

CANADA'S ENHANCED FORWARD PRESENCE IN THE BALTICS: AN ENDURING COMMITMENT TO TRANSATLANTIC SECURITY

Christian Leuprecht, Joel Sokolsky

What explains the character and extent of Canada's contribution to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) Battlegroup Latvia, a commitment on a different continent, thousands of kilometres from Canada's shores? The answer can be found in Canada's deep and continuing commitment to the transatlantic alliance. For Canada, NATO has been first and foremost about security, particularly European security. While Canadians have at times facetiously observed that Europeans like to fight their wars down to the last Canadian, the EFP is yet another example why Canada, irrespective of the government of the day, is a "closest realist": an unwavering commitment to peace and stability in Europe is integral to Canadian grand strategy for reasons of national as well as collective interest.

In this context it is not surprising to see Canada as the framework country for Latvia, contributing more than 450 of the 1,138 foreign NATO member country troops in the land domain, consisting of a headquarters component and parts of a battleground with a Canadian infantry battalion as well as reconnaissance and support elements.¹ That amounts to almost 10% of the total non-indigenous troop strength contributed by NATO allies to the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Canada's commitment in troop strength, as well as command and field units, in terms of total numbers may not be comparable to Canada's Cold War deployment to Germany, but on a per capita basis

1 NATO. "NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence," May 2017, http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_05/1705-factsheet-efp.pdf. The precise number of actual Canadian personnel remains undisclosed and fluctuates as a function of temporary surges in support of training and exercises.



Canada's commitment to the Baltics in general and Latvia in particular actually surpasses the proportion of Canadian troops stationed in Europe during the Cold War. At sea, where Canada has consistently contributed a frigate to NATO Maritime Group One (SNMG1) as part of Operation REASSURANCE. In the air domain, Canada's rotating contribution to NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission takes the form of four fighter jets. In addition, Canada contributes to assurance and deterrence throughout Central and Eastern Europe in a variety of other ways. For example, although not a NATO mission, a Canadian military training unit of some 200 personnel was deployed to Ukraine in 2015.

These Canadian EFP deployments and other collaborative measures are in response to the new situation confronting NATO nearly thirty years after the end of the Cold War. And yet, they are only the latest tangible manifestations of support for transatlantic security in a history of what can be judged to be a highly successful Canadian commitment to NATO that goes back to the very beginning of the Alliance, of which Canada was one of the founding members.²

Canada's Path to and Support for the EFP

When representatives of the original twelve members of NATO signed the North Atlantic Treaty on 4 April 1949, the US Marine Band played two selections from George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*: "It Ain't Necessarily So," and "I Got Plenty of Nothin'." As then-Secretary of State Dean Acheson dryly observed in his celebrated memoirs, *Present at Creation: My Years at the State Department* the choice of music "added a note of unexpected realism."³ For the Canadians "present" at this "creation" though, the new Atlantic Alliance already reflected a decidedly realistic approach to the country's foreign and defence policy objectives.

2 Joseph T. Jockel and Joel J. Sokolsky. "Canada and NATO: An Assessment," paper presented at *The 7th Congress of the Polish Association of Canadian Studies, Torun, Poland, May 2016*. For a broad historical analysis of Canada's approach to NATO, see also Joseph T. Jockel and Joel J. Sokolsky's "Canada and NATO: Keeping Ottawa in, Expenses Down, Criticism out...and the Country Secure," *International Journal* 64, no. 2 (June 2009).

3 Dean Acheson. *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969), 284.

Canada saw it as vital to its interests the prevention of any single power from dominating Europe – first Germany, against which Canada went to war twice, and then the Soviet Union. As one harsh critic of Canadian engagement in NATO once put it, “In many ways Canada’s role in NATO was a form of atonement for our lack of broad foreign policy objectives after the First World War.”⁴ Having tried to retreat into isolationism after 1918 only to be dragged back into another European war in 1939, Canadians said in 1949 “never again,” and thus were prepared to join in, to address the Soviet threat before it got out of hand. As one articulate Canadian diplomat put it during the negotiations that led to the North Atlantic Treaty, “[t]his link across the North Atlantic seems to me to be such a providential solution to so many of our problems that I feel we should go to great length and even incur considerable risk in order to consolidate our good fortune and ensure our proper place in this new partnership.”⁵

Though much doubt attended its birth, the seemingly always “troubled” and fractious Alliance has defied its sceptics and continually puts to the lie to predictions of its imminent demise. As it was at the “creation” and throughout the Cold War and into the 1990s and post 9/11, which saw the Alliance play a role in Afghanistan, to today’s new threats; Canada remains prepared to go to great lengths and incur costs to ensure its “proper place” in the now enlarged NATO partnership.

