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TO TRIP A BEAR:

CANADIAN-LED ENHANCED FORWARD
PRESENCE IN LATVIA

BY ANDRIS BANKA

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TO TRIP A BEAR: CANADIAN-LED ENHANCED FORWARD PRESENCE IN LATVIA

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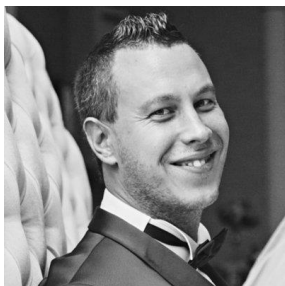
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Canada assumed the lead-nation role for the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battle-group in Latvia in the summer of 2017. The deployment of troops and military hardware represents Ottawa's largest involvement on the European continent in more than a decade. The following article offers a nuanced look at the Canadian presence in Latvia, assessing the nature of this deployment, challenges that it faces and the extent to which this multinational force formation is capable of deterring a country like Russia.

The first section looks at the growing links and diplomatic ties between Canada and Latvia and lays out a political and historical background of NATO's decision to establish an enhanced forward presence in eastern parts of Alliance territory. The subsequent section focuses on the geo-strategic location of the Baltic republics and consequences that flow from their geographical proximity to the Russian Federation. After this, the article provides a foundational understanding of deterrence: its logic, typology and mode of operation. It also discusses specifics of the eFP deterrence and its intended effects. Furthermore, the analysis seeks to address some of the arguments that have been raised by the critics of the mission. The article concludes with practical policy prescriptions for strengthening NATO's eastern flank.



Introduction

At a time when major NATO countries are consumed with domestic affairs, Canada has quietly re-engaged with the transatlantic alliance and is contributing to collective defence far away from its own shores. It leads a multinational battle-group in Latvia, one of NATO's most-at-risk members. The deployment of troops and military hardware represents Ottawa's largest involvement on the European continent in more than a decade. As various forces seek to tear apart the transatlantic fabric, both from outside and within, Canada is breathing much needed enthusiasm and confidence into the 70-year-old alliance.

The key objective of the Canadian mission, and enhanced forward presence (eFP) is to deter the Russian Federation. Since the end of the Cold War, the concept of deterrence has largely fallen into disuse, but after Russia's illegal takeover Crimea, deterrence is back on the minds of NATO military planners. To strengthen collective defence, four multinational battle-groups, of roughly a thousand troops each, have been stationed in Poland and the Baltic republics. The Canadian presence in Latvia has been greeted with open arms. In the words of the country's prime minister, the battalion, led by Canada, "is the perfect gift to Latvia on its centenary."¹ But is such a relatively modest force enough to deter a country like Russia? Or does putting troops near the Russian border only further poison an already toxic relationship with Moscow and increase the likelihood of conflict? Questions like this figure prominently in today's policy conversations and deserve closer scrutiny.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section looks at the growing connections between Canada and Latvia and provides a historical background of the decisions behind the eFP initiative. This is followed by an exploration of the geo-

strategic position of the Baltics and the challenges posed by the Russian military. After this, I outline the nature of deterrence and discuss the specifics of the eFP deterrence posture vis-à-vis Russia. The analysis also addresses some of the arguments that have been raised by critics of the

"...after Russia's illegal takeover of Crimea, deterrence is back on the minds of NATO military planners."



mission. In conclusion, the piece offers some practical policy measures to further strengthen NATO's eastern frontier.

Canada and Latvia: a growing partnership

Sitting on the opposite sides of the Atlantic, Canada and Latvia are unlikely partners. Significant disparities exist between the two in terms of size and global reach. Yet Canadian ties with Latvia, as noted by Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, "go back a long way."² Canada was the first G7 country to recognize Latvia's independence after its breakaway from the Soviet Union in 1991, and among the first to officially ratify its membership to NATO in 2004.³ Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia (1999-2007), someone who was instrumental in steering the country back towards the West, lived in Canada for more than twenty years, lecturing at the University of Montreal. A dual-citizen of both Canada and Latvia, she gave up her Canadian passport just hours before assuming the highest political office in the country. It is estimated that Canada is home to some 28,000 Latvian-Canadians. Since Latvia joined NATO, links with Canada have further intensified. Canadian Hornet fighter jets, for example, have policed the Baltic skies and troops of both nations have worked shoulder to shoulder in Afghanistan. Canada's decision to station combat-ready troops on Latvian soil, however, opened a whole new chapter in this bilateral relationship. This has led to routine high-level diplomatic engagements between the two sides.



