Mārtiņš Vargulis

ORCID 0000-0002-3969-0331

Framing of US Nuclear Policy in the Context of NATO's Deterrence and Defence Posture Adaptation: a Case Study of the Baltic States (2014–2024)

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Supervisor:

Dr. sc. pol., Professor **Andris Sprūds**,
Rīga Stradiņš University, Latvia

Official Reviewers:

Dr. sc. pol., **Ieva Bērziņa**,
National Defence Academy of Latvia

Dr. oec. **Jānis Bērziņš**,
National Defence Academy of Latvia

PhD, Associate Professor **Juris Pupčenoks**,
Marist College, US

Chair of the Doctoral Committee:

Dr. sc. pol., Assistant Professor **Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova**,
Rīga Stradiņš University, Latvia

Members of the Doctoral Committee:

PhD, Associate Professor **Kārlis Bukovskis**,
Rīga Stradiņš University, Latvia

PhD, Researcher **Valērijs Bodnieks**,
Center for Geopolitical Studies, Latvia

Dr. sc. pol., **Ieva Bērziņa**,
National Defence Academy of Latvia

PhD, Professor **Daunis Auers**,
University of Latvia

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List of Abbreviations

INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty
MAD	Mutually Assured Destruction
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPR	Nuclear Posture Review
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
UN	United Nations
US	United States

Introduction

The role of nuclear weapons in the context of international security is indispensable. They contributed to the end of the Second World War, shaped the dynamics of the Cold War between great powers, and continue to influence contemporary international relations. Nuclear weapons have become an integral part of the modern international order. Their development during the Second World War challenged previously established doctrines of balance of power and deterrence, introducing new concepts into international relations and fundamentally altering how states perceive both their own and collective security.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, discussions surrounding the role and impact of nuclear weapons significantly declined. Greater emphasis was placed on crisis management and the regulation of limited conventional conflicts. Tensions among nuclear powers decreased, which also influenced NATO's operational planning and capability development, shifting the focus towards the conventional dimensions of defence. However, since Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, NATO's deterrence and defence posture on its Eastern flank has undergone substantial transformation. Within this evolving context, nuclear deterrence has regained importance, functioning both as a military instrument and as a political signal of the Alliance's commitment to collective defence. In the Baltic states, this signal is perceived with particular sensitivity, given the region's security vulnerabilities and its dependence on the credibility of extended deterrence. Therefore, a crucial question arises not only regarding how US nuclear policy is implemented, but also how it is interpreted and perceived by allies.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 affected not only major powers but also international organizations, particularly the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Since 2014, NATO has undergone significant changes, largely driven by growing security concerns in Eastern Europe in response to Russia's increasing assertiveness in the region. The Alliance established multinational battlegroups in the Baltic states and Poland, strengthened efforts to counter cyber and hybrid threats, and created new centres and initiatives to address these challenges. Several member states increased defence spending to meet NATO's benchmark of 2% of GDP. NATO has enhanced its rapid response capabilities through the development of the NATO Response Force (NRF) and improved coordination mechanisms. It has also deepened cooperation with international partners and adapted its military doctrine to address a changing security environment. Within this process of adaptation, NATO has revisited and reinforced its deterrence policy, placing renewed emphasis on both conventional and nuclear deterrence. Nuclear threats have thus re-emerged as a significant and complementary element in NATO's doctrine and strategic messaging. This is reflected both in how NATO frames

nuclear weapons within its deterrence and defence posture and in the military activities – such as exercises and signalling practices – used to emphasize their role.

This Doctoral Thesis argues that the framing of US nuclear policy has undergone significant transformation since 2014, and that these changes directly influence the perceived credibility of NATO's deterrence in the Baltic region. The analysis demonstrates that across different US administrations, dominant frames have shifted from an emphasis on assurance towards allies to a stronger focus on credibility and escalation management. In the Baltic states, these discursive shifts resonate particularly strongly, as the credibility of deterrence is perceived as an existential security issue. Consequently, this study demonstrates that nuclear policy framing is not merely rhetorical, but constitutes a significant factor shaping deterrence perception.

The geopolitical shocks triggered by Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2014 created a need to reassess the role of nuclear weapons not only within NATO but also in US national and international security policy. As one of the key actors shaping NATO's strategic agenda, the United States plays a central role in influencing international security dynamics. With the rise of Russian nuclear rhetoric and the continued development and modernisation of nuclear arsenals by various states, US nuclear policy has adapted by shifting its priorities and influencing broader strategic thinking.

The importance of nuclear policy within US foreign and security policy has thus increased. This adaptation has influenced not only the overall international security environment but has also become a key element in discussions concerning the security of the Baltic states. The way in which the United States frames and communicates its nuclear policy directly affects the broader deterrence and defence posture of the Baltic region within NATO's evolving strategic framework. Responses to Russian nuclear signalling, as well as proactive communication of nuclear weapons as an integral component of NATO's deterrence posture, shape the overall security dynamics of the region.

The Baltic states have experienced a growing sense of threat since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia's continued aggression against Ukraine and its sustained military activity in the region have generated tension and concern in the Baltic states, which historically have been within Russia's sphere of strategic interest, particularly under Vladimir Putin's leadership. Calls from the Baltic states for a stronger NATO deterrence and defence posture have influenced the presence and capabilities of allied forces in the region. By emphasizing Russia's assertive and revisionist behaviour, the Baltic states have reinforced the perception among allies that additional deterrence and defence measures are necessary. In the context of NATO's adaptation, particularly in the Baltic region, increasing attention has been paid to

multi-dimensional threats – conventional and hybrid – which affect operational planning and capability development. Within this framework, nuclear weapons have assumed an increasingly important role. Given that nuclear weapons are embedded in Russia's military doctrine, their inclusion in both NATO and US planning and strategic communication has become an essential component of strengthening deterrence and defence in the Baltic states.

In the current evolving international security environment, the security of the Baltic states is affected by multiple challenges across different dimensions. Considering their limited resources, military capabilities, and geographical position, the support of allies – particularly in terms of deterrence – remains a fundamental precondition for their ability to respond to security threats. The United States has historically been a key actor in strengthening Baltic security, both during the restoration of independence and thereafter, including support for NATO accession, military capability development, and participation in regional exercises. However, as the international security environment and the political leadership of the United States have evolved, so too has security cooperation between the United States and the Baltic states. These changes are reflected in both the scale and nature of US engagement, including financial support and the rotational presence of military forces in the region. In the context of increasing Russian military activity, aggressive rhetoric, and large-scale exercises near Baltic borders – as well as prior aggression in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) – the presence of US forces has been widely regarded as a critical element of deterrence and defence.

Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its continued military build-up near NATO's borders, the presence of allied forces on NATO's Eastern flank became a central issue on the Alliance's agenda. At the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit, a decision was made to ensure an enhanced forward presence in the Baltic region. During discussions on force contributions, both the Baltic states and Poland expressed a strong preference for hosting US military forces. Given Russia's demonstrated reliance on power projection and coercive strategies, the presence of US forces has been perceived as essential for deterrence and national defence. This perception, rooted in historical experience, continues to shape the strategic outlook of Baltic policymakers. As all three Baltic states emphasize the importance of allied presence in their national defence strategies, calls for a permanent US military presence in the region are likely to intensify further.

In the context of the need for an enhanced US presence in the Baltic states, calls from Baltic foreign and security policy-makers for a stronger allied – particularly US – position on nuclear issues have gained increasing prominence. This is especially evident in light of Russia's aggressive rhetoric and the deployment of (tactical) nuclear weapons closer to the borders of the Baltic states, particularly in Belarus. Although the potential use of these weapons is

primarily directed beyond the Baltic region, their deployment – combined with accompanying rhetoric – contributes to a heightened sense of insecurity. From the perspective of Baltic policy-makers, this situation necessitates a firmer stance from allies, particularly from the United States as the key security guarantor. Moreover, it significantly affects how NATO and the United States, as its principal strategic actor, should adapt their military doctrine – first, by strengthening deterrence (including the role of nuclear signalling), and second, by ensuring the defence of the Baltic states against a nuclear-armed adversary.

The strategic shocks caused by Russia's annexation of Crimea led to a shift in the United States' focus on international security, particularly in relation to NATO and the Baltic states. This shift was further reinforced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. As a result, the US 's strategic focus shifted back to Europe. This was in recognition of the fact that security disruptions in the region have wider-reaching implications for the international system that the United States has helped to shape since the end of the Cold War. Russia's actions in Ukraine have raised concerns among the United States and its allies about a renewed era of great power competition, in which Russia (in the short to medium term) and China (in the long term) are identified as primary challenges to Western security. Consequently, the United States has officially revised its national security strategy to prioritise these state-based threats over terrorism, which had dominated the agenda following the attacks of 2001.

