# Putin’s Baltic war games intensify tensions amid NATO’s strategic bolstering



Vladimir Putin's recent military exercises in the Baltic Sea have sent a stark message regarding Russia's assertiveness in the region. As NATO nations bolster their defences, the Russian naval display — involving 20 warships, 25 aircraft, and around 3,000 personnel — underscores the ongoing tension between the two military powers. Amidst these drills, a diesel submarine engaged in live-fire exercises, targeting a mock Western vessel, while the use of 30-mm AK-630 automatic rifles highlighted a readiness to respond to perceived threats from marine drones and unmanned aerial systems.

This aggressive posturing is not merely a series of isolated exercises but part of a broader strategy outlined by the Baltic Fleet, which aims to secure Russian naval interests in a contested maritime environment. The drills are intended to enhance capabilities for defending naval bases, particularly in light of the intensifying geopolitical competition between Russia and NATO, with the Baltic Sea serving as a focal point of these tensions.

NATO has significantly strengthened its eastern flank since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, particularly after the escalation of hostilities in Ukraine in 2022. Countries such as Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have improved their military capacities, supported by increased presence from the United States, France, Germany, and the UK. The strategic implications of Finland and Sweden’s accession to NATO — nearly encircling the Baltic Sea with alliance members — further complicate this landscape, prompting Russia to recalibrate its military readiness.

Additionally, recent incidents in the Baltic area, such as Estonia's attempt to seize a Russian tanker allegedly violating sanctions, reflect the mounting strain on regional security. Retaliatory actions, including Russia's detainment of a Greek-owned oil tanker, have accentuated the precarious nature of maritime relations. This reciprocal aggression signals the potential for escalation and has prompted NATO to launch initiatives like Operation Baltic Sentry, aimed at bolstering surveillance and protection of critical undersea infrastructure, amidst concerns over possible sabotage.

Compounding these maritime tensions, accusations of hybrid warfare tactics, including disinformation campaigns and provocative military maneuvers, further highlight Russia's strategic approach in the region. The removal of maritime boundary markers by Russian officials serves as a stark reminder of the ongoing disputes that could threaten international stability. Such actions reflect a broader pattern of aggression that challenges established norms and raises alarms among neighbouring nations.

On the humanitarian front, the fallout from the conflict in Ukraine continues to be devastating, with civilian casualties reported in recent Russian strikes. A tragic example includes a nine-year-old girl killed in Zaporizhzhia, amid broader reports of indiscriminate shelling that has raised concerns over potential war crimes. These humanitarian crises underscore the need for international attention and intervention amid escalating hostilities.

As military exercises continue and regional tensions rise, the Baltic Sea remains a critical zone of contention, emblematic of the larger confrontation between NATO and Russia. The ongoing arms race and skirmishes only serve to highlight the fragility of peace in Europe, with each military exercise posing risks of miscalculation that could lead to broader conflict.

