

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

SOCIAL SCIENCES

INSTITUTE OF PSYCHOLOGY

HELMUTH MARTIN REISNER

RAISING DEFENCE EXPENDITURES TO 5%:

BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE CASE STUDY ON ESTONIAN DECISION-MAKERS

KAITSEKULUTUSTE TÕSTMINE 5% PEALE:

EESTI OTSUSTAJATE KÄITUMISTEADUSLIK JUHTUMIUURING

MASTER'S THESIS

APPLIED BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE

(227502)

THESIS SUPERVISORS: ANDERO UUSBERG, PhD

ARDI PRIKS, PhD

TARTU 2026

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT -----	3
LÜHIKOKKUVÕTE -----	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY -----	5
PROBLEM MAPPING -----	9
Theoretical framework – towards behavioural political science -----	9
Problem behaviour, target group -----	11
Research aims & questions -----	12
Methods-----	12
Results -----	14
Attitudes -----	14
Norms and other social beliefs -----	17
Perceived Behavioural Control-----	19
Beyond the TPB framework: additional insights -----	22
SOLUTION MAPPING -----	23
IMPACT STUDY -----	27
USED SOURCES AND REFERENCES -----	29
ANNEX 1 - THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR CODING TREE-----	31
ANNEX 2 – SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS -----	34
ANNEX 3 - COLLECTION OF MAIN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE PROMPTS -----	36
NON-EXCLUSIVE LICENCE TO REPRODUCE THESIS AND MAKE THESIS PUBLIC -----	38

ABSTRACT

Chronic underinvestment into defence among most NATO allies has led to a security vacuum in Europe. Despite repeated declarations and commitments to increase defence investments, these intentions have often failed to translate into actual expenditure. A handful of NATO countries, however, have consistently exceeded agreed targets which warrants further analysis.

Drawing on elite interviews with Estonian decision-makers, this thesis explains the behavioural and political factors that enabled Estonia to increase defence expenditure to over 5% of GDP already before such a target was established among NATO members. Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour as an analytical framework, the findings suggest that elevated threat perceptions alone are insufficient to explain increased defence investments. Instead, the decision emerged from the interaction of multiple factors shaping behavioural intentions.

Positive attitudes towards defence spending were driven by perceived military necessity, informed by threat perceptions and expert military advice. These were supported by favourable domestic and international norms, including strong alignment with NATO commitments. At the same time, perceived behavioural control was enhanced by increased fiscal flexibility, through anticipated changes to EU deficit rules, which enabled further deficit spending for defence. Crucially, the translation of behavioural intention into actual policy was enabled by prime-ministerial leadership, which acted as the key mechanism in advancing the decision despite constraints.

This thesis contributes to broader international relations research by applying a behavioural science perspective to policymakers' behaviour in the formulation of defence policy with geopolitical implications. It further outlines a set of policy recommendations for nations to increase defence spending and proposes a potential impact study to assess which factors are most influential in shaping decision-makers' willingness to increase defence investments.

Key words: defence spending, burden-shifting, national defence, budget negotiations, national defence policy, behavioural science, theory of planned behaviour, NATO

LÜHIKOKKUVÕTE

Kaitsevaldkonna pikaajaline alarahastamine on viinud märkimisväärsete võimelünkadeni Euroopa kaitstes. Vaatamata ühistele deklaratsioonidele ja lubadustele kaitsekulutusi tõsta, ei ole NATO liitlased suutnud seda kavatsust ellu viia. Küll aga on seda suutnud käputäis liitlasriike, kelle positiivne käitumine väärib täiendavat analüüsi mõistmaks, kuidas mõned riigid on suutnud kaitsekulusid tõsta ja teised ei ole.

Magistritöö raames Eesti võtmeotsustajatega läbiviidud intervjuud aitavad selgitada käitumuslikke ja poliitilisi tegureid, mis võimaldasid Eestil suurendada kaitsekulusid üle 5% SKPst juba enne kui vastav sihttase NATO liitlaste seas kokku lepiti. Magistritöö osundab, et ainult kõrgendatud ohutajust ei piisa, et selgitada Eesti kaitsekulude kasvu. Planeeritud käitumise teooriale tuginedes selgitab magistritöö, et käitumuslik kavatsus kaitsekulusid tõsta Eesti otsustajate seas kujunes vajalike hoiakute, sotsiaalsete normide ja tajutud tegutsemisvõime koosmõjus.

Positiivseid hoiakuid kaitsekulutuste suhtes kujundas sõjaline vajadus, mida mõjutasid nii tajutud julgeolekuoht kui ka kaitseväge eksperthinnang. Seda soodustasid aga siseriiklikud ja rahvusvahelised normid, sealhulgas tajutud ootus täita NATO võimeeesmärke. Samal ajal suurendas tajutud tegutsemisvõimet ootus, et Euroopa Liit on peatselt lõdvendamas eelarvepuudujäägi piiranguid võimaldamaks kaitsekulutuste suurendamist. Nende koosmõjul kujunes käitumuslik kavatsus kaitsekulusid suurendada, mille kujundamisel ja realiseerimisel mängis otsustavat rolli Eesti peaminister.

Kasutades käitumusteaduslikku lähenemist poliitikakujundajate käitumise analüüsimiseks, panustab magistritöö riigiteaduste ja rahvusvaheliste suhete uuringutesse ning esitab soovitusi, kuidas teistes riikides soodustada kaitsekulutuste tõstmist. Viimaks kirjeldab töö potentsiaalset uuringut, mille abil oleks võimalik hinnata kuivõrd suurel määral erinevad tegurid mõjutavad poliitikakujundajate valmidust kaitsekulutusi suurendada.

Märksõnad: kaitsekulutused, koormanihutamine, riigikaitse, eelarve läbirääkimised, riigikaitse, käitumisteadus, planeeritud käitumise teooria, NATO

defence spending, burden-shifting, national defence, budget negotiations, national defence policy, behavioural science, theory of planned behaviour

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“If we don’t spend more together now to prevent war, we will pay a much, much, much higher price later to fight it.” – NATO Secretary General - Mark Rutte (2024)

In a speech titled “To prevent war, NATO must spend more”, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte (SG) spoke about the urgent need to increase defence spending among NATO allies in order to ensure that NATO is ready to deter threats facing the alliance in the next four to five years. These remarks were made in the context of Europe facing its most serious security situation since the end of the Cold War with Russia being able to conduct a local war within 6 months, a regional war within 2 years and a large-scale attack on Europe within 5 years after a ceasefire is reached in Ukraine according to Danish Defence Intelligence Service (2025).

In the final years of the Cold War NATO countries spent roughly 3% of their GDP on defence. With the onset of the “peace dividend” instigated by the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO defence spending fell down to an all-time low of 1.43% in 2015 (Rutte, 2024; SIPRI, 2026). As a result of prolonged underinvestment, in 2024 NATO had less than five percent of the required air defence systems along with shortfalls in multiple capabilities necessary to protect itself against a Russian incursion per its own defence plans (ERR, 2024).

Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO member states set a common target to raise defence expenditure to “at least” 2% of GDP by 2024 (NATO, 2014). Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 only seven out of thirty-two NATO members had reached that target. Instead, NATO states have continuously pushed the decision to invest¹ into defence farther into the future despite agreed targets, common pledges and mounting security risks. A similar effort was made at the NATO Hague Summit in June 2025 where NATO states pledged to raise defence

¹ This thesis uses the term “defence investment” to describe all the defence expenditures which produce an output in the form of security and peace.

investments to 5% of GDP (3.5% core national defence and 1.5% defence-related spending) by the year 2035 (NATO, 2025). NATO SG later warned that if the same historical trends of underinvestment were to continue, then alliance members should all start learning Russian (Rutte, 2025).

