

## Analysis

# An Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltics

## Canada's enduring commitment to transatlantic security<sup>1</sup>

Christian Leuprecht and 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? 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. 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, notwithstanding its well-deserved liberal-internationalist image, remains a "closet realist" when it comes to defence policy: peace and stability in Europe is integral to Canadian grand strategy for reasons of national as well as collective security.**

It is, therefore, not surprising to see Canada as the framework country for Latvia, contributing more than 450 of the 1,138 foreign NATO member ground troops.<sup>2</sup> That amounts to almost 10 percent of the total non-indigenous troop strength contributed by NATO allies to the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. On a per capita basis, 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, Canada has contributed a frigate to NATO Maritime Group One (SNMG1) as part of Operation REASSURANCE, while its 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 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 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 — one that goes back to the very beginning of the Alliance, of which Canada was a founding member.<sup>3</sup>

### Situating Canada's proper place in NATO

It was in Canada's vital national interest to prevent any single power from dominating Europe — first Germany in both world wars, and then the Soviet Union. In the words of a Canadian diplomat during the negotiations that led to the establishment of the Alliance, "[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."<sup>4</sup> Since NATO's "creation," through the Cold War and into the post-9/11 period, Canada remains prepared to go to great lengths and incur costs to ensure its "proper place" in the now enlarged Atlantic alliance.

Canada can do so because of its military capacity. While it may be tempting to become fixated on defence spending as a portion of GDP, such a comparative metric fails to take stock of either the size of Canada's defence budget in absolute terms or the strength of its military. After all, Latvia and Canada spend about the same percentage of GDP on defence, and neighbouring Estonia is widely held up for spending 2 percent of GDP on defence. Yet their spending yields very different capacities from Canada's military expenditure. For militaries, quality and quantity are complementary, and context matters.

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 15<sup>th</sup> in the world in total military expenditure. In NATO, only the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy spend more on defence in absolute terms. All of which are also more populous and have larger economies than Canada. On a per capita basis, only the United States, Norway, United Kingdom, Denmark, Netherlands, France, Germany, and Greece spend more.<sup>5</sup> 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 show, such crude reductionism is misleading: in fact, Canada is one of only five NATO member countries that maintains a full-spectrum military. Of course, this does not mean that all is well in the Canadian military. Canada's defence spending as a percentage of GDP, currently around 1.3%, is not projected to reach the NATO target of 2% over the next ten years.<sup>6</sup>

In the final analysis, defence is ultimately about balancing cost, capability, and commitment. Canada's mantra has always been to focus on capability and commitment. But we need to remember that in this regard, Canada has consistently outperformed on both factors — for which Canada warrants and receives greater recognition. Only a handful of members have headquarters and field capacities analogous to the ones Canada can bring to bear. Canada may not be conspicuous by its presence in the EFP, but it would certainly have been conspicuous by its absence.

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? These questions arose in the Canadian public discourse just as the government deliberated on how to respond to the request from NATO allies, including the United States, for a significant and visible role in the Baltics. 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 Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. As with other allies, it should not be surprising that this specific Canadian deployment was not made without some controversy — even if it was never seriously in doubt.

### **Canada's path to and support for the EFP**

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 US 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 (EU) in particular. 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 US 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, as is the case for the United States, Canada has historically embraced an expeditionary approach when it comes to its strategic culture and 'grand strategy'. "From Paardeberg to Panjwai," as eminent historians David Bercuson and Jack Granatstein have written, "Canadian governments...have believed that one of the key missions of the Canadian military is to deploy abroad."<sup>7</sup> 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 both global threats and other lesser challenges.

In addition to 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.<sup>8,9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

While adopting a global expeditionary attitude to defence policy, Canada has, apart from the World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the early Cold War years, been reluctant to devote a large portion of the national budget to the armed forces thereby limiting the size of its overseas deployments. 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.”<sup>11</sup>

Its particular interests apart, 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 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.” The US is so relatively powerful that it can afford to make unilateral decisions. But, for most allies, 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, first and foremost the US. 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 — by offering greater say over the means and ends of a mission. But this points to the other collective action problem facing NATO: solving the inherent challenge of easy-riding among member countries that are tempted to spend too little on defence and are over-reliant 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. Along with increasing defence spending, participation by Canada and other allies in the EFP will help secure the vital American commitment to NATO as it faces a new and more complex Russian threat.

### **The EFP as insurance policy**

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 US, the UK, Germany, and Canada. In contrast to climate change or cyber-threats, NATO members have a collective interest in ensuring the territorial integrity of member states. Yet, NATO troops confront an adversary with an orders of magnitude larger 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.<sup>12</sup>

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, needs 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 in the form of “little green men,” as NATO likes to refer to the irregulars 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.

## Conclusion

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.<sup>13</sup> 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 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 may 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 Canada's contribution to Baltic security, and 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.<sup>14</sup>

And 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 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 guaranteed the enduring importance of NATO and in so doing has also sustained Canada's commitment and ability to contribute to European security whenever and wherever it has been at risk.

Professor Christian Leuprecht is Matthew Flinders Fellow at Flinders University of South Australia and professor of political science at the Royal Military College of Canada. Joel Sokolsky is Professor of Political Science at the Royal Military College of Canada. He is also a Research Affiliate at the Strategic Studies Program of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Senior Analyst with Wikistrat.com.

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<sup>2</sup> NATO Factsheet. *NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence*. May 2017, [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int). The precise number of actual Canadian personnel remains undisclosed and fluctuates as a function of temporary surges in support of training and exercises.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph T. Jockel, and Joel J. Sokolsky. *Canada and NATO: An Assessment*. Paper presented to the 7<sup>th</sup> 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 "Canada and NATO: Keeping Ottawa in, expenses down, criticism out...and the country secure," *International Journal* Vol. 64 No. 2 (June 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Escott Reid, *Time of Fear and Hope: The Making of the North Atlantic Treaty, 1947-1949*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977): 312.

<sup>5</sup> NATO. *Defence Expenditures in NATO Countries*. NATO Press Release, July 4, 2016, [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int).

<sup>6</sup> Canada, Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa 2017): 46.

<sup>7</sup> 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*, ed. David S. McDonough. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Joel J. Sokolsky, "A Seat at the Table: Canada and Its Allies," *Armed Forces & Security* Vol.16 No.1 (1989): 11-35.

<sup>9</sup> Justin Massie, "Why Democratic Allies Defect Prematurely: Canadian and Dutch Unilateral Pullouts from the War in Afghanistan," *Democracy and Security* Vol. 12 No.2 (2016): 85-113.

<sup>10</sup> 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*, ed. David S. McDonough. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012)

<sup>11</sup> 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* Vol. 5 No. 1 (2007): 1-24.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, three of the four framework countries are federations, and the fourth has a devolved unitary system of government.

<sup>13</sup> Jockel, Joseph T. and Joel J. Sokolsky. "Canada and NATO: An Assessment," paper presented to the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Polish Association of Canadian Studies, Torun. Poland, May 2016.