

Estonia: fortifying the coast

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On 6 October the Estonian Centre for Defence Investment (ECDI) announced the procurement of Blue Spear 5G SSM missiles with a range of 290 km for a land-based coastal defence unit under development. They will be delivered by an Israel-Singapore joint venture, Proteus Advanced Systems. The details of the contract were not disclosed, nor did the ECDI provide any further information on the whole system, i.e. the number of fire units and the type of launcher. As a part of the Navy, it is set to become fully operational in 2024 and cover the entire coastline of the country. The Estonian defence budget for 2022 allocates €46 million for the implementation of this programme (next year Estonia's defence expenditure will reach 2.31% of its GDP, or €748 million).

Commentary

- The acquisition of an advanced land-based coastal defence system marks a breakthrough in the modernisation of the Armed Forces of Estonia, which will be the first of the Baltic states to have long-range missiles, and thus the capability to hit targets beyond its borders. For Tallinn, this programme kicks-off the development of Estonia's anti-access capabilities. This is the most important but not the only element of the plan to strengthen coastal defence. Estonia has also purchased a significant number of Finnish-made sea mines (the deliveries will start this year) and plans to procure sensors to improve the surveillance of its maritime areas.
- According to statements by representatives of the Estonian Armed Forces, elements of the coastal defence missile unit could operate inland (their range would still cover the Gulf of Finland, which is 130 km at its widest point) and on the West Estonian archipelago located between the entrance to the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Riga. A deployment of this kind would make it possible to protect the northern and western sea approaches. Missiles on Estonian islands could also serve the defence of the Latvian coastline, in particular restricting access to the Gulf of Riga. In 2019, an element of the Polish Naval Missile Unit exercised in Saaremaa.
- The contract has once again demonstrated the limitations in cooperation between the Baltic states in the field of joint military procurements. In 2020–2021, Estonia held talks with Latvia on the joint purchase of a coastal defence system and armoured vehicles. However, due to the incompatible timelines of their armed forces' development plans, Tallinn favoured land-to-sea missiles, while Riga prioritised investments in the land forces. Therefore, the two countries will make separate procurements – the Estonians will first acquire a coastal defence system and then new armoured vehicles in the second

half of the decade, while the Latvians will procure these in the opposite order. The Baltic states are conducting preparatory work for the joint purchase of an artillery system – MLRS with long-range missiles.

- Estonia's investments in coastal defense could spur closer military cooperation with Finland, which in 2018 ordered Israeli Gabriel V anti-ship missiles for its missile boats, and new corvettes. This means that the naval forces of both countries will use long-range missiles from the same family and the same sea mine system. In this situation a new potential field of cooperation in exercises and training will open up for their navies.