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**The Baltics and NATO:
How a History of Russian Influence May Strengthen a Posture of Deterrence**

JCSP 47

Exercise Solo Flight

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 47 – PCEMI 47
2020 – 2022

Exercise Solo Flight – Exercice Solo Flight

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THE BALTICS AND NATO: HOW A HISTORY OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE MAY STRENGTHEN A POSTURE OF DETERRENCE

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 serves as a dangerous reminder to the world of President Putin's revanchist policies. This ongoing invasion follows Russia's support of rebellious forces in Moldova in the 1990s, which led to a *de facto* independent state in Transnistria; its brutal actions in Chechnya during the First and Second Chechen Wars of the 1990s; its military operation in the former Soviet republic of Georgia in 2008; its 2014 annexation of Crimea and subsequent support of pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Ukraine regions of Luhansk and Donetsk.

It would thus appear, then, Canada and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies have otherwise failed to deter Russian aggression in Eastern Europe.

Following a review of the history of the Baltic states and their relationship with Russia, and their path to membership in NATO, this essay will examine deterrence and defence, two key areas of concern in the Baltic states, as well as their approaches to defending their territories. Next, this paper will explore what NATO countries have done since 2014 in the Alliance's bid to deter Russian aggression in the region, as well as its response to date to Russia's continued aggression in Ukraine. Finally, this essay will briefly review Canada's contribution to these deterrence efforts, through the Canadian Armed Forces-led Enhanced Forward Presence battle group in Latvia, to include a whole-of-government approach, with recommendations for Canada's continued commitment in the region, training and capability requirements, and other potential areas of support.

Part I – The Shaping of the Baltic States

Centuries of Conflict

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are three countries which are distinct from one another – each with their own language, culture, traditions – yet they are very closely linked to one another by a shared history. It is a shared history of having found themselves as the doormat of other, greater powers, nations stronger than they were. For more than four hundred years, these three countries, known as the Baltic states because of their western shores on the Baltic Sea, were either conquered by, occupied by, or marched through by the armies of Sweden, Germany and Russia.¹

These three small countries have a long history of mutuality – and of confrontation – with Russia. During the Livonian War (1558-1583), Tsar Ivan IV of Russia invaded the region known as Livonia, which was composed of modern-day Northern Latvia and Southern Estonia.² While Russia had some early successes, taking many Livonian fortresses and territory, it was countered by a coalition of armies from the Kingdom of Sweden, the Danish-Norwegian Realm, and the Union of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland.³ This Union helped turn the tide of the war, Russia lost the gains it had made, and the southern portions of Livonia came under Polish and Lithuanian rule, while the northern portions of Livonia went to the Swedish Empire,

¹David Jacobs, “Baltic States: Historical Overview,” Hoover Institution Archives, 2003, p. 1.

https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/library/docs/baltic_states_guide_english-1.pdf

²The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Livonia,” accessed 17 May 2022,

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Livonia-historical-region-Europe>.

³City of Lublin, “The Union of Lublin (1569): A Historic Example of Integration of Two Countries, Exceptional in the History of Europe, and a Pivotal Moment in Development of Democratic Principles,” accessed 17 May 2022,

https://lublin.eu/gfx/lublin/userfiles/_public/lublin/przestrzen_miejaska/zabytki/znak_dziedzictwa_europejskiego/broszura_agad/union_en_a5.pdf p. 14-19.

along with Estonia.⁴ The Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) allowed the Swedish Empire to consolidate its gains in the Baltic region, while expanding its territory into northern Germany.⁵

Under the ruling of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Kingdom of Sweden, as well as through the renewal of various truces which ended the Livonian War and other wars, there was a relative peace in the Baltic region, until the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648-1657), which saw Cossacks in Ukraine rebel against Polish rule. Fighting ultimately spread across the region.⁶ Lithuania and Livonia were further devastated by the armies of the Swedish Empire and Russia during the Second Northern War (1655-1660), only to see the trend of destruction of its lands continue during the Great Northern War (1700-1721), during which the region also suffered through a plague and a famine.⁷

The Great Northern War saw the Swedish Empire's influence in the region come to an end. Its losses to the armies of Peter the Great of Russia culminated in the Kingdom of Sweden ceding Estonia and Livonia to Russia in 1721, in the Treaty of Nystad.⁸ Russia continued to expand its control in the region, annexing the Latgale region in 1772, as well as the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia in 1795.⁹ As for the Polish-Lithuanian

⁴Wikipedia, "Livonian War," accessed 17 May 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Livonian_War.

