

US Army in Lithuania: a new outpost on the eastern flank

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In mid-December, the US Army deployed a contingent of approximately 500 soldiers in Pabradė, located to the north-east of Vilnius. The troops will remain in Lithuania for eight months – until mid-2021. This is the third rotation of a US armoured battalion in the country. Previous contingents were stationed there from October 2019 to June 2020 and from September to November 2020. These forces are part of the US Armoured Brigade Combat Teams (ABCT) that have been exercising in the eastern flank countries since 2017, rotationally based in Poland. Currently, an ABCT from the 1st Cavalry Division from Fort Hood, Texas is training on the eastern flank. In the Baltic states, the US Army is also providing a rotational presence of a helicopter unit in Latvia (as a part of rotating Combat Aviation Brigades).

Commentary

- Another deployment of the US Army armoured battalion in Lithuania in December 2020 embeds the rotational US military presence in the country. After three US company-size units withdrew from the Baltic states, having been deployed there between 2014 and 2017, Poland became a hub for the rotating US Army ABCTs. Their units take part in exercises across the entire eastern flank of NATO. This strategy was dictated by politics – by withdrawing from the Baltic states, the US wanted to force its European allies to increase their contribution to the security of the Baltic Sea region, which happened as the NATO battlegroups consisting of European and Canadian forces were being deployed in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. However, within the framework of the European Deterrence Initiative, the US has been present in the Baltic states by extensively participating in military exercises, investing in military infrastructure and aiding the modernisation of their armed forces (from 2021 also under the new Baltic Security Initiative). However, this attitude has been criticised both in the Baltic countries and in the United States. US forces have been perceived as the most reliable guarantee of security for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The rotations of the US battalion in Lithuania are therefore intended to make the US military presence more visible and thus reinforce deterrence measures, including with regard to the so-called ‘Suwałki Gap’. In recent years, the importance of keeping this link between Poland and Lithuania open has been emphasised in the context of the defence of the Baltic states. The US Army units are currently deployed on two sides of the Polish-Lithuanian border: as part of the NATO battlegroup in Orzysz (its core consists of US battalion) and in Pabradė (the US armoured battalion).
- The presence of the armoured battalion in Lithuania stems not only from the US calculations, but also from the intensive diplomatic efforts made by the Saulius

Skvernelis' government since 2017. Vilnius used all available channels to expand contacts within Trump's administration, the US Armed Forces, the Congress and US think tanks. It pushed intensively for the expansion of US-Lithuanian military cooperation and the presence of the US forces on Lithuanian territory to complement the German-led NATO battlegroup in the country. The US share in the development of Lithuania's military capabilities has also arisen during Trump's presidency. Since 2017, the decision-makers in Vilnius have emphasised the need to further increase defence expenditure (with a target of 2.5% of GDP by 2030, since Lithuania already meets the 2% requirement as of 2018) and, off-the-record, to increase procurements of arms and military equipment from the US. In 2014-2016, the value of the Lithuanian defence ministry's US contracts amounted to €24 million (during this time Lithuania bought equipment worth over €460 million in Germany). In 2017-2020, this was already over €360 million and was spent on Black Hawk helicopters, Oshkosh vehicles and Javelin missiles (these purchases were partly co-financed by the US as part of its assistance to Lithuania's armed forces).

- One of the goals featured in the agenda of Ingrida Šimonytė's government, established in December 2020, is to build strategic security relations with the United States and to ensure a permanent presence of the US forces on Lithuanian territory, which would include a land forces battalion and ground-based air defence systems (medium-range). However, in practice, Vilnius would welcome maintaining regular US Army rotations in the country and the air defence exercises aimed at deploying the US Patriot systems in Lithuania. So far, these systems have been deployed in Lithuania during NATO's Tobruk Legacy air defence exercises in 2017 and 2020. The Lithuanian government is optimistic about the presidency of Joe Biden, hoping to maintain bilateral military cooperation with the US at the current level, while strengthening US involvement in NATO and improving relations between the US and its Western European allies.
- Pabradė is one of the two military bases in Lithuania with adequate infrastructure for allied forces. A NATO battlegroup has been stationed at the Lithuanian army's main base in Rukla since 2017. The largest Lithuanian training ground is also located near Pabradė. Its modernisation and expansion will last until 2022 (between 2017 and 2019, the US has allocated \$8 million for this purpose and the investments are also supported by Germany and NATO). The US Army's training priorities in Lithuania are exercises with two Lithuanian brigades and a NATO battlegroup. However, in 2020 the US forces' exercise programme in Lithuania was trimmed down as a result of the pandemic. During the first wave, the activities of the German-led battlegroup were scaled down to a minimum. As a result, in spring 2020, the US battalion only exercised with a Norwegian company, which was caught by a military lockdown in Pabradė. Also in 2021, the activity of the US battalion in Lithuania will be influenced by the development of the pandemic. However, it may be expected that in the future US troops in the country will participate in large-scale exercises (e.g. Lithuanian Iron Wolf or US Saber Strike) and train more frequently with the NATO battlegroup.