

Policy

Brief

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Nato's Enhanced Forward Presence (Efp): Considering Canada's Operations In Latvia And Additional Engagement Opportunities

About the Authors



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About the Authors



Melissa Finn, Ph.D is a researcher in the Department of Political Science at the University of Waterloo. Her research focuses on citizenship, Arab youth, transnationalism, political participation, and anti-racism and youth empowerment frameworks through positive community engagement. She is the co-author of multiple academic articles on Arab youth and citizenship and has one single-author manuscript on al Qaeda and sacrificial agencies.



Sarah Sharma is a Vanier Scholar in International Relations in the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University. She has recently completed fieldwork for her doctoral dissertation, which examines how urban flooding is being governed through a global policy paradigm, climate resilience, to understand the unique position cities are in when adapting to climate change. Her two case studies are Amsterdam, the Netherlands and Dhaka, Bangladesh, two diverse locales that both grapple with heightened urban flooding from intensifying rainstorms. In undertaking field research, Sarah was a Visiting Research Fellow at the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and a Visiting PhD Scholar at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

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ISSUE

1. Canada has led Operation Reassurance as part of NATO's enhanced forward presence (eFP) in Latvia since 2017. The mission is operational until 2023 and approximately 500 Canadian troops are currently deployed. The cost associated with this high-profile leadership role in NATO operations is 131 million CAD in the 2020-21 fiscal year.

2. Operation Reassurance is at the mid-way point of its mission. This is an opportunity to review and reassess the benefits and limitations of the eFP, including the potential approaches that Canada and its NATO partners can take to counter Russian aggression, especially Russia's use of cyber warfare and other "grey zone" tactics.

BACKGROUND

3. eFP refers to NATO's deployment of four multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in response to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. Each eFP operation is led by a "framework nation" (United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, and the United States, respectively).

4. The eFP model aims to reassure Baltic countries of NATO support and build an effective trip-wire deterrence on the alliance's northeastern flank to deter Russian territorial encroachment in the region.

5. eFP operates on an 'opt-in' basis, meaning that NATO members volunteer to participate or lead a defence group. These "coalitions of the willing" have been strategically designed to enhance solidarity and cooperation within the transatlantic alliance while allowing other NATO members to opt out of participating in the eFPs. NATO cooperation is exemplified through the rotation of personnel and resources, the integration of technology, the transfer of enhanced skill sets, and the provision of ongoing information and training.

6. Positive outcomes from eFP include the reassurance to "host nations" that they are receiving support from NATO members, enhanced agility of their responsiveness in the region, strengthened self-defence capabilities, and mutually beneficial defence, political, and economic relationships with contributing NATO members, particularly their respective framework nation.

7. Some eFP host nations such as Poland, however, prefer to pursue bilateral support from the US military which is understood to stagnate alliance responses to threats.

8. eFP was created and implemented during significant political schisms within NATO, including the weakening of unanimity among member states, institutional debates about burden sharing, a complicated relationship between Turkey and Russia, threats of American withdrawal from NATO, and significant uncertainty concerning the Trump administration's willingness to uphold US alliance commitments.

9. Canada's involvement in Operation Reassurance represents a concrete and symbolic demonstration of the country's willingness to bear its share of the collective defence burden and of its commitment to NATO. The country's eFP involvement is occurring within the context of, and is a high-profile counter-weight to, American criticism that Canada is not meeting the recommended target of 2% GDP in defence spending.

CHALLENGES

10. Emerging Threats are Non-Conventional in Nature: Baltic states need to concretely demonstrate their resolve when confronted with multifaceted threats posed by Russia. Demonstrated resolve includes the capacity to support the quick mobilization and deployment of larger numbers of NATO service personnel and equipment in the face of large-scale Russian military aggression. One significant limitation of eFP is that it is currently ill-equipped to deal with Russia's non-conventional acts of aggression. These "grey zone" tactics are multifaceted and include the secret deployment of independent private military companies (PMCs) or other non-state actors by the Russian state, cyber-attacks directed against essential infrastructure, disinformation and negative propaganda campaigns, electoral interference, or the fomenting of ethno-political unrest among the Baltic region's significant Russian-speaking minorities.

11. Lack of Consensus on the Frames of Reference for Mission Execution: There are several challenges within the eFP framework regarding the development of common language for communications, a unified command structure and philosophy, and having adequate measures in place with respect to the nature of equipment and military material standardization. The eFP model may in fact inadvertently encourage bilateral security arrangements over further multilateral engagement, due to the relationships developed between host and Framework nations. For instance, Poland has sought for the installation of a permanent US military base on its territory.

12. The eFP Model Alone Cannot Prevent Alliance Fragmentation: The expiration of Operation Reassurance in 2023 raises further concerns regarding NATO's ability to deter Russian aggression in Latvia and the Baltic region beyond the eFP model, in part due to the larger issue of alliance cohesion. If eFP battlegroups are curtailed, countries preferring bilateral relations with the US may be tempted to seek reassurance through bilateral security assistance agreements outside of NATO's institutional framework.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of these achievements and challenges, we recommend that Canada:

13. Undertake a mid-term review to assess its continued eFP leadership role in Operation Reassurance in Latvia beyond 2023. As part of such a review, Canada should consult with its eFP partners in Latvia, along with the other battlegroups' framework and host nations, to establish clear and measurable markers of eFP success, including the extent to which eFPs contribute to relationship and trust building, and enhanced strategic collaboration.

14. Further increase Operation Reassurance's capability to address cyber-related threats as part of NATO in Latvia. Two sub-recommendations are made to achieve this goal.

a. Canada should further engage with and learn from NATO's Tallinn-based Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) through the Centre's training activities and exercises. Canada is the newest member state of CCDCOE and has the opportunity to improve both its national and the alliance's cyber defence capabilities. The Centre has already demonstrated its utility and relevance for other eFP framework nations. For instance, in November 2019, the CCDCOE and the United Kingdom, the framework nation responsible for the eFP battlegroup in Estonia, organized the CYBER FOG exercise in order to address the specific cyber threats this deployment faces. Canada can learn from the UK's experience and reach out to other framework nations to build upon and further compliment the Centre's expertise in cyber strategies that are suited for the eFP model in general, but also tailored to the context of each of the four battlegroups.

b. To promote mutual learning and cooperation on vulnerable areas of eFP deployment and opportunities for action, Canada should consult with other framework nations and the CCDCOE to organize a NATO cyber defence conference by no later than the end of 2021 to critically and strategically assess the alliance's planned extension of the organization's Baltic region eFP strategy.

15. Strengthen regional support in the Baltic region beyond military engagement, including further developing civil society networks by enhancing and supporting greater interdepartmental coordination between DND and Global Affairs Canada to expand diplomatic, trade, and development engagement in Latvia. Responding to the multifaceted nature of Russian threats in the region includes increasing engagement with Russian-speaking minorities and building trust with governments and populations in the Baltic region. An example of further engagement in this regard would be having more Russian-speaking personnel and experts on the Baltic region diplomatic and military staff.