



# A New Generation of Forward Defence—NATO in the Baltic states

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Cover: Alexander Welscher/DPA. 17 December 2024, Estonia, Tapa: An emblem of the NATO combat unit in Estonia is attached to the uniform of a soldier.

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## Abstract

At the Madrid Summit in 2022, NATO Allies agreed to scale up the Alliance's forward presence along the eastern flank to brigade-sized units as part of an increased emphasis on deterrence by denial. The flexibility of the concept has resulted in the framework nations and host nations in the Baltic states opting for three different models of the Forward Land Forces (FLF). This study examines the design of the FLFs in the Baltic states and analyses the key political and military considerations behind the choices made.

The study reveals that considerations relating to the military credibility of the forward posture and Alliance solidarity have become more prominent after 2022 than before. At the same time, constraining factors, such as national resource limitations and a desire to maintain national political control, are evident in the design of the multinational brigades and their command and control. However, the risk of escalation appears to be less of a concern than before.

Whether the FLFs contribute to deterrence by denial is dependent on developments on both sides of the NATO–Russia border as well as on other parts of NATO's evolving strategy. In particular, the deterrent value of the FLF is linked to Allies' capacity to deploy further reinforcements and to undertake the necessary defence reforms to fulfil NATO's capability targets.

**Keywords:** Baltic states, Canada, deterrence, enhanced Forward Presence, escalation, Estonia, forward defence, Forward Land Forces, framework nations, Germany, host nations, Latvia, Lithuania, NATO, strategy, UK.

## Sammanfattning

Vid Natotoppmötet i Madrid 2022 kom medlemsländerna överens om att förstärka alliansens framskjutna närvaro längs Natos östra flank till brigadnivå, vilket utgör en del av ett ökat fokus på avskräckning genom förnekelse. Flexibiliteten i konceptet har lett till att ramverks- och värdnationerna i de baltiska länderna har valt tre olika modeller för Natos framskjutna närvaro. I denna studie analyseras utformningen av den framskjutna närvaron i de baltiska staterna samt de politiska och militära överväganden som ligger bakom de vägval som har gjorts.

Studien visar att överväganden relaterade till den framskjutna närvarons militära trovärdighet och allianssolidaritet har fått ökad betydelse efter 2022 jämfört med tidigare. Samtidigt är det tydligt att begränsande faktorer som nationella resursbegränsningar och en önskan att bibehålla nationell politisk kontroll har påverkat utformningen av de multinationella brigaderna och deras ledningsstrukturer. Däremot verkar risken för eskalation ha mindre inverkan jämfört med tidigare.

Huruvida Natos framskjutna närvaro bidrar till avskräckning genom förnekelse beror på utvecklingen på båda sidor av gränsen mellan Nato och Ryssland samt på andra delar av Natos framväxande strategi. Den framskjutna närvarons avskräckande effekt hänger nära ihop med Natoländernas förmåga att bidra med ytterligare förstärkningar samt att genomföra de försvarsreformer som krävs för att uppnå Natos förmågemål.

**Nyckelord:** avskräckning, Baltikum, eskalering, Estland, framskjuten närvaro, framskjutet försvar, Kanada, Lettland, Litauen, Nato, ramverksnationer, Storbritannien, strategi, Tyskland, värdnationer.

## Preface

Commissioned by the Swedish Ministry of Defence, FOI's programme on Northern European and Transatlantic Security (NOTS) analyses security and defence developments in Western countries and organisations that influence Swedish security.

As part of our efforts to continuously track NATO developments, this study offers a detailed examination of a key element of NATO's evolving strategy for deterrence and defence: the strengthened forward presence on the eastern flank. An analysis of the choices made and trade-offs experienced in designing NATO's Forward Land Forces in the Baltic states is of particular value as Sweden assumes the role of framework nation for the FLF in Finland.

The authors extend their heartfelt gratitude to all the officials and experts who generously shared their knowledge and significantly contributed to the study. Special thanks are due to the defence counsellor at the Swedish Permanent Representation to NATO and the defence attachés at the Swedish Embassies in Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius, who provided valuable assistance in arranging meetings.

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Stockholm, June 2025

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## Abbreviations

BG	Battlegroup
DDA Concept	Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area
eFP	enhanced Forward Presence
FLF	Forward Land Forces
FOFA	Follow-on Forces Attack
IFV	Infantry Fighting Vehicle
MBT	Main Battle Tank
MN BG	Multinational Battlegroup
MNC-NE	Multinational Corps Northeast
MND-N	Multinational Division North
NAC	North Atlantic Council
NDPP	NATO Defence Planning Process
NFM	NATO Force Model
NRFA	NATO–Russia Founding Act



## Executive summary

The strategic shock of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has caused a sea change in NATO's approach to deterrence and defence. The Alliance now seeks to strengthen its capacity for deterrence by denial. In addition to new member states, new operations planning and a new force structure, NATO's most tangible commitment to the defence of its frontline states—the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland—was transformed into the Forward Land Forces (FLF) in 2022 and extended to Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria.

At the Madrid Summit in June 2022, NATO announced that the battalion-sized eFP battlegroups were to scale up to brigade-level units as part of a rebalancing between NATO's in-place forces and reinforcements. The rather small eFP units were primarily seen as a political signal of the Alliance's commitment to the defence of the Baltic states and Poland, intended to serve as a tripwire for further reinforcements in case of Russian aggression. The move from battalion-sized to brigade-sized units integrated into division headquarters indicates that the military credibility of the forces deployed is now prioritised.

However, different perspectives on forward deployments among NATO members saw a “where and when required” compromise formula added to the brigade-size requirement. This gives framework nations and host nations considerable flexibility and underscores that military credibility is not the sole consideration in designing NATO's strategy and force posture.

Lessons from the Cold War and the period between Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and its 2022 full-scale invasion show that the desire for military credibility is frequently complemented by considerations of Alliance solidarity, resource constraints, national political control, and escalation risks. This report assesses how these considerations have interacted in the design of the FLFs in the Baltic states.

### Three different models in the Baltics

The flexible concept for the FLF has resulted in three different models in the Baltic states. They differ in a number of aspects; the degree of permanent deployments, the degree of multinationality, the type of units deployed (infantry, mechanised, or armoured), and the setup of division command and control (host nation, multinational, or framework-nation division HQ). Table 1 summarises the key characteristics of these solutions.

Table 1: Summary of key attributes of the FLF brigades in the Baltic states

	FLF Estonia	FLF Latvia	FLF Lithuania
<b>Framework nation</b>	United Kingdom	Canada	Germany
<b>Type of presence</b>	In-place BG, stand-by brigade	Rotating brigade (2 battalions in place, 1 on standby)	Permanent brigade (from 2027)
<b>Number of contributing countries</b>	2 (GBR, FRA)	13 (CAN, ALB, CZE, DNK, ISL, ITA, MKD, MNE, POL, SVK, SVN, ESP, SWE)	7 (DEU, NLD, NOR, BEL, CZE, HRV, LUX)
<b>Type of units</b>	Mechanised BG, infantry brigade (2 GBR infantry battalions, 1 FRA battalion)	Mechanised brigade (1 MN mechanised BG, 1 DNK/SWE mechanised battalion, 1 CAN infantry battalion)	Armoured brigade (1 MN mechanised BG, 1 DEU armoured battalion, 1 DEU mechanised battalion)
<b>Key capabilities<sup>(a)</sup></b>	MBTs, IFVs, <sup>(b)</sup> artillery, short-range air defence, rocket artillery	MBTs, IFVs, artillery, short-range air defence	MBTs, IFVs, artillery
<b>Division HQ</b>	Host nation (EST)	Multinational (DNK, LVA)	Framework nation (DEU)
<b>Decision making in Art. 5</b>	GBR, FRA national decision needed to deploy before NAC decision, no parliamentary decision needed	NAC decision and national decisions needed, in CAN no parliamentary decision needed	NAC decision and national decisions needed, in DEU parliamentary approval needed
<b>Full brigade exercise</b>	May 2025 (Hedgehog) <sup>(c)</sup>	Nov. 2024 (Resolute Warrior)	?

In Estonia, the UK has opted for a stand-by model. There is no permanent deployment, but the UK, supported by France, holds a light infantry brigade with three manoeuvre battalions at readiness at home. The former eFP battlegroup provided by the same countries remains in Estonia, integrated into the 1st Estonian Brigade, on a rotational basis. In case of deployment, the UK-led brigade would fall under the Estonian division, augmented by UK officers and divisional enablers, such as rocket artillery and short-range air defence, already deployed to Estonia.

In Latvia, Canada has opted for a rotational model. There is no permanently deployed brigade, but a forward-deployed reduced mechanised brigade is persistently in place; its units normally rotate in and out every six months. It contains three manoeuvre battalions, of which one is the multinational former eFP battlegroup and one is on standby in Canada. Thirteen countries contribute to the brigade, making it by far the most multinational FLF. The brigade is under the division command of the Danish-Latvian Multinational Division North.

In Lithuania, Germany has opted for a permanent model. From 2027, a German armoured brigade with two manoeuvre battalions will be permanently in place in Lithuania. In addition, the former multinational eFP battlegroup will become part of the brigade but remain rotational. The brigade will fall under German division command provided by the 10th Armoured Division.

Despite the different models chosen, the FLFs in the Baltic states share challenges and opportunities on their way towards full operational capability. The flexible concept means that there are multiple lines of command between host nations, framework nations, contributing nations, and NATO, which must work in a crisis or war. These may become clearer over time and with upcoming reforms of NATO's command structure, but they deserve immediate attention. Furthermore, the mix of national, multinational, and NATO HQs makes rapid national decision-making procedures vital, particularly so in scenarios where Article 5 is not activated.

From NATO HQ's point of view, grey-zone crises are the host nations' responsibility, meaning that there is no automatic FLF response. On the other hand, contributing nations have forces in place—in the UK case, even integrated into national military structures—and sitting idly by may not be an option. Continuous consultations and table-top exercises are one way to explore different scenarios and mitigate risks. Recurring deployments of brigade-level formations, particularly of the specific units assigned to each FLF, are also necessary to ensure real-life experience of deployment and integration with host nation forces.

## **Key political and military considerations**

The most prominent considerations in the design of the FLFs in the Baltic states are the military credibility of the forward posture and Alliance solidarity. These are the most frequently cited by the framework nations for their decision to take responsibility for the FLF. Even so, these considerations do not exist in a vacuum, and a number of constraining factors come into play in the design of the multinational brigades and their command and control.

Resource constraints clearly influence the degree of permanent presence, the number of contributing countries, and the type of capabilities deployed in the different FLFs. The latter pertains both to manoeuvre forces and enablers. The desire to maintain national political control, particularly over advanced capabilities and enablers, is evident in the setup of command and control at the division level and above.

Concerns regarding the risk of escalation, on the contrary, have become less prominent post-2022 than before. Discussions have instead turned to NATO's options for escalation management. However, the framework nations' desire to

maintain national political control over advanced capabilities, such as rocket artillery and enablers capable of hitting targets on Russian territory, likely stems from a wish to maintain control of escalation.

### **The Forward Land Forces in NATO strategy**

While the transformation of the eFP into the FLF is part of NATO's increased emphasis on deterrence by denial, the FLF cannot achieve this on its own. The capacity for deterrence by denial is dependent on developments on both sides of the border. If or when the war in Ukraine is no longer fixing a large share of Russian forces, and if Russia succeeds in implementing announced build-ups in its Moscow and Leningrad military districts, force ratios may become reminiscent of pre-2022 levels, and one could argue that NATO is no closer to deterrence by denial than it was in 2017. Judging by our findings, NATO strengthening its presence with further in-place forces to match Russian increases may be a tall order, at least for framework nations.

However, NATO has other ways to manage negative force ratios along the NATO–Russia border. The effectiveness of the FLFs are linked to NATO's operations planning, most importantly the Regional Plans, and the NATO Force Model (NFM) for further reinforcements. The general impression from our interviews is that the FLFs are satisfactorily integrated into the NFM and operations planning. As all are in continuous development, this pattern will likely become even stronger in the future. However, it also makes the FLF dependent on the fate of necessary defence reforms needed in essentially all European member states to fulfil the ambitious capability targets adopted to resource NATO's new planning.

While NATO has taken great strides in recent years and the direction of travel is clear, large parts of the implementation remain. The FLFs and all other parts of NATO's evolving strategy must now be seen in a context of increased US unpredictability and seemingly decreased conventional engagement in Europe. On the one hand, the implementation of NATO's operations and defence planning in general, and the FLFs in particular, can be viewed as an excellent opportunity for European member states and Canada to take on a larger share of the burden for NATO's forward defences. On the other hand, the combination of a possible drawdown of the war in Ukraine and a less engaged US willing to park the Russia problem may incentivise some Allies to pursue similar policies and could re-open the debate on the appropriate way of handling the defence of the eastern flank.

# 1 Introduction

Russia's attack on Ukraine made it clear that the current means are not sufficient to deter Russia and we must prepare for Russia putting NATO's readiness to the test. Therefore, we need to move from the forward presence to forward defence.<sup>1</sup>

Estonia would be wiped off the map and the historic centre of its capital city razed to the ground under current Nato plans to defend the country from any Russian attack, according to its prime minister.<sup>2</sup>

These words, expressed by Kaja Kallas, the Prime Minister of Estonia, within a few months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, capture the fundamental change NATO is currently undergoing. The new mindset is most prominent among the countries along NATO's eastern flank. The Baltic states and Poland are constructing a defence line consisting of bunkers, counter-mobility obstacles, sensors, artillery systems, mining equipment, and border guards.<sup>3</sup> The same countries have announced their intention to withdraw from the Ottawa Convention, banning the use of anti-personnel mines.<sup>4</sup> Lithuania has also decided to withdraw from the Oslo Convention, prohibiting cluster munitions.<sup>5</sup>

The sense of urgency felt along NATO's eastern flank has pushed NATO as a whole to move towards a new generation of forward defence. However, as allies still diverge in their perception of the threat from Russia and differ in their views on the most appropriate way to handle the new security environment, NATO continues to walk a fine line in designing its force posture on the eastern flank.<sup>6</sup>

At the Madrid Summit in June 2022, NATO Allies committed to transform the existing enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups (eFP BGs) into brigade-sized

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<sup>1</sup> Government of the Republic of Estonia, "Kallas at NATO summit: Estonia needs NATO division and air defence," 24 March 2022, <https://www.valitsus.ee/en/news/kallas-nato-summit-estonia-needs-nato-division-and-air-defence>.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Milne, "Estonia's PM says country would be 'wiped from map' under existing Nato plans," Financial Times, 22 June 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/a430b191-39c8-4b03-b3fd-8e7e948a5284>.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Defence, Republic of Latvia, "This year's investment into Eastern Border Military Strengthening and Counter-mobility Plan will reach 45 million euro," 26 March 2025, <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/news/years-investment-eastern-border-military-strengthening-and-counter-mobility-plan-will-reach-45>.

<sup>4</sup> Baltic News Network, "Baltic and Polish defence ministers propose withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention," 18 March 2025, <https://bnn-news.com/baltic-and-polish-defence-ministers-propose-withdrawal-from-the-ottawa-convention-266071>.

<sup>5</sup> Saulius Jakučionis, "Lithuania sends 'strategic message' as it leaves cluster munitions convention—MoD," Lithuanian Radio and Television, 6 March 2025, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2505198/lithuania-sends-strategic-message-as-it-leaves-cluster-munitions-convention-mod?srsltid=AfmBOopqboYaiU-YOGCOMeSwaAUIYijt-YMH2LRE0v4tc7Vh1RpMPLL0>.

<sup>6</sup> Björn Ottosson et al., Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2024: Part II: The Evolving European Security Landscape—Political tensions and strategic challenges toward 2030, FOI Reports FOI-R--5623--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency—FOI, 2024), 29.



units “where and when required.” This compromise formula reflected the different perspectives on forward deployments within the Alliance and gave the framework nations and host nations of the Forward Land Forces (FLF) flexibility in designing the new posture. As NATO Allies could not agree on moving towards a forward defence posture, the Alliance refers to the FLFs as part of its *forward defences* instead of constituting *a forward defence*.

In the years since the Madrid Summit, the framework nations and host nations in the Baltic states have agreed on roadmaps outlining the future force postures and the chains of command for the FLFs. The three framework nations—the UK, Canada, and Germany—have, in several regards, opted for different solutions:

- The UK-led FLF in Estonia applies *a stand-by model*, where forces are held at readiness in the UK.<sup>7</sup>
- The Canadian-led FLF in Latvia employs *a rotational model*, where forward-deployed forces are persistently in place but rotate in and out (typically every six months).
- The German-led FLF in Lithuania uses *a permanent model*, where Germany will permanently relocate units to Lithuania, with soldiers serving on longer-term contracts.

Apart from the degree of permanent presence, the models differ concerning the number of contributing allies and the types of units and capabilities deployed. Furthermore, they have made different choices in the set-up of division HQs, the degree of national political control over forces, and the level of integration with the host nation forces.

Given that the framework nations of these three FLFs have chosen three different solutions, this study seeks to understand and analyse the considerations that have influenced their respective designs. The design and planning of the FLFs are a joint endeavour between framework nations and host nations, but the flexibility of the concept means that, in general, framework nations have more of a say over the design than host nations, as the former control the means. Thus, the report has more of a focus on the framework nations’ considerations than those of the host nations.

Furthermore, in September 2024, Sweden and Finland announced their intention to establish an FLF brigade in Finland, with Sweden assuming the role of framework nation.<sup>8</sup> The choices made and the considerations behind the design of the FLFs in the Baltic states will, thus, be of value in the planning for the coming presence in Finland.

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<sup>7</sup> The UK retains, however, a battalion-sized battlegroup in place in Estonia. See Chapter 3.1 for details.

<sup>8</sup> Finnish Government, “Sweden announces ambition to take on role as Framework Nation in NATO enhanced forward presence to be established in Finland,” 16 September 2024, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/sweden-announces-ambition-to-take-on-role-as-framework-nation-in-nato-enhanced-forward-presence-to-be-established-in-finland>.

