

FRIVÄRLD

UNITED WE STAND

- A roadmap to create an urgently needed common Nordic - Baltic security culture for the era of multiple and complex crises and existential threats.

UNITED WESTAND

Summary

- Ukrainian victory is a key security interest for the Baltic Sea region and the Nordic and the Baltic countries collectively (Nordic - Baltic Eight, NB8). A Russian victory will inevitably lead to an existential threat for a democratic and sovereign Baltic Sea region, sooner rather than later.
- The worsening security situation creates a need for both immediate innovation and action to ensure freedom, prosperity and peace for all our countries. Of all urgent needs, a toolbox to deal with hybrid threats is especially needed.
- Action and innovation must be built upon shared and common values.
- NB8 can substantially contribute to other formats, such as the EU and NATO, by functioning as “a glue.”
- The challenges are real, complex and long-lasting, but the situation could deteriorate quickly. The need for understanding of the situation, at all levels, is crucial. Here follows the important mission to explain to the population what is at stake.
- In order to build a common security culture, the Stockholm Free World Forum hereby invites policy experts, business leaders, opinion makers and politicians from all NB8 countries to contribute to the formation of a Nordic - Baltic manifesto, an ideological framework of who we are together and as members of the free world, NATO and EU.



Gunnar Hökmark is the chairman of Stockholm Free World Forum. Gunnar Hökmark is a former Swedish politician and Member of the European Parliament (MEP).



Patrik Oksanen is a resident senior fellow at Stockholm Free World Forum as well as Fellow of the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences and Royal Military Society. Patrik Oksanen has extensive experience as a journalist, writer and opinion-maker in security and defence.

NB8 Cooperation format - introduction

The NB8 format coordinates the cooperation between the Baltic and Nordic countries. It started in the early 90's and is based upon common values and interests. Its importance is growing due to Russia's aggression. In 2023, Latvia was chair of the cooperation and had following priorities:

- strengthening a rules-based international order;
- strengthening military security and deterrence;
- strengthening resilience.

On January 1st, 2024, Sweden took over the chair and Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billström has publicly pointed out three priorities:

- reinforcing security policy cooperation in our region;
- reaffirming our unwavering commitment to Ukraine's freedom, sovereignty and territorial integrity;
- reaching out globally in support for Ukraine.

This brief is a contribution to the ongoing NB8 debate and serves as a road map on how to broaden the cooperation, increase awareness and discuss what NB8 can and should do.

United we stand - a philosophical approach

The understanding of strength in unity and collaboration, expressed as "United we stand," goes back to the beginnings of mankind's history. We have learned that together we can not only survive but achieve greatness. It is first attributed to the Greek writer Aesop (620–564 BC) and his fables, but it also appears in the Bible and in the more modern context in the pre-revolutionary US "The Liberty Song."

"United we stand" (because divided we fall) should be the strategic compass and key narrative for the NB8-region, both amongst ourselves but also with other like-minded democracies in the global community. The more united we stand, the stronger we can be, not only in our own defense but also as a nucleus for closer cooperation among the countries in the free world.

A narrative within a democracy cannot not be built from nothing; it must be backed up with actions and a solid ground. That is why policies need to both form and be formed by the strategic narrative. Here, there is a fundamental European interest that Ukraine wins the war. For the Nordic and the Baltic countries, Ukraine's victory is crucial if peace and our democracies are to prevail. A Russian victory will lead to an existential threat against sovereignty and democracy as we know it all over Europe, but our region will face the threats earlier than anyone else. No effort to support Ukraine should be spared.

Even if the NB8 countries firmly believe in cooperation with democracies through the EU (Norway and Iceland are still outside but associated through EFTA, the EU single market and Schengen) and NATO (with Sweden's accession still pending with an uncertain time frame), the NB8 could do more to build a firm foundation and capacities during stormy days.

Standing united in these challenging times starts with ourselves. It is too important to just assume that decisions at NATO's North Atlantic Council or in EU institutions will just solve our common problems with us as passive bystanders.

