

# Paying it forward: Canada's renewed commitment to NATO's enhanced Forward Presence

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## Abstract

Although the dissolution of the Soviet Union may have altered the founding Cold War rationale for NATO, the fundamental principle of the transatlantic alliance has prevailed for 70 years: the collective defence of shared interests. In the face of Russian aggression, and uncertainty about US continued commitment to the alliance, reinforcing NATO has emerged as Canada's top expeditionary defence priority. Indeed, just before the NATO summit in July 2018, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau renewed Canada's commitment to the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) as the Framework Nation for Latvia for four years, and scaled up Canada's contribution to the allied battlegroup. This decision is as much a reflection of the eFP's immediate collective defence requirements in Latvia as it is of the extent to which the existential fate of Canada's most important defence asset hangs in the balance: the alliance, Canada's role in it, and the future of Canadian defence policy.

## Keywords

Foreign affairs, defence policy, US, NATO, Latvia, Baltics, Russia, eFP

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In violation of international law, Russia's annexation of Ukraine in 2014 disrupted nearly a generation of relative peace and stability between the Kremlin and its Western neighbours. It fundamentally called into question the political order since the end of the Cold War. This conflict in Ukraine served as a wake-up call to many NATO member states in the West, revealing Russia's belligerence and lack of qualms about encroaching on NATO's borders by means of territorial conquest in its supposed sphere of influence across the former Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Russia's insistence on its "military assertiveness, showcasing its conventional power and rattling its nuclear saber,"<sup>2</sup> served as "an I-told-you-so moment: after years when Asia and the Middle East had been the main conflict arenas, Western attention turned to Europe again, validating persistent Baltic cautionary tales about engaging Russia."<sup>3</sup> NATO's north-eastern flank is conspicuously exposed; the only territory that connects NATO's European members to the Baltics is at the geo-strategically important Suwalki Gap—a 100-km border between Poland and Lithuania that adjoins the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad in the west, and Russian ally Belarus in the east. The Baltic states are vulnerably exposed, and might have already suffered Ukraine's fate as a result, save for their membership in NATO.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately prior to the NATO summit in July 2018, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau renewed Canada's commitment to the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) as the Framework Nation for Latvia for four years. The existing mandate of operation REASSURANCE was to end in March of this year; however, it was expected to be renewed before then.<sup>5</sup> Canada renewing its commitment more than half a year prior to the expiration of the existing mandate for an extended four-year period signalled its commitment to a substantive leadership role. This decision reflects Ottawa's concern about not only the situation in Latvia and the eFP, but also the fate of the alliance itself, Canada's role in it, and, indeed, about the future of Canadian defence policy.

## **NATO internationalism: Why "keep the Russians out"?**

Since the late 1940s, followed by the contentious times of the Cold War, and up to the point of the July 2018 recommitment to the eFP in Latvia, Canadian defence and foreign policy has been largely influenced by the US-led multilateral,

1. Eglė E. Murauskaitė, "Nuclear matters: Lithuanian security culture in the context of NATO trends," *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 16, no. 1 (2018): 37.
2. John-Michael Arnold, "NATO's Readiness Action Plan: Strategic benefits and outstanding Challenges," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (2016): 74–105; Steven Pifer, "Putin's nuclear saber-rattling: What is he compensating for?" *Order from Chaos*, 17 June 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/06/17-putin-nuclear-saber-rattling-pifer> (accessed 23 January 2019).
3. Murauskaitė, "Nuclear matters," 48–49.
4. *Ibid.*, 49.
5. For an analysis of Canada's decision to commit to the eFP in Latvia, see Christian Leuprecht, Joel J. Sokolsky, and Jayson Derow, "On the Baltic watch: The past, present and future of Canada's commitment to NATO's enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia," Macdonald-Laurier Institute, Ottawa, Ontario, 2018, from which parts of this paper are drawn.

liberal-democratic Western international(ist) security order. This is especially true with regard to Europe through NATO, and in North America through a wide array of bilateral defence and security linkages, and the “binational” North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). Any suggestion that this order might be coming to an end calls into question Canada’s defence posture.

