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The Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education

This month the LeMay Center highlights Baltic and Nordic air policing as a contemporary exemplar of deterrence through alliance integration.

Since 2004, when Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) without sovereign fighter forces, the alliance has maintained a continuous rotational air policing mission to protect Baltic airspace. What began as a steady-state assurance activity has evolved into a persistent deterrence operation in response to increasingly assertive Russian military aviation activity along NATO's borders.



In March 2023, multiple Russian military aircraft departed Kaliningrad and flew over the Baltic Sea without flight plans or active transponders. NATO's Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) directed Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) fighters from two allied nations to scramble. Within minutes, multinational aircraft identified and shadowed the formation, ensuring it remained outside Alliance sovereign airspace. While the intercept ended without escalation—unmistakable signaling occurred. The mission depended on shared radar feeds, interoperable data links, standardized intercept procedures, and synchronized political authorities. No single nation executed the response alone; NATO delivered a collective deterrence.

Why it matters today: Baltic and Nordic air policing exemplifies principles found in Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 3-01, *Counterair*, and AFDP 1, *The Air Force*, while reinforcing the National Defense Strategy's concept of integrated deterrence. Counterair doctrine affirms that control of the air underpins sovereignty and joint freedom of maneuver—even in competition below armed conflict. Through persistent QRA posture; centralized command, distributed control, and decentralized execution; with seamless multinational interoperability, NATO demonstrates deterrence by denial. Allied forces detect, intercept, and professionally manage violations before adversaries can alter the

strategic environment. As Finland and Sweden integrate into NATO's air and missile defense architecture, the mission underscores a central truth of airpower—credible deterrence is not episodic; the Alliance builds it daily through readiness, integration, and visible unity of effort.

For more on the Air Force's approach to Counterair Operations, see [AFDP 3-01](#). You can also explore our doctrine podcast library on iTunes, Spotify, Amazon Music, or at www.doctrine.af.mil.