Within this context of great power competition, and particularly in response to Russia's actions, US security strategy has increasingly emphasized the role of nuclear weapons in ensuring overall security. While the United States has expanded its military presence in the region and cooperated with Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia to strengthen their defence capabilities, discussions on the potential role of nuclear weapons – including scenarios involving aggression against the Baltic states – have intensified. Russia's war in Ukraine has demonstrated to the United States and its allies that the current Russian political leadership is difficult to predict, thereby increasing the need for preparedness and preventive strategies, including in the nuclear domain. In response to these developments, the US approach to international security in the context of NATO and the Baltic states has evolved to reflect the growing threat posed by Russia and the need to reinforce deterrence and defence measures.

Tensions and disruptions in international relations influence the framing of national security policies. In the United States, an evolution in nuclear policy framing has been observable since 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the increasingly aggressive rhetoric accompanying it, including in the nuclear domain. Since 2014, the United States has conducted several Nuclear Posture Reviews (NPRs), which reflect the evolving

dynamics of nuclear policy framing in response to systemic shocks in the international environment.

US nuclear policy is not monolithic. It is shaped by a broad spectrum of values, security considerations, historical narratives, and international commitments, forming a complex framework for addressing nuclear security challenges. Accordingly, this study analyses how the framing of US nuclear policy has evolved from 2014 to 2024, taking into account shifting geopolitical dynamics and the adaptation of NATO's deterrence and defence posture. The year 2014 serves as a critical reference point, as Russia's annexation of Crimea – and the subsequent escalation of its aggression in Ukraine – marked a turning point that intensified international tensions and acted as a catalyst for changes in US nuclear policy thinking. These developments influenced how the United States perceives the role, development, and necessity of nuclear weapons, both in strengthening its national position and in supporting NATO's adaptation efforts, particularly in the Baltic region. The shocks generated by Russia's actions have thus shaped US policy through evolving security narratives and framing practices.

The analysis in this study covers developments up to the end of October 2024, prior to the US presidential elections scheduled for early November. This timeframe is justified by the fact that presidential elections mark the conclusion of an administration's active policy-making cycle and its associated framing. Given that the methodological approach employed in this study – framing analysis – is based on official documents and public statements by foreign and security policy actors, changes in administration are likely to influence the framing itself. The year 2024 therefore represents the culmination of the Biden administration's nuclear policy framing, as well as its approach to NATO's deterrence and defence posture and the security challenges facing the Baltic states. The decade from 2014 to 2024 thus provides a relevant and analytically coherent period for assessing how different US administrations – and their respective policy actors – frame nuclear policy in response to evolving security dynamics.

Although the timeframe of this dissertation covers the period from 2014 to 2024, its relevance extends to developments of recent years and months, suggesting that the research remains pertinent beyond the period under examination. In late 2025, the US security policy strategy was revised, accompanied by changes in nuclear policy messaging. The way these messages were perceived both in Europe and, more specifically, in the Baltic States demonstrates the importance of reflecting on and understanding historical framing. Such an understanding makes it possible to assess whether changes – or the absence of changes – in US framing represent a genuinely new security vision that may potentially require allies to reconsider their own security calculations. Analysing these frames from a historical perspective

and across different US presidential administrations therefore provides a basis for developing a more consistent allied policy approach and strategic outlook.

Accordingly, the **aim** of this Doctoral Thesis is to analyse the framing of US nuclear policy in the context of NATO's evolving deterrence and defence posture, with a particular focus on the Baltic states over the period from 2014 to 2024.

In line with this aim, the study addresses the **following research questions**:

1 What are the dominant frames in the formulation of US nuclear policy?
2 How did US nuclear policy framing evolve in the context of the adaptation of NATO's deterrence and defence posture between 2014 and 2024?
3 How did the framing of security threats to the Baltic States evolve in the context of US nuclear policy framing between 2014 and 2024?

The structure of the research questions is based on a sequential analytical logic encompassing three dimensions: identification, dynamics, and impact. First, the dominant frames of US nuclear policy are identified across different administrations, establishing the conceptual foundation of the analysis. Second, the study examines the evolution of these frames within the context of NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation, revealing their transformation and interaction with the changing security environment. Third, the research assesses the impact of these frames on the Baltic security discourse, with particular attention to the perception of deterrence credibility in the region. This structured approach ensures a coherent progression from the analysis of discursive constructions to their broader strategic implications.

In order to achieve the aim of the study and address the identified research questions, the following **research tasks** are formulated:

1 To develop a comprehensive theoretical framework integrating constructivism and the concept of deterrence.
2 To identify the dominant frames in US nuclear policy and analyse the underlying core values, security considerations, and historical narratives embedded within these frames.
3 To assess the adaptation of NATO's deterrence and defence posture following Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014.
4 To examine how the framing of US nuclear policy has evolved between 2014 and 2024 in response to security challenges posed by Russia.
5 To evaluate how nuclear policy actors within the administrations of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden have framed the security of the Baltic states.

6 To apply the causal logic of deterrence theory in order to provide conclusions and policy recommendations regarding the correlations between US nuclear policy framing, NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation, Baltic national security efforts, and the perspectives of US policy actors.
7 To analyse the interpretation and practical functioning of US nuclear policy framing in the Baltic security context, identifying dominant narratives, differences in perception, and points of tension among security policy actors at different levels.

This study adopts a theoretical approach based on the synergy between constructivism and the concept of deterrence. Constructivism provides a framework for understanding the role of norms, ideas, and identities in nuclear policy, as well as their influence on the dynamics of international relations. In contrast, the concept of deterrence offers an analytical basis for examining the role of nuclear weapons in preventing direct large-scale military confrontation among nuclear actors.

The study makes three main theoretical contributions to the academic debate. First, it integrates framing analysis – supported by artificial intelligence tools – into deterrence theory, demonstrating that the credibility of deterrence is shaped not only by material capabilities but also by discursive constructions. Second, it conceptualises the perception of extended deterrence as a dynamic process in which framing influences how allies interpret security commitments. Third, it empirically demonstrates that the discursive evolution of US nuclear policy since 2014 is closely linked to the adaptation of NATO's deterrence and defence posture on the Eastern flank. These contributions are theoretically consolidated in the framed credibility model proposed in the study.

In international relations scholarship, constructivism and the concept of deterrence are typically treated separately and situated within different theoretical paradigms. Deterrence, most commonly associated with realist approaches, is grounded in rationalist assumptions about the maximisation of state interests and the pursuit of physical security. During the Cold War, deterrence was widely applied as a central strategic instrument, particularly in the context of mutual nuclear deterrence between the United States and the Soviet Union, conceptualised as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Despite the end of the Cold War, deterrence remains a central concept in contemporary international relations, especially in relation to nuclear-armed states and other strategic threats.

As a strategic approach, deterrence is pragmatic and often militarised, grounded in the logic of balance of power, which evolves in response to changing geopolitical and military conditions. By contrast, constructivism conceptualises international relations as a socially constructed and evolving process. It emphasizes that the characteristics of the international

system, including norms and identities, are continuously shaped and reshaped through social interaction. Rather than focusing solely on material power, constructivism highlights the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behaviour and interests.

By combining the concept of deterrence with constructivist theory, this study addresses a key critique of constructivism – namely, its perceived lack of causal explanatory power. Constructivism is often criticised for being primarily descriptive, focusing on how social constructions emerge without sufficiently explaining causal relationships. Moreover, interpretations of social constructs are inherently influenced by the researcher's own understanding, introducing a degree of subjectivity.

The integration of constructivism with the concept of deterrence helps mitigate this limitation by embedding the analysis within a framework that incorporates identifiable causal logics of deterrence, particularly in the context of nuclear policy development. This combined approach allows for the systematic identification of how US nuclear policy strategies and deterrence practices are interpreted and framed. It also enables the analysis of deterrence not only as a military strategy but as a socially constructed concept, encompassing norms, values, identities, and accepted patterns of behaviour in international relations, as perceived and articulated by US nuclear policy actors.

Within the context of this study, this approach enables the analysis of how US nuclear policy – and the social ideas and identities embedded within it – are constructed in relation to nuclear deterrence. In other words, the synergy between constructivism and the concept of deterrence provides new perspectives for understanding deterrence policy by revealing the role of norms, values, and ideas within the broader nuclear policy framework of the state. It also allows the researcher to examine how existing social structures are linked to specific policy framings. Such an integrated approach, combining these two paradigms, offers a significant contribution to both the theory and practice of international relations and can therefore be regarded as a form of scientific novelty.

