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# Commentary

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## Paying It Forward: Sustaining the Transatlantic Relationship with Canada's Mission in the Baltics

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### Introduction

Immediately prior to NATO's Brussels summit in July 2018, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau renewed Canada's commitment to NATO's mission in Latvia. He extended Canada's leadership role as the framework nation of NATO's multinational enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) deployment in Latvia.

The eFP is a mission by NATO forces to buttress Eastern Europe and the Baltics against a revanchist Russia. As the lead Framework Nation, Canadian troops lead a multinational battlegroup in Latvia; other Framework Nations include the US in Poland, the UK in Estonia, and Germany in Lithuania. Canada's deployment to Latvia, under the existing mandate of *Operation Reassurance*, was to end in March 2019, though it was expected to be renewed before then, so the prime minister's commitment was not surprising.

That Canada renewed more than half a year prior to the expiration of the existing mandate for an extended four-year period signalled that this country intends to sustain its leadership in funding and staffing of both the eFP's headquarters and battlegroup in Latvia. Indeed, Canada had also boosted the number of troops deployed in Latvia to 540. These decisions reflect 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.

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In a recent MLI study, “On the Baltic Watch: The Past, Present and Future of Canada’s Commitment to NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia,” we had examined this mission in detail and concluded that it was best viewed as a prudent insurance policy (Sokolsky, Leuprecht and Derow 2018). In this commentary, we will extend our analysis to include some more recent developments pertaining to this mission.

## History and background

Canada’s decision to renew its commitment came on the heels of a June letter from US President Donald Trump that chided Canada for not meeting NATO’s aspirational target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence. Trump castigated NATO members generally for not fairly sharing the financial burden associated with supporting NATO. His comments followed previous remarks about NATO’s irrelevance in which he noted that the United States was dealing with North Korea unilaterally. In that role, he had suspended military exercises without prior consultation with allies in the Indo-Pacific. NATO allies were concerned that Trump might also unilaterally offer similar concessions to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Since the late 1940s, through the Cold War, and up to 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 via a wide array of bilateral defence and security linkages and the “bi-national” North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD). Any suggestion that this order might be coming to an end calls into question Canada’s entire defence strategy.

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Although much doubt attended the inception of NATO, the seemingly always problematic and fractious alliance has defied its skeptics and continues to put to the lie predictions of its imminent demise. Canada was at the alliance’s creation and remained a part of it throughout the Cold War, into the 1990s, and following September 11 (after which the alliance played a significant role in Afghanistan), up until today, when the worldwide security situation is rapidly evolving. 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 both capacity and capability.

Canada’s commitment to the security of the Baltics – Latvia in particular – while certainly self-interested, is also to a large extent 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” (McKay 2018). The pall that President Trump has cast over America’s commitment to the Atlantic Alliance is potentially very problematic for Canada.

As a founding member of NATO, Canada has for decades seen the alliance as a cornerstone of this country’s defence policy. Arguably, nothing runs more counter to Canada’s grand strategy than a weakened NATO, let alone a NATO without the United States, its most powerful member state. Hence, Canada has every interest in forestalling American disengagement, which has necessitated its telegraphing a steadfast commitment to NATO, particularly through its renewed commitment to the eFP in Latvia.

## Potential US actions

To be sure, recent votes in Congress and the reaction from past and present members of the American foreign policy elite indicate that the president's ideas of what made the United States great and what an effective "America First" policy requires is not universally shared in the United States. Nevertheless, given both the president's power to shape foreign policy and the strength of Trump's base (which identifies with his anti-NATO rhetoric), going into the 2018 and 2020 elections the Atlantic Alliance would be wise to hedge its bets.

In the next few months, President Trump may well try to cut a Singapore-style deal with Vladimir Putin, since Trump does not believe that Russia poses a (genuine existential) threat to the United States. Under that scenario, Trump would stop burying transatlantic differences for the sake of anti-Russian unity. He would defect from the NATO consensus on deterring Russia, dispense with perceived defence free-riders and instead put a premium on "offshore balancing" to "bring the troops home." And he would stop holding joint US and NATO exercises along the eastern flank. That would spell the likely end of the eFP. France might opt to keep the eFP on life support by backfilling for the US as a framework nation in Poland, but as a wholly European mission without US backing, the eFP's deterrent effect would be much diminished.