⁵Erik Esvelt, "The Swedish Empire and the Baltic Nations," accessed 17 May 2022, <http://www.conflicts.rem33.com/images/The%20Baltic%20States/svenskrijk.htm>.

⁶Shaul Stampfer, "What actually happened to the Jews of Ukraine in 1648," in *Jewish History* vol 17 no 2 (2003), p. 207. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20101498>

⁷"The Roads to Independence," in *Lithuania in the World*, accessed 24 May 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20110512014106/http://www.liw.lt/archive_vid.php?shid=1211283347&id=1211283055.

⁸The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Second Northern War," accessed 17 May 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eric-Count-Dahlbergh>. Estonia was conquered by Russia in 1710, ceding it to Russia was a formality of the Treaty.

⁹Latvia is divided into of four regions, and retain centuries-old names. Latgale is the easternmost region, on the border with Russia, while Courland and Semigallia are the westernmost and central/southernmost region, along the border with Lithuania. Vidzeme is northeastern-most, sharing a border with Estonia. Riga is located in Vidzeme, but is essentially its own region, as the capital.

Commonwealth, its existence came to an end during the Partitions of Poland, with a large portion of Lithuania becoming part of the Russian Empire by 1795.¹⁰

An Awakening

Although now under the control of the Russian empire, each of the Baltic states enjoyed periods of “awakening”,¹¹ followed by some level of repression and

Russification¹²:

- Estonia’s period of national awakening saw an increasing number of books be translated into Estonian, rather than in the predominant language of the day, German, which increased numeracy and literacy in the country.¹³ By the 1850s, political movements increased, demanding more freedoms and autonomy. Russification was initiated in the 1880s, which was countered by Estonian nationalism;¹⁴
- Latvia’s national awakening, also known as its First Awakening,¹⁵ started centred around the national capital, Riga. By the 1860s, Riga was connected by rail and through its port, the largest in the Russian Empire, which led to an increase in economic opportunities, which in turn led to a migration of the population from its rural, farming base to the cities, including Liepāja on the west coast, for employment and education opportunities. This in turn fueled an interest in Latvian history, culture, and traditions, and the rise of the Young Latvian movement.¹⁶ Russification began in Latgale, in the east, and later enveloped the rest of

¹⁰Wikipedia, “Partitions of Poland,” accessed 18 May 2022.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partitions_of_Poland. The Partitions of Poland saw the Commonwealth divided amongst the Habsburg monarchy, the Kingdom of Prussia and the Russian Empire, through a seizing of territory by war and/or occupation, and annexation. The First Partition was in 1772; the Second in 1793; and the Third in 1795.

¹¹An “awakening” is to be understood as a period in which a population begins to acknowledge their existence as a nation, with the right to govern themselves and an expressed desire to re-establish an independent state.

¹²Russification, or Russianization, was a policy of the Russian Empire which sought to culturally assimilate non-Russians. It was designed to spread Russian language, culture, and religion among non-Russians, while repressing or even banning, in some cases, other national languages, cultures and religions [compiled from various open sources, including Encyclopedia Britannica, Wikipedia, the Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)].

¹³Wikipedia, “Estonian national awakening,” accessed 19 May 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estonian_national_awakening.

¹⁴Estonica, “1850-1914. National awakening,” accessed 19 May 2022, http://www.estonica.org/en/History/1850-1914_National_awakening/.

¹⁵Wikipedia, “Latvian National Awakening,” accessed 21 May 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvian_National_Awakening.

¹⁶On Latvia, “Latvian National Awakening (1860-1918),” accessed 20 May 2022, <https://www.onlatvia.com/latvian-national-awakening-1860-1918-74>.