## 1.1 Aim, research questions, and contribution

The aim of the study is to examine the design of the FLFs in the Baltic states and analyse key political and military considerations behind the choices made.

The research questions guiding the analysis are:

- What are the key political and military considerations behind the design of NATO's Forward Land Forces in the Baltic states?
- How do the Forward Land Forces fit into NATO's strategy for deterrence and defence?

To answer these questions, Chapter 2 first briefly examines the political and military considerations that drove NATO strategy and forward defence posture during the Cold War and, more extensively, during the period between Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Chapter 2 contributes necessary background to the analysis in Chapter 3, which examines how the framework and host nations in each Baltic state have implemented the decisions adopted in Madrid in 2022 when establishing NATO's Forward Land Forces. Chapter 3 outlines the central components of each FLF, focusing on developments from 2017–2025, perceptions of the task of the FLF, the force posture, and command and control. As there is an intentional degree of flexibility in the design of the FLFs, the report compares and contrasts the different designs chosen.

The report then analyses the political and military considerations behind the design of the FLF in Chapter 4, drawing on lessons from NATO's forward defence during the Cold War and the post-2017 eFP BGs. In the concluding Chapter 5, the report discusses how the FLF is anchored in NATO's evolving strategy of deterrence and defence, and outlines the major remaining issues going forward.

Apart from the Baltic states, NATO is establishing FLFs in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Finland. We focus specifically on the FLFs in the Baltic states for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Baltic states, together with Poland, hosted the original eFP battlegroups, presenting an opportunity to compare and contrast the eFP and FLF constructs. Secondly, the Baltic FLFs have come the furthest in scaling up to brigade-size, and have done so in three different ways. This presents both an interesting research puzzle and possible lessons learned for other countries hosting or assuming framework nation responsibility for an FLF. Thirdly, the Baltic region is a hotspot in the NATO-Russia rivalry, with announced and partly implemented build-ups of military power on both sides of the border, making a thorough study of the developments on NATO's side relevant.

While much has been written about NATO's overall strategy for deterrence and defence and specific initiatives like the eFP, especially in the immediate period

after its conception, the transition towards FLFs has so far not been analysed to a greater extent. This report aims to address this gap through an in-depth study of the three FLFs in the Baltics, grounded in a vast array of interviews with those involved. The rich empirical material is complemented by an analytical focus on the political and military considerations underpinning the solutions chosen. These considerations are important, as they serve as a temperature indicator for further measures going forward—What costs are NATO Allies willing to bear for increased military credibility?

## 1.2 Methodology

Before examining the different designs of the FLFs in the Baltic states, we must first define some of the key concepts used in the report. This is helpful for understanding the nuances of how framework nations and host nations perceive the task of the FLF and how it differs from the eFP. Second, we outline the framework chosen to study the political and military considerations behind the FLF. Chapter 2 goes into further detail on how these considerations came into play during the Cold War and until today.

### 1.2.1 Key concepts

Since 2014, NATO's principal task has shifted to the deterrence and defence of allied territory. However, in official documents, NATO rarely differentiates between the tasks of deterrence and defence, or explains the interconnectedness between the two. In addition, some of NATO's post-2014 measures have aimed at reassuring exposed allies. Taking our starting point from the academic discourse, we define these concepts as follows:

- *reassurance* includes efforts to convince exposed allies that they have the support of other members of the Alliance;
- *deterrence* covers efforts to discourage or restrain an opponent from taking unwanted action; and
- *defence* encompasses efforts to counter and reduce an adversary's capabilities once an aggression has commenced.<sup>9</sup>

Historically, NATO has aimed to deter aggression in two principal ways: deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial. However, ever since its founding, the balance between the two has shifted.<sup>10</sup> In this report, we define:

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<sup>9</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defence* (Princeton: New Jersey, 1961), 3; Erik Gartzke and Jon R. Lindsay, *Elements of Deterrence: Strategy, Technology, and Complexity in Global Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Sean Monaghan shows how the balance between NATO's sword (deterrence by punishment) and shield (deterrence by denial) has shifted over time in NATO's strategic concepts and how interconnected they

- *deterrence by punishment* as attempts to deter an opponent from taking unwanted action by threatening to punish it for its transgression. This threat can comprise severe economic sanctions, military confrontation, or nuclear escalation. The aim is to convey that aggression, even if militarily successful in the area of operations, will be too costly *ex post*, prompting the potential aggressor to refrain from attempting aggression in the first place;
- *deterrence by denial* as attempts to deny a potential aggressor success in achieving the desired objectives of an aggression. The aim is to persuade an adversary that aggression will fail or prove too costly *ex ante*, for example by building capable and robust conventional capabilities.<sup>11</sup> Convincing a potential aggressor of the futility of achieving success, of course, is intended to make the aggressor refrain from launching an attack altogether.

NATO's force posture to achieve these objectives has shifted over time. In its first Strategic Concept of 1949, the Alliance stressed the importance of establishing *a forward defence* to stop the Soviet Union as far to the east as possible. Nevertheless, during its first decades, NATO relied heavily on nuclear deterrence—a strategy later dubbed *massive retaliation*. By the time of the fourth Strategic Concept in 1968, NATO had shifted to a strategy of flexible response, which aimed to develop more flexible and graduated response options to a Soviet attack.<sup>12</sup>

After the end of the Cold War, NATO again shifted priorities, this time to out-of-area operations, and dismantled the previous forward posture. Furthermore, NATO enlargement moved NATO's border further to the east. Allies agreed to move away from the concept of forward defence to a reduced *forward presence*.<sup>13</sup> This policy did not change until the 2016 Warsaw Summit, when Allies agreed to establish the enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups, initially comprising four multinational battalion-sized battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, led by the UK, Canada, Germany, and the US, respectively. At the outset, experts considered the eFP BGs merely a *tripwire* that, following a deterrence-by-punishment logic, would ensure an engagement from a large number of allies in case of an armed attack. Over time, as rotating deployments became familiar with the terrain and integrated into host nations' defence plans, some experts viewed

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are. Sean Monaghan, Resetting NATO's Defense and Deterrence: The Sword and the Shield Redux, CSIS Brief, 28 June 2022.

<sup>11</sup> See Michael J. Mazaar, Understanding Deterrence, RAND (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Sean Monaghan, Resetting NATO's Defense and Deterrence.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

them as more of a *speed bump*, constituting a noticeable obstacle to any Russian attempt at a quick land grab, adding some deterrence-by-denial logic.<sup>14</sup>

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted the next step in the transformation of NATO's force posture. In the latest Strategic Concept, adopted in 2022, NATO vows to "defend every inch of allied territory." On NATO's force posture, the Allies assert that "(w)e will adjust the balance between in-place forces and reinforcement to strengthen deterrence and the Alliance's ability to defend."<sup>15</sup> As mentioned earlier, NATO decided to scale up the eFP BGs to brigade size, but granted the respective framework nations considerable flexibility in designing the FLFs.

NATO (and the literature) differentiates between general, tailored, and immediate deterrence. General deterrence is the most common form of deterrence and is present in peacetime. It pertains to an actor's military capabilities and its communication on how it intends to use them in certain scenarios. NATO sees this as a form of "general reputation." Tailored deterrence is geared towards the Alliance's specific rivals and adversaries. It still aims, however, to address a range of possible threats, whereas immediate deterrence is directed at a specific threat and comes into play when aggression is looming. It involves actions taken and threats issued, including possible escalatory measures, against a specific actor that is in the process of conducting an attack or other actions against NATO's interests.<sup>16</sup>

In NATO doctrinal terms, the FLF is an example of tailored deterrence. There is no immediate Russian aggression looming and the FLF must be able to handle different kinds of threats and scenarios, but it is specific in that it seeks to handle potential and actual malign behaviour from Russia toward NATO's frontline states, and aims to remove the option of attacking any FLF host nation without encountering a unified NATO response. In times of crisis, where indications and warnings suggest that Russia is actively contemplating an attack, NATO would presumably move to immediate deterrence and reinforce the FLF.

However, brigade-level units cannot, on their own, be expected to handle the immediate deterrence phase. In such a scenario, NATO would presumably utilise the operations planning developed in recent years to complement the FLF with a

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<sup>14</sup> Albin Aronsson et al., *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2024: Part III: NATO's Strategy for Deterrence and Defence towards 2030—Matching Ambition and Capabilities*, FOI Reports FOI-R--5636--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency—FOI, 2024), 26; and Toms Rostoks, "Latvia as host nation," in *Lessons from the Enhanced Forward Presence, 2017–2020*, eds. Alexander Lanoszka, Christian Leuprecht and Alexander Moens (Rome: NATO Defense College, Nov. 2020), 55.

<sup>15</sup> NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, para. 20 and 21.

<sup>16</sup> NATO Standardization Office, *Allied Joint Publication (AJP-01)*, (Brussels: NATO Standardization Office, 2022), 48; and Aronsson et al., *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2024: Part III*, 43. See also Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

range of other measures in multiple domains, more specifically aimed at convincing Russia not to try its luck. This could, among other things, involve forward deployments of air and naval assets, the deployment of the rapid-reaction Allied Reaction Force to the area and, depending on what type of aggression indications and warnings suggest, more specifically reinforcing the FLF in the Baltic states with capabilities that might contribute to changing Russia's cost-benefit analysis.

Because of this, and the fact that NATO is moving towards multi-domain operations, analysing the land forces of the FLF in isolation comes with challenges. We address these by sketching other initiatives for strengthened deterrence and defence in the Baltic region in Section 2.3 and by complementing the in-depth analysis of each Baltic FLF with a more general outlook on the FLF's place in NATO's strategy, and how it fits with the other elements, in Section 5.3.

### 1.2.2 Analytical framework

When analysing the motives behind the different designs of the FLF in the Baltic states, we focus on five key political and military considerations. Based on previous research, we deduced the most prominent considerations in debates on NATO strategy and force posture during both the Cold War and the post-2014 period, listed below.<sup>17</sup> Thereafter, during our interviews, we first asked the respondents to identify the most important considerations behind the choices made in designing the FLF in their respective country, and then asked specifically about the considerations below. In addition, we critically assessed what factors may have been prevalent. While no new categories were added as a result of considerations identified during interviews, respondents' views added nuances and a deeper understanding of the relevant aspects of each category and how they relate to each other.<sup>18</sup>

The political and military considerations we examine in the report are:

- *military credibility*, which aims to capture efforts tailored to achieve credible deterrence and operational effectiveness. This encompasses a perception that the force posture is appropriately designed for the task and terrain at hand, and to inflict substantial costs on an attacker and deny it the ability to quickly achieve its objectives.<sup>19</sup> Often, military

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<sup>17</sup> Albin Aronsson et al., *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2024: Part III*, 19–23; and Eva Hagström Frisell and Krister Pallin (eds.), *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2020: Part I—Collective Defence*, FOI Reports FOI-R--5012--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency—FOI, 2021). See Chapter 2 for additional details on how these considerations have played out historically.

<sup>18</sup> While respondents mainly confirmed previously identified considerations, our own understanding of considerations of both military credibility and escalation risks was widened as a result of insights received from respondents.

<sup>19</sup> See Jüri Luik and Henrik Praks, *Boosting the Deterrent Effect of Allied Enhanced Forward Presence* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2017), 8.

credibility is understood as a combination of resolve and capability. This category focuses on capability, but does not entirely exclude considerations of resolve. For example, a permanent deployment may be more credible both because it removes the logistical obstacle of movement, but also because it communicates more resolve as a hand-tying measure.

- *Alliance solidarity*, which implies a desire among framework nations to demonstrate to Russia, host nations, and the rest of the Alliance that they are reliable allies and that they take responsibility for the implementation of NATO's strategy.
- *Resource constraints*, which involves the economic, military, and infrastructural constraints that may influence the chosen force posture. Resource constraints also relate to military credibility. If a robust forward deployment comes at the expense of further reinforcements in reserve, it may be perceived as less credible.
- *National political control*, which covers to what extent framework nations try to retain freedom of manoeuvre and control over decision-making in peace, crisis, and war. This pertains both to caveats on the use of their national armed forces and a more general wish to have a say in military decision-making in NATO. This category is related to the alliance-security dilemma, in that framework nations may have an interest in reducing the risk of entrapment in certain scenarios by keeping arrangements flexible, whereas host nations fear abandonment and prefer permanency and automaticity in any response.<sup>20</sup>
- *Escalation risks*, which include the perceived risks of destabilising moves. This may influence the types of units and capabilities deployed, or the participation in different types of activities and exercises in the host country. This category is also related to the theory of security dilemmas, in that some allies may wish to avoid measures that could increase Russian paranoia or grievances.<sup>21</sup>

As noted above, these considerations are not mutually exclusive. In a perfect world, framework nations and host nations would probably have preferred the maximum amount of military credibility, Alliance solidarity, and national political control, in combination with low escalation risks, but trade-offs between them exist. Since 2022, NATO has prioritised military credibility and Alliance

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<sup>20</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 461–95, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010183>.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214. Naming this category has been difficult, as deterrence in general and NATO strategy require a threat of escalation (captured by our category of military credibility). However, this category is more related to a sense that some measures do not contribute to deterrence but rather influence the overall conflict dynamic negatively, and may incentivise rather than deter hostile Russian actions.

solidarity, but concerns stemming from resource constraints, a desire to maintain national political control over forces, and to avoid escalation risks continue to influence NATO's and the framework nations' view of the FLF. At the same time, the host nations in the Baltic states have an interest in boosting military credibility and demonstrating Alliance solidarity, given their geostrategic predicament.

### 1.3 Sources

The study relies on qualitative analysis of data gathered from written sources and semi-structured interviews. The written sources consist of both primary sources, such as official NATO documents, bilateral agreements, and government publications, and secondary sources, such as academic journals, research reports, and newspaper articles.

Since the FLFs in the Baltic states are recent phenomena and continue to evolve, there is a lack of written sources on their development. Furthermore, official documents rarely reveal potentially sensitive considerations behind a policy choice. Therefore, the study relies heavily on interviews with policy officials, military officers, and experts conducted in Brussels, Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius between December 2024 and March 2025. The respondents were selected to represent key institutions responsible for the design of the FLFs in the framework and host nations, as well as in NATO's International Staff. In total, we conducted 29 interviews, mostly in person, but two online. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the report does not provide the names of the respondents, nor does it include quotes from the interviews. The organisational affiliation of the respondents is listed in the bibliography.

Given that the major decisions on the design of the FLF in each country have already been made, even if much of the implementation remains, there is a risk that respondents paint the outcomes achieved in the best light possible. While we did not receive this sense—rather, most respondents were open about elements of the FLF construct that they saw as suboptimal and possible remedies—we have tried to address this potential pitfall in several ways. Firstly, we conducted a wide range of interviews with respondents from both host and framework nations, to cover both perspectives. Secondly, we complemented the interviews with serving officials and military officers with expert interviews, to gain more of an outside perspective. Thirdly, we critically assessed the information provided and compared it with earlier research and other sources.

The interviews in Riga were conducted in December 2024, prior to the deployment of a Swedish reduced battalion to the FLF in Latvia. This, and this report's focus on NATO, framework nations, and host nations, mean that Sweden's role and contribution to FLF Latvia, falls outside the scope of this study. However, FOI's



project on International Military Missions will publish a study on the Swedish contingent later in 2025.<sup>22</sup>

## 1.4 Structure of the report

Chapter 2 examines how the selected political and military considerations, and the trade-offs between them were handled in NATO's strategy-making during the Cold War and in the design of the eFP battlegroups between 2017 and 2022. The chapter concludes by outlining the place of the FLFs in the broader context of NATO's evolving strategy for deterrence and defence post-2022.

Chapter 3 outlines the evolution of the FLFs in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The presentation of each FLF provides an overview of developments from 2017–2025, the respondents' view of the task of the FLF, the design of the force posture, and the choices made for command and control.

Chapter 4 builds on the previous chapter and analyses the key political and military considerations of the framework nations and the host nations. It compares and contrasts the considerations of the framework nations and host nations, as well as the different models chosen for the FLF.

Chapter 5 presents the report's conclusions. It analyses the development of the respective FLFs, identifies outstanding issues that should be addressed and the role played by the political and military considerations under investigation. Lastly, it reflects on the place of the FLF concept in NATO's evolving strategy for deterrence and defence going forward.

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<sup>22</sup> Jan Frelin, Elin Jakobsson, and Anna Lövström Svedin, NATO's Forward Land Forces – A new type of international military operation for the Swedish Armed Forces?, FOI Memo (forthcoming).

## 2 Forward defence: Then and now

Chapter 1 shows how NATO's strategic aims have evolved towards an increased emphasis on deterrence by denial and military credibility since 2022. However, these aims will be pursued in the context of an Alliance of 32 member states with differing strategic and economic priorities. While all allies agree that the Alliance as a whole, and individual measures such as the Forward Land Forces, should be militarily credible, they also, to varying extents, have other priorities and constraints that affect that pursuit.

This chapter begins by briefly illustrating how the political and military considerations identified in Chapter 1 were part of NATO's strategy-making during the Cold War and how trade-offs between them were handled. Secondly, it analyses more extensively the way in which the considerations influenced the design of the eFP battlegroups between 2017 and 2022.<sup>23</sup> The chapter concludes by summarising the evolving post-2022 strategy that the FLFs are part of.

### 2.1 The Cold War: Forward defence

Direct comparisons between today and the Cold War are difficult due to the vast differences in the military problem(s) facing NATO, and the changed geography, size, and military power of NATO and the Soviet Union/Russia. However, the political and military considerations behind NATO strategy, and the trade-offs associated therewith, may still shed light on important aspects to study in relation to the FLF.<sup>24</sup> This section provides one example of each consideration, and the associated trade-offs with others.

