

Anna Moraczewska^{*}

The international dimension of the Polish Deterrence and Defence Programme – the “East Shield”

Wymiar międzynarodowy Programu Odstraszania i Obrony Polski – „Tarcza Wschód”

ABSTRACT:

This article investigates the international dimension of Poland’s Deterrence and Defence Programme – “East Shield” and assesses whether the project strengthens the emerging collective deterrence network on NATO and the EU’s eastern flank and in East-Central Europe. A qualitative comparative case-study design is employed, combining primary document analysis, strategic mapping, and process tracing. Findings show that although “East Shield” originated as a national scheme, its layered fortifications, ISR architecture, and forward logistics hubs are technically and doctrinally interoperable with the Baltic and Finnish border projects, together forming a developing continuous denial belt. The system hardens the Suwałki Gap logistics corridor, enhances deterrence credibility vis-à-vis Kaliningrad and Belarus, and recasts Poland from a passive front-line consumer into a regional deterrence integrator. Practical implications include the need for a unified ISR framework, command-and-control harmonisation under Multinational Corps North-East, and a joint EU-NATO funding line for border fortifications. The study concludes that East Shield constitutes a pivotal bridge between NATO’s deterrence-by-denial doctrine and the EU’s critical-infrastructure agenda, catalysing deeper territorial defence integration across Central and Eastern Europe

KEYWORDS:

“East Shield”, Baltic Defence Line, regional security, cooperation

^{*} Anna Moraczewska – Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9133-7690>, e-mail: anna.moraczewska@mail.umcs.pl.

STRESZCZENIE:

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie międzynarodowego wymiaru polskiego „Narodowego Programu Odstraszania i Obrony – Tarcza Wschód” (East Shield) oraz ocena, czy inicjatywa ta wzmacnia wspólny system odstraszania na wschodniej flance NATO i UE oraz w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Zastosowano jakościowe studium porównawcze, łączące analizę dokumentów rządowych i sojuszniczych, mapowanie strategiczne oraz *process tracing*. Wyniki wskazują, że choć Tarcza Wschód powstała jako program narodowy, który ma być realizowany w latach 2024–2028, jej architektura (czterowarstwowe fortyfikacje, sieć ISR, HUB-y logistyczne) jest kompatybilna z Bałtycką Linią Obrony i fińską „smart-fence”, rozbudowując realną, ciągłą barierę wzdłuż granicy z Rosją i Białorusią. Projekt ma wzmacniać ochronę korytarza suwalskiego, podnosić wiarygodność odstraszania wobec Kaliningradu i Białorusi oraz zmieniać percepcję Polski z „państwa frontowego – odbiorcy” na integratora regionalnej infrastruktury obronnej. Wnioski praktyczne obejmują potrzebę ujednolicenia standardów ISR, harmonizacji dowodzenia w ramach MNC-NE oraz stworzenia wspólnej linii finansowania UE-NATO dla inwestycji fortyfikacyjnych. Artykuł dowodzi, że Tarcza Wschód jest kluczowym ogniwem konwergencji strategii NATO i UE oraz katalizatorem szerszej integracji odstraszania terytorialnego w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

„Tarcza Wschód”, Bałtycka Linia Obrony, bezpieczeństwo regionu, współpraca

Introduction

The “East Shield” is a national project of Poland, aiming to enhance Poland’s resilience to attacks and hybrid warfare, and a response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. It is intended to demonstrate a commitment to defending Polish borders on its eastern and northern sides. The project involves the construction of fortifications and natural terrain obstacles, such as planting forests and improving small-scale hydro retention. The “East Shield” is a defence infrastructure system that will consist of a line of trenches, bunkers, and reinforced concrete hedgehogs, as well as using existing natural terrain obstacles: forests, swamps, rivers, or escarpments. Depending on the needs, logistics centres, storage facilities for materials, fortification elements and shelters, or a drone detection and tracking system using radar, thermal vision and aerial surveillance, are planned to be built.

While it is a Polish project focused on the security of Polish borders, infrastructure, and society, its impact can have an international reach. It

will serve the joint defence of the eastern flank of the European Union and NATO, implementing the Alliance's regional plans. There are ongoing talks with Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland on sharing their experience and combining border protection efforts.

Poland has drawn the attention of the European Union to the problem of defending its eastern border. The construction of East Shield is to be seen as an element of joint action by EU states, in a sense of solidarity, to oppose Russian aggression and defend an international order based on principles and norms, rejecting war as a means of pursuing interests. On 12 January 2025, as part of a vote on a resolution to strengthen the European Union's defence, the European Parliament adopted an amendment recognising East Shield as a flagship project for the EU's common security.