## Canada's decision on the eFP in the face of three possible alternatives

In making its decision in June to renew its commitment to the eFP, Canada was hedging against alternative futures, three of which seem particularly likely:

1. *Status quo*. There are no major Russian provocations. If, instead, Russia consolidates its gains and allied anxieties subside, Canadian renewal is politically easy and the resource requirements are readily manageable.
2. *Russia steps up its pressure on the Baltics*. The eFP becomes a higher priority for the US, with Washington then calling for NATO allies to double down on their commitments. That request would exert pressure on Canada to do more. Coming from the Trump administration, such a demand may cause the Canadian government (of any political stripe) some discomfort. However, under this scenario, Ottawa's main problems would be, first, getting agreement from European allies and, second, to get them to contribute to the effort.

Many of those allies are far more irritated by Trump than Canada is. To curry favour for the sake of allied unity and to convince the European allies to make the necessary decisions, Ottawa could find itself under pressure to greatly increase its military resources in the region. Such a decision would require the deployment of additional military forces, in particular capabilities that would better enable success in any military conflict, such as air defence, artillery capable of long-range precision fires, 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 enablers would be a more effective deterrent. The issue, then, is that the US possesses most of these assets. Any withdrawal of their commitment to the security of the

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Baltic states would lead to questions about the ability of NATO member states 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 the need for alliances, could lose interest in the Baltics and the eFP entirely, declaring that it is a European problem, and thus should be dealt with by the Europeans. President Trump's characteristically blunt language would say to Europe: "We Americans are busy. You Europeans sort it out!" (Atlantic Treaty Association 2016). 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" (Atlantic Treaty Association 2016).

Based on Trump's surprise adoption of North Korean rhetoric about American military "provocation" and his offer to sacrifice US-South Korean military exercises while floating the idea of a general pull-back of US forces in the Asia-Pacific area, America may well retrench from NATO-enabling commitments in Europe, especially those that Russia has long deemed an affront. The eFP is first and foremost among such "provocations." This would reflect a major, yet quite possibly fundamental and prolonged shift in US national security and foreign policy toward the pre-World War Two *status quo ante*. That approach was already detectable at the end of the Cold War, but was delayed by unipolarity, Clinton's internationalist engagement, NATO enlargement, and the neo-imperialist moment precipitated by 9/11.

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This third alternative future would be the most difficult for Canada because it would give rise to a serious predicament. 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?

## Will Canada have to choose between Europe and the United States?

What would be the future of the alliance, let alone of the eFP, with waning US support and new fissures a further US disengagement would 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 replace troops and assets following any US drawdown along the north-eastern frontier, would it be a high enough priority on the EU's agenda? Even if it were, would there be enough resources to go around so it could 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 increase its defence spending, but it is unclear whether President Trump would take notice, let alone be satisfied with whatever resources Canada could reasonably inject. This is especially true given the federal government's highly fiscally-constrained environment. Even if Canada were to change course and raise defence spending, the nature of the budgetary cycle means that it would have had little bearing on the immediate future, since the next federal budget is not due until spring 2019. Since the current Trudeau government is up for reelection in 2019, in that election budget domestic priorities are bound to take pre-

cedence over international and defence spending. To the contrary, the prime minister may well decide that Trump's recent imposition of tariffs on some Canadian goods and his disparaging *ad hominem* remarks gives him licence and domestic support to resist US pressure to ramp up defence spending.

## Canada's strong support of the eFP

It is no surprise, then, that in the face of President's Trumps calls for NATO countries to do more, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and new Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte were quick to stick to their policy guns. All three claimed 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 role as one of the most militarily capable NATO member states, but its relative importance in getting across the organization's political message and establishing the operation's general credibility.

Credibility will be key to the eFP's success at deterring Russian adventurism, and that credibility can be achieved through various types of messaging. For example, Canada's renewal of its commitment to Baltic security in general, and Latvian security in particular, conveys that it is militarily capable of inflicting substantial costs on an adversary while denying it any ability to quickly achieve its objectives (Luik and Praks 2017).

In turn, a key feature of the eFP is its multinational character and the interoperable capacity of its battlegroups. This is politically and militarily crucial in signaling allied solidarity and enables all countries involved to share the burden of protecting the Baltics (Luik and Praks 2017). In this context, having made clear that it is not about to increase 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: it will offer a sustained commitment to the eFP. The hope is that others will follow suit. Also of note, Canada's position as a Framework Nation differs from that of the UK in Estonia, Germany in Lithuania, and the US in Poland insofar as Latvia involves contributions from (many) more NATO members countries: together, they make up a third of the alliance.

