riho Terras explained that this type of direct intervention in Ukraine would be possible only 'if the United States is in it together with us'.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, while rhetorically leaving the door open for crossing this particular threshold, Estonian officials have simultaneously stressed that Tallinn would not undertake such actions unilaterally without the input of Washington.<sup>105</sup>

In this context, it is worth emphasising that the Baltic public has little appetite for such undertakings. For instance, a 2024 survey in Lithuania revealed that over half of the respondents were against any type of military deployment to Ukraine. In the survey, 15 per cent of Lithuanians backed the idea, but with the caveat that other allies would come along.<sup>106</sup> A mere 3.5 per cent approved of the Lithuanian military actively participating in combat missions. These results are consistent with larger scholarly studies. By fielding a survey experiment, Lauren Sukin and Alexander Lanoszka's work demonstrated that allied audiences in frontline NATO countries, including the Baltics, 'prefer demonstrations of credibility that minimize the risks of crisis escalation' due to the understanding that they would suffer immensely in a military conflict with Russia.<sup>107</sup> In a key sentence, they write: 'We find that NATO allies are significantly concerned about Russian aggression, but they do not seem to believe that Russian behavior needs to be matched by aggression in kind. Instead,

<sup>101</sup>The White House, 'Remarks by President Biden on Russia's unprovoked and unjustified attack on Ukraine' (24 February 2022), available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/24/remarks-by-president-biden-on-russias-unprovoked-and-unjustified-attack-on-ukraine/>.

<sup>102</sup>Ania Nussbaum and Milda Seputyte, 'France drums up Baltic support for Ukraine after troops backlash' Bloomberg (8 March 2024), available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-03-08/france-drums-up-baltic-support-for-ukraine-after-troops-backlash>.

<sup>103</sup>Krisjanis Karins, 'NATO is moving to a war footing, says Latvian FM', *Conflict Zone* (20 March 2024), available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/nato-is-moving-to-a-war-footing-says-latvian-fm/video-68626987>.

<sup>104</sup>'Former EDF chief: Deploying Western troops to Ukraine only possible with US', ERR (27 February 2024), available at: <https://news.err.ee/1609265694/former-edf-chief-deploying-western-troops-to-ukraine-only-possible-with-us>.

<sup>105</sup>'Defense minister: Ideas about sending soldiers to Ukraine have gone nowhere', ERR (14 May 2024), available at: <https://news.err.ee/1609341942/defense-minister-ideas-about-sending-soldiers-to-ukraine-have-gone-nowhere>.

<sup>106</sup>Nate Ostiller, 'Poll: More than half of Lithuanians opposed to any kind of military deployment to Ukraine', *Kyiv Independent* (3 April 2024), available at: <https://kyivindependent.com/poll-more-than-half-of-lithuanians-opposed-to-any-kind-of-military-deployment-to-ukraine/>

<sup>107</sup>Lauren Sukin and Alexander Lanoszka, 'Credibility in crises: How patrons reassure their allies', *International Studies Quarterly*, 68:2 (2024), p. 12, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae062>.

respondents prefer more cautious policy options and are wary about military escalation.’ This illustrates a significant delta between the image of the Baltics as willing risk-takers and their genuine willingness to avoid a potential military collision with Russia.

### Conceding a half point: Alliance entanglement

The preceding discussion argues that the Baltic republics, contrary to how the critics have portrayed them, have been more cautious in their strategic outlook and avoided taking bellicose actions. While advancing the point that Washington’s risk of entrapment in the Baltics has been overstated, it is still important to acknowledge that alliances are not entirely risk-free. When tracking the past two decades, one must concede that Washington’s role in the regional security architecture has become ever more present. Since Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania entered NATO in 2004, the United States has gradually taken on more security burdens to assure the Baltics and deter Russia. One study, for instance, estimates that adding the Baltic republics to NATO has cost the US taxpayer tens of billions of dollars.<sup>108</sup> Today, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are among the highest per-capita defence spenders in the transatlantic alliance, with recent pledges to spend as much as 5–6 per cent. That said, it is also worth recalling that none had reached the 2 per cent mark for a decade after clinching the NATO membership.<sup>109</sup> Estonia first allocated 2 per cent of its GDP on defence only in 2015.

