

## Analysis

### Paying it forward

#### Canada's renewed commitment to NATO's eFP

Christian Leuprecht, Joel Sokolsky, and Jayson Derow

**Immediately prior to the NATO summit in July 2018 Prime Minister Justin Trudeau renewed Canada's commitment to the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) as the Framework Nation for Latvia for four years. The existing mandate of Operation REASSURANCE was to end in March 2019; however, it was expected to be renewed before then.<sup>1</sup> That Canada renewed both its commitment to provide the headquarters and maintain its contribution of some 550 troops to the allied battlegroup, more than half a year prior to the expiration of the existing mandate for an extended four-year period signaled its commitment to a leadership and substantive role. This decision reflects Ottawa's concern about not only the situation in Latvia and the eFP, but also the fate of the alliance itself, Canada's role in it and, indeed, about the future of Canadian defence policy.**

#### **NATO internationalism: "Keep The Russians Out"**

Since the late 1940s, throughout the Cold War, into the post-Cold War and post-9/11 years and up to the point of the July 2018 recommitment to the eFP in Latvia, Canadian defence and foreign policy has been largely influenced by the US-led multilateral, liberal-democratic Western international(ist) security order. This is especially true with regard to Europe through NATO and in North America through a wide array of bilateral defence and security linkages, and the 'binational' North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD). Any suggestion that this order might be coming to an end calls into question Canada's entire defence posture. Though much doubt attended the inception of NATO, the seemingly always problematic and fractious alliance has defied its skeptics and continually puts to the lie predictions of its imminent demise. Canada remains prepared to go to great lengths and incur considerable costs to ensure its "proper place" in the now enlarged NATO alliance. Canada can do so because it has capacity and capability. Canada's commitment to the security of the Baltics, Latvia in particular, while certainly self-interested, also largely represents an effort to persuade the Trump administration that "NATO was neither obsolete nor a club of states free-riding on American largesse as a means of shoring up the alliance."<sup>2</sup>

As a founding member of NATO, the alliance has been a cornerstone of Canadian defence policy for decades. Arguably, nothing runs more counter to Canadian grand strategy than a weakened NATO, let alone a NATO without its most powerful member state: the United States of America. Thus, Canada has every interest to forestall American disengagement. That necessitated Ottawa counter-"tweeting" a steadfast commitment to the Transatlantic alliance, particularly through its renewed commitment to the eFP in Latvia.

## **eFP options: the way ahead**

In making its decision to renew, Canada had to hedge against alternative futures, three of which seem plausible:

1. Status quo. There are no further major Russian provocations. If Russia consolidates its gains instead and allied anxieties subside, Canadian renewal is both politically easy and readily manageable in terms of resource requirements.
2. Russia steps up its pressure on the Baltics. The eFP becomes a higher priority on the US agenda, which calls on NATO allies to double down on their commitments. That would exert pressure on Canada to do more. Such a demand may cause the Canadian government – irrespective of political stripes – some discomfort. However, under this scenario, Ottawa’s main problem will be getting European allies to agree first and contribute as well, many of whom are far more irritated by Trump than Canada. To curry favour, for the sake of allied unity, and to incentivise decision-making, Ottawa could have found itself under pressure to surge military resources. In this context, such a decision would, in fact, come down to additional military forces in the form of enablers, such as Air Defence, long-range precision fire, electronic warfare assets, surveillance, and other similar capabilities, all of which are currently in short supply in the Canadian military. To be sure, additional troops might be useful, but the aforementioned enablers would be a more effective deterrent. The issue then is that the US possesses most of these assets, and as such, any withdraw of their commitment to the security of the Baltic States would surely call into question the ability of NATO member states to provide the much-needed assistance and equipment to assure security in the Baltics should Russia step up its pressure in the region.
3. American disengagement. The Trump administration, given its other defence and security priorities and questioning of the very need for alliances, could lose interest in the Baltics and the eFP, declaring that it was a European problem, and thus should be dealt with by the Europeans. President Trump’s characteristically blunt language says to Europe: “We Americans are busy. You Europeans sort it out.”<sup>3</sup> Yet “European forces are too hollowed out, lack key enablers, and vital logistics, and their leaders are too lacking in political will to respond in force.”<sup>4</sup> This stance on European security reflects a major – yet quite possibly fundamental and prolonged – shift in US national security and foreign policy toward the status quo ante before the Second World War.