Latvia by the 1880s.¹⁷ Russification, among other changes to both Latvian and Estonian society, saw their education and justice systems come under direct Russian control.¹⁸

- Lithuania's national awakening faced a more difficult path, due in part to the January Uprising of 1863, in which Polish conscripts, joined by Polish and Lithuanian officers and others, rebelled against Russian rule and sought the restoration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.¹⁹ Russia's reaction to Lithuania's participation in the rebellion was harsh: Russian became the official language of the country, Catholic churches were closed, and anyone who participated in the rebellion or who fomented opposition against the Russian Empire were imprisoned, executed, or exiled to Siberia. Faced with more restrictions than their Baltic neighbours, Lithuania's awakening simply took longer to happen.²⁰

Russification did not have the desired effect – one of (imposed) *rapprochement* of the Baltic states with the Russian empire – however, as the repression of their respective cultures, languages and traditions instead inspired a greater sense of nationalism and a desire for autonomy.²¹ The Russian Revolution of 1905 saw calls for self-government continue from the Baltic states, but it was not until the First World War, with the February Revolution of 1917, the fall of tsarist rule and the end of Russia's participation in the Great War through the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, did the Baltic states achieve some degree of independence. It was not without bloodshed, though, as each one of the Baltic countries fought their own wars of independence: against Soviet Russia under the Bolsheviks (1918-1920), the Germans (1919) and, for Lithuania, against the

¹⁷Wikipedia, "Latvia," accessed 20 May 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvia#National_awakening.

¹⁸Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, "Russification Policies Imposed on the Baltic People by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union," *International Crimes and History* issue 14 (2013): 143.

¹⁹TrueLithuania.com, "The Rule of Russian Empire in Lithuania (1795-1918)," accessed 21 May 2022, <http://www.truelithuania.com/the-rule-of-russian-empire-in-lithuania-1795-1918-254>.

²⁰Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, "Russification Policies Imposed on the Baltic People by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union," *International Crimes and History* issue 14 (2013): 143-144.

²¹Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, "Russification Policies...": 144-145.

Poles (1919-1920).²² This last conflict would result in tensions between the two countries for the next twenty years.²³

A Second Period of Russification and a New Independence

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, the non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, divided the countries of Central and Eastern Europe amongst the two Axis powers, with the Baltic states falling into the Soviet sphere of influence, proclaiming them Soviet Socialist Republics. This was short-lived, however, when Nazi Germany launched its 1941 attack against Soviet forces, in Operation Barbarossa. Uprisings in the Baltic States initially supported Germany against Soviet forces, but they would then suffer three years of German occupation before the armies of the Soviet Union returned and reclaimed them as Soviet Socialist Republics.

A second period of Russification descended upon the Baltic states, which would drastically change the ethnic composition of the region. This period of Russification under Joseph Stalin repressed the individual cultures of the Baltic states, as the Russian language was declared the official language of the Baltic countries for all administrative, legal and judiciary purposes. Essentially, if a Latvian, Estonian or Lithuanian civilian had to deal with Soviet authorities, the only way to do so was by speaking Russian. All cultural activities were regulated by the authorities, and all cultural works, such as books,

²²Wikipedia, "Latvia," "Lithuania," and "Estonia," accessed 22 May 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvia#Declaration_of_independence, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithuania#1918%E2%80%931939>, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estonia#Independence>.

²³Wikipedia, "Polish-Lithuanian War," accessed 22 May 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish%E2%80%93Lithuanian_War.

songs and theatre productions, were to praise the Soviet system.²⁴ National symbols were banned, while those of Russia were favoured.²⁵

Stalin's Russification policies also caused the imprisonment, execution or exile of ethnic Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. To replace these citizens, particularly as various industries were established in the Baltic countries,²⁶ Russian immigration to the Baltic states was heavily encouraged. The numbers of ethnic Baltic citizens dropped considerably in Estonia and Latvia, while a lack of industrial infrastructure in Lithuania made it less desirable for Russian immigration.²⁷

The Soviet Union's slow walk to dissolution began in the 1970s, in part due to a lack of competitiveness in the global economy. The reforms introduced by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, aimed at ensuring the Soviet Union's survival on the global stage, led instead to a rising awareness and demands for greater independence and autonomy from the Republics. Protests by citizens of the Republics became more difficult to extinguish.²⁸

From the perspective of the Baltic states, perhaps the greatest symbol of the changing political landscape governing the Soviet Socialist Republics was "The Baltic Way". This peaceful protest against Soviet Union rule saw approximately two million citizens of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania form a 675-kilometre-long human chain from one capital city to the next and to the next again. The Baltic Way occurred on 23 August

²⁴Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, "Russification Policies ...": 147-149.

²⁵Wikipedia, "Lithuania," accessed 22 May 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithuania#1918%E2%80%931939>.