In this context, Mira Rapp-Hooper’s work on alliances advances the important point that, while alliance entrapment risks have largely been exaggerated, US alliance networks have been prone to different, more subtle dynamics whereby the US has expanded its security commitments.<sup>110</sup> After the Russian illegal takeover of Crimea in 2014, the US stepped up regional military exercises and helped to institute NATO’s so-called enhanced forward presence (eFP) model.<sup>111</sup> Moscow’s February 2022 war or invasion further prompted Washington to shift its posture to a modest but ‘persistent rotational presence’ across the Baltics.<sup>112</sup> In the face of Russian revisionism, the pleas from the Baltic elites have also become more vocal, calling for a significant forward-deployed alliance presence. Whereas the discussion about NATO’s Article 5 previously revolved around coming to assist the Baltics militarily and evicting Russian forces, today, the promises have shifted to not giving up an inch of Baltic territory.<sup>113</sup> Meeting this objective necessitates more robust allied boots on the ground, prepositioning military firepower, and other forward-leaning activities.

Here, it is worth recalling that at the time of alliance formation, the US government hardly expected to have a persistent military presence on the eastern European border. As Stephen Walt observes: ‘There was a period when people were willing to extend these guarantees on the assumption that we would never actually have to honor them. That merely by extending them, we would guarantee peace and therefore we would never have to actually fight for these places, because no one would challenge the mighty United States.’<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Stephen Wertheim underscores that during the 2004 NATO enlargement round, Washington did not fully consider how the new members

<sup>108</sup> Alley Joshua and Fuhrmann Matthew, ‘Budget breaker? The financial cost of U.S. military alliances’, *Security Studies*, 30:5 (2021), pp. 661–690 (p. 684), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2021.2021280>

<sup>109</sup> Andris Banka, ‘Reclaiming a good ally status: Baltic coping strategies in the America First world’, *European Security*, 30:2 (2020), pp. 159–177 (p. 166), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2020.1840361>.

<sup>110</sup> Rapp-Hooper, *Shields of the Republic*, p. 49.

<sup>111</sup> Andris Banka and Margit Bussmann, ‘Uncomfortable neighbors: NATO, Russia and the shifting logic of military exercises in the Baltics’, *Defence Studies*, 23:1 (2022), pp. 1–24, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2022.2089657>.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Austin assures Baltic states of U.S. commitment’, US Department of State (23 February 2023), available at: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3300628/austin-assures-baltic-states-of-us-commitment/>.

<sup>113</sup> The White House, ‘Remarks by President Biden on the united efforts of the free world to support the people of Ukraine’ (26 March 2022), available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/26/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-efforts-of-the-free-world-to-support-the-people-of-ukraine/>.

<sup>114</sup> Stephen Walt, ‘Realism and balance of threat with Dr. Stephen Walt’, Hopkins Podcast on Foreign Affairs (8 November 2023), available at: <https://hopkinspofa.com/2023/11/08/realism-and-balance-of-threat-with-dr-stephen-walt/>.

would be defended in a crisis situation nor what it would cost.<sup>115</sup> However, due to the worsening security environment, the US has had little choice but to step up demonstrations of resolve on NATO's eastern flank.

The logic that may be compelling the US to care about the needs of its junior treaty allies is connected to the broader notion of American credibility. Even if the Baltics, as some insist, are in and of themselves strategically unimportant actors,<sup>116</sup> the US is still strongly incentivised to take into account the Baltic security outlook, given that failing to uphold treaty obligations would risk shredding Washington's carefully cultivated reputation. Under this reasoning, 'the alliance comes to be perceived as an end in itself'.<sup>117</sup> Stated differently, reputational concerns could be the pathway through which the US finds itself ever more entangled in the Baltic region. It is further worth noting that Baltic officials are also aware that perceived injury to the US reputation could be the driving motivation behind Washington's decision to defend them. As one Estonian official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, acknowledged: 'When the war starts, all we need is a dead American in the country.'<sup>118</sup>

Given the high importance attached to Washington's involvement, there is no doubt that the Balts would try to use every argument in the book to convince their great power patron to join the fight on their behalf. To be clear, this does not constitute a case of alliance entrapment. Inherent in the concept of entrapment is a sense of allied recklessness and aggressive behaviour, which is not the case here. However, critics would be correct to point out that the US has come to resource the security of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania on a greater scale than it had envisioned during the initial alliance formation phase.