A few countries however have been outliers on defence spending. For example, since joining NATO in 2004, Estonian defence spending rose to near 2% and exceeded the NATO 2% target in 2015 (SIPRI, 2026). Since then, Estonia has consistently had one of the highest levels of defence investments as a percentage of GDP among NATO allies with defence investments reaching over 3% in 2024 and almost 4% in 2025 (SIPRI, 2026). In the beginning of 2025, before such a target was set by NATO, the Estonian government announced that it would increase defence spending to 5% starting from 2026 (ERR, 2025). Three months later, the 5% target was agreed upon among NATO allies at the Hague Summit (NATO, 2025).

In an effort to understand why some countries like Estonia have been able to consistently raise defence investments while most NATO allies have been unable to do so, this thesis sets out to understand the behavioural and political insights governing decisions to raise defence investments. To this end a small number of elite semi-structured interviews were conducted with the highest government officials within Estonia to understand their motives, concerns and perceived context within which they collectively decided as a government to raise defence investments to 5%. Based on the interviews and the best practices of Estonia, the thesis proposes 16 concrete recommendations for other NATO members to increase defence investments. Finally, looking forward, the thesis outlines a potential impact study in the form of a table-top exercise to simulate and understand which factors are most influential in shaping the behavioural intention to raise defence investments.

The interviews conducted with Estonian political leaders and key civil servant stakeholders indicated that the decision to raise defence expenditure to 5% of GDP cannot be explained through elevated threat perceptions alone. Instead, the findings suggest that in addition to threat perceptions, a key role in shaping the attitudes towards defence investments was the perception that it was a military necessity, derived from new NATO regional defence plans (NATO, 2023). This in turn was supported by the widely accepted norm among decision-makers that Estonia will always

fulfil its obligations within NATO. Most importantly however, this decision was enabled by the anticipated change to EU budget deficit rules making the investment a feasible policy option.

In turn, the behavioural intention to raise defence investments was translated into policy through prime-ministerial leadership, which acted as the critical initiator and the enabler to push the decision through despite fiscal constraints.

To the best of the author's knowledge, this thesis is unique due to the access to the critical decision-makers, who were both directly and indirectly responsible for increasing defence investments in Estonia to 5%. The interviewees were the Estonian prime minister, defence minister, foreign minister, justice minister, civil servants from the security and defence apparatus and other senior political operatives. The interviews were conducted close to a year after the decision was made. The thesis is thus able to provide an overview of a very specific decision from the viewpoint of different but intertwined actors, governmental institutions and stakeholders. Additionally, through the use of behavioural science theories (Theory of Planned Behaviour) supplemented by political science theories (Audience Cost Theory, Leadership Theory), the thesis offers a much more detailed lens into policymaking and with a greater explanatory value than broader international security theories alone would allow.

The key limitation, however, lies in the fact that all conducted interviews have the inevitable risk of post-hoc rationalization and social desirability bias in explaining with the benefit of hindsight why certain decisions were made. Thereby the thesis is unable to completely capture the full range of motives and constraints that decision-makers perceived when making the decision to increase defence spending to 5%. This risk is however mitigated through the use of triangulation as a method to capture multiple views from cabinet members belonging to different parties; parliamentarians, political operatives and civil servants allowing for a wider body of evidence concerning only a single policy question. A further limitation is based on the fact that this thesis focuses on only one country and thus cannot provide a comparative perspective with nations that have similar defence expenditure levels such as Latvia or Lithuania nor nations with distinctly different expenditure levels such as Spain and Italy. This merits further research for which this thesis sets the groundwork for.

The thesis also offers a list of recommendations for nations to consider in order to increase their defence expenditures. The interventions are structured around the key components of the Theory of Planned Behaviour and thus offer possible means to bolster attitudes, social norms and perceived feasibility to increase defence expenditure. For instance, attitudes towards defence expenditure could be strengthened by levelling the shared understanding of security threats among senior politicians through regular security briefings to all cabinet members and key opposition members, scenario-based table-top exercises and national defence courses. Societal norms permitting defence spending could be strengthened by introducing clearer narratives about the benefits of investing into national defence and increasing international pressure from other governments or NATO to raise expenditure. Finally, the perceived feasibility of spending increases could be fostered by further exploitation of fiscal and monetary instruments such as the recently amended EU deficit spending criteria and the low-interest SAFE loan mechanism for defence investments.

For future research the thesis lays out the groundwork for a potential impact study in the form of a table-top exercise to assess how different scenarios and conditions influence the willingness of decision-makers to increase defence investments. Furthermore, this research would benefit from a comparative study of other nations' practices on defence spending in order to better explain why countries such as Spain, Italy or France have been unable or unwilling to increase their defence spending to the set NATO targets.

PROBLEM MAPPING

Chronic underinvestment into defence by most of the NATO allies suggests that, despite formal commitments and joint threat assessments, political leaders are often unwilling or unable to translate intentions to invest into defence in actual defence investments (Šešelgytė, 2023). Given the gravity of the security threat that Europe is facing, it is highly relevant and arguably of existential importance in the current European security context, to understand why NATO member states have been unable to translate their commitments into actual investments and what lessons can be learned from those who have been able to do so consistently.

Theoretical framework – towards behavioural political science

Geopolitics and security are most frequently analysed through broad theories of international relations (IR) and political science with the main units of analysis being states, which are predominantly treated as rational actors. Along these lines, Olson & Zeckhauser's economic theory of alliances (1966) for example argues that there is a persistent incentive for states to free-ride within alliances by shifting the burden to other, oftentimes bigger allies. Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat Theory (1987) in turn argues that states respond to external threats by investing more into their own capabilities based on their perceived power, perceived intentions and geographic proximity to the threats. By Walt's line of argumentation, underinvestment into defence could therefore be explained by an insufficient or an incorrect threat perception among NATO members.

Much like classical economic theory's reliance on the concept of homo *economicus*, mainstream approaches to international relations tend to treat states as rational actors pursuing utility-maximizing outcomes. While such models are useful in explaining why states should invest into defence, they struggle to explain why these investments are persistently delayed or avoided despite clear strategic incentives. In the context of NATO, this creates a well-documented gap between formal commitments and actual defence expenditure. Existing theories such as Olson & Zeckhauser's economic theory of alliances or Walt's balance of threat framework offer partial explanations for this behaviour, yet they remain limited in explaining why states repeatedly fail to translate intention into action. As such, these approaches provide insufficient insight into how and why such political decisions are formulated.

To overcome these limitations, the focus needs to be placed on the individuals who are responsible for making policy decisions in order to understand under which motives, constraints and contextual factors they ultimately formulate their policy intentions. Behavioural science offers a useful lens in this regard explaining both how behavioural intentions are formulated but also why they do not always translate into actual behaviour.

One of the most widely used frameworks for explaining the relationship between behavioural intention and actual behaviour is the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The theory stipulates that an individual's intention to perform a behaviour is shaped by three key components: attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. Attitudes refer to the individual's beliefs about the outcomes of a behaviour, subjective norms capture perceived social pressures to perform or not perform the behaviour, and perceived behavioural control reflects the individual's assessment of whether they have the necessary resources and opportunities to carry out the behaviour. Together, these components form behavioural intentions, which are most immediate predictors of actual behaviour.