As with any major theoretical approach in international relations, constructivism encompasses multiple strands and schools of thought, supported by different theoretical traditions. In this study, the analytical foundation is based on the work of one of the leading constructivist scholars, Alexander Wendt. Wendt places the identity of the actor – primarily the state – at the centre of analysis, emphasising how identities are constructed in relation to other actors within the international system. Intersubjectivity, a core concept in constructivism, serves as the basis for the formation of identities, norms, and values, as actors define themselves in relation to others.

From this perspective, the dynamics of international relations are shaped by how states perceive one another and interpret the nature of the international system. Unlike other constructivist approaches, which might focus on how international norms influence US nuclear policy or how NATO principles shape US policy framing, Wendt's constructivism foregrounds the role of ideas and interests in international relations. Accordingly, this study analyses the framing of US nuclear policy through the lens of threat construction. The central analytical focus is on how threats are perceived and constructed in relation to NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation and the security challenges of the Baltic states, and how these constructions are reflected in the evolution of US nuclear policy framing.

Wendt's approach is particularly suitable for addressing the research questions of this study, as it aligns closely with the concept of deterrence. He argues that in understanding security and deterrence, it is essential to consider the meanings attributed to capabilities and power. In other words, what matters is not only the existence of capabilities, but how actors interpret and construct threats. These interpretations, in turn, shape the resulting security policy frameworks.

In international relations scholarship, deterrence is used in two interrelated meanings – as a concept and as a theory. The concept of deterrence denotes the basic idea of how one actor can influence another actor's choices by creating the conviction that the costs of aggression will exceed its benefits. Deterrence theory, in turn, is a set of assumptions and causal explanations about the conditions under which, and the mechanisms through which, deterrence succeeds or fails – for example, how it is affected by the credibility of threats, the signalling of capabilities and resolve, and the rationality and perceptions of actors.

In this study, the two meanings are distinguished but used in a complementary manner. Deterrence theory provides the causal foundation of the study, particularly with regard to extended deterrence and credibility, whereas the concept of deterrence serves as an analytical category through which US nuclear policy frames are identified and coded.

Since, following Alexander Wendt's constructivism, the study primarily analyses not the effectiveness of deterrence policy but how deterrence is interpreted and framed, the term "concept of deterrence" is used, while references to "deterrence theory" relate to its assumptions and causal explanations. The central focus is therefore on how US nuclear policy is framed: how deterrence is perceived, which threats are constructed as significant, how historical narratives influence deterrence debates, which ideas and policy paradigms shape deterrence framing, and how US constructions of deterrence differ from those of NATO, allies, and adversaries. At the same time, the study seeks to contribute to deterrence theory itself by proposing a framed credibility model for the analysis of extended deterrence.

The core focus of the study is how US nuclear policy has been constructed and framed in policy documents and in the messages of US foreign and security policy agents, particularly in the context of Baltic security. Developing a comprehensive answer to what US nuclear policy should be and which specific military activities should be undertaken in the Baltic states lies beyond the scope of this study. At the same time, the chosen research focus allows the author to formulate an assessment of the preconditions for strengthening the security of the Baltic states. In this respect, the conclusions highlight the importance of allied military presence and exercises in demonstrating the credibility of deterrence, the complementarity of conventional capabilities and nuclear deterrence, and the importance of escalation management. The analysis also reveals differences between US and Baltic officials' interpretations of the credibility of security guarantees, pointing to the need to align political messages with their practical military underpinning.

Considering the importance of intersubjectivity in constructivism – namely, the construction of the "self" in relation to the "other" – this study deliberately treats Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as a single analytical unit: the Baltic states. Both allies within NATO and adversaries from an operational perspective tend to view these three countries as a unified operational theatre. Similarly, within the context of NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation, policy discussions often refer to the Baltic region as a collective entity, particularly in relation to the Alliance's Eastern flank and regional defence planning.

Based on the theoretical framework and its underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions, this study employs qualitative research methods, including framing analysis, case study analysis, and in-depth interviews. Framing analysis serves as the primary methodological approach, as it enables the identification of dominant frames in US nuclear policy and the examination of their evolution within the context of NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation. It provides a systematic way to analyse how US nuclear policy actors construct policy narratives, particularly through the lens of the "other" – in this case, the security challenges posed by Russia.

Framing analysis allows for the examination of underlying security assumptions, spheres of interest, key emphases, stakeholder influence, and the mapping of policy narratives. The application of framing analysis in this study follows a structured set of analytical steps, as outlined below:

- Definition and application of framing: In this study, framing is understood as a selective interpretative framework that structures the definition of security problems, the articulation of policy solutions, and the legitimation of specific policy instruments. Analytically, frames are identified through recurring narrative

structures, consistent conceptual emphases, and the coherence of political signals across official documents, leadership speeches, and strategic communication practices.

- Research questions: The framing analysis is guided by the following research questions: 1) What are the dominant frames in the formation of US nuclear policy? 2) How has the framing of US nuclear policy evolved in the context of NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation? 3) What is the dynamic of framed Baltic security challenges within the constructed US nuclear policy context during the period 2014–2024?
- Identification of key framing agents: The primary agents of US nuclear policy framing include the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defence, and senior national security and foreign policy advisors across the administrations of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden.
- Sources: The empirical material consists of official speeches, policy documents, press releases, and formal statements issued by the identified policy actors, all directly related to the thematic scope of the study.
- Frame identification: Frames are identified through the systematic analysis of recurring keywords, phrases, metaphors, symbols, and overarching narratives that shape the representation of nuclear policy and security challenges.
- Analytical tool: The study employs the artificial intelligence tool Ivory Mind[1] to support the framing analysis, enabling the classification, mapping, and clustering of textual data and policy narratives.
- Deconstruction of framing elements: Identified frames are further deconstructed into their constituent elements, including core ideas, values, and underlying assumptions. Particular attention is given to the goals, interests, and identities of policy actors, which may influence the positioning and articulation of specific frames.
- Comparative analysis of frames: Frames are systematically compared and contrasted across different US administrations, allowing for the identification of convergences and divergences in perspectives and identity constructions. This comparative approach also examines power dynamics that may contribute to the dominance or marginalisation of specific frames.
- Conclusions and interpretation: Based on the analysis, conclusions are drawn regarding the causal relationships underlying policy actors' framing practices. These

[1] https://www.ivorymind.com

conclusions are interpreted through the lens of the deterrence concept, in the context of NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation and the case of Baltic security challenges. This approach enables the identification of the evolving dynamics of US nuclear policy identities.

In addition to the previously discussed critique of constructivism within international relations scholarship, another line of criticism suggests that it is difficult – if not impossible – for a researcher outside the studied discourse to fully grasp how a particular policy is constructed. It should therefore be noted that, during the preparation of this study, the author spent nearly one year in the United States. During this period, through engagement with security policymakers and scholars, the author examined the formation of US nuclear policy, including its historical and contemporary narratives, key assumptions, and underlying principles. This also involved gaining insight into NATO's adaptation processes and the role of the Baltic states within the broader development and strategic scenarios of US nuclear policy.

As part of the empirical research, 23 in-depth interviews were conducted (a full list of interviewees is provided in Appendix No. 3) with experts and practitioners of US nuclear policy who have been directly involved in the development of strategic documents, policy framing, and decision-making processes. Interviewees were selected based on their professional experience, their affiliation with or proximity to the previously identified nuclear policy actors, and their influence on the framing of US nuclear policy.

The purpose of the in-depth interviews is not to independently identify frames, but rather to strengthen the author's understanding of how US nuclear policy actors perceive, construct, and articulate framing elements, including threat classifications and strategic priorities. In this sense, the interviews help mitigate the risk of misinterpreting the social construct under analysis, particularly given the author's own positionality shaped by professional experience in the Baltic context, including work in the Ministry of Defence and diplomatic engagement with NATO.

The interviews were designed to address key aspects of US nuclear policy framing, including: how framing is constructed; which actors and factors exert the greatest influence; how Russia and its associated threats are classified; how NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation is interpreted; the role of nuclear policy within the broader US national security strategy; and how US nuclear policy constructions have evolved across different administrations.

In addition, interviews were conducted with Baltic security policy actors in order to further validate and contextualise the findings. The breadth of in-depth interviews conducted within this study is therefore considered a significant added value. Interaction with respondents

was structured in two formats: 1) in-depth interviews and 2) structured questionnaires. As the research progressed, it became increasingly important to assess the dynamics of framed Baltic security challenges within the constructed US nuclear policy context (2014–2024). Structured questionnaires provided an additional layer of empirical input, complementing the analysis of official discourse and framed narratives with insights from experts and practitioners in the field. A more detailed methodological framework is presented in Chapter 4 of the dissertation.