Military parade held for the 100th anniversary of the independence of the Republic of Latvia

PHOTO CREDIT: COMBAT CAMERA



The decision to form a multinational battle group was reached at NATO's 2016 Warsaw summit. As the summit's final communiqué read, "We have decided to establish an enhanced forward presence in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to unambiguously demonstrate, as part of our overall posture, Allies' solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression."⁴ Canada's Minister of National Defence, Harjit Sajjan, bluntly summarized Ottawa's decision to strengthen NATO's eastern flank, when he said, "Canada has a deep sense of wanting to help when it's needed [...] therefore Canada is stepping up."⁵ With high level Latvian and Canadian officials in attendance, including NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the battle-group was officially formed on June 19, 2017 at Ādaži military base.⁶ About a year later, in the first ever bilateral visit by a Canadian prime minister to Latvia, Justin Trudeau officially extended the mission to March 2023.

It did not take long for the Latvian Parliament to respond in kind. As a sign of appreciation for Canada's contribution to regional security at a critical time, Latvian decision makers swiftly approved the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada. It is the first European Union country to do so. Ojars Kalnins, Chair of the Latvian Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, thinks that most Canadians do not fully realize just, "how keen the country of less than 2 million people is to build stronger ties with Canada."⁷ According to a recent study, only 3 percent of Canadians are aware that the Canadian Armed Forces are currently serving in Latvia.⁸ Nonetheless, Canada's willingness to contribute to collective defence is a crucial development for Latvia and the Baltic region as a whole.

Unkind Geography

Nearly fifteen years have passed since the Baltics became members of the world's largest military alliance. Despite deep integration into the Western security architecture, defence planning for the Baltic region keeps NATO strategists up at night. Geographical proximity to Russia and large ethnic minorities make these nations particularly vulnerable to any malign actions arising from their much more powerful neighbor. In his classic work, *The Clash of Civilizations*, famed political scientist Samuel Huntington defined the region as the "eastern boundary of western civilization."⁹ Estonian Minister of Defence Jüri Luik once jokingly characterized the Baltics as stuck between "the devil and the deep blue sea".¹⁰ He has a point.



The Baltics are almost completely cut off from other NATO partners. Lithuania alone shares a short land border of 100 kilometers, referred to as the Suwalki gap, with fellow alliance member Poland. Analysts have described this narrow strip of land as, “NATO’s most vulnerable choke point.”¹¹ If Russia decided to attack and close it, this would seal the Baltics off from rest of the Alliance. Latvian national security advisor Janis Kazocins recently reflected on his country’s predicament, noting that, “as much as we would like to change places with British Columbia [...] we are here and Russia is going to be here as our neighbour in the future as long as we exist.”¹² In short, the Baltics are bound by geography to be the most exposed link in the transatlantic alliance.

“...the Baltics are bound by geography to be the most exposed link in the transatlantic alliance.”

While the trio of Baltic countries have long been considered as a possible flashpoint between the West and Russia, only recently, as the international community watched Moscow steadily redraw the borders of Ukraine, did the Baltic region make a

dramatic return as a topic worthy of academic inquiry. Could the Russians make a similar military landgrab in the Baltics, as in Crimea? To answer this question, numerous research institutions took up the task of quantifying Russia’s military presence in the region, modelling possible conflict scenarios. The results revealed glaring weaknesses on the part of the Baltics. The 2016 RAND Corporation report is the most prominent and widely cited. Intensive war games revealed that, “the longest it has taken Russian forces to reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga [Estonian and Latvian capitals] is 60 hours.”¹³ Other independent analyses similarly drew attention to the ill-prepared state of Baltic defence.¹⁴

Since 2014, NATO has worked diligently to address numerous deficiencies in the region. First, the Alliance put a Readiness Action Plan into effect – “a series of land, sea and air activities in, on and around the territory of NATO Allies in Central and Eastern Europe.”¹⁵ Another key development included the introduction of Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), or “spearhead force” within NATO Response Force, which should be able to move a 5,000-strong brigade to a crisis point at short notice.¹⁶ Spooked by Moscow, the Baltic states themselves have also become more serious about defence spending levels. For the first time in their history, all three nations reached NATO’s suggested mark of 2 percent of GDP on defence in 2018.¹⁷



The most notable development, however, was NATO's decision to establish an enhanced forward presence, consisting of four rotating multinational battalion-size battle-groups, in eastern parts of Alliance territory. This was the first time that Alliance troops have been stationed, albeit on rotational basis, "east of the former East-West German border."¹⁸ Canada assumed the lead role in Latvia while other battle-groups in Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland are led respectively by the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States. Yet even with this significant adjustment on the part of NATO, Russia retains an overwhelming conventional supremacy in the region.¹⁹ According to the RAND Corporation, the Baltics and Poland combined, "collectively field

much smaller ground forces than those present in Russia's Western Military District alone."²⁰ Given that numerical advantage still strongly favours the Russian Federation, do the four battle groups in the Baltics and Poland change Moscow's calculus in any way? Is this a robust deterrent or just a feel-good measure? The following analysis looks deeper into these questions.



