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Canada as framework nation

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As a smaller ally far from Europe, Canada is not an obvious choice for being a Framework Nation. Yet NATO's goal to enhance the security of its Allies on the border with Russia has precedent in Canada's century-long strategic commitment to Europe. Close cooperation with the United States and with NATO Allies is the essence of Canada's defence posture. Russia upending Europe's post-Cold War order in 2014 was a direct challenge to Canada's strategic interests. Canada's strategic relationship with Europe is second only to the United States. It has a vested interest in the territorial integrity of NATO Allies, which, if compromised, risks undermining European unity and stability.

Canada's interest in Europe transcends security and defence. Canada recently negotiated a Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement (CETA) with the European Union (EU). Though modest in overall volume of trade, the political symbolism of the CETA allows for deeper trade relations. The crisis with Russia re-ignited a sense of principle and purpose for Canadian involvement in Europe. Canada's relationship with NATO and the EU is not only about interests but also a set of values given how NATO fosters a rules-based international order that is guided by "the principles of individual liberty, democracy, and the rule of law..."² Moreover, Russia's actions in Ukraine and its threatening posture towards the Baltic nations also resonates in Canada. Over one million Canadian citizens – and voters – identify as being of Ukrainian descent. Many other Canadians trace their ancestry to the Baltic states and other Eastern and Central European countries that had

1 This study draws partly from C. Leuprecht and J. Derow, "Conceptions of deterrence: the eFP's political and military posture", in M. Ozawa (ed.) "The Alliance five years after Crimea: implementing the Wales Summit pledges", *NDC Research Paper 7*, NATO Defense College, Rome, 2019; C. Leuprecht, J. Sokolsky, and J. Derow, "Paying it forward: Canada's renewed Commitment to NATO's enhanced Forward Presence", *International Journal*, Vol.74, No.1, 2019, pp.162–171; and from A. Moens, J. Waugh, and C. Turdeanu, "NATO's place in Canada's interest-focused and rules-based international order", *The Riga Conference Papers*, Riga, Latvia Institute of International Affairs, 2019.

2 NATO, North Atlantic Treaty Preamble, 4 April 1949, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm/

been subjected to the Soviet oppression. Accordingly, there was considerable domestic pressure for Canada to act.³

By taking on the role of Framework Nation in the largest multilateral mission to contain Russia since the end of the Cold War, Canada is signalling that NATO remains a top defence priority. Among the four Framework Nations, Canada leads and integrates the most multinational force while bolstering domestic resilience to counter Russian information operations that endeavour to undermine the cohesion of the Alliance. Notwithstanding challenges relating to sustained warfighting, domestic and political ambivalence about the mission in Canada, the eFP's Latvian Battle Group highlights the promise of effective multilateral cooperation without direct US participation.

Setting up the eFP

Although Canada had played an important role in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, there was a sense that the then Conservative government under Stephen Harper eventually soured on NATO. Allies' caveats often left Canada's Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar exposed.⁴ Ottawa did not participate in the post-ISAF Resolute Support mission and ended its contribution in the Airborne Warning and Control System mission.

Since late 2015, however, Canada has reinforced its role in NATO, with its commitment being most tangibly expressed in its role of eFP Framework Nation to Latvia. What explains this assignment? The Afghanistan experience came in handy when deciding who would be responsible for what state. The United Kingdom had already worked with Estonia, and Germany with Lithuania. Poland has long had close defence and security relations with the United States. This narrowed down the options to four potential states with the necessary multinational headquarters capacity and experience to lead the mission in Latvia: France, Spain, Italy, and Canada. France was already engaged in Mali and at home as part of anti-terrorism activities. Spain was amidst an election without a government that had the legal authority to commit. Italy was preoccupied with NATO's southern flank.