The aim of this article is to present the main assumptions of the East Shield project, its relevance to the security of the Central and Eastern European region, and to find similarities and differences between the East Shield and the Baltic Defence Line. Research questions concern, firstly, in what ways does the Polish initiative integrate with or shape the wider security framework of the Baltic Sea region and Central-Eastern Europe? And whether the East Shield and the Baltic Defence Line are based on a strategic interdependence between countries and will, therefore, unite NATO's eastern flank. A hypothesis of this article is: the Polish "East Shield" programme, although designed as a national border defence initiative, is evolving into a strategic component of the wider Baltic Sea regional security architecture by enhancing deterrence-by-denial, supporting NATO's eastern posture, and aligning with multilateral initiatives such as the Baltic Defence Line and Finnish territorial defence efforts. This article employs a qualitative comparative case study approach, combining document analysis, strategic mapping, and process tracing. The core analytical focus is placed on Poland's "East Shield" programme, examined in relation to two key regional reference points: the Baltic Defence Line (BDL) and Finland's post-accession defence posture.

1. Deterrence by design: Strategic logic of the "East Shield"

The dramatic shift in the geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe after 2022 has profoundly reshaped the security strategies of European Union

member states. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the protracted nature of the conflict, and the growing risk of its westward escalation have forced frontline states to rethink their national defence postures. These developments have triggered a wave of strategic investments aimed at strengthening border regions, enhancing physical infrastructure, and building resilient national security systems capable of absorbing hybrid and conventional threats.

Poland, sharing its eastern border with Belarus – a country complicit in hybrid pressure tactics, including orchestrated migration flows – has been at the forefront of these efforts. In parallel, Poland also borders the Kaliningrad Oblast¹, a heavily militarised Russian exclave hosting advanced missile systems and Baltic Fleet assets, making it one of NATO's most sensitive frontlines. In response, the Polish government has launched an ambitious defence initiative: the National Programme for Deterrence and Defence – “East Shield”.

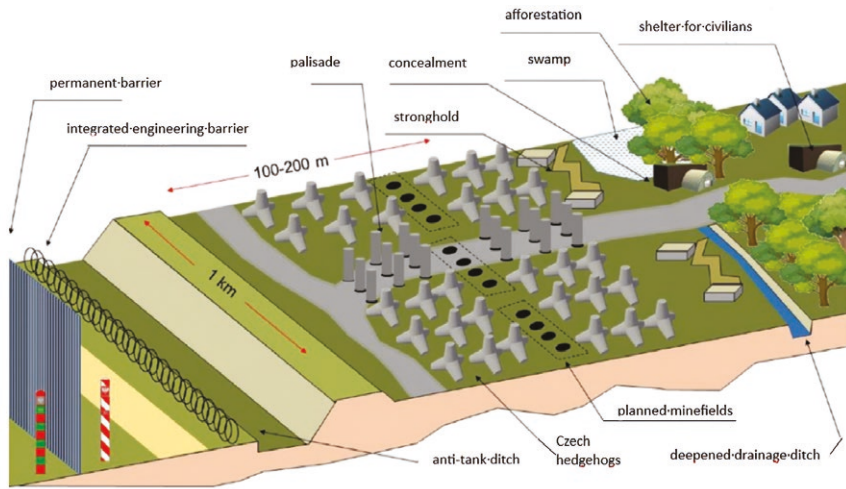
The programme is designed as a multidimensional fortification strategy, aimed at deterring potential adversaries, limiting their manoeuvrability, and protecting military personnel and civilians in the event of aggression. It reflects a doctrinal shift from reactive defence to forward-looking deterrence-by-denial, which involves physically and technologically hardening territory to make any hostile incursion costly and ineffective². Importantly, “East Shield” is not just a stand-alone infrastructure initiative – it is also embedded in a broader strategic transformation of the Polish Armed Forces, which includes force modernisation, increased readiness, and stronger alignment with both NATO's Regional Plans (2023) and the EU's emerging defence priorities under the Strategic Compass. By reshaping the operational and physical landscape along its eastern border, Poland aims not only to secure its national territory but to enhance deterrence and stability across the wider Baltic Sea region³.

The “East Shield” programme represents a doctrinal pivot in Polish national defence strategy, embracing deterrence-by-denial and territorial

¹ In Poland, based on the work of the Commission for the Standardization of Geographical Names Outside the Borders of the Republic of Poland operating under the Geodetic and Cartographic Law, instead of the name Kaliningrad/Kaliningrad Oblast, the name Królewiec/Królewiec Oblast is used.

² *Tarcza Wschód: Narodowy Program Odstraszania i Obrony*, <https://tarczawschod.wp.mil.pl/> [15.06.2025].

³ Ibid.