### **NATO multilateralism: “Keep the Americans in”**

This third alternative future would be the most difficult for Canada because it would give rise to a serious predicament. Should Canada re-commit, even increase its contribution to show its continued faith in NATO? If the US decision were to weaken NATO to the point where it could no longer play the role of eFP enabler, should Canada still join in an EU-only show of effort in the Baltics as a way of demonstrating the most credible commitment possible for the sake of deterrence? But what really is the future of the alliance, let alone of the eFP, with waning US support and new fissures such a move is bound to open up, is the EU in a position to take over the eFP given the challenges it is already facing? Even if it were in a position to backfill for a US drawdown along the north-eastern frontier, would that be high enough a priority on the EU’s agenda, and even if it were, would there be enough

resources to go around to scale up in Poland, especially without compromising competing EU security operations along its southern flank, across the Middle East, and Africa?

To be sure, Canada could have surged defence spending; but it is unclear whether President Trump would be satisfied with whatever Canada could reasonably inject. Even if Canada were to change course and up its game on defence spending, the nature of the budgetary cycle means that it would have had little bearing on the decision to renew the Latvia mission, since the next federal budget is not due until spring 2019. Since the current government of Prime Minister Trudeau is up for reelection in 2019, in that election budget domestic priorities are bound to trump international and defence spending. To the contrary, the Prime Minister may well decide that President Trump's behaviour during the ultimately successful, but nonetheless renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the insistence that the pact be needlessly re-named United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, combined with the possible continued imposition of tariffs on some Canadian goods and his disparaging ad hominem remarks might well afford Mr. Trudeau ample license and domestic support to resist US pressure to ramp up defence spending.

### **NATO needs: "More Canada"**

No surprise then that Prime Minister Trudeau, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and new Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, were quick to stick to their policy guns, claiming that what counts is not some arbitrary, hard to count, inconsistently applied measure of the portion of national wealth devoted to defence spending, but capacity, capability, and commitments to NATO's collective defence posture. Canada's significant contribution to the eFP not only reflects its standing as one of the most militarily capable NATO member states, but also as having a rather important role in political messaging and establishing credibility of the operation as a whole. Credibility is key to the eFP as a successful mechanism of deterrence against Russian adventurism, and one that can be achieved through various types of messaging. By example, Canada's renewal of its commitment to Baltic security conveys the military capability to inflict substantial costs on an adversary, while denying it any ability to quickly achieve its objectives. In turn, a key feature of the eFP concept is the multinational character and interoperability capacity of the battlegroups. This is politically and militarily crucial in signaling allied solidarity and enables burden-sharing. In this context, having made clear that it is not about to up its "fully costed" spending on defence, Canada only had capacity, capability, and commitments left to leverage. By renewing early for four years, Canada is looking to lead by example: a sustained commitment to the eFP. The hope is that others will follow suit.

Canada and its member state partners in Latvia committing early to renewal sets the pace for renewal by Framework Nations and partners in Estonia and Lithuania. Together, these member states are sending a clear signal to the US: an unambiguous commitment to burden-sharing – at least insofar as the eFP is concerned. Rather than the United States having to corral Canada to commit, as President Obama did when the Americans were looking for a member state with headquarters capacity to become the Framework Nation in Latvia, Canada is now looking to corral the United States: making sure the US recommits as the eFP Framework Nation for Poland and stays the course on the European Deterrence Initiative as a way of staying the course on Russia. In an additional show of commitment to the eFP, the Canadian government has signaled its intent to post Canadian Armed Forces

members and their families to the Canadian Headquarters element in Latvia. Former Commander of the eFP Battlegroup Latvia, Brigadier-General Simon Hetherington, said the decision to station Canadian Armed Forces, and potentially their families, in the Baltics permanently, is to ensure a “consistent and continuous presence in Latvia.” This degree of commitment is unique amongst eFP Framework Nations and NATO member countries and signals a level of commitment and partnership well beyond the rotational elements of the battlegroup.

