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Latvia's Drone Diplomacy

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Abstract

In 2024, Latvia and the United Kingdom initiated an international programme with the objective of providing Ukraine with unmanned systems, which was designated the Drone Coalition. The purpose of this initiative is to facilitate the delivering of drones to Ukraine, as well as the training of personnel in the utilisation of state-of-the-art technologies. From Latvia's standpoint, the project presents an opportunity to bolster its defence capabilities, foster domestic enterprises through research, and enhance its international reputation as an innovative nation. This initiative also represents a novel domain within the broader field of diplomacy, namely *defence innovation and production diplomacy* (DIPD).

Keywords: Latvia, Drones, Diplomacy, Technologies, Digitalization

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Latvia has experienced dynamic economic development. However, the emergence of numerous challenges, including an ageing society due to population decline and emigration, the consequences of the 2008-2010 economic crisis (the global economic crisis affected Latvia much more severely than neighbouring countries), the pandemic of 2020, significant income disparities, and differences in regional development levels have forced the state to implement technological transformation and digitalization in its domestic policy[1]. Concurrently, contemporary technologies have had the potential to exert a substantial influence on Latvia's foreign policy. In recent years, in the face of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Latvian diplomacy has sought to enhance its defence capabilities, foster domestic enterprises through the promotion of scientific research, and project an image of innovation on the global stage. Latvia's perspective on the role of modern technologies encompasses several key areas. Firstly, in the field of domestic policy, it is believed that modern technologies facilitate innovation and enhanced productivity within corporate entities as well as these technologies are recognised as a means of providing residents with access to public services, thereby contributing to the reduction of regional disparities[2]. It is in the line of the concept of resilience which concerns the ability of state or organisations to move quickly and seamlessly to adopt new technology solutions and then to recover, rebound, and move forward if things go wrong. Latvia’s authorities emphasize technology development as a path of its transformation toward sustainability and prosperity. This also reflects the need for redesigning its institutional framework to enhance innovative and democratic systems. It should be underlined that Latvia, together with Estonia and Lithuania, appears in the top of IMD World Digital Competitiveness ranking evaluating the landscape of developing digital technologies and examining the level of preparedness of an economy to challenges in the future. Three Baltic states are among the most innovative countries in the Central European region, and their standings

[1] A. Kuczyńska-Zonik, *The Baltic States: Digital Democracy in the Era of the Pandemic*, IEŚ Policy Papers, no. 6, 2021.
[2] N. Wendt-Lucas, S. Jessen, M. Brynteson, *National Digital Inclusion Initiatives in the Nordic and Baltic Countries*, Nordregio Report, no. 3, 2024.

are gradually rising. This reflects the openness of the states to new, non-standard ideas. Additionally, those data show how economies employ new technologies, which could help react to serious challenges.

Secondly, in the area of foreign policy, the impact of modern technologies is considered significant in determining military development[3]. For smaller economies such as Latvian, investing in modern technology allows them to create niches and specializations, amplifying their impact despite limited resources. Finally, they can play a supportive role in enhancing and fostering cooperation between states, thereby influencing regional security.

This paper offers empirical evidence of utilization of modern technologies for diplomatic purposes by Latvia. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) known as drones are an example of advanced technology armament that offers a wide range of advantages across military, economic and diplomatic spheres. Drones are becoming a top priority for national defence sectors, promoting their wider integration into defence strategies. They encompass a broad spectrum of unmanned systems, including air, land, and maritime drones, as well as counter-drone solutions. Drones are inexpensive means for intelligence gathering and they can neutralize enemy defences, helping countries project power. They are easy to transport, enable high attrition rates with deniability, and can quickly strengthen local proxies. So far drones have been used for military power in conflicts in various regions, including Libya, Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine. Drones may also become a core component of a country's foreign policy, helping it strengthen partnerships as seen between Turkey and Ukraine[4]. In the special geopolitical context of Russia-Ukraine war, an intention of this paper is to utilize a concept of drone diplomacy to define Latvia's foreign policy strategy and its drone technology as an integral asset to achieve military, economic and diplomatic objectives. Firstly, an aim is to present theoretical framework relating to technology, military and diplomacy. Then, the concept is tested using empirical date on Latvia's co-led initiative of drone

[3] See: M. Górka, *Cyber deterrence policies of the Baltic states in the years 2016–2023*, Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, vol. 22, no. 1, 2024, pp. 45-66, DOI: https://doi.org/10.36874/RIESW.2024.1.3.