Picture 1. The first line of defence of the "Eastern Shield" along the border

Source: Sztab Generalny Wojska Polskiego, Założenia Programu „Tarcza Wschód”.

resilience as core principles. Formally adopted by the Council of Ministers in June 2024 (Resolution No. 58)⁴, and overseen by an interministerial Steering Committee (Regulation No. 159/2024)⁵, the programme is Poland's most ambitious military fortification project since the Cold War. The "East Shield" is founded on four operational pillars: anti-surprise capabilities (*przeciw-zaskoczeniowość*), counter-mobility (*kontrmobilność*), force protection, and civil defence. These pillars align with NATO's deterrence-by-denial posture and the EU's strategic emphasis on infrastructural resilience⁶.

Infrastructure for the "East Shield" includes deep-layered fortifications (bunkers, reinforced shelters, hardened logistics hubs), engineering countermeasures (anti-tank ditches, demolition charges on bridges, terrain shaping), integrated sensor and reconnaissance grids (long-range optical towers, acoustic and thermal surveillance), and passive drone defence capabilities⁷ (Picture 1). Spatial resilience planning is a key component, with the use of

⁴ Resolution No. 58 of the Council of Ministers, 10 June 2024, establishing the "East Shield" programme.

⁵ Regulation No. 159/2024 of the Prime Minister establishing the Steering Committee for the East Shield programme.

⁶ Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030; EU Strategic Compass (2022).

⁷ *Tarcza Wschód...*

natural features (forests, rivers) and dual-use terrain management (e.g., adaptive water engineering, forestry)⁸. This “total defence” concept borrows from Nordic doctrine, embedding military objectives in broader environmental, civilian, and infrastructural strategies.

In the construction of military facilities and security structures in the border zone, the use of Ultimate Building Machine (UBM) technology is planned. This technology enables the rapid production of semi-finished elements for the assembly of final constructions, including, among others, field storage facilities for material supplies, modular buildings, and prefabricated shelters. The implementation of UBM technology allows for: automation and acceleration of the construction process, increased durability and weather resistance of the facilities, high mobility and versatility of use, minimal labour requirements, cost-efficiency, and the ability to build in difficult terrain conditions⁹. The application of UBM in the “East Shield” programme provides a critical logistical and engineering advantage. By allowing for the rapid deployment of modular defensive infrastructure, including storage bunkers and personnel shelters, UBM enhances the mobility and adaptability of Polish forces along the eastern border. It directly supports key pillars of the programme, such as anti-surprise capabilities (by enabling quick reaction capability through pre-positioned or rapidly deployed assets), force protection, especially in forward-operating hubs (HUBs), and civilian resilience, where modular shelters may serve dual purposes in crisis scenarios. Moreover, UBM aligns with total defence principles, enabling swift and decentralised infrastructure buildup even in degraded or remote environments, without relying on large-scale construction forces.

As of 2025, implementation is underway across four voivodeships (Lubelskie, Podlaskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Podkarpackie), with a 10-billion PLN budget sourced from national and EU funds¹⁰. The design logic reflects a forward-looking fusion of classic territorial defence and 21st-century threat scenarios (e.g., hybrid incursions, mass migration, drone swarms). As such, the “East Shield” marks a structural shift in Polish, Baltic and Central

⁸ W. Jarczewski, B. Sroka, *Rola planowania przestrzennego w budowaniu rezylencji obronnej Polski oraz realizacji założeń “Narodowego Programu Odstraszania i Obrony” – „Tarcza Wschód”*, Instytut Rozwoju Miast i Regionów (the article has not been published yet, only submitted for publication in 2025).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Annex to the Resolution No 58 Council of Ministers: National Programme for Deterrence and Defence – East Shield, 2024–2028 budget and scope.

Europe regional defence planning, anchoring deterrence not just in combat readiness, but in terrain-integrated resilience.

From the perspective of security studies, Poland's "East Shield" programme can be conceptualised through the lens of strategic deterrence-by-denial – a theory which posits that an adversary is dissuaded from initiating aggression not merely by the threat of retaliation, but by the high likelihood of failure due to physical, operational, or psychological barriers on the defender's side¹¹. The logic underpinning the "East Shield" reflects an applied lesson drawn directly from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia's tactics – especially in the opening stages of the 2022 war – revealed a doctrine of high-tempo ground penetration aimed at achieving strategic paralysis through rapid mobility, infrastructure sabotage, and local encirclement¹². This exposed a critical vulnerability: the absence of pre-prepared, hardened defensive belts and insufficient spatial depth along key axes of advance, particularly near urban centres and supply corridors.

In response, Poland has reoriented its defence planning away from expeditionary projection and towards territorial defence-in-depth, echoing classical principles of strategic geography and area denial¹³. The core assumption is that preparing the terrain itself as a defensive asset – through layered fortifications, sensor networks, drone denial zones, and mobile bridging logistics – can significantly slow down or disorganise any future Russian-style combined-arms thrust.