PHOTO CREDIT: COMBAT CAMERA

Re-learning deterrence

After decades of expeditionary force deployments in far-flung corners of the world and a focus on non-state adversaries, the Alliance has been forced to reorient itself back towards its original core task of collective defence. This paradigm shifting moment was triggered by Russia's seizure of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine. Deterrence – a concept perceived as a relic of the Cold War,

has found its way back into policy discussions. Consider the following, the term 'deterrence' appeared only once in the 1999 NATO Washington Summit communiqué but is mentioned 28 times in the 2016 Warsaw Summit communiqué.²¹ There is little doubt that deterrence will form part of the Alliance's lexicon for years to come. Canada's forward deployment in Latvia has also



been framed as a deterrence mission vis-à-vis Russia. In 2016, Canada's Minister of National Defence clarified that, "we have gone from assurance to deterrence."²²

In scrutinizing the eFP deterrence posture, it is useful to take a step back and lay out a foundational understanding of deterrence: its logic, typology and mode of operation. To that end, the scholarly work of strategists like Thomas Schelling, John J. Mearsheimer and Lawrence Friedman can be of help. Deterrence, broadly defined by Mearsheimer, means, "persuading an opponent not to initiate a specific action because the perceived benefits do not justify the estimated costs and risks."²³ Deterrence can be viewed as a form of coercive logic by which actors "seek to forestall certain courses of action by convincing opponents that they cannot realize meaningful gains from undertaking these actions."²⁴ The ultimate goal of deterrence is to prevent conflict from transpiring in the first place. A good day for deterrence, therefore, is when nothing happens.

Capability is of great importance when it comes to deterring an adversary. As Kaufman observes, one must have the, "demonstrated capability...to achieve the defense of the interest in question, or to inflict such a cost on the attacker that, even if he should be able to gain his end, it

"The ultimate goal for deterrence is to prevent conflict from transpiring in the first place. A good day for deterrence...is when nothing happens."

would not seem worth the effort to him."²⁵ That being said, military hardware alone does not deter. It must be married up with credibility, which can be defined as "the quality of being believed."²⁶ For this reason, one can say that deterrence has an important psychological dimension to it, as one side attempts to shape the thinking of the other. In the end, deterrence takes place in the mind of the opponent. In his scholarly work, Lawrence Friedman refers to credibility as the, "magic ingredient," that must be injected in deterrence for it to succeed.²⁷ Deterrence needs to be clearly and unambiguously communicated to the adversary. The crucial task, as Schelling points out, is to communicate your threats persuasively and in a manner that it does not come across as a bluff.²⁸



‘Tripwire’ deterrence

Not all deterrence is cut from the same cloth. There are, generally speaking, two strategic modes: deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. Deterrence by denial seeks to deter unwanted action by the opposing side by, “making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thus denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objectives.”²⁹ In deterrence by denial, an actor establishes a potent force in order to stop the aggressor in their tracks. For this strategy to work, “the defender has to have sufficient lethal capabilities in or near the likely site of aggression to demonstrate that victory will be either impossible or difficult to attain.”³⁰ The key objective is to make the target of possible aggression, “indigestible and therefore too difficult to take and hold.”³¹



Dry fire artillery exercise in Ādaži during Op REASSURANCE

PHOTO CREDIT: COMBAT CAMERA

Studies have demonstrated that deterrence by denial is the more reliable option, when compared to deterrence by punishment.³² However, denial is considered an, “expensive military strategy” that requires substantial force deployment and monetary investments.³³

The second way to deter an enemy is by punishment. In this case, the enemy may

achieve its military objectives, but the punitive costs are so high and consequences so intolerable that the aggressor is discouraged to invade.³⁴ Such costs can also be non-military in nature and include economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation or significantly damaged reputation on the international stage. When it comes to Russia, some analysts have argued that its greatest strategic vulnerability is the financial assets it has parked in Western countries and that NATO can deter Moscow by using economic threats, in addition to the military tools available. For example, by making it clear that in case of aggression against a NATO member, Russian bank accounts abroad would be frozen and the country may be cut off from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication system, otherwise known as Swift.³⁵ In essence, what deterrence by



punishment means is that even if you cannot stop the advance of your opponent militarily, you can make life incredibly difficult for them, thereby suggesting that aggression is not worth the pursuit in the first place.