Ruiz Palmer finds that the development of the military postures and strategies of NATO and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War was driven as much by internal factors in each alliance, such as preferences and constraints related to "geographical, historical, political, and economic factors," as by each side's perceptions of the threat.<sup>25</sup> It follows that NATO Allies, in trying to deter the Soviet Union, were preoccupied with finding militarily credible solutions, but that this pursuit was tempered and enabled by other kinds of considerations.

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<sup>23</sup> As collective defence of NATO territory was not a NATO priority in the period between the Cold War and 2014 (or 2008), we have not studied that period. However, it may well be that similar considerations were in play during those years, as evidenced by the extensive use of national caveats during the Afghanistan operation.

<sup>24</sup> Sten Rynning, "NATO: Ambiguity about Escalation in a Multinational Alliance," in *Nuclear Weapons and Escalation: Managing Deterrence in the 21st Century*, ed. Stephan Frühling and Andrew O'Neil (Acton: Australian University Press, 2021), 69.

<sup>25</sup> Diego Ruiz Palmer, "The NATO–Warsaw Pact Competition in the 1970s and 1980s: A Revolution in Military Affairs in the Making or the End of a Strategic age?" *Cold War History* 14 no. 4 (2014): 540.

The parallel search for military credibility and national political control, and the trade-offs between the two, is a long-standing feature in NATO. It is well illustrated by a 1956 NATO Military Committee Report on preparations for defending against a Soviet surprise attack, which detailed how NATO Allies wished to maintain national political control over the authority to “institute preparatory measures which could be considered unsettling, threatening, or warlike”. This made them reluctant to pre-delegate to SACEUR the mandate to prepare and position forces in anticipation of an attack, even if the delay in decision-making negatively impacted military credibility.<sup>26</sup> Escalation risks played a part here as well; the reluctance stemmed from nations wishing to maintain control over potentially escalatory measures, such as preparing and positioning forces in anticipation of an attack, even if it came at the expense of military credibility.

The doctrine of massive retaliation that guided NATO’s efforts to handle conventional Soviet superiority in the first decade of the Cold War was, in many ways, a result of resource constraints and the need for Alliance solidarity tempering military credibility. Moody details how these parallel needs, taken together, produced the concepts of forward defence and massive retaliation. Defending as far to the east as possible was deemed necessary to uphold Alliance unity by assuring European members that the US and UK did not plan on abandoning the continent in case of war.<sup>27</sup> Simultaneously, Europeans lacked the resources or the will to allocate resources for a conventional deterrent, and the US wanted to reduce defence spending. The solution was a heavy reliance on nuclear weapons which, according to Moody, would have wreaked significant destruction and been devoid of political benefits if put to the test.<sup>28</sup>

Alliance solidarity (or necessity) and perceived military credibility guided the Alliance towards forward defence. In the 1980s, in the context of increasing tensions and a more heated Cold War, NATO and the US Army both tried to use emergent technology and long-range weapons to make the forward defence task

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<sup>26</sup> NATO Military Committee, A Report by the Military Committee to the North Atlantic Council on Allied Command Europe Counter-Surprise Military Alert System (1956). See, also, John R. Deni, *The new NATO Force Model: Ready for launch?* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2024).

<sup>27</sup> While the forward defence of the Cold War has often been contrasted with the forward presence and tripwire logic of the post-2014 years, it is worth noting that the tripwire logic was present during the Cold War as well. Geographic realities made the defence of West Berlin dependent on some ten thousand soldiers who, in Schelling’s words, could “die heroically, dramatically, and in a manner that guarantees that the action cannot stop there,” thereby deterring aggression. See Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Simon Moody, “Enhancing Political Cohesion in NATO during the 1950s or: How it Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the (Tactical) Bomb,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40, no. 6 (June 8, 2015), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2015.1035434>. However, it should be noted, as Moody also points out, that Europeans were also guided by other considerations than strictly financial ones, including fears that US engagement could decrease with alternative defence concepts. To Europeans, tactical nuclear weapons in Europe secured a link to US strategic forces and strengthened deterrence.

more manageable through concepts such as Follow-on Forces Attack (FOFA) and AirLand Battle.<sup>29</sup> These concepts increased the military credibility of NATO's forward defence, but prompted a heated transatlantic debate on escalation risks.

Critics opined that such forward-leaning concepts might contribute to escalation by increasing Soviet first-strike incentives and accelerating a war's velocity and intensity beyond political control and NATO's aim of rapid war termination.<sup>30</sup> Such criticisms assessed that the Soviet Union would find the "deterrent itself to be intolerable to the point that the deterrent actually generates the attack."<sup>31</sup> Others instead took issue with the negative political fallout such concepts would have on NATO's presentation of itself as a defensive alliance, strictly concerned with safeguarding and, if necessary, restoring the territorial integrity of its members.<sup>32</sup>

The debate highlights the trade-offs between military credibility, Alliance solidarity, national political control, and escalation risks. It even prompted then-SACEUR Bernard Rogers to publically defend NATO's nascent FOFA concept. He asserted that FOFA did not change the fact that NATO was a defensive alliance and did not mean that NATO would turn to more offensive practices such as pre-emptive strikes or ground attacks across Warsaw Pact borders, presumably easing some escalation concerns, but perhaps also reducing the concept's military credibility.<sup>33</sup>

## 2.2 Post-2014: The eFP battlegroups

After Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and aggression in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, NATO needed updated thinking on how to reassure allies and deter Russia. The Alliance quickly rediscovered that calibrating NATO's deterrence vis-à-vis Russia has as much to do with "managing inter-alliance politics and utilising its limited military resources" as with assessing what measures are most likely to

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<sup>29</sup> This was to be done by reducing the number of forces that NATO forces would have to engage at the forward edge of the battle area by, essentially, extending the forward-defence zone into Warsaw Pact territory. By targeting Soviet transport infrastructure and follow-on forces that had not yet reached the forward battle area with conventional deep-strike weapons, in addition to airpower (which had long held this task), the concepts hoped to make force ratios more manageable.

<sup>30</sup> Johan Jörgen Holst, "Denial and Punishment: Straddling the Horns of NATO's Dilemma," *Adelphi Papers* 26, no. 206 (1986), 76.

<sup>31</sup> John E. Peters, "Evaluating FOFA as a deterrent," *RUSI Journal* 132, no. 4 (1987), 39–40. However, Peters himself does not make this specific argument in relation to FOFA.

<sup>32</sup> Arie Van der Vlis, "AirLand Battle in NATO, A European View," *US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 14, no. 1 (1984), 11. For a similar, modern version of this debate in the Baltic context, including trade-offs between political imperatives and military logic, see Lukas Milevski, "Manoeuvre Warfare in the Baltic: Political Imperatives and Tactical Conditions," *The RUSI Journal* 169, no. 6 (October 10, 2024), 78–86.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Rogers, "Follow-on Forces Attack (FOFA): Myths and Realities," *US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 15, no. 2 (1985), 78.

affect Russian behaviour.<sup>34</sup> This was evident, among other things, in the 2016 decision to deploy battalion-sized battlegroups in the Baltic states and Poland under the banner of enhanced Forward Presence.

The overall deterrence posture that NATO started building in 2014 leaned mostly towards deterrence by punishment. It aimed to be reassuring and at least somewhat militarily credible, but not nearly as ambitious as the forward defence of the Cold War. NATO members wanted the deterrent effect without radically increasing defence spending or adjusting their force structures and postures. Frear et al. find that, apart from military credibility, NATO's approach was driven by a desire for flexibility, cost-efficiency, and restraint.<sup>35</sup> This characterisation fits well with considerations regarding national political control, resource constraints, and escalation risks.

The need for flexibility stemmed from different threat perceptions and priorities among NATO members. While most agreed that Russia was a threat, it was not everyone's main priority, and other theatres consumed much attention.<sup>36</sup> As shown below, the desire for flexibility overlaps with member states' wish to maintain national political control over their forces and NATO decision-making, and to avoid too much automaticity in NATO's response to certain situations. Similarly, domestic politics and budgetary concerns influenced allies' calculations on NATO's deterrent approach, as allies were reluctant to spend too much. Lastly, NATO aimed to combine the strengthening of deterrence with restraint, so as not to provoke or unnecessarily escalate tensions with Russia.<sup>37</sup>

Stoicescu and Järvenpää characterise the principles guiding NATO's approach to Russia at the time as a transparent and tailored response. Transparency here refers to NATO's active use of communication to reduce Russian paranoia or accusations of offensive intent, whereas the tailored response refers to NATO using the minimum level of forces required for deterrence.<sup>38</sup>

## 2.2.1 Considerations behind the design of the eFP

In designing the eFP battlegroups, the desire for military credibility and Alliance solidarity was complemented by a parallel focus on maintaining national political control, managing escalation risks, and getting the most out of constrained resources. Lanoszka and Hunzeker concluded that no matter the level of the

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas Frear, Lukasz Kulesa and Denitsa Raynova, *Russia and NATO: How to overcome deterrence instability?* (European Leadership Network, 2018), 9.

<sup>35</sup> Frear, Kulesa and Raynova, *Russia and NATO*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Ottosson et al., *Western Military Capability*, 27–33.

<sup>37</sup> Frear, Kulesa and Raynova, *Russia and NATO*, 10–14.

<sup>38</sup> Kalev Stoicescu and Pauli Järvenpää, *Contemporary Deterrence: Insights and Lessons from Enhanced Forward Presence* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2019), 6.

Russian threat, “domestic considerations and financial constraints will continue to stymie efforts to implement a truly standardised, Alliance-wide plan for maintaining a robust forward presence,” and that resulting suboptimal outcomes are to be expected in an Alliance of 32 members.<sup>39</sup>

The eFP battlegroups aimed to prevent a Russian fait accompli or hybrid action. They aimed to show Russia the ability to contest any such attempts, or at least deny it the possibility of acting in a covert manner, and drive home that any attack on the Baltics or Poland would inevitably constitute an attack on a far larger number of NATO Allies and precipitate possibly uncontrollable escalation, thereby contributing to deterrence.<sup>40</sup>

The small size of the eFP contingents and their rotational character have been attributed to a NATO desire to avoid escalation by showing restraint and abiding by political commitments made in the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act (NRFA) to ensure deterrence and defence without additional permanent deployments of significant combat forces.<sup>41</sup> While experts still discuss the interpretation of the NRFA, it seems fair to determine that NATO could have opted for more robust measures without violating it.<sup>42</sup>

However, Russia could have been unnecessarily provoked nonetheless and, perhaps more importantly, the restrained approach was cheaper and allowed for more national political control, compared to permanent and larger deployments. The resulting rotational scheme of battalion-sized battlegroups in the Baltic states and Poland was perhaps not the most militarily credible, but promised reinforcements and other punitive countermeasures in case of aggression. In terms of our considerations, some military credibility was sacrificed to reduce escalation risks and allow for increased political control, restraint, and cost-efficiency.<sup>43</sup>

While some considerations exhibited a constraining influence on the military credibility of the battlegroups, others worked in its favour. Many NATO Allies’ decisions to assume responsibility as framework nation or to contribute forces

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<sup>39</sup> Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A Hunzeker, “Evaluating the Enhanced Forward Presence After Five Years,” *RUSI Journal* 168, no. 1–2 (2023), 97.

<sup>40</sup> Heinrich Brauss and Nikolaus Carstens, “Germany as Framework Nation,” in *Lessons from the Enhanced Forward Presence, 2017–2020*, eds. Alexander Lanoszka, Christian Leuprecht and Alexander Moens (Rome: NATO Defense College, Nov. 2020), 62–63.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander Lanoszka, Christian Leuprecht and Alexander Moens, “Introduction,” in *Lessons from the Enhanced Forward Presence*, 3 and Stoicescu and Järvenpää, *Contemporary Deterrence*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> William Alberque, “Substantial Combat Forces” in the Context of NATO–Russia Relations, Research Paper No. 131 (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Stoicescu and Järvenpää, *Contemporary Deterrence*, 5; and Frear, Kulesa and Raynova, *Russia and NATO*, 10.

were driven by a desire to show Alliance solidarity and readiness to defend exposed Allies.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, the desire to show Alliance solidarity may partly stem from a desire to compensate for inadequate defence expenditure and more general constraints in military forces available domestically and to NATO. Canada's decision to assume framework-nation responsibility in Latvia came against a backdrop of severely constrained resources and consistent nudging from the US and other NATO Allies to take a larger share of the burden. The battlegroup in Latvia thus became the most multinational in NATO history, which observers attribute to the need to compensate for limited Canadian resources.<sup>45</sup>

The desire for national political control was evident in a number of ways. The general trade-off between national political control and military credibility can be summarised as the parallel needs for a posture designed to deny Russia any chance of limited aggression, while simultaneously upholding political control so that local crises would not inadvertently escalate to general war.<sup>46</sup>

For some framework and contributing nations, such as Germany, strong parliamentary oversight and control meant that it was unclear whether the German-led battlegroup in Lithuania would receive the mandate to act in case of an attack.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the desire for national political control caused allies to refrain from giving permissive political pre-authorisation and mandates to SACEUR to act in certain scenarios, which raised question marks around the promised further reinforcements if the tripwire was tested, negatively impacting military credibility.<sup>48</sup> Zapfe holds the lack of identified and ready reinforcements, and the lack of politically pre-approved contingency plans for courses of action with necessary

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<sup>44</sup> Stoicescu and Järvenpää, *Contemporary Deterrence*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Christian Leuprecht, Alexander Moens and Alexander Lanoszka, "Canada as framework nation," in *Lessons from the Enhanced Forward Presence*, , 47–48. Another example of these kinds of considerations—Alliance solidarity and a need to contribute to allied efforts despite resource constraints—is found in Maria Määlkso, "NATO's New Front: Deterrence Moves Eastward," *International Security* 100, no. 2 (2024), 546, in which a Baltic interlocutor describes how the US, in trying to get Europeans to contribute to the eFP, urged them to "do something, be the bloody tripwire."

<sup>46</sup> Rynning, *NATO: Ambiguity about Escalation*, 70.

<sup>47</sup> Eva Hagström Frisell, "Germany," in *Western Military Capability 2020: Part II—National Capabilities*, ed. Eva Hagström Frisell and Krister Pallin, FOI Reports FOI-R--5013--SE (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency—FOI, 2021); and Lanoszka and Hunzeker, *Evaluating the Enhanced Forward Presence*, 94. On the other hand, others conclude that the level of cooperation achieved between Germany and Lithuania likely rendered any transfer of authority in a crisis more of a formality. See Brauss and Carstens, "Germany as Framework Nation," 67.

<sup>48</sup> Frear, Kulesa and Raynova, *Russia and NATO*, 12.

authorities delegated to operational and tactical commanders, as one of the main impediments to the military credibility of the eFP.<sup>49</sup>

Instead, the eFP battlegroups were generally the business of contributing and host nations—in contrast to what could have been a more coherent and NATO-controlled design—which meant that the capitals of framework nations retained a large degree of national control.<sup>50</sup> The battlegroups were not under NATO’s chain of command, meaning that contributing nations retained the possibility of not transferring authority to NATO in case of crisis or conflict.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, Stoicescu and Järvenpää find that contributing nations harboured no doubts that they would act together with host nations forces’ if needed, even before the North Atlantic Council (NAC) had activated Article 5.<sup>52</sup>

## 2.3 Post-2022: Forward Land Forces

To understand NATO’s 2022 transition from eFP to FLF, one must start with the general strategic change within the Alliance that Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine prompted.<sup>53</sup>

The direction NATO has taken since 2022 is both a reaction to Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine and a consequence of pre-2022 thinking on what deterrence and defence in relation to Russia should look like. The 2019 military strategy and, more importantly, the 2020 Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (the “DDA Concept”) predate the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and contain the fundamentals that later planning and activities build upon. The invasion contributed to a sense of urgency and to tipping the internal debate on the balance between forward defence and reinforcements in favour of the former. While the direction of travel is now clear, the dynamics introduced by the policies of the Trump administration and future developments in the war in Ukraine will probably see the debate resurface in coming years.

Officials at NATO headquarters in Brussels argue that NATO does not have a strategy of forward defence, but that forward defence is part of the strategy. This fits well with Rynning’s 2021 observation that NATO’s modern-day strategy, at

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Zapfe, “Deterrence from the Ground Up: Understanding NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence,” *Survival* 59, no. 3 (2017), 153. For a wider view, see Jens Ringsmose and Sten Rynning, “The NATO Response Force: A Qualified Failure No More?” *Contemporary Security Policy* 38, no. 3, (2017), 449, on the compromise between Allies favouring national political control and Allies favouring pre-delegation of command for the NATO Response Force, which was the ear-marked first-responder reinforcement to the eFP at the time.

<sup>50</sup> Lanoszka and Hunzeker, *Evaluating the Enhanced Forward Presence*, 97.

<sup>51</sup> Lanoszka, Leuprecht and Moens, *Introduction*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Stoicescu and Järvenpää, *Contemporary Deterrence*, 7

<sup>53</sup> Aronsson et al., *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2024: Part III*.



heart, remains anchored in the Cold War concept of flexible response.<sup>54</sup> The concept stipulated that NATO, for credible deterrence and defence, must maintain the capabilities to conduct direct defence, deliberate escalation, and general nuclear war. The three-pronged approach had the following objectives:

- Be able to meet any type of aggression on the level at which the enemy chooses to fight by a tailored *direct defence* conducted at the place(s) of attack and elsewhere, through forward defence “by forces-in-being,” i.e. positioned forward and immediately available, and further reinforcements. Seeking to physically prevent the enemy from obtaining its objectives, it aimed for deterrence by denial by being able to counter any aggression, irrespective of place, time, level, and duration. Direct defence aimed initially to counter aggression at the level chosen by the enemy, i.e. without escalation, but could, if necessitated by enemy actions, involve the use of nuclear weapons.
- If this failed, *deliberate escalation* served to defeat the aggression or force the Soviets to reconsider by widening or intensifying the conventional fight, or by nuclear escalation. Thus, deliberate escalation complemented the direct defence’s aim to defeat the aggression as such with a deterrence-by-punishment logic, encompassing measures geared towards weakening the Soviet will to continue the fight by raising the costs through escalation.
- The ultimate deterrent and military response was a *general nuclear response*.<sup>55</sup>

The FLF make up the most important capability for direct defence in the land domain, in addition to NATO’s frontline states’ forces. The increased emphasis on forward defence requires more capabilities in place, as opposed to the previous reliance on reinforcements. To officials in Brussels, this has given military credibility a more prominent role in allied thinking, whereas escalation risks and national political control occupy a less prominent one. However, financial concerns and resource constraints still play a part, since forward deployments are expensive.<sup>56</sup>

The FLF are not the only part of NATO’s capability for direct defence conducted forward. The frontline nations’ national armed forces and border defences constitute the most important capability in this regard. The Baltic states are constructing the Baltic Defence Line, and Poland the Eastern Shield. Both projects aim to fortify each state’s borders with Russia and Belarus by investments in counter-mobility

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<sup>54</sup> Rynning, NATO: Ambiguity about Escalation, 75.

