

Toms Rostoks  
Alexander Lanoszka

# SUCCESS ASSURED?

Appraising the Canadian-Led  
Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup  
in Latvia



April 2024



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## Executive summary | *sommaire*

**At the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit**, members announced the formation of the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), a set of multinational battalion-sized battlegroups deployed to the Baltic region for the purposes of reassuring the countries there most worried about Russian military aggression. Canada agreed to become the Framework Nation for Latvia and so has been leading the largest and most multinational battlegroup ever since.

The Canadian-Latvian partnership, now in its seventh year, has not only been trouble-free, but also a success story. Canadian troops are welcome, there have been no significant incidents involving Canadian forces, Latvia has significantly altered its military posture, and the multinational diversity that characterizes the battlegroup seems to be a source of strength rather than of weakness. Nevertheless, despite such success, challenges appear to be mounting.

One key decision made at the 2022 NATO Madrid Summit was to expand the battlegroup from a battalion to a brigade. For Canada, how it will provide the necessary troops and armaments is unclear given the cumulative effects of many years of chronic under-investment in the Canadian Armed Forces. The Latvian government may face its own difficulties in increasing defence spending up to 3 percent of gross domestic product by 2027. Its own economic development has fallen behind that of its Baltic neighbours and sustaining such high levels of military expenditures over the long run may be challenging.

The fundamental problem facing the battlegroup is that its capabilities might be insufficient to properly defend Latvia against a highly resolved and militarily reconstituted Russia. Canada is unlikely to be able to contribute beyond its current military commitment. Moreover, being situated on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean means that Canada cannot rapidly surge its military presence in Latvia. Indeed, Canada announced cuts to its defence budget at a time when the Canadian Armed Forces is already under severe strain. In the short-term at least, it is reassuring that Canada will indeed deploy 2200 troops to Latvia and will have equipment prepositioned for the whole brigade. In the medium-to-long term, however, doubts remain about the ability of Canada to carry out its pledges fully and effectively.

Latvia appreciates the difficulties that Canada is experiencing and has not been idle. It has reintroduced conscription to build a larger military. It has also increased its defence spending and is in the process of acquiring critically important military platforms such as medium-range air defence, artillery rocket, and coastal defence systems that in turn will help the Canadian-led bridge operate more effectively in Latvia. Crucially, Latvia announced plans to develop a large new military training base in Selonia, which would allow for larger military exercises that can even involve the other eFP battlegroups deployed in the Baltic region.

The eFP has received little public attention in Canada, whereas in Latvia there is broad social consensus on the need to address the security threat posed by Russia. However, considerable differences remain with regards to how average Latvians and the country's Russian-speaking minority population view security challenges posed by Russia. One recent controversy in Latvia was whether to use anti-personnel landmines along the Latvian border with Russia and Belarus. The outcome of this bitter and divisive discussion was that Latvia would not pursue the acquisition of anti-personnel landmines, but it would develop a Baltic Defence Line together with Estonia and Lithuania and invest in fortifications and prepared defenses along its border with Russia and Belarus. Presumably, the fact that the "Ottawa Treaty" banning anti-personnel mines takes its public name from Canada's capital might have dissuaded Latvian officials from considering using such weapons.

We conclude the report by making several policy recommendations:

- Ensure the continued interaction between Canadian and Latvian forces amid concerns that new basing options within Latvia would lead to less interaction between the multinational battlegroup and its Latvian counterpart.
- Deepen political and military cooperation between the three Baltic Host Nations and the three Framework Nations since the Baltic states together constitute one single operational theatre.
- Develop a credible plan in Canada for its force posture in view of the tightening constraints that the Canadian Armed Forces is facing in the current environment. **MLI**

***Lors du Sommet de l'OTAN tenu à Varsovie en 2016, les États membres de l'organisation ont annoncé la création en Baltique de la « présence avancée renforcée » (enhanced Forward Presence – eFP), un contingent de groupements tactiques multinationaux de la taille d'un bataillon à l'appui des pays de la région les plus préoccupés par une éventuelle agression militaire russe. Le Canada a accepté de devenir le pays-cadre pour la Lettonie et dirige depuis le plus important et le plus multinational des groupements tactiques.***