Theory of planned behaviour (TPB) also recognizes that intentions do not always result in actual behaviour. Even in cases where individuals may have positive attitudes and supportive norms, behaviour may not occur if the necessary conditions are not met. This is particularly relevant in the context of defence spending, where political leaders may express support for increased investment but fail to act due to perceived constraints such as fiscal limitations or political risks. As such, TPB provides a useful framework not only for understanding why decision-makers intend to increase defence spending, but also why these intentions may or may not materialize into actual policy decisions.

While the TPB framework is traditionally applied to individual decision-making, it can also be used to analyse collective political decisions by examining the perceptions of the key decision-makers individually. By focusing only on the subjective perceptions of the decision-makers, it is able to account for different interpretations of the situation and how it is perceived both individually and subjectively. This is particularly relevant in the context of defence where the same threat assessment can be internalised and perceived differently between decision-makers. Although the final decision emerges at the collective level, it is the combined interaction of individual-level

perceptions that collectively determine how policy is formulated. Applying TPB in this context therefore allows for a more detailed understanding of how the policy to increase defence investments was formulated compared to wider political science theories. While other behavioural science theories and models were also considered such as COM-B (Michie et al., 2011) or Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), they were assessed to be more limited in analysing the behaviour of a collective and for explaining the gap between intentions and actions.

To complement the TPB framework, this thesis also draws on insights from political science, particularly from leadership theory (Blondel, 1987) and audience cost theory (Fearon, 1994). Leadership theory emphasizes the key role of individual political actors, such as the prime minister, in shaping decision outcomes. In the context of TPB, strong political leadership can influence perceived behavioural control by overcoming political constraints such as push-back from coalition partners or the Ministry of Finance. Audience cost theory however highlights the role of external expectations and the potential political consequences of failing to follow through on set policy goals. This aligns with the concept of subjective norms, as decision-makers may feel compelled to act in line with domestic or international expectations in order to avoid public criticism or electoral costs. Together, these complementary perspectives help to place the TPB framework within a broader political science context.

Problem behaviour, target group

The problem behaviour in the focus of this thesis is the lack of willingness of NATO members to increase investments into national defence to meet NATO investment targets. The thesis takes a positive psychology approach to this problem by analysing a case where the desired behaviour has been achieved instead of the more widespread cases where defence investments remain problematic. By focusing on the positive example, this thesis is able to dive deeper into understanding which factors are most critical for decision-makers to actually translate intention into real action, instead of factors which are most limiting and inhibiting. Through this approach the thesis attempts to identify the relevant policy recommendations for other countries. Therefore, the key behaviour under review in this thesis is the Estonian government's decision to increase defence investments to 5% of GDP before a similar goal was agreed upon among NATO members. Following on from this, the relevant target group for this research is composed of the key decision-makers within the

Estonian government responsible for the definition, deliberation and the delivery of defence policy.

Research aims & questions

The aim of this thesis is to understand what behavioural and political factors influenced Estonian policymakers to increase defence investments to 5% of GDP in early 2025, 3 months before the NATO Hague Summit where the 5% defence spending target was formally set among allies. This thesis will attempt to analyse this through the theory of planned behaviour framework and seek to map the attitudes, norms and perceived feasibility which influenced Estonian decision-makers in early 2025.

The key research questions were:

- 1) What attitudes regarding the decision to increase defence investments to 5% of GDP were present among policymakers during the decision-making process?
- 2) What norms surrounding the decision to increase defence investments to 5% of GDP were present among policymakers during the decision-making process?
- 3) What was the perceived feasibility of increasing defence investments to 5% of GDP among policymakers during the decision-making process?

Methods

In qualitative research where comparative data is lacking, interviews are particularly valuable because they provide access to insider knowledge about policymaking processes, institutional dynamics, and informal political interactions (Berry, 2002). Research questions from the previous paragraph were explored through a total of 12 elite semi-structured and unstructured interviews with the target group. Triangulation (Denzin, 1978) was employed to enhance the credibility of the findings by comparing perspectives across different interviewees and cross-referencing these with documentary evidence. This allowed for the identification of consistent themes as well as divergences in how decision-makers interpreted the factors shaping defence investment decisions.

The interviews were carried out between 01.03.2026 - 17.04.2026, almost one year after the decision to increase Estonian defence spending to 5% was made. They were conducted in person and

lasted on average 40 minutes. The semi-structured interview questions were designed around the Theory of Planned Behaviour framework (Annex 2).

The interviewees were chosen based on their role and relevance to the decision-making process when Estonia decided to increase its defence investments to 5%. As these were handpicked elite interviews other more traditional factors in social science research such as the demographic representation of the interviewees was not taken into account. These interviewees included cabinet members from both governing coalition partners, civil servants who played a role in the planning of the defence budget and capability development, political strategists and key civil servants, advisors and experts on defence. Among them were the Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal, Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur, Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna, Justice Minister Liisa Lypakosta, former head of Prime Minister's bureau Gerrit Mäesalu, Parliament's defence committee member Kristo Enn Vaga and other individuals who have chosen to remain unnamed in this paper. At the beginning of each interview, informed consent was asked from the interviewees regarding data processing and presentation within the context of this thesis. Later consent was asked regarding the attribution of quotes to them by name or title.

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted both in person and recorded for later transcribing manually. All interviews were conducted in Estonian and approximately 60 pages of transcripts were compiled by hand, machine translated by OpenAI and then coded in English. Initial codes were defined manually through repeated reading and comparison across interviews and later were structured and refined through both Atlas.ti and OpenAI tools. In this regard, the role of AI was strictly supportive and all artificial intelligence and large-language models used within this thesis were set to operate within the limitations of the Tartu University guidelines (TU Guidelines). For transparency and replicability key prompts used are listed in the annex (Annex 3).

The remaining six unrecorded interviews were used mainly for the refinement of semi-structured interview questions and the data from them was only included in the solution mapping chapter, not the results chapter. Based on the codes, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the transcripts for insights based on individual interviews and later in cross referencing and triangulation between other interviews. The coding matrix was designed to incorporate the key pillars of Theory of Planned Behaviour (attitudes, norms, feasibility) in addition to audience

cost theory and leadership theory. The coding matrix consisted of six main categories, 16 subcategories and 69 lower-level codes (annex 1).

The author of this paper has prior professional experience in the Estonian civil service, in particular within the Estonian Ministry of Defence and in politics as a former political advisor to a cabinet minister, which has shaped the author's understanding of political bargaining and views on budget negotiations. The prior professional familiarity with the topic and personal connections enabled access to the interviewees and helped formulate informed follow-up questions and when necessary challenge the interviewees on their explanations. This however also creates the risk of prioritising explanations most familiar to the author in the research which was addressed by using semi-structured interviews, grounding the analysis in the TPB framework and comparing themes across interviews rather than relying on any single account.

Results

The interviews showed that given the scale of the investment, the decision-making process behind it was outside the scope of traditional budget negotiations in government and the decision to raise defence spending so rapidly was not perceived as an inevitable choice. Instead the findings demonstrate that it emerged through the close interaction of political, institutional and behavioural factors which makes Estonia a useful case study to understand how such decisions are made. Particularly so, as the Estonian decision to increase defence investments to 5% was made three months before the NATO Hague Summit where the 5% defence expenditure target was set. All interviewed decision-makers assessed that a different government would probably have reached similar conclusions, but would have decided to increase defence spending more gradually or push the decision into the future.