<sup>55</sup> North Atlantic Military Committee, Final Decision on MC 14/3: A Report by the Military Committee to the Defence Planning Committee on Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Area (1968).

<sup>56</sup> Interviews, Brussels, January 2025.

obstacles, surveillance assets, mines, air defences, et cetera.<sup>57</sup> In addition, the regular and steady stream of various exercises, and other permanent or recurrent deployments and activities in the Baltic region, contribute to NATO's direct defence. The most important of these deployments and activities are listed below:<sup>58</sup>

- Baltic Air Policing, through which NATO allies safeguard the Baltic states' airspace.
- NATO's Standing Naval Forces are continuously present in the Baltic Sea, including both frigates and mine countermeasures vessels.
- NATO ground-based air defence assets in Estonia, Latvia, and Poland.
- NATO regularly conducts deterrence operations in the Baltic Sea region, in the form of so-called enhanced vigilance activities.<sup>59</sup>
- The US persistently rotates units through the Baltic states, usually encompassing infantry, Special Forces, artillery units, and elements of a combat aviation brigade.<sup>60</sup> Equally, other US exercises and deterrence activities, such as Bomber Task Force missions, are conducted in the Baltic states.

The Cold War's flexible response doctrine came about from the US wish to raise the nuclear threshold by strengthening NATO's capability for direct defence with conventional means, which the Europeans, at least initially, were not inclined to do. However, some regard as one of the concept's main benefits that it was sufficiently vague to allow allies to read into it what they wished, and NATO to keep its political relations in order, even if guidance for implementation suffered.<sup>61</sup> This suggests that a closer look at the design of the FLFs, and the strategic considerations behind them, is warranted.

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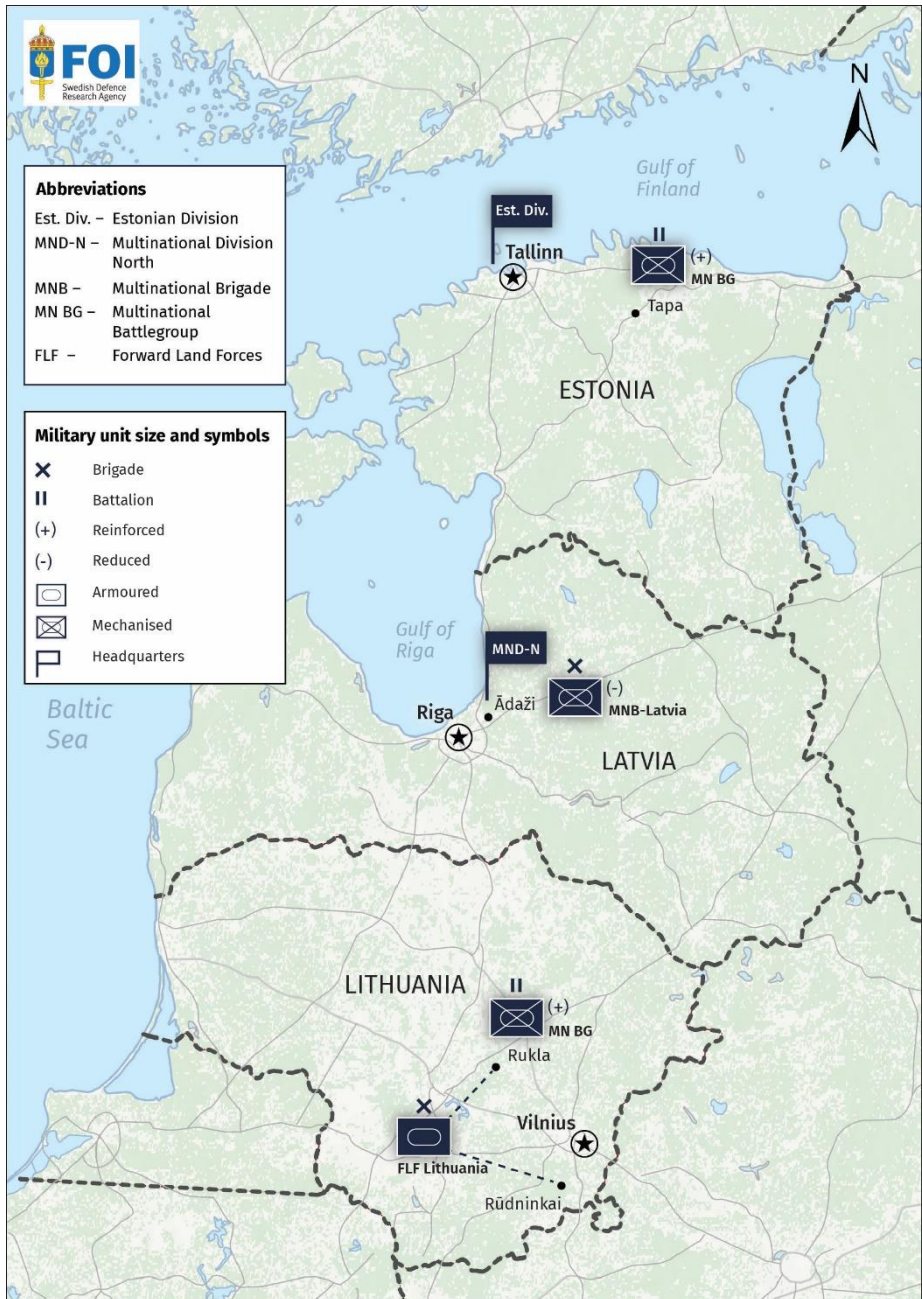
<sup>57</sup> Aurélie Pugnet, "Frontline countries pitch €10 billion defence line for Russia–Belarus border," Euractiv, February 28, 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence/news/frontline-countries-pitch-e10-billion-defence-line-for-russia-belarus-border/>.

<sup>58</sup> For an overview of some of these initiatives and an illustrative image, see NATO, The Secretary General's Annual Report 2024 (Brussels, NATO, 2025), 7.

<sup>59</sup> One example is the ongoing Baltic Sentry operation in winter and spring 2025, which has involved deployments of frigates, maritime patrol aircraft, and naval drones to safeguard undersea infrastructure and deter sabotage.

<sup>60</sup> Derek E. Mix, *Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania: Background and U.S.–Baltic Relations* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2025), 13.

<sup>61</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *NATO Myths*, *Foreign Policy* 45 (1981), 51; 64. This is not to be understood as (only) a criticism of the concept—rather, Freedman holds that the alliance consensus that the concept allowed for was critical for NATO's security, as that too contributed to deterrence. For a similar line of reasoning, see Roger L. Facer, *Conventional Forces and the NATO Strategy of Flexible Response* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1985), 18.



Map 1: FLF presence in the Baltic states.

Source: Karin Blext, FOI.

## 3 The design of the Forward Land Forces in the Baltic states

This chapter presents our findings on the evolution of the Forward Land Forces in the Baltic states and analyses the political and military considerations behind the different national approaches to its design. Each FLF is presented separately, using the same outline. Each section first provides a brief historical overview of developments from the post-2017 eFP BGs to the post-2022 scale-up to brigade level. Second, we analyse how the respondents' view the task of the FLF and how it contributes to forward defence. Third, we examine different aspects of the chosen force posture, such as the degree of permanent presence, the number of contributing allies and the type of units and capabilities deployed. Fourth, we discuss the command and control of the FLF, concerns pertaining to national political control, and the forces' integration with host nations' forces and exercises. In the final section, we summarise the main characteristics of the three different designs of the FLF in the Baltic states. Map 1 illustrates the FLF presence in the Baltic states.

### 3.1 FLF Estonia

#### 3.1.1 Development 2017–2025

The UK has been the framework nation for NATO's eFP battlegroup in Estonia since 2017. The UK contribution has consisted of an armoured infantry battalion, including main battle tanks (MBTs) and support units such as artillery, air defence, engineers, ISR, and logistics, totalling some 800–900 soldiers on six-month rotations.<sup>62</sup> France and, until 2023, Denmark have also contributed to the battlegroup.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the UK surged additional troops to Estonia on a bilateral and temporary basis for the remainder of the year. These surge forces roughly doubled the UK presence in Estonia and initially consisted of an additional armoured infantry battalion, which was later replaced by light infantry.<sup>63</sup>

After NATO's 2022 Madrid summit, the UK announced plans to enhance the firepower of its presence by deploying advanced capabilities, such as attack helicopters and artillery systems. It also strengthened its Estonian headquarters,

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<sup>62</sup> Louise Brooke-Holland, UK forces in Estonia (House of Commons Library, 2022).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

HQ Cabrit, with the aim to facilitate rapid reinforcements “at the brigade level.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the UK pledged to support the development of Estonia’s national division headquarters.<sup>65</sup>

In November 2022, Estonia and the UK signed a roadmap for the future development of the UK’s presence in Estonia, which to a large degree gave structure and details to already announced initiatives. The roadmap states that Estonia will develop a national division headquarters capable of commanding Estonian and NATO units, including reinforcements, which the UK will support. The UK will strengthen the in-place NATO Multinational Battlegroup (MN BG) Estonia by deploying divisional enablers, in the form of short-range air defence and rocket artillery, to Estonia.<sup>66</sup> As for brigade-level reinforcements, the UK was to hold what at the time was called “the balance of a brigade” at high readiness in the UK, with deployment to Estonia to be regularly rehearsed. Estonia pledged to secure necessary host-nation support and infrastructure for the additional UK capabilities.<sup>67</sup>

In October 2024, the countries adopted a second roadmap providing further details on the evolving UK contribution. The UK’s rather vague promise to provide “the balance of a brigade” was replaced with a commitment to an actual brigade. In line with NATO’s regional plan, two battalions of the UK 4th Light Brigade Combat Team will be held at readiness for rapid reinforcement of Estonia from July 2025, complemented by a French battalion (1st Marine Infantry Regiment) from 2026.<sup>68</sup> The deployment of the brigade will be facilitated by prepositioned equipment and ammunition. While the brigade consists of light infantry and associated materiel, the roadmap specifies that the UK will periodically deploy capabilities such as Challenger 3 MBTs and Archer artillery to Estonia.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> HQ Cabrit is the UK headquarters in Estonia, in charge of the UK’s FLF contributions to Estonia and Poland. Formerly a British national support element, it is now developing into a warfighting command able to support the Estonian division in crisis and war.

<sup>65</sup> UK Ministry of Defence, “UK to make more forces available to NATO to counter future threats,” press release, June 29, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-make-more-forces-available-to-nato-to-counter-future-threats>.

<sup>66</sup> The former eFP Battlegroup that remains deployed to Estonia under the command of the first Estonian brigade is referred to in a number of ways in official communication from the UK and Estonia. NATO Multinational Battlegroup Estonia and NATO Battlegroup Estonia seem to be the most common references. In this report, it is referred to as the Multinational Battlegroup, or the MN BG.

<sup>67</sup> UK Ministry of Defence, “Joint Statement between the UK MOD and the Estonian MOD,” press release, November 8, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-between-the-uk-mod-and-the-estonian-mod>

<sup>68</sup> Interviews, Tallinn, February 2025.

<sup>69</sup> Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Defence, “Joint Declaration by the Defence Ministers of the United Kingdom and Estonia,” October 17, 2024, [https://kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/20241016\\_est-](https://kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/20241016_est-)

Notably, the UK-led battlegroup remains under the command of the 1st Estonian Brigade, and the FLF brigade comes in addition to it. This means that the UK offers an additional battalion-sized unit to Estonia compared to the other framework nations in the Baltic states.

### 3.1.2 Task of the FLF

According to NATO officials, the establishment of the FLF is part of a doctrinal shift in NATO towards deterrence by denial. The Madrid Summit agreement to defend every inch of allied territory underscores this change.<sup>70</sup> UK and French officials assert that the task of the FLF is to deter and be prepared to defend. They note that the earlier emphasis on public relations and cultural engagement has given way to a focus on deterrence by demonstrating military credibility and combat power. The mindset has shifted in Estonia as well: earlier planning for a resistance force has given way to plans for winning the first battle at the border.<sup>71</sup>

In the run-up to NATO's 2022 Madrid Summit, Estonian officials worked hard to change NATO's mission towards deterrence by denial, which was contrasted with the tripwire approach and small, battalion-level sizes of the earlier eFP. On the same theme, they note that NATO's operations planning for the Baltics before 2022 was a restoration operation, whereas the aim now is not to cede any territory.<sup>72</sup>

Estonian military officers point out that the enemy gets a say in whether NATO's new presence constitutes deterrence by denial. Some see it as scenario-dependent: if Russia aims for a full occupation, the FLF is still mostly a tripwire. At the same time, such a full-scale invasion will inevitably give strategic warning, which allows for mobilisation. Others note that Russia is planning to scale up its presence close to the border as well, which means that the force balance will remain the same once Russia implements its announced changes, making the FLF a trip-wire.<sup>73</sup>

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uk\_flf25\_roadmap\_joint\_statement\_with\_signatures.pdf. As of summer 2025, Challenger MBTs have not been deployed to Estonia as they are still in development.

<sup>70</sup> Interview, Brussels, January 2025.

<sup>71</sup> Interviews, Brussels and Tallinn, January–February 2025.

<sup>72</sup> Interview, Tallinn, February 2025.

<sup>73</sup> Interviews, Tallinn, February 2025.

### 3.1.3 Posture

#### Type of presence and contributing countries

The UK's choice of a stand-by presence, meaning a brigade held at readiness in the UK, is largely dictated by resource constraints. UK officials note that the British Army is stretched thin, which makes a permanent deployment challenging. Furthermore, the UK has to maintain some flexibility to uphold global commitments, making it hesitant to tie its hands with a permanent deployment.<sup>74</sup>

While resource constraints may be the main determining factor, UK officials underline that the combination of a forward-deployed MN BG and a stand-by brigade gives the UK more levers of escalation than a permanent deployment would. In that sense, the UK's options for adjusting the posture can be used for escalation management to strengthen deterrence in a crisis. There are ongoing discussions on prepositioning, in which both the UK and France see a trade-off between increased deployment speeds and risk, in terms of forward-deploying equipment within range of Russian fires.<sup>75</sup>

Estonian officials note that from 2022 onwards, there has been a clear signal from the UK that a permanent deployment is not feasible as it would be very challenging for the British Army to sustain constant brigade-size deployment in Estonia. They also argue that this actually corresponded well with Estonia's preference to use its limited funds to procure equipment for its national armed forces above massive infrastructure investments that a permanent Allied brigade would have demanded. Some note that the stand-by design holds a higher military risk than a permanent or rotational presence, given the frictions introduced by additional planning for deployment and force protection, and the difficulties of knowing if the brigade will be in place when the need arises.<sup>76</sup>

While it may not be the main explanation, some respondents note that the different designs of the Baltic FLF can partly be attributed to the distinct military problem and geography in each Baltic country. Estonia envisions that the FLF may contribute to the defence of rather narrow corridors north and south of Lake Peipus, which gives time to fly in reinforcements.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Interview, Tallinn, February 2025. On this note, also see Tomas Jermalavičius and Alice Billon-Galland, *The UK's Role in Nordic Baltic Security and UK-Estonia Defence Cooperation* (Tallinn, International Centre for Defence and Security, 2023), 12, on how the UK wishes to avoid the cost and inflexibility of a permanent deployment and stresses that deterrent effect, not headcount, is what should be measured. Interestingly, as the authors note, the German approach in Lithuania was similar until the announcement of a permanent German brigade, which seemed not to have been coordinated with London beforehand.

<sup>75</sup> Interviews, Brussels and Tallinn, January–February 2025.

<sup>76</sup> Interviews, Tallinn, February 2025.

<sup>77</sup> Interview, Tallinn, February 2025.

The Estonian FLF is by far the least multinational, with only two countries making up the military contributions. In general, UK, French, and Estonian officials assess that there is a trade-off between multinationality and effectiveness, and appreciate that the FLF in Estonia has prioritised the latter. Whereas a highly multinational presence may demonstrate Alliance solidarity, fewer troop contributors foster greater interoperability and military credibility. Furthermore, some argue that the UK's and France's status as nuclear powers enhances deterrence.<sup>78</sup>

### Type of units and capabilities

The UK contribution to FLF Estonia is, as noted, partly the in-place MN BG, which will remain part of the 1st Mechanised Estonian Brigade, and partly a light infantry brigade, encompassing two UK infantry battalions, one French battalion (from 2026), and support units.<sup>79</sup> The MN BG is planned to retain the same composition as before, with a mix of armoured and mechanised units, but the FLF brigade is made up of lighter units. There are still many unknowns regarding the specific composition of the FLF brigade, as the 4th Light Brigade Combat Team does not take over responsibility until summer 2025.