The study also includes a dedicated case study of the Baltic states. This case is essential for understanding the gradation of US nuclear policy framing, particularly in relation to NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation. The analysis focuses on how Baltic security challenges – primarily shaped by Russian activities and the perceived limitations of NATO's deterrence and defence posture – are framed by US nuclear policy actors.

By analysing these frames, it becomes possible to draw conclusions about the role and positioning of the Baltic states within the broader US strategic discourse, the stability of this framing, and its susceptibility to shifts in the international security environment. Based on these findings, the study also offers policy-relevant recommendations for Baltic foreign and security policy actors, including an assessment of the causal dynamics underlying Baltic framing. This contributes to a deeper understanding of how to ensure effective deterrence and defence against potential Russian aggression, while simultaneously supporting broader international security and stability.

Theoretical significance of the study. The study contributes to deterrence theory and to the constructivist approach in international relations. First, it combines Alexander Wendt's constructivism, the causal logic of the concept of deterrence, and framing analysis into a single analytical framework, thereby mitigating the lack of causal explanation for which constructivism is criticised. Second, it proposes a framed credibility model (Subchapter 1.2.3), which explains the credibility of extended deterrence as the outcome of mutual interpretations among the defender, the protégé, and the adversary, and complements classical approaches to extended deterrence with a discursive dimension. Third, the study can be positioned within the constructivist strand of the "fourth wave" of deterrence theory and empirically demonstrates how deterrence credibility is constructed and sustained through political communication.

Methodological significance of the study. The study applies framing analysis to the study of nuclear policy, combining the coding of policy documents and security policy agents' messages with an artificial intelligence text analysis tool and in-depth interviews. This triangulation of document and interview data makes it possible to distinguish officially declared

framing from its interpretation in practice, and it can also be applied in security policy research on other states.

Practical significance of the study. The findings are relevant for foreign and security policymakers in Latvia and the other Baltic states. First, the study shows that the Baltic states are rarely named in US nuclear policy discourse and that their security is linked to the US nuclear guarantee mainly through NATO commitments and the allied presence in the region; this means that maintaining and strengthening the allied presence is also a matter of the credibility of nuclear deterrence. Second, the study reveals differences between US and Baltic officials' interpretations of the credibility of security guarantees, which points to the need to align political messages with their practical military underpinning. Third, the findings can be used in preparing Baltic positions in NATO nuclear policy discussions, including in the Nuclear Planning Group, and in strategic communication on deterrence.

Contribution to the sub-field of international politics within political science. The study complements international politics research with a systematic analysis of how US nuclear policy framing evolved across three presidential administrations (2014–2024) and how it relates to the adaptation of NATO's deterrence and defence posture and to the security of small allies. It broadens the understanding of how extended deterrence functions in relations between a great power and small allies and offers an analytical framework that can also be applied to other cases, such as US security guarantees to Japan and South Korea.

1 Synergy Between Constructivism and the Concept of Deterrence

In this dissertation, constructivism is employed as the theoretical foundation because it draws attention to questions that other theories do not fully address. The ontological approach of constructivism emphasises that states and their characteristics do not exist independently of human understanding and interpretation. State identities and behaviour are not determined *a priori* but are constructed on the basis of political leaders' interpretations of other international actors. This aspect of constructivism makes it an appropriate theoretical framework for this dissertation, as it enables an analysis of the place of the Baltic States within the US nuclear policy security discourse, particularly following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The dissertation assumes that US security policy decision-makers construct perceptions of the Baltic States and other international actors, thereby also influencing the formulation of US nuclear policy and NATO deterrence policy.

Constructivism encompasses several strands, but the theoretical framework of this dissertation draws on Alexander Wendt's constructivism, which emphasises the role of social reality and shared beliefs in shaping state behaviour. His proposition that "anarchy is what states make of it" suggests that anarchy itself does not determine threat perceptions or behaviour; rather, these are shaped by states' interpretations grounded in social and historical factors. Wendt's approach is particularly suitable in this context because it highlights how ideas and shared interests shape the framing of US nuclear policy, threat assessments, and attitudes towards NATO and the Baltic States. Other constructivist approaches would place greater emphasis on how international norms influence the framing of nuclear policy, whereas this dissertation focuses on Wendt's emphasis on the impact of international developments and the security challenges they generate on socially constructed US security policies.

The concept of deterrence is a fundamental strategic approach in international relations that seeks to deter potential aggressors through credible threats and anticipated consequences. The analysis conducted in this dissertation demonstrates that, although nuclear deterrence strategies may appear rational, their effectiveness is often challenged by threats and circumstances characterised by a high degree of uncertainty. In such contexts, the implementation of deterrence becomes more complex, and decision-makers may reach conclusions that do not correspond to logically rational patterns of thought.

In this context, framing analysis constitutes an important instrument for both research and military-strategic assessment, as it helps to understand threat perceptions and the intentions of potential aggressors. It is therefore important to analyse how member states perceive threats and how these perceptions influence strategic decisions. Framing analysis makes it possible to

identify how decision-makers in individual states perceive potential threats and how these perceptions shape their behaviour, taking into account social and identity-related dimensions. Framing analysis is a useful methodological instrument for understanding how the ideas and identities emphasised by constructivism are constructed and maintained in international politics. It enables researchers to examine in detail how political leaders and international organisations frame communication concerning particular events, threats, or problems. Through framing analysis, it is possible to identify which aspects of international issues are emphasised and which are disregarded, thereby contributing to particular public and international perceptions. This methodological instrument is important because it helps explain why certain policies are accepted while others are rejected.

By combining constructivism with framing analysis, it is possible to explain how states respond to threats and how they construct their identities and relationships with other international actors. This approach also makes it possible to trace changes in identities over time, which is particularly important when analysing the evolution of US nuclear policy in the context of NATO's adaptation of its deterrence and defence posture. Nuclear policy is an area in which state identities and frames frequently shape strategic decisions and responses. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the discourse surrounding US nuclear policy has changed significantly, while the adaptation of NATO's deterrence and defence posture has become an increasingly important component of US security strategy. This approach helps demonstrate that changes in US nuclear policy are driven not only by objective military threats but also by how the United States and its allies perceive the threat posed by Russia and how this threat is constructed within ideational and political discourse. Framing analysis also makes it possible to examine how US nuclear deterrence policy is perceived by different international audiences, including the Baltic States, and whether it is regarded as sufficient to ensure regional security.

The combination of constructivism and framing analysis provides a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding not only the process through which states formulate foreign policy, but also how political leaders maintain public support for their security policies. This integrated model is particularly useful for analysing nuclear policy and security strategies because it reveals how leaders construct the roles of their states within the international system and how frames influence decision-making processes and international relations.

Drawing on Alexander Wendt's constructivism and framing analysis, the dissertation proposes a framed credibility model (Subchapter 1.2.3), which explains the credibility of extended deterrence as the outcome of mutual interpretations among three actors – the defender,

the protégé, and the adversary – and complements the classical conditions of credibility (capabilities and resolve) with a discursive dimension. The model rests on three assumptions. The coherence assumption holds that credibility is higher when the defender's nuclear policy framing is aligned with its conventional signals – force presence, exercises, and infrastructure. The interpretation gap assumption holds that differences between the defender's framing and the protégé's interpretation create a credibility gap, which the protégé seeks to narrow by demanding additional assurances, such as a persistent presence. The framing anchor assumption holds that, where a region appears only implicitly in the defender's nuclear discourse, the general nuclear guarantee is linked to it through conventional presence and the Alliance's institutional commitments.

2 Dominant US Nuclear Policy Frames in the Context of the Evolution of Security Policy

The framing of US national security strategy has evolved over time, incorporating nuclear policy as an integral component of the broader security strategy. From the 1980s until the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union dominated the US national security agenda, while in the early 2000s the challenges associated with Iraq and Afghanistan became increasingly prominent. During the Donald Trump administration and through 2022, the challenges posed by China and Russia came to the forefront. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia once again emerged as a major security threat, prompting the United States to refocus its attention on European security.

An examination of US security policy discourse demonstrates that its principal themes and priorities have changed considerably over time. During the Cold War, deterrence constituted the dominant security paradigm, whereas in the early 2000s terrorism became the principal security challenge. From 2010 onwards, deterrence and great-power competition once again gained prominence, driven by the growing ambitions of Russia and China.