The rest of the results chapter will follow the TPB model and cover each factor separately to identify how attitudes, social norms and perceived feasibility shaped behavioural intentions to increase defence investments to 5% of GDP in early 2025.

Attitudes

Icek Ajzen refers to attitudes as the individual's overall evaluation of performing a specific behaviour based on the beliefs about its consequences and the value assigned to these outcomes (1991).

The interviews revealed that all decision-makers held very positive attitudes towards increasing defence spending however, this contrasted with attitudes concerning its impact to other sectors.

The dominant factor shaping these attitudes was the perceived threat to national security posed by Russia and the corresponding need to counter these threats through increased military readiness. While the war in Ukraine was frequently mentioned as the main source of the elevated threat perception, the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the main root of the threat perception lies in the Kremlin's imperialist ambitions which is perceived as an existential threat to Estonia. One interviewee noted that the risk Estonia faces is the complete destruction of Estonian cities and widespread murder seen in Ukraine. These concerns were also explained through multiple references to episodes of Estonian history such as the deportations of family members by the Soviet Union which were used as examples of consequences brought forth by inadequate defence readiness. In addition, regular security briefings attended by cabinet members were highlighted as an important mechanism which helped shape a common understanding of the threat landscape among the decision-makers.

In parallel to Russian aggression, the potential withdrawal of the United States from Europe was also cited in some interviews as a factor which intensified perceived vulnerability. Notably, some decision-makers also admitted that their attitude towards defence investments had been more sceptical in the past when the Russian threat was not as acute as it is today. This shows that attitudes among Estonian decision-makers are dependent on the context and subject to change. Overall based on the shared understanding of the threat posed by Russia and the potentially existential consequences of a military attack, policymakers came to view investments into defence as necessary and urgent, shaping the behavioural intention to increase defence investments.

In close relationship with the threat perception, the interviews revealed that their attitude towards defence spending was also heavily influenced by the expert input by the Estonian Chief of Defence (CHOD) and the requirements foreseen in new NATO regional defence plans (Vilnius, 2023) and the subsequent capability targets. The interviewees displayed very high degree of authority and trust placed in the CHOD and NATO defence plans. Once the CHOD's advice and NATO plans were translated into capability targets the conclusion to fulfil the military requirements followed. In the words of one cabinet member "*We had the CHOD's recommendation together with NATO*

capability targets which made it clear that if we want to have the capabilities to defend ourselves we need to move beyond 5%". This indicates that the attitude towards defence investment was strongly shaped by the input and near absolute authority of the Estonian Chief of Defence which effectively narrowed the decision-making architecture for the decision-makers to its only logical conclusion that investments had to be made.

On a more personal basis, the interviews revealed that positive attitudes towards defence investments were also shaped in some cases through personal connections to the defence forces or through family members who had recently finished their military service. Through this, defence issues and concerns were seen as less abstract and the potential consequences of a military conflict felt more acutely.

In contrast, the main root of more sceptical attitudes towards increasing defence spending was the opportunity cost and the consequences it might have on other sectors of society. Taken in isolation increasing defence investments might be seen favourably but if that comes with detrimental consequences to other areas such as health care, then both factors need balancing. The Minister of Defence stated that the 5% goal was eventually found as the optimal balance between fulfilling NATO capability targets whilst also ensuring that other sectors would not be adversely affected. In his own words *"5% was seen as reasonable which does not tear society apart. Had we had put 8%, we would have run the risk of a societal backflip and healthcare workers on the street demonstrating."* This was also evident in the interview with the prime minister who stressed repeatedly how difficult the decision was to take money away from other sectors. In his own words *"It was difficult, in rhetoric everyone supports higher defence spending, but if you have to take money away from something, then everyone will be angry at you"*. The subsequent chapter on perceived behavioural control will discuss how these challenges were overcome in more detail.

In conclusion, whilst several factors contributed to the formulation of positive attitudes towards the increasing defence spending, they were ultimately rooted in a shared underlying belief that Estonia faces an existential security threat. As a result, decision-makers did not question the necessity of increased defence investments based on the regional defence plans set out by NATO and the CHOD's recommendation. Although opportunity costs created a degree of hesitancy, they did

not outweigh the strong positive attitudes towards increased defence investments. As one minister stated “there’s just no other choice when you need to defend the country”.

Norms and other social beliefs

The Theory of Planned Behaviour posits that the second key factor behind behavioural intentions is norms, or the perceived external pressure to perform or not to perform a given behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). This is tied to how an individual assumes how others expect them to act and whether the persons behind the said expectations are of relevance to the individual. In case of the Estonian decision-makers the norms surrounding the behavioural intention to increase defence investments can be separated into four categories –inner personal norms, institutional norms, domestic political norms and international norms.

The most influential normative expectation shaping the Estonian government’s decision to raise defence spending stemmed from the belief that NATO capability targets and defence plans must be fulfilled in line with the recommendations of the CHOD. All interviewees indicated that there was no question about whether Estonia would commit to meeting its obligations within the NATO alliance. Instead, the discussion centred on how rapidly these targets could be achieved and how to fund it. As one cabinet member stated “*There was no doubt that we needed to make the investment and the only relevant question left on the table was where to find the money for it*”. Other interviewees reflected that an instrumental factor was the very high level of trust and authority of the Estonian Defence Forces among Estonian decision-makers². As a result, the norm of fulfilling NATO commitments was strongly internalised among decision-makers, effectively removing the option of inaction. Thereby institutional norms played a central role in supporting the behavioural intention to increase defence spending.

Close to all interviewees alluded to an earlier public controversy regarding defence investments as a relevant factor which influenced the expectations on the whole government. Less than a year prior, the Defence Ministry’s Permanent Secretary Kusti Salm publicly resigned in protest of the government’s inaction on defence investments. This scandal highlighted a broader political expectation in Estonia that the government needs to handle defence issues properly and that these issues

² A 2026 poll highlighted that 76% of Estonian public trust the Estonian Defence Forces - https://kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2026-05/Public%20Opinion%20on%20National%20Defence%202026_Emor.pdf

are under high public scrutiny. As highlighted by Kristo Enn Vaga former campaign director of the Reform Party and the Parliament's Defence Committee member "*No cabinet member or head of government in Estonia can afford to be accused of dragging their feet on defence issues.*" Other interviews also pointed to the fact that the ruling party had won the elections on a strong pro-defence campaign which narrowed their capacity to neglect defence issues. This suggests that while the government did not perceive acute public or political pressure, the decision-makers were conscious of the norm in Estonian politics that defence issues are highly sensitive and under close scrutiny. As such the findings are well in line with audience cost theory which argues that politicians face domestic and political pressure if they fail to act in line with public expectations.

Notably, none of the cabinet members suggested that there was any significant perceived external pressure from the opposition. The interviews highlighted that the opposition was expected to criticize any decision that would have been made by the ruling government. One of the interviewees noted that the main line of attack by the opposition parties was not that investments into defence increased to five percent, but that the increase should have been even larger at around seven percent of GDP. This shows that political pressure from the opposition, an important institutional factor in parliamentary democracies, had limited impact on the development of the behavioural intent to increase defence spending.