*Non seulement le partenariat entre le Canada et la Lettonie, qui en est à sa septième année, fonctionne sans problème, mais en plus, il témoigne d'une grande*

*réussite. Les troupes canadiennes sont appréciées, aucun incident d'importance n'a mis en cause les forces canadiennes, la Lettonie a considérablement renforcé sa posture militaire et la diversité multinationale qui caractérise le groupement semble être une source de force plutôt que de faiblesse. Néanmoins, malgré ces succès, des difficultés semblent apparaître.*

*Une décision clé issue du Sommet de l'OTAN tenu à Madrid en 2022 a été d'élargir la portée du groupement en transformant le bataillon en brigade. Or, du côté du Canada, la fourniture de troupes et d'armements est incertaine, compte tenu des effets cumulés de nombreuses années d'insuffisance chronique des investissements dans les forces armées. Cela, alors que le gouvernement letton pourrait éprouver lui-même des difficultés à faire passer ses dépenses de défense à 3 % du produit intérieur brut d'ici 2027. Le retard de son propre développement économique par rapport à celui de ses voisins baltes pourrait peser lourdement sur le maintien durable de dépenses militaires élevées.*

*Le problème fondamental posé au groupement tactique, c'est que ses capacités pourraient être insuffisantes pour défendre adéquatement la Lettonie contre une Russie très résolue et militairement reconstituée. Il est peu probable que le Canada puisse aller au-delà de son engagement militaire actuel, et le fait qu'il soit situé de l'autre côté de l'Atlantique rend impossible tout renforcement rapide de sa présence militaire sur place. D'ailleurs, le Canada a annoncé des réductions de son budget de défense à un moment où ses forces armées sont déjà en grande difficulté. Au moins à court terme, il est rassurant d'apprendre qu'il déploiera tout de même 2 200 soldats en Lettonie et que l'ensemble de la brigade disposera d'équipements prépositionnés. À moyen et à long terme, toutefois, des doutes subsistent quant à sa capacité à répondre pleinement et efficacement à ses engagements.*

*La Lettonie est consciente des difficultés du Canada et n'est pas restée les bras croisés. Elle a réinstauré le service militaire obligatoire en vue d'accroître la capacité. Elle a également relevé ses dépenses et est sur le point d'acquiescer des plateformes militaires d'une importance cruciale, notamment de l'équipement de défense aérienne à moyenne portée, des roquettes d'artillerie et des systèmes de défense côtière qui, à leur tour, aideront l'intermédiaire canadien à accroître l'efficacité en Lettonie. Mais surtout, la Lettonie a annoncé son intention d'établir la nouvelle zone d'entraînement militaire « Sélonie », qui permettra des exercices de grande envergure auxquels pourront participer même les autres groupements tactiques de la eFP déployés dans la région balte.*

*La eFP n'a guère attiré l'attention du public canadien, alors qu'en Lettonie, il y a un large consensus social quant à la nécessité de contrer la menace de sécurité posée par la Russie. Toutefois, les Lettons et la minorité russophone du pays perçoivent ces risques de manière fort différente. Par exemple, récemment, le recours aux mines antipersonnel le long de la frontière avec la Russie et la Biélorussie a suscité une vive controverse. À la suite de débats houleux, la Lettonie a décidé d'y mettre fin et d'établir plutôt une ligne de défense balte en liaison avec l'Estonie et la Lituanie, puis d'investir dans des fortifications*

*et des défenses bien réglées le long de sa frontière avec la Russie et la Biélorussie. Le fait que la « Convention d'Ottawa » sur l'interdiction des mines antipersonnel tire son nom de la capitale canadienne a sans doute dissuadé les autorités lettones d'envisager ces armes.*

*Nous concluons ce rapport en formulant les recommandations politiques que voici :*

