

DGAP POLICY BRIEF

From “Forward Presence” to “Forward Defense”

Germany Must Strengthen NATO’s Northeastern Flank in Lithuania



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Issues of deterrence and defense along NATO’s northeastern flank have been a greater focus of NATO members since the Russian attack on Ukraine began. Particularly in the Baltic States, there is a determination to protect every inch of the Alliance’s territory against a possible Russian attack. To prevent such a scenario, NATO is making military adjustments to which Germany will have to increase its contribution.

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- Because of the Russian threat, NATO should focus more on defending the Alliance area, especially in the geographically exposed Baltic States.

 - The reinsurance and deterrence measures initiated since 2014 are insufficient and need to be corrected more than before.

 - The German government can contribute to improving the defense capability of the Alliance area by permanently stationing the brigade committed to the defense of Lithuania on Lithuanian soil.

 - Germany should encourage the United Kingdom and Canada to take similar measures in Estonia and Latvia.
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At the latest since the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, deterrence and defense on NATO's northeastern flank have become topical again. Consequently, the adaptation of military measures is necessary. In this context, NATO Allies should pay special attention to the Baltic States, which are particularly exposed from a geostrategic point of view. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania border on Russia. At the same time, all three countries lack a geographic space of retreat because they are small and narrow.

For Germany in particular and NATO in general, this situation has political, strategic, and military implications. If Russia were to attack one or more of the Baltic States, Germany would be directly affected. After all, Bundeswehr troops are part of the military presence that currently secures NATO's eastern border with multinational forces. In the event of a Russian attack scenario, however, a fait accompli – one in which Moscow would use nuclear threats to prevent the other NATO members from organizing military support for the Baltic States – could not be ruled out. The very prospect of success of such blackmail attempts could disrupt NATO and result in a strategic victory for Russia that it could achieve without having to fight a protracted war.¹

Such a development would severely damage confidence in Germany's reliability and cohesion within the Alliance. This is particularly problematic because the Baltic states are already questioning the German government's ability and willingness to defend them against a Russian attack.

This makes it all the more important to recall the "proposals" that Russian President Vladimir Putin made for a new European security architecture in early December 2021. In ultimatums addressed to the United States and NATO, Putin demanded, among other things, the reversal of NATO enlargement since 1999 and a de facto withdrawal of the Americans from Europe.² If the Americans were to comply with these demands, Europe would be in a difficult position. After all, the United States guarantees a large part of Eu-

ropean security within the framework of NATO – not least by means of its nuclear umbrella, which stretches over NATO Europe.

GERMANY'S ROLE ON NATO'S NORTHEASTERN FLANK: WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Germany has played an increasingly important role in the deterrence and defense context of NATO since 2022. As the framework nation of the multinational battle group in Rukla, Lithuania, it has already been leading Alliance troops in Lithuania since 2017 as part of the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) mission.³ In response to the renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine, the German government has increased the troop contingent to almost 900 forces.⁴ Furthermore, last year Germany pledged a combat brigade of around 3,000 servicemen and -women for Lithuania's protection. The brigade's command staff of about 60 is already permanently stationed in Rukla. The rest of the force, on the other hand, is to remain on German soil and be transferred to Lithuania only for exercises. The main task of the command staff is to prepare for this transfer, including the necessary equipment.

Lithuanian expectations for the provision of a mechanized brigade have caused tensions between the two countries. Lithuania hoped that not only the command staff would be permanently stationed in Lithuania, but also the entire brigade and its equipment.

However, the German government currently rejects this, citing the inadequate equipment of the Bundeswehr. At the same time, it emphasizes that it should be NATO deciding on a permanent presence.⁵ In addition, Berlin states – rightly so, in principle – that Lithuania has so far lacked the infrastructure to host a brigade permanently in the country; this includes, among other things, accommodation for servicemen and -women and their families as well as training areas.⁶

1 Heinrich Brauß, "The Need for the Alliance to Adapt Further" in *Future NATO – Adapting to new Realities*, ed. John Andreas Olsen (London, 2020), pp. 131–144.

2 Sabine Fischer, "Moskaus Verhandlungsoffensive – Kurz gesagt," SWP, December 22, 2021: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/moskaus-verhandlungsoffensive> (accessed May 31, 2023).

3 The following other nations participate in the current rotation: Belgium, Croatia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, and Czech Republic; cf. "Enhanced Forward Presence: Litauen – eFP und eVA," bundeswehr.de: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/einsaetze-bundeswehr/anerkannte-missionen/efp-enhanced-forward-presence> (accessed May 31, 2023).

4 Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 20/5700 vom 28.02.2023 (Unterrichtung durch die Wehrbeauftragte – Jahresbericht 2022 (64th Report)), p. 10.

5 "Pistorius visits NATO partner – "Sicherheit Litauens ist auch unsere Sicherheit," Tagesschau, March 7, 2023: <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/pistorius-litauen-103.html> (accessed May 31, 2023).

