

## BRIEF

NATO'S POSTURE ON THE  
NORTH-EAST FLANK

VILNIUS SUMMIT SERIES, NO. 1

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**At NATO's Madrid Summit in June 2022, the Allies agreed to bolster enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) by deploying "additional robust in-place combat-ready forces on our eastern flank, to be scaled up from the existing battlegroups to brigade-size units where and when required, underpinned by credible rapidly available reinforcements, prepositioned equipment, and enhanced command and control".<sup>1</sup> The Baltic states had fought hard for a more robust NATO military presence to deter Russia and to provide a realistic chance of defending every square inch of NATO territory against a Russian attack. It has turned out, however, that moving from battlegroups to brigades—and thus towards forward defence—has been more difficult than the Baltic states anticipated.**

The 2022 Madrid Summit was NATO's post-invasion summit. There, the Baltic states expected the Alliance to agree to move beyond the token military presence in their region. Considering Allies' agreement about the gravity of the threat posed by Russia, the Baltic states had reasons to be optimistic: NATO had adopted a new strategic concept, which referred to Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area".<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had vowed that NATO would defend every inch of its territory, a statement that was echoed on numerous occasions by US President Joe Biden.<sup>3</sup> Yet, one year after the Madrid Summit, there are few indications of the

most visible aspect of NATO's decisions: the move from battlegroups to brigades.<sup>4</sup>

## WARSAW AND MADRID

The 2016 Warsaw Summit decision to deploy NATO eFP battlegroups was a success for Baltic diplomacy. For the first time since their accession to the Alliance, land forces from other member states would be deployed to the Baltic region on a rotational basis, providing a standing NATO military presence.<sup>5</sup> The first rotations were in place in 2017 a mere year after the summit. The battlegroups have been a success from the perspectives of both host nations and framework nations.<sup>6</sup> Six years on, the rotational eFP battlegroup deployments have become routine. Many of the deployed troops have been to the Baltic states more than once and much of the initial excitement has gone.

The implementation of the Madrid Summit decision to upgrade the existing battlegroups to brigades has been slow, and a source of much frustration in the Baltic capitals. Disagreements between the framework nations and the host nations over the urgency of deploying brigade-size units have been aired in public, notably in Lithuania, leading to intense domestic political

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debates in the Baltic capitals on how best to approach their bilateral relationships with the framework nations.<sup>7</sup> The three main factors that hamper the speedier deployment of brigades to

the Baltic region are examined below: a disagreement on what was actually agreed in 2022 in Madrid; a lack of troops and shortfalls in military capabilities in the framework nations; and a lack of suitable infrastructure in the host nations.

## WHAT WAS AGREED IN 2022?

The Baltic states seemingly achieved their aims in Madrid, but the devil, as always, is in the detail. Importantly, the collective decision was to deploy “brigade-sized units where and when required”.<sup>8</sup> The Baltic states would like these brigades to be deployed now, and permanently, for deterrence purposes, fearing their Allies may be too slow to move troops to the Baltic region, or even refrain from doing so to avoid escalation in the event of rising tensions with Russia. This could provide Russia the room to attempt a fait accompli attack on the Baltic states.

Since 2017, eFP has largely been implemented through the close bilateral relationships Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have built with their framework nations (respectively, the UK, Canada, and Germany). As a result, the situation today is different in each of the three states. Lithuania expected Germany to contribute a heavy brigade in addition to leading its eFP battlegroup.<sup>9</sup> Germany, however, has walked back on the pledges that Olaf Scholtz made in June 2022, and the resulting disagreements have become public. The Lithuanians have criticised

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Germany for not taking its commitments seriously enough, while Germany has pointed out that Lithuania does not have the facilities to host a brigade even if one was available.