2. From national shield to European Union security asset

The adoption of the "Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030" in March 2025 by the European Commission marks a turning point in Brussels' collective threat perception¹⁴. The document opens with the

¹¹ See more L. Freedman, *Deterrence*, Cambridge 2004; G.H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defence: Toward a Theory of National Security*, Princeton University Press, 2016.

¹² M. Kofman, R. Lee, *Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military's Ill-Fated Force Design*, "War on the Rocks" 2022, no. 6, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/not-built-for-purpose-the-russian-militarys-ill-fated-force-design/> [17.06.2025].

¹³ E.C. Sloan, *Modern Military Strategy: An Introduction*, Routledge 2016, pp. 101–103.

¹⁴ European Commission, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, JOIN(2025) 120 final. Brussels, 19 March 2025.

acknowledgement that “Europe faces an acute and growing threat”¹⁵ and that decades of under-investment have eroded credible deterrence. In response, ‘the White Paper’ calls for a “once-in-a-generation surge” in defence spending, accelerated capability development, and the transformation of borders into genuine security frontiers. In the main text, risks are recognised for the EU as its distinctive geography and history, which usually make the continent exceptionally vulnerable to pressures coming from its wider neighbourhood. Mentioning challenges such as terrorism, hybrid attacks, the operations of transnational criminal networks, and cyber-enabled crime, the Commission indicates Russia as the most acute peril: it is prosecuting a full-scale war on European soil, sustained by a wartime economy and bolstered by material support from Belarus, North Korea, and Iran¹⁶.

The White Paper situates the Union’s defence renaissance within NATO’s broader security architecture – an alliance that now includes nearly every EU member state and, since 2023, all countries along the Union’s eastern external frontier. Because capability gaps on that border translate directly into vulnerabilities for the Alliance, the document argues that Europe’s re-arming must unfold step-in-step with NATO’s force-planning cycles¹⁷. It lays out four interlocking pillars for such coordination: 1) Joint identification of investment priorities; 2) Long-term, cross-party political commitments; 3) Agreed governance frameworks; and 4) Targeted EU funding and enabling measures. The EU plans to share rules for each capability domain and complement the EU’s financial instruments with NATO command structures. Moreover, in the document, seven critical capability gaps are indicated – air and missile defence, artillery, ammunition, drones, military mobility, AI/cyber/quantum, and critical-infrastructure protection – with urgent remedies urged by 2030¹⁸. The Polish project – “East Shield”, speaks directly to two of these gaps: critical-infrastructure protection – by hardening bridges, roads, and energy nodes along the Suwałki–Bug line, and military mobility – by pre-designing corridors, hubs, and dual-use crossings that serve both EU logistics and NATO reinforcement plans.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 8, 19.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 6–7.

Poland's "East Shield" illustrates how concepts translate into practice. By hardening the Alliance's most exposed land corridor along the Suwałki–Bug axis, the programme plugs a recognised gap in NATO's deterrence-by-denial posture while tapping EU funds for dual-use infrastructure and military mobility. In doing so, a national fortification scheme becomes a key element of collective security for the Alliance's north-eastern flank. Within this new strategic grammar, the Polish defence and deterrence project is explicitly referenced – as the "Eastern Border Shield" – a model project for reinforcing the Union's most exposed land frontier with Russia and Belarus. The White Paper describes it as "an integrated land-border management system [...] designed to strengthen the EU's external land border against military and hybrid threats"¹⁹, combining physical barriers, infrastructure upgrades, and advanced surveillance. By elevating what began as a national fortification plan to an EU-level "exercise", Brussels signals that Polish investments are no longer a parochial undertaking but part of the Union's collective resilience architecture. Moreover, all Member States must field "sufficient deterrence capacity to prevent a potential war of aggression"²⁰ while remaining interoperable with the Alliance. "East Shield" illustrates this logic. Built by Poland, co-funded by EU instruments, and fully nested in NATO regional plans, it embodies autonomy through capability contribution, not separation.

3. The East Shield and the Baltic Defence Line: From parallel walls to a unified deterrence belt

The three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – carry a singular geopolitical burden. Having spent nearly half a century inside the Soviet Union, they emerged in 1991 as small, demographically fragile democracies situated on NATO's narrowest frontage with Russia. Their combined population barely reaches six million; their armed forces field, in peacetime, fewer active soldiers than a single Russian army corps. Geography compounds that vulnerability: the region lacks strategic depth, with national capitals, road networks, and energy nodes lying within artillery range of the frontier.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

A decision by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania on 19 January 2024 to construct a joint Baltic Defence Line (BDL) created the northern half of a future continuous denial belt along NATO and the EU's frontier with Russia and Belarus. Estonia alone intends to erect 600 hardened bunkers, a figure that implies thousands more sites once Latvia and Lithuania scale the concept to their far longer borders²¹. Yet from the outset, Baltic defence ministers stressed that success would depend on “co-ordinating our activities with Poland” and on securing European Union co-financing²². East Shield spans the Suwałki–Bug axis, sealing the only land corridor through which a Russian thrust from Belarus could sever the Baltics from the rest of NATO. In practical terms, it turns the BDL's terminal bunker line near Druskininkai into the forward edge of a deeper Polish defensive system rather than an exposed southern flank.