- Veiller à ce que les forces canadiennes et lettones puissent continuer d'agir de concert – on craint que les nouvelles options de positionnement des bases en Lettonie ne diminuent les interactions entre le groupement tactique multinational et sa contrepartie lettone.*
- Approfondir la coopération politique et militaire entre les trois États baltes hôtes et les trois nations-cadres puisque les États baltes constituent ensemble un seul et même théâtre d'opérations.*
- Élaborer au Canada un plan crédible pour son dispositif militaire, compte tenu du durcissement des contraintes pour ses forces armées dans l'environnement actuel.*
- Préparer le public canadien à une stratégie d'endiguement à long terme envers la Russie, car la faible visibilité de la mission eFP risque de ne pas permettre de saisir les enjeux posés ainsi que les engagements du gouvernement canadien en matière de sécurité européenne. **MLI***

## Introduction

**At the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit**, members announced the formation of the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), a set of multinational battalion-sized battlegroups deployed to the Baltic region for the purposes of reassuring the countries there most worried about Russian military aggression. To organize these battlegroups, four NATO members assumed leadership roles as so-called Framework Nations. These Framework Nations provide the military backbone of the battlegroups while working in coordination with the Host Nation receiving them. Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States thus became the Framework Nations for Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland, respectively. Canada agreed to become the Framework Nation for Latvia.

That Canada and Latvia would partner in this way was neither inevitable nor obvious. After all, Canada is geographically distant from Latvia, far removed from the Baltic country than more militarily powerful countries in Europe. Unlike the UK or the US, Canada cannot simply threaten nuclear retaliation if its troops were to come under Russian fire. It cannot mobilize the European Union or exercise its trading power as what Germany can ostensibly do. How it would fare in leading the most diverse battlegroup within the eFP was not apparent.

For Latvia's part, many regarded it to be a weak link in NATO owing to its complicated domestic politics, lack of military investment relative to its neighbours, and a large Russophone minority whose views of Russia were largely sympathetic. Nevertheless, the Canadian-Latvian partnership, now in its seventh year, has not only been trouble-free, but also a success story. Canadian troops are welcome, Latvia has significantly altered its military posture, and the multinational diversity that characterizes the battlegroup seems to be a source of strength rather than of weakness (Andžāns 2023).



The purpose of this paper is to assess the battlegroup and to identify its strengths as well as the challenges it faces. Unfortunately, we argue that although the battlegroup arguably has had much success, those challenges appear to be mounting. One key decision made at the 2022 NATO Madrid Summit was to expand the battlegroup from a battalion to a brigade. However, it is unclear how Canada will provide the necessary troops and armaments given the cumulative effects of many years of chronic under-investment in the Canadian Armed Forces. The Latvian government may face its own difficulties in increasing defence spending up to 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2027, reintroducing conscription, acquiring costly top-of-the-shelf military capabilities, and providing Host Nation support, most notably with the Selonia military base. Latvia's military ambitions may be difficult to maintain as it has somewhat fallen behind Estonia and Lithuania in terms of economic development. It too will confront problems in delivering on its own military initiatives.



*However, it is unclear how  
Canada will provide the necessary  
troops and armaments.*

This paper will examine these issues and offer a critical perspective on the battlegroup as plans take shape to expand it. In so doing, it proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the history of the eFP deployment. The second section discusses the expectations that Latvia and Canada have of the deployment. The third section assesses the current state of play as regards to the battlegroup, with emphasis on capability acquisition, the Selonia training ground, and public debate over it. The fourth section concludes by outlining several policy recommendations.

## A brief history of deployment

Although the three Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined NATO in 2004, the alliance had refrained from adopting any meaningful strategy for defending them until sometime after the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008. Even so, the Baltic countries had to rely exclusively on their own forces to safeguard their territory from Russian aggression.

This situation proved unsustainable in the face of Russia's seizure of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and its subsequent destabilization of Ukraine's Donbas region. The credibility deficit that marked NATO promises to defend the Baltic countries widened in view of their relatively isolated geographical position next to Russia. At the 2014 NATO Wales Summit members of the alliance recognized this problem and called for a stronger reassurance policy. Two years later at the Warsaw Summit, they established the eFP, with multinational battalion-sized battlegroups deployed to each of the Baltic countries as well as Poland. To remain in standing with the *NATO-Russia Founding Act*, which proscribes "additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces," the deployments are rotational over six-month cycles (NATO 1997). However, the battlegroups were relatively small, as they were heavy on assurance and light on deterrence. For the battlegroup in Latvia, Canada agreed to be the Framework Nation, thus providing the most military personnel and support. The first Canadian troops arrived in Latvia in early 2017.