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## Measuring Canada's commitment in Latvia

Because Canada and its member state partners in Latvia have committed early to renewing the eFP agreement, that has set the pace for renewal by other framework nations and partners in Estonia and Lithuania. Together, these member states are sending a clear signal to the United States: there is an unambiguous commitment among them to sharing the burden of costs and assets, at least insofar as the eFP is concerned. Rather than the United States having to corral Canada to commit to supporting the eFP, 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. Canada wants to make sure the US recommits as the eFP framework nation for Poland and stays the course on the European Deterrence Initiative as a way of continuing to deter Russia.

In a show of additional commitment to the eFP, the Canadian government has signalled its intent to post Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members and their families to the Canadian headquarters in Latvia. Former commander of the eFP Battlegroup Latvia, Brigadier-General Simon Hetherington, said the decision to station CAF (and potentially their families) permanently in the Baltics is to ensure a “consistent and continuous presence in Latvia... We’ve learned over the years that we have to have that consistency at a command level” (Graney 2017).

This degree of commitment, with Canadians stationed in an open-ended assignment that could last years and see Canadian families join the soldiers, is unique amongst eFP framework nations and NATO member countries. It signals a level of commitment and partnership well beyond what is generally expected of a battlegroup that is present for only a limited time (Montgomery 2017).

As a Framework Nation in Latvia, Canada initially contributed 455 of the approximate 1,175 foreign NATO member state troops stationed there. That personnel commitment consists of the group’s headquarters and parts of a battlegroup with a Canadian infantry battalion as well as reconnaissance and support staff. Those personnel amount to almost 40 percent of the total number of non-indigenous troops that NATO allies have contributed to the eFP in Latvia, and approximately 10 percent of the combined total of 4,547 non-indigenous troops that Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland have committed as of May 2018. Canada’s commitment will increase to 540 troops in the spring of 2019. The number of troops (and the command and field units) may not be comparable to Canada’s Cold War deployment to Germany, but 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.

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By contrast, the costs for Canada to defect from the eFP, let alone from its commitments as a Framework Nation, are high. Defection would close doors, let down old and new friends, waste human and political capital, and squander the political and military credibility generated by Canada’s commitment to the eFP. Canada would be abandoning a low-risk mission that continues to pay dividends in developing for the country and its partners the military capability, interoperability, training, and readiness to act in the face of an ever-changing security environment.

## Canada’s commitment in Iraq and Afghanistan

At the NATO Summit in Brussels in July 2018, Canada also committed to assuming command of NATO’s new, multinational non-combat training and capacity-building mission in Iraq in its first year of operation. The Canadian government insists that this mission is the natural next step for Canada, in so far as it is Canada’s objective to move beyond the militarily successful fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria to help its security forces build Iraq’s institutional capacity, its defence and security institutions, and its national defence academies. The goal in building these capabilities is to establish robust foundations for the country’s long-term peace, security, and stability.

Specifically, Canada will deploy up to 250 CAF personnel and assets from the fall of 2018 to the fall of 2019 (Trudeau 2018). NATO's efforts, and in turn the efforts of the Canadian government, are focused at the national level and will not help non-state actors such as the Peshmerga.

To rebut Trump's complaints about defence spending, Canada is now leading on two of NATO's most important missions: the eFP and Iraq. Since both announcements came in quick succession, Canada appears to be trying to counter Trump's bluster. Justin Massie and Benjamin Zyla conclude: "NATO should make clear to its members that the alliance is about more than just the United States, and that they have an individual and important role to play in shaping the identity of the alliance to come" (Massie and Zyla 2018).

Parallels to Canada's deployment to Afghanistan are compelling. Canada's military commitment to the US-led coalition operations in Afghanistan was considered a way of buttressing Canada's relationship with both the United States and the transatlantic multilateral alliance. The notion of valuing the alliance helps to reinforce Canada's decision to go to war and remain at war. For example, 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 becomes: 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" (Massie and Zyla 2018). As with Canada's outsized contributions to Afghanistan, putting troops on the ground, in whatever numbers, is noticed in Washington where it counts: at the Pentagon and in Congress.

## The strength of Canada's support for NATO

Canada's military is popular, robust, competent, and well-equipped. As such, Canada has become the paradigm for analysts arguing that the United States' favoured metric of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence is arbitrary. They note that what matters is that member countries contribute effectively to coalition operations when asked to do so. The 2 percent metric tends, at times, to discount the efforts of allies who make meaningful contributions to the alliance while still falling short of the threshold. For example, what we are currently witnessing as part of the eFP Latvia is a continuation of Canada's long-standing commitment to NATO. Canada is 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 this country'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 any US decision to step back from the eFP and the Baltic States would call into question the future of the alliance, Ottawa is assuring its European allies that it will hold firm to its current policy. Canada has affirmed its solidarity with Ukraine, and remains committed to a strong 29-state NATO alliance even if the US scales back its involvement in European security. By providing a sustained military presence in Europe, Canada's leadership of Battlegroup Latvia will continue to confirm that this country is an effective ally, one committed to providing protection for European security.