Table 2.1

US Nuclear Policy Framing: Description and Manifestation

Nuclear Policy Frame	Description	Manifestation
1 Deterrence against great-power threats	The use of nuclear weapons as a means of responding to challenges posed by major powers, including the Soviet Union, Russia, and China	The legacy of MAD and first-strike calculations
2 Extended deterrence	The United States protects not only its own territory but also its allies, particularly NATO member states	Strategic nuclear sharing within the Alliance
3 Response to emerging threats	Nuclear policy incorporates modernisation in response to emerging nuclear challenges and the modernisation of other states' nuclear forces	Nuclear disarmament efforts and sanctions against relevant actors
4 Mutual benefit	The pursuit of *win-win* outcomes in relations with major powers, particularly Russia and China	*START* and *New START* treaties
5 Strengthening the conventional dimension	The growing significance of nuclear weapons following Russia's aggression against Ukraine and their use as an instrument of deterrence	Development of tactical and strategic nuclear capabilities amid the erosion of arms control

Source: Table compiled by the author.

US nuclear policy is the product of a complex and dynamic system that reflects both historical narratives and contemporary security challenges. Nuclear weapons play a critical role in safeguarding US strategic interests, protecting allies, and maintaining stability in

the international security environment. The challenges facing the United States require continuous adaptation and strategic thinking in order to preserve the role of nuclear weapons as a security guarantee.

The framing of US nuclear policy is based on several key principles, including deterrence against great-power threats, whereby the possession of nuclear weapons is justified by the challenges posed by Russia and China. The strategic nuclear triad, comprising land-based missiles, nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, and strategic bombers, serves to ensure the ability of the United States to respond to potential attacks and maintain strategic stability. Extended deterrence is equally important, as US security guarantees extend beyond the defence of its own territory to the protection of allies, particularly NATO member states, thereby strengthening the Alliance and the credibility of its security guarantees.

Historical narratives, including the legacy of the Cold War and post-Cold War nuclear disarmament efforts, have shaped the framing of US nuclear policy. During the Cold War, strategic relations were structured around the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), which served to prevent direct military conflict between the major powers. Post-Cold War nuclear disarmament framing was based on the assumption that reductions in nuclear arsenals could contribute to international security and mutual confidence, as reflected in agreements such as *START* and *New START*.

However, Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014 has transformed the European security architecture, generating new uncertainties and strategic challenges. Consequently, extended nuclear deterrence has returned to greater prominence within US nuclear policy framing, particularly in the context of strengthening Alliance security. At the same time, greater emphasis has been placed on the synergy between conventional and nuclear deterrence as mutually reinforcing components of the broader deterrence and defence posture.

3 US Nuclear Policy Framing in the Context of NATO Deterrence Adaptation

US security policy in the context of NATO's adaptation of its deterrence and defence posture changed significantly following Russia's aggression in 2014 and, subsequently, its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Following the annexation of Crimea, the United States focused on strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank by increasing its military presence in the Baltic States and Poland. During this period, NATO introduced the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), which strengthened regional defence against potential Russian aggression through the deployment of rotational forces. Complementing these measures, US nuclear deterrence capabilities became an increasingly important instrument for deterring Russia from potential attacks. Different US administrations adopted different approaches to addressing perceived gaps in deterrence.

Following 2014, the Barack Obama administration developed a policy aimed at ensuring a rapid and effective response to Russian aggression. It emphasised NATO's collective security guarantees, increased the frequency of military exercises, and strengthened European defence infrastructure. European allies were also supported in developing their own defence capabilities, although their perception of the threat posed by Russia did not, until 2022, fully correspond to that of the Baltic States and the United States. The Donald Trump administration, by contrast, emphasised the need for allies to increase defence spending, arguing that European countries, including the Baltic States, should be capable of strengthening their own defence capabilities and thereby contribute more substantially to the overall deterrence system. Trump frequently criticised European allies for insufficient investment in collective defence and called for more equitable burden-sharing.

Although greater emphasis was placed on the national contributions of allies, nuclear deterrence policy was not neglected, and the modernisation of US nuclear forces remained a priority. In response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Joe Biden administration placed considerable emphasis on restoring transatlantic cooperation and strengthening capabilities to address multiple global threats. Military assistance was provided to Ukraine to strengthen its ability to resist Russian aggression. The Biden administration also supported Israel's efforts to defend itself against terrorist groups and addressed security challenges posed by China. The United States increased investment in the modernisation of its nuclear forces and reinforced the role of nuclear capabilities in European deterrence, seeking to ensure that US nuclear weapons remained credible both as a deterrent against Russia and against other potential threats, including China. Nuclear weapons, whose prominence had declined after the Cold War, regained a more central role as an important instrument of deterrence against

threats posed by Russia. NATO increasingly recognised that Russia integrates conventional and nuclear capabilities within its military strategy, prompting the Alliance and its nuclear-armed members to reassess the role of nuclear weapons in NATO's military doctrine.

This "nuclear renaissance" within NATO strategy involved viewing nuclear weapons not merely as a means of last resort but also as a powerful deterrent intended to prevent potential Russian aggression. Russia's increasingly assertive nuclear rhetoric and threats concerning the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons prompted NATO and the United States to reinforce the political and operational relevance of nuclear sharing, through which non-nuclear allies participate in aspects of NATO's nuclear mission, including consultation and planning. Nuclear consultation formats were also strengthened, while nuclear scenarios became a more prominent component of exercises and strategic planning, thereby signalling resolve and deterrence to potential adversaries.

US investment in the nuclear triad - including the modernisation of land-based missiles, nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, and strategic bombers - became an important factor in maintaining the credibility of US nuclear forces and strengthening NATO's collective security. Nuclear sharing, which enables European allies to participate in NATO's nuclear mission, remained an important mechanism for sustaining allied confidence in extended deterrence and reinforcing security, particularly on NATO's Eastern Flank, including the Baltic region. Russia's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus further reinforced NATO's assessment of the need to maintain credible nuclear deterrence capabilities. US policy thus became a central component of NATO's adaptation to the Russian threat, intended to deter calculated Russian aggression and preserve regional security. Nevertheless, despite the increased prominence of nuclear framing within NATO, the Alliance's nuclear messaging remained predominantly reactive and oriented towards deterrence and de-escalation.

Framing analysis demonstrates that the approaches adopted by individual US administrations differed, reflecting changing requirements related to strategic competition, nuclear deterrence, and arms control. The Obama and Biden administrations, for example, placed greater emphasis on arms control and reducing the role and number of nuclear weapons, whereas the Trump administration placed greater emphasis on strengthening the US military posture in response to emerging strategic and nuclear threats.

Across all three administrations, however, Russia was increasingly framed as an aggressive and destabilising actor threatening US interests and international security. Under the Obama administration, Russia was portrayed as a significant challenge to the international order, accompanied by an emphasis on strong US leadership, nuclear non-proliferation, and strategic stability. The Trump administration adopted a more nationalist and competitive

approach, highlighting Russia's efforts to weaken US influence and divide its allies, while framing Russia as a major strategic competitor possessing significant conventional and nuclear capabilities. The Biden administration framed Russia as an acute threat to a free, open, and rules-based international order, particularly following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, while emphasising NATO's collective defence and close cooperation among allies as essential instruments for addressing the threat posed by Russia to the international security system.

4 Dynamics of Security Challenges to the Baltic States as Framed by US Nuclear Policy Agents Across Presidential Administrations (2014–2024)

The framing of Russia within US security policy has varied considerably over time. Each presidential administration framed threats, the security challenges facing the Baltic States, and their relationship to US nuclear policy differently. For example, the Barack Obama administration, including in its nuclear policy framing, emphasised diplomatic values and cooperation within NATO while adopting a more cautious approach towards nuclear escalation. During the Donald Trump administration, the framing of US nuclear policy, much like the broader security policy construct, fluctuated throughout the administration. This framing was not unambiguous and included signals with contrasting connotations and sentiment towards both allies and adversaries. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Joe Biden administration explicitly framed Russia as an immediate threat to a free and open international system, calling for a collective response and support for Ukraine.

Demonstrations of military strength, whether through large-scale military exercises or a sustained presence of allied forces, constitute a strong signal to a potential aggressor that credible defence planning is in place. Conversely, when such a posture is weakened or reduced, Russia may interpret this as a sign of weakness that can be exploited to advance its own interests. The Biden administration's framing, in particular, included clear signalling regarding scenarios in which Russia might employ nuclear weapons. This framing encompasses military exercises, the development and deployment of tactical nuclear capabilities, and the position that the use of nuclear weapons – including in a geographically limited conflict involving the Baltic States - would have serious and potentially catastrophic consequences.