Canada can do so because it has capacity. In authorized troop strength, Canada fields the eighth-largest military in NATO. Canada ranks among the top 20 militaries in the world. Although within NATO Canada ranks in the bottom third on military spending as a percentage of GDP, Canada consistently ranks around 15th in the world in total military expenditure. In NATO, only the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy spend more on defence, all of which are more populous and have larger economies than Canada. On a per capita basis, only the United States, Norway, United Kingdom, Denmark, Netherlands, France, Germany,

4 Lewis Hertzman et al. *Alliances and Illusions: Canada and the NATO-NORAD Question* (Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig, Ltd., 1969), 15.

5 Escott Reid. *Time of Fear and Hope: The Making of the North Atlantic Treaty, 1947-1949* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), 312.



and Greece spend more than Canada.⁶ Canada is roundly criticized for spending too little on defence, but as these figures and Canada's contribution to the enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia shows, such crude reductionism is misleading: in fact, Canada is one of only five NATO member countries that maintains a full-spectrum military, it is prepared to deploy that capacity in support of collective defence, regional stability and international security. The capacity that Canada offers is popular, robust, competent, and well-equipped. After all, Latvia and Canada spend about the same percentage of GDP on defence, and neighbouring Estonia is widely held up for spending 2% of GDP on defence, yet, that spending has very different yields than Canada's military expenditure. For militaries, quality and quantity are complementary, and context matters. Defence is ultimately about balancing cost, capability, and commitment. Canada's mantra has always been not to get hung up on expenditure, and to focus on capability and commitment instead, since Canada consistently outperforms on both.

But why should Canada spend on the military at all? What explains the level of military spending in Canada? And why would Canada incur the financial and political cost of deploying troops to the Baltics, notwithstanding its continued strong support of NATO and desire to remain an active member of the Alliance? These questions arose in the Canadian public discourse as the government deliberated on how to respond to the request from NATO allies, including the United States, that elements of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) take an active, significant and visible role in the EFP intended to reassure and bolster Baltic security. Canada, after all, is still dealing with the consequences of its prolonged and costly engagement in Afghanistan, while at the same time dispatching forces to deal with the threat from the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. As with other allies, including the United States, it should not be surprising, therefore, that this specific Canadian deployment was not made without some measure of controversy even if, as in the past, a significant and welcomed commitment was eventually made and, in fact, was never seriously in doubt.

6 NATO. "Defence Expenditures in NATO Countries," July 4, 2016, http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_07/20160704_160704-pr2016-116.pdf.

And yet, as we have written about elsewhere,⁷ in the larger public policy context governments cannot easily escape the dilemmas, problems and paradoxes of defence spending, especially for unanticipated foreign deployments. On the one hand, funds spent on defence are then not available to enhance economic prosperity and social well-being. In domestic politics, there is little electoral payoff to spending on defence relative to the disproportionate payoff for spending on economic growth and social programs. That explains why as a percentage of GDP and overall government expenditure, democracies spend not just very little on defence, by and large, they actually spend (significantly) less on defence than other types of regimes. On the other hand, NATO collectively accounts for about 75% of global defence spending. Ergo, democracy needs to be defended; but because democracies tend to be disproportionately prosperous, they can afford to outspend other regimes on defence without breaking the bank. In fact, military spending among democracies is not just instrumental but also strategic: In the case of Russia, for instance, sanctions hamper the economy while the security dilemma has Russia spending more on defence, which has a compound deleterious impact on regime's ability to spend on economic and social issues and thus on its legitimacy in the eyes of a population that bears the brunt of the consequences.

NATO is commonly understood as a military alliance whose overarching purpose is collective defence. Further, NATO is a means to regional, international, and transnational security and defence governance. Since its inception, however, NATO has also been a mechanism to overcome two insidious collective-action problems.⁸ One is the incessant risk of US isolationism, such as the current wave potential retrenchment under the premise of Offshore Balancing that would see fewer US troops stationed abroad and a greater emphasis on favoured regional powers to check the hostile ones.⁹ Canada has an interest in keeping the United States engaged, as do all other NATO member countries. But only a handful

7 Christian Leuprecht and Joel J. Sokolsky. "Defence Policy, 'Walmart Style': Canadian Lessons in 'Not-So-Grand' Strategy," *Armed Forces & Society* 41, no. 3 (2015): 541-62.