[4] F. Borsari, *Turkey's drone diplomacy: Lessons for Europe*, European Council on Foreign Relations, Commentary 31 January 2022.

cooperation in order to identify how new technologies in military domain may contribute to Latvia's diplomatic, military and economic potential and visuality.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of *defence* or *military diplomacy* encompasses the classic umbrella term for the activities of state institutions, especially defence ministries and armed forces through negotiations or other measures of a peaceful nature. It refers to the utilisation of diplomatic instruments and methodologies including engagement with other nations and international organisations to attain foreign policy objectives such as security, integrity and sovereignty[5]. It includes sets of practices such as: exchange of personnel, ships and aircraft, high-level visits and senior commanders, bilateral meetings and dialogue, training and exercises, regional defence forums, military assistance, confidence-building measures and non-proliferation, with an aim to build and maintain trust and help in the development of democratic armed forces[6].

In turn, the concept of *tech diplomacy* defines the relations of states with the technology sector and the governance of new technologies. This term confirms how the internet, advanced technologies, and social media platforms have become indispensable for diplomacy[7]. It is also important to emphasise that dual-use technologies represent a significant domain of policy and cooperation between states, frequently associated with security and defence. Nevertheless, a consensus on a single definition remains elusive. In order to denote the combination of defence and technology in the context of diplomacy the term *defence-tech diplomacy* is employed unofficially to link cutting edge technology expertise, high-tech business strategies, and foreign policy tools, to prevent authoritarian nations from using new technologies to expand their power and undermine precious freedoms[8]. It is the deliberate combination of defence diplomacy and technology diplomacy tools to shape access, development, transfer, and regulation of advanced

[5] https://www.diplomacy.edu/topics/defence-diplomacy/.
[6] A. Cottey, A. Forster, *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance*, Routledge 2004, p. 7; L. Drab, *Defence diplomacy – an important tool for the implementation of foreign policy and security of the state*, Security and Defence Quarterly, vol. 20, no. 3, 2018, pp. 57-71. doi:10.5604/01.3001.0012.5152.
[7] C. Bjola, M. *Kornprobst, Studying Tech Diplomacy—Introduction to the Special Issue on Tech Diplomacy*, Global Policy, vol. 1, no. 8, 2025. **https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70035**.
[8] https://techdiplomacy.org/tech-diplomacy/.

technologies (especially dual-use) for military capabilities, interoperability, and supply chain resilience. The strategy integrates conventional peacetime military instruments, such as visits, attachés, training, and agreements, with initiatives directed towards the technology sector, standards, and export controls. However, it should be noted that this term is more of a descriptive nature and does not constitute a technically recognised academic term.

Moreover, the advent of neologisms in this field, such as *production diplomacy*, underscores the coordination of supply chains and defence industries among allies, a concept that has been incorporated into the defence industry strategies of numerous nations. This phenomenon has calls for integrating the defence industrial bases of allies and partners and "provides opportunities to protect supply chains, strengthen alliances and partnerships, enhance deterrence, and build defence readiness" and is in relation to the US National Defence Industrial Strategy (NDIS), published in September 2023[9]. It emphasizes necessity to supplement the state investments as well as to maintain closer co-operation on defence industrial challenges with allies and partners as a top priority. *Defence production diplomacy* is similar term, defined as the coordinated diplomatic and industrial actions with allies and partners that integrate and scale arms production chains (co-development, co-production, co-sustainment) to increase capabilities, supply resilience, and interoperability. This is achieved through friend-shoring and joint investments in production capacity, and can be characterized by so-called "production-oriented diplomacy," a term that was discussed and popularised by in the NDIS[10]. Both p*roduction diplomacy* and *defence production diplomacy* should be seen as a strategy to protect supply chains, but it can support far more national security objectives, especially in the unpredictable geostrategic environment.