Another theme that emerged across the interviews was a strong sense of personal responsibility for Estonia's security among decision-makers, rooted in their role as statesmen and government leaders. While not a norm in the sense of external social pressure as defined by Ajzen, the sense of duty effectively functioned as an internalised personal norm. The Prime Minister's statement illustrates this clearly: "*I am ready to give up the office of Prime Minister or have a vote of no confidence for having invested into defence rather than being voted out of office for having not done enough.*" Similarly, another cabinet member noted that "*I try to make as many right decisions as possible in this role in order to ensure that I won't feel embarrassed looking back on this role in the future.*" While these statements reflect strong pro-defence attitudes, they also point towards a deeper layer of role-based identity and self-imposed expectations. These findings suggest that that institutional roles such as holding public office can have a strong impact on decision-makers personal norms and that behavioural intentions are shaped not only by external pressures but also by internalised norms and sense of duty.

In regards to international norms, most interviews highlighted that the inauguration of President Donald Trump in January 2025 as a relevant factor. The decision-makers stated that the general expectation was that the United States would soon ramp up the pressure on NATO allies to raise defence spending. This was only in anticipation of pressure from the United States and none of the interviews indicated that actual pressure was perceived at the time when the decision was actually made. Therefore, the anticipation of a subjective norm supported the formation of the behavioural intention to raise defence spending.

In addition to the United States, interviewees also noted that other Baltic countries, Latvia and Lithuania, had similarly begun to signal that they are considering a move to increase defence spending in light of new NATO defence plans. One interviewee claimed that if the other Baltic neighbours were to raise defence spending, then Estonia could not be the odd one out whilst another interviewee mentioned that Estonia itself was trying lead by example to push the Baltics and other NATO countries to move towards the 5% target. The interviewees noted that regional pressure was a factor in consideration, yet not of much relevance.

To conclude, the findings suggest that the most significant norm positively influencing the decision to increase defence spending was the belief that NATO commitments need to be fulfilled, supported by the anticipation of pressure from the re-elected US president and the perceived sense of responsibility by the decision-makers. At the same time the sensitivity and high level of public scrutiny around defence issues in Estonia created a norm which reduced the risk of action and increased the risk of inaction that further enabled the decision to increase defence investments.

Perceived Behavioural Control

The final pillar of the theory of planned behaviour is perceived behavioural control which refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing a behaviour. Ajzen (1991) splits this into self-efficacy such as required skills and competences, and controllability such as rules or available resources. Perceived behavioural control was the key constraint in the decision-making process with the lack of resources acting as the key barrier to increase defence spending and anticipated

changes to EU deficit rules acting³ as the key enabler which allowed for the rapid increase in defence investments.

As previously mentioned, the interviews revealed strong support for increasing defence spending but the main barrier was finding the necessary resources for it. The three options under discussion were tax hikes, spending cuts or borrowing. Regarding taxes all cabinet members expressed strong opposition to tax hikes since four new taxes had been already introduced⁴ to fund previous defence spending increases along with other policy initiatives. One cabinet member expressed that the government had already been beat up⁵ over the earlier tax increases and there was no appetite for new taxes. In regards to budget cuts from other areas, ministers stated that the government was already operating with an austerity budget with cuts to key areas and there was no room for additional cuts to fund such a massive increase in defence spending. In regards to borrowing, decision-makers were aware that there was limited room to extend the budget deficit without violating EU deficit rules. Consequently, the decision-makers perceived all conventional financing options to be severely constrained resulting in low perceived controllability of the decision to increase defence investments.

The viable solution to these constraints was found in the expected amendment to EU deficit rules enabling member states to expand their budget deficit by 1.5% of GDP to finance defence spending. When the decision to raise defence investments was deliberated, these amendments were not yet in force but all ministers highlighted that they were expecting these changes to be made soon. In addition, some cabinet members mentioned that Estonia together with other likeminded countries was actively pushing the EU to make these changes. The interviews highlighted that changes to the deficit rules were the key enabler or a “*gamechanger*” as one interviewee put it. When asked about whether the decision could have been made without the changes to EU deficit rules, all interviewees stated that it would have been more difficult and the trajectory towards 5% investment target would have been slower³ but it still would have been done. Thus, limited perceived

³ Under emerging EU fiscal arrangements, the existing deficit spending limit of 3% of GDP was set to be amended to enable additional deficit spending of up to 1.5% of GDP for defence purposes. - <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/national-escape-clause-for-defence-expenditure-nec>

⁴ New taxes in 2023 and 2024 were corporate profit taxes, motor vehicle tax, VAT and income tax hikes.

⁵ At the time the government’s approval ratings were polling at a historic low of 19% - <https://news.err.ee/1609630532/party-ratings-support-for-new-ruling-coalition-totals-19-percent>

behavioural control was overcome through expected changes to EU deficit rules which allowed for more resources to fulfil the investment requirement in a short timeframe.

In regards to the self-efficacy variable, one of the key concerns was whether these resources can be effectively managed by the Ministry of Defence and converted into actual capabilities. This was explicit in almost all interviews that there were real concerns whether the rapid influx of funding in a short timeframe can actually be effectively managed or should the hike in defence spending be more gradual. The key concern was whether the Estonian Centre for Defence Investment (ECDI) had the necessary capacity to find and negotiate large procurement contracts which would ensure the delivery of the necessary capabilities on time. One interviewee noted that the question on the table was “*whether we can actually spend so much money reasonably and whether we’ll also buy things which will not be technologically outdated immediately*”. Estonian Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur, whose role was to alleviate these concerns, highlighted that the Ministry of Defence had done their homework ahead of the negotiations and drawn up a number of different scenarios showing in detail how NATO capability targets could be fulfilled. In his own words “*If you clearly show what you can get for the money, then nobody will question the need for additional ammunition and armor[ed vehicles]*.” Another interviewee noted that one of the factors which helped manage these concerns was that the Ministry of Defence had a proven track record of being able to quickly convert additional funding into capabilities⁶. This increased decision-makers’ confidence that the allocated resources could be translated into actual military capability, thus strengthening the perceived feasibility.

In conclusion, the most important perceived constraint was the inability to finance the significant rise in defence spending in a short timeframe given that new taxes, cuts to the budget and borrowing were ruled out as policy options. This constraint was resolved through changes to EU deficit rules which permitted higher deficit borrowing to fund defence investments. The secondary constraint was the ability of the ECDI to effectively absorb the new resources and use the funds effectively. This was alleviated through the demonstration of detailed investment plans and a proven track record of converting resources into capabilities. As a result, perceived behavioural control

⁶ Evidence of this positive track record can be found in the procurement of CAESAR howitzers which were delivered in six months after the signing of the contract. <https://news.postimees.ee/8182925/estonian-defense-forces-receive-first-caesar-self-propelled-howitzers>

shifted from being a binding constraint to a sufficient enabling condition, allowing decision-makers to translate intention to increase defence investments into action

Beyond the TPB framework: additional insights

Beyond the TPB framework, a dominant theme which emerged from the interviews was the role of political leadership, particularly that of the prime minister. Interviewees consistently highlighted that the initiative to increase defence spending originated from the prime minister, who played a central role in pushing the decision onwards and translating the behavioural intention into concrete policy action. Although the prime minister is formally the head of government, this role should not be taken for granted, as the initiative could have emerged from other actors such as the minister of defence, civil servants, or from external pressures. In addition to the attitudes, norms, or perceived feasibility previously described, political leadership appeared to function as the necessary mechanism which enabled the behaviour intention to be converted into actual policy.