The Canadian-led battlegroup in Latvia stands out for several reasons. First, it is the most multinational of the four established in the Baltic region. Joining Canada are ten other countries: Albania, the Czech Republic, Iceland, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain, representing more than one-third of NATO's member nations. In January 2024, Sweden – with its NATO membership still incomplete due to Turkish and Hungarian reluctance to ratify its protocols – announced its intent to contribute to the battlegroup (Ritchie 2024).

Second, the Latvian battlegroup has consistently been one of the largest in terms of the military personnel involved and has an intensely rigorous certification process to ensure its ability to operate as a cohesive unit (Lanoszka, Leuprecht, and Moens 2020). Finally, among the other Framework Nations of Germany, the UK, and the US, Canada is the only one that has neither

nuclear weapons nor membership in the EU (Lanoszka 2017). EU and NATO members France and Italy have bigger militaries than Canada, but they could not be the Framework Nation for their own reasons.

Although the battlegroup operated without much trouble between 2017 and 2022, questions arose regarding the overall sufficiency of the eFP amid Russia's military build-up near Ukraine in 2021 and the subsequent full-scale invasion that it launched on February 24, 2022. In the spring of 2022, Canada joined the other Framework Nations in reinforcing the eFP with more equipment and more personnel, although it was the last to do so. However, the Madrid Summit saw NATO members agree to scaling up the battlegroups to the level of a brigade (i.e., 4000 troops). At the 2023 NATO Vilnius Summit, alliance members reiterated this pledge, with the additional commitment to make 2 percent of GDP as a floor, and not just as a goal, for defence spending (NATO 2023).

## What do Latvia and Canada expect from the battlegroup?

**As a front-line state with** a small population of about 1.9 million, Latvia sees the deployment of the Canadian-led battlegroup as essential for its security (Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was unsurprising to Latvians because of intelligence made public several months prior to the invasion. What was somewhat surprising was its brutality – that is, the atrocities committed by the Russian troops – and the scale of the fighting. Although there were reasons to expect that NATO deterrence would still hold as it had done in the past, the time for complacency was no more. Latvia came to the view that the NATO military presence on its territory must be expanded both temporarily and in the long run. Ukraine needed massive amounts of military and economic assistance, but Latvia also needed visible assurances that the alliance was taking its obligations seriously. Allied military presence was reinforced to bolster NATO's deterrence, but Latvia clearly wanted to see the NATO eFP battlegroup upgraded into a brigade.

Given the scale of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the risks that it posed to European security, the deployment of a brigade-sized unit to Latvia could hardly be seen as an overreaction.

An important lesson that Latvian decision-makers drew from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was that deterrence based on reinforcement was insufficient. If Russia had tried to present NATO with a *fait accompli* in Ukraine, it could try to pull off something similar in the Baltic region sometime in the future. Adopted in 2023, the Latvian State Defence Concept claims that deployment of at least one NATO brigade, supplemented with air and naval components, is essential for transitioning to forward defence posture (Latvian Ministry of Defence 2023). Accordingly, Latvia asserted the need for a brigade-sized unit and prepositioned equipment that, put together, would make it possible to engage Russia before it could occupy a large swath of Latvian territory. Another lesson from the war in Ukraine was that liberating the territory seized by Russia is harder than stopping Russian advances early on. Latvia would need a much larger military that would be capable of stopping Russia's potential military aggression. Hence, in 2022, Latvian defence minister Artis Pabriks announced that Latvia would reintroduce conscription by way of a program that bears the appellation of the State Defence Service (Latvijas armija 2022).