Latvia’s relations with Canada and Estonia’s relations with the UK have been less controversial. Estonia’s expectations regarding the UK’s military contribution were lower from the start. In November 2022, the UK committed to “enhance the effectiveness of its permanently based eFP Battlegroup” by maintaining some division-level assets, such as air defence and rocket artillery, and periodically deploying some

specific capabilities to Estonia. It also agreed to hold “the balance of a brigade” in the UK at high readiness to reinforce Estonia if needed.<sup>10</sup> At no point has the UK promised to deploy a brigade-sized unit to Estonia permanently, and Estonia has seemingly come to accept this situation.<sup>11</sup> Latvia clearly expects that Canada will deliver on the promises made in a Joint Declaration of June 2022.<sup>12</sup> Although the wording is intentionally vague, Canada pledged that it would work with Latvia and other Allies “to be able to surge a combat capable brigade”. Canada has indicated, however, that it would be unable to provide a brigade on its own. In the runup to the Vilnius Summit, Latvia expects Canada to make announcements regarding its deployment that would go beyond Defence Minister Anita Anand’s June announcement that Canada would deploy an additional 131 personnel and 15 Leopard tanks.<sup>13</sup>

## FRAMEWORK NATION CAPACITY

However, the framework nations all have shortfalls of troops, equipment, and ammunition. A recent study concluded that “only the largest European states can deploy as much as a brigade abroad, and even then only if other European states or, in most cases, the US provide support”.<sup>14</sup> The biggest obstacle to brigade-sized deployments is not a lack of political will, but the consequences of underinvestment in and neglect of the armed forces in previous decades. The unfortunate outcome is that Germany, the UK, and Canada do not have enough troops to ensure a larger military presence in the Baltic region.<sup>15</sup>

The lack of deployable units and capability shortfalls has also generated domestic controversy in Germany, the UK, and Canada. In Canada, for example, analysts have suggested that defence spending of just 1.29% of GDP (2022) may sour relations with Allies.<sup>16</sup> (Canada is also one of the few Allies not to meet the NATO guideline of spending at least 20% of defence expenditure on equipment.<sup>17</sup>) Even Canadian soldiers deployed in Latvia suffer from equipment and ammunition shortages, which have been further exacerbated by donations of

equipment and ammunition to Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> Still, shortfalls are seldom talked about publicly for fear of their detrimental impact on NATO's deterrence posture in the Baltic region.

## THE HOST NATIONS

As eFP host nations, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are already doing a lot for their own defence.<sup>19</sup> Their defence spending is either already at 2.5% of GDP or will soon reach that benchmark, and there is a consensus among Baltic policymakers to increase defence spending even further towards 3%. This marks them out as responsible NATO members, but their real defence expenditure is relatively small, making critically important capabilities such as air defence hard to afford. The Baltic militaries are also small, although there is considerable variation among the three. As of 2023, all three Baltic armed forces have conscription policies that will eventually allow them to generate large wartime force structures.

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Nonetheless, the Baltic states have homework to do to properly host Allies. The lack of infrastructure and insufficient training area capacity are key obstacles to hosting larger forces. All three states are taking steps to create new training areas, but this will take time. Regarding infrastructure, much depends on the size and character of the Allied deployment. Permanently stationed troops would need not just military infrastructure, but also, for example, housing and schools for families. There are also questions about where Allied troops could be stationed. For example, the "Selonia" military base that Latvia will build in the south-east of the country will be in a relatively remote area, making it an unattractive location for soldiers' families. Lithuania has pledged to build new military installations to support its case for hosting a German brigade, while Estonia is expanding a training area in Nursipalu in its south-east, in part to provide more training opportunities for Allied forces. Host nation support is, however, not cheap and will

significantly impact the defence budgets of all three states.

## IMPLICATIONS

The slow pace of implementation of the Madrid Summit decisions has implications for NATO's ability to deter, and if necessary to defend against, Russia in the Baltic region. It would be premature to jump to any conclusions about long-term defence needs while Russia's war in Ukraine is ongoing and its ultimate outcome is unclear. Nonetheless, NATO's assessments of Russia's capabilities and intentions, and of what NATO needs to do to successfully deter Russia have clearly changed. The decision to boost defences in NATO's north-east was based on an assessment of the clear threat that Russia poses to frontline allies. If the framework nations ultimately do not deploy brigade-size units to the Baltic states, this would indicate that NATO assesses that it can ensure deterrence and defence without permanently stationing large numbers of troops in the region.

But how realistic would such an assessment be? The war in Ukraine has shown that large military formations are needed to defend against Russia's large armed forces. However, the Baltic states' announced level of ambition—to create in each of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania a division-sized structure that would include both local forces and an Allied brigade—does not seem to be a particularly large force. Conducting defence operations without NATO brigades in the Baltic states would seem to be hardly possible.