²⁶Wikipedia, "Latvia," and "Estonia," accessed 22 May 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvia#Declaration_of_independence, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estonia#Independence>.

²⁷Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, "Russification Policies...": 150-151.

²⁸Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, "Russification Policies... ": 151-152.

1989, exactly fifty years to the day of the 23 August 1939 signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.²⁹

Independence for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as the other Soviet Socialist Republics, would be restored in the next few years. Russian troops would leave the former Republics in the ensuing years.

New Memberships

NATO enlargement to include the Baltic states was an important topic of discussion for the organization following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Baltic states were “desperate” to join NATO, as they hoped to benefit from the promise of the security guarantee in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.³⁰ The Treaty is essentially a pact of mutual assistance, with Article 5 an important component of the document, and of the NATO Alliance, as it provides, “[...] if a NATO Ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the Alliance will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked.”³¹ Membership in the Alliance would therefore provide the Baltic countries with something which they could not easily provide for themselves: a strong deterrent to aggression by Russia, even in its weakened post-Cold War state.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania would not become members of the Alliance during the first significant period of enlargement since its original formation in 1949. Rather,

²⁹Estonian World, “The Baltic Way – the longest unbroken human chain in history,” accessed 23 May 2022, <https://estonianworld.com/life/estonia-commemorates-30-years-since-the-baltic-way-the-longest-unbroken-human-chain-in-history/>.

³⁰Dr. Adrian Hyde-Price, *NATO and the Baltic Sea Region: Towards Regional Security Governance?* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2000), 5.

³¹North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Collective defence – Article 5,” last modified 24 March 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm.

Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999. At the time, allowing the Baltic states into the Alliance was considered to be “too sensitive” a decision; of particular concern was how Russia might react if an invitation were to be extended to Estonia and Latvia.³² The Baltic states would have to wait until 2004 before they could join the Alliance, along with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The Baltic states and the four others new members were the first of the former Soviet republics to join NATO, and their membership – in particular, the Baltic states’ membership – in the Alliance did not sit well with Russia.³³ The loss of these former Soviet republics signified an important loss of Russian influence in the region, what it considers the “near-abroad” in its foreign policy.³⁴

The Baltic states also accessioned to the European Union in 2004, further cementing their relationship with the West and distancing themselves from Russia.

Part II – After Crimea

Crimea and NATO’s reaction

Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 sent waves of concern through much of Europe, and in particular through the Alliance. Concerned by Ukraine’s clear intent to form stronger ties with the West by signing an agreement with the European Union in February 2014, “little green men” – later identified as Russian soldiers who had removed identifying insignia such as name plates and unit affiliation badges³⁵ – began appearing

³²Dr. Adrian Hyde-Price, *NATO and the Baltic Sea Region...*, 15-16.

³³Laurence Peter, “Why Nato-Russia relations soured before Ukraine,” *BBC*, last modified 03 September 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29030744>.

³⁴Britannica, “Ethnic relations and Russia’s ‘near-abroad’,” accessed 23 May 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia/Ethnic-relations-and-Russias-near-abroad>.

³⁵John R. Haines, “How, Why, and When Russia Will Deploy Little Green Men – and Why the US Cannot,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, last modified 09 March 2016, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/03/how-why-and-when-russia-will-deploy-little-green-men-and-why-the-us-cannot/>.

on the Crimean Peninsula. In little more than a month, by the middle of March 2014, Crimea had been annexed by Russia.³⁶

Prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, there were no plans for NATO to deploy combat troops in Eastern Europe. After all, NATO's International Security and Assistance Force was still heavily engaged in Afghanistan.³⁷ Calls for an increased military presence by NATO in Eastern Europe led to the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, Poland, during which the Alliance members agreed to establish four battle groups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, with the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and the United States leading each respective battle group. The battle groups were to be multinational to demonstrate "the strength of the transatlantic bond", while demonstrating a willingness to defend a Treaty ally if one was attacked, thereby equally posing a

³⁶Steven Pifer, "Crimea: Six years after illegal annexation," *The Brookings Institution*, last modified 17 March 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/17/crimea-six-years-after-illegal-annexation/>.