Overall, and particularly on the basis of the analysis conducted in the Subchapter 4.2 of the this Doctoral Thesis, it can be concluded that the framing of security challenges facing the Baltic States within the context of US nuclear policy constitutes a multilayered and uneven discursive structure in which official policy documents, institutional practices, and the interpretations of security policy agents overlap. By combining the analysis of policy documents with interview material, it can be concluded that the Baltic States are generally not framed as an autonomous security object within US nuclear policy discourse. Rather, they are situated within the broader architecture of NATO deterrence, in which deterring Russia remains the central focus.

At the same time, the empirical analysis demonstrates that this framing is interpreted differently across institutional levels. From the perspective of US policymakers and NATO institutional actors, the nuclear dimension in the Baltic context primarily functions as a strategic

guarantee and an instrument of political credibility. Baltic officials, by contrast, more frequently interpret it as a concrete security commitment, the credibility of which is assessed through practical indicators. These differences in perception do not necessarily constitute a conceptual disagreement; rather, they reflect different positions of security perception between global and regional perspectives.

The analysis further demonstrates that the dominant framing identified in the interviews is structured around the credibility of extended deterrence as the central organising principle. In practice, however, this frame operates through several interconnected narratives: the nuclear dimension is interpreted as a political signal, conventional deterrence as the primary operational instrument, and escalation management as the principal strategic challenge in a Baltic contingency. This multilayered framing indicates that the interpretation of US nuclear policy in the Baltic region cannot be reduced to a single dominant narrative. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of multiple discursive layers.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the constructivist assumption that security policy is shaped through interpretations and socially constructed understandings rather than solely through the balance of material capabilities. The analysis of the interviews demonstrates that the framing of Baltic security challenges in the context of US nuclear policy is not static but is continuously constructed and reconstructed through the discursive interaction of policymakers, institutional actors, and experts. In this respect, the empirical analysis not only complements the frames identified through the analysis of policy documents but also provides insight into how these frames function in practice.

These findings correspond to the framed credibility model proposed in Sub-chapter 1.2.3. The differences between US and Baltic officials' interpretations illustrate the interpretation gap assumption, while the role of conventional presence in linking the general nuclear guarantee to the Baltic region illustrates the framing anchor assumption. The empirical analysis thus not only characterises US nuclear policy framing but also tests the model's assumptions in a specific case.

Finally, the analysis of this subchapter demonstrates that, although the Baltic States rarely appear as a central object in US nuclear policy discourse, in practice they are increasingly perceived as a test of deterrence credibility and as a potential reference point for escalation scenarios. This transformation – from indirect discursive framing to concrete strategic significance – constitutes one of the key empirical findings of this dissertation and provides a more precise understanding of the role of US nuclear policy within the Baltic security architecture.

Conclusions

The findings of this doctoral dissertation contribute to a deeper understanding of the formation and interpretation of US nuclear policy framing within the context of Baltic security. The primary theoretical contribution lies in the development of a synergistic framework that integrates constructivism with the concept of deterrence. This framework enables the analysis of nuclear policy not merely as a function of material capabilities, but as a discursive process in which security policy is constructed through interpretations, narratives, and institutional practices.

Methodologically, the study combines framing analysis with qualitative empirical approaches, allowing for the reconstruction of how US nuclear policy framing circulates across policy documents, NATO's institutional environment, and Baltic security discourse. A particularly significant contribution is provided by the empirical analysis, which integrates framing analysis, in-depth interviews, and structured questionnaires with security policy actors. This approach enables the identification not only of dominant frames, but also of their practical interpretation and application.

The dissertation develops an integrated analytical model combining constructivism, the concept of deterrence, and framing analysis, which is applied to examine US nuclear policy in the context of NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation. Particular attention is given to the Baltic states as a case study, highlighting the interaction between US nuclear policy framing and the perception of regional security threats, including responses in the nuclear domain.

The aim of the study – to analyse the framing of US nuclear policy in the evolving context of NATO's deterrence and defence posture, with a focus on the Baltic states during the period 2014–2024 – has been achieved. This is demonstrated by:

1) the identification of dominant frames in US nuclear policy, and
2) the analysis of their correlation with NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation.

The theoretical analysis demonstrates that the integration of constructivism and the concept of deterrence expands the interpretation of deterrence, particularly by incorporating its discursive dimension. The developed framework shows that deterrence credibility is shaped not only by material capabilities, but also by framing processes that structure threat perception, political decision-making, and allied trust. From this perspective, nuclear deterrence in the Baltic region functions not only as a military instrument, but also as a continuously reconstructed discursive construct embedded in policy documents, institutional practices, and the interpretations of security policy actors.

The study's contribution to deterrence theory is the framed credibility model, and the empirical analysis supports its assumptions. First, in the Baltic security context, deterrence credibility is strengthened by linking US nuclear messaging to allied military presence and exercises, whereas a mismatch between political messages and their practical military underpinning weakens credibility. Second, the analysis reveals differences between US and Baltic officials' interpretations of the credibility of security guarantees, which confirms the existence of a credibility gap and explains the Baltic states' consistent demand for a persistent allied presence. Third, although the Baltic states rarely appear as a central object in US nuclear policy discourse, in practice they are perceived as a test of deterrence credibility, and the link between the general nuclear guarantee and the region is provided by conventional presence and NATO's institutional commitments. The model is also applicable to other cases of extended deterrence, such as US security guarantees to Japan and/or South Korea, which marks a direction for future research.

Constructivism serves as the theoretical foundation of this study, as it addresses dimensions of international relations that are not fully captured by other theoretical approaches. Its ontological premise – that social reality does not exist independently of actors' interpretations – implies that state interests, identities, and threat perceptions are not given, but constructed. The way political actors identify and interpret other states directly shapes their patterns of cooperation or confrontation.

This assumption underpins the study's analytical focus on how the Baltic states are positioned within the US nuclear policy discourse, particularly in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The study proceeds from the premise that, like all international actors, the Baltic states are socially constructed within the perceptions of US security policy actors. Similarly, the broader international security architecture is constructed through these perceptions. These constructions, in turn, influence how US nuclear policy is framed and how NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation is articulated.

This perspective challenges the core assumptions of classical theories such as realism and liberalism. Rather than assuming that states inherently interpret others through the lens of power balancing (realism) or potential cooperation (liberalism), this study demonstrates that such interpretations are contingent upon socially constructed meanings. Nuclear weapons, therefore, are not inherently determinant of behaviour; their significance depends on how they are interpreted within the intersubjective understanding of allies and adversaries.

Within constructivism, this study adopts the approach of Alexander Wendt as its primary theoretical reference point. Wendt emphasizes the role of intersubjectivity, arguing that state behaviour is shaped by shared ideas, identities, and social interaction. His well-known

proposition – "anarchy is what states make of it" – illustrates that the international system does not inherently determine threat perceptions; rather, these are shaped through social and historical interpretation.

Wendt's approach is particularly well-suited to this study, as it foregrounds the role of ideas and interests in shaping policy constructions. It enables the analysis of how US nuclear policy framing reflects evolving threat perceptions, particularly in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and how these perceptions influence the framing of NATO's deterrence and defence posture, as well as the positioning of the Baltic states within this framework.

The concept of deterrence represents a central strategic approach in international relations, aimed at preventing potential aggression through the credibility of threats and the anticipation of consequences. This study has examined the evolution of deterrence and its relationship with nuclear policy. As demonstrated by the discussion of key international relations theorists, deterrence in international security is not always grounded in fully rational decision-making; it is often shaped by elements of irrationality, uncertainty, and misperception.

The analysis highlights that, although nuclear deterrence strategies may appear rational in design, their effectiveness is frequently challenged by uncertainty and complex threat environments. Under such conditions, deterrence becomes increasingly difficult to sustain, and decision-makers may adopt policies that diverge from strictly rational logic.

In this context, the analysis of framed narratives emerges as a crucial reference point for both academic research and practical strategic assessment, as it provides insights into perceived intentions, including those of potential adversaries. Understanding how actors perceive threats – and how these perceptions shape strategic decisions - is therefore essential. Framing analysis enables the identification of how decision-makers interpret potential threats and how their actions are constructed in relation to social and identity-based factors.

While the concept of deterrence has been widely studied, this research introduces an added analytical dimension through the modelling of three key actors: the United States, NATO, and the Baltic states. This triadic perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of deterrence, particularly within the context of extended deterrence. By adopting a holistic view of security challenges and deterrence dynamics, the study offers a more nuanced analytical model that accounts for multiple variables, thereby strengthening the robustness and relevance of research in today's complex international environment, especially in the nuclear domain.