There are different views on whether a light or heavy brigade is best suited for Estonia. UK officials underline that the light infantry brigade is specifically tailored towards the military geography and military needs of Estonia. As they aim for a capability to defend, the terrain calls for a light infantry brigade with strong anti-tank capabilities, adapted to lessons learned from Ukraine. Thus, they find the 4th Brigade very well suited to the task.<sup>80</sup>

In Estonia, some would have preferred more armour. They see the current transformation and re-equipping of UK armoured and mechanised forces as the main reason for the choice of an infantry brigade. However, they assess that other assets, such as attack helicopters, may compensate for the infantry brigade's lack of firepower.<sup>81</sup> Open-source analysis has questioned the combat-support capabilities—including artillery, logistics, and engineers—of the infantry brigade, which are found in reserve-based units.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Interviews, Brussels and Tallinn, January–February 2025.

<sup>79</sup> The specific make-up of the French battalion is being discussed, but the regiment in charge of the deployment is light armoured, with light tanks and armoured personnel carriers.

<sup>80</sup> Interview, Brussels, January 2025.

<sup>81</sup> Interviews, Tallinn, February 2025. For more on the difficulties of modernising the armoured forces and upholding readiness and deployments, see Tim Ripley, "British Battlegroup in Estonia faces Re-jig," Defence Eye, March 8, 2024, <https://www.defenceeye.co.uk/2024/03/08/british-battlegroup-in-estonia-faces-re-jig/>.

<sup>82</sup> Gabriele Molinelli, "What NATO wants," UK Armed Forces Commentary blog, January 20, 2025, <https://ukarmedforcescommentary.blogspot.com/2025/01/what-nato-wants.html?m=1v>.



In addition to the brigade, the UK aims to provide a package that complements Estonia's development of a division. In line with this, the UK national support element for FLF contributions—HQ Cabrit—is transforming into a warfighting command, under which the UK has placed divisional enablers such as rocket artillery. The periodic deployments of attack helicopters and other capabilities announced in the roadmaps would fall under HQ Cabrit.<sup>83</sup> Deployments of attack helicopters have been exercised during Swift Response in May 2024 and Spring Tempest in June 2023, but deployments outside of exercises appear not to have taken place.<sup>84</sup>

### 3.1.4 Command and control

#### Division HQ

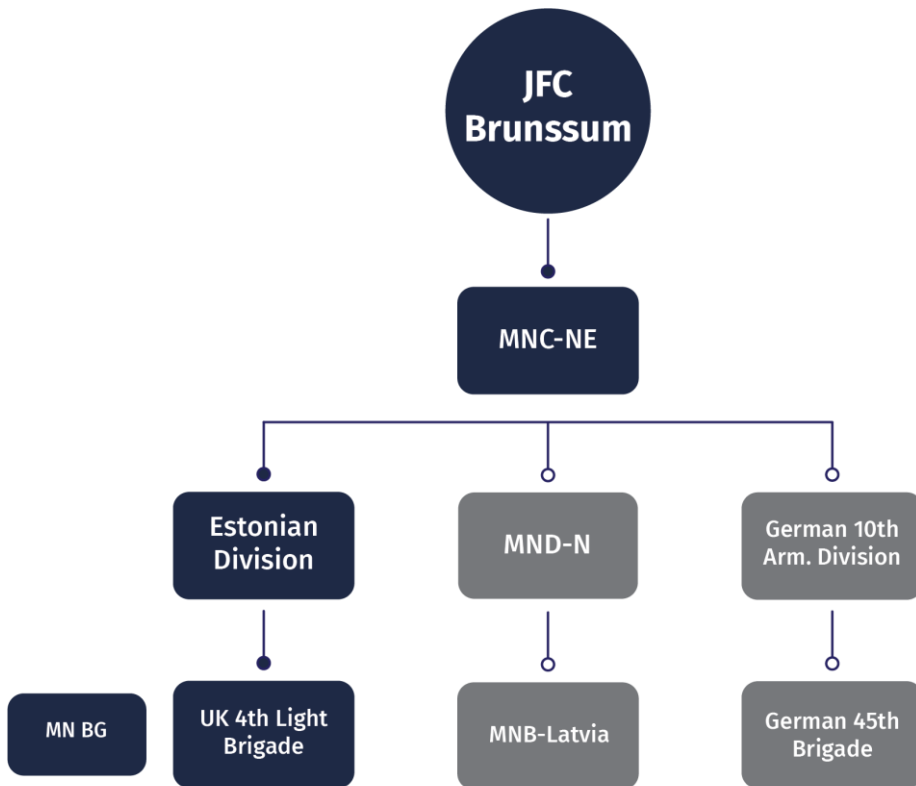
When deployed, the FLF brigade will fall under the Estonian division. Likewise, the MN BG is part of the 1st Estonian Brigade, which is part of the same division. Officers within the division assess that it has come a long way in the two years it has been in development and is combat-ready, if not yet fully operationally capable. There are outstanding issues related to manpower and divisional enablers. Personnel from the UK HQ in Estonia will merge with the Estonian division HQ in a crisis or war, with the UK brigadier general in charge of the UK HQ assuming the position of Deputy Commander in the Estonian division.<sup>85</sup> As of 2025, the division is under the command of Multinational Corps Northeast (MNC-NE) in Poland. Figure 1 illustrates the command and control of FLF Estonia.

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<sup>83</sup> Interview, Tallinn, February 2025.

<sup>84</sup> UK Ministry of Defence, "British fighter jets and helicopters train to attack targets at sea, alongside NATO allies in Estonia," press release, June 4, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-fighter-jets-and-helicopters-train-to-attack-targets-at-sea-alongside-nato-allies-in-estonia> and UK Royal Air Force, "RAF helicopters join British Army and NATO allies in Finland and Estonia," press release, April 25, 2024, <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/raf-helicopters-join-british-army-and-nato-allies-in-finland-and-estonia/>.

<sup>85</sup> Interviews, Tallinn, February 2025.



### Abbreviations

JFC – Joint Force Command  
 MNC-NE – Multinational Corps Northeast  
 MND-N – Multinational Division North  
 MNB – Multinational Brigade  
 MN BG – Multinational Battlegroup

Figure 1: Command and control of FLF Estonia

### National political control

The most probable scenario in which the FLF contributes to defence in Estonia is one in which NATO has activated Article 5. The planning assumption is that the FLF brigade will be activated bilaterally when indications and warnings call for strengthening deterrence. When decisions on collective measures have been made in the North Atlantic Council (NAC), the brigade should already have deployed to Estonia, and command should have been transferred to the Estonian division. At

that point, presuming that NATO activates Article 5 and is organising a collective response, NATO would take over command of the Estonian division.<sup>86</sup>

UK officials note that the period between a national deployment decision and collective action in NATO may be complicated and must be worked through beforehand. The UK and Estonia are preparing by conducting political-military discussions and table-top exercises. These also include discussions on how to handle a situation where Estonia wants to act before or without NATO, and what that entails for the UK and French presence in-country, as well as for FLF reinforcements.<sup>87</sup> In any case, neither France nor the UK requires parliamentary approval to deploy military forces, which should contribute to speedy decision-making, as long as political will exists.

In the design of command and control, the UK has retained some national political control over key capabilities. The divisional enablers the UK offers to Estonia—an aviation task force including attack helicopters, rocket artillery and intelligence support – are tied to a task force within the UK HQ Cabrit. In a crisis or war, the personnel of the task force will merge with the Estonian division. As Commander Cabrit is the *red card holder* in peacetime (the highest national authority regarding the use of British forces), this arrangement presumably upholds some control over the use of divisional assets in a crisis as well. In the same manner, France aims to have representatives at all levels in the decision-making processes and the chain of command, to be able to influence decisions.<sup>88</sup>

### Integration and exercises

Estonian officials are very pleased that the MN BG remains in the 1st Estonian Brigade. They view it as the most integrated of all former eFP BGs and argue that moving it would have been a waste. For the UK, the transition to brigade-level contributions means that the partnership now also involves the 2nd Estonian Brigade.<sup>89</sup>

Before 2025, the assigned FLF brigade had not deployed for exercises. The UK has, however, exercised brigade force projection by deploying other UK units to Estonia in 2023 and 2024.<sup>90</sup> In May 2025, on the other hand, the FLF brigade, or at least significant parts of it, deployed to Estonia from the UK and France and integrated with the Estonian division for a rehearsal of the Estonian national

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<sup>86</sup> Interviews, Brussels and Tallinn, January–February 2025.

<sup>87</sup> Interviews, Tallinn, February 2025.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Sean Monaghan et al., *Is NATO Ready for War?* (Washington D.C: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024), 5.

defence plan as part of Estonian exercise Hedgehog 25. The UK personnel belonged to two battalions of the 4th Light Brigade Combat Team and the brigade HQ, with marine infantry making up the French contribution.<sup>91</sup>

In preparation for the exercise, Estonian officers noted the political value of deploying the full brigade, but assessed that from a military perspective it does not really matter if the UK deploys 50, 80, or 100 per cent of the brigade as long as all of its components and associated procedures are tested, including command and control and logistics. The UK sees the exercise as vital to test the reinforcement concept.<sup>92</sup>

## 3.2 FLF Latvia

### 3.2.1 Development 2017–2025

Canada has been present in Latvia as the framework nation for the eFP BG since June 2017. The Canadian contribution has comprised staff officers supporting the Latvian Mechanised Infantry Brigade HQ, the bulk of the eFP BG HQ, a mechanised infantry company and the majority of combat support and combat service support companies to the eFP BG.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Canada surged additional capabilities to Latvia, including an artillery battery and an electronic warfare troop. Canada also committed staff officers to the Multinational Division North (MND-N) to strengthen command and control.<sup>93</sup>

At the Madrid Summit in June 2022, Canada and Latvia agreed to develop a more robust posture, which would be able to surge a combat-capable brigade. Latvia committed to developing and providing the appropriate infrastructure to support the deployment of a brigade-sized unit. In January 2023, Canada deployed a

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<sup>91</sup> British Army, "'Stronger together,' British troops deploy to Estonia," May 7, 2025, <https://www.army.mod.uk/news/stronger-together-british-troops-deploy-to-estonia/>; and Tim Ripley, "British Army Scales Back NATO Exercises," Defence Eye, May 9, 2025, <https://www.defenceeye.co.uk/2025/05/09/british-army-scales-back-nato-exercises/>; and British Army, "British and Estonian troops stronger together as Exercise Hedgehog ends", May 21 2025, <https://www.army.mod.uk/news/british-and-estonian-troops-stronger-together-as-exercise-hedgehog-ends/>.

<sup>92</sup> Interviews, Tallinn, February 2025.

<sup>93</sup> Government of Canada, Joint declaration between the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia and the Department of National Defence of Canada concerning augmented forward presence Latvia, 29 June 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2022/06/joint-declaration-between-the-ministry-of-defence-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-department-of-national-defence-of-canada-concerning-augmented-fo.html>.

forward-command element to prepare the integration of the multinational brigade into MND-N.<sup>94</sup>

In July 2023, the countries agreed on a roadmap to scale up the eFP BG to a combat-capable multinational brigade. Canada committed to achieving the full implementation of a persistently deployed brigade consisting of up to 2200 Canadian soldiers by 2026. This would include the addition of a Canadian tank squadron equipped with 15 Leopard 2 MBTs. Latvia committed to developing a new military training area in Selonia, procuring medium-range air defence, rocket artillery, and coastal defences, and introducing conscription to fill units in the Latvian Armed Forces.<sup>95</sup>

In July 2024, the NATO Multinational Brigade Latvia was inaugurated at the Adazi military base outside of Riga. However, the brigade HQ will be located close to the Latvian Armed Forces HQ at Ceri in Riga. At the time, 12 allies contributed forces to the brigade: Canada as framework nation, Albania, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain. From January 2025, Sweden has contributed a reduced mechanised battalion to the brigade, alternating with the Danish battalion.<sup>96</sup>

In October 2024, the command of the NATO Multinational BG Latvia (the former eFP BG) transferred from the Latvian Mechanised Infantry Brigade to the Multinational Brigade Latvia.<sup>97</sup> The complete brigade exercised force integration during Resolute Warrior 24, in November 2024.<sup>98</sup> The aim is to declare full operational capability after the combat readiness exercise Oak Resolve, which is to be held in November 2025.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Canada, Joint declaration.

<sup>95</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, Roadmap—Scaling the eFP Latvia Battle Group to brigade, 10 July 2023, [https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/CAN\\_LV\\_roadmap-ENG\\_parakstits\\_10.07.2023.pdf](https://www.mod.gov.lv/sites/mod/files/document/CAN_LV_roadmap-ENG_parakstits_10.07.2023.pdf).

<sup>96</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, NATO Multinational Brigade in Latvia, no date, <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/nato/nato-capabilities/nato-multinational-brigade-latvia> (retrieved 11 December 2024). For an analysis of the Swedish contribution to the multinational brigade in Latvia, see Frelin, Jakobsson, and Lövsström Svedin, NATO's Forward Land Forces, FOI Memo (forthcoming).

<sup>97</sup> Public broadcasting of Latvia, NATO multinational battle group in Latvia becomes separate brigade, 18 October 2024, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defense/18.10.2024-nato-multinational-battle-group-in-latvia-becomes-separate-brigade>.

<sup>98</sup> National Armed Forces Latvia, New NATO Multinational Brigade in Latvia conducts its first full-scale field Exercise, 31 October 2024, <https://www.mil.lv/en/news/new-nato-multinational-brigade-latvia-conducts-its-first-full-scale-field-exercise>.

<sup>99</sup> Interview, Riga, December 2024.

### 3.2.2 Task of the FLF

By assuming the role of framework nation for the FLF, Canada wants to show leadership and underline its historic role of providing transatlantic reinforcements to Europe.<sup>100</sup> Canadian officials emphasise that the mission of the FLF is to deter and be prepared to defend. The task encompasses being present in the country, building up a combat-capable force, proving that troops are ready to fight through exercises, and building infrastructure for the long term. Communicating the intent to defend every inch of Allied territory is also important.<sup>101</sup>

According to Latvian officials, the mission of the FLF is deterrence and defence from day one. This is to be achieved by being present and training across the country. This also reassures the local population.<sup>102</sup>

However, officials and experts have diverging views on what scaling up from the eFP BG to a multinational brigade means for the character of the mission. Some argue that this does not change that the force is still largely a tripwire force, and that a substantially larger force would be needed for defence.<sup>103</sup> Regardless, Latvian officials expect that the multinational force will engage Russian forces as soon as they cross the border and defend every metre of Latvian territory.<sup>104</sup>

Unlike in the other two Baltic states, the Latvian–Canadian roadmap does not refer to the concept of forward defence. It instead reiterates the agreement in Madrid to establish “a more robust, multi-domain, and scalable force posture” on NATO’s eastern flank.<sup>105</sup>

### 3.2.3 Posture

#### Type of presence and contributing countries

At the Madrid Summit in June 2022, Canada had not decided how it would scale up the presence in Latvia to brigade-size. Canadian officials contend that, due to the geographic distance, Canada could not have a brigade on standby at home and rapidly scale up its presence. Instead, Canada opted for a persistent, but rotational, deployment of a reduced brigade of circa 1700 soldiers and prepositioning of

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<sup>100</sup> Interview, Brussels, January 2025.

<sup>101</sup> Interviews, Riga and Brussels, December 2024–January 2025.

<sup>102</sup> Interviews, Riga, December 2024.

<sup>103</sup> See also Toms Rostoks and Alexander Lanoszka, Success Assured? Appraising the Canadian-led Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup in Latvia (Macdonald-Laurier Institute, April 2024), 12.

<sup>104</sup> Interviews, Riga and Brussels, December 2024–January 2025.

<sup>105</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, Roadmap.

equipment for reinforcements, with an ability to scale up to about 2200 soldiers.<sup>106</sup> Canadian forces are to rotate every six months, except for a few hundred in the brigade HQ, which will stay for a year or longer.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, this will be a significant commitment, and officials assess that Canada, over time, will need to rotate its entire army to Latvia.<sup>108</sup>

Latvian officials stress the need for persistent allied deployments and are content with Canadian plans. They worry that, if tensions with Russia rise, a fear of escalation would otherwise hinder Allies from sending reinforcements. A counter argument raised is that Allies rapidly managed to scale up the presence after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.<sup>109</sup>

However, the views diverge on the advantages and disadvantages of a rotational vs. a permanent presence. On the one hand, the recurring rotational deployments of Canadian soldiers put a lot of stress on Canadian personnel and their families, which over time could lead to problems with recruitment and retention. On the other hand, having permanently deployed troops would involve significant costs for the host nation in building the appropriate infrastructure and may encounter known problems of foreign military bases in relations with the local population.<sup>110</sup>

According to our interlocutors, being the most multinational of the FLFs in the Baltics has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it means that more countries can train together and become familiar with conditions for deploying forces to Latvia. It furthermore raises the Allied political commitment to deterrence and avoids overreliance on individual Allies. On the other hand, it takes longer to build interoperability between so many troop contributors and national decisions in more countries are required before the brigade can deploy. Military officers argue that the biggest disadvantage of having 13 contributing Allies in the brigade is logistics. It means that 13 national supply functions need to coordinate deployments.<sup>111</sup> At present, multinationality is avoided below company level in the Multinational BG, but during the Cold War multinationality was avoided below the corps level, due to a wish to maintain strategic flexibility of national forces and not risk the combat effectiveness of the force.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Interview, Brussels, January 2025.

<sup>107</sup> See also Rostoks and Lanoszka, *Success Assured?*, 17.

<sup>108</sup> Interview, Riga, December 2024.

<sup>109</sup> Interviews, Riga, December 2024.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* The war in Ukraine has also demonstrated the significant challenges of operating and maintaining a large number of different weapon systems.

<sup>112</sup> Martin Zapfe, *Efficacy, not Efficiency: Adjusting NATO's Military Integration*, Research Paper No. 118 (Rome: NATO Defense College August 2015), 2–3.