³⁷North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO and Afghanistan," last modified 19 April 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm#:~:text=NATO%20Allies%20went%20into%20Afghanistan,on%20Allied%20soil%20from%20Afghanistan.

deterrence factor against further Russian aggression.³⁸ The figure below indicates the lead nation and the contributing nations in each host nation.³⁹

Under NATO command through Multinational Corps Northeast, the four “enhanced forward presence” battle groups work in close cooperation with the host nation’s defence forces, and the composition of each battle group is task-tailored to the geography of the host nation and any requirements it may have identified.⁴⁰ The battle groups conduct joint training exercises on a regular basis with host nation units, as well as exercises and training events, such as firepower demonstrations and skills competitions,



with units from the other battle groups.

Deterrence Defined and Expanded

³⁸North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Warsaw Summit Key Decision,” last modified 06 February 2017, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_02/20170206_1702-factsheet-warsaw-summit-key-en.pdf.

³⁹North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO Enhanced Forward Presence: 4 Multinational Battlegroups,” accessed 24 May 2022, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/220210-MAP-eFP-en.pdf.

⁴⁰North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO’s military presence in the east of the Alliance,” last modified 28 March 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm#:~:text=Fully%20deployed%20by%20July%202017,fully%20sustainable%20and%20rotational%20basis.

These battle groups, as formed on the ground by the capabilities and equipment provided by the contributing nations, are essentially a form of conventional deterrence against further Russian aggression. Deterrence, of course, involves convincing an enemy who has the ability and the capabilities to attack, decide or choose not to attack. Conventional deterrence is then the use of conventional military force – thereby excluding the use of nuclear weapons or other, unconventional weapons – to deter an enemy from attacking.⁴¹

Viewed through this basic definition of conventional deterrence, some might argue Russia’s annexation of Crimea was a failure of conventional deterrence, and even stretch this argument to the current Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁴² It should be noted, however, there was little the Ukrainian forces could have done in 2014 to deter Russia’s forces in Crimea.⁴³ NATO allies, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom warned of a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the numerous countries, including those of the European Union and NATO allies, warned of possible sanctions should Russia invade Ukraine – sanctions being a form or part of conventional deterrence.⁴⁴

⁴¹Karl Mueller, “The Continuing Relevance of Conventional Deterrence,” *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020*, 48-52.

⁴²Adérito Vicente, “Why Europe Slept? The failure to prevent the war in Ukraine,” European Leadership Network, last modified 04 May 2022, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/why-europe-slept-the-failure-to-prevent-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

⁴³Karl Mueller, “The Continuing Relevance...”, 56.

⁴⁴Karl Mueller, “The Continuing Relevance of Conventional Deterrence,” *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020*, 50 and 60.

Defence in the Baltics

The Baltic states are considered by military experts as among the most vulnerable NATO members to Russian aggression.⁴⁵ As previously discussed, this is due in large part to its shared borders with Russia, the historical links, and the Russian-speaking populations, particularly in Estonia and Latvia. The close proximity to Russia presents in own strategic and operational challenges in attempting deterrence, as Russia has a much larger conventional force in the Baltic region than NATO's three battle groups.⁴⁶ It is a significant imbalance which cannot be ignored, regardless of Russia's difficult-to-verify/confirm combat losses suffered to date in its invasion of Ukraine.

In seeking to deter Russian aggression against their countries, the Baltic states have identified slightly different approaches to their defense, based in part on their respective geographies and the composition of their conventional military capabilities. Taken as a whole, however, the Baltic states' approach amounts to an integrated defense and comprehensive security approach, with some slight differences. All three countries make use of the instruments of national power: diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement (DIMEFIL).⁴⁷ Considering their small sizes, in terms of territory, population and military forces, the Baltic states must use all of the tools at their disposal.

Estonia has adopted a total defence approach focused on territorial defence. It has maintained compulsory military service for male citizens in the Estonian Defence Forces since 1991. Trained conscripts then move to the reserve force and undergo regular

⁴⁵D. Bankauskaite *et al*, "Baltics Left of Bang: Comprehensive Defense in the Baltic States," *Strategic Forum* no. 307 (September 2020): 3.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 4.

training to maintain their skills.⁴⁸ The (regular) Land Forces are a professional force organized in two infantry brigades. Having experienced a significant cyber attack in the past, Estonia established a cyberwarfare command, and is home to the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence.⁴⁹ Estonia also has a small naval force for coastal defence through mine countermeasures operations, and a flight training and air surveillance capability through its unarmed aircraft. In case of war, Estonia expects to mobilize its reserve force, bringing its total armed forces to approximately 60,000 personnel.⁵⁰