Both projects are framed around “deterrence-by-denial”: static obstacles, pre-surveyed demolition chambers, and pre-positioned barriers are meant to slow armoured breakthroughs long enough for allied fires to concentrate. The Polish variant adds forward logistics “HUBs” and 70-metre sensor towers whose data can be integrated with the BDL's planned regional fusion cell, creating a single real-time picture.

What is worth mentioning is that in spring 2025, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia formally notified the United Nations of their withdrawal from the 1997 Ottawa Convention, the treaty that bans the use, stockpiling, production, and transfer of anti-personnel landmines. The step – coordinated among the four eastern-flank allies – reflects a judgment that, in light of Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine, self-imposed constraints on mine warfare can no longer be justified when the potential adversary ignores them and is not a signatory to the Convention. (Poland ratified the Ottawa Convention at the end of 2012)²³. By signalling their intent to leave

²¹ *The Baltic Defence Line*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/02/the-baltic-defense-line/> [18.06.2025]; *Baltic nations prepare 600-strong bunker defensive line, with Russian threat in mind*, Breaking Defence, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/02/baltic-nations-prepare-600-strong-bunker-defensive-line-with-russian-threat-in-mind/> [18.06.2025].

²² *Baltic States and Poland seek EU funding for Baltic Defence Line*, <https://defence-industry.eu/baltic-states-and-poland-seek-eu-funding-for-baltic-defence-line/> [20.06.2025].

²³ *Kraje bałtyckie wypowiedziały międzynarodowy traktat. Powiadomiły ONZ*, Polish Press Agency, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/zakaz-uzywania-min-przeciwpiechotnych-jest-ruch-krajow-baltyckich> [28.06.2025].



Picture 2. The East Shield and Baltic Defence Line – a unified deterrence belt

Source: *The Great Wall of Europe: Poland and Baltic Nations demand 1500-mile defence line along EU's border with Russia and Belarus amid growing WW3 fears*, "Daily Mail", 27 June 2024, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13577127/The-Great-Wall-Europe-Poland-Baltic-Nations-demand-1500-mile-defence-line-EU-s-border-Russia-Belarus-amid-growing-WW3-fears.html>.

the treaty – six months after the June 2025 notification – the four states aim to reintroduce defensive minefields as part of “East Shield” and the Baltic Defence Line, thereby thickening the physical barrier on NATO’s and the EU’s eastern frontier. As such, the denunciation of the Ottawa norms is framed not as a retreat from humanitarian principles but as an additional layer of deterrence-by-denial in a rapidly deteriorating regional security environment.

Poland’s “East Shield” and Baltic Defence Line share similar design logics; both rely on layered counter-mobility obstacles, pre-surveyed demolitions, and forward ammunition points to turn national borderlands into a single deterrence zone. Because “East Shield” already incorporates comparable engineering solutions – anti-tank ditches, “dragon’s-teeth”/Czech hedgehogs barriers, and pre-positioned stores – it can plug smoothly into wider Baltic

plans, offering economies of scale in procurement and a common template for NATO engineering units deployed in a crisis.

Both projects aim at re-profiling existing border roads with new anti-tank ditches, while drainage canals are converted into similar trenches to deny armoured movement. The obstacle belt will combine concrete blocks, “dragon’s teeth”, and anti-tank mines, all aligned with the natural lay of the land – swamps, forest patches, and river courses – to maximise defensive depth²⁴. Because “East Shield” is building similar storage bunkers and demolition nodes on its side of the frontier, the two projects together can provide mutually reinforcing magazines and obstacle clusters, allowing Polish and Baltic engineers to swap stocks and standardise firing tables. In this sense, “East Shield” does not merely mirror the Baltic Defence Line; it extends and strengthens it, completing the missing southern link in what is rapidly becoming NATO’s first truly continuous land-border denial belt.

4. The Finnish factor: Northern flank meets the Eastern barrier

In 2023, Finland evolved rapidly from a militarily non-aligned state to a front-line NATO ally, reshaping the security dynamics on the Alliance’s North-East flank. Since joining NATO, it has begun erecting a 200-kilometre smart fence – steel mesh topped with barbed wire, fitted with cameras, sensors, and loudspeakers – along the most vulnerable stretches of its 1,340 km border with Russia. The project is continuing and will run through 2026, complementing the indefinite closure of all land-border crossing points and the extension of Finland’s Border Security Act to counter instrumentalised migration²⁵. “Finland’s border region is naturally defensive, dominated by forests, lakes, and wetlands, which would complicate a large-scale Russian ground incursion”²⁶.