In the end, the motivation of nations to contribute to NATO operations has little to do with threat perceptions, domestic defence spending, or the heckling of a world leader. Rather, what explains some states' motivations is

an appreciation for the overall health of the alliance (alliance value) and a sense that there is a need to increase their status on the international stage (status enhancement) (Massie and Zyla 2018). This explains why Canada is trying to convey that it is doing its fair share in strengthening NATO’s deterrence and defence posture. Yet, “[w]hy invest billions to maintain a capable, professional, well-funded and well-equipped Canadian military?” The answer is obvious, states Canada’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland: “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” (Freeland 2017).

In that regard, given current fiscal constraints, the eFP is a manageable international commitment to the NATO alliance. In turn, the commitment is advantageous to the Canada-US relationship because it demonstrates a willingness to “share the burden” without significantly increasing current defence spending, which is at \$25.5 billion for the 2018/2019 fiscal year. Yet, as we have written elsewhere (see Leuprecht and Sokolsky 2015), in the larger public policy context, governments cannot easily escape the dilemmas, problems, and paradoxes of defence spending, especially for unanticipated foreign deployments.

Canada’s approach to defence spending and NATO specifically is in keeping with the recent White Paper, *Strong. Secure. Engaged*. Given the uncertainty and complexity of the global security environment and, with that, its intricate implications for Canadian security, “Canada will pursue leadership roles and will prioritize interoperability in its planning and capability development to ensure seamless cooperation with allies and partners, particularly NATO. The Canadian Armed Forces will be prepared to make concrete contributions to Canada’s role as a responsible international actor” (Canada 2017). 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 that at 1.23 percent, Canada’s defence expenditures fall well below the objective of 2 percent of GDP for NATO members.

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## 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 counterbalance to Soviet power, and now to Russian aggression. The interdependence and interconnectedness of the modern world demand an alliance that stands and falls on its unity. The dissolution of the Soviet Union may have altered the rationale for NATO, but the fundamental principles that comprise the foundation of such a relationship remain intact: the defence of shared values and interests. In this respect, NATO’s unity, and even more so, its presence in the Baltic States, is of the utmost importance.

The enduring commitment of Canada to the protection of security in Europe has become a testament to the success and the strength of the NATO alliance, at least for the time being. Along with the continuation of the European integration project, NATO has brought stability and democratic norms and values to post-communist Europe. However, the true strength and effectiveness of the NATO alliance is certainly being tested in Europe today. As a result,



NATO will have to re-evaluate its approach to Russia. While Russian adventurism is unlikely to rival the Cold War in its degree of danger, it nonetheless represents an unsettling source of future European instability.

In this ever-changing 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 (Seidman and Stavridis 2016). As long as there is a need, in one way or another, Canada will help stand guard in the Baltic states. The eFP has become a symbol of collective strength that reminds us that it is only the commitment and the unity of the alliance that will deter Russia. Now that commitment has become a litmus test for robustness of the transatlantic relationship as a whole.

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## What people are saying about the Macdonald- Laurier Institute

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*In five short years, the institute has established itself as a steady source of high-quality research and thoughtful policy analysis here in our nation's capital. Inspired by Canada's deep-rooted intellectual tradition of ordered liberty – as exemplified by Macdonald and Laurier – the institute is making unique contributions to federal public policy and discourse. Please accept my best wishes for a memorable anniversary celebration and continued success.*

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE STEPHEN HARPER

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*The Macdonald-Laurier Institute is an important source of fact and opinion for so many, including me. Everything they tackle is accomplished in great depth and furthers the public policy debate in Canada. Happy Anniversary, this is but the beginning.*

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE PAUL MARTIN

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*In its mere five years of existence, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, under the erudite Brian Lee Crowley's vibrant leadership, has, through its various publications and public events, forged a reputation for brilliance and originality in areas of vital concern to Canadians: from all aspects of the economy to health care reform, aboriginal affairs, justice, and national security.*

BARBARA KAY, NATIONAL POST COLUMNIST

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*Intelligent and informed debate contributes to a stronger, healthier and more competitive Canadian society. In five short years the Macdonald-Laurier Institute has emerged as a significant and respected voice in the shaping of public policy. On a wide range of issues important to our country's future, Brian Lee Crowley and his team are making a difference.*

JOHN MANLEY, CEO COUNCIL

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