The convergence of military readiness, regional diplomacy, and humanitarian crises illustrates a complex landscape that requires careful navigation by European leaders. As NATO marks its 75th anniversary, bolstering unity among member states and maintaining a vigilant stance against malign actions will be crucial in preventing further escalation in this strategically vital region.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14767427/Putin-stages-major-war-games-NATOs-doorstep-submarine-fires-torpedoes-mock-Western-ship-Russia-vows-conduct-dozens-naval-drills-summer.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/07/11/on-nato-s-eastern-flank-on-the-russian-border-the-pre-war-era-has-begun_6680829_4.html)
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* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/d7fe602af6bd7cb8a01ece611effcec9), [[5]](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/10/12/finland-and-estonia-suspect-sabotage-after-gas-pipeline-leak_6167451_4.html), [[6]](https://apnews.com/article/aa2a46782a44bbf0c27424d2c8c97d5c)
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* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14767427/Putin-stages-major-war-games-NATOs-doorstep-submarine-fires-torpedoes-mock-Western-ship-Russia-vows-conduct-dozens-naval-drills-summer.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/d7fe602af6bd7cb8a01ece611effcec9)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14767427/Putin-stages-major-war-games-NATOs-doorstep-submarine-fires-torpedoes-mock-Western-ship-Russia-vows-conduct-dozens-naval-drills-summer.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/07/11/on-nato-s-eastern-flank-on-the-russian-border-the-pre-war-era-has-begun_6680829_4.html> - Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has significantly bolstered its eastern flank, with increased military presence from Finland to Bulgaria. This buildup intensified after the Ukraine war began in 2022, formalised during NATO's 2022 Madrid summit and further discussed in Washington in 2024. Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have notably enhanced their military infrastructure and personnel, while the US, France, Germany, and the UK have expanded their presence and coordination in the region. However, Hungary and Slovakia have lagged due to pro-Russian positions. Russia's hybrid warfare tactics, including targeted fires and disinformation, indicate strategic preparations for potential future conflicts. As NATO marks its 75th anniversary, the Alliance continues to reinforce and prepare its eastern borders, reflecting growing tensions and preparations for potential conflicts.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/cf2c092d-66b2-4406-9670-48d9448182cc> - On May 23, Russian officials removed buoys marking the maritime border between Russia and Estonia in the Narva River, symbolising Russia's disregard for established boundaries and provoking neighbouring countries. This action aligns with Russia's recent provocative behaviour towards Lithuania and Finland and is seen as an attempt to test NATO's response. Similar maritime border disputes are occurring globally, such as China's assertive claims in the South and East China Seas. These incidents highlight the significance of maritime borders, as violations can disrupt international norms and maritime activities. The removal of these buoys in the Baltic Sea signifies ongoing tensions and potential future conflicts exacerbated by Russia's aggressive tactics.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/d7fe602af6bd7cb8a01ece611effcec9> - Over 2,000 troops from a Russia-led security alliance began military exercises in Belarus near the borders of NATO countries. Participants include troops from Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. Armenia, though a member, did not send forces due to tense relations with Russia. The drills aim to prepare for joint operations and nuclear accident responses and will continue until Wednesday in Belarus regions bordering Poland and Lithuania. Polish officials view the exercises as a destabilising move. Belarus reported a Polish helicopter entered its airspace, prompting a diplomatic complaint. Russia has stationed forces and tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus but Belarusian troops are not involved in the Ukraine conflict. Ukraine has bolstered its border security in response to the drills.
5. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/10/12/finland-and-estonia-suspect-sabotage-after-gas-pipeline-leak_6167451_4.html> - Finnish and Estonian authorities suspect sabotage after a leak in the Baltic Connector gas pipeline connecting Estonia and Finland, as well as damage to an undersea telecommunications cable in the Baltic Sea. The investigation is in its early stages, but both countries, supported by NATO and the EU, consider it likely to be deliberate. A magnitude 1 tremor was recorded by the Norwegian institute Norsar. The incidents are not expected to significantly impact gas supply. Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo and Estonian counterpart Kaja Kallas have consulted on the situation, and additional security measures for the Baltic Sea are being considered. The possible sabotage is viewed as a test for NATO, with suspicions of Russian involvement.
6. <https://apnews.com/article/aa2a46782a44bbf0c27424d2c8c97d5c> - Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda has expressed support for U.S. President Donald Trump's call for NATO countries to increase their defense spending to 5% of GDP to deter potential Russian aggression. In an interview with The Associated Press, Nausėda emphasised the importance of including Ukraine in any ceasefire negotiations with Russia, warning that Russia could use a ceasefire to consolidate its forces and prepare for further attacks. Lithuania, which shares borders with Russia's Kaliningrad exclave and Belarus, is concerned about the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the possibility of broader regional aggression. Additionally, Nausėda highlighted the need for NATO and the EU to protect the Baltic Sea's critical underwater infrastructure following a series of incidents damaging undersea cables and gas pipelines. Despite domestic objections, Nausėda insists that increasing military expenditures is essential for Lithuania's national security.
7. <https://www.ft.com/content/c6375406-df00-4e1d-801f-9435b6a8d253> - Sweden has officially joined NATO, becoming the 32nd member of the alliance, and along with Finland, this nearly encircles the Baltic Sea with NATO member states. The strategic importance of the mid-Baltic island of Gotland, now under NATO's umbrella, enhances the defense of the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In response, Russia has signalled military fortification plans focusing on addressing perceived threats from these new NATO members. This expansion reconfigures regional security dynamics, transforming the Baltic into what some officials call a 'NATO lake.' The integration of Sweden is expected to foster unprecedented cooperation and consolidation between Nordic and Baltic states, particularly regarding airspace control and military logistics. Enhanced collective defense and deterrence capabilities are significant outcomes for Northern Europe, although experts caution that tensions with Russia are likely to persist.