But “why do we spend billions on defence, if we are not immediately threatened?” Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland asks rhetorically. Although no foreign adversary is poised to threaten Canadian sovereignty or territorial integrity—and, as such, one could conceivably turn inward and say “Canada first”—we are, nonetheless, confronted by Russian military adventurism and expansionism that threatens the liberal democratic order.<sup>6</sup> Given the uncertainty and complexity of the global security environment, Canada remains prepared to go to great lengths and incur considerable costs to ensure its “proper place” in the now enlarged NATO alliance. The means to that end are capacity and capability. Canada’s commitment to the security of the Baltics, Latvia in particular, while certainly self-interested, is also indicative of an effort to persuade the Trump administration that “NATO [is] neither obsolete nor a club of states free-riding on US largesse as a means of shoring up the alliance.”<sup>7</sup>

### What were Canada’s options?

In the face of Russian aggression, and uncertainty about US continued commitment to the alliance, doing more for NATO should be Canada’s top defence priority. This means more than “counter-tweeting” in response to Trumpian rhetoric. Certainly, the world may need “more Canada,” and if we truly expect to rejuvenate Canada’s role in NATO, “our deeds will need to match our words. We need forces that can engage in tasking by NATO and we need new, interoperable equipment for our troops to engage swiftly and effectively along with our allies.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, in making its decision to renew, Canada had to hedge against alternative futures, three of which seemed plausible:

1. Status quo. There are no further Russian provocations. If Russia consolidates its gains instead and allied anxieties subside, Canadian renewal is both politically easy and readily manageable in terms of resource requirements.
2. Russia steps up its pressure on the Baltics. The eFP becomes a higher priority on the US agenda, which calls on NATO allies to double down on their

6. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chrystia Freeland, as quoted in Martin Shadwick, “Strong, Secure, Engaged: The Liberal defence policy statement of 2017,” *Canadian Military Journal* 17, no. 4 (2017): 78–84.

7. James R. McKay, “Why Canada is best explained as a ‘reliable ally’ in 2017,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 16, no. 2 (2018): 137–164.

8. Brian Mulroney, “If Canada expects NATO to do more on global security, we must do more for NATO,” *The Globe and Mail*, 20 June 2016, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/if-canada-expects-nato-to-do-more-on-global-security-we-must-do-more-for-nato/article30525896/> (accessed 23 January 2019).

commitments. That would exert pressure on Canada to do more. Such a demand may cause the Canadian government—irrespective of political stripes—some discomfort. However, under this scenario, Ottawa’s main problem will be getting European allies, many of whom are far more irritated by Trump than Canada, to agree first and contribute as well. To curry favour, for the sake of allied unity, and to incentivize decision-making, Ottawa could have found itself under pressure to surge military resources. In this context, such a decision would, in fact, come down to additional military forces in the form of enablers, such as air defence, long-range precision fires, electronic warfare assets, surveillance, and other similar capabilities, all of which are currently in short supply in the Canadian military. To be sure, additional troops might be useful, but the aforementioned enablers would be a more effective deterrent. The issue, then, is that the US possesses most of these assets, and as such, any withdrawal of their commitment to the security of the Baltic States would surely call into question the ability of NATO member states to provide the much-needed assistance and equipment to assure security in the Baltics should Russia step up its pressure in the region.

3. US disengagement or outright defection. The Trump administration, given its other defence and security priorities and its questioning of the need for alliances, could lose interest in the Baltics and the eFP, declaring it a European problem that should be dealt with by Europeans. This stance on European security reflects a major—yet quite possibly fundamental and prolonged—shift in US national security and foreign policy toward the status quo ante, before the Second World War. Indeed, Charles Kupchan recently argued, Trump’s approach represents a return to the largely successful US grand strategy of the 19th century.<sup>9</sup> Hitherto, US support for NATO has remained undiminished under the Trump administration, with the US actually increasing its commitment and presiding over large exercises on NATO’s eastern flank. On the Iran deal and the Paris climate accord, however, President Trump has lived up to his campaign rhetoric. Secretary of Defense James Mattis’s departure may yet prove a harbinger of disengagement: his resignation was prompted by his disagreement with the president over the continued importance of allies to US security. Dismissing him prior to the end of February 2019 meant that Mattis would not be attending the NATO ministerial earlier that month. As Thomas Wright recently noted in *Foreign Affairs*,<sup>10</sup> given that the president has shed most of the few champions of multilateralism from his administration, his foreign policy

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9. Charles A. Kupchan, “Trump’s nineteenth-century grand strategy: The themes of his UN General Assembly speech have deep roots in U.S. history,” *Foreign Affairs-Postscript*, 26 September 2018, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-09-26/trumps-nineteenth-century-grand-strategy?-cid=nlc-fa\\_twofa-20180928](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-09-26/trumps-nineteenth-century-grand-strategy?-cid=nlc-fa_twofa-20180928) (accessed 23 January 2019).