Interviewees also reflected more broadly that other NATO allies have failed to increase defence spending not due to a lack of awareness of the threat posed by Russia, but due to insufficient political leadership to mobilize support for defence spending and take political risks to increase investments. As highlighted by the Estonian Defence Minister, public understanding and support for defence investments is dependent on political communication and leadership. In his words: *“Society is always shaped and there is no doubt that communication and messaging plays a huge role in how defence issues are perceived.”* This indicates that in line with leadership theory, key leaders have a crucial role not only in decision-making itself, but also in shaping the broader conditions in which policy decisions are formulated and deliberated.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that the decision to increase defence spending was neither inevitable nor driven by a purely rational cost–benefit calculation, but instead emerged from the interaction of behavioural, political and institutional factors, enabled by strong political leadership. Notably no significant divergence of views emerged from the interviews indicating that there was a very strong consensus on defence issues among the decision-makers. Through the TPB framework, this decision can be explained by strong threat and military expertise driven attitudes, which established the necessity of action, supported by the norm that NATO commitments must be fulfilled. Ultimately however, the decisive factor was the change in perceived behavioural control to

fund the necessary investments. Once it was anticipated that EU deficit rules would permit further investment into defence, the necessary conditions were in place to increase defence spending and the behavioural intention was translated into action by the leadership of the prime minister.

SOLUTION MAPPING

The preceding analysis identified behavioural and political factors shaping defence spending decisions. These were used to develop a solutions map supported by broader political and behavioural science literature and measures which have already been employed in Estonia. These were in turn assessed on their feasibility, impact and trade-offs based on the inputs from the recorded elite interviews, unrecorded interviews and the author's own experience in the field of defence over 9 years.

In total 16 interventions were identified and grouped by different pillars of TPB. The operationalisation of the interventions is highly dependent on the context surrounding each country and which component of the TPB demands the most attention. In effect, none of the interventions are mutually exclusive and could all be operationalised at the same time.

Table 1 - *Behavioural interventions to increase defence expenditure willingness among policymakers*

TPB	Problem Behaviour	Solution logic	Intervention	Impact	Feasibility	Trade-off
Attitudes	Underestimating the need to increase defence investments among key decision-makers	Increasing salience of security threats and understanding of the need for defence investments among key decision-makers	1.1 Weekly classified briefings on security threats, including threats to NATO collective defence on the Eastern Flank for all cabinet members (especially the minister of finance)	High	High	Politicisation of intelligence institutions and security briefings; security clearance necessity
			1.2 Monthly classified briefings on security threats, including threats to NATO collective defence on the Eastern Flank to key decision-makers within government such as top civil servants of different ministries.	Moderate	High	Politicisation of intelligence institutions and security briefings; security clearance necessity
			1.3 Quarterly classified briefings on security threats, including threats to NATO collective defence on the Eastern Flank to opposition politicians	Low	High	Politicisation of intelligence institutions and security briefings; security clearance necessity
			1.4 Organising regular Higher National Defence Course seminars for key figures in society (politicians, media, spokespersons)	Moderate	Moderate	Resource intensive (time, money, personnel)
			1.5 Organising table-top exercises and scenario-based simulations to key cabinet members and key civil servants	High	Moderate	Resource intensive (time)
	Defence seen as a cost, not investment	Reframing the narrative around defence investments	1.6 Linking defence investments to innovation, economic and industrial benefits in public communications	Low	High	Risk of oversimplifying defence issues

TPB	Problem Behaviour	Solution logic	Intervention	Impact	Feasibility	Trade-off
Social norms	Low perceived political and public pressure	Building public awareness of national threats to society	2.2 Publication of national security threat overviews on an annual or bi-annual basis from intelligence agencies	Moderate	Moderate	Increased threat anxiety within society; resource intensive (time, personnel)
			2.3 Deliberately open and public communication of security incidents and threats	High	High	Increased threat anxiety within society
			2.4 Organising regular Higher National Defence Course seminars for key decision-makers in society (including politicians from all parties, media figures and key thought leaders in society)	Moderate	Moderate	Resource intensive (time, money, personnel)
			2.5 Circulating crisis preparedness booklets and materials to the public via mail	Moderate	Moderate	Resource intensive (money); increased threat anxiety
	Lack of peer comparison	Create reputational incentives	2.6 Public “score-cards” by NATO showing which countries are doing enough and who is lagging behind	Low	Moderate	Risk of political apathy
	Lack of international expectations and pressure on governments to fulfil obligations	Increasing pressure on states to invest into defence	2.7 Strategic signalling by major allies and use of punitive measures (delays in arms transfers or technology transfer)	Moderate	Low to moderate	Risk of political apathy, alienation or push-back to succumb to international pressure

TPB	Problem Behaviour	Solution logic	Intervention	Impact	Feasibility	Trade-off
Perceived behavioural control	Lack of financial resources for defence investments	Creating budgetary and fiscal flexibility to enable defence investments	3.1 Easing national deficit rules to accommodate defence spending (i.e. enabling additional deficit spending limits on defence)	High	Low	High risk for select countries to grow public debt to unsustainable levels in the long run
			3.2 Enabling defence investment borrowing on low-interest rates over a longer period of time through new financial instruments (such as EU SAFE loan, EIB loans, DSR bank loans)	Moderate	Low	High risk for select countries to grow public debt to unsustainable levels in the long run
	Concern over effective use of funds or capacity to absorb funds	Demonstrate capacity to absorb funds and convert into capabilities rapidly	3.3 Pre-negotiated procurement frameworks for key capabilities and clear investment priorities and plans	Moderate	Moderate	Resource intensive to constantly update procurement contracts
	Knowledge gap on how to build societal support for defence spending	Empowering leaders and decision-makers to foster public and elite support to defence spending	3.4 Drafting a white paper on the best practices and lessons from countries such as Estonia on how to build societal support to defence investments	Low to moderate	High	Resource intensive (time)

Note. Author's own compilation based on thematic analysis of elite interviews and the Theory of Planned Behaviour framework.

IMPACT STUDY

In order to further understand which factors are the most influential in shaping the decision to increase defence investments, a possible study could be conducted to assess the impact of different elements based on the theory of planned behaviour and the list of interventions highlighted above. To this end, simulated budget negotiations could be used to test different hypothetical and real-world scenarios in order to assess which components of TPB are the most influential in driving behavioural intentions to raise defence investments and how these components interact to reach the desired effect. Such a simulation could also help identify which behavioural and political barriers are critical in preventing policymakers from translating commitments into actual investments. Similar simulations are already widely conducted in the defence domain in the form of table-top exercises (TTX) which makes this format suitable for studying behavioural intentions related to defence investments.

The design of the TTX could foresee the participation of relevant decision-makers in a simulated cabinet discussion, including parliamentarians from different political parties, ministers or senior civil servants from different ministries. The same TTX could be carried out within different countries and among different groups of participants which would allow for comparative insights on how different sets of officials react to the same scenarios in various countries. The exercise would expose participants to multiple escalating scenarios related to geopolitical and domestic scenarios which have an impact on national security.

The TTX would consist of the following example scenarios which act as the independent variable and aim to test attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control of the participants:

- Russia has begun to gradually move its forces back to its bases behind NATO borders. NATO Joint Intelligence Assessment suggests that Russia will possess necessary offensive capability within 12 months to launch a limited attack against a NATO ally.
- Allies agree at the next NATO summit to set the new defence investment target to 10% by 2035 in order to fulfil updated NATO capability requirements.
- The United States signals that it will henceforth only protect NATO allies who are spending more than 10% of GDP on national defence.

- Collapse of the global economy has reduced government revenues by 20% and necessitates deep budget cuts across different sectors.
- EU deficit rules are amended to allow for 6% of budget deficit spending on defence.