Latvia originally focused on participating in international operations, such as deploying personnel to take part in NATO's mission in Afghanistan, as a means to develop a professional regular force of approximately 6,500 personnel. Latvia abolished conscription in 2007.⁵¹ Latvia recently shifted its policy stance, to adopt a comprehensive defense and a whole-of-society approach to confronting Russian aggression.⁵² The Latvian National Guard, known as the *Zemessardze*, form the backbone of Latvia's comprehensive defence plan. It is approximately 8,000 personnel strong, with a cadre of 600 professional soldiers who fill the leadership roles in the *Zemessardzes* battalions. Latvia's naval and air forces are comparable in size, equipment and capabilities to those of Estonia.

⁴⁸Republic of Estonia, "Estonian Defence Forces," accessed 26 May 2022, <https://mil.ee/en/defence-forces/compulsory-military-service/>.

⁴⁹Republic of Estonia, "The NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence," accessed 26 May 2022, <https://mil.ee/en/landforces/ccdcoe/>.

⁵⁰Viljar Veebel and Illimar Ploom, "Are the Baltic States and NATO on the right path in deterring Russia in the Baltic?" *Defense and Security Analysis* 35(4) (October 2019): 8.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 8.

⁵²D. Bankauskaite *et al*, "Baltics Left of Bang...": 10.

Lithuania reintroduced conscription in 2015, after deciding to suspend it in 2008, in part due to “catastrophically low” numbers of personnel.⁵³ By reintroducing conscription, Lithuania maintains a larger active armed forces than its Baltic neighbours, with more than 20,000 active personnel (compared to 7,200 for Estonia and 14,900 for Latvia).⁵⁴ Lithuania has focused its efforts on deterrence and resilience for its approach to comprehensive defence, by building military and civilian resistance and resilience to hybrid threats, and building a cyber security capability.⁵⁵ Its naval and air forces are again comparable to those of its Baltic neighbours.

Following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Suwalki Corridor (or Suwalki Gap) – the 104 kilometres-long border between Lithuania and Poland – gained strategic importance. Between Belarus and Russia’s Kaliningrad exclave, it connects the Baltic states to Poland – and the rest of NATO.⁵⁶ The Corridor/Gap has been the focus of exercises by both NATO and Russia and Belarus in the last five years.⁵⁷

In terms of commitments to defence spending, all three of the Baltic states are committed to spending to the 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) sought by NATO leadership, if not more. Estonia has consistently spent above the 2% mark since 2015,⁵⁸ while Latvia has incrementally increased its budget spending to reach the 2% of GDP since 2018.⁵⁹ As of 2018, Lithuania has also put 2% of GDP towards its defence budget.⁶⁰

⁵³Viljar Veebel and Illimar Ploom, “Are the Baltic States ...”: 9.

⁵⁴Wikipedia, “Lithuanian Armed Forces,” accessed 28 May 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithuanian_Armed_Forces.

⁵⁵Viljar Veebel and Illimar Ploom, “Are the Baltic States...”: 11.

⁵⁶D. Bankauskaite et al, “Baltics Left of Bang...”: 11.

⁵⁷Wikipedia, “Lithuania-Poland border,” accessed 28 May 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithuania%E2%80%93Poland_border.

⁵⁸D. Bankauskaite et al, “Baltics Left of Bang...”: 6.

⁵⁹Viljar Veebel and Illimar Ploom, “Are the Baltic States...”: 9.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 10.

Part III – NATO’s Adjustments

Following Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the NATO Alliance committed additional forces towards further strengthening its flank in Eastern Europe. Additional battle groups have been committed to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, which will increase the number of multinational battle groups from four to eight.⁶¹ This is a significant adjustment to the Alliance’s posture in the region. Russia was particularly angered by the Baltic states’ membership in NATO and was not pleased when NATO announced it would deploy battle groups to the Baltic states and Poland at the 2016 Warsaw Summit (as previously discussed). With the March 2022 announcement of the new additional battle groups, to be deployed to four NATO member countries – four countries who are also former Soviet Socialist Republics, like the Baltic states, no less – will surely not calm Russia’s anger. It is ironic, then, that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was based in part on the threat Russian President Vladimir Putin believed NATO posed for Russia.⁶²

In addition to the four new battle groups to be deployed to the Eastern Flank, NATO allies committed additional troops and equipment to the four original battle groups, committed resources to the air and sea domains, and announced increases to existing military budgets. Some examples of these increases include the following:

- Canada committed an artillery battery to its current contingent in Latvia, for an additional 120 troops and artillery pieces;⁶³

⁶¹Lili Bayer, “NATO set to boost forces on its eastern flank, chief says,” *Politico*, last modified 23 March 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-ukraine-russia-stoltenberg-summit-forces-eastern-flank/>.