10. Thomas Wright, “Trump’s Foreign Policy Is No Longer Unpredictable: Gone Are The Days of Divided Administration,” *Foreign Affairs Snapshot*, January 18 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2019-01-18/trumps-foreign-policy-no-longer-unpredictable>

may no longer be seemingly “divided” and the world may well see anti-NATO actions to match the rhetoric.

## **NATO multilateralism: Why “keep the Americans in”?**

This third alternative future would be the most difficult for Canada because it would give rise to a serious predicament. If the US decision were to weaken NATO to the point where it could no longer play the role of eFP enabler, should Canada still re-commit, even increase its contribution in an EU-only show of effort in the Baltics, as a way of demonstrating the most credible commitment possible for the sake of deterrence?

To be sure, Canada could surge defence spending, but it is unclear whether President Trump would be satisfied with whatever Canada could reasonably inject. Since the government of Prime Minister Trudeau is up for re-election this year, domestic priorities are bound to trump foreign and defence spending in this year’s budget. Moreover, the Prime Minister may well decide that President Trump’s behaviour during the ultimately successful but needlessly re-named US–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), combined with the continued imposition of tariffs on some Canadian goods, and disparaging ad hominem remarks, might well give Trudeau license and domestic support to resist US pressure to ramp-up defence spending.

Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay have called upon leading US allies in NATO and elsewhere, including Canada, who have amongst them the collective military and economic capacity, to form a “committee to save the world.” If they can “summon the will” to do so and increase their individual military expenditures, these states can adopt a kind of “holding action” that can “maintain the rules-based order in the hope that Trump’s successor will reclaim Washington’s global leadership role and lay the groundwork to make it politically possible for that to happen.”<sup>11</sup>

But what really is the future of the alliance, let alone of the eFP, with waning US support and the new fissures such a move is bound to open up? In such a scenario, is the EU in a position to take over the eFP, given the challenges it is already facing? The “European forces are too hollowed out, lack key enablers, and vital logistics, and their leaders are too lacking in political will to respond in force.”<sup>12</sup> Even if it were in a position to backfill for a US drawdown along the north-eastern frontier, would that be high enough a priority on the EU’s agenda? And if it were, would there be enough resources to go around to scale up in Poland, especially

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11. Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, “The committee to save the world order America’s allies must step up as America steps down,” *Foreign Affairs*, 30 September 2018, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-09-30/committee-save-world-order?cid=nlc-fa\\_twofa-20181004](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-09-30/committee-save-world-order?cid=nlc-fa_twofa-20181004) (accessed 23 January 2019).

12. “NATO: The enduring alliance 2016,” Atlantic Treaty Association, 27 June 2016.

without compromising competing EU security operations along its southern flank, across the Middle East, and Africa?

### **Why does NATO need “more Canada”?**

No surprise, then, that Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, were quick to stick to their policy guns, claiming that what counts is not some arbitrary, hard-to-count, inconsistently applied measure of the portion of national wealth devoted to defence spending, but capacity, capability, and commitments to NATO’s collective defence posture. Canada’s significant contribution to the eFP not only reflects its role as one of the most militarily capable NATO member states, but also its rather important role in political messaging and establishing credibility of the operation as a whole. By example, Canada’s renewal of its commitment to Baltic security conveys the military capability to inflict substantial costs on an adversary, while denying it any ability to quickly achieve its objectives.<sup>13</sup> In turn, a key feature of the eFP concept is the multinational character and interoperability capacity of the battlegroups. This is politically and militarily crucial in signalling allied solidarity and enabling burden-sharing.<sup>14</sup> In this context, having made clear that it is not about to up its “fully costed” spending on defence, Canada only had capacity, capability, and commitments left to leverage. By renewing early for four years, Canada was looking to lead by example: a sustained commitment to the eFP. The hope is that others will follow suit.

Canada and its member state partners in Latvia committing early to renewal sets the pace for renewal by Framework Nations and partners in Estonia and Lithuania. Together, these member states are sending a clear signal to the US: an unambiguous commitment to burden-sharing, at least insofar as the eFP is concerned. Rather than the US having to corral Canada to commit, as President Obama did when the Americans were looking for a member state with headquarters capacity to become the Framework Nation in Latvia, Canada continues to corral the US: making sure the US recommits as the eFP Framework Nation for Poland and stays the course on the European Deterrence Initiative, as a way of staying the course on Russia. In a show of additional commitment to the eFP, the Canadian government has signalled its intent to post Canadian Armed Forces personnel and their families to the Canadian Headquarters element in the Baltics to ensure a “consistent and continuous presence in Latvia.”<sup>15</sup> This degree of

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13. Jüri Luik and Henrik Praks, “Boosting the deterrent effect of allied Enhanced Forward Presence,” Policy Paper, International Centre for Defence and Security, Tallinn, Estonia, 2017, [https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/ICDS\\_Policy\\_Paper\\_Boosting\\_the\\_Deterrent\\_Effect\\_of\\_Allied\\_eFP.pdf](https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/ICDS_Policy_Paper_Boosting_the_Deterrent_Effect_of_Allied_eFP.pdf) (accessed 23 January 2019).