### **eFP framework nation: paying it forward**

Concretely, as a Framework Nation in Latvia, Canada contributes 455 of the approximate 1,175 foreign NATO member state troops in the land domain, consisting of a headquarters component and parts of a battlegroup with a Canadian infantry battalion as well as reconnaissance and support elements. That amounts to almost 40% of the total non-indigenous troop strength contributed by NATO allies to the eFP in Latvia, and approximately 10% of the combined total non-indigenous troop strength contributed by Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, which sits at approximately 4,547 troops as of May 2018. Canada’s commitment will increase to 540 troops in spring 2019. 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 Canada’s commitment to Latvia actually surpasses the proportion of Canadian troops stationed in Europe during the Cold War.

By contrast, the costs for Canada to defect from the eFP, let alone its commitment as a Framework Nation, are high. Defection would have closed doors, let down old and new friends, wasted human and political capital along with the political-military credibility Canada’s commitment to the eFP has generated. Canada would be abandoning a low-risk mission that continues to pay dividend in developing Canadian and partner military capability, interoperability, training, and readiness to act in face of the ever-changing security environment.

What is more, at the Brussels Summit in July 2018 Canada also committed to assume command of NATO’s new multinational non-combat training and capacity building mission in Iraq for its first year of operation. The Canadian government regards that this mission is the natural next step in so far as it is Ottawa’s objective to move forward from the militarily successful fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and assist in building institutional capacity of Iraq’s security forces, its defence and security institutions, and its national defence academies to establish robust foundations for long-term peace, security, and stability. This will entail the deployment of up to 250 Canadian Armed Forces personnel and assets from fall 2018 to fall 2019. NATO’s efforts, and in turn the efforts of the Canadian government, are focused at the national level and not directed at capacity building of non-state actors such as the Peshmerga. Canada is now leading on NATO’s most important in-area and out-of-area missions: the eFP and Iraq.

### **NATO Needs (More Than) Americans To Operate**

Parallels to Canada’s deployment to Afghanistan are compelling. Its military commitment to the US-led coalition operations in Afghanistan was considered a means to buttress the

credibility of Canada's relationship with the United States as well as the transatlantic multilateral alliance. Canadian forces deployed to Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 and Ottawa significantly augmented its commitment in 2005. Between 2007 and 2011, Canada ranked first among NATO allies in terms of the share of its military personnel deployed to Afghanistan as a percentage of its armed forces. Canadian troops suffered the third highest ratio of casualties among the multinational coalition as a share of troops deployed. The fundamental question then comes forward: Why did Canada carry such a considerable share of the burden, which is so evident from the aforementioned statistics? Massie and Zyla argue "the size and riskiness of Canada's military deployments as part of the ISAF operation not only reflected Canada's value for the alliance but also aimed at revamping the country's international status as a leading military ally."<sup>5</sup>

Canada offers a military that is highly regarded, robust, competent, and well-equipped. As such, Canada has become the paradigm for analysts arguing that the United States' favoured metric of spending 2% of GDP on defence is arbitrary, and what matters is effective contributions to coalition operations when requested to do so. This metric, at times, tends to discount the efforts of allies who make meaningful contributions to the alliance, while still falling short of the 2% threshold. By example, what we are currently witnessing as part of the eFP in Latvia is certainly a continuation of Canada's long-standing commitment to NATO – once again dispatching forces to Europe and lending its capabilities and highly sophisticated military expertise to bolster the stability and security of a region that remains essential to Canada's national interests. This commitment to the protection of security on the European continent has become a testament to the success and the strength of the NATO alliance.

Although a US decision to step back from the eFP and the Baltic States would call into question the future of the alliance, Ottawa is presently assuring its European allies that it will hold firm to its current policy, affirming Canada's commitment to its solidarity with Ukraine, and remaining committed to the 29-state alliance without it becoming weakened should the US scale back its involvement in European security. By providing a sustained military presence in Europe, Canada's leadership of and significant contribution to the battleground in Latvia reaffirm the country's standing as an effective ally when it comes to providing for the protection of European security.