## Type of units and capabilities

According to both Latvian and Canadian officials, the multinational BG has since 2017 helped to change the mindset in the Latvian Mechanised Infantry Brigade by introducing advanced capabilities, such as MBTs and short-range air defence, which Latvia lacked. The addition of a Polish tank company in 2024 further increased the BG's combat capabilities.<sup>113</sup>

Canadian officials argue that the expansion to a multinational brigade brings additional capabilities, for example combat service support. At the same time, some enablers move from the BG to the brigade level, which means that the BG can focus more on manoeuvre warfare.<sup>114</sup>

The Multinational Brigade Latvia currently consists of a multinational mechanised battalion, a rotating Danish and Swedish mechanised battalion (alternating every 6 months), and a Canadian infantry battalion on high readiness in Canada, which regularly deploys to reinforce the brigade. The manoeuvre forces are supported by a multinational artillery battalion, a multinational logistics battalion, a multinational medical unit, as well as various reconnaissance, aviation, and combat engineering elements.”<sup>115</sup>

One controversy between Canada and Latvia has concerned the use of anti-personnel land mines. As Canada is the initiator and depositary nation of the Ottawa Convention banning the use of this type of mine, Latvian discussions about withdrawing from the convention have been sensitive.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, in March 2025, the three Baltic states and Poland, after consultations with allies, jointly announced their intention to leave the Ottawa Convention.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Interviews, Riga and Brussels, December 2024–January 2025.

<sup>114</sup> Interview, Riga, December 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Interview, Riga, December 2024.

<sup>116</sup> Rostoks and Lanoszka, *Success Assured?*, 18–19.

<sup>117</sup> Baltic News Network, “Baltic and Polish”.



### 3.2.4 Command and control

#### Division HQ

The multinational brigade in Latvia is under the command of the Danish-Latvian MND-N, which currently falls under MNC-NE and JFC Brunssum. Building a multinational division allows Denmark and Latvia to share costs and responsibilities, while decisions are subject to bilateral discussions and therefore take longer.<sup>118</sup> Figure 2 illustrates the command and control of FLF Latvia.

From the Canadian point of view, the establishment of the multinational brigade puts more pressure on the division level. Currently, the MND-N lacks several divisional enablers such as air defence, artillery, medical support, and logistics. The current cycle of the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) is supposed to address the lack of these assets.<sup>119</sup>

#### National political control

According to Canadian officials in Latvia, a NAC decision is needed before the multinational brigade can engage in fighting. In addition, in a crisis and war, all contributing allies would have to make national decisions on the transfer of authority of their forces to SACEUR.<sup>120</sup> In the case of the framework nation, Canada, this decision is the prerogative of the government, without a need for parliamentary approval.

Some acknowledge that the national decision-making processes among so many allies bring a level of uncertainty regarding the use of the brigade, particularly in grey-zone situations, which needs to be taken into account and discussed between allies beforehand. Others point out that even if there is a delay in NATO decision-making, the brigade has the mandate to engage in self-defence and can start to prepare for warfighting before the NAC makes a decision.<sup>121</sup>

Latvian officials underline that the Latvian National Armed Forces will likely engage before NATO activates its plans. Due to geography and terrain, the first line of defence in the eastern part of Latvia will probably be the responsibility of the National Guard, as the terrain is more suitable for lighter vehicles. In a hybrid or grey-zone scenario, before NATO has agreed, national, bilateral, and minilateral cooperation, such as the JEF, would be available options.<sup>122</sup>

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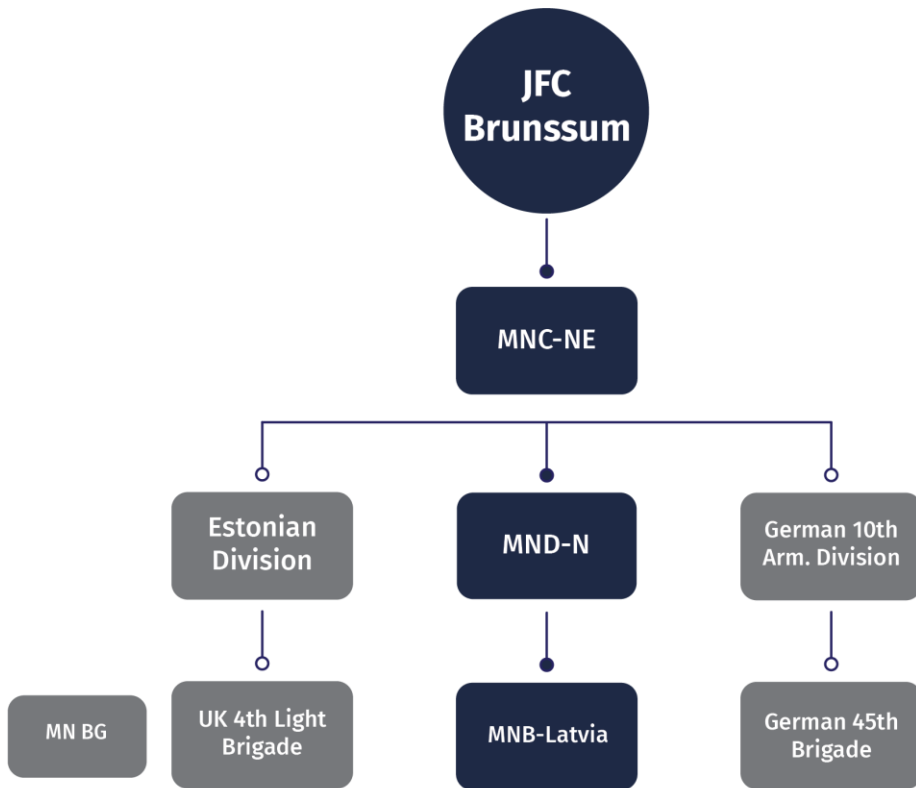
<sup>118</sup> Interviews, Riga, December 2024.

<sup>119</sup> Interviews, Riga and Brussels, December 2024–January 2025.

<sup>120</sup> Interviews, Riga, December 2024.

<sup>121</sup> Interviews, Riga, December 2024.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.



### Abbreviations

JFC – Joint Force Command

MNC-NE – Multinational Corps Northeast

MND-N – Multinational Division North

MNB – Multinational Brigade

MN BG – Multinational Battlegroup

Figure 2: Command and control of FLF Latvia

### Integration and exercises

Latvian officials contend that the transfer of the eFP BG to the Multinational Brigade means that the Latvian Mechanised Brigade will lose key capabilities. To mitigate this loss, it is considered important to continue joint training between the

two brigades and to exercise the detachment of battalions between the multi-national and the Latvian brigade. An advantage in Latvia compared to the other Baltic states is that Latvia has larger training grounds in Adazi and Selonia.<sup>123</sup>

Canada has exercised the deployment of the committed force of 2200 soldiers during Resolute Warrior in November 2024. A combat-readiness exercise of the full brigade will be held in November 2025. For Canada, it is important to show commitment by demonstrating the capability to deploy the full force package. In fact, Canada is considering moving its annual national brigade-level exercises from western Canada to Latvia.<sup>124</sup>

### 3.3 FLF Lithuania

#### 3.3.1 Development 2017–2025

Germany has been the framework nation of the eFP BG in Lithuania since 2017. The BG initially consisted of approximately 500 German soldiers, which, together with other troop-contributing countries, made up a mechanised battalion, reinforced by combat support such as nuclear, biological, and chemical defence, reconnaissance, and artillery units. The eFP BG has been based in Rukla, close to Kaunas, under the command of the Lithuanian 1st Mechanised Brigade, called the Iron Wolf Brigade.<sup>125</sup>

In January 2022, before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Germany reinforced the BG with an additional 350 soldiers.<sup>126</sup> In addition, since 2022, Germany has had a brigade on stand-by for reinforcement to Lithuania, as part of the so-called enhanced Vigilance Activities undertaken by NATO. By September 2022, a forward command element for the stand-by brigade was deployed to Lithuania.<sup>127</sup>

In early June 2022, before the Madrid Summit, Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced that Germany was ready to scale up its presence and lead a brigade in Lithuania to deter and defend against Russian aggression. German statements that

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Interview, Brussels, January 2025.

<sup>125</sup> Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, "Strengthening NATO presence in Lithuania," updated 22 December 2023, <https://kam.lt/en/strengthening-nato-presence-in-lithuania/>.

<sup>126</sup> Justinas Juozaitis, "Germany moving in to keep Russia out: Implications and challenges of the Bundeswehr's permanent deployment to Lithuania," *Journal of Baltic Security* 9, no. 2 (12 November 2023): 38, [https://doi.org/10.57767/jobs\\_2023\\_006](https://doi.org/10.57767/jobs_2023_006).

<sup>127</sup> Lithuanian Armed Forces, "37th Mechanized Infantry enhanced Vigilance Activity Brigade of the Bundeswehr begins its tour of duty in Lithuania," 12 December 2024, <https://kariuomene.lt/en/37th-mechanized-infantry-enhanced-vigilance-activity-brigade-of-the-bundeswehr-begins-its-tour-of-duty-in-lithuania-/26279>.

the brigade would remain in Germany, referring to a lack of infrastructure in place, caused concern in Lithuania, whose officials pushed for the permanent stationing of the brigade.<sup>128</sup> One expert pointed out that the principal reason for the German hesitation was not the dearth of infrastructure, but rather the absence of combat-ready brigades at the time.<sup>129</sup> The controversy regarding the type of presence ended in June 2023, when German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius suddenly announced that from 2026 the brigade would permanently deploy to Lithuania, on condition that the host nation would provide the necessary infrastructure.<sup>130</sup>

The two countries have since established a joint working group to prepare for the permanent deployment of the brigade, and in December 2023, Germany and Lithuania signed a roadmap for the coming years. The brigade will consist of approximately 4800 soldiers and 200 civilian personnel. The lion's share of the armoured brigade will deploy in 2025–2026, and, according to the plan, the brigade should become fully operational by the end of 2027.<sup>131</sup> Lithuania has committed to developing the appropriate infrastructure to host the force in Rūdninkai and Rukla, while accommodation for staff and families is to be provided in Vilnius and Kaunas. Between 2023 and 2027, Lithuania plans to spend EUR 1.5 billion on host-nation support, including military infrastructure, training areas, housing, childcare facilities, and schools.<sup>132</sup>

In October 2024, the commander of the German 45th Armoured Brigade arrived in Lithuania, marking the next step in preparations. The brigade was activated officially in April 2025. Thereafter, the units of the brigade will gradually relocate from Germany to Lithuania. The brigade will consist of the 203rd Armoured Battalion from Augustdorf in Nordrhein-Westfalia, the 122nd Mechanised Infantry Battalion from Oberviechtach in Bavaria, and the previous eFP BG. The latter transferred into a multinational BG (MN BG) in February 2025 and will become part of the brigade in 2026.<sup>133</sup> The multinational BG will continue to be rotational, including contributions from the Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, the Czech Republic,

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<sup>128</sup> Jacek Tarociński and Justyna Gotkowska, “Expectations versus reality: NATO brigades in the Baltic states?”, Centre for Eastern Studies, 6 December 2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-12-06/expectations-versus-reality-nato-brigades-baltic-states>.

<sup>129</sup> Interview, Vilnius, February–March 2025.

<sup>130</sup> Justinas Juozaitis, “Germany moving in,” 39–44, [https://doi.org/10.57767/jobs\\_2023\\_006](https://doi.org/10.57767/jobs_2023_006).

<sup>131</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Federal Republic of Germany and Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, Roadmap Brigade Lithuania, 18 December 2023, [https://kam.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Roadmap-Brigade-Lithuania\\_angliskai.pdf](https://kam.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Roadmap-Brigade-Lithuania_angliskai.pdf).

<sup>132</sup> Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, “Strengthening NATO presence.”

<sup>133</sup> The eFP BG was renamed MN BG in connection with the incoming BG rotation in February 2025. See Ministry of Defence of the Federal Republic of Germany and Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, Roadmap Brigade Lithuania.

Croatia, and Luxembourg. The soldiers of the 45th Brigade will serve on three-year contracts, whereas the staff of the MN BG will have six-month contracts.<sup>134</sup>

### 3.3.2 Task of the FLF

Germany's decision to deploy a permanent brigade to Lithuania can be attributed to the country's desire to show solidarity within NATO and to demonstrate leadership within the Alliance. According to German officials, the task of the FLF is to provide credible deterrence and defence.<sup>135</sup> The commander of the 45th Brigade has stated, in an interview, that the mission of the German deployment is: "First and foremost, it is a deterrence against our adversaries. We will defend every inch of NATO and that is the reason we are here."<sup>136</sup> German officials also claim that the FLF is part of a general move towards a flexible forward defence, with more forces forward-deployed and allocated to NATO.<sup>137</sup>

Lithuanian officials were pivotal in promoting NATO's turn towards forward defence after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. They point out that the FLF brings mass and the ability to hold territory and repel an invasion. Furthermore, they emphasise the strategic message towards the local population and Russia that a permanent presence of Allied forces conveys.<sup>138</sup>

Lithuanian officials also highlight the significance of NATO's move away from the previous reinforcement concept, which is no longer considered appropriate. However, they point out that this is not yet the case across the eastern flank, which constitutes a weakness.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Bundeswehr, "The Bundeswehr in Lithuania: Major steps towards the German manoeuvre brigade," no date, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/news/bundeswehr-lithuania> (Accessed: 17 March 2025); Lithuanian Armed Forces, "NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group kicks off new rotation in Lithuania by a new name as the NATO Multinational Battle Group," 6 February 2025, <https://kariuomene.lt/en/nato-enhanced-forward-presence-battle-group-kicks-off-new-rotation-in-lithuania-by-a-new-name-as-the-nato-multinational-battle-group/26337>; and Interview 26, Vilnius, 19 February 2025.

<sup>135</sup> Interview, Vilnius, February–March 2025.

<sup>136</sup> Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Lithuania, "German Brigade Commander: Our mission is clear—to defend Lithuania and common values," 30 October 2024, <https://kam.lt/en/german-brigade-commander-our-mission-is-clear-to-defend-lithuania-and-common-values/>.

<sup>137</sup> Interviews, Brussels and Vilnius, January–March 2025.

<sup>138</sup> Interviews, Vilnius, February–March 2025.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

### 3.3.3 Posture

#### Type of presence and contributing countries

According to German officials, there are both political and military logics behind the permanent stationing of a brigade in Lithuania. First, given Germany's historical experience of a strong allied forward defence deployed on its soil during the Cold War, Germany wants to show solidarity with NATO's current frontline states. Secondly, a brigade permanently in place allows for greater knowledge of the terrain and tasks. It also removes the military problem of having to move forces in the middle of a crisis.<sup>140</sup>

Lithuanian officials also see that a permanently deployed brigade has several military advantages. A permanent presence improves reaction time, strengthens deterrence, and decreases the risk of abandonment. In contrast, a strategy of reinforcement is more vulnerable to Russian threats of escalation and reliant on the ability to move forces across the narrow Suwalki Corridor in a tense situation.<sup>141</sup>

One limitation of the current setup is Lithuania's lack of military training areas. This shortage can be alleviated by using civilian areas for exercises or by conducting exercises in other countries on the eastern flank.<sup>142</sup> Germany is also dependent on Lithuanian infrastructure investments before the bulk of forces can deploy.

Even though the brigade is largely portrayed as a national German commitment, German officials claim that the multinational character of the MN BG will remain, with the Netherlands and Norway as the other main contributors. Belgium, the Czech Republic, Croatia, and Luxembourg will contribute occasionally. The contributing countries place their forces under German command.<sup>143</sup>

#### Type of units and capabilities

The current MN BG consists of approximately 1600 soldiers, along with Leopard 2 MBTs, CV90s, Puma and Boxer Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFVs) and the PzH 2000 self-propelled artillery system.<sup>144</sup> The upcoming 45th Brigade will bring one additional armoured and one mechanised battalion. According to German officials, the brigade has been designed to fit the terrain of Lithuania, which consists of forests, valleys, and plains. Thus, a mix of armoured and mechanised forces was judged necessary.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Interviews, Brussels and Vilnius, January–March 2025.

<sup>141</sup> Interviews, Vilnius, February–March 2025.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

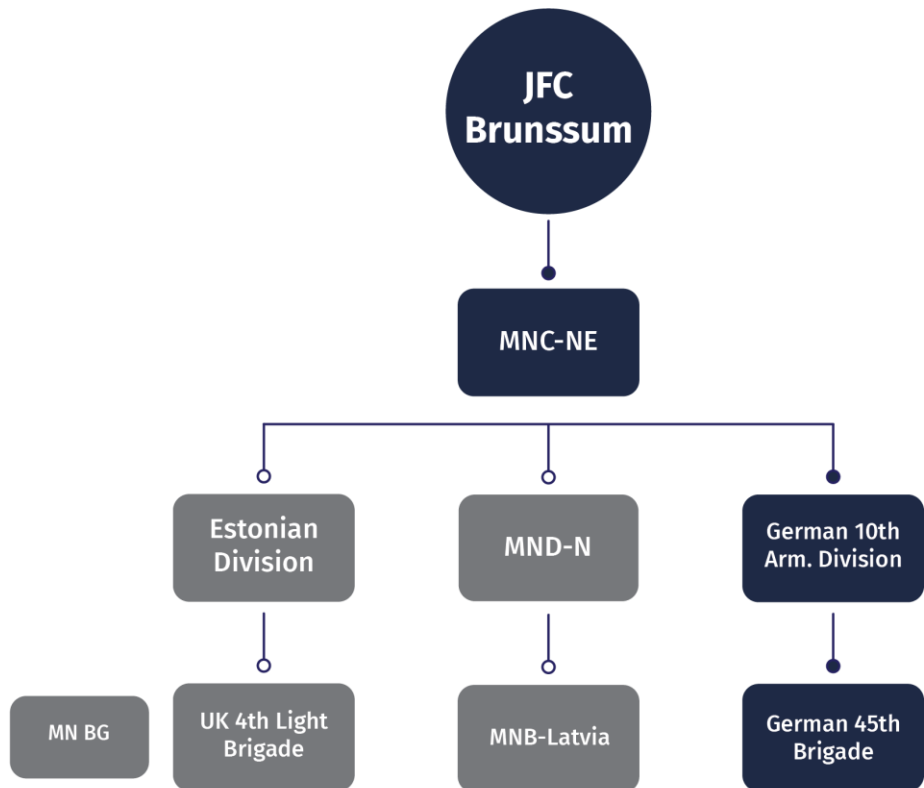
<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Lithuanian Armed Forces, "NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group."