6 "Ukraine Aktuell: Pistorius sagt Litauen dauerhafte deutsche Präsenz zu," Deutsche Welle, March 7, 2023: <https://www.dw.com/de/ukraine-aktuell-pistorius-sagt-litauen-dauerhafte-deutsche-pr%C3%A4senz-zu/a-64903846> (accessed May 31, 2023).

These three arguments can be countered as follows, however:

First, if the German government is serious about the announced *Zeitenwende* in its security and defense policy and wants to be credible with its implementation, it must provide the resources and materiel to enable the Bundeswehr to fulfill its core mission: national and alliance defense. This mission mainly includes securing and, if necessary, defending the northeastern flank of the Alliance.

Second, Germany showed last year that it does not have to wait for NATO decisions to act but rather shapes them. For example, before the NATO summit in Madrid at the end of June, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz promised Lithuania the brigade whose exact deployment is now being debated.

Third, although it will probably take three to five years before the infrastructural prerequisites are in place, Lithuania is already working on the implementation.⁷

FROM DETERRENCE TO DEFENSE

The foundation for the current shift from increased forward presence and deterrence to greater defense capability, particularly in the Baltic States and Poland, was decided by the Allies back in 2014 with the Readiness Action Plan (RAP).⁸ The RAP was a response to Russia's incipient aggression against Ukraine in the same year and initially focused on preparing for the gradual military reinforcement of those Allies that are situated along the border with Russia.

The RAP, adopted at the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, represented a significant step toward strengthening the northeastern flank and included a number of air, sea, and land adaptations, including the strengthening of NATO air policing over the Baltic States. In addition, leaders in Wales agreed to triple the size of NATO's response force to about 40,000 troops whose “spearhead,” the multinational Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) of

about 5,000 servicemen and -women, is expected to be ready to deploy with initial elements within days.

These decisions and measures were based on the conviction that, in light of the annexation of Crimea in violation of international law and Russian support for the separatists in southeastern Ukraine, NATO had to return to its original *raison d'être*: deterrence and defense. Thus, the Allies additionally decided to increase their forward military presence along the northeastern flank.⁹

Russia's military presence in Kaliningrad complicates deployment of troops to the Baltic States

Since 2017, the core of this presence has been the deployment of four multinational battlegroups, roughly the size of a reinforced battalion, as part of NATO's eFP. At the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw, member states agreed to deploy eFP forces in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland on a six-month rotation to help improve the deterrence of the Alliance against Russia. This was intended to signal to those in power in Moscow that even in the event of a limited military incursion into the territory of one of the four members, Russia would immediately be at war with all of NATO, including the nuclear powers of France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.¹⁰

All of the measures that have been set in motion since 2014 and implemented and further adapted

7 “Lithuania and Germany Further Build on Military Cooperation by Increasing Deterrence and Defence in the Region,” Defense-Aerospace, March 8, 2023: <https://www.defense-aerospace.com/lithuania-preparing-to-host-permanent-german-brigade> (accessed May 31, 2023); “Lithuania needs special law on German brigade infrastructure – Landsbergis,” The Baltic Times, November 15, 2022: https://www.baltictimes.com/lithuania_needs_special_law_on_german_brigade_infrastructure_landsbergis (accessed May 31, 2023); Augustas Stankevičius and Ignas Jačauskas, “Nausėda says Scholz agreed on gradual deployment of German brigade in Lithuania,” LRT, April 28, 2023: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1973065/nauseda-says-scholz-agreed-on-gradual-deployment-of-german-brigade-in-lithuania> (accessed May 31, 2023).

8 Wales Summit Declaration, NATO, September 5, 2014: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm (accessed May 31, 2023).

9 Heinrich Brauß, “NATO Beyond 70: Renewing a Culture of Readiness,” International Centre for Defence and Security, November 2018, pp. 1–11.

10 The UK provides troops amounting to 993 in Estonia, Canada deploys up to 639 forces, and the United States provides 780 servicemen and -women for the eFP battlegroup in Poland; see Factsheet, “NATO's Forward Presence,” NATO, June 2022: <https://shape.nato.int/efp/efp/fact-sheet.aspx> (accessed May 31, 2023).

in the years since have one thing in common: they serve to reassure member states along the flank that stretches from the north to the southeast. However, none of these measures are sufficiently geared toward the defense of NATO's territory.

The government must implement a permanent increase in the defense budget

In the event of a Russian attack, eFP forces have the task of taking up delaying action, i.e., slowing the aggression down until further NATO forces can move in to defend one or more of the Baltic States or to recapture parts of them together with Baltic national forces. The transfer of troops and materiel to the Baltic States – especially in a conflict situation – could be made more difficult, however, by the fact that Russia has stationed air defense, extensive artillery, and electronic warfare equipment in its exclave of Kaliningrad between Lithuania and Poland in the framework of an Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy.¹¹ In the event of war, Russia could militarily close this very narrow strip of land by establishing a presence along the so-called Suwalki corridor, a strip only about 80 kilometers wide that connects Poland with Lithuania. The consequence would be that the Baltic States could only be reached by land by the armed forces of other NATO states with delays and possibly at the cost of high own losses.¹²