On balance, however, it is crucial to underscore that the US has not acquiesced to all the demands of its junior security partners. For one, the Baltics do not host permanent US troops or military bases on their soil despite repeated calls from Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius.<sup>119</sup> Occasionally, US political and military leadership has signalled its willingness to shift its posture in the region to a more permanent footing. For instance, in 2022, General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the House Armed Services Committee that he favoured setting up permanent bases for stationing US troops in the Baltics.<sup>120</sup> According to John Deni's scholarly work, permanent troop basing is also preferable as a cost-saving measure when compared to the current rotational deployment model.<sup>121</sup>

Permanent US troop presence across the Baltics even enjoys support from the US public. A 2024 opinion poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs indicates that a majority of Americans (54 per cent) would support the establishment of long-term US military bases in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.<sup>122</sup> Yet subsequent administrations, both Democrat and Republican, have viewed this as a

<sup>115</sup>Stephen Wertheim, 'A new U.S. grand strategy: The case for U.S. retrenchment overseas, with Stephen Wertheim', Council on Foreign Relations (19 March 2024), available at: <https://www.cfr.org/podcasts/new-us-grand-strategy-case-us-retrenchment-overseas-stephen-wertheim>.

<sup>116</sup>Rajan Menon and William Ruger, 'NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: A net assessment', *International Politics*, 57 (2020), pp. 371–400 (p. 378), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00235-7>.

<sup>117</sup>Beckley, *The Myth*, p. 15.

<sup>118</sup>Maria Mälksoo, 'Deterrence icons as status symbols: American forces in NATO's eastern flank', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 60:1 (2024), pp. 75–96 (p. 10), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367241254307>.

<sup>119</sup>Amy Mackinnon, 'Lithuanian lawmakers call for permanent U.S. troop presence', *Foreign Policy* (2 February 2022), available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/02/lithuania-us-troop-presence-russia-baltics/>.

<sup>120</sup>Mark A. Milley, 'Full committee hearing: "Fiscal Year 2023 Defense Budget Request", House Armed Services Committee (6 April 2022), available at: <https://democrats-armedservices.house.gov/hearings?ID=9165C8E2-53A6-4A45-8BB7-CFEA21CF021F>.

<sup>121</sup>John R. Deni, *Rotational Deployments vs. Forward Stationing: How Can the Army Achieve Assurance and Deterrence Efficiently and Effectively?* (Washington, D.C.: US Army War College Press, 2017).

<sup>122</sup>Karl Friedhoff, 'Americans see security alliances as beneficial to the United States', The Chicago Council on Global Affairs (23 September 2024), available at: <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-see-security-alliances-beneficial-united-states>.

bridge too far.<sup>123</sup> Instead, US officials have repeatedly opted for measures short of permanent troop basing. This reflects a carefully calibrated approach by Washington. On the one hand, it has placed the so-called tripwire forces<sup>124</sup> and sold HIMARS launchers to all three Baltic nations to boost their long-range artillery capacity. On the other hand, it has sought to maintain some flexibility and refused calls to establish a permanent military presence near Russian borders. This speaks to America's willingness and ability to manage alliance-related risks.

## Discussion and conclusion

This article interrogated the Baltic states' behaviour regarding the charge of alliance entrapment. While critics have depicted these NATO eastern allies as overly adventurist, emboldened by US security backing, the presented analysis finds no empirical proof of this claim. Proponents of the notion that the Baltics present a classic case of moral hazard, namely that the superpower's security guarantees incentivise the recipient party to act recklessly, must account for the numerous 'dogs that did not bark'. As illustrated in this paper, there have been multiple instances where further escalation on the part of the Baltics as US allies was entirely possible given the challenges brought by Moscow. Yet in these episodes, officials in Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius took measured steps to lower the temperature and defuse the crises. They did not pursue policies that ran counter to the expressed interests of Washington. The indictment of the Baltic republics as overly provocative partners that are just waiting for the right moment to spark a crisis and embroil the US in military action against Russia does not withstand closer scrutiny. The material discussed aligns with William Wohlforth's assertion that, when it comes to states neighbouring Russia, it is hard to find 'examples of provocative, war-risking behavior enabled by the alliance.'<sup>125</sup>