Canada became the default. Eastern European allies wanted to see Canada commit to the eFP in Latvia. Canada had already vowed to defend the interests of the Baltic states in the event of an armed attack. Moreover, Operation Reassurance had enlisted a Canadian presence in the region since April 2014, conducting exercises and interoperability training

3 D. Sanders, "How Ukrainian politics became the most Canadian of politics", *Globe and Mail*, 5 July 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-how-ukrainian-politics-became-the-most-canadian-of-politics/>

4 D. P. Auerswald and S. M. Saideman, *NATO in Afghanistan: fighting together, fighting alone*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2014.

in Poland and the Baltic states. Given Canada's presence and experience in the region, Allies anticipated that Ottawa would surely contribute. Importantly, the foreign policy articulated by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau highlighted a renewed Canadian dedication to multilateralism. In the words of a senior policy adviser, this dedication to multilateralism resulted from "Trudeau's brand of internationalism, which blends small l-liberal idealism and interest-based realism".⁵ It was clear from Justin Trudeau's first interactions with Vladimir Putin at the G20 summit in 2015 that Canada would continue to oppose Russia's actions in Ukraine. The appointment of Chrystia Freeland as foreign minister in 2017, given her unique understanding of Ukrainian culture and resolve to maintain the liberal international order, further strengthened the perception that the Trudeau government would stand by Eastern European NATO Allies.⁶ At the same time, this mission was ready-made for Canada to mitigate persistent complaints from Washington about NATO burden-sharing.

Indeed, Canada ended up being the last Framework Nation to be determined. Most observers believe that the Stephen Harper government, which lost the October 2015 election, was reluctant to commit to another NATO mission. However, both "friends of Canada" on the inside of NATO and President Barack Obama by direct phone conversation with the Canadian Prime Minister advocated with the Canadian government to commit to lead a multinational effort in Latvia.⁷ NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had also requested Canada's participation. One complication was the government's concern that a relatively large military undertaking – by Canadian standards – could hamper the newly elected government's promised commitment to return to peacekeeping by contributing, for example, to the UN mission in Mali. Canada would not be able to sustain two major missions in two different regions. However, a day after US President Obama explicitly courted a larger NATO commitment from Canada in a speech before the Parliament of Canada, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan announced Canada's commitment as the eFP Framework Nation for Latvia, stating: "Canada stands side by side with its NATO Allies working to deter aggression and assure peace and stability in Europe".⁸

Some 400 Canadian troops began deploying in early 2017, led by the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. By February 2019, Battlegroup Latvia (BG LVA) consisted of

5 R. Paris, "Justin Trudeau and Canadian foreign policy", in N. Hillmer and P. Lagasse (eds.), *Justin Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p.18.

6 *Ibid.*, pp.22 and 46.

7 Confidential interview with Canadian policy official by authors, 21 May 2019.

8 Quoted in O. Dzadan, "Canada to send troops to Latvia to bolster NATO forces in stand against potential aggression from Russia", *National Post*, 30 June 2016, <http://nationalpost.com/news/politics/canada-to-send-troops-to-latvia-to-bolster-nato-forces-instand-against-potential-aggression-from-russia>

roughly 1,400 troops with eight participating NATO member states. Sizeable Spanish, Polish, and Italian subcomponents featured prominently inside the Canadian battlegroup as did smaller contingents from other European allies.

Canada now leads the most multinational battlegroup ever put together in the NATO context below the level of a Brigade.⁹ Such a highly visible multilateral role nicely suits Trudeau's stated multilateralism. Seasoned observers surmised that the multinationalism of BG LVA was the result of competing demands on a country with a modest defence budget and thus relatively small pool of Canadian capacity and personnel. The mission provides the Canadian Armed Forces and other established medium-sized NATO partners with an opportunity to train with new and less capable member states. Canada is thus making common cause to learn to work together and harness synergies as yet another way to enhance burden-sharing within the Alliance: these countries, or a subset, might henceforth be able to deploy more effectively on future missions.¹⁰