Further distinctions can be drawn between direct and extended deterrence. Direct deterrence is when a state attempts to deter an attack on its own territory. Meanwhile, extended deterrence involves discouraging aggression against your partners or treaty allies. In the scholarly literature, extended deterrence is perceived as the more challenging option. This is because of obvious operational complications. As RAND's Michael Mazarr writes, "it is more difficult to deny an attack far from home, a mission that demands the projection of military force sometimes thousands of miles away and often much closer to the territory of the aggressor state."³⁶ Secondly, extended deterrence puts greater emphasis on credibility. Schelling's insights are valuable. In his classic work, *Arms and Influence*, he differentiates between the "national homeland" and "everything abroad."³⁷ He points out that we naturally expect national military forces to make every effort to defend the homeland and if needed "die gloriously in a futile effort at defense."³⁸ However, in a case of extended deterrence, there is nothing automatic about sending forces to a foreign territory to defend an ally in times of crisis. As Schelling writes, "some threats are inherently persuasive, some have to be made persuasive."³⁹ When deterrence involves third parties, a much greater effort is needed to convince the opponent that an actor will sacrifice its own soldiers and citizens to defend an ally on the other side of the globe.

Based on the outlined discussion of deterrence, how can we classify Canada's deployment in Latvia and eFP as a whole? It is clear that this is not a deterrence-by-denial case. While the deployment could slow down a possible Russian incursion, it would be severely outmatched by Russian forces and unable to deny them their military objectives. As explained by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, eFP is designed to be something different than during the Cold War, when hundreds of thousands of troops faced each other along the borders.⁴⁰





Simulated attack during eFP Battle Group Latvia Exercise CLAYMORE FORGED at camp Ādaži

PHOTO CREDIT: COMBAT CAMERA

In sum, what NATO has put together in the Baltics and Poland is a relatively light forward presence, but one that, at least in theory, can be rapidly reinforced in a crisis. For this reason, analysts have often referred to these deployments as a ‘tripwire’ deterrent – “triggers that, when engaged, fire off a much more powerful NATO response.”⁴¹ This mode of deterrence rests heavily upon the Alliance’s ability to swiftly reinforce the Baltics in case of Russian aggression. As a form of extended deterrence, a great deal of pressure is also put on credibility. As Canadian political scientists, Christian Leuprecht, Joel Sokolsky and Jayson Derow note in their report entitled *Paying it Forward*, “credibility is key to the eFP as a successful mechanism of deterrence against Russian adventurism.”⁴² NATO has to convince the Russian Federation that if it crosses the red-line, additional partner forces will arrive and fight on the side of the Baltic countries. In Schelling’s terms, such a threat is not inherently persuasive, but has “to be made persuasive.”⁴³

It is also of merit to note that this type of tripwire deterrence is conceptually connected to the full arsenal of NATO capabilities, including nuclear weapons. As Martin Zapfe, senior researcher at the Center for Security Studies ETH Zurich, reminds us, “as a nuclear alliance, NATO’s deterrence



is ultimately based on the threat of nuclear retaliation.”⁴⁴ This notion is cemented in the Alliance’s strategic doctrine. NATO’s Strategic Concept clearly states that, “nuclear weapons are a core component of the Alliance’s overall capabilities for deterrence and defence alongside conventional and missile defence forces.”⁴⁵

While nuclear weapons are an integral part of the Alliance’s overall deterrence posture, analysts have questioned their usefulness in the context of the Baltic theatre. According to Estonian political scientist Viljar Veebel, who conducted interviews with Estonian and Latvian political and military elites, deterrence in the Baltics is seen “largely through the prism of conventional deterrence.”⁴⁶ The nuclear option is seen only as “the measure of last resort.”⁴⁷ This view is supported by other scholars. A Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report entitled *Evaluating Future US Army Force Posture in Europe* points out that “the alliance today cannot reasonably rely on nuclear threats alone to deter Russian aggression in the Baltic States.”⁴⁸ It goes on to argue that, “NATO has substantial conventional capabilities at its disposal and it is difficult to believe it would escalate to nuclear use without first trying an alternative strategy.”⁴⁹ For this reason, the report concludes, nuclear weapons offer only “limited deterrence value” and in order to credibly deter Russia, NATO must primarily rely on “non-nuclear military forces.”⁵⁰

The Skeptics’ side

The posting of four multinational combat battalions has drawn criticism from two key angles. Some observers argue that NATO’s presence in the region is far too modest. Writing for the *National Interest*, Dianne Chamberlain, research fellow at Columbia University, suggests that the rotational forces come across as a “cheap force.”⁵¹ In her judgement, NATO has to either “make an extremely costly deployment to the Baltics” in order to credibly deter Russia or “admit that it lacks the interest and motivation to do so and stay home.”⁵² For Andrew Michta, dean of the College of International and Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center, deploying some 4,500 troops across Eastern European frontier is a step in the right direction, however adding that the expectation that such a “small forward rotational multinational presence [...] will be enough to establish credible deterrence is a stretch.”⁵³