This begs the question: why hasn't the 'reckless driving' prediction panned out as suggested by numerous scholars? In this case, some underlying structural factors work against incentivising a direct confrontation with Russia. To state the obvious, a vast power asymmetry exists between the Baltic states and Russia. Multiple studies have demonstrated that Moscow has the upper hand in the Baltic region regarding force ratios as well as time and space advantages.<sup>126</sup> While recent Swedish and Finnish additions to NATO and increased allied deployments surely improve their outlook,<sup>127</sup> overall, the balance of power still favours the Russian side. Baltic officials are keenly aware of this fact. As the Estonian ambassador to NATO soberly notes, notwithstanding the Kremlin's incompetence in prosecuting its war in Ukraine, Russian forces successfully occupied the size of Estonian territory on the first day of entering Ukraine.<sup>128</sup>

This is to say that the Baltic states, even with the US military on their side, would not reap any benefits from a conflict with Russia. They would not be insulated from significant military blowback. As Latvia's foreign minister tells it: 'If there is any potential conflict, there is a high likelihood that it would be in our backyard', which means the Baltics are interested in 'stability' and

<sup>123</sup>Jacqueline Feldscher, 'Is this the next US military base in Europe?', *Defense One* (3 October 2021), available at: <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2021/10/next-us-military-base-europe/185808/>; Robin Emmott and Andrius Sytas, 'Insight: The Baltic states want more NATO. They won't get all they seek', *Reuters* (15 June 2022), available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/baltic-states-want-more-nato-they-wont-get-all-they-seek-2022-06-15/>.

<sup>124</sup>Dan Reiter and Paul Poast, 'The truth about tripwires: Why small force deployments do not deter aggression', *Texas National Security Review*, 4:3 (2022), pp 33–53, available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/13989>; Paul Musgrave and Steven Ward, 'The tripwire effect: Experimental evidence regarding U.S. public opinion', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 19:4 (2023), pp. 1–25, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orad017>.

<sup>125</sup>William C. Wohlforth, 'The right choice for NATO', in Jeremi Suri and Benjamin Valentino (eds), *Sustainable Security: Rethinking American National Security Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 245–262 (p. 255).

<sup>126</sup>Scott Boston et al., *Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe. Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2018).

<sup>127</sup>Andris Banka, 'Asmus strategic vision makes a comeback: Finnish–Swedish role in defending the Baltics', *Nordic Review of International Studies*, 3 (2024), pp. 72–80, available at: <https://nr.is.journal.fi/article/view/144599>.

<sup>128</sup>Jüri Luik, 'Heroes? NATO on the doorstep of the Madrid summit', Lennart Meri Conference (14 May 2022), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGkJLVwR80>.

'non-provocation'.<sup>129</sup> These structural realities push against Baltic willingness to engage in anything resembling alliance entrapment. Underneath the sometimes-soaring Baltic rhetoric about the need to defeat Russia in Ukraine, there is a clear understanding that truly reckless alliance behaviour would, first and foremost, bring about catastrophic results for themselves. This notion is strongly supported by the work of Sukin and Lanoszka, who found that populations of NATO's Central–Eastern European states favour the policy options that minimise escalation risks.<sup>130</sup>

Admittedly, the Balts do have some delicate lines to walk. While operating with restraint and avoiding excessive risk-taking, they equally do not want to feed the notion that their resolve is low and that they would crumble in the face of potential Russian aggression. At the end of the day, displays of timidity and weakness can also serve as an invitation to the Kremlin to test NATO's red lines. For this reason, they have often been the loudest voices in the transatlantic community advocating military aid to Ukraine and the diplomatic isolation of Moscow. Just before Moscow's war launched in 2022, when many in Europe dithered, the Baltic states sent US-made Stingers and Javelins to Ukraine. Later, Ukrainian officials acknowledged that Baltic-sent weaponry had played a crucial role in defending Hostomel Airport, a key episode in setting the larger trajectory of the conflict. But even in the case of these weapons transfers, the Baltic governments had first asked permission from the US State Department for US-origin weapons to be sent to Ukraine.<sup>131</sup> This suggests that they do not treat US security guarantees frivolously and are careful not to go against American expressed wishes.

Even with these findings, US policymakers may likely remain wary about the risk of entrapment. Daniel Sobelman puts it well when he writes: 'That the empirical record does not reveal unambiguous cases of entrapment is of little relevance or consolation for states fearing future entrapment. Leaders are afraid of becoming the exception to this rule.'<sup>132</sup> Kim advances a similar point, positing that the rarity of entrapment behaviour does not change the fact that states fear this alliance-related pathology.<sup>133</sup> That said, the structural conditions inherent in the Baltic region and past behaviour by Tallinn, Vilnius, and Riga as discussed in this paper suggest that alliance entrapment is a manageable issue for the United States.