Following the introduction of the scenarios, all participants would be allowed to discuss the scenarios to simulate a cabinet discussion and would later fill out a questionnaire to assess their attitudes, perceived norms and behavioural control regarding defence investments. The questionnaire would include the self-report assessment of the following constructs:

- Support for increasing defence investments
- Perceived severity of security threat
- Perceived domestic political pressure
- Perceived international pressure
- Perceived feasibility of financing higher defence spending
- Willingness to increase taxes to finance defence investments
- Willingness to cut public spending on healthcare and pensions to finance defence investment

The collected data from the questionnaires would then be quantitatively analysed using Repeated-Measures ANOVA testing given that same participants would be measured multiple times under different conditions. This would enable researches to assess to which extent different scenarios (independent variable) influence attitudes, norms and perceived behavioural control measured on a Likert scale (dependent variables) and whether they correlate with higher support to increase defence investments. Although this would not replicate a real-world scenario, which is its main limitation, it would still prove useful insights into studying which factors are the most relevant for decision-makers.

USED SOURCES AND REFERENCES

- Ajzen, I. (1991). *The theory of planned behavior*. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179–211. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978\(91\)90020-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T)
- Berry, J. M. (2002). Validity and Reliability Issues in Elite Interviewing. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 35(4), 679–682. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1554809>
- Blondel, J. (1987). *Political leadership: Towards a general analysis*. Sage Publications.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Danish Defence Intelligence Service. (2025). *Intelligence outlook 2025*. https://www.fe-ddis.dk/en/produkter/Risk_assessment/riskassessment/intelligence-outlook-2025/
- Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- ERR. (2024, May 30). *FT: NATO only has 5 percent of air defenses needed to protect eastern flank NATO*. <https://news.err.ee/1609356720/ft-nato-only-has-5-percent-of-air-defenses-needed-to-protect-eastern-flank>
- ERR. (2025, March 18). *Prime minister: Defense spending likely to exceed 5% of GDP in coming years*. <https://news.err.ee/1609636382/prime-minister-defense-spending-likely-to-exceed-5-of-gdp-in-coming-years>
- Fearon, J. D. (1994). Domestic political audiences and the escalation of international disputes. *American Political Science Review*, 88(3), 577–592. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2944796>
- Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica*, 47(2), 263–291. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1914185>
- Michie, S., van Stralen, M. M., & West, R. (2011). The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Science*, 6(1), Article 42. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-6-42>
- NATO. (2014, September 5). *Wales Summit Declaration*. <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2014/09/05/wales-summit-declaration>
- NATO. (2023, July 11). *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*. <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2023/07/11/vilnius-summit-communication>
- NATO. (2025, June 25). *The Hague Summit Declaration*. <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2025/06/25/the-hague-summit-declaration>

Olson, M., & Zeckhauser, R. (1966). *An economic theory of alliances*. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 48(3), 266–279. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1927082>

Rutte, M. (2024, December 12). *To prevent war, NATO must spend more*. NATO. <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2024/12/12/to-prevent-war-nato-must-spend-more>

Rutte, M. (2025, June 9). *Mark Rutte warns NATO members must increase defence spending or “you better learn to speak Russian”*. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/tv/news/mark-rutte-nato-spending-russian-language-video-b2766680.html>

Šešelgytė, M. (2023). *Defence spending*. International Centre for Defence and Security. In T. Lawrence (Ed.), *NATO's Vilnius Summit series*. <https://icds.ee/en/series-natos-vilnius-summit/>

SIPRI. (2026). *Military spending as a share of GDP, 1993 to 2025 (Estonia)*. Our World in Data. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/military-spending-as-a-share-of-gdp-sipri?tab=line&time=1991..latest&country=~EST>

University of Tartu. (n.d.). *Suunis tehisintellekti kasutamiseks õppetöös*. <https://ut.ee/et/sisu/suunis-tehisintellekti-kasutamiseks-oppetoos>

Walt, S. M. (1987). *The origins of alliances*. Cornell University Press.

ANNEX 1 - THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR CODING TREE

1. ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCREASING DEFENCE SPENDING

1.1 Perceived military necessity

1.1.1 NATO regional defence plans

1.1.2 NATO capability targets

1.1.3 CHOD / military expert advice

1.1.4 Capability gaps and readiness needs

1.2 Threat perception

1.2.1 Russia as existential threat

1.2.2 War in Ukraine

1.2.3 Historical memory and lessons

1.2.4 Concern over future escalation

1.3 Positive expected outcomes

1.3.1 Increased national defence capability

1.3.2 Stronger deterrence

1.3.3 Greater credibility among allies

1.3.4 Strengthening defence industry / economy

1.4 Negative expected outcomes

1.4.1 Opportunity costs for other sectors

1.4.2 Tax increases or budget cuts

1.4.3 Risk of social backlash

1.4.4 Risk of inefficient spending / absorption problems

2. PERCEIVED NORMS

2.1 Institutional norms

2.1.1 Obligation to fulfil NATO commitments

2.1.2 Trust in Defence Forces and military planning

2.1.3 Expectation to follow CHOD advice

2.1.4 Defence as a state responsibility

2.2 Domestic political norms

2.2.1 Public support for defence spending

2.2.2 Opposition pressure or anticipated criticism

2.2.3 Coalition expectations

2.2.4 Cross-party consensus on defence

2.2.5 Statesmanship / personal responsibility

2.3 International norms

2.3.1 NATO expectations

2.3.2 US / Trump pressure

2.3.3 Baltic and Polish comparison

2.3.4 Eastern flank coordination

2.3.5 Estonia as example-setter or norm entrepreneur

3. PERCEIVED BEHAVIOURAL CONTROL / FEASIBILITY

3.1 Fiscal feasibility

3.1.1 EU deficit-rule flexibility

3.1.2 Ability to borrow

3.1.3 Defence taxes or revenue measures

3.1.4 Budget cuts and reallocation

3.1.5 Maastricht / deficit constraints

3.2 Political feasibility

3.2.1 Prime ministerial authority

3.2.2 Coalition support

3.2.3 Ministry of Finance position

3.2.4 Parliamentary support

3.2.5 Perceived electoral risk

3.3 Administrative / implementation feasibility

3.3.1 Ability to absorb additional funding

3.3.2 RKIK procurement capacity

3.3.3 Defence industry and supply constraints

3.3.4 Long-term capability planning

3.3.5 Risk of rushed procurement

4. BEHAVIOURAL INTENTION

4.1 Intention to raise defence spending rapidly

4.2 Intention to reach 5% before NATO-wide agreement

4.3 Intention to signal credibility to allies

4.4 Intention to act before external pressure becomes unavoidable

4.5 Intention to translate defence plans into budgetary decisions

5. TRANSLATION FROM INTENTION TO ACTION

5.1 Prime ministerial leadership

5.1.1 PM as initiator

5.1.2 PM overcoming resistance

5.1.3 PM converting intention into policy

5.2 Decision process

5.2.1 Small-circle decision-making

5.2.2 Cabinet / coalition approval

5.2.3 RES and budget process

5.2.4 Timing before Hague Summit

5.3 Final policy outcome

5.3.1 Commitment to 5%

5.3.2 Inclusion in fiscal planning

5.3.3 Defence spending increase from 2026 onwards

6. COMPETING OR QUALIFYING EXPLANATIONS

6.1 Structural inevitability

6.1.1 Security situation made increase unavoidable

6.1.2 NATO plans made increase necessary

6.1.3 Any government would have moved upward

6.2 Collective decision-making

6.2.1 Cabinet consensus

6.2.2 Coalition agreement

6.2.3 Institutional process rather than individual leadership

6.3 Fiscal-rule explanation

6.3.1 EU deficit flexibility as decisive condition

6.3.2 Without fiscal space the decision would have been slower

6.3.3 Financial feasibility as limiting factor

ANNEX 2 – SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The semi-structured interview questions were designed around the Theory of Planned Behaviour framework and focused on the attitudes, norms and perceived behavioural control surrounding the Estonian government's decision to increase defence expenditure to 5% of GDP. The exact wording and order of questions varied between interviews depending on the interviewee's role and the development of the discussion. The main interview questions included:

Background and role

1. In your own words how did the decision to increase defence investments to 5% unfold between 2024 and 2025?
2. Can you describe your role in the defence spending decision-making process?

