

# Congressional support increases for permanent US military bases in the Baltics

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## U.S.

By  
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Stars and Stripes • March 2, 2022



Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is welcomed by Lithuanian acting defense minister Garbrielius Landsbergis, left, during a ceremony in Vilnius, Lithuania, on Feb. 19, 2022. Austin arrived to meet with Baltic leaders concerned about Russia's military buildup near Ukraine's borders. (Chad J. McNeeley/Defense Department)

WASHINGTON — Russia's invasion of Ukraine is prompting congressional lawmakers to reconsider the U.S. security structure in the Baltics, where leaders have long sought permanent American military bases in their countries.

“Having a U.S. flag there – a permanent one – is a deterrence,” Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., a member of the House Armed Services Committee and co-chairman of the Baltic Caucus, said Tuesday during a committee hearing. “Russia will know they're not just going into the Baltics... but they are attacking U.S. forces when they do so. I think it will have a reassuring effect for the Baltics, who are very small.”

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the only former Soviet republics to join NATO and the European Union, are considered by military experts to be the alliance’s most vulnerable flank. The Baltic states are connected to the alliance’s main territory through a 40-mile sliver of land called the Suwalki Gap and fear they could easily be cut off from Europe by Russian forces, according to retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, who led the U.S. Army in Europe from 2014 to 2017.

In a news conference last month with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Lithuania’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis reiterated his country’s request for long-term American forces to boost security there. Lithuania and Latvia border Belarus, where Russian President Vladimir Putin stationed 30,000 troops before launching a full-scale attack on Ukraine last week from Russian and Belarusian territory.

“We need to make sure that [Putin] sees that his actions are creating a response in the Baltic region ... and we are reinforced, we are strengthened, and we do not allow him to even think about looking [in our direction],” Landsbergis said.

The U.S. has maintained a 500-troop battalion on rotation in Lithuania since 2019 but Congress appears ready to deepen engagement in the region.

Along with Bacon, Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, the top Republican on the House Armed Services Committee, said establishing permanent American basing in the Baltics, as well as Romania and Poland, would show serious U.S. commitment to safeguarding NATO’s eastern flank.

“I think it would send a great message to our NATO allies that... we are going to do everything in our power to protect our NATO allies and their borders,” Rogers said. “I think the best way to do this is to enhance our position there... The Baltics are very vulnerable.”

Last week, NATO activated its response force for the first time as Russian troops advanced on three fronts into Ukraine, including an intensifying move on the capital city of Kyiv.

Rep. Elissa Slotkin, D-Mich., said Russia’s “unbelievable” decision to strike its neighbor despite years of U.S. efforts to ease tension with the Kremlin has changed how the U.S. should think about its military presence in Europe.

“I couldn’t agree more with my colleagues who have talked about putting more force in,” she said. “We need to be doing more and obviously China is watching everything that we do. We have to completely reevaluate deterrence and how we reestablish it.”

Some senators said they are also reconsidering the post-Cold War security order in Europe. The U.S. Army sharply reduced the number of troops on the ground after the fall of the Soviet Union and, in 1997, NATO signed an agreement with Russia agreeing not to establish permanent bases in new member countries in the Eastern Europe.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, the second-highest ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee and co-chairwoman of the Senate NATO Observer Group, said the U.S. is closely working with the Baltics to coordinate a response to the war in Ukraine.

“As the United States explores additional options to both support Ukraine and bolster efforts to reinforce European security from Putin’s malign ambitions, we should carefully consider the U.S. force posture in the region,” she said in a statement.

Putin has long lamented the collapse of the Soviet Union and suggested in a speech last week that all former members of the Soviet Union were infected with a “virus of nationalist ambitions.” The Baltics were annexed into Soviet territory during World War II and gained independence in 1991.

Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., said she is open to reconsidering the nature of U.S. military structure in Eastern Europe given the “immense shifts in the geopolitical environment,” according to her spokesperson. An aide for Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said he is also amenable to reevaluating U.S. base locations.

Mara Karlin, the assistant secretary of defense for strategy, plans and capabilities, told the House Armed Services Committee on Tuesday that the Defense Department will be reexamining its global defense posture in the wake of Russian aggression.

“We recognize this dynamic situation now requires us to give it another fine-tooth look, to see what’s necessary to ensure that we’ve got deterrence of Russia and that we can absolutely 150% say that NATO is safe and secure,” she said. “We’re looking at what sort of troop presence – whether it’s rotational or permanent – is necessary given this current security environment, both in the near term and frankly, and in the long term.”