²⁴ *Border fortification*, <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/border-fortification> [20.06.2025].

²⁵ *Situation at Finland’s eastern border*, Finnish Government, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/situation-at-finlands-eastern-border> [28.06.2025]; *EU external border countries face common security challenges both on land borders and in the Baltic Sea*, Ministry of Interior of Finland, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/1410869/eu-external-border-countries-face-common-security-challenges-both-on-land-borders-and-in-the-baltic-sea> [28.06.2025].

²⁶ J. Budginaite-Froehly, *How NATO’s eastern flank is setting the standard for collective defense*, Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-natos-eastern-flank-is-setting-the-standard-for-collective-defense/> [29.06.2025].

By hardening terrain and integrating real-time surveillance systems, Finland provides the northern anchor to the East Shield concept: its sensors and obstacles can be joined with the Baltic Defence Line to create a single situational-awareness picture and a contiguous physical barrier.

In June 2025, Finland's parliament voted to withdraw from the Ottawa Convention on Anti-Personnel Mines, joining Poland and the Baltic states in re-authorising defensive mine warfare after the six-month notice period expires. Politicians argued that Russia's extensive use of landmines in Ukraine and Moscow's non-participation in the treaty justified restoring a capability critical for blocking Finland's forested frontier²⁷. The decision enables Finnish engineers to pre-position modern smart mines in concert with East Shield and Baltic Defence Line obstacles, thereby thickening the denial belt that underpins NATO's forward-defence posture.

Per Erik Solli and Øystein Solvang compare the deterrence and defence strategy of Norway and Finland as frontline states to Russia, and they indicate different geographical determinants for each of the states. They highlight that Finland's land boundary with Russia extends roughly 1,340 kilometres, but the territory's width varies between only 100 and 500 kilometres. This gives Finland a smaller buffer than Norway to facilitate allied military activity for credible deterrence. For this reason, starting in 2023, Finland authorised US Air Force RC-135 Rivet Joint signals-intelligence aircraft, operating out of RAF Mildenhall in the United Kingdom, to patrol the full length of Finland's frontier with Russia – from the Gulf of Finland up to Lake Inari, adjacent to the Kola Peninsula's military complex. These American platforms reportedly hold diplomatic clearances that mean, at certain points, they can fly less than 50 km from the Russian border. Moreover, Finland has extended similar access to the Swedish Air Force, whose electronic-reconnaissance planes are also allowed to fly close to the Russian border²⁸.

²⁷ *Finland's parliament votes to withdraw from landmine treaty due to Russia threat*, EuroNews, 19 June 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/2025/06/19/finlands-parliament-votes-to-withdraw-from-landmine-treaty-due-to-russia-threat> [29.06.2025].

²⁸ P.E. Solli, Ø. Solvang, *Deterrence and (Re)assurance in the High North. Finland and Norway Compared*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, "Policy Brief" 2024, no. 4, p. 4.

5. East Shield: From national fortification to regional deterrence asset

Tomasz Wróblewski recognises the importance of the “East Shield” more from the national perspective, as an upgrading of the military support network, chiefly by building a dense logistics backbone right along the frontier. Placing depots only a short distance from the border is expected to sharpen force readiness, giving units near-instant access to high-value material – armoured systems, ammunition, and other critical stores. Parallel plans call for a web of hardened shelters that protect both service members and the local population. Policymakers describe these structures as incorporating reinforced designs able to absorb artillery fire, air attacks, and other kinetic threats, while remaining habitable for extended periods if a crisis drags on²⁹.

From the broader regional perspective, Poland’s “East Shield” transforms the security geometry of the Eastern – European – Baltic region by embedding a dense obstacle-and-sensor system across the Suwałki–Bug axis – the narrow land corridor on which all NATO reinforcement of the Baltic states depends. In doctrinal terms, the project operationalises the Alliance’s 2023 shift from “deterrence by punishment” to “deterrence by denial”. Instead of threatening retaliation, the Shield physically impedes a rapid attack from Russia’s Kaliningrad enclave or from Belarus. Allied analysts already frame “East Shield” and the northern Baltic Defence Line as paired “flagship” measures in the EU-NATO handbook for forward defence, underscoring Brussels’ and NATO’s convergence on terrain-based deterrence³⁰. By strengthening bridges, creating artificial and natural barriers, and building logistics hubs within the Suwałki Gap, the programme protects the main logistics artery connecting Central Europe with the Baltic states, thereby neutralising what Russia considers to be NATO’s Achilles heel. At the strategic level, it increases the credibility of Western deterrence vis-à-vis both Kaliningrad, whose Iskander brigades and Baltic Fleet assets now face a fortified southern periphery, and Belarus, whose territory would be the likely

²⁹ T. Wróblewski, *Narodowy program odstraszenia i obrony „Tarcza Wschód” w strategii zabezpieczania wschodniej granicy Polski*, “International Journal of Legal Studies” 2024, no. 2(18), pp. 119–136, DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0054.9842.