Attitudes towards increasing defence expenditure

1. What were your initial views on increasing defence spending to 5% of GDP?
2. What did you perceive as the main benefits of increasing defence expenditure?
3. What concerns or drawbacks did you associate with this decision?
4. How did the security situation and the war in Ukraine influence your views?
5. Did your opinion change during the decision-making process? If yes, why?

Norms and expectations

1. To what extent did expectations from NATO allies influence the decision?
2. How important were regional dynamics involving Latvia, Lithuania and other allies?
3. Did coalition partners, opposition parties or public opinion create political pressure?
4. Were there any actors or institutions whose expectations were particularly important?
5. To what extent did international developments, including the election of Donald Trump, influence the discussion?

Perceived behavioural control and feasibility

1. How feasible did increasing defence expenditure to 5% seem at the time?
2. What were the main financial or political constraints?
3. Did changes to EU fiscal rules affect the feasibility of the decision?
4. What role did the Ministry of Finance and the budgetary process play?
5. Were there any barriers that had to be overcome before the decision could be made?

Decision-making process

1. Can you describe how the decision developed over time?
2. Who were the key actors driving the process?
3. To what extent was the decision driven by political leadership versus collective agreement?
4. Were there disagreements within government and how were they resolved?
5. What was the key turning point that enabled the decision?

Reflection and counterfactuals

1. Was the decision inevitable given the security situation?
2. What might have happened if the decision had not been made at that time?
3. Would another government coalition made the same decision based on the same information?
4. Looking back, what was the single most important factor behind the increase in defence expenditure?

ANNEX 3 - COLLECTION OF MAIN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE PROMPTS

Artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive capacity to assist with the organisation and refinement of codes. However, all final coding decisions, interpretation of the findings, and substantive arguments presented in the thesis were made by the author and remain the author's sole responsibility.

OpenAI ChatGPT (model 5.5):

1. Master thesis project – project instructions:

You are to be an assistant for my master thesis and help plan, research and suggest improvements for it. I do not want you to be the main drafter, you can suggest edits, improvements, wording but not whole chapters of the thesis.

The masters course is Tartu University Rakenduslik käitumisteadus, the thesis word-limit is 8000 words. The idea for the thesis is to combine behavioural science and political science.

You will need to adhere to the input files (specifically magistritöö juhend) and other files.

Keep in mind that the criteria for the use of AI in thesis writing for Tartu University is:

"Järgnevalt on esitatud üldised põhimõtted, millest tuleb lähtuda TI rakenduste, sh tekstirobotite kasutamisel bakalaureuse- ja magistriastme lõputööde koostamisel. Iga Tartu Ülikooli struktuuriüksus võib oma valdkonna ja eriala spetsiifika põhjal neid põhimõtteid täiendada, sest TI kasutamise tavad ja piirangud võivad valdkonniti erineda.

Soovitame lõputööde koostamisel kasutada TÜ infotehnoloogia osakonna heaks kiidetud TI rakenduste versioone, mis kindlustavad, et vestlustes kasutatavad andmed on kaitstud.

TI rakenduste kasutamine abivahendina lõputöö koostamise eri etappidel ei ole keelatud, kuid oluline on silmas pidada, et TI loodud sisu esitamine lõputöös (ja üldisemalt igasuguses akadeemilises tekstis) oma isiklike mõtetena on akadeemiline petturlus ega pole kooskõlas hea teadustavaga.

Generatiivse TI rakendusi võib kasutada näiteks: inspiratsiooniallikana, abivahendina oma mõtete ja ideede arendamiseks, töö struktuuri täpsustamiseks, võtme- või otsisõnadele sünonüümide leidmiseks, teemakohaste allikate leidmiseks, tõlkimiseks, keeruliste kontseptsioonide või teooriate mõistmiseks ja õppimise toetamiseks töö varastes etappides, tagasiside küsimiseks, programmeerimisprobleemide tuvastamiseks.

TI rakenduste kasutamine ei ole lubatud lõputöö teksti suuremahuliseks koostamiseks (nt tervikpeatüki, abstrakti või kokkuvõtte loomiseks) ja sisuliste arutluskäikude koostamiseks. Sellisel juhul on tegu akadeemilise petturluse ja hea teadustava rikkumisega.

Kui lõputöö koostamisel kasutatakse TI rakendusi isikuandmete töötlemiseks, tuleb lähtuda TÜ juhendis "Isikuandmete töötlemine üliõpilaste lõputöödes" (pdf, 207 kB) esitatud suunistest.

TI rakenduste kasutamise mainimisel ja kirjeldamisel tuleb aluseks võtta lõputöö valdkonnas kehtivad nõuded (nt APA, Chicago, MLA vms või akadeemilises üksuses kehtestatud nõuded).

Kui üliõpilasel tekib TI kasutamisel või selle kasutamise kirjeldamisel küsimusi, peaks ta kindlasti pidama nõu oma juhendajaga."

You are to adhere to this criteria and ruleset; never to exceed it and to notify me if my requests would require to go against the set guidelines.

2. Prompts related to coding and analysis:

- *Code the following transcripts in line with Theory of Planned behaviour models. Include attitudes, norms, perceived behavioural control, leadership theory and audience cost theories as the main categories.*
- *Categorize the following interview excerpts according to the Theory of Planned Behaviour framework and explain whether they represent attitudes, norms or perceived behavioural control.*
- *Identify recurring themes across the interviews concerning Estonia's decision to increase defence spending to 5%.*
- *Compare the perspectives of different interviewees and identify contradictions or disagreements.*
- *Present quotes with strongest evidence of attitudes, norms and feasibility*
- *Assess whether the results chapter captures the main themes of the codes and thematic analysis*

NON-EXCLUSIVE LICENCE TO REPRODUCE THESIS AND MAKE THESIS PUBLIC

I, Helmuth Martin Reisner, grant the University of Tartu a free permit (non-exclusive licence) to reproduce, for the purpose of preservation, including for adding to the digital archives of the University of Tartu until the expiry of the term of copyright, my thesis: “Raising defence expenditures to 5%: behavioural science case study on Estonian decision-makers” supervised by Andero Uusberg and Ardi Priks;

2. grant the University of Tartu a permit to make the thesis specified in point 1 available to the public via the web environment of the University of Tartu, including via the digital archives, under the Creative Commons licence CC BY NC ND 4.0, which allows, by giving appropriate credit to the author, to reproduce, distribute the work and communicate it to the public, and prohibits the creation of derivative works and any commercial use of the work until the expiry of the term of copyright;

3. am aware of the fact that the author retains the rights specified in points 1 and 2;

4. confirm that granting the non-exclusive licence does not infringe other persons’ intellectual property rights or rights arising from the personal data protection legislation.

Helmuth Martin Reisner

30/05/2026