None of the aforementioned concepts have hitherto incorporated both innovation and advanced technology, as well as defence and diplomacy. Thus, it is suggested to introduce a concept of *defence innovation and production diplomacy* (DIPD) with an

[9] A. Brown, J.T. Watts, M. Garlauskas, *Production diplomacy for deterrence, readiness, and resilience in the Indo-Pacific*, Atlantic Council, June 27, 2024.
[10] National Defense Industrial Strategy, Department of Defense 2023, https://www.businessdefense.gov/docs/ndis/2023-NDIS.pdf

objective to define a coordinated diplomatic approach with allies and partners that fuses defence innovation (R&D, dual-use, deep tech) with scaled co-development, co-production and co-sustainment. While it focuses on accelerating capability deployment, strengthening supply chain resilience, and enhancing interoperability, DIPD consciously expands the already established *production diplomacy* with a distinct innovation module. It also combines defence innovation (R&D, dual-use, deep tech) with large-scale co-production (co-dev/co-prod/co-sustain). The following section provides empirical data on the DIPD concept based on Latvia's Drone Coalition.

Drone Coalition

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, several European countries including Latvia have dynamized their activity for domestic military purposes and for the coordination of defence industrial support for Ukraine including defence equipment, training, and logistical support. The aim of these efforts has been to encourage and align international commitments to defence investment, production, and procurement actions. Particularly, UAVs play a critical role in the Ukrainian Air Force's efforts to resist Russian aggressor.

As a result, on 14 February, 2024, Latvia and the United Kingdom initiated an international project to provide Ukraine with unmanned aerial vehicles, so-called the Drone Coalition, in order to coordinate the Coalition's common fund and joint procurement to ensure the continuity of supplies of unmanned aerial vehicles to Ukraine. The commitment includes supplying Ukraine with combat drones of various capacities, developed in accordance with the requirements set by the Ukrainian armed forces. The Coalition currently includes 20 member states: Latvia, the United Kingdom, Australia, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Estonia, Italy, New Zealand, Canada, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Turkey, Ukraine, Germany and Sweden. The Drone Coalition's mission is threefold: firstly, to ensure the continued transfer of combat drones with various parameters, designed in accordance with the requirements of the Ukrainian Armed Forces; secondly, to develop the production of drone systems; and thirdly, to promote secure supply chains for these devices in Western countries.

In 2024, the total support provided to Ukraine by member states of the Drone Coalition amounted to €1.8 billion. At that time, Latvia allocated €20 million, and plans to allocate the same amount in 2025. An international fund with an endowment in excess of €80 million has also been operating within the Coalition since July 2024 (Latvia allocated €5 million for this purpose). In accordance with the contracts signed in January 2025, with a total value of €54 million, the Coalition is obligated to provide Ukraine with 30,000 drones. Two Latvian companies are also involved in the production process, and it is anticipated that they will deliver 12,000 drones with a total value of €17 million.

Latvia's involvement in the Drone Coalition has resulted in substantial advancements in the production of unmanned aerial vehicles, thereby stimulating industries that utilise contemporary technologies. This initiative has had the effect of strengthening the country's defence potential, whilst concomitantly creating new opportunities for local entrepreneurs, the research sector, and the defence industry. Participation in the Coalition furnished Latvia with access to the knowledge and experience gained during the war in Ukraine, funding for technology development, and the opportunity to test and develop cutting-edge drone solutions through international public procurement. These initiatives have enabled Latvia to develop concepts for new devices and to develop its own combat capabilities, while Latvian companies have gained the opportunity to participate in international tenders and to promote their brands on the global market. For instance, Latvia hosted the "Drones for Ukraine" hackathon and launched the Latvian Drone Capabilities Development Initiative to enhance the drone capabilities of the Latvian Armed Forces. In June 2024, a testing ground was also established at the Sēlia military training ground, where both domestic and foreign drone manufacturers can conduct tests on developing technologies using unmanned aerial vehicles. In October 2024, Origin, a Latvian company specialising in advanced autonomous systems, received €4 million in funding from the European Defence Fund for drone innovation.

Latvia’s leadership in drone diplomacy

The endeavours of Latvia's political authorities to furnish technological assistance to Ukraine have resulted in the advancement of the European and particularly Latvian drone industry. Latvia is consolidating its position in this field by maintaining its support for

Ukraine (in the previous year, it furnished Ukraine with almost 5,000 drones), advocating for the advancement of the domestic defence industry, fostering business collaboration, and catalysing innovation. In addition, Latvia's Competence Centre for Autonomous Systems was established to develop unmanned aerial vehicle technology and explore cutting-edge solutions to address the threats posed by drones to critical infrastructure. In general, Latvia has fostered domestic drone production, stimulated technological innovation, and deepened international partnerships.