14. Ibid.

15. Juris Graney, “Canadian troops to find permanent home in Latvia to deter Russian aggression,” *Edmonton Sun*, 25 February 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180313014813/https://edmonton.com/2017/02/25/canadian-troops-to-find-permanent-home-in-latvia-to-deter-russian-aggression/wcm/2e3b4bc4-5be6-4d08-a04d-d8c27afa001c> (accessed 23 January 2019).

commitment is unique amongst eFP Framework Nations and contributing countries, and signals a level of commitment well beyond the rotational elements of the battlegroup.<sup>16</sup>

## How is Canada paying it forward?

As of spring 2019, Canada as a Framework Nation in Latvia contributes 540 of the approximate 1393 foreign NATO member state troops in the land domain, consisting of a headquarters component and parts of a battlegroup with a Canadian infantry battalion as well as reconnaissance and support elements.<sup>17</sup> That amounts to approximately 39 percent of the total troop strength currently contributed by NATO allies to the eFP in Latvia, and approximately 11 percent of the combined total non-indigenous troop strength contributed by Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, which amounts to about 4833 troops.<sup>18</sup> Ottawa's commitment in troop strength, as well as command and field units, in terms of total numbers may not be comparable to Canada's Cold War deployment to Germany, but on a per-capita basis, Canada's commitment to Latvia actually surpasses the proportion of Canadian troops stationed in Europe during the Cold War.

Ergo, the costs for Canada to defect from the eFP, let alone its commitment as a Framework Nation, are high. Defection would close doors, let down old and new friends, and waste human and political capital along with the political-military credibility Canada's commitment to the eFP has generated. Canada would be abandoning a low-risk mission that continues to pay dividends in developing Canadian and partner military capability, interoperability, training, and readiness to act in the face of the evolving security environment.

What is more, at the Brussels Summit in July 2018, Canada also committed to assume command of NATO's new multinational non-combat training and capacity-building mission in Iraq for its first year of operation. Canada's objective within this mission is to move forward from the militarily successful fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and assist in building the institutional capacity of Iraq's security forces, its defence and security institutions, and its national defence academies to establish robust foundations for long-term peace, security, and stability. This mission, ending in fall 2019, entails approximately 250 Canadian Armed Forces personnel and assets.<sup>19</sup> Canada continues to lead on NATO's most important in-area and out-of-area missions: the eFP and Iraq.

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16. Marc Montgomery, "NATO and Russia: Canadian troops have challenges to overcome in Latvia," *Radio Canada International*, 21 March 2017, <http://www.rcinet.ca/en/2017/03/21/nato-and-russia-canadian-troops-have-challenges-to-overcome-in-latvia/> (accessed 23 January 2019).

17. "NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, June 2018, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2018\\_06/20180606\\_1806-factsheet\\_efp\\_en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_06/20180606_1806-factsheet_efp_en.pdf) (accessed 23 January 2019).

18. *Ibid.*

19. Justin Trudeau, "Canada's leadership in Iraq," Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, 11 July 2018, <https://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2018/07/11/canadas-leadership-iraq> (accessed 23 January 2019).

## Does NATO need more than Americans to operate?

Parallels to Canada's deployment to Afghanistan are compelling. That major military commitment to the US-led coalition operations in Afghanistan was considered at the time as a means to buttress the credibility of Canada's relationship with the US as well as the transatlantic multilateral alliance. This notion of valuing the alliance helps to reinforce Canada's decision to go to war and remain at war. By example, between 2007 and 2011, Canada ranked first among NATO allies in terms of the share of its military personnel deployed to Afghanistan as a percentage of its armed forces. Canadian troops suffered the third highest ratio of casualties among the multinational coalition as a share of troops deployed. The fundamental question then comes forward: why did Canada carry such a considerable share of the burden? Massie and Zyla argue that "the size and riskiness of Canada's military deployments as part of the ISAF operation not only reflected Canada's value for the alliance but also aimed at revamping the country's international status as a leading military ally."<sup>20</sup>

Canada offers a military that is popular, robust, competent, and well-equipped. As such, Canada has become the paradigm for analysts arguing that the US-favoured metric of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence is arbitrary, and what matters instead is contributing effectively to coalition operations when requested to do so. This metric, at times, tends to discount the efforts of allies who make meaningful contributions to the alliance, while still falling short of the 2 percent threshold. By example, what we are currently witnessing as part of the eFP Latvia is certainly a continuation of Canada's long-standing commitment to NATO—once again dispatching forces to Europe and lending its capabilities and highly sophisticated military expertise to bolster the stability and security of a region that remains essential to Canada's national interests.