To strengthen deterrence, some have advocated a permanent NATO's presence in the region. Indeed, this has been a long-standing desire for many Eastern Europeans. Poland, for example, recently stepped forward with a bold suggestion by reportedly offering Washington \$2 billion for a permanent American base and boots on the ground.⁵⁴ During his visit to Washington, Polish President Andrzej Duda urged Donald Trump to establish a permanent base.⁵⁵ Baltic leaders too have repeatedly asked for a stronger US presence within their borders. Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė was quoted by the *Wall Street Journal* as saying, “having in mind the challenges we are facing and the increase in tensions in our region it would be preferable to have the US on a permanent basis.”⁵⁶ For the time being however, apart from a few supporters in the US Congress, suggestions like these have not gained traction inside the Alliance.⁵⁷

Then there are those who, on the contrary, have painted the enhanced Forward Presence as too provocative and aggressive a measure. For years, the Kremlin has maintained that tension in Eastern Europe is a result of continuous Western hubris and NATO's military push towards Russian borders. Therefore, it came as no surprise that the Russian government reacted negatively to the arrival of Canadian troops in Latvia. They immediately labelled the mission as, “an unnecessarily provocative move.”⁵⁸ According to investigative work by the Atlantic Council, which looked into over 150 articles in pro-Kremlin and Russian state-funded media, the dominant narrative surrounding the eFP in the Baltics has been that “NATO is provocative and aggressive”.⁵⁹



Members of Duke's Company with eFP Battle Group Latvia, wait for extraction during Exercise TOMAHAWK

PHOTO CREDIT: COMBAT CAMERA



Some Western analysts make a similar argument by placing blame on NATO's doorstep and portraying Russia as a victim. University of Chicago political scientist John Mearsheimer and Stephen Cohen, Professor Emeritus of Russian Studies at New York University, have led the way by asserting that the West has provoked Moscow with the expansion of NATO.⁶⁰ Moreover, they have challenged enduring orthodoxies about US foreign policy. For this reason, some have dismissed these two scholars as "Russia apologists".⁶¹ They are, however, serious thinkers whose arguments merit a hearing. Mearsheimer and Cohen have repeatedly complained that American lawmakers are incapable of "putting themselves in Mr. Putin's shoes" or seeing the world from the vantage point of the Kremlin.⁶² They point to a systematic lack of empathy in US foreign policy and an inability to grasp the opposing side's perspective. They claim that more effort to empathize and less demonization of your adversary could lead to more constructive engagement between the two sides.

While Mearsheimer's and Cohen's arguments contain kernels of good advice, they are flawed. For instance, they assert that the downturn in Russian relations with the West has resulted because the United States intends to make Eastern Europe, "part of the West and the Russians found that to be intolerable."⁶³ They portray Washington as ruthlessly abusing the sovereignty of East European nations, coercing and incorporating them into the transatlantic alliance. This narrative is simply ahistorical. In fact, countries like Poland and the Baltics pushed for entry into the world's strongest

"The principal reason why there are Alliance troops in the Baltics today is because host nations...desperately want them there."

military alliance. The principal reason why there are Alliance troops in the Baltics today is because host nations like Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia desperately want them there. Somehow, these two scholars have quietly swept aside the desire of many Eastern Europeans to join NATO.

For Stephen Cohen, no one has benefited from NATO expansion. As he is quoted as saying in a recent interview with *Vice News*, "any fool could tell you that bringing these countries [the Baltics] into NATO will diminish everyone's security."⁶⁴ But these claims contradict empirical evidence. For small nations like Latvia, NATO is synonymous with security. As the National Security Concept of Latvia points out, "being a member of NATO [...] is an important basic element of the



national security of the Republic of Latvia.”⁶⁵ Public opinion polls have also repeatedly demonstrated that the Latvian public considers NATO as the key guarantor of its national security.⁶⁶

According to Mearsheimer and Cohen, Russia is entitled to a buffer zone to facilitate a sense of security. This appears to line up with the opinions of the Russian public at large. Opinion polls indicate that majority of Russians (60 percent) think that parts of other neighboring countries still rightly belong to them.⁶⁷ In the eyes of many Russians, the “near abroad” – consisting of former Soviet bloc countries, Baltics included, is an area where Moscow has a legitimate right to dictate developments. For Eastern Europeans, this brand of twentieth century geopolitical thinking is exactly what has caused tremendous pain and destruction. Baltic membership in NATO may be an irritant to the Kremlin, but sovereign nations have the right to choose their friends and allies. It is hard to understand why, as argued by Mearsheimer and Cohen, Russian national security interests should come at the expense of smaller neighbouring nations. Who has the more legitimate claim to feel secure – a nuclear powered Russia, or small nations that were forced to live under Moscow’s forceful rule for half a century?

