



NATO: the mission in the Baltics shifts from surveillance to real air defense

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NATO has strengthened its air posture in the Baltic countries, transforming the historic **Baltic Air Policing** mission into a setup with tasks closer to those of real air defense.

The change expands the operational capabilities of allied aircraft deployed in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. NATO pilots will no longer be called upon solely to identify, intercept, and escort suspicious aircraft, but will be able to intervene more quickly against drones, missiles, or aircraft considered a concrete threat.

According to Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda, the new setup grants allied forces greater freedom of action, including the possibility of destroying a threat if the situation requires it. However, this is not an automatic authorization to shoot down any Russian aircraft approaching NATO airspace: any potential use of weapons will continue to depend on threat identification, rules of engagement, and decisions of the allied command chain.

From air policing to air defense

Baltic Air Policing was launched in 2004, following the accession of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to NATO. The three countries do not have their own sufficient fighter component to independently ensure airspace surveillance.

For over twenty years, Alliance member states have alternated in deploying aircraft and personnel at bases in the region, especially in Šiauliai, Lithuania, and Ämari, Estonia.

The mission was conceived as a permanent peacetime activity: fighters on operational readiness would take off to identify aircraft flying without a flight plan, with transponders off, or without maintaining communications with air traffic control.

In most cases, these were Russian military aircraft heading towards the Kaliningrad exclave or transiting over the Baltic Sea. The allied intervention generally consisted of approaching, visually identifying, and accompanying the aircraft, without offensive actions.

With the worsening security situation on the eastern flank, this setup has been progressively considered insufficient.



An Italian Eurofighter flies alongside a Montenegrin Learjet 45 during a simulated interception exercise in Montenegro's skies, as part of NATO's Air Policing mission in the country.

Drones and missiles change the nature of the threat

The war in Ukraine has profoundly altered the operational landscape. To the traditional activity of Russian military aircraft, the risk posed by drones, cruise missiles, electronic jamming, and

flying objects capable of crossing NATO borders either unintentionally or deliberately has been added.

In this scenario, simply identifying a target is not always sufficient. A drone loaded with explosives, an off-course missile, or an aircraft displaying hostile intentions may require a decision in a few minutes, if not seconds.

The new posture should therefore allow for a quicker and more flexible response, reducing the time needed to move from alert to the potential neutralization of the threat.

The strengthening of the Baltic mission is part of the broader NATO integrated air and missile defense system, which includes radars, command centers, interceptor fighters, and ground-based anti-aircraft systems. The Alliance considers airspace protection a fundamental element of deterrence and defense of the eastern flank.

A political shift as well

The shift from air policing to air defense has a significance that goes beyond the technical aspect.

Baltic Air Policing was primarily a mission of presence, vigilance, and solidarity among allies. The new configuration introduces a more explicitly combat capability: fighters are not deployed solely to show the NATO flag or document an incursion but also to materially prevent its consequences.

The decision thus sends a direct message to Moscow: an entry into allied airspace, especially if accompanied by hostile behavior, might no longer end with a simple interception.

At the same time, NATO will have to continue managing the risk of escalation with extreme caution. Russian and allied aircraft regularly operate in close proximity over the Baltic Sea, often in high-tension conditions. A misidentification, a misinterpreted maneuver, or a decision made in seconds could produce very serious political and military consequences.

The precedent of Russian interceptions

In recent years, NATO fighters have frequently taken off to intercept Russian military aircraft operating without transponders, without a communicated flight plan, or without contact with

civilian controllers.

In April 2026, a large Russian formation including Tu-22M3 bombers and several Su-30 and Su-35 fighters was intercepted by allied aircraft over the Baltic Sea. The operation involved, among others, French Rafales and aircraft from Sweden, Finland, Poland, Denmark, and Romania.

Such episodes demonstrate how the Baltic airspace has become one of the main points of military contact between Russia and NATO.

So far, however, the prevailing logic has been one of control and deterrence. The new setup, however, brings the mission closer to a system where surveillance, identification, and engagement capabilities are part of the same operational device.

Not just fighters

A true air defense cannot rely solely on interceptors.

To counter small and relatively inexpensive targets, such as drones, the use of an air-to-air missile or the takeoff of a fighter may be disproportionate and costly. For this reason, the defense of the Baltic countries will require a layered network composed of sensors, electronic warfare, ground-based anti-aircraft systems, interceptors, and command structures capable of rapidly sharing information.

Fighters will remain essential against military aircraft and high-speed threats, but they will need to be integrated with ground systems intended for close and medium-range defense.

The transformation of Baltic Air Policing thus represents only part of a broader process: the transition from a predominantly demonstrative military presence to an advanced defense posture, ready to operate in increasingly contested airspace.

Is NATO preparing for the worst-case scenario?

Strengthening the mission does not mean that a direct conflict with Russia is inevitable. However, it means that the Alliance no longer considers sufficient a structure conceived over twenty years ago for a very different strategic environment.

In 2004, the main task was to ensure the air sovereignty of the new Baltic members. Today, NATO must prepare to face drones, missiles, provocations, electronic jamming, and possible hostile actions conducted with extremely short notice.

The change is therefore substantial: in the Baltic skies, allied fighters will no longer perform only a policing function. They will be part of a setup tasked, when necessary, with identifying, intercepting, and neutralizing a threat before it can strike Alliance territory.

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