Another point of concern was that the concept of reinforcement relies too much on the ability and willingness of NATO allies to deploy troops quickly before the war begins. Making this concept problematic is that some NATO allies might regard taking any meaningful decisive action before Russia's invasion as too provocative. Accordingly, Latvia put public emphasis on the need for aggressively bolstering its Eastern flank in anticipation of NATO's Madrid Summit in 2022. Latvia's assertiveness, however, has not negatively impacted its bilateral relations with Canada, and today both allies are on the same page when it comes to the road map for surging to a full-sized brigade.<sup>1</sup>

Canada's expectations for the battlegroup differ from those of Latvia. The battlegroup does enhance Canadian security, despite its geographic separation from North America. Historically, Canada's international strategy has centred on its commitment to alliances and the upholding of a rules-based order. Europe has been of high importance, not least because of NATO. Assuring that Europe remains open and free is a key interest in view of Canada's economic, diplomatic, and cultural links there. Canada has also seen in Russia, generally but not invariably, an adversary that has

the willingness and ability to undermine the post-1945 liberal international order that Canada helped to establish.

Accordingly, Canada reinforced the battlegroup in early 2022 and agreed to update it at Madrid. Canada wants to contain the Russian threat and so wishes to see all members of the battlegroup pull their weight by undertaking a rigorous certification process under its leadership, especially as the Canadian Armed Forces has excelled in providing military training. (The number of participants will soon drop to nine, because Slovakia plans to depart the mission to focus on its own territory. However, it could become ten again if Sweden contributes.) Expectations that participating countries will help with the scaling up of the battlegroup are likely to intensify considering the difficulties that Canada itself may face (Canadian Army Podcast 2023). Canada expects that the deployment will remain the primary mission for its land forces into the foreseeable future (Canadian Army Podcast 2023).

## The current state of play

**How will the battlegroup develop** in the foreseeable future? In this section, we consider this question by examining three separate issues that indicate the status of the current deployment: the acquisition of military capabilities; the development of the Selonia military training ground in southeastern Latvia; and the public prominence of the battlegroup in Latvia and Canada.

### Capabilities acquisition

The battlegroup's fundamental problem is that it might not have the capability to properly defend Latvia against a highly resolved and militarily reconstituted Russia. Canada's distance from Latvia further aggravates this concern: could Canada quickly boost its military presence to counter future Russian aggression? Most troops will need to be already in place, with equipment and ammunition stocks prepositioned. Indeed, such appears to be the plan, as Canada will deploy up to 2200 troops in Latvia, and hundreds of additional troops can be flown in quickly if such a need arises.

Unfortunately, Canada is not committed to increase its defence spending to at least 2 percent GDP despite official pledges it has made at various NATO summits. In fact, Canada is poised to cut its defence budget in view of a contracting Canadian economy and the mounting fiscal difficulties that its federal government now faces (Curry 2023). The consequences for the Canadian Armed Forces are dire. Capability gaps widen, especially as equipment becomes so extensively used in various deployments and training exercises that they need to be replaced at a rate faster than what the budget allows (Shimooka 2022). The Canadian Armed Forces' growing role as a response force that provides disaster relief on Canadian home territory is only adding to the strain. A December 2023 internal Department of National Defence memorandum indicated that just over half of the Canadian Armed Forces could respond in a crisis involving a NATO ally, and that half of the equipment is simply "unavailable and unserviceable" (Brewster 2024a).

*“Canada has made a major military and financial commitment to Latvia’s defence, one that is much appreciated in Latvia.”*

To be sure, Canada has made a major military and financial commitment to Latvia’s defence, one that is much appreciated in Latvia. Canada almost doubled the number of its troops in Latvia amid Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and its most recent expression of the seriousness of Canada’s commitment has been the deployment of 15 Leopard 2 tanks and an additional 130 personnel to Latvia. It has also purchased a Swedish-made short-range air defence system to provide further protection to the battlegroup (Brewster 2024b).

Nevertheless, absent a significant and sustained uptick in Canada’s defence spending and procurement, such markers of commitment will come under duress. They expose Canada to the charge that “these are token contributions that are unsustainable in aggregate for the military [but] serve the political purpose of showing Canada doing ‘something’” (Shimooka 2023a). Canada’s military is

too small and under-resourced to contribute beyond its commitment to deploy up to 2200 troops to Latvia by 2026. Some observers even question whether the Canadian Army can sustain its existing commitments past that date (Shimooka 2023b). After all, the Canadian Armed Forces suffers not only from chronic under-investment but also a severe recruitment and retention problem (Dyson 2023). In interviews conducted by one of the authors, Canadian military and political leaders emphasize that the eFP deployment would not be adversely affected by budgetary<sup>2</sup> and capability shortfalls.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to see how that would be the case. For example, Canada has not followed up its donation of Leopard 2 tanks and M777 howitzers to Ukraine with any announcement to procure replacement capabilities.

