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NATO brigades in the Baltic states: new chapters in the long march toward deployment

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On 17 October, the defence ministers of Estonia and the United Kingdom signed a bilateral defence roadmap, outlining steps to further enhance the British military presence in Estonia. From July 2025, the UK will maintain a light brigade on standby, capable of rapid deployment to Estonia if required. The deployment of these forces will be practised regularly. Both nations will also develop plans for the pre-positioning of brigade's stocks and military equipment in Estonia.

On the same date, a ceremony was held to mark the transfer of command authority from the NATO Multinational Battlegroup to the NATO Multinational Brigade in Latvia.

On 3 October, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania ratified an agreement on defence cooperation with Germany, which was signed in September. It established the legal framework for the operation of the German contingent, which will be permanently stationed in Lithuania as part of the expanding German brigade, along with provisions for the presence of soldiers' families. It regulates the use of selected military facilities and the storage of armament and military equipment, while also creating the legal basis for setting up German institutions (for example, in education), which will be granted tax exemptions. Lithuania has committed to providing appropriate accommodation and logistical support.

Since 2017, NATO's multinational battalion-sized battlegroups have been deployed in the Baltic states on a permanent rotational basis (one more battlegroup was formed in Poland). Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO resolved to assign additional high-readiness forces to these battlegroups. If required, these forces can be rapidly deployed from the framework nations (the UK in Estonia, Canada in Latvia, and Germany in Lithuania) and form a full brigade alongside the battalion-sized battlegroups in the host countries. The Baltic states have secured commitments from the framework nations to expand their presence to brigade level, albeit under different terms. The aforementioned agreements represent further steps in this process (see '*Expectations versus reality: NATO brigades in the Baltic states?*').

Commentary

- **For Estonia, the plans to pre-position stockpiles of British armament and military equipment represent a significant step, as they will enable a quicker transition from battalion to brigade level in the event of a crisis.** Estonia is the only Baltic state that has not secured a commitment to expand the hosted battlegroup to a permanent or

rotational brigade, due to a shortfall in the British Army, which has only two armoured brigades available. For this reason, a light, rather than heavy, brigade combat team has been designated to support Estonia in the event of a crisis. NATO will maintain its permanent rotational presence in the country at the level of a battlegroup composed of a British reinforced mechanised battalion (equipped with artillery and air defence systems) and a French motorised company, totalling around 1,060 soldiers. Nonetheless, this battlegroup will be provided with better equipment and enablers.

- **The German-Lithuanian agreement represents another step towards establishing a permanent German presence in Lithuania in the form of the 45th Armoured Brigade ('Brigade Lithuania').** Its scope and structure resemble the Defence Cooperation Agreements that the U.S. has signed with individual allies. According to the roadmap from December 2023, approximately 4,800 German soldiers and 200 civilian military staff, along with their families, are set to be stationed in Lithuania by the end of 2027. The brigade is currently in the process of establishing its command battalion, while a tank battalion, a mechanised battalion, and an artillery battalion will be relocated from Germany in the coming years. Furthermore, the German-led NATO multinational battlegroup will be assigned to this brigade. However, this process may face delays, as several reports in German media have highlighted issues such as insufficient funding and challenges with establishing infrastructure in Lithuania. Should the plans be realised despite these difficulties, the Bundeswehr will have the largest military presence in the Baltic states of all European allies (see '*The German 'Brigade Lithuania*").
- **The expansion of NATO's battlegroup in Latvia into a brigade has been progressing according to the timeline adopted in mid-2023; however, this timeline was unambitious from the outset, being spread over an extended period due to Latvia's infrastructure shortcomings and challenges faced by the Canadian Armed Forces.** This will be the most multinational brigade in the Baltic states, with a total strength exceeding 3,500 soldiers. By 2026, the number of Canadian troops detached to Latvia is expected to rise from around 1,600 to 2,200, though their presence will remain rotational. Since mid-2024, Canada has been supported by Denmark, which will rotate a mechanised battalion every six months, alternating with Sweden. Ultimately, the brigade will comprise a Canadian motorised battalion, a multinational (likely armoured) battalion, a mechanised battalion from Denmark or Sweden, and a multinational artillery battalion.