8 Robert O. Keohane. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

9 Christopher Layne. "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security* 22, no.1 (1997), 86-124.



of members have headquarters and field capacities analogous to the ones Canada can bring to bear; so, Canada may not be conspicuous by its presence in the EFP, but it would certainly have been conspicuous by its absence. Making a credible commitment of its own is also a way for Canada to entice the United States to stay engaged in NATO and in the region. The Americans are much more likely to commit when the burden that commitment brings is shared among allies. Like all countries, the United States pursues its self-interest and has always done so. It has always been “America First.” America is so relatively powerful that it can afford to make unilateral decisions whilst most allies cannot: multilateralism becomes the default option. By way of example, Canada would never go to war or deploy on its own: it does so always in coordination with allies, the United States first and foremost among them. America’s clout means that decisions made in Washington reverberate disproportionately with allied countries. Commitments to collective defence, such as the EFP, are thus also a way for allies such as Canada to temper US unilateralist inclinations because they afford Canada a greater say over the means and ends of a mission. In the words of NATO’s first Secretary General, Lord Ismay (1952–1957), the purpose of the alliance is “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”

Yet, Germany is now the EFP framework country for Lithuania. Indeed, the other institutionalist rationale for NATO has long been to solve inherent commitment problems in the form of easy-riding (not free-riding, as we explain in Leuprecht and Sokolsky, 2015) among member countries tempted to spend too little on defence and contain the temptation of over-reliance on the US security umbrella. That risk is real: during the initial years of the millennium, European NATO allies reduced their defence budget by some 50 billion Euros collectively.

NATO missions require the unanimous consent of all member countries. Member countries such as Canada care about the North–Eastern flank for at least three strategic reasons. First, Canada’s prosperity hinges directly on trade, notably its ability to export resources across the world. So, any threat to trade and open trade routes runs counter to Canada’s interests, in part because countries that are at war tend to consume fewer resources and thus depress demand for trade.

Second, aside from Canada's bilateral relationships with the United States and its transatlantic NATO partners, Europe is Canada's most important multilateral partner. For strategic reasons, then, Canada is intent on a stable, united, prosperous, harmonious, and powerful Europe in general, and European Union in particular. Measured as a function of the crises it and its member countries are called on to solve, the European Union is an emerging superpower. Any threat that compromises the sovereignty of any European and EU member state is thus a direct threat to Canadian interests. Strategically, then, it is thus much more efficient and effective for Canada in the short and medium-term to incur the financial and political cost of a modest contribution to reassure a NATO member ally on the North-Eastern flank, relative to the cost and consequences of local and regional instability.

Third, since the Ogdensburg Declaration of 1938 and the Kingston Dispensation of 1940, the United States and Canada have pursued a continental grand strategy whose objective is to keep security threats and instability away from North American shores. That explains why the strategic culture of the United States and Canada is inherently expeditionary. Canada's grand strategy is premised on two seemingly contradictory dimensions of its strategic culture. The first is that Canada has historically embraced an expeditionary approach when it comes to defence policy and the posture and deployment of Canadian military power. "From Paardeberg to Panjwai," as eminent historians Bercuson and Granatstein have written, "Canadian governments [...] have believed that one of the key missions of the Canadian military is to deploy abroad."¹⁰ These deployments have served the national interest because, in imperial wars, world wars, the Cold War and myriad limited conflicts that have characterized the post-Cold War and post 9/11 period, Canada has contributed extremely useful and highly regarded forces to the efforts of allies to contain global threats and lesser challenges posed by regional instability to the security and stability of the West and, therefore, to Canada. As such, Canada's national interest was served. But in addition to

10 David J. Bercuson and Jack L. Granatstein. "From Paardeberg to Panjwai: Canadian National Interests in Expeditionary Operations," in *Canada's National Security in the Post 9-11 World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).



meeting a common threat, forces have been dispatched overseas to send a message and, by so doing, to guarantee Ottawa “a seat at the table” along with a sense of status and prestige.¹¹ This expeditionary strategic culture allowed Canada – which was never regarded, nor saw itself, as a great power – to nonetheless,

*show larger nations (e.g., Britain and the United States), international organizations, such as the United Nations, or allied nations such as the members of NATO that Canada is ready and able to put a shoulder to the wheel when military forces are needed to defend allies, deter aggression, or keep or enforce the peace. In other words, Canada has been willing to do its share of the hard, dirty work. Doing so wins Canada diplomatic recognition, political acceptance, entrée into arrangements, treaties, and alliances that are important to Canada and Canadians, and a voice on how future international policies will be pursued. Were Canada not to take part in such missions abroad, friends and enemies alike would have concluded long ago that Canada is of no consequence, does not deserve to be heard and ought not to be accorded any favours in bilateral or multilateral negotiations over matters of consequence.*¹²

This approach to allied commitments guarantees that Canada “will always prefer to undertake less of an effort than its great-power partners want it to, but not so little as to be eliminated altogether from their strategic decision making.”¹³

11 Joel J. Sokolsky. “A Seat at the Table: Canada and its Allies,” *Armed Forces & Security* 16, no.1 (1989), 11–35; Justin Massie. “Why Democratic Allies Defect Prematurely: Canadian and Dutch Unilateral Pullouts from the War in Afghanistan,” *Democracy and Security* 12, no. 2 (2016), 85–113.