In the short-term at least, it is reassuring that Canada will indeed deploy 2200 troops to Latvia and will have equipment prepositioned for the whole brigade (Canadian Army Podcast 2023). In the event of a local military conflict, Canada will be able to get the remaining troops to Latvia quickly. Moreover, no country involved in the eFP Battalion has expressed a willingness to cease its contributions. Italy has suggested that it might expand its presence, with, as noted, Sweden pledging to send a “reduced battalion” to Latvia. The allied presence in Latvia will remain substantial. Still, Canada will not be able to contribute naval assets or air power to Latvia, having already been forced to withdraw its CF-18 presence in Romania due in part to pilot and technician shortages (Berthiaume 2022). Canada might eventually operate helicopters from the Lielvārde Air Base, but their arrival will not happen until 2025 at the earliest because NATO’s Baltic Air Policing mission is using that facility and so cannot accommodate them and their crews.

Latvia appreciates the difficulties that Canada is experiencing and has not been idle. Consider the following developments: The first is that Latvia has reintroduced conscription to build a larger military. The recently adopted State Defence Concept aims for a wartime strength of 61,000 troops (31,000 peacetime strength and 30,000 reserve). This number is more than double than that which the 2020 State Defence Concept identified (Latvian Ministry of Defence 2023). The first military draft in 2023 was relatively small and voluntary. The lottery system was not yet in place, and the armed forces wanted to make military training a public relations success. Hence the decision to start with low hundreds of volunteers. There were 488 applicants, from which 254 were selected for military service (LSM.lv 2023). Moreover,

to make the financial terms of conscription far more attractive for volunteers, conscripts who volunteer are receiving a monthly allowance of EUR 600 while those who will be selected through lottery will receive just EUR 300. The number of conscripts, however, is slated to grow in the coming years when the National Armed Forces will have made the necessary adjustments in terms of infrastructure and training. Crucially, the aim is to build a culture of military readiness and to make military service an obvious choice.

The second is that Latvia will considerably increase defence spending in the coming years. Defence spending in 2024 will be 2.4 percent of GDP. It is supposed to reach the 3 percent mark in 2027. Third, Latvia is in the process of acquiring critically important military systems such as IRIS-T SLM medium-range air defence system (to be procured with Estonia), six High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), and coastal defence systems. The acquisition of these systems will help the Canadian-led brigade operate more effectively in Latvia (Latvijas armija 2023).

### **The Selonia military training ground**

Latvia's defence-related efforts are not confined to conscription and acquisition of modern military platforms, however. Defence minister Artis Pabriks announced in early July 2022 that a new military training base – Selonia – will be developed. The Latvian government passed legislation on this military base in June 2023, with it slated to become the largest military training ground in the Baltic states – visible proof of Latvia's efforts to provide host nation support. The government estimates that initial investment will be just EUR 38 million, but it may reach up to EUR 700 million (Delfi 2023). NATO allies are likely to cover a substantial share of this cost.

Because the announcement on the Selonia base largely coincided with the NATO Madrid Summit, many observers initially assumed that the new military base would be built specifically for the purpose of housing the Canadian-led brigade.

However, this assumption was wrong: Selonia will be primarily used for brigade-level exercises, while Canadian (and other) troops will remain primarily stationed at the Ādaži military base just northeast of Riga. Selonia's location in southeastern Latvia is too remote. Building the necessary barracks and depots would take too much time, delaying the deployment of the Canadian-led brigade.



Latvian defence officials grudgingly accepted Canada's decision to stay in Ādaži. They had hoped that Ādaži would house some portion of new conscripts despite concerns about it being at full capacity. On the positive side, accommodating Canadian troops in the Ādaži military base would ensure extensive interaction with the Latvian military, especially given that the eFP battlegroup will become a separate brigade and no longer will be part of the Latvian Mechanized Infantry Brigade.