⁶²Amanda Connolly, “Why is Russia invading Ukraine? Amid ‘astounding’ resistance, here’s what you need to know,” *Global News*, last modified 11 March 2022, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8672963/why-russia-invasion-ukraine-explainer/>.

⁶³Briar Stewart, “As Canada sends more troops to Latvia, some locals fear country may be dragged into larger war,” *CBC News*, last modified 13 April 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/nato-canadian-troops-latvia-1.6417411#:~:text=Canadian%20contingent,->

- The United States sent an additional 3,000 troops, adding to its members currently in Poland, as well as Patriot missile-defense systems;^{64,65}
- The United Kingdom announced it would double the size of its forces in Estonia, including more tanks and armoured fighting vehicles;⁶⁶
- Germany announced an additional 350 troops and 100 vehicles, including howitzers, for its contingent in Lithuania, and Norway increased its troop commitment by 50-60 soldiers;⁶⁷
- Spain, the second-largest contingent in the Canadian-led battle group in Latvia, committed 100 more troops as well as a battery of surface-to-air missiles;⁶⁸

Increases in troop numbers, the deployment of four additional battle groups to former Soviet Socialist Republics, and additional commitments of equipment and capabilities aside, there is more NATO can do to ensure the Alliance continues to present a relevant conventional deterrent to Russian aggression. First, it must continue to use the instruments of national power at its disposal (DIMEFIL) in close concert and cooperation with each of the Alliance's member nations.

Under its leadership, NATO should continue to strengthen the unconventional warfare capabilities in the Baltic states. The NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Estonia is an excellent example of a key capability which could be used to defend the Baltic states from Russia's aggressive cyberwarfare capabilities. Additionally,

[The%20master%20corporal&text=Canada%27s%20military%20presence%20in%20the,extended%20its%20Latvia%20mission%20indefinitely.](#)

⁶⁴Idrees Ali and Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: U.S. to send 3,000 additional troops to Poland," *Reuters*, last modified 12 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-us-send-3000-additional-troops-poland-officials-say-2022-02-11/>

⁶⁵Nancy A. Youssef, "U.S. to Send Patriot Missile Systems to Poland," *The Wall Street Journal*, last modified 09 Mar 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-03-09/card/u-s-to-send-patriot-missile-systems-to-poland-Jb2ydLPC30HkBQ9jSvOm>.

⁶⁶Reuters, "UK will double the number of troops in Estonia as part of NATO mission," last modified 16 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-will-double-number-troops-estonia-part-nato-mission-2022-02-16/>.

⁶⁷Reuters, "Germany army reinforcements reach Lithuania amid Ukraine crisis," last modified 17 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-army-reinforcements-reach-lithuania-amid-ukraine-crisis-2022-02-17/>.

⁶⁸AFP, "Spain adding missiles, troops to NATO Latvia mission: report," *The Hindu*, last modified 29 May 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/spain-adding-missiles-troops-to-nato-latvia-mission/article65471470.ece>.

the electronic warfare capabilities in each of the battle groups should be strengthened, in order to build resilience throughout the Eastern flank. It would also increase the Baltic states' capacity to counter Russian information warfare activities.

As seen in Ukraine's needs in defending itself against Russia, night vision devices, man-portable anti-armour and anti-aircraft weapons, and armed unmanned aerial vehicles have all played key roles in degrading Russian armour and air capabilities. While each nation would identify for itself where to spend its precious defence budget dollars, ensuring an initial, baseline capability is available to the defence forces, along with the necessary training to effectively employ those weapon systems, would provide an additional defence capability.