Framing analysis serves as an effective methodological tool for examining how ideas are prioritised and how identities are constructed and maintained within a constructivist framework. It allows for the analysis of how events, threats, and policy issues are presented and

communicated by political leaders and international organisations. By highlighting certain aspects while downplaying others, framing shapes how international issues are perceived by both domestic and international audiences. This approach not only facilitates a deeper understanding of how international conflicts are constructed, but also explains why certain policies are legitimised while others are contested.

The integration of constructivism and framing analysis thus provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding how states respond to threats and how international security is socially constructed. This approach enables the examination of how states construct their identities and relationships with other actors, as well as how these identities evolve over time. This is particularly relevant in the context of US nuclear policy and NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation, where identity and framing play a critical role.

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, US nuclear policy discourse has undergone significant transformation. NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation has become a central element of US security strategy. The synergy between the theoretical framework and framing analysis demonstrates that these changes are not driven solely by objective military threats, but also by how threats are perceived and constructed within political and strategic discourse.

Framing analysis further reveals how security issues are communicated across different audiences. For instance, it highlights how US nuclear deterrence policy is interpreted within the Baltic states, and whether it is perceived as a credible and sufficient instrument for ensuring regional security.

Overall, the synthesis of constructivism and framing analysis developed in this study provides a theoretical and methodological framework that enhances the understanding of both the formulation of foreign and security policy and the processes through which political leaders generate and sustain support for such policies. This combined analytical model is particularly valuable in the study of nuclear policy and security strategies, as it reveals how leaders construct their role within the international system and how these constructions influence decision-making processes and the broader dynamics of international relations.

In order to achieve the stated research objective, the dissertation addressed three core research questions, for which comprehensive answers have been provided.

1 What are the dominant frames in the formation of US nuclear policy?

Overall, five dominant frames can be identified in the historical evolution of US nuclear policy:

- deterrence against great power threats;
- extended deterrence;
- response to emerging threats;
- mutual benefit; and
- the strengthening of the conventional dimension.

The framing of US national security strategy has evolved over time, incorporating nuclear policy as an integral component of the broader security architecture. From the 1980s until the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union constituted the central focus of US strategic thinking. In the early 2000s, attention shifted towards the challenges posed by Iraq and Afghanistan. From the beginning of Donald Trump's administration until 2022, strategic competition with China and Russia became increasingly prominent. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia once again emerged as a primary threat, prompting the United States to refocus on European security.

An analysis of US security policy discourse demonstrates that its core themes and priorities have undergone significant transformation. While deterrence dominated during the Cold War, terrorism became the central security concern in the early 2000s. By around 2010, deterrence and great power competition re-emerged, driven by the growing ambitions of Russia and China. Russia's aggressive actions in 2014 and 2022 served as key catalysts, leading to notable shifts in both the broader US security policy framing and the specific framing of nuclear policy, as reflected in the statements and narratives of US policy actors.

US nuclear policy represents a complex and dynamic system shaped by both historical narratives and contemporary security challenges. Nuclear weapons play a critical role in safeguarding US strategic interests, protecting allies, and maintaining global stability. The evolving threat environment requires continuous adaptation and strategic recalibration to preserve the role of nuclear weapons as a cornerstone of security guarantees.

The framing of US nuclear policy is grounded in several core principles. Deterrence against great power threats remains central, with nuclear capabilities justified primarily in relation to challenges posed by Russia and China. The strategic triad – comprising land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, and strategic bombers – ensures the ability of the United States to respond to potential attacks and maintain strategic stability. Extended deterrence plays a crucial role by extending US security guarantees

beyond its own territory to allies, particularly NATO members, thereby reinforcing alliance cohesion and credibility.

Historical narratives, including the legacy of the Cold War and post-Cold War disarmament efforts, have significantly shaped US nuclear policy framing. During the Cold War, strategic relations were structured around the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), which functioned as a mechanism to prevent direct military conflict between great powers. In the post-Cold War period, nuclear disarmament was framed as a pathway to enhanced international security and trust, as reflected in agreements such as START and New START. However, Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014 has altered the security architecture, introducing new uncertainties and strategic challenges. This has led to a renewed emphasis on extended deterrence within the context of alliance security, as well as a stronger focus on the synergy between conventional and nuclear capabilities.

In summary, the dominant frames in the formation of US nuclear policy can be characterised as an overlapping and evolutionary structure. Deterrence against great power threats and extended deterrence constitute the central organising axis, while the remaining frames function as context-dependent complementary layers. Framing analysis demonstrates that these frames are not static, but are continuously reconstructed in response to changes in the international security environment, particularly in reaction to the strategic ambitions of Russia and China, as well as emerging challenges such as nuclear proliferation and regional crises.

Empirical analysis, based on interviews and structured questionnaires with security policy actors, further reveals that in practice these dominant frames operate through multiple discursive narratives. Extended deterrence is consistently interpreted as the primary mechanism ensuring the credibility of allied security. The nuclear dimension frequently functions as a tool of political signalling, while conventional capabilities are perceived as the primary operational element of deterrence. At the same time, interview data highlight the growing importance of escalation management as a central component of contemporary security framing.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings confirm that dominant frames in US nuclear policy cannot be reduced solely to the balance of material capabilities. Instead, they reflect a constructivist logic of security policy, in which deterrence is shaped through interpretations, narratives, and institutional practices. Accordingly, the answer to the question of dominant frames in US nuclear policy points to a complex and multi-layered discursive system, where deterrence functions as the structuring principle, while other frames enable its adaptation to a changing international security environment.

2 How did US nuclear policy framing evolve in the context of the adaptation of NATO's deterrence and defence posture between 2014 and 2024?

The evolution of US nuclear policy framing within the context of NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation has been dynamic in terms of its substance, strategic priorities, and communicated narratives. These changes can be traced across several key dimensions: the perceived ability of European allies to ensure credible deterrence and defence, differing threat perceptions across US administrations, the availability of resources, and evolving assessments of Russian (mis)calculations regarding NATO vulnerabilities, particularly in the Baltic region.

The adaptation of NATO's deterrence and defence posture in relation to Baltic security began following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. These events marked a turning point in the Alliance's strategic orientation, prompting a renewed focus on collective defence, which had been relatively deprioritised during its engagement in out-of-area operations. In response to Russia's actions, NATO strengthened its military presence in the Baltic states and Poland. This shift was formalised at the Wales and Warsaw Summits, where decisions were made to deploy multinational battlegroups under the leadership of key allies, including Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

Within this adaptation process, the Baltic states emerged as strong advocates for reinforcing NATO's deterrence posture, emphasising the need for a sustained allied presence in the region. Although the 2016 Warsaw Summit represented a significant milestone, from the Baltic perspective these measures were only an initial step. Ongoing concerns remained regarding the permanence of allied forces, response times, and vulnerabilities in the air and maritime domains.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 acted as a further strategic shock, not only for the Baltic states but also for Europe more broadly. While the Baltic states had already increased defence spending and strengthened national capabilities since 2014, they continued to emphasize that the Russian threat constitutes a long-term challenge requiring an enhanced NATO presence and rapid response capabilities. Continued Russian military activity near Baltic borders and a lack of transparency further intensified regional tensions, reinforcing the importance of credible deterrence.

At the same time, shifts in the approaches of major European actors such as Germany and France influenced the distribution of responsibilities within the Alliance. Between 2014 and 2022, vulnerabilities were more actively identified and addressed by the United States, shaping both practical measures and strategic messaging directed at potential adversaries. After

2022, however, several European states significantly adjusted their policies, strengthening both national and collective defence capacities.

Following Russia's actions in 2014 and especially after 2022, US and NATO nuclear policy underwent a notable transformation, directly impacting NATO's deterrence and defence posture. Nuclear weapons, whose role had diminished after the Cold War, regained central importance as a key deterrence instrument against Russian threats. This transformation, initiated in 2014 and intensified after 2022, reflected a growing recognition within NATO that its primary adversary integrates nuclear and conventional capabilities in its military planning. Consequently, both the Alliance and nuclear-armed member states adjusted their doctrinal emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons.

The renewed prominence of nuclear weapons in NATO strategy reflects a shift towards recognising their role not only as a last-resort defence mechanism but also as a critical deterrent tool. Russia's increasingly aggressive nuclear rhetoric and the threat of tactical nuclear use have prompted NATO and the United States to reinforce nuclear sharing arrangements, enabling non-nuclear allies to participate in nuclear planning and operational frameworks. The nuclear dimension has become more prominent in military exercises and strategic scenarios, serving as a signalling mechanism towards potential adversaries.