³⁰ *How NATO’s eastern flank is setting the standard for collective defense*, Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-natos-eastern-flank-is-setting-the-standard-for-collective-defense/> [30.06.2025].

staging ground for a flanking move³¹. Politically, “East Shield” elevates Poland from a “front-line consumer” to an integrator of regional deterrence, providing a ready-made logistics and obstacle template that the Baltic and Nordic partners can plug into³².

6. Conclusion: Strategic convergence or fragmented front?

Information assembled in this article indicates that the Polish “East Shield” does far more than add another national fortification scheme. By joining its obstacle belts, sensor towers, and forward-logistics hubs with the Baltic Defence Line and Finland’s smart-fence, the Shield creates a contiguous deterrence-by-denial zone that stretches from the Gulf of Finland to the Lubelskie Voivodeship. In practical terms, it hardens the Suwałki Gap – the line for NATO reinforcement of the Baltics, while presenting Kaliningrad and Belarus with a multi-layered barrier that complicates a rapid attack from the east. The project, therefore, strengthens rather than fragments the emerging Euro-Atlantic front. It provides NATO with a ready-made east-north flank for its 2023 deterrence and defence plans³³ and offers the European Union a tangible security asset that aligns with the White Paper’s call for “critical-infrastructure protection” on the Union’s external border. Poland’s role consequently shifts from that of a passive front-line state to an active integrator of regional deterrence, setting engineering standards, and pooling EU and national funds into common security investments.

The “East Shield”, Baltic Defence Line, and Finland smart fence align with the broader re-emergence of static defence logic in European security

³¹ *Poland’s prime minister visits defensive fortifications on border with Russia*, The Associated Press, <https://apnews.com/article/7101916ad746db98e883984544198a79> [30.06.2025].

³² *Strategic Posturing and Capability Development for NATO’s Eastern Flank Defense: General Christopher Donahue’s Vision at the 2025 RUSI Land Warfare Conference*, Debug, <https://debuglies.com/2025/06/24/strategic-posturing-and-capability-development-for-natos-eastern-flank-defense-general-christopher-donahues-vision-at-the-2025-rusi-land-warfare-conference/> [30.06.2025].

³³ *The Secretary General’s Annual Report 2023*, NATO, Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA Concept) and Warfighting Capstone Concept, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_223291.htm [30.06.2025].

thinking – once marginalised by the era of manoeuvre-centric doctrines, now resurfacing due to the reality of large-scale, high-intensity warfare on NATO and the EU's borders. As Polish experts now argue, “infrastructure is deterrence”, and denying the adversary a swift path through physical and informational space becomes a strategic objective in itself³⁴. At a conceptual level, “East Shield”, therefore, constitutes not only a set of military installations but also a material manifestation of Poland's threat perception, strategic learning process, and alliance signalling.

The trajectory from the national shield to “European Security Asset” underscores how rapidly the Union's defence paradigm is evolving. By incorporating “East Shield” into the White Paper's roadmap, the European Union acknowledges that safeguarding the EU now begins at the Białowieża Forest. In turn, Poland's investment gains strategic leverage, transforming concrete reinforcement and surveillance points into tangible symbols of European solidarity and strategic autonomy.

Looking ahead, three pathways could amplify the Shield's integrative effect. First, a common ISR architecture³⁵ – built on shared data standards and real-time fusion cells – would turn the patchwork of national sensor grids into a single operational picture. Second, formal command-and-control harmonisation under NATO's Multinational Corps Northeast³⁶ would ensure that obstacle-activation orders, mine-laying rules, and fire coordination follow a unified manual during a crisis. Third, deeper regulatory alignment and funding synchronisation – for example, a joint EU-NATO financing line for border fortifications – would eliminate investment gaps that could otherwise produce weak points. Pursued together, these steps would lock “East Shield” and its northern counterparts into a coherent, resilient frontier,

³⁴ Information gathered during an interview with employees of the General Command of the Polish Armed Forces – Military Engineering Board on 2 April 2025.

³⁵ ISR – Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance, is an integrated set of capabilities that “synchronises and links the planning and employment of all collection assets with the processing, exploitation, and dissemination of the resulting information, directly supporting the planning, preparation, and conduct of operations”. In practical terms, it brings together data gathered by satellites, crewed and uncrewed aircraft, ground sensors, and other collectors, and turns them into actionable intelligence, delivering a continuous, common operating picture for commanders – knowledge that underpins the timing of strikes, manoeuvres, and defensive action. *NATO Standard AIntP-14 Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (JISR) Procedures in Support of NATO Operations*, Edition A, Version 1, NATO.