Turning to the eFP presence in the Baltics, it is hard to see how and in what scenario these battalions could be used as an invasion force to mount an attack on Russia. The troop numbers in the region, even with the eFP presence, are woefully against the Baltics. Russia retains a tremendous numerical superiority. As one senior Estonian government representative ironically remarked, “those that can count to 10 know that this [eFP] does not change the military balance in the region.”⁶⁸ Mirroring this statement, RAND analysts have pointed out that one needs to be “profoundly out of touch with reality” to imagine that rotational forces could march on Russian cities.⁶⁹ The established battalions are modest in size and cannot be viewed as provocative or somehow escalatory. In the words of President of Latvia, Raimonds Vejonis, the numbers of troops stationed in the Baltics has not been large and “so no-one could claim they were a threat to Russia.”⁷⁰

All things considered, the Alliance has responded to a significantly changed security environment in proportionate and judicious fashion. Since 2014, it has not sat with arms folded but markedly strengthened NATO’s eastern flank. Fearing a possible security dilemma, it has also not swung too



far in the other direction by placing substantial Western troops a stone's throw away from Moscow. As Russia-scholar Kimberly Marten points out, the number of troops NATO decided to station on a rotational basis is in fact “far below the recommendations of more hawkish Western defense analysts.”⁷¹ Moreover, all the Baltic countries have hosted Russian observers and allowed them to tour sites used by NATO battlegroups to mitigate the possibility of misunderstandings.⁷² As an organization governed by consensus, NATO has managed to combine both the frontline states' desire for a credible deterrent, with an equal willingness (on the part of countries like Germany, Italy and France) to maintain a pragmatic dialogue with Russia. The Brussels Summit declaration clearly notes that the Alliance remains open to, “a periodic, focused, and meaningful dialogue with a Russia.”⁷³ NATO believes that deterrence and dialogue can and should be fused together as a strategy.

Multinational force composition



PHOTO CREDIT: COMBAT CAMERA

A crucial aspect of the eFP missions in the Baltic states and Poland is that a great number of NATO members - 25 out of 29, have ‘some skin in the game.’ For this reason, it is fair to ask



whether such a diverse group of nations with distinct command styles, doctrine and equipment can gel together effectively and work under one common alliance's flag. Such a question is particularly relevant to the Canada-led battalion in Latvia, as it stands out as the most multinational. Currently, the group consists of Canadians, Latvians, Czechs, Spaniards, Albanians, Italians, Poles, Slovaks and Slovenians. NATO history tells us that achieving interoperability at the strategic, operational and tactical level is something that the Alliance has struggled with at times.⁷⁴

Based on first-hand experience with eFP missions, professor at the US Army War College John Deni, reports that the multinational nature of these missions can create problems, such as, military equipment compatibility, lack of adequate English-language proficiency and duplication of certain capabilities.⁷⁵ Analysts have also

“NATO history tells us that achieving interoperability at the strategic, operational and tactical level is something that the Alliance has struggled with at times.”

called aspects of eFP's command and control dimension into question. As an Estonian think-tank report highlights, eFP battle-groups have links to three different lines of command – “the NATO command structure, national lines of command of the contributing nations, and the line of command in the host nation,” which can make things rather confusing.⁷⁶ Canada has been open about such challenges, admitting that it has not worked with some of the eFP members before and that it fits more easily with traditional partners like the Americans, the British, or the French⁷⁷ However, it has equally emphasized that every new rotation results in better integration.⁷⁸

Canada is exceptionally well qualified to bring together diverse group of nations. As one Canadian soldier deployed to Latvia remarked in an interview, “I think that's one of our strengths. We can bring that multiculturalism we have learned as Canadians to the table and strengthen NATO.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, political scientist Stéfanie von Hlatky points out that Canada is gender-conscious in its military approach and has made an effort to include 15 percent women in its Latvia-deployment.⁸⁰ In short, whatever setbacks of interoperability may have arisen, they are outweighed by the symbolic importance of diverse NATO countries working in unison for collective defense.



The ‘teeth’ of eFP deterrence, as previously discussed, is clearly not in troop numbers. Rather, it lies in the fact that a great number of like-minded states have been willing to answer NATO’s call. Some countries like Canada have come with 450 troops and armoured fighting vehicles, while others like Iceland have sent one civilian strategic communications expert to Estonia and one public affairs representative to Lithuania. However, as a whole this reflects an Alliance-wide commitment to NATO’s eastern front and sends a strong signal of solidarity. It demonstrates that nations are willing to contribute in places away from their own immediate strategic area of interest. For Ojars Kalnins, Chair of the Latvian Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee, the crucial component of the eFP is “not how many troops there are, but how many countries. The significance there is if Russia were to invade, and they start going after Canadians, Spaniards, Italians, then it’s against NATO as a whole, and I think Putin understands that.”⁸¹ For this reason, the broad participation of allies in battlegroups should be viewed as the foundation of credible deterrence.