US investments in the modernisation of the nuclear triad – land-based missiles, nuclear submarines, and strategic bombers – have been essential for maintaining its position as a leading nuclear power and supporting NATO's collective security. Nuclear sharing arrangements continue to play a key role in ensuring allied confidence in deterrence policy, particularly in the Baltic and Eastern European regions. The potential deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons, including in Belarus, has further reinforced NATO's need to maintain credible nuclear deterrence capabilities. In this context, US policy has become a central pillar of NATO's adaptation to Russian threats, with the aim of preventing miscalculated aggression and preserving regional stability. At the same time, despite the increased prominence of nuclear framing, the prevailing narratives continue to focus on de-escalation and reactive posturing.

US security policy within the context of NATO's deterrence and defence posture adaptation has also varied across different administrations. Following Russia's aggression in 2014, the Obama administration emphasized rapid and effective responses, focusing on strengthening NATO's collective defence, increasing military exercises, and reinforcing defence infrastructure in Europe. At the same time, efforts were made to enhance European allies' defence capabilities, whose threat perceptions – until 2022 – often differed from those of the Baltic states and the United States.

During the Trump administration, the focus shifted towards burden-sharing, with strong pressure on European allies, including the Baltic states, to increase defence spending and strengthen their own deterrence capabilities. Although this approach prioritised national contributions, it did not diminish the importance of nuclear deterrence, and nuclear modernisation remained a central priority.

In contrast, the Biden administration, confronted with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, placed renewed emphasis on transatlantic unity and the ability to address multiple global challenges simultaneously. This included military support for Ukraine, support for the defence efforts of Israel, and addressing strategic competition with China. The administration also increased investment in nuclear modernisation and expanded the presence of US nuclear capabilities in Europe, with a strong focus on maintaining credibility as a deterrent against both Russia and other potential adversaries.

3 What is the dynamics of the framed security threats to the Baltic States in the context of framed US nuclear policy between 2014 and 2024?

The analysis demonstrates that the dynamics of framed Baltic security challenges within the context of US nuclear policy are not linear but rather constitute a multi-layered and evolving discursive process. This process reflects the interaction between shifting strategic priorities across US administrations, NATO's institutional deterrence logic, and the interpretations of key security policy actors. While each presidential administration has adopted a distinct approach to framing Baltic regional security, these differences are not reducible to simple policy shifts but instead reflect a broader evolution of narratives within US nuclear policy discourse.

Each administration has framed Baltic security differently. The Obama administration diplomatic values and cooperation within NATO, while maintaining a cautious stance towards nuclear escalation. In contrast, the Trump administration adopted a more variable and transactional approach, placing stronger emphasis on burden-sharing among allies, which generated uncertainty among Baltic leaders. Notably, the framing during the Trump period was not monolithic, as it also incorporated elements of escalation-oriented signalling.

The demonstration of military power – through large-scale exercises and forward deployment of allied forces – has consistently functioned as a key signal to potential adversaries that the defence of each member state, and thus the Alliance as a whole, is taken seriously. Conversely, any perceived reduction in commitment risks being interpreted as a vulnerability that could be exploited by Russia. In this context, the Biden administration's framing includes more explicit signalling regarding scenarios involving potential nuclear use by Russia. This

framing incorporates military exercises, the development of tactical nuclear capabilities, and a clear position that any use of nuclear weapons – even in limited regional scenarios such as the Baltic states – would result in severe, potentially catastrophic consequences.

Through framing analysis, it becomes evident that differences between administrations reflect both strategic competition and the dual necessity of maintaining nuclear deterrence while pursuing arms control. For instance, the Obama and Biden administrations place greater emphasis on arms reduction and strategic stability, whereas the Trump administration foregrounds power projection and explores responses to scenarios such as the potential for a first strike.

Across all three administrations, Russia is consistently framed as an aggressive and destabilising actor that threatens US interests and global security. Under the Obama administration, Russia is characterised as a significant threat to the international order, with emphasis placed on American leadership and the importance of strategic stability and non-proliferation. The Trump administration adopts a more nationalist framing, portraying Russia as a principal adversary seeking to weaken US influence and divide its allies, while emphasising its military and nuclear capabilities. The Biden administration, particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, frames Russia as an immediate threat to a free and open international system, highlighting the importance of collective defence through NATO and coordinated responses among allies.

The framing of Russia within US security policy has thus been dynamic and heterogeneous. While the Obama administration prioritised alliance cohesion and cooperation, the Trump administration pursued a more transactional approach, combining recognition of Russian aggression with attempts to maintain dialogue. The Biden administration, in turn, has emphasized collective response and support for Ukraine, reinforcing Russia's role as a central threat. Despite these differences, Russia is consistently framed across administrations as a destabilising force, although its perceived threat level and policy implications vary.

Beyond administrative differences, the empirical analysis identifies stable, dominant narratives that persist throughout the analysed period. Interview data indicate that Baltic security framing is consistently structured around the credibility of extended deterrence as its central organising principle. At the same time, this framing operates through several overlapping discursive layers: the nuclear dimension functions primarily as a tool of political signalling and strategic credibility; conventional deterrence serves as the primary operational mechanism; and escalation management emerges as a central strategic challenge in Baltic scenarios.

The analysis of interviews and survey data further reveals perceptual differences among security policy actors at different levels. From the perspective of US policymakers and NATO institutional actors, Baltic security is consistently framed within a broader deterrence architecture. In contrast, Baltic officials more often interpret security through the lens of direct and immediate security guarantees. This asymmetry reflects differing positional perspectives between global and regional levels, while not undermining the overall consensus on deterrence.

Overall, the empirical findings suggest that while the Baltic states are rarely framed as an autonomous security object within US nuclear policy discourse, they increasingly function in practice as a test case for deterrence credibility and a reference point for potential escalation scenarios. The analysis reveals a layered framing structure in which the credibility of extended deterrence serves as the central organising principle, while the nuclear dimension primarily operates as a signalling and escalation-control instrument. At the same time, the findings highlight persistent perception gaps between US policymakers and Baltic officials, reflecting differing security perspectives shaped by global and regional contexts.

List of publications and conference presentations related to the Doctoral Thesis[2]

Publications:

1. Vargulis, M. Forthcoming in 2026. The Evolution of the US Security and Nuclear Deterrence Narratives Towards Baltic States (2010–2020). Security Dimensions.
2. Vargulis, M. 2025. Framing nuclear deterrence and international law: U.S. National Security Strategy and the construction of Russia as a threat (1987–2022), Socrates. Rīga Stradiņš University Faculty of Law Electronic Scientific Journal of Law. Volume 2025 (2025): Issue 3-33 (December 2025), https://reference-global.com/article/10.25143/socr.33.2025.3.82-89?tab=article
3. Vargulis, M. 2022. Framing the Baltic States in the US Security Policy Discourse During Donald Trump Administration. Security Dimensions. 40(2022): 80–96. doi: 10.5604/01.3001.0015.8155. https://securitydimensions.publisherspanel.com/article/158155/en
4. Vargulis, M. 2021. Digital Civic Engagement in the EU: Analysing Examples. Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs. 4(2021): 84. https://journalse.com/digital-civic-engagement-in-the-eu-analysing-examples-tools-and-sentiment-in-latvia-and-estonia/

Conference presentations:

1. Vargulis, M. 2025. Participation in the International Scientific and Applied Research Conference Modern Security Challenges and Strategies for Their Prevention – Towards a Secure Society. Rīga Stradiņš University, Riga, Latvia, 19 September 2025.
2. Vargulis, M. 2021. Framing the Baltic States in the US Security Policy Discourse during Donald Trump Jr. Administration. Oral presentation at the 2nd International Interdisciplinary Conference «PLACES». Rīga Stradiņš University, Riga, Latvia, 25 March 2021.
3. Vargulis, M. 2025. Speaker in the panel discussion The Framing of US Nuclear Policy and NATO's Deterrence Posture in the Baltic Context: The Perspective of Artificial Intelligence Application. Kharkiv International Legal Forum, Kharkiv, Ukraine (hybrid format), 25 September 2025.
4. Vargulis, M. 2021. Participation with presentation Digital Democracy in the EU: The Case Study of Latvia. IAI Virtual Academic Conference, International Academic Institute, 16 June 2021.

[2] [1] The results of the dissertation have been validated not only through scientific publications and conferences, but also within the international professional and expert community. A significant part of the research was further developed and validated during the author's nearly one-year stay and professional engagement at the *Nuclear Threat Initiative* (*NTI*) in Washington, D.C., United States, where the research questions and findings were discussed with leading experts in nuclear policy, nuclear deterrence, and international security. This experience provided an opportunity to assess the theoretical and empirical findings developed in the dissertation against the professional perspectives of US nuclear policy experts and to further refine the interpretations applied in the research.

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