Stronger cooperation will also mean a stronger voice and contribution to the EU and NATO. In times when authoritarian forces try to tear the Alliance and the Union apart, NB8 can be the clear-minded glue that is a force of stability. We have all the chances to act preemptively to avoid, or at least mitigate, crises. And if we are in great need, we must prove that we are worth helping by demonstrating the willingness and ability to take responsibility for our own security, help others, be resilient, have defensive capabilities, and defend freedom and democracy wherever it is needed.

Even if we are talking about small countries in the High North, we should not underestimate our collective strength. Alone, we might be various sized dwarfs, but together we are formidable. The facts and figures are clear:

The NB8-countries have 33.6 million citizens. In a global context the NB8 would be the 42th most populous country. Even if Russia has approximately 4.5 times larger population than the NB8, the GDP is in parity.

In the 2023 Liberal Democracy index by V-Dem institute, Denmark ranks number 1 in the world, followed by Sweden and Norway, with Estonia in 5th place, Finland in 10th and then Latvia, Lithuania and Iceland in 25th, 26th and 29th¹ place. In various other global indexes, the NB8 countries appear in the top. Just to take a few examples of gold medals: Word Press Freedom index (Norway), Happiness (Finland), Quality of Life (Sweden). Or getting silver and bronze

medals like in Global Innovation (Sweden 2nd) and Cyber security (Estonia 3rd).

As The Economist points out, Russian aggression has brought the Nordic-Baltic region closer together in several ways. Economically and politically, “Putin has brought the Nordics around to the Baltic way of thinking.”² The Baltic states' experiences under occupation and regained freedom combined with the Nordic countries' developed democracies is a formidable match.

It is also hard to find a more democratic bloc of small countries that together could muster such strength and creativity. Here we have some of the world's most stable old democracies and some of the most stable new democracies. Free individuals and free enterprises in a free society is a “superpower” authoritarian states fear. That is why authoritarian states want to undermine trust and belief in democracies and use hybrid influence methods to sow division and fuel tensions to weaken us.

That is why we need to step up the protection of our “superpower” and put the full energy of free societies into better use in a more difficult and complex global world.

The situation is not looking good in the coming years and we will need to do much more, much faster in order to secure a prosperous and peaceful future.

“Russia believes it can outlast Ukraine and the Euro-Atlantic community. It thinks it can wear Ukraine and us down. We must and can prove them wrong.”

Kaja Kallas, Prime Minister of Estonia, on X 14th of November 2023.

1. V-Dem institute report 2023 https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf

2. <https://www.economist.com/the-world-ahead/2023/11/13/ukraine-has-brought-nordic-and-baltic-countries-together>

A brief conclusion of the overall situation in the end of December 2023

- The Russian ambition for Ukraine has not changed and will not change with nothing less than a complete Russian defeat. The imperial desire goes deeper than Putin in Russian society. Russia is preparing for a long war of attrition and puts huge effort into moving the country towards a war economy. Ensuring Ukrainian victory is an existential interest for the NB8.
- The collective West seems to risk losing our window of opportunity to secure a rules based order built on principles of human rights and democracy for this century. This is due to a lack of a sense of urgency against brutal Russian aggression, a failure to react to the Chinese threat and a hesitancy to see democracy as a dividing line where peace and security is to be safeguarded. But there is more to it than that. The West has been too introverted for too long and thus risks alienating the Global South. High levels of societal stress due to climate change, immigration, terrorism, extremism and populism are exploited by malign actors.
- The West is also vulnerable due to an empty armory and far too slow a growth in defense production. One illustrative example, according to prognosis, is that the US is likely to produce less of the 155 mm grenades in 2025 than Russia will already be producing next year.
- We are starting to see what a more “multi-polar world” means: An era of wars, displacement of people, hatred and aggression. It is not a world that can deal with mankind's collective challenges and solve climate change, AI, food scarcity, poverty, much less reach the UN 2030 agenda, where all people should enjoy peace and prosperity.
- The Nordic-Baltic region will become the frontline between Russia and the West with increasing tensions in the High North, particularly when China also moves further into the Arctic. The Chinese - Russian partnership has no limits, as Putin and Xi Jinping have declared.
- Hybrid warfare and influence tools are deployed against NB8-countries with larger physical impacts. The cutting of a gas pipe and cables from Estonia is a significant escalation; the use of a Hong Kong registered ship also illustrates the toxic and complex combination of Russia and China. And we see again how refugees are driven to our borders, with Finland forced to close the border to Russia. This is a tactic both Belarus and Russia have used against the region before.
- 2024 will be a crucial and dangerous year for democracies, with global tensions and several important elections fueling conflicts inside Western societies. Within a year, the NB8-countries could be in a much more difficult and dangerous situation. Using the time in the coming months is essential.
- Even if the NB8-countries are deeply committed to the collective Euro-Atlantic security, huge efforts are needed to build security on our own terms that could be strong in itself but also strengthen both the EU and NATO.