"DEFENDING EVERY INCH OF NATO TERRITORY"

Reports of war crimes committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine, for example in Butsha and Irpin, have once again reinforced the understanding on the part of some NATO members, especially the Baltic States, that allied territory along the northeastern flank, especially in the particularly exposed Baltic States, must not fall into Russian hands in the first place. Instead, NATO members have repeatedly emphasized that they will defend every inch of the Alliance's territory. Olaf Scholz and Joe Biden also expressed this warning to Putin.¹³

Accordingly, at an unscheduled summit on March 24, 2022, the Alliance decided to expand the number of eFP battlegroups geographically. Ever since, multinational battlegroups have also been deployed in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.¹⁴ In addition, NATO members that have already been serving as framework nations for eFP forces since 2017 have increased their troops on the ground.¹⁵ Individual member states are also providing additional aircraft for air policing in the Baltic States or reinforcing the Standing Naval Forces.¹⁶

NATO continued to evolve its military strategy away from a "forward presence" to a "forward defense" posture at the summit in Madrid last June. The following decision represented a significant step forward: "Allies have committed to deploy additional robust in-place combat-ready forces on our eastern flank, to be scaled up from the existing battlegroups to brigade-size units where and when required, underpinned by credible rapidly available reinforcements, prepositioned equipment, and enhanced command and control."¹⁷ Thus, by the summer of 2022, it was already clear that brigade-strong forces would be a central component of NATO's new strategy. How far it has come with the implementation of this decision will be the subject of this year's summit in Vilnius, Lithuania among other things.

11 Heinrich Brauß and Nikolaus Carstens, "Germany as framework nation," NDC Research Paper No. 14, November 2020, pp. 61–69.

12 Roger Näbig, "Beistand fürs Baltikum – Die 'Enhanced Forward Presence' der NATO gilt als modernes Abschreckungskonzept gegen Russland – aber ist sie mehr als ein Symbol?," Internationale Politik No. 6, November/December 2021, pp. 77–80.

13 German Federal Government, "Strengthening Security in the Baltic States together," May 26, 2023: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/federal-chancellor-b3-summit-2193288> (accessed June 7, 2023); The White House, "Remarks by President Biden Ahead of the One-Year Anniversary of Russia's Brutal and Unprovoked Invasion of Ukraine," February 21, 2023: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/21/remarks-by-president-biden-ahead-of-the-one-year-anniversary-of-russias-brutal-and-unprovoked-invasion-of-ukraine> (accessed June 7, 2023).

14 Timo Kather, "Vier zusätzliche NATO-Battlegroups an der östlichen NATO-Flanke," Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, March 25, 2022: <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/vier-zusaetzliche-nato-battlegroups-fuer-osteuropa-5381844> (accessed May 31, 2023).

15 Florian Manthey, "Bundeswehr entsendet mehr Truppen an NATO-Ostflanke," Bundesministerium für Verteidigung, February 7, 2022: <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/bundeswehr-entsendet-mehr-truppen-an-nato-ostflanke-5344416> (accessed May 31, 2023).

16 "Deutschland erweitert Engagement beim enhanced Air Policing South in Rumänien," Bundesministerium für Verteidigung, February 24, 2022: <https://www.bmvg.de/de/presse/deutschland-erweitert-engagement-eaps-5361524> (accessed May 31, 2023); "NATO Allies send more ships, jets to enhance deterrence and defence in eastern Europe," NATO, January 24, 2022: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_191040.htm (accessed May 31, 2023).

17 Madrid Summit Declaration, NATO, January 29, 2022: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm (accessed May 31, 2023).

RECOMMEDED ACTIONS:

- To prevent Russia from seizing Alliance territory, the German government should provide for the permanent stationing of a brigade in Lithuania. On the path to permanent deployment, Germany should deploy a further fully equipped battalion to Lithuania, in addition to German troops already contributing to the eFP force. An envisaged period of three to five years for this deployment would give Germany the opportunity to build up the forces and Lithuania the chance to build up the necessary infrastructure accordingly.
 - The German government should advocate within the Alliance framework for the United Kingdom and Canada, currently the two other lead nations for eFP forces in the Baltics, to take similar steps in Estonia and Latvia, respectively, to improve the defense capability of the entire northeastern flank.
 - In addition, Germany should work on the storage of military material in depots on the ground in Lithuania to have them quickly available in case of need. It is also necessary to work toward the rapid full equipment and staffing of the brigade designated for Lithuania's defense to signal a credible deterrence and, if necessary, defense readiness vis-à-vis Russia.
 - Furthermore, it is important that Germany strengthens and builds interoperability and trust with and vis-à-vis Lithuania. To this end, the announced brigade alongside the exercises is a first meaningful step.
 - To ensure that the Zeitenwende in Germany's security policy is implemented and conveys reliability both internally and externally, the German government must implement a permanent increase of the defense budget and introduce necessary reforms to eliminate or accelerate bureaucratic hurdles such as (procurement) processes in the defense policy apparatus.
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