Deterrence is clearly cheaper than defence. Difficult as it might be, deploying brigades to the Baltic states to strengthen deterrence by denial, and defence if needed, would go a long way towards limiting Russian aggression. It thus remains imperative to get this done—to strengthen the security of the Baltic states and stability and security in Europe more broadly—even if the timetable is extended to 2025 or beyond.

NATO's Vilnius Summit presents an opportunity that the Alliance cannot afford to miss to encourage the framework nations and other contributors to step up their direct involvement

in the security of the Baltic states. At the most basic level, NATO member states should affirm that they are no longer bound by the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, which precluded the stationing of substantial combat forces in states that joined the Alliance after the Cold War.<sup>20</sup>

A better outcome for the Baltic states would be a repeat of the pledge made a year ago in Madrid

to deliver brigade-size units, coupled with a concrete timetable for getting this done. This could be closely tied to the adoption of the new defence plans and the associated clear allocation of responsibilities to specific Allies. Moving from battlegroups to brigades should remain the key objective for NATO's deterrence and defence posture in the Baltic region.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> NATO, "[Madrid Summit Declaration](#)," 29 June 2022, para. 9.

<sup>2</sup> NATO, "[NATO 2022 Strategic Concept](#)," 4.

<sup>3</sup> "[NATO Chief Says Alliance Will Defend 'Every Inch' Of Its Territory, As It Sets New Summit](#)," RFE/RL, 24 February 2022; "[Biden: 'Every inch of NATO territory will be defended'](#)," Sky News, 30 June 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Visiting Vilnius on 26 June 2023, Germany's defence minister Boris Pistorius claimed that Berlin was ready to permanently station a 4000-strong brigade in Lithuania. However, this promise was tied to the completion of the necessary infrastructure and to its compatibility with NATO defence planning. No timeline was given. "[With eyes on Russia, Germany ready to station troops permanently in Lithuania](#)," Reuters, 26 June 2023.

<sup>5</sup> NATO, "[Warsaw Summit Communiqué](#)," 9 July 2016, para. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Lanoszka, Christian Leuprecht, and Alexander Moens (eds.), "[Lessons from the Enhanced Forward Presence, 2017-2020](#)," NDC Research paper 14, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Lidia Gibadto and Joanna Hyndle-Hussein, "[Controversy over deployment of German brigade in Lithuania](#)," OSW, 4 May 2023.

<sup>8</sup> NATO, "Madrid Summit Declaration," para. 9.

<sup>9</sup> President of the Republic of Lithuania, "[Joint communiqué by the President of the Republic of Lithuania and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany](#)," 7 June 2022.

<sup>10</sup> UK Government, "[Joint Statement between the UK MOD and the Estonian MOD](#)," 8 November 2022.

<sup>11</sup> "[EDF chief: Extra NATO forces do not need to be permanently based in Baltics](#)," ERR, 17 June 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Government of Canada, "[Joint declaration between the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia and the Department of National Defence of Canada concerning augmented forward presence Latvia](#)," 29 June 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Government of Canada, "[Defence Minister Anita Anand meets with NATO Allies and announces deployment of Canadian Army Tank Squadron to Latvia](#)," 16 June 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Sven Biscop, "[Battalions to Brigades: The Future of European Defence](#)," *Survival* 62:5 (2020), 106.

<sup>15</sup> Jacek Tarociński and Justyna Gotkowska, "[Expectations versus reality: NATO brigades in the Baltic states?](#)" OSW, 6 December 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Murray Brewster, "[Canada's defence spending hasn't made it a NATO pariah — but that could change, ex-diplomat warns](#)," CBC, 22 April 2023.

<sup>17</sup> NATO, "[Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries \(2014-2022\)](#)," 2023, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Murray Brewster, "[An 'embarrassing' gear shortage has Canadian troops in Latvia buying their own helmets](#)," CBC, 5 June 2023; Steve Saideman and Justin Massie, "[Battle Rhythm Podcast Episode 2.23: From Battalion to Brigade](#)," 7 June 2023..

<sup>19</sup> Tony Lawrence, "[Accelerated Growth: Development in Baltic Defence](#)," ICDS, 12 June 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Ian Brzezinski and Alexander Vershbow, "[Memo to NATO Leaders](#)," *Atlantic Council*, 2023, 3.

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