“The beginning of all wisdom is recognition of facts.”

Juho Kusto Paasikivi, 7th president of Finland (1946-1956).

Dealing with the threats

The idea that many Western countries and leaders were fooled by – that Russia is possible to reason with and affect through diplomacy and economic dependencies – is (and must remain) dead and buried for a foreseeable future.

Russia will not go away, and the support of the war of imperialism is greater in the Russian population than what many in the West tend to think. Therefore, we must come to understand that it is not “Putin's war” but the “Russian war of imperialism” that is being fought in Ukraine.

The failure to listen to the insights and experiences Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had about Russia will be judged harshly by history. Here, one can now fear that the West is making the same mistake when it comes to China. Underestimating the CCP's ambition will be dangerous. Therefore, we need to prepare for a long, challenging time with a perspective of decades instead of grasping for hopes of “normality” within months or a year. This normality will not come. The world before 24th of February 2022 is gone forever.

We must prepare our citizens and societies for this by communicating frankly, sincerely and openly what is at stake; not only peace and prosperity but also freedom, sovereignty and democracy itself.

Building a robust security culture in the Nordic-Baltic region must be laid on hard facts without naivety. Accepting that the situation is going to be “abnormal” for the foreseeable future is a must, just as the acceptance that things could quickly get much worse. The security culture must also rest on the rule of law, freedom of opinions and speech, and democratic system of governance.

In order to enhance capabilities to deal with all types of threats, cooperation must be strengthened at all levels of society. The first step is to understand what is going on, to have a situational awareness that goes across borders. This is not only military; it is also crucial that all government bodies that could encounter hybrid threats are participating in this. Vital is also an understanding at the political level that goes beyond ministers and parliamentarians in committees dealing with defense and foreign policy. Media coverage in the region should not be underestimated. The need for common public understanding and conversations across borders are vital.

Situational awareness goes hand in hand with increasing the understanding of the situation. In order to improve the security culture, a huge effort is needed to educate key actors in society, especially in dealing with the complexity of hybrid threats. Hard work must be done to diminish our own weaknesses as societal vulnerabilities are exploited in all fields possible.

An attacking malign actor should be deterred in two ways. It should primarily be denied the possibility to attack, but when it happens, the costs must be imposed against the aggressor and its proxies. Here, the Western approach to hybrid attacks has been too slow and too mild. A toolbox needs to be developed, and the NB8-countries should act together in developing it. The response to a hybrid attack must have legitimacy among citizens and be seen as proportionate. It must be based on national and international law but also have the ingredients of asymmetry to strike back where it hurts the aggressor. To react to hybrid attacks is not an escalation. Rather, the lack of a reaction is an escalatory invitation to the aggressor.

“We must prepare for the fact that conflict can present itself at any moment and in any domain, including the Arctic.”

NATO Admiral Rob Bauer, October 21st 2023.

But the need to counter hybrid threats does not mean that we lose focus on the war in Ukraine and the possibility of future Russian military aggression against any country in the Nordic-Baltic region. A German report points out that, after peace in Ukraine, Russia could rebuild its army to go to war with NATO in 6 to 10 years.³

An Estonian estimate is that it will take Russia 2 to 4 years to reach pre-2022 strength again.⁴ The Polish head of the National Security board says we have 36 months (counting from the beginning of December 2023) to prepare a clear deterrent capability to preserve the peace against the Kremlin.⁵ This means we are in a race against time. This is understood more in the Baltic countries, and to some degree in Finland, than in Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

Another threatening scenario that could happen even faster is a total mobilization in Russia in the spring of 2024. Together with political warfare that divides countries within NATO and/or EU and stymies institutional decision making, hybrid activities and the threat of nuclear weapons, we might find ourselves at war at the shores of the Baltic Sea already in 2025.

