

Expectations versus reality: NATO brigades in the Baltic states?

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At the end of November, the Estonian defence minister Hanno Pevkur and his German counterpart Christine Lambrecht held discussions in Berlin on the German and allied military presence in the Baltic states. They announced the start of a dialogue in a 3+3 format, in which the Baltic states and the framework nations of the NATO-enhanced Forward Presence in these three countries (Germany, Canada and the United Kingdom) would take part. Since 2017, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (as well as Poland) have hosted multinational battalion-sized battlegroups, which were slightly expanded after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the Madrid NATO summit in July 2022, a compromise formula was found to assign a standby force to individual Baltic states, which could be rapidly deployed there from the framework nation countries if needed. These forces, together with a permanent rotational presence, would form an individual brigade for each of the Baltic states.

Currently, Lithuania is hosting a NATO multinational battlegroup of about 1800 troops (from Germany, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway) led by Germany (with about 850 Bundeswehr soldiers); in previous years the battlegroup had numbered about 1100–1200 soldiers.

Since 2017, the UK has been maintaining a battlegroup of over 800 troops in Estonia, which is usually reinforced by a company from France or Denmark (up to a total of 1100 troops in past years). In response to the Russian concentration of troops near the border with Ukraine in February 2022 the UK deployed a second battlegroup in Estonia outside the NATO framework, which was replaced by a light infantry battalion a few months later.

The largest NATO force in the Baltic states is currently stationed in Latvia. It consists of a multinational battlegroup of 1840 soldiers (from Canada, Albania, the Czech Republic, Iceland, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain) led by Canada; in previous years it numbered around 1400 soldiers. In addition, a Danish battalion-sized unit (about 800 soldiers), consisting of a mechanised company and support & logistics units, has been deployed in Latvia along with a Spanish NASAMS short-range air defence battery.

Commentary

- The compromise formula adopted at the NATO summit in Madrid for allocating additional forces to NATO battlegroups did not satisfy the Baltic states, which are seeking an increase in allied forces on their territory – optimally to brigade size. In recent

months Lithuania and Estonia in particular have expressed dissatisfaction with the Madrid solution, and have held talks with the framework nations of the NATO battlegroups (Germany and the UK) about further increasing their military presence. Vilnius is also pushing for the permanent rotational stationing of a full German brigade within three years; this would challenge the current arrangement, namely the deployment of a brigade-level headquarters forward command post in Lithuania, together with an increase in readiness and the assignment of the German 41st Mechanised Brigade to offer rapid support to the country in the event of a crisis. In turn, according to the UK-Estonian agreement, a light infantry battalion will be withdrawn from Estonia in December this year, but rocket artillery and anti-aircraft units will remain in the country. In 2023, a brigadier-general will become the battlegroup commander, and the sub-units that make up the balance of the brigade will be kept at very high readiness in the UK and will rotate regularly to Estonia. Latvia, which currently has the largest allied presence, is not presently engaged in similar discussions with Canada. The proposed German-Estonian 3+3 initiative is presumably intended to unify the adopted solutions and strengthen cooperation between the NATO battlegroups in the Baltics, as well as to alleviate the criticism which has been brought against the framework states (Germany, the UK, Canada).

- The efforts to increase the allied presence in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to the size of permanently rotating brigades highlights the structural problems on the part of both the framework (Germany, the UK, Canada) and the host nations. Despite ongoing diplomatic efforts, none of the Baltic states is in a position to provide the infrastructure necessary to station such forces in the near future. The training grounds and barracks infrastructure is insufficient and needs to be significantly developed. Lithuania has declared that it will complete the relevant investments by 2026. Estonia, as agreed with London, will develop its military infrastructure so that it can accommodate an entire brigade. In Latvia too, the NATO battlegroup is making full use of the military installations there; Latvia has taken steps to expand them. The problems of inadequate housing for soldiers and the too small military training grounds in the Baltic states are not new. The military infrastructure has been undergoing a process of modernisation for years there, but the scale of requirements remains very high.
- The Baltic states' negotiations with the framework nations have also highlighted the difficulties experienced by those NATO members which significantly reduced their land forces and profiled them for conducting expeditionary crisis management operations after the end of the Cold War. At present – and for the foreseeable future – the British Army is unable to maintain a continuous rotational presence of an entire armoured brigade outside the UK without announcing mobilisation. Its 3rd Division, intended for operations in the European theatre, will only complete the process of restructuring and modernisation by 2030, and will consist of two armoured and one reconnaissance & artillery brigade combat teams. That is why London is unable to assign a specific brigade to Estonia, but can only offer individual subunits. The German Army will not have one fully equipped brigade available until 2023, when it will be on duty with NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The Bundeswehr will only have one fully modernised division available by 2027, and a further two by 2031. It would thus only be able to permanently deploy one brigade in Lithuania on a rotational basis by around 2026.

Canada also has the problem of deploying an entire brigade without prior mobilisation, as its peacetime armed forces consist of only three mechanised brigades.