In May 2018 the Canadian government decided to renew its eFP lead nation role for an unprecedented five years, until March 2023.¹¹ It also increased the number of Canadian troops from 455 to 540. The decision came a year before the existing commitment in Latvia would run out.¹² It reflects Ottawa's concern for not only the situation in Latvia and the eFP, but also the fate of NATO itself, Canada's role in it, and, indeed, the future of Canadian defence policy. In light of the highly critical public relations battle waged by the White House over Allied defence spending, Ottawa had incentives to placate the White House by doubling down on its current commitments. Hence Ottawa agreed to lead NATO's advise and assist mission to Iraq. Canada's level of participation in NATO missions had far exceeded its contribution to UN peacekeeping despite the new Liberal government's earlier musings about the latter.¹³ It took nearly two years for the Canadian government to come through with its modest, six-month, time-limited contribution to the UN mission in Mali – a commitment that ended in 2019.

9 Confidential interview with Canadian official by authors, 11 June 2019.

10 C. Leuprecht, A. Lanoszka, A. J. Derow, and K. Muti, "Future multilateral cooperation: leveraging the NATO enhanced Forward Presence two years on", in A. Spruds, M. Andzans, and S. Sraders (eds.), *Riga Conference Papers 2019: NATO at 70 in the Baltic Sea Region*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, pp.15-31.

11 "Operation Reassurance", *Government of Canada*, 15 November 2018, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-reassurance.html>

12 C. Leuprecht *et al.*, "Paying it forward", p.167.

13 J. R. McKay, "Why Canada is best explained as a 'reliable ally' in 2017", *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol.16, No.2, 2018, p.137.

Assessing the Canadian-led Latvia mission

The eFP deployment deters Russia by means of a multilateral allied military presence, but as said in previous chapters of this volume, hesitation exists in calling it a tripwire force. Latvian forces used to be augmented by small units of rapidly rotating US and NATO forces. Now, there is a continuous multinational presence of more than 1,100 soldiers composed of nine NATO Allies.

Multi-nationality poses a challenge to military efficiency, and thus the credibility of deterrence. By spreading risk, however, it reinforces political deterrence, which is just as important an offset. Canada's leadership in the BG LVA has introduced a high tempo of training as well as adaptive military diplomacy to enhance multinational cooperation. Two times per year, BG LVA goes through a certification process, which is arguably more stringent than in the other eFPs, to qualify as "fully integrated and battle ready". This level of interoperability below the brigade level is unprecedented in NATO.

Canada has also been dispelling Russian influence operations. Specifically, Russian disinformation tactics have sought to delegitimize the eFP among the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia. In the first year of the eFP, Russian-speaking media outlets accused NATO troops of polluting the environment and inflating real estate prices. By 2019, Russian-language attempts at disseminating false news had been on the wane. Information attacks focussed on NATO in general rather than the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) mission. In 2020, however, COVID-19-related information attacks surged: CAF members were allegedly bringing the virus to Latvia.¹⁴

Canadian countermeasures push out messages that debunk false claims that Russian actors level against CAF members and the CAF mission in Latvia. The CAF works with local authorities, such as the Latvian Ministry of Defence, to set the record straight on troops spreading coronavirus. In collaboration with other NATO partners, the CAF neutralizes false narratives with accurate counter-narratives. Although reactive and limited in reach, Latvians seem to appreciate having the CAF in the country, notwithstanding Russian efforts to convince them otherwise. CAF members prioritize engaging with locals so that Latvians can understand the CAF presence and how CAF members measure up against the negative narratives spread by Russia.¹⁵

14 Interview with multiple Canadian officials and officers in Latvia, June 2018 and 24-28 June 2019; and C. Pinkerton, "Canadians lead fight against Russian disinformation in Latvia", *iPolitics*, 18 June 2018, <https://ipolitics.ca/2018/06/28/canadians-lead-fight-against-russian-disinformation-in-latvia/>; and M. Brewster, "Canadian-led NATO battlegroup in Latvia targeted by pandemic disinformation campaign", *CBC News*, 24 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/nato-latvia-battle-group-pandemic-covid-coronavirus-disinformation-russia-1.5581248>

15 M. Montgomery, "Canadian NATO soldiers in Latvia targeted by disinformation campaign", RCI, 25 May 2020, <https://www.rcinet.ca/en/2020/05/25/canadian-nato-soldiers-in-latvia-nato-targeted-by-misinformation-campaign/>; and Brewster, "Canadian-led NATO Battlegroup".