Even if not the most likely scenario it cannot be ruled out. Thus, we do not know how much time we have.

“For Russia, ‘peace agreement’ only means ‘time to rearm’. We are dangerously close to missing the opportunity to end centuries of the Kremlin's imperial aggression and secure the future of multiple continents. Our children will curse us in the trenches we are digging for them.”

Gabrielus Landsbergis, Foreign Minister of Lithuania, on X 4th of November 2023.

3. Mölling, C. and Schütz, T., “Preventing the Next War Germany and NATO Are in a Race Against Time”, German Council on Foreign Relations (2023). <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/preventing-next-war>

4. The Estonian estimate came under a visit by the defense minister to Washington in 2022, see for example. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20221018-russia-can-rebuild-military-in-2-4-years-estonia>

5. This was widely reported, see ERR for an English version.

<https://news.err.ee/1609183456/polish-security-chief-nato-eastern-flank-states-have-3-years-to-prepare-for-russia-attack>

Build a foundation for a narrative - The NB8-security manifesto

In order to do the right thing, we must understand our time. Here, a “United we stand” narrative can build common ground for the NB8, functioning both as a compass and a powerhouse to inspire public and political action.

Stockholm Free World Forum firmly believes that such a narrative must be carved out from our common commitment to democracy and freedom. Even if we have lived in an era when this needed no explanation, we have now entered a time when democracy is no longer the natural expected development for the global community.

All of this is happening when mankind has pressing matters to deal with, such as climate change and AI. This is a reality we have to face and address. Autocrats use weapons of fear and division against us in order to advance their interests, even in ways we thought belonged to the garbage heap of history, such as a full-scale war in Europe.

The NB8 manifesto should address security concerns in a broad sense but stand firmly on the ideas of fundamental rights and freedoms that transcends national borders, religious faith, gender and ethnicity as well as the belief in free societies, free individuals and free markets. These values are absolute and valid in all places and at all times.

We champion freedom of assembly, religion, thought and expression. We believe that our countries have a moral obligation and that this obligation also serves our own security by globally standing up for democracy, against oppression and collectively defending the right of self-defense if armed attack occurs against a democracy anywhere in the world.

Here, special focus should be placed on Ukraine and the commitment to support Ukraine “as long as it takes” to achieve victory.

Stockholm Free World Forum hereby invites policy experts, business leaders, opinion makers and politicians from all NB8 countries to contribute to the formation of a NB8-manifesto. The ideological framework for the concepts, ideas, reforms and cooperation that need to be adopted in various areas include:

- Supporting Ukraine
- Strengthening and securing the economy against hybrid threats in the region
- Joint international engagement with democracies and for democracy globally
- Military capabilities development (in a NB8-framework within in NATO)
- Civil defense planning for strategic products and refocusing of production capabilities in times of crisis and war
- Multiply arms production
- Secure cross border infrastructure
- Education
- Media

...and last but not least, developing a counter-hybrid toolbox for deterrence.

Exactly how this manifesto should be formulated, and what it should contain to give nourishment to actions and form bonds across borders, is a journey that began in Stockholm on December 7th, 2023 in a Chatham House discussion arranged together with the embassies of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The discussion is reflected in this road map.

To defend ourselves we need a whole of society approach. The aim is to have a manifesto published during the spring/summer of 2024 together with ideas for reforms and actions in various areas.

There is no longer time to simply examine the problems. It is time for action. Together. And preferably yesterday.

“It is simply in the cards that many places in the world, simultaneously or sequentially, are in the risk of having a shorter chain of escalation into large-scale conflict. This could happen both through the expansion of existing conflicts and through those that have not yet erupted. This insight is, I am sometimes afraid, not fully present with us in all parts of society.

That should lead us to the following conclusions: Things could get a lot worse, both in the short and medium term. An armed attack against Sweden or partner countries cannot be ruled out. Time is thus a cost that is not factored into a sufficiently high extent.”

Carl-Oskar Bohlin, Minister of Civil Defense of Sweden, on LinkedIn 16th of October 2023.