12 David J. Bercuson and Jack L. Granatstein. “From Paardeberg to Panjwai: Canadian National Interests in Expeditionary Operations,” in *Canada’s National Security in the Post 9-11 World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

13 David Haglund and Stéphane Roussel. “Is the Democratic Alliance a Ticket to (Free) Ride? Canada’s ‘Imperial Commitments,’ from the Interwar Period to The Present,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2007), 1–24.

In the vernacular, the EFP is often characterized as a speedbump or a tripwire. If the sovereignty of any NATO member country were compromised, that would pose an existential threat to all of the framework countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada. In contrast to climate change or cyber-threats, NATO member countries have a collective interest in ensuring the territorial integrity of member countries. Yet, NATO troops confront an adversary that has as orders of magnitude the number of troops stationed on the other side of the border. Moreover, unlike NATO, that adversary has the advantage of being a unitary actor, whereas NATO functions more like a federation. In fact, three of the four framework countries are federations, and the fourth has a devolved unitary system of government. If NATO wanted to deter against all-out invasion, many more troops would be required. Instead, defence policy in general, and the EFP in particular, need to be understood as an insurance policy: you buy the amount and extent of coverage you need for the risk you anticipate. The EFP was never designed to provide all-perils coverage; instead, it is meant to provide specified perils coverage against sovereignty violations of a NATO member country's air, sea, land, and even cyber domain, especially irregulars in the form of "little green men" as NATO likes to refer to those that appeared in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

Latvia, the Baltic States and even Eastern and Central European countries are not alone in their concerns. After having withdrawn its troops and sold off its military lands, Sweden is redeploying troops to the island of Gotland at great expense. The difference is that Latvia made a strategic, sovereign choice: to join NATO, the most powerful military alliance in history. Conversely, NATO member countries made a strategic choice in having Latvia join. NATO is an exclusive club: not all who knock shall enter, and some take much longer to be admitted than others. For NATO, the EFP in the Baltics is as much about reassuring the sovereignty of local member states as it is about securing NATO's North-Eastern flank, which is inherently vulnerable by dint of geography, history, size and the fact that adjoining Finland and Sweden have thus far opted to stay out of NATO.



Concluding Remarks

As the now enlarged Atlantic Alliance faces a revived Russian threat, particularly to the “new” allies on its now more easterly frontier, NATO appears to be in the process of a “re-creation” consistent with its founding purpose of providing for the collective defence of all its members.¹⁴ But, as in the past, this will entail a good deal of political and military uncertainty and complications that will challenge the management and unity of the Alliance, demanding adjustments and compromises. Yet it should not be forgotten that the Cold War and post-Cold war success of NATO was due in no small part to the fact that a flexible response has not only been its long-standing strategic doctrine, but has profoundly shaped the way the Alliance approached all its seemingly intractable and inherently contradictory problems of a strategic and, above all, political nature. True to the messy nature of democratic government itself, this collection of democracies has managed to surprise and confound its critics by continually adopting a series of initiatives that placed political considerations and at the centre of its strategic calculations. Amongst those wise policies was the importance attached to military contributions from its members, no matter how limited they be in relative terms. This approach provided Canada with a security community to which, by any assessment, it could (and did) make a successful, significant and appreciated military contribution.

Thus today, not surprisingly, in the concrete manifestation of Canada’s contribution to reassurance in the Baltics in general, and in Latvia in particular, we are witnessing a continuation of Canada’s commitment to NATO, once again dispatching forces to Europe, lending its albeit modest - yet not inconsiderable - capabilities and highly sophisticated military expertise to bolster the stability and security of a region that remains essential to Canada’s national interests.

14 Joseph T. Jockel and Joel J. Sokolsky. “Canada and NATO: An Assessment,” paper presented at *The 7th Congress of the Polish Association of Canadian Studies, Torun, Poland, May 2016*.

If the rationale and character of Canada's present contributions to the EFP can be explained, what does this suggest about the durability of these commitments? If the past is prologue, then there should be little doubt that Ottawa will continue to support NATO's collective efforts on the Alliance's eastern frontier. Even if specific Canadian contributions are replaced from time to time by those from other allies on an agreed-upon rotational basis, Ottawa will remain engaged in Baltic security as long as the threat remains and as long as the Alliance, its frequent internal disagreements notwithstanding, remains ultimately unified in its determination to provide collective security for all its members. This unique combination of flexibility and unity has sustained NATO and Canada's commitment and ability to contribute to European security whenever and wherever it has been at risk.