Although a US decision to step back from the eFP and the Baltic states would call into question the future of the Alliance, Ottawa assures its European allies that it will hold firm to its current policy, affirming Canada's commitment to its solidarity with Ukraine, and remaining committed to the 29-state alliance - soon to be 30 with the joining of North Macedonia - without it becoming weakened should the US scale back its involvement in European security. By providing a sustained military presence in Europe, Canada's leadership of a battlegroup in Latvia will continue to represent Canada as an effective ally when it comes to providing for the protection of European security.

As in the past, Canada's commitment goes beyond a belief in NATO's collective interests and values: "Why invest billions to maintain a capable, professional, well-funded and well-equipped Canadian military?"<sup>21</sup> The answer is obvious, states

20. Justin Massie and Benjamin Zyla, "Alliance value and status enhancement: Canada's disproportionate military burden sharing in Afghanistan," *Politics & Policy* 46, no. 2 (2018): 320–344.

21. Chrystia Freeland, "Address by Minister Freeland on Canada's foreign policy priorities," Global Affairs Canada, 6 June 2017, [https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address\\_by\\_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address_by_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html) (accessed 23 January 2019).

Freeland: “To rely solely on the US national security umbrella would make us a client state... [S]uch a dependence would not be in Canada’s interest... It is by pulling our weight... in all our international partnerships, that we, in fact, have weight.” In that regard, given current fiscal constraints, the eFP is a manageable international commitment to the NATO alliance. Additionally, it is a commitment that advantages the Canada–US relationship by demonstrating a willingness to “share the burden” without significantly increasing defence spending, which has a forecast expenditure set at \$25.5 billion (Canadian) for the 2018/2019 fiscal year.

Canada’s approach is in keeping with its 2017 defence white paper, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, and, thus, is principled. Given the uncertainty and complexity of the global security environment and its intricate implications for Canadian security, “Canada will pursue leadership roles and will prioritise interoperability in its planning and capability development to ensure seamless cooperation with allies and partner.”<sup>22</sup> The political benefit of this approach to engaging in eFP Latvia demonstrates Ottawa’s willingness to deploy its military assets in support of common defence objectives, notwithstanding Canada’s current defence expenditures of 1.23 percent falling well below the aspiration of 2 percent of GDP reinforced by NATO members at the 2014 Wales Summit.

## Conclusion

As it marks its seventieth anniversary, the resolve and effectiveness of the NATO alliance is certainly being tested in Europe. The dissolution of the Soviet Union may have altered the rationale for the alliance, but the fundamental principle that comprises the foundation of this relationship remains intact: the defence of shared interests and values. This collection of democracies has managed to surprise and confound its critics by continually adopting a series of initiatives that place political considerations at the centre of its strategic calculations. Amongst such wise policies is the importance attached to military contributions from its members, no matter how limited they might be in relative terms. This approach provides Canada with a security community to which, by any assessment, it could make, and certainly continues to make, a successful, significant, and appreciated military contribution.

In this evolving security environment, Canada needs NATO to remain strong, ready, and capable of forging interdependencies between European states, in order to be better positioned to respond to the challenges that may seem local, but actually threaten the entire rules-based international order.<sup>23</sup> The eFP is a practical and symbolic testament to NATO’s willingness to meet those challenges, a measure and litmus test of the Alliance’s collective faith in its enduring purpose and future

22. “Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy,” Government of Canada, <http://dgpapp-forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/docs/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf> (accessed 23 January 2019).

23. Dov Seidman and James Stavridis, “Supreme Allied Commander Stavridis: Donald Trump is so wrong about NATO,” *Time*, 21 July 2016, <http://time.com/4417061/donaldtrump-wrong-about-nato/> (accessed 23 January 2019).

relevance. Through its renewed, significant, and welcomed commitments in Latvia and elsewhere, Canada is manifesting its willingness to help sustain that purpose and future.

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