<sup>145</sup> Interview, Brussels, January 2025.

Lithuanian officials value the deployment of all the necessary capabilities for a heavy brigade, including MBTs, IFVs, and artillery. This has also allowed the Lithuanian Armed Forces to test capabilities that it later plans to procure.<sup>146</sup>

### 3.3.4 Command and control



#### Abbreviations

JFC – Joint Force Command  
 MNC-NE – Multinational Corps Northeast  
 MND-N – Multinational Division North  
 MNB – Multinational Brigade  
 MN BG – Multinational Battlegroup

Figure 3: Command and control of FLF Lithuania

<sup>146</sup> Interview, Vilnius, February–March 2025.

## Division HQ

The German brigade in Lithuania is to become one of three brigades of the German 10th Armoured Division, which is the first German division to become operational and committed to the NATO Force Model as Division 2025.<sup>147</sup> The division will be under the command, and assigned to the area of operations, of the Multinational Corps Northeast (MNC-NE) in Szczecin in Poland, which is jointly led by Poland, Germany, and Denmark.<sup>148</sup> Figure 3 illustrates the command and control of FLF Lithuania.

In parallel, Lithuania is setting up a national division to be completed by 2030. The 1st Lithuanian Division will consist of the 1st Mechanised Brigade at higher readiness (the Iron Wolf Brigade), the 2nd Motorised Brigade at lower readiness and the 3rd Light Infantry Brigade, consisting mostly of reserves. The command of the Iron Wolf Brigade will transfer to the Lithuanian division in 2026. As a whole, the division is planned to operate Leopard 2 MBTs, Boxer and CV90 IFVs, and enablers such as tactical air transport, air defence, combat engineers, reconnaissance, and artillery units. To finance this raised level of ambition, Lithuania plans for defence expenditures amounting to 5–6 per cent of GDP in the period 2026–2030.<sup>149</sup>

Currently, however, the Iron Wolf Brigade is under the command of the Multinational Division Northeast in Elblag, Poland, in order to jointly defend the Suwalki Corridor together with Polish forces. Once the Lithuanian division is operational, MNC-NE will be the superior multinational command. Consequently, Lithuania is in the process of becoming a framework nation of this command.<sup>150</sup> This implies that both a German and a Lithuanian division will take part in the defence of Lithuania. This increases the number of forces available for deterrence and defence, but requires delineation of tasks in order not to complicate command and control.

Both German and Lithuanian officials point out that divisional enablers, e.g. air defence, are a common shortage in NATO, but that this is the responsibility of national commands at higher levels.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Justyna Gotkowska and Jakub Graca, “The German ‘Brigade Lithuania,’” Centre for Eastern Studies, 22 December 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-12-22/german-brigade-lithuania>.

<sup>148</sup> Interview, Vilnius, February–March 2025.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. Also see Emelie Thorburn, “Lithuania,” in *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2023: Part I National Capabilities* (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency— FOI), FOI-R--5527--SE, 111–112.

<sup>150</sup> Interview, Vilnius, February–March 2025.

<sup>151</sup> Interviews, Vilnius, February–March 2025.



## National political control

As Germany considers the deployment of its brigade to Lithuania a peacetime mission, the government has the authority to decide on its permanent stationing without requesting parliamentary support. Furthermore, in peacetime, the brigade will largely operate under German national command and control, which, however, can easily be transferred to NATO for specific exercises. In the event of an armed attack from Russia, a NAC decision and a German national decision, including an approval from the Bundestag, are likely required before the brigade can engage in warfighting. According to German officials, there is no doubt that Germany would show solidarity and take the necessary decisions in such an event.<sup>152</sup>

Lithuanian officials accept the requirement for a NAC decision and approval from the Bundestag before using the German brigade for warfighting as a fact in the Alliance. At the same time, they point out that SACEUR, in line with NATO's Crisis Response Measures, would be able to take several steps to prepare for defence before an armed attack, e.g. mass forces beforehand or deploy forces for exercises. NATO forces always retain the right to engage in self-defence.<sup>153</sup>

## Integration and exercises

Lithuanian officials argue that the presence of the eFP BG has raised the competence of the Iron Wolf Brigade to an international level, testing the ability to communicate with others and exercise with capabilities such as MBTs and IFVs.<sup>154</sup> According to both German and Lithuanian officials, the transfer of command of the multinational BG to the German brigade will not have a significant negative effect; Lithuanian and German units will continue to exercise together and remain in the same bases. The relations will remain close, as Lithuania is about to integrate newly acquired Leopard MBTs and Boxer IFVs into the Iron Wolf Brigade.<sup>155</sup>

The integration of the MN BG into the Iron Wolf Brigade has been tested twice a year in the Iron Wolf I and II exercises. The exercises include active combat, interaction with one of the Lithuanian battalions and integration into the brigade chain of command.<sup>156</sup> The brigade has not yet exercised in full.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> NATO, JFC Brunssum, "NATO's 'Iron Wolf 2024-II' Exercise Underway: Enhancing Eastern Flank Defence," 17 October 2024, <https://jfcbs.nato.int/page5964943/2024/natos-iron-wolf-2024ii-exercise-underway-enhancing-eastern-flank-defence>.

### 3.4 Summary of the FLF in the Baltic states

The analysis above shows that the framework nations and host nations in several aspects have opted for different designs of the FLF in the Baltic states. Table 1 summarises the key characteristics of these solutions. However, the political and military considerations behind the different designs are similar in many respects. This will be the object of analysis in the next chapter.

Table 1: Summary of key attributes of the FLF brigades in the Baltic states

	FLF Estonia	FLF Latvia	FLF Lithuania
<b>Framework nation</b>	United Kingdom	Canada	Germany
<b>Type of presence</b>	In-place BG, stand-by brigade	Rotating brigade (2 battalions in place, 1 on standby)	Permanent brigade (from 2027)
<b>Number of contributing countries</b>	2 (GBR, FRA)	13 (CAN, ALB, CZE, DNK, ISL, ITA, MKD, MNE, POL, SVK, SVN, ESP, SWE)	7 (DEU, NLD, NOR, BEL, CZE, HRV, LUX)
<b>Type of units</b>	Mechanised BG, infantry brigade (2 GBR infantry battalions, 1 FRA battalion)	Mechanised brigade (1 MN mechanised BG, 1 DNK/SWE mechanised battalion, 1 CAN infantry battalion)	Armoured brigade (1 MN mechanised BG, 1 DEU armoured battalion, 1 DEU mechanised battalion)
<b>Key capabilities<sup>(a)</sup></b>	MBTs, IFVs, <sup>(b)</sup> artillery, short-range air defence, rocket artillery	MBTs, IFVs, artillery, short-range air defence	MBTs, IFVs, artillery
<b>Division HQ</b>	Host nation (EST)	Multinational (DNK, LVA)	Framework nation (DEU)
<b>Decision making in Art. 5</b>	GBR, FRA national decision needed to deploy before NAC decision, no parliamentary decision needed	NAC decision and national decisions needed, in CAN no parliamentary decision needed	NAC decision and national decisions needed, in DEU parliamentary approval needed
<b>Full brigade exercise</b>	May 2025 (Hedgehog) <sup>(c)</sup>	Nov. 2024 (Resolute Warrior)	?

Remarks: **(a)** This category lists capabilities that are or will be placed in-country. The UK, for example, has announced possible deployments of attack helicopters and other capabilities, which are not listed here. **(b)** MBTs and IFVs are part of the in-place BG, whereas the stand-by brigade is a lighter formation. **(c)** At the time of publication, the extent to which the “full” brigade participated in the exercise remains unclear and the term is used somewhat loosely by all involved. However, it seems that personnel from the UK and French battalions, some support units, and the brigade staff deployed to Estonia.



## 4 Key considerations behind the design of the Forward Land Forces

This chapter analyses the key political and military considerations of the framework nations and the host nations in designing NATO's Forward Land Forces. The chapter compares and contrasts the considerations of the framework nations and host nations, as well as their views on the different models chosen for the FLF.

The chapter takes its point of departure in the markedly increased NATO ambitions announced at the 2022 Madrid Summit and subsequent planning. This signals that NATO now prioritises military credibility and Alliance solidarity in the design of its posture on the eastern flank. At the same time, the previously identified considerations from the Cold War and the post-2014 period, such as resource constraints, maintaining national political control, and avoiding escalation risks, can be discerned to various degrees in the design of the three FLFs in the Baltic states.

### 4.1 Military credibility

Framework nations' and host nations' officials display a common view that the task of the FLF has shifted to deterrence by denial by demonstrating a capability to defend every inch of Allied territory. This has made previous reassuring aspects of the forward presence less prominent but still important. In the case of Latvia, both the framework nation and the host nation refrain from using the term "forward defence" in the joint roadmap and continue to underscore the need for visible presence across the country, e.g. in exercises. All countries argue that close bilateral ties in a broader context between framework nations and host nations are an important aspect of the mission.

Even though the task in official rhetoric has changed to deterrence and defence, several military officials and experts in host nations still consider the forward presence insufficient to achieve deterrence by denial. Even so, military officers stress that they will fight with the capabilities at hand and engage any Russian forces in the first metre of Allied territory.

The FLF in Estonia will actually consist of a BG in place and a brigade on standby, which in total implies a larger force than the FLFs in Latvia and Lithuania. The downside, however, is that the brigade will be held at readiness in the UK, which creates a greater military risk for Estonia. By contrast, the brigades in Latvia and Lithuania will deploy persistently or permanently. The majority of the brigade in Latvia is already in place, but will be subject to continuous six-month rotations with potential gaps between rotations and new units continuously having to exercise force integration. The German permanent brigade, with three-year

contracts, will be able to build up greater knowledge of the terrain and task. On the downside, the German brigade will not fully deploy until 2027.

Furthermore, the differences in military geography of the three Baltic states can, to some extent, explain the different designs of the FLFs. The planning assumption is that the FLF in Estonia would probably be defending very narrow corridors north and south of Lake Peipus. In that terrain, a light brigade with advanced anti-tank capabilities is considered even more appropriate, or at the very least no less so, than a heavier unit.<sup>157</sup> In Latvia, the mechanised units of the FLF is concentrated on the defence of Riga, whereas the first line of defence in the eastern part of the country will likely be taken up by the Latvian National Guard. Their light vehicles are more suited for defence in terrain consisting of forests, hills, plains, and marshes. In Lithuania, a mix of armoured and mechanised forces is viewed as more appropriate for halting an invasion in the open, but still mixed, terrain of forests, valleys, and plains. Furthermore, Lithuania's position by the Suwalki Gap may explain the emphasis on readiness that a permanently stationed brigade entails.

A military advantage of the eFP BGs and later on the MN BGs is that they have brought advanced capabilities (such as MBTs, IFVs, artillery, air defence, attack helicopters, engineers, and ISR) and an offensive mindset to the host nations' brigades. This has enhanced the military capability of the host nations' armed forces as a whole. To promote military credibility, the UK has opted to keep the MN BG within the 1st Estonian Brigade and, in parallel, deploy divisional enablers, such as rocket artillery and attack helicopters, that are lacking in the other FLFs.

However, in the case of FLFs Latvia and Lithuania, the MN BGs will move from the host nations' brigades to those of the framework nations. This means that interaction between the two needs to move to a higher level, which raises the demands on command and support functions not only at the division level, but also at the corps level. Particularly in Latvia, divisional enablers such as air defence, longer-range artillery, medical support and logistics are lacking.

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<sup>157</sup> This point has been raised before. In 2020, Clark et al. noted that "UK armour is ill-suited to Estonia's swampy and boggy ground, particularly in winter." See Robert Clark, Andrew Foxall and James Rogers, "United Kingdom as framework nation," in Alexander Lanoszka, Christian Leuprecht and Alexander Moens, *Lessons from the Enhanced Forward Presence, 2017–2020*, (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2020), 30–31.

## 4.2 Alliance solidarity

All FLF framework nations refer to their traditional roles within the Alliance and a desire to show solidarity and leadership as the main motivations for taking on increased responsibility. The UK government aims for the UK to be the leading European nation in NATO and has adopted a NATO-first policy for the coming years.<sup>158</sup> Canada wants to reassert its historic role during the two world wars of providing transatlantic reinforcements to Europe.<sup>159</sup> As a former front-line state during the Cold War, Germany wishes to demonstrate solidarity towards the current front-line states and assume leadership within the Alliance.

One may also suspect that committing forces to NATO operations is a way to avoid Allied criticism of low defence expenditures and deficient national military capabilities. At the same time, the sustainability of the countries' presence in the Baltic states will largely depend on successful defence reforms and sufficient investments in their respective armed forces.

In general, there is a political-military trade-off involved in any multinational deployment. It can arguably contribute to deterrence by increasing the number of countries an opponent would have to face in case of an attack, but it also comes with drawbacks for interoperability and, thus, military credibility.<sup>160</sup> In earlier research, these different types of deterrence have been labelled strategic deterrence and military deterrence, respectively.<sup>161</sup>

The three host nations' views on the trade-off between a highly multinational presence and military credibility diverge. Estonia clearly emphasises the military credibility and greater interoperability of only having two Allies contributing to the FLF. Officials also underline the deterrent effect of both the UK and France being nuclear powers.

Latvia contends that having 13 Allies contributing to the FLF signals both political commitment and delivers a greater military effect as the country is less vulnerable to the national decision-making of individual Allies. Because of regular rotations, several Allies have become familiar with the process of deploying forces to Latvia, which may increase the likelihood of receiving reinforcements in a crisis.

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<sup>158</sup> John Healey, "UK Role in NATO," transcript, House of Commons Website, November 18, 2024, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-11-18/debates/9921426E-A2E7-44C1-B874-A065DB31F158/UKRoleInNATO>, and Dan Sabbagh, "UK will be 'leading European nation' in Nato, defence secretary pledges," *The Guardian*, July 10, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jul/10/uk-will-be-leading-european-nation-in-nato-defence-secretary-says>.

<sup>159</sup> Interview, Brussels, January 2025.

<sup>160</sup> Braaus and Carstens, *Germany as Framework Nation*, 64–65.

<sup>161</sup> Stoicescu and Järvenpää, *Contemporary Deterrence*, 9.

in Lithuania, the respondents are not worried by the relative degree of multinationality of the FLF. Even though the multinational BG will continue to include other troop-contributing countries, the brigade is viewed largely as a German national responsibility. Lithuania is content with the ground-breaking German commitment to station a brigade in the country permanently.

In general, the reassurance aspect of the FLF seem to work well, in that respondents seldom raised abandonment concerns. In the case of Latvia and Lithuania, having a persistently or permanently deployed brigade lessens abandonment concerns, as continuously deployed forces constitute a clear signal of commitment. The in-place BG in Estonia may fill the same function. The risk of further reinforcements being held back in a crisis may decrease as contributing nations already have a significant level of commitment by having thousands of soldiers forward deployed.

### 4.3 Resource constraints

While military credibility and alliance solidarity played a key role in the decision to scale up NATO's forward presence to brigade-level, the framework nations' lack of available capabilities and deployment constraints have had a large influence on the implementation of this commitment. The British Army cannot sustain a forward deployed brigade while retaining flexibility and meeting global commitments. Canada is stretching its army thin by providing recurring rotations to Latvia, and some question whether this is tenable in the long term.<sup>162</sup> Limited national capabilities can also be one of the reasons behind the highly multinational approach of the Canadian-led brigade.<sup>163</sup> Germany struggles to station a permanent brigade in Lithuania, and only made this decision after significant pressure from the host nation, and with a long timeline for implementation.

In addition, all framework nations experience a trade-off between providing military support to Ukraine, maintaining forces at high readiness for the FLF, and building mass for longer-term reinforcements. However, these issues are interconnected, and if the first two fail, pressure will increase on the latter. In fact, the need to cannibalise other parts of the Bundeswehr to deploy a brigade to Lithuania might negatively affect Germany's capability to provide further reinforcements. Thus, a balanced approach is needed, but limited resources make priorities inevitable.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> See Rostoks and Lanoszka, *Success Assured*, 15.

<sup>163</sup> Leuprecht, Moens, and Lanoszka, "Canada as framework nation," 48.

<sup>164</sup> The dilemma between prioritising winning the first battle or preparing for a longer conflict—or, framed differently, between readiness and sustainability—was also present during the Cold War. At the time, some experts argued in favour of prioritising the former—readiness to prevent loss of territory at the expense of sustainability for a longer-term conflict and the ability to retake territory—as frontline states would not be reassured by the ability for reconquest if they had to endure their countries becoming

Sustained political support and rising defence expenditures in framework nations should make it possible to overcome present resource constraints. At the same time, NATO has left framework and host nations considerable flexibility in the design of the respective FLFs. While a realistic approach, the lack of NATO guidance on the “how” inevitably means that host nations has less influence in the design of FLFs, compared to the framework nations. This means that host nations must carefully weigh the pros and cons of spending political capital on trying to influence the framework nations’ deployments. In the worst case, host nations might pursue unrealistic aims and achieve nothing but souring relations. On the other hand, political pressure from Lithuanian officials contributed to securing a permanent German brigade in the country.

Host nations also experience a trade-off regarding how to spend significantly increasing, but still limited, resources. Whereas Lithuania plans to invest in infrastructure and host-nation support, Estonia prioritises its national armed forces. With increasing defence expenditures, the room for pursuing both options may be expanding.

## 4.4 National political control

While framework nations tend to emphasise military credibility more than previously, the worsened security environment and more capable forces in place may have driven a parallel emphasis on national political control, at least in situations before Article 5 has been activated.