The extent to which Canada has been proactive in the battle of ideas for the hearts and minds of the Latvian people is an important complement to effective military deterrence. On the one hand, Canada set up Task Force Latvia headquarters (TFL HQ) in Riga with continuous officers and staff to assure continuity of communication and progress across battlegroup rotations. Housed in the Latvian Brigade's HQ, it creates a permanent liaison. Although the BG LVA rotates every six months, officers in the TFL HQ are typically on three-year rotations. On the other, the Embassy, the TFL-HQ, and BG LVA have taken a "whole-of-government" approach. Political, economic, and military actions and messages are integrated and transmit the same themes. In terms of civil-military relations, the aim is to thwart Russian claims that NATO is an occupier and to reassure Latvia's ethnic Russian minority that NATO does not threaten any aspect of Latvian society. It forges domestic resilience in the face of persistent Russian influence operations by showing that NATO is a good citizen that is ultimately there to help Latvia help itself. The message is taken across Latvia to community and civil-society events.

All eFPs, including BG LVA, face the challenge of how NATO is capable of reinforcing or retaliating should it be confronted by adversarial aggression. In terms of covert and hybrid threats, the eFP is, of course, not the first responder. Still, the TFL is aware of Latvian plans and ready to assist if called upon. In the case of a large-scale attack of conventional forces on Latvia, the eFP task of "deterrence-by-denial" could be reinforced. It needs sufficient deterrence effect so that "the punishment imposes costs on an adversary that are greater than the adversary's valuation of the gains through action".¹⁶ NATO is aware of vulnerabilities in reinforcing the Baltic missions. It must overcome the growing Russian capacity to deny NATO access to redeploy forces from the centre to the periphery of the Alliance on short notice. For the VJTF to support such a multinational battlegroup as the one led by Canada is key to the eFP's credible deterrence posture. To this effect, NATO is setting up a wider division-level command and control structure as well as Joint Support and enabling command and function nearer the geographical location of the eFPs.

The Canadian-led BG LVA draws on forces from eight contributing member states – more than twice the contributing states than the other three eFP country deployments. National forces have potentially conflicting rules of engagement and greater variation in military equipment. Accordingly, the inability to pre-position VJTF equipment and troops due to the diverse multinational structure of the eFP battlegroup in an area under imminent or pending threat could prove to be a liability. As several security analysts warn, "[t]he VJTF is not regionally aligned, so if a conflict in [...] one area erupts at the same

16 J. Arnold, "NATO's Readiness Action Plan: strategic benefits and outstanding challenges", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol.10, No.1, 2016, p.82.

time as another crisis requiring a NATO response, the VJTF might be unavailable". The overall combat readiness and capacity of the battlegroups risks being compromised or relegated to "ineffective 'Frankenstein' battalions".¹⁷ Although NATO is addressing these problems and the Canadian-led battlegroup has added more firepower, Canada alone or in conjunction with other Allies could do more to boost the conventional defence value of its mission.

There is also room to enhance cooperation among the four battlegroups. Polish and Lithuanian eFP forces exercise jointly, but others do not. Baltic regional defence cooperation remains fragmented and falls short of realizing its full potential. The three Baltic eFPs could do more to overcome the traditional and historic lack of military cooperation among Baltic states. A recent report by an Estonian think tank observes: "there is a distinct impression that none of the three Baltic states regard trilateral military cooperation as an absolute priority, and that they only invoke its ideals as a matter of political ritual".¹⁸ At one point, each Baltic country's priority was likely to work bilaterally with the United States. As of late, there is a growing sense of each working with NATO. Absent a more robust effort at multilateralism, the security architecture in the Baltic region risks assuming a hub-and-spoke character that encourages strong ties between the United States and local partners to the detriment of weak ties among themselves and among their respective Framework Nations. Even the eFP battalions deployed in the Baltic region risk prioritizing bilateralism between Framework and Host Nations at the expense of wider multilateralism among both Host and Contributing Nations. For example, rather than Canada and Latvia being hub nations within a multiplayer network, each has set up their defence relations as a hub-and-spoke network between one another and each Contributing Nation. Doing so risks missing opportunities to build military and political cohesion among subsets of NATO partners as well as greater resiliency within the Alliance.