The need for speed & mobility

The implementation of eFP in the Baltics and Poland has been a success story. NATO has bolstered its presence in the region and is in significantly better position to defend the territorial integrity of its East European members than it was when Russia grabbed Crimea. That Germans would be standing guard in Lithuania, Brits patrolling Estonian borders and Canadians working shoulder to shoulder with Latvians is something almost unimaginable just five years ago. However, a number of deficiencies in conventional deterrence posture still exist and need to be addressed. First, numerous analysts have remarked that the Alliance is still not fully fit for today’s challenges. Questions remain about the speed with which combat power could be moved across Europe by road, rail and water in a crisis scenario to reinforce allied nations under attack.

Lithuania’s Minister of Defence recently admitted that “an inconvenient truth is that NATO forces may still be too little and too late for the defence of the Baltic countries.”⁸² Due to geography, Russian forces could swiftly advance into the Baltics. The same cannot be said about NATO. Sharing his experience regarding troop-mobility within Europe, former commanding general of the US Army in Europe, Ben Hodges, noted, “I was naïve. I just assumed, well, these are all EU countries, or NATO countries, it should be like going from Florida to Virginia on I-95. And it’s absolutely not the case.”⁸³ European countries have different set of rules and regulations for



military movement in their territories. For example, in Germany trucks loaded with tanks and other heavy machinery are “allowed on highways only at night on weekdays.”⁸⁴ Other mobility issues on the European continent include, “varying gauges of rail track and legal restrictions on shipping ammunition across borders.”⁸⁵

However, some progress has already been made. Moving military forces from Germany to Poland took about nine days in 2017 but now only takes five.⁸⁶ Further lifting of the bureaucratic barriers and synchronization of procedures regarding military movement should be a key future focus for NATO military planners. The transatlantic alliance should also exercise transportation of equipment and troops more regularly. According to extensive analysis by a major German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the Russians have carried out three times as many military drills as NATO.⁸⁷ Elisabeth Braw, who runs the Modern Deterrence program at the Royal United Services Institute, notes that NATO is “still far behind Russia in moving large numbers of troops.”⁸⁸ The Alliance needs to close this gap. By showcasing NATO’s ability to mobilize swiftly, this would send a message of resolve and combat readiness to Russia.

The 2018 Brussels Summit Declaration appears to address this matter. The document states that the alliance will seek to “reinvigorate our culture of readiness.”⁸⁹ One of its key deliverables is to implement the so-called ‘30-30-30-30’ plan, which will facilitate the assembly of 30 land battalions, 30 aircraft squadrons and 30 warships within 30 days.⁹⁰ The declaration further stresses the need



Members of eFP Battle Group Latvia arrive for Exercise NAMEJS

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to improve military mobility by land, air, or sea as soon as possible. It remains to be seen how these goals will be carried out in practice.



‘Keeping the Canadians in’

The challenges that lie ahead are not simply a matter of sharpening NATO’s capabilities. Questions remain about the long-term political commitment of allied countries to keeping multinational forces in the Baltics. First and foremost, the mission requires continuous support of both the lead framework nation Canada and host-nation, Latvia. So far, the Canadian-led battalion has been popular among the wider Latvian society. According to a 2017 poll commissioned by the Latvian Ministry of Defence, only 17 percent of Latvia’s residents oppose its presence, 43 percent approve of it and 30 percent remain neutral on the issue.⁹¹ Overall, Eastern European countries continue to see NATO in a highly favourable light and associate it with protection of their country.⁹²

To ensure continued support, Canadian and Latvian lawmakers need to remain vigilant about the effectiveness and sophistication of Russian spread of propaganda. Through the fog of disinformation, Russia has demonstrated an ability to exploit weaknesses in target societies. Baltic countries served as a testing ground for various cyber operations and the spread of false narratives



A Canadian soldier takes part in a trench clearing exercise at Camp Ādaži

PHOTO CREDIT: COMBAT CAMERA

long before Moscow’s hand was exposed in US and Western elections. Estonia was the first country to experience a well-organized cyber-attack in 2007 directed by Moscow. In Lithuania, where Germany is the framework nation, Russian propaganda outlets claimed that German soldiers were responsible for raping an underage Lithuanian citizen. Police investigation later concluded the story to be false.⁹³