Framework nations generally want to retain as much political control over their forces and key capabilities as possible. The UK will place divisional enablers, such as attack helicopters, rocket artillery, and intelligence support, under UK command, with the British brigadier being the *red card holder* for the use of UK assets. The German brigade in Lithuania is placed directly under a German division. In fact, the German brigade will be under national or partly German-led multinational command up to the corps level.<sup>165</sup> The FLF in Latvia is placed under the Danish-Latvian-led multinational division. However, the Canadian commander of the multinational brigade is likely the highest national authority, i.e. *red card holder*, regarding the use of Canadian forces.

The fact that the framework nations of the FLFs in Latvia and Lithuania assess that an NAC decision is required before the forces can fight puts a greater premium on NATO’s Alert System and the ability to interpret and act on indications and warnings. It raises the question of whether SACEUR has the appropriate level of

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battlegrounds in the meantime. This tracks well with the Baltic states preferred NATO approach and the thinking behind NATO’s post-2022 turn towards forward defence. See Facer, *Conventional Forces*, 89.

<sup>165</sup> However, these arrangements could also be attributed to a prioritisation of military credibility, as less multinationality may increase efficiency.



authority to prepare the FLF before an armed attack. Furthermore, rapid national decision-making is required among all contributing Allies. In the case of Germany, having German soldiers permanently forward-deployed would likely oblige faster national decision-making, including Bundestag approval, in the event of an armed attack.

Having forces under national command of the host nations, as is the case for the UK in Estonia, may, theoretically, enable their use in a pre-Article 5 scenario, before NATO agrees to launch an operation. However, the process for transferring authority in these situations needs to be discussed and tested among framework nations, host nations, and contributing Allies beforehand.

## 4.5 Escalation risks

Framework nations and host nations have a more unified view on the risk of escalation after 2022 than before. None of our respondents assessed that the deployment of the FLF is likely to lead to escalation. On the contrary, and according to host nations, it is a lack of capabilities that would tempt Russia and create a risk for escalation.

Estonian respondents emphasise how NATO has gone from fearing escalation to emphasising escalation management. Previously, NATO avoided military engagements in sensitive regions for fear of Russian reactions, but now delivers power to these sensitive spots. Before 2022, many allies did not want to exercise east of Tallinn, whereas the recent *Pikne* exercise, a NATO Vigilance Activity, was conducted some 20 kilometres from the Estonian-Russian border.<sup>166</sup>

However, framework nations are more cautious than host nations, or at least approach escalation risks and crisis stability differently. While the UK contends that the combination of one BG permanently deployed and one brigade held at readiness gives it more levers of escalation, both UK and French officials worry about prepositioning too much high-value equipment, as it would be vulnerable to Russian pre-emptive attacks.

On the other hand, the process of moving from tailored to immediate deterrence, by deploying reinforcements and equipment to get the FLF brigades to full strength, would take place in a context of heightened tensions and mutual suspicion in which the risk of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation increases. This could also give rise to contentious domestic debates in troop-contributing nations, in which some may see dialogue, rather than strengthened deterrence, as the correct way to handle tensions. Permanently deployed brigades would ease the political and military concerns related to deploying reinforcements into what may be a tense

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<sup>166</sup> Interview, Tallinn, February 2025.

but difficult-to-interpret situation and make the transition to immediate deterrence less challenging, but come with disadvantages for NATO's flexibility.

The main area where escalation concerns may still play a more direct role is the deployment of rocket artillery and other divisional enablers that are capable of striking targets on Russian territory.<sup>167</sup> In the Estonian case, their placement within a UK taskforce, rather than directly in the FLF brigade or under the Estonian division, may reflect a UK preference to maintain national control over these assets as a way of managing escalation risks. German officials, however, see deep strike capabilities as a corps-level asset, and there seems to have been no discussions about forward stationing them to Lithuania.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> While there is no universal definition of surface-to-surface deep-strike capabilities, NATO doctrine defines them in relation to the forward line of NATO troops (forward line of one's own troops, FLOT) and unit level. Thus, a brigade's deep operations area extends 50 kilometres behind the FLOT, whereas a division's stretches 150 kilometres behind the FLOT, while a corps' extends 300—500 kilometres. See Héloïse Fayet and Léo Péria-Peigné, *Deep Precision Strikes: A New Tool for Strategic Competition?* (Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 2024), 12-13.

<sup>168</sup> Interview, Brussels, January 2025.



## 5 Conclusions

This report examines the design of the Forward Land Forces in the Baltic states and analyses the key political and military considerations behind the three different models that framework nations have chosen. Empirically, it offers the first in-depth look at the FLFs in the Baltic states, their development in recent years and issues that may need further work. Conceptually, it seeks to make sense of how NATO's post-2022 strategic shift affects its frontline forces and the extent to which military credibility now trumps other considerations. The research questions that guide our analysis are:

- What are the key political and military considerations behind the design of NATO's Forward Land Forces in the Baltic states?
- How do the Forward Land Forces fit into NATO's strategy for deterrence and defence?

In this concluding chapter, we first present our key findings on the design and status of implementation in the respective FLFs in the Baltics. Thereafter, we reflect on the impact of and interplay between the political and military considerations that have shaped the design of the FLFs in the Baltic states. We find that all of them are present to some extent, but that their influence varies between the different stages of implementation. Lastly, we analyse the FLFs in the wider context of NATO's evolving strategy for deterrence and defence and assess possibilities and challenges in the years ahead.

### 5.1 NATO's FLF in the Baltic states: Work in progress

NATO has a clear aim for the FLF, but remains flexible on how to achieve it. As a result, the three FLFs in the Baltic states have chosen three different models. They differ in a number of aspects, including the degree of permanent deployments, the degree of multinationality, the type of units deployed (infantry, mechanised, or armoured), and the setup of division command and control.

Furthermore, the implementation of the agreed roadmaps differs in each country pair. The political and military issues raised in the three cases are indicative of how far they have come in the implementation of the pledge to scale up from eFP BGs to brigades "where and when required." The countries encounter, work on, and prioritise problems depending on how far they have progressed from initial planning to full operational capability.

In Estonia, the UK currently focuses on establishing the in-place HQ for the brigade and assisting in the development of Estonia's national division, including by deploying divisional enablers, rather than preparing for a persistent or permanent deployment of the brigade. In the absence of a permanent UK presence,

Estonia prioritises its national defence planning, achieving a fully operational division HQ, and acquiring necessary enablers, either through procurement or allied deployments. The May 2025 Hedgehog Exercise represents the first exercise involving the deployment of the FLF brigade and may allow the UK and Estonia to move ahead and identify necessary next steps.

In Latvia, the agenda mainly concerns force integration through exercises as large parts of the FLF have already deployed. The deployment of the full FLF brigade was exercised in November 2024, and a combat readiness evaluation is planned for November 2025. Planning for the use of the brigade in crisis and war has also prompted discussions relating to divisional enablers, coordination of national supply lines, and decision-making in grey-zone scenarios. Latvia is simultaneously working on developing a new large training area and securing personnel and materiel for its armed forces.

In Lithuania, the focus is still very much on planning for the deployment of German units to Lithuania. The brigade command is now in place, but needs to be complemented by the two manoeuvre battalions moving from Germany. This requires significant Lithuanian investments in infrastructure, as they need to provide barracks, accommodation, and schools for the Bundeswehr's personnel and their families. Simultaneously, Lithuania is building a national division, which will require significant acquisitions through 2030.

On the way towards full operational capability, the framework nations and host nations need to address a number of outstanding issues regarding command and control, national decision-making procedures, and exercises. The flexible concept means that there are multiple lines of command between host nations, framework nations, contributing nations, and NATO, which must work in crisis or war. These may become clearer over time and with upcoming reforms of NATO's command structure, but deserve immediate attention. Furthermore, the mix of national, multinational, and NATO HQs make rapid national decision-making procedures vital, particularly so in scenarios where Article 5 is not activated.

From NATO HQ's point of view, grey-zone crises are the host nations' responsibility, meaning that there is no automatic FLF response.<sup>169</sup> On the other hand, contributing nations have forces in place—in the UK case, even integrated into national military structures—and sitting idly by may not be an option. Continuous consultations and table-top exercises are one way to explore this kind of scenario and mitigate risks. Recurring deployments of brigade-level formations, particularly of the specific units assigned to each FLF, are also necessary to ensure real-life experience of deployment and integration with host nation forces.

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<sup>169</sup> Interviews, Brussels, January 2025.

## 5.2 Political and military imperatives shape the FLF

Our analysis of the political and military considerations behind the design of the FLF reveals that all considerations have been present to varying degrees. Overall, the military credibility of the forward posture and Alliance solidarity are more prominent in the post-2022 period than before. These are also the considerations most frequently cited by the framework nations for their decision to take responsibility for the FLF.

However, a number of constraining factors also come into play in the design of the multinational brigades and their command and control. Resource constraints clearly influence the degree of permanent presence, the number of contributing countries, and the type of capabilities deployed in the different FLF. The latter pertains both to manoeuvre forces and enablers. The desire to maintain national political control, particularly over advanced capabilities and enablers, is evident in the setup of command and control at the division level and above.

Concerns regarding the risk of escalation, on the contrary, have become less prominent post-2022 than before. Discussions have instead turned to NATO's options for escalation management. However, the desire that framework nations have to maintain national political control over advanced capabilities, such as rocket artillery and enablers capable of hitting targets on Russian territory, likely stems from a wish to control escalation.

Even though military credibility is more highly valued now than before, the authors of this report are unable to point to one of the FLFs as more credible than the other two. Each has its strengths and weaknesses and much comes down to what scenario it is measured against and how we envision the primary Russian threat—Is it mass or salami slicing? As NATO cannot know what problem the FLFs will have to solve, flexibility is necessary, but it comes with trade-offs.

One could argue that the German-led FLF in Lithuania will eventually make up the most robust military contribution. However, this should be weighed against the extra years it will take to reach full operational capability, consequences for the German Armed Forces' capability to provide further reinforcements, and the opportunity costs for Lithuania in devoting limited defence spending to infrastructure instead of equipment.

Equally, Estonians may argue that the more forward-leaning strategic culture and nuclear weapons of the UK and France compensate for the lack of permanent deployment. Latvians, in turn, value the persistent presence of a large number of troop-contributing countries, which they view as a demonstration of Alliance solidarity that increases the prospects of receiving reinforcements in crisis and war. In essence, these arguments illustrate how the reassurance and deterrence value of each FLF is contingent upon factors other than solely the capabilities deployed.

## 5.3 Towards a new generation of forward defence

While NATO aims to rebalance from forward presence to forward defence, much of the implementation remains. Different perspectives on the level of forwardness of NATO's forward defences have given rise to the flexible mandate granted to framework nations in the design of the FLF. Is the transition to the FLF an embodiment of NATO achieving deterrence by denial in the Baltic region?

The answer depends on several factors. Through the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), NATO aims to deny Russia a decisive military advantage in readiness or capability anywhere along the eastern flank.<sup>170</sup> The absence of a clear geographical place of maximum danger (compared to the inner German border of the Cold War) makes this challenging. In 2025, NATO is a larger Alliance, situated closer to Russia proper, and has more territory to defend. This explains NATO's emphasis on flexibility to handle a more diverse set of military problems, but it still strives to defend as far forward as possible *where and when required*, prompting the trade-offs between a militarily credible forward defence and the other considerations under study in this report.<sup>171</sup>

The capacity for deterrence by denial is dependent on developments on both sides of the border. If or when the war in Ukraine is no longer fixing a large share of Russian capability, and if Russia succeeds in implementing announced build-ups in its Moscow and Leningrad military districts, force ratios may become reminiscent of pre-2022 levels, and one could argue that NATO is no closer to deterrence by denial than it was in 2017. As seen in Chapter 3 of this report, NATO strengthening its presence with further in-place forces to match Russian increases may be a tall order in the short to medium term, at least for framework nations.

However, the capacity for deterrence by denial is also dependent on other parts of NATO's evolving strategy, which may allow for other ways of handling negative force ratios along the NATO-Russia border. The effectiveness of the FLFs are tied to the DDA Family of Plans, most importantly the Regional Plans, and the NATO

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<sup>170</sup> Stephen R. Covington, "NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA)," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, August 2, 2023, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/natos-concept-deterrence-and-defence-euro-atlantic-area-dda>.

<sup>171</sup> In earlier work, we have characterised the idea as a "dynamic and tailored 'forward defence-in being,' which is responsive to various indications and warnings. Thus, through the new alert system and the higher readiness and responsiveness, the aim of the subordinate strategic plans and regional plans, as well as deterrent activity in peacetime, is to constantly deny Russia local superiority 'when and where required,' thereby achieving a sort of deterrence by denial." See Aronsson et al., *Western Military Capability*, 66.

Force Model (NFM) for further reinforcements.<sup>172</sup> The general impression from our interviews is that the FLFs are satisfactorily linked to the NFM and operations planning. As all are in constant development, this pattern should become even stronger in the future.

Some factors might work against this, as the FLFs seem likely to involve more political considerations than the operations planning, in which the military rationale should hold primacy. All FLFs are multinational, which serves to signal Alliance solidarity. It is unlikely, however, that all 21 Allies (this number varies over time) contributing to the FLFs in the Baltic states hold meaningful military roles in the operations planning for a Baltic contingency. Thus, the synchronisation between the FLFs and other parts of NATO strategy not only involves practical coordination, but also striking the right balance between military and political considerations. On a more concrete level, these dependencies make the deterrent value of the FLFs closely linked to the promise of further reinforcements from the NFM, and the fate of necessary defence reforms needed in essentially all European member states to fulfil the ambitious capability targets adopted to resource NATO's new planning.

NATO's deterrence and defence strategy relies on more than just land-based capabilities, however. The DDA Family of Plans' theatre-wide operations planning includes domain-specific plans that would see air and naval assets, which may offset Russian advantages in land forces, play a vital role in a contingency. Furthermore, the plans give NATO, in principle and if political agreement can be achieved, the option of counterattacking (or threatening to counterattack) in other domains, anywhere in the Euro-Atlantic Area, contributing to deterrence by punishment. The current NDPP cycle's emphasis on strengthening NATO's ability to strike deep into enemy territory is part of this pattern.<sup>173</sup> However, these capabilities may also be used to strengthen the capability for deterrence by denial.

While NATO has taken great strides in recent years and the direction of travel is clear, large parts of the implementation remain. The FLFs and all other parts of NATO's evolving strategy must now be seen in a context of increased US unpredictability and seemingly decreased conventional engagement in Europe. On the one hand, the implementation of NATO's operations and defence planning in general, and the FLFs in particular, can be viewed as an excellent opportunity for European member states and Canada to take on a larger share of the burden for NATO's forward defences. On the other hand, the combination of a possible

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<sup>172</sup> After all, two of the Baltic FLFs, and all five of the others, are still reliant on reinforcements to achieve brigade-sized units.

<sup>173</sup> Angus Lapsley and Pierre Vandier, "Why NATO's Defence Planning Process will transform the Alliance for decades to come," Atlantic Council, March 31, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/why-natos-defence-planning-process-will-transform-the-alliance-for-decades-to-come/>.



drawdown of the war in Ukraine and a less engaged US willing to park the Russia problem may incentivise some Allies to pursue similar policies and could re-open the debate on the appropriate way of handling the defence of the eastern flank.

For Sweden, the decision to contribute to the FLFs in both Latvia and Finland is a way to take greater responsibility for regional security. The lessons from setting up the FLFs in the Baltic states are valuable when Sweden assumes the role of framework nation for the FLF in Finland. The experience from the Baltic states demonstrates that there are several ways to implement NATO's ambition and that political and military considerations need to be weighed against each other in the design of the FLF. Hopefully, this report sheds some light on the options and trade-offs going forward.

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### **Riga, 2–5 December 2024**

Canadian Task Force Latvia.  
Center for Geopolitical Studies.  
Expert at a defence-policy think tank.  
Latvian Institute of International Affairs.  
Latvian Ministry of Defence.  
Latvian National Armed Forces HQ.  
Multinational Battlegroup Latvia, in Adazi.  
Multinational Division North, in Adazi.  
National Defence Academy of Latvia.  
NATO Force Integration Unit Latvia.

### **Brussels, 15 January 2025**

Joint Delegation of Canada to NATO.  
NATO's Defence Policy and Planning Division.  
Permanent Delegation of the Federal Republic of Germany to NATO.  
UK Joint Delegation to NATO.

### **Tallinn, 12–14 February 2025**

1st Brigade, Estonian Defence Forces.  
1st Division, Estonian Defence Forces.  
Estonian Ministry of Defence.  
French section of HQ Cabrit.  
International Centre for Defence and Security.  
Joint HQ, Estonian Defence Forces.  
NATO Force Integration Unit Latvia.  
UK Embassy in Tallinn.  
UK HQ Cabrit.

**Vilnius, 18–20 February, 3, and 30 March**

1st Mechanised Brigade, Lithuanian Armed Forces.

45th Brigade, German Armed Forces.

General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania (online).

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After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO has significantly strengthened its emphasis on deterrence by denial. Notably, NATO is transforming the battalion-sized enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups rotationally deployed to the Baltic states and Poland into brigade-sized Forward Land Forces (FLF) all along the eastern flank. However, lingering divergences between member states relating to threat perceptions and the appropriate way to handle the new security environment have resulted in a flexible FLF concept. In the Baltic states, this flexibility is evident in how framework nations—the UK, Canada, and Germany—have opted for three different models of providing an FLF brigade. The models differ in several respects, for example concerning the degree of permanent deployments, the degree of multinationality, the type of units deployed, and the setup of division command and control.

The report finds that the most prominent considerations behind the design of the FLF brigades are the military credibility of the forward posture and Alliance solidarity. However, a number of constraining factors come into play in the design of the multinational brigades and their command and control, including resource constraints and a desire to maintain national political control. The report concludes that even though the FLFs in the Baltics are developing into more credible fighting formations, their contribution to NATO's capacity for deterrence by denial is dependent on progress in other parts of NATO's evolving strategy, including the new operations planning and force structure.

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