While this paper has been foremost concerned with the great power risk of entrapment and entanglement, it is worth briefly noting that these alliance-related dynamics can cut both ways. Indeed, scholarly literature suggests that the weaker allies can end up being victims of America's erratic and rash decision-making.<sup>134</sup> In this context, it is worth recalling that NATO's Article 5 has only been invoked on behalf of the United States. While the Baltic countries had no direct stake in Afghanistan and Iraq, they joined US coalitions of the willing, deploying without caveats in hotly contested battlefronts such as Helmand province in Afghanistan, suffering one of the highest death-to-population ratios among allied forces.<sup>135</sup> Put differently, they upheld their end of the bargain, although their direct interests did not call for joining these US-led coalitions.

Another example where the Baltics were caught up in a crisis that was not of their making was the targeted killing of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani. On 3 January 2020, the US took a unilateral strike when its Reaper drone struck and killed Iranian major general Qasem Soleimani. Retaliating, Iran struck a military base in Iraq, which, together with US personnel, also housed Latvian soldiers. In this instance, the great power ally had exposed their junior partners to military

<sup>129</sup> Stuart Lau, 'Next NATO boss should come from a big defense spender, Latvian hopeful says', *Politico* (28 November 2023), available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/latvia-next-nato-boss-should-come-from-a-country-high-defense-budget-krisjanis-karins/>.

<sup>130</sup> Sukin and Lanoszka, 'Credibility in crises'.

<sup>131</sup> 'US accuses Russia of recruiting officials in attempt to take over Ukrainian government', CNN (21 January 2022), available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/20/politics/us-transfer-weapons-ukraine/index.html>.

<sup>132</sup> Sobelman, 'Restraining an ally', p. 14.

<sup>133</sup> Kim, 'Why alliances', p. 376.

<sup>134</sup> Kim, 'Why alliances', p. 357; Lanoszka, *Military Alliances*, p. 72.

<sup>135</sup> Andris Banka, 'Neither reckless nor free-riders: Auditing the Baltics as US treaty allies', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 20 (2022), pp. 161–83, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42738-022-00096-3>.

blowback.<sup>136</sup> Valuing the relationship with their patron, the Baltics played down the episode and insisted that Washington, in striking and killing Soleimani, had exercised its right of self-defence. Indeed, to avoid abandonment, junior allies have learned to tolerate and accommodate their dominant alliance partner, even in instances where it exhibits destabilising behaviour.<sup>137</sup> These examples suggest that aligning with the United States is also not entirely risk-free for small states like the Baltics.

In conclusion, it is important to note here that the analysis of US involvement in the Baltic region took place against the backdrop of the presidential transition period in the United States. It is possible, even likely, that the second Donald Trump presidency will inject a whole new level of uncertainty into alliance relations. Some behind-the-scenes diplomatic talks have already hinted that the US may reduce or withdraw altogether its forces from the Baltic states and Eastern Europe.<sup>138</sup> Abandonment rather than entrapment fears may come to dominate the transatlantic agenda. In the future, it will be worthwhile for scholars to reassess the current US administration's impact on small-state allies.

**Acknowledgments.** An early version of this article was presented at the 2025 West Point Social Science Seminar at West Point, New York, during which I received valuable feedback. I am particularly grateful to Dr Brian Blankenship for his useful comments on the paper. I also have benefited tremendously from conversations with Professor Margit Bussmann when discussing alliances and Baltic security matters. I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and recommendations.

**Dr Andris Banka** is a senior researcher at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Baltic Sea Region Research (IFZO) at the University of Greifswald in Germany, specialising in Baltic and transatlantic security. He holds a PhD in Politics and International Relations from the University of Birmingham, UK.

<sup>136</sup> Viljar Veebel, Illimar Ploom, and Zdzislaw Sliwa, 'The Soleimani effect: A risk for small states in Europe', *Global Affairs*, 7:6 (2022), pp 921–39, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2021.2018343>.

<sup>137</sup> Kim, 'Why alliances'.

<sup>138</sup> Gideon Rachman, 'Vance's real warning to Europe', *Financial Times* (17 February 2025), available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/11f121f9-391c-4597-93f7-f12894e1b79d>.