Latvia's active role within the Drone Coalition presents an essence of *drone diplomacy*. The term covers the deliberate use of drones—and the policies governing their development, export/transfer, co-production, training, and regulation—as tools of statecraft: from signalling and power projection (ISR/strike) to deepening partnerships via sales, co-production and training, to soft-power humanitarian uses and the shaping of UAV norms. Latvia's strategic ambition in this regard is twofold: firstly, to develop and promote domestic drone technologies on a global scale, and secondly, to shape the image of an innovative country. Firstly, this format has fostered active exchange of information on research and innovation in the field of unmanned aerial vehicles, creating opportunities for countries to organise joint projects in the future. The Drone Coalition has been demonstrated to enhance Latvia's security, as the advancement of robotics and artificial intelligence has the potential to furnish optimal defence capabilities against asymmetric threats. It is also important for the development of the drone industry in Latvia, security of supply, and strengthening the national economy. Secondly, Latvia's effort to become European leader in the field of so-called *drone diplomacy* was demonstrated at the international Drone Summit in Riga, on 28 May, 2025, with the participation of the Latvian Ministry of National Defence and Riga University of Technology. Representatives of Drone Coalition member states, military experts, scientists, entrepreneurs, and leaders from the unmanned aerial vehicle industry attended the Summit, discussing the Coalition's achievements. The Summit also aimed to provide Latvian companies and researchers with opportunities to network with international partners and to encourage the optimal use of research potential in the defence industry. This event provided an additional platform for discussion and future

directions, with a particular focus on challenges related to global security and new dimensions of warfare.

Conclusions

Without any doubts the advent of modern technologies, including drones, has precipitated a fundamental shift in warfare tactics. In the context of Russia full-scale aggression, it is evident that drones have become a significant component of Ukraine's military apparatus, particularly in reconnaissance and strike missions. This analysis contributes to this fields with a special attention to drones and their role for military, economy and diplomatic purposes. Firstly, the focus was on theoretical consideration on innovative technology in defence sector and diplomacy. While some definitions were proposed to denote the current roles of advanced technologies for domestic and foreign policies, DIPD aligns allied defence innovation with scaled co-development/co-production to accelerate fielding, build supply-chain resilience, and improve interoperability. For example, Turkey's foreign policy strategy shows how a country utilizes its drone technology as an integral asset to achieve diplomatic, economic, and military objectives. Latvia has potential for innovation and defence technology development, too. It has a reliable technology infrastructure, effective digital policy and it ranks in good positions in terms of digital development in Europe, which results in Latvia being recognize as an innovative and digitally developed country. Autonomous military drones are stealthy and multi-domain integrated, and have been transforming modern warfare with AI. The "drone army" enhances national capabilities which is now one of its priority for Latvia's defence sector. By developing its own unmanned systems and counter-drone systems, Latvia builds its resilience and security. Additionally, drone diplomacy as an illustration of DIPD aims at strengthening alliances and partnerships, enhancing deterrence and building defence readiness. From Latvia's standpoint, the concept offers the prospect of enhancing its own defence capabilities, fostering the growth of domestic enterprises through the utilisation of scientific research, and projecting an image of an innovative nation on the global stage. Both the International Drone Summit and the Competence Centre for Autonomous Systems provide an opportunity to strengthen Latvia's leadership role in this regard. Latvia's co-leadership in

the Drone Coalition serves as an additional means of pressuring national, EU, and international structures to improve procedures, procurement issues, and investment efforts in the defence sector. It helps to collectively change the approach of EU and NATO members towards a "full-time-war logic" needed to support Ukraine.

In essence, for Latvia, drone diplomacy is not just about military hardware; it's a strategic pathway to enhance its international standing, stimulate economic growth through specialized defence production, foster technological innovation, and strengthen its national defence and alliances in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape. It allows Latvia to be a central node in a critical technological domain, much like a specialized gear within a larger, complex machine, contributing significantly to its overall function and direction.

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