The eFP initiative in Latvia, therefore, should encourage the participating states to overcome geographic divides, exchange lessons learned, and develop new skills and expertise, as well as tactical synergies to increase common understanding and interoperability. Enhanced cooperation offers a powerful rejoinder to the criticism that NATO countries are insufficiently bearing the burden of collective and regional defence.

Canada's actions in Latvia also can benefit from better exposure and support on the domestic front. Canada's government could be better at articulating how Canadian actions in NATO advance both Canadian values and interests. The government is making this case on the international stage but seems reluctant to do so at home. Canada's ambitious

17 W. Clark *et al.*, *Closing NATO's Baltic gap*, Tallinn, International Centre for Defence and Security, 2016, p.18.

18 T. Jermalavicius *et al.*, *NATO's Northeast quartet: prospects and opportunities for Baltic-Polish defence cooperation*, Tallinn, International Centre for Defence and Security, 2018, p.186.

pace of NATO deployments in Latvia, Ukraine, and most recently in the training mission in Iraq, and the operational requirements that come with them are only sustainable with broad understanding and support from Canadians. An uninformed public and absence of scholarly work accompanying Canadian policies in NATO leaves the Canadian government orphaned in success or failure.¹⁹

Conclusion

Canada has committed itself to European security since the watershed year of 2014. Besides the eFP mission in Latvia, Canada is involved with several NATO Allies in a training and capacity-building mission with some 200 troops in Ukraine. A Canadian ship regularly patrols with the two Standing Maritime Groups assigned to the NATO Response Force. Four or five CF-18 fighter jets take turns with various Allies in NATO air policing missions in the Baltic states and Romania.²⁰ In 2018, Canada agreed to lead the NATO training mission in Iraq, which now includes some 250 personnel.²¹ By its active participation in so many missions, Canada is pushing back on the perception that NATO is yesterday's alliance. To the contrary, NATO remains Canada's most important multilateral institution precisely because it acts as a force multiplier for Canada's core interests.

As it doubles down on NATO, Canada now has a greater stake in making NATO's positions tenable. In Latvia, this includes boosting NATO's political and military deterrence value through robust forward defence and demonstrating that the Alliance is resolute in countering aggression against its members. The Latvia eFP mission also allows Canada to optimize inter-operational synergies for future collective deployments elsewhere: a military and political mini-Alliance within the Alliance. Ostensibly, that not only advances burden-sharing, but also raises Canada's leverage in decision-making in the North Atlantic Council about future deployments. Influence in higher allied councils has long been a justification for and assumption about Canadian military commitments, but, except for the early 1950s, Ottawa has never committed sufficient troops to influence allied decision-making since it never really had a distinct policy agenda for which to press. Canada is, however, capitalizing on its expertise in civil-military relations in the Latvia mission. As adversarial influence operations become a staple of the regional and global threat environment, expertise in societal resilience is bound to be in high demand.

19 To change the academic culture of neglect and to prepare Canadian students for careers in defence and diplomacy, the authors are part of a new annual programme called the NATO Field School and Simulation Program. This new academic initiative serves to introduce Canadian and other NATO member university students to NATO's values, processes, and interests by interacting, observing, experiencing, and simulating. See <https://www.sfu.ca/natofieldschool.html>

20 "Operation Reassurance", Government of Canada, 15 November 2018, <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-reassurance.html>

21 "Canada to command NATO mission in Iraq for a second year", Government of Canada, 26 June 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/news/2019/06/canada-to-command-nato-mission-in-iraq-for-a-second-year.html>