³⁶ Multinational Corps Northeast, <https://mncne.nato.int/>.

transforming Europe's most exposed land border from a strategic liability into a shared deterrent asset.

References:

- Annex to the Resolution no 58 Council of Ministers: National Programme for Deterrence and Defence – East Shield, 2024–2028 budget and scope.
- Baltic nations prepare 600-strong bunker defensive line, with Russian threat in mind*, Breaking Defence, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/02/baltic-nations-prepare-600-strong-bunker-defensive-line-with-russian-threat-in-mind/>.
- Baltic States and Poland seek EU funding for Baltic Defence Line*, <https://defence-industry.eu/baltic-states-and-poland-seek-eu-funding-for-baltic-defence-line/>.
- Border fortification*, <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/border-fortification>.
- Budginaite-Froehly J., *How NATO's eastern flank is setting the standard for collective defense*, Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-natos-eastern-flank-is-setting-the-standard-for-collective-defense/>.
- EU external border countries face common security challenges both on land borders and in the Baltic Sea*, Ministry of Interior of Finland, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/1410869/eu-external-border-countries-face-common-security-challenges-both-on-land-borders-and-in-the-baltic-sea>.
- European Commission, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, JOIN(2025) 120 final. Brussels, 19 March 2025.
- Finland's parliament votes to withdraw from landmine treaty due to Russia threat*, EuroNews, 19 June 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/2025/06/19/finlands-parliament-votes-to-withdraw-from-landmine-treaty-due-to-russia-threat>.
- Freedman L., *Deterrence*, Cambridge 2004.
- How NATO's eastern flank is setting the standard for collective defence*, Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-natos-eastern-flank-is-setting-the-standard-for-collective-defense/>.
- Jarczewski W., Sroka B., *Rola planowania przestrzennego w budowaniu rezylencji obronnej Polski oraz realizacji założeń "Narodowego Programu Odstraszania i Obrony – "Tarcza Wschód"*, Instytut Rozwoju Miast i Regionów (The article has not been published yet, just submitted to publication in 2025).
- Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, EU Strategic Compass, 2022.
- Kofman M., Lee R., *Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military's Ill-Fated Force Design*, "War on the Rocks" 2022, no. 6, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/not-built-for-purpose-the-russian-militarys-ill-fated-force-design/>.
- Kraje bałtyckie wypowiedziały międzynarodowy traktat. Powiadomiły ONZ*, Polish Press Agency, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/zakaz-uzywania-min-przeciwpiechotnych-jest-ruch-krajow-baltyckich>.
- Multinational Corps Northeast, <https://mncne.nato.int/>.

- NATO Standard AIntP-14 Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (JISR) Procedures in Support of NATO Operations*, Edition A Version 1, NATO.
- Poland's prime minister visits defensive fortifications on border with Russia*, The Associated Press, <https://apnews.com/article/7101916ad746db98e883984544198a79>.
- Regulation No. 159/2024 of the Prime Minister establishing the Steering Committee for the East Shield programme.
- Resolution No. 58 of the Council of Ministers, 10 June 2024, establishing the "East Shield" programme.
- Situation at Finland's eastern border*, Finnish Government, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/situation-at-finlands-eastern-border>.
- Sloan E.C., *Modern Military Strategy: An Introduction*, Routledge 2016.
- Snyder G.H., *Deterrence and Defence: Toward a Theory of National Security*, Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Solli P.E., Solvang Ø., *Deterrence and (Re)assurance in the High North. Finland and Norway Compared*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, "Policy Brief" 2024, no. 4.
- Strategic Posturing and Capability Development for NATO's Eastern Flank Defense: General Christopher Donahue's Vision at the 2025 RUSI Land Warfare Conference*, Debug, <https://debuglies.com/2025/06/24/strategic-posturing-and-capability-development-for-natos-eastern-flank-defense-general-christopher-donahues-vision-at-the-2025-rusi-land-warfare-conference/>.
- Tarcza Wschód – Narodowy Program Odstraszania i Obrony*, <https://tarczawschod.wp.mil.pl/>.
- The Baltic Defence Line*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/02/the-baltic-defense-line/>.
- The Secretary General's Annual Report 2023*, NATO, Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA Concept) and Warfighting Capstone Concept. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_223291.htm.
- Wróblewski T., *Narodowy program odstraszania i obrony „Tarcza Wschód” w strategii zabezpieczania wschodniej granicy Polski*, "International Journal of Legal Studies" 2024, no. 2(18), pp. 119–136, DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0054.9842.