Most of the 2200 Canadian troops will be deployed to Latvia for six-month rotations, as per general practice for it and the rest of the eFP battlegroups since 2017. A few hundred Canadian troops, mainly at the brigade headquarters, will stay either for one year or longer. The timescale of deployments could be increased to ease the pressure on the battlegroup.

The Canadian-led brigade will comprise two Canadian battalions and a multinational battalion that will draw troops from the other NATO allies that are currently part of the NATO eFP battlegroup. The deployment of Danish and Swedish troops will add further to the brigade.

Most Canadian troops will stay at Ādaži, but approximately 700 of them will be staying at Camp Ceri where the brigade headquarters will be built. Although the Ādaži military base is often characterized as already full, that primarily applies to the use of military training ground. To accommodate additional Canadian troops, more barracks will be built. The Canadian-led brigade will be primarily stationed at Ādaži, but it will train at Selonia.

Of course, NATO's eastern flank has different fronts, with Latvia being but one of them. The Canadian-led battlegroup interacts regularly with battlegroups in Lithuania and Estonia led by Framework Nations Germany and the UK, respectively. Military exercises are organized on a regular basis – a significant achievement given the workload involved in coordinating all participating countries' efforts. Yet precisely because the three Baltic states constitute a single theatre of operations, such coordination is essential.

If Russia were to attack the Baltic states, it is unlikely that it would carry out military aggression against just one of them. The Selonia training ground will contribute to closer collaboration between these three eFP brigades given its probable use by the German-led and UK-led Battlegroups.

## The battlegroups and public attention

For better or for worse, public debate on the eFP deployment has been muted in both Canada and Latvia. Neither the deployment of the Canadian-led brigade nor the development of the Selonia military training ground has been the centre of defence-related debates in Latvia as of early 2024.

Spurred by the seeming inability of the US and the EU to secure funding and weapons supplies for Ukraine for 2024, views have shifted regarding the Russian threat to Baltic countries. The assumption that the Baltic states have ample time – at least until the end of the 2020s – to prepare for the next round of Russian aggression no longer seems safe. Accordingly, the three Baltic countries have focused attention on how to militarize their border with Russia and to prepare defensive installations. Giving further public justification to this need is the ongoing weaponization of migrants by Belarus and Russia against their western neighbours since 2021.

In mid-January 2024, the three defence ministers of the Baltic states signed an agreement on the Baltic Defence Line. This common defensive line would include anti-mobility infrastructural elements to hamper the ability of Russia to advance deep into any of their territory during the early phases of a potential military conflict (Latvian Ministry of Defence 2024).

Then there was a bitter and divisive debate within the Latvian defence community about anti-personnel landmines. Upon his resignation after serving as state secretary at the Latvian Ministry of Defence for eight years, Jānis Garisons joined former defence minister Artis Pabriks in voicing strong opposition to Latvia's continued participation in the 1997 Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention, often called the Ottawa Convention. The controversy led Latvian defence minister Andris Sprūds and the chief of defence lieutenant general Leonīds Kalniņš to issue a statement that they would give this issue further consideration, eventually breaking with Lithuania and Estonia in forgoing the use anti-personnel landmines along the Latvian border with Russia and Belarus (LSM.lv 2024). This decision provoked criticisms from military analysts who favour using landmines (LSM.lv 2024a), and the debate on the subject could ultimately divert public attention from other significant defence developments where Latvia is making progress.

In Canada, the battlegroup has low public visibility, but that is generally true of the Canadian Armed Forces and issues relating to military power. Although Canadian political leaders do occasionally visit Latvia and make

announcements about the brigade, the deployment has low prominence. For instance, during the last federal election in 2021, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau hardly spoke of the deployment. This omission was somewhat surprising, since it was a success story that Trudeau could have claimed amid criticism of his foreign policy – especially regarding the debacle that attended the final withdrawal of allied forces from Afghanistan just a few months before. One reason for this silence may be a bona fide desire to shield the deployment from disinformation campaigns. Yet another less charitable explanation is that Canadian political leaders are uncomfortable with military notions of deterrence and defence, and so refrain from discussing the mission any more than they must.

Nevertheless, had Latvia abrogated its commitment to the Ottawa Convention and installed land mines along its border, such a move could have provoked outcry, if not embarrassment, within Canada. After all, the arms-control agreement was signed in Canada's capital, and in its time, was a major foreign policy achievement made by the same political party that holds power today.

