

Newsweek

The Baltic States Are Not Serious About Defending Themselves

By [Ted Galen Carpenter](#)

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News stories in the West contend that Russia's increasingly aggressive behavior is causing the Baltic states and other NATO members in Eastern Europe to become far more serious about [national defense](#).

There is no doubt that tensions in the region are on the rise, including a surge of incidents involving NATO [intercepts](#) of Russian military aircraft operating over the Baltic Sea. The new congressional approval of military aid to Ukraine may well increase the already alarming level of animosity between NATO and Russia.

But the notion that the Baltic republics have embarked on serious programs to boost their defense capabilities in light of Moscow's menacing behavior is vastly overstated. The military spending of those three countries has merely moved from minuscule to meager.

Although all NATO members pledged after the Alliance's summit meeting in 2006 to spend a minimum of 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, few members have actually done so. Indeed, eight years later, only the United States, Britain, Greece, and Estonia among the 28 member states [fulfill that commitment](#).

And Estonia barely met that standard.

All three Baltic governments are going to great lengths to highlight their alleged seriousness about defense, but the actual data fail to support the propaganda. Amid much fanfare, Estonia plans to boost its military spending from 2.0 percent of GDP to—wait for it—2.05 percent! Lithuania intends to raise its budget next year from 0.89 percent to 1.01 percent. And Latvian leaders solemnly pledge that their country will spend no less than 1 percent—up from the current 0.91 percent.

The alarmist rhetoric of the Baltic republics about the danger of Russian aggression is not matched by their actions. Given the security situation in the region, spending even 2 percent of GDP on defense, to say nothing of devoting 1 percent or less, is pathetic.

No one believes that the small Baltic states could repel a Russian invasion on their own, but it is not too much to expect that they would build military capabilities sufficient to slow an advance and raise the costs to Moscow in blood and treasure. Such a commitment, however, would require military outlays at three to five times current levels. There is no indication that the Baltic governments intend to boost spending to anything close to that

The geographic vulnerability of the Baltic states, combined with their continuing military weakness, should underscore to U.S. leaders that such “allies” are strategic liabilities, not assets. Washington is drifting into confrontation with a nuclear-armed Russia over countries that have little economic or strategic relevance to the American republic.

U.S. officials need to consider carefully whether it makes sense for this country to incur such risks on behalf of so-called allies that seem unwilling even to make serious efforts on behalf of their own defense. It is a stretch to argue that the United States should care so much about the defense of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that we must be willing to risk war, but it is preposterous to argue that we should care more about their defense than they do.

Yet that appears to be the current situation.

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