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A German brigade permanently stationed in Lithuania?

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On 26 June 2023, Germany's Minister of Defence Boris Pistorius and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg paid a visit to Lithuania. It happened against the backdrop of upcoming NATO summit and the Griffin Storm exercise currently taking place there, which has been jointly organised by the Bundeswehr and the Lithuanian Armed Forces, and will last until 7 July. The drills are intended to test the rapid reinforcement of the German-led NATO battalion-size battlegroup to brigade size. As part of this exercise, within around six days the Bundeswehr deployed around 1000 of its troops and more than 300 units of equipment from the 41st Panzergrenadier Brigadein Mecklenburg-Vorpommern to Lithuania.

During a press conference held at the Pabradė training area, attended by Stoltenberg and Lithuania's president Gitanas Nausėda, minister Pistorius declared that Germany is ready to permanently station a 'robust brigade of around 4000 troops in Lithuania. However, the deployment will be conditional on Lithuania building the required military and other infrastructure such as barracks, training areas and storage facility. The German military presence would be expanded in proportion to the progress in constructing this infrastructure. Another condition involves the opinion issued by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) on whether the German brigade's permanent presence complies with NATO's new regional defence plans, and whether it guarantees flexibility in the use of NATO forces on the eastern flank.

Commentary

- The German defence minister's declaration puts an end to the controversy surrounding the interpretation of the joint German-Lithuanian communiqué of 7 June 2022 in which the parties agreed that in addition to commanding NATO's enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup Germany is ready to lead a combat ready brigade in Lithuania. Thus far, Berlin's interpretation of this communiqué was that the greater part of this brigade would be permanently stationed in Germany. In Vilnius's interpretation, on the other hand, the German troops were to be permanently stationed in Lithuania, which is consistent with what Pistorius announced at the press conference. This indicates that Lithuania has emerged the victor in the dispute on the issue it had considered critically important for itself even if it turns out that the decisions are unlikely to be enforced in the short term. In the most optimistic scenario, the process of permanently deploying the German brigade to Lithuania (provided that the SACEUR issues a positive opinion, the necessary infrastructure is built and the Bundeswehr gains the relevant capability) may take at least three years. No schedule has been agreed, and the opinion of whether the Lithuanian

infrastructure (currently being expanded) is sufficient may be called into question. Moreover, unless Germany's regular defence budget is increased, it may be difficult to finance the Bundeswehr brigade's deployment to Lithuania.

- It is worth noting that the German minister spoke about the German brigade's permanent deployment (which means that the soldiers will be joined by their families) rather than permanent rotation (in which the contingent rotates every six months). This would be a novelty in the context of the compromise on permanent rotational presence on the eastern flank, which has been in place in NATO since 2016 and is in line with the provisions of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. This Act envisaged a commitment by NATO to refrain from permanently stationing substantial combat forces in NATO's new member states. Until recently, Berlin was the main supporter of this provision, and it is still reluctant to agree that NATO should officially denounce this Act, preferring a narrative suggesting that the Act should be suspended temporarily due to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Should a permanent deployment of the German brigade to Lithuania indeed happen, this would *de facto* equate to Berlin changing its stance. This shift would also put pressure on other framework nations with NATO battlegroups in Latvia, Estonia and Poland (that is Canada, the United Kingdom and the US) to modify their current model of military involvement in the region. Notwithstanding all the doubts regarding how Germany will carry out the decisions it has announced, Berlin's declared intention to deploy its brigade on a permanent basis has been motivated by several factors. The context involves a change in how Germany views Russia: in Germany's most recent national security strategy Russia is defined as a threat to the security of Germany and its allies (see '*Germany's first national security strategy: the minimal consensus*'). The political backdrop includes the need to regain credibility in the Baltic states and, most likely, the perception of increasing competition with Warsaw for the status of security leader in the region.
- Lithuania has declared that it views constructing the necessary infrastructure as one of its priorities. The Lithuanian leadership intends to complete this process by 2026, although this should be viewed as optimistic. As regards military infrastructure, the demand for modernisation is huge. Lithuania has very few training areas, and the ones which already exist are too small (Gaižiūnai in Rukla, Pabradė, Rūdninkai). According to plans, the Rūdninkai training area, located in the south-eastern part of the country, will be the biggest such facility. However, the expansion of this training could well take until the end of the present decade, and one of the related challenges will involve removing the aircraft ammunition which remained there following the Soviet-era military exercises. In addition, Lithuania plans to build three 'military towns' for the Bundeswehr soldiers (each will house a unit of the size of a battalion), although it should be noted that no work on constructing any of these has yet been launched. Moreover, plans have been made to build a logistical hub in Rukla by 2027.
- The Griffin Storm exercise is one result of the decisions taken at the NATO summit in Madrid. Germany has been the third framework nation (after the US and the UK) to carry out an exercise based on the rapid reinforcement of a NATO battlegroup (which includes more than 700 German soldiers and around 1000 soldiers from other countries) to brigade size (nearly 3000 soldiers in this case). In May 2023, as part of the Griffin Shock

exercise, the US (acting as the framework nation of the NATO battlegroup in Poland) deployed elements of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment from Vilseck in Germany to Orzysz. This resulted in a temporary increase in the size of the NATO battlegroup in Poland (around 1400 troops) to brigade level (more than 3000 troops). A similar exercise, Spring Storm, was carried out in May 2023 in Estonia with the participation of soldiers from the UK (1500 troops) and other allies.

- Aside from seeking to agree upon regional defence plans and other related issues, and to have Germany pledge to deploy a full brigade in Lithuania, Vilnius has been in favour of boosting air defence in the Baltic states. This is because these states have limited own capabilities in this respect: since 2020 Lithuania has operated two NASAMS batteries, while Estonia and Latvia have launched talks with Diehl Defence regarding the planned purchase of IRIS-T SLM systems. The statements by Stoltenberg and Nausėda indicate that the Baltic states' switch from the current Air Policing model (which involves Allied fighter jets patrolling the Baltic air space) to the Air Defence model will be announced at the NATO summit in Vilnius. The new approach envisages additional rotational deployment of short- and medium-range ground-based air defence systems. However, one particular challenge will involve ensuring continuous Allied involvement. Since mid-2022, Spain has rotated one NASAMS short-range air defence battery in Latvia, and in April 2023 it deployed another one in Estonia for four months. To guarantee security during the upcoming Vilnius NATO summit, Germany will deploy a Patriot medium-range missile defence system in Lithuania, and Spain will redirect one NASAMS battery there from Latvia.