In the end, the motivation of states to contribute to NATO operations is more than a function of threat perceptions, domestic defence spending decisions or the perceived need to satisfy American burden-sharing complaints (whether diplomatically or rudely conveyed). Rather, what explains some states' motivations is an appreciation for the overall health of the alliance – alliance value – and a perceived need to increase their overall stature on the international stage – status enhancement.<sup>6</sup> This explains why Canada is not shy in arguing, to foreign and domestic audiences alike, that it is doing its fair share in strengthening the deterrence and defence posture of NATO. "[W]hy invest billions to maintain a capable, professional, well-funded and well-equipped Canadian military?", Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland asks. The answer for Freeland is obvious: "To rely solely on the US national security umbrella would make us a client state.... [s]uch a dependence would not be in Canada's interest.... It is by pulling our weight... in all our international partnerships, that we, in fact, have weight." In that regard, given current fiscal constraints, the eFP is a manageable international commitment to the NATO alliance. In turn, it is a

commitment that advantages the Canada-US relationship by demonstrating a willingness to “share the burden” without significantly increasing current defence spending, which is at \$25.5 billion for the 2018/2019 fiscal year.

Canada’s approach is in keeping with its recent defence White Paper – *Strong. Secure. Engaged*. Given the uncertainty and complexity of the global security environment and, inescapable and profound implications for Canadian security, “Canada will pursue leadership roles and will prioritise interoperability in its planning and capability development to ensure seamless cooperation with allies and partners.... The Canadian Armed Forces will be prepared to make concrete contributions to Canada’s role as a responsible international actor.” The political benefit of this approach to engaging in eFP Latvia demonstrates Ottawa’s willingness to deploy its military assets in support of common defence objectives, notwithstanding Canada’s defence expenditures falling well below the objective of 2% of GDP for NATO members – currently sitting at 1.23%.

### **Conclusion**

A commitment to NATO has been central to Canada’s foreign and defence policy for almost 70 years. The Atlantic alliance always entailed much more than providing a countervailing balance to Soviet power, and now to Russian overt and covert provocations. The interdependence and interconnectedness of the modern world demands an Atlantic alliance that can maintain its unity in word and deed. The enduring commitment of Canada to the protection of security on the European continent has become a testament to the success and the strength of NATO. Along with the continuation of the European integration project, NATO has brought stability and democratic norms and values to post- Cold War Europe, West and East.

Today the true strength and effectiveness of the NATO alliance is certainly being tested again. While Russian adventurism is unlikely to rival the Cold War in its degree of danger, it will nonetheless represent an unsettling source of European instability into the future. In this uncertain security environment, Canada needs NATO to remain strong, ready, and capable of forging interdependencies between European states to be better positioned to respond to the challenges that may seem local, but actually threaten the entire rules-based international order.<sup>7</sup>

The eFP is a practical and symbolic testament to NATO’s willingness to meet those challenges; a measure and litmus test of the alliance’s collective faith in its enduring purpose and future relevance. Through its renewed significant and welcomed commitments in Latvia and elsewhere Canada has demonstrated its willingness to help sustain that purpose and future.

Christian Leuprecht is a Munk Senior Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute and Class of 1965 Professor in Leadership at the Royal Military College of Canada. Dr. Joel J. Sokolsky is a Professor of Political Science at the Royal Military College of Canada and Senior Analyst with Wikistrat.com. Jayson J.R. Derow is an 8-year veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces and a Research Analyst at the NATO Association of Canada.

Would you like to react?

Mail the editor: [redactie@atlcom.nl](mailto:redactie@atlcom.nl).

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an abridged version of a chapter by the same title that appeared in *Security in the Baltic Sea Region Revisited amid the Baltic Centenary*, eds. Andris Spruds and Maris Andzans. Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> James R. McKay. 'Why Canada is best explained as a "reliable ally" in 2017', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 16, no. 2, 2018, 137-164.

<sup>3</sup> 'NATO: The Enduring Alliance 2016', *Atlantic Treaty Association*, 2016, [www.atahq.org](http://www.atahq.org).

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Massie, Benjamin Zyla. 'Alliance Value and Status Enhancement: Canada's Disproportionate Military Burden Sharing in Afghanistan', *Politics & Policy* 46, no. 2, 2018, 320-344.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> Dov Seidman, James Stavridis. 'Supreme Allied Commander Stavridis: Donald Trump is so Wrong About NATO', *Time*, July 21, 2016, <http://time.com>.