## Conclusion

**NATO's reaction to Russia's annexation** of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine eight years later has been to reassure its frontline allies and deter Russia. Although NATO's posture in the Baltic region initially was heavy on reassurance, the emphasis on deterrence has increased. NATO will certainly reassert this mission when it celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary at the upcoming NATO Washington Summit in July 2024. No significant changes with respect to the eFP appear to be in store at this milestone meeting.

Up until now, Canada has largely been effective as a Framework Nation. Surging the battlegroup to a brigade may yet work out well. That success, however, cannot be taken for granted moving forward. Canada's defence commitments will come under more duress amid tightening budgetary constraints as well as equipment and personnel shortages.

Several policy recommendations flow from our analysis. They are as follows:

- 1. Ensure the continued interaction between Canadian and Latvian forces:** Canada's contribution has been well-received in Latvia, not least by the Latvian military. The Canadian-led battlegroup was integrated into Latvian Mechanized Infantry Brigade. This integration opened opportunities for daily joint training and interaction between Latvian soldiers and troops from the NATO eFP Battlegroup. Surging to a brigade means that there will be two separate brigades. The headquarters of the Canadian-led brigade will be at Camp Ceri, with the likely result that the two brigades will interact less, even though most NATO troops will stay at Camp Ādaži. Both brigades stand to benefit from continued cooperation. Thus, extensive ties and joint training should be preserved. Cooperation with the Canadian-led brigade may include Latvian conscripts who stand to gain from enriching their military experience during their eleven months of service.
- 2. Deepen political and military cooperation between the three Baltic Host Nations and the three Framework Nations.** NATO eFP battlegroups already are in contact and train together. An additional political 3+3 framework brings together the three Framework Nations and the three Baltic Host Nations. Each battlegroup has its own particular focus, and the three Baltic states may end up with different arrangements for NATO brigades. The Baltic states, however, are a single operational theatre, thus they stand to benefit from close cooperation and joint training. Moreover, NATO states are in the process of organizing defence procurement that may make them stronger in the long run, while capability shortfalls are likely in the short term. Those shortfalls can be bridged with the pooling of scarce resources and close cooperation.
- 3. Canada needs a credible plan for its force posture:** Statements that Canada's contribution to the eFP battlegroup in Latvia would be shielded from budgetary and capability shortfalls are not believable, at least not in the medium term. The Canadian Armed Forces is experiencing severe strain in light of its growing involvement

in disaster relief at home. The serious recruitment and retention problem that Canada's military is already facing may yet intensify. Eventually, these problems, if left unchecked, will compromise the quality of Canada's contribution to the battle group. Given that the military and political challenges posed by Russia will almost certainly not go away, Canada needs to evaluate its force posture to ensure its long-term viability. Pressure on Canada will only mount, whether or not Donald Trump wins back the US presidency in November 2024. Canada's military commitment to Latvia is crucial for NATO, but a plan needs to be in place to ensure its durability and strength.

- 4. Prepare the Canadian public for a long-term containment strategy against Russia:** The battlegroup has low visibility in Canada despite it being Canada's most significant military deployment. Good reasons might exist for sheltering the battlegroup from public conversation or debate. Nevertheless, Canada does have a de facto strategy of containing Russia given the battlegroup and its significant support for Ukraine. However, the federal government has not clearly articulated a strategy of containment, even if its own practices amount to one. Released in 2017, Canada's defence policy, titled "Strong, Secure, Engaged," makes no such assessment either. The Trudeau government would do well to explain to Canadians what is at stake with respect to Russia's military and geopolitical aggression, what connects support for Ukraine and the Latvia deployment, and how this de facto containment strategy may have to be in place for the foreseeable future given the structure of Russian politics. **MLI**

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## Endnotes

- 1 Interview between Toms Rostoks and an official at the Latvian Ministry of Defence, Riga, Latvia. October 3, 2023.
- 2 Interview between Toms Rostoks and a Canadian diplomat. October 13, 2023.
- 3 Interview between Toms Rostoks and a high-ranking Canadian military officer, Riga, Latvia. October 31, 2023.

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