Russian sources have purposely mischaracterized the Canadian mission in Latvia. For instance, Russian media outlets have attempted to undermine the mission by describing the force as full of homosexuals,⁹⁴ attacking Canada’s Defence Minister for wearing a turban and claiming that



Canadian soldiers are accommodated in luxury apartments.⁹⁵ Such narratives are amplified by the use of bots. According to one NATO study, Russian bots created around “55% of all Russian-language messages about NATO in the Baltic States and Poland.”⁹⁶ Attempts to bad-mouth the mission and sow division among the allies will continue. As the Latvian Ambassador to Canada noted, “the Kremlin will ensure that the state-sponsored media conveys the sense that Canadians and Canada are getting involved and entangled in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that it would be better if they concentrated on hockey”.⁹⁷

Be that as it may, Canada and Latvia appear to have prepared to operate and push-back in the cyber domain. For example, among the Canadian contingent in Latvia, soldiers have been tasked to monitor attempts to discredit the mission and inform leadership if appropriate response is needed.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the Canadian-led battalion has sought to actively engage with the local community from playing friendly hockey matches to cleaning litter around the capital.⁹⁹ They take any opportunity to directly inform Latvian society about purpose of the mission. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Latvian Embassy has also remained highly engaged with the Canadian press, offering rebuttal to doctored false stories. The embassy has vigorously tried to strip away misleading myths surrounding Latvia and correct the record with facts.¹⁰⁰

For the time being, Ottawa’s commitment to Latvia, estimated to cost the Canadian taxpayer around a \$145-million-a-year,¹⁰¹ is not controversial in Canada. In a visit to Latvia, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau extended Canadian contribution until 2023 and added that, “we are absolutely committed to the protection of our allies and global peace and security.”¹⁰² The same sentiment was also repeated by Canada’s Minister of Defence, who stressed that his nation is “committed for the long term.”¹⁰³ One must, however, keep in mind that governments change and public attitudes can flip. In the view of the Chair of the Latvian Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee, Canada must be prepared to keep soldiers deployed in Latvia for as “long as a decade.”¹⁰⁴ For the time being, the interests of both nations appear aligned. Canadian boots on the ground are clearly in Latvia’s best interest. For Canada, this should also win some political capital inside the Alliance and, to some degree, offset criticism about its relatively low defence spending. However, if the deployment stretches out for a decade, it may become a harder sell. Lawmakers must be prepared to explain how moving troops half a world away is in the national interest and not simply charity.



NATO credibility in the age of Trump

Lastly, a few observations need to be made regarding the United States as it is the power that underpins the transatlantic alliance. While this analysis focused on Canada's presence in the Baltics, there is no question that a credible deterrent can only be delivered in tandem with the United States. As the report by Leuprecht, Sokolsky and Derow point out, "as a wholly European mission without US backing, the eFP's deterrent effect would be much diminished."¹⁰⁵ A well-motivated middle-power like Canada, in the right place at the right time, can make an impactful contribution to Baltic security.¹⁰⁶ However, should Washington decide to substantially change course and step away from providing collective security guarantees to Eastern Europe, this would have a dramatic impact on NATO.



Latvian soldiers and military personnel from six contributing nations march during a ceremony marking the standup of the eFP Battlegroup Latvia.

PHOTO CREDIT: COMBAT CAMERA



Unfortunately, Donald Trump's ill-advised public statements have already helped shred NATO's credibility. As a presidential candidate, he openly suggested that he would not automatically provide military aid to the Baltics in case of Russian aggression.¹⁰⁷ Even his staunchest supporters like John Bolton had to concede that such remarks represented a "massive failure of deterrence."¹⁰⁸ There is an argument to be made that on a policy level that the Trump administration has been understanding and even generous towards Eastern Europe. For instance, they allocated the Baltics around \$100 million USD in military aid to strengthen defences against Russia.¹⁰⁹ The National Security Strategy further notes that the United States intends to "strengthen NATO's eastern flank."¹¹⁰

But then again, one has to question what is this really worth if the White House routinely plants uncertainty about whether the US would actually deliver on its Article 5 commitments. Former US National Security Advisor Susan Rice has warned, "the words of the President of the United States matter enormously. Yes, facts on the ground too. But words become facts when they come out of the mouth of the president."¹¹¹ Whatever material investments America has made in Eastern Europe, their value can be easily eroded by unwise presidential pronouncements. During the 2018 Brussels NATO Summit, for example, when asked if he was open to suspending military exercises in the Baltics upon the request of Vladimir Putin, Trump replied, "perhaps we'll talk about that."¹¹² By laying it out as a possibility, Trump is undermining deterrence vis-à-vis Russia. His erratic behaviour, inconsistent policy views and dislike for traditional allies cast a long shadow over NATO and remain a major cause for concern. ♦



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