As previously discussed, the Baltic states are small countries geographically, militarily, and in population base. Regional defense cooperation, unfortunately, has been limited. Deterring continued and future Russian aggression in the Baltic states, in part, needs to rely on regional cooperation. Coordinating efforts in terms of external policy in their dealings with Russia, for one, would demonstrate a united front. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have separate national defense plans, as they have sought to employ the limited resources available to them to best defend their citizens and their territory.⁶⁹ However, sharing the basics of their defense plans with one another and identifying where one state could support the other, based on Russian actions and contingency plans, would foster greater confidence and cooperation between the three Baltic states.

⁶⁹Based on the author's own experiences during his deployment to Latvia, January-July 2021.

Part IV – Canada’s Role

As previously noted, Canada’s has increased its commitment to the Canadian Armed Forces-led enhanced forward presence battle group in Latvia. With the deployment of an artillery battery, its personnel and its guns, Canada’s contingent numbers more than 700 soldiers. This is in addition to the 500-plus sailors onboard two frigates; the 140 Royal Canadian Air Force members participating in air policing over NATO airspace; and the 100-plus soldiers recently deployed to Poland to assist with fleeing Ukrainian citizens. This is the current extent of Canada’s commitment to Operation REASSURANCE, as part of NATO’s assurance and deterrence mission in Central and Eastern Europe.⁷⁰

One recommendation, specific to Canada’s contribution to Latvia, would be to explore the possibility of extending the duration of the deployment of key battle group head quarters staff, for all nations. This may be subject to different caveats and contributing nation requirements. The constant rotation of key staff, every six months, does not allow for cohesion to be built between the members of the battle group staff and their counterparts in the Latvian Mechanized Brigade. Just as a strong working relationship is coming together, redeployment has begun.⁷¹

As part of NATO’s announced intent to deploy four additional battle groups to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, Canada could offer to provide a small training cadre to the host nation forces in those countries, as it did under Operation UNIFIER, its

⁷⁰Department of National Defence, “Operation Reassurance,” accessed 29 May 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-reassurance.html>.

⁷¹Based on the author’s personal experience while deployed to Latvia, January to July 2021, and as expressed by members of the Latvian Mechanized Brigade with whom the author worked closely. Canadian positions in the Latvian Mechanized Brigade headquarters were longer posting of two to three years, while battle group headquarters staff were rotated in-out every six months.

currently paused mission to provide training support to the security forces of Ukraine. Much of Bulgaria's military equipment, for example, is outdated or non-functioning Russian equipment.⁷² Training and experience in joint, multinational operations would be one strength Canada could provide.

From a whole-of-government perspective, Canadian government departments should explore how they could best support its allies. Bulgaria continues to struggle with corruption at the political level,⁷³ while Hungary's democratic decline due to Prime Minister Viktor Orban's continued autocratic rule has stifled democratic reforms in the country, where corruption is also a significant issue. Canada's strong history of democratic institutions could be of assistance in stabilizing the political situation in both of those countries.

Conclusion

This essay explored the history of occupation and repression the Baltic states suffered at the hands of its various occupiers, over more than four centuries. This history shaped each country and its people, who yearned and fought for independence from those who ruled over it, from the early rulers of the Russian Empire, to the Tsars, to the Soviet Union's leaders during and after the Cold War. It is a history and an independence the Baltic states have paid for in blood.

To understand NATO's place in this history, this essay explored how the Baltic states have taken their own internal initiatives to strengthen their deterrence and resiliency

⁷²Krassen Nikolov, "Bulgarian army not able to face risks arising from global crises," last modified 16 February 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/bulgarian-army-not-able-to-face-risks-arising-from-global-crises/.

⁷³Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2021 – Bulgaria," accessed 27 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bulgaria/freedom-world/2021>.

capabilities, both militarily and, in a limited way, at the civilian level as well. Finally, this essay discussed what NATO and Canada could do, in addition to their current commitments, to support the Baltic states in deterring Russian aggression in the region.

Faced with a conventionally superior force, the Baltic states and its allies in the battle groups in each of their countries will be hard pressed to withstand the strength in numbers and equipment Russia could bring to bear. This is what is currently playing out in Ukraine, another former Soviet Socialist Republic, as it attempts to defend itself against a Russian invasion. What Ukraine has demonstrated, though – through its resilience, through the employment of certain weapons systems, and through its training with NATO allies from 2014 until February 2022 – is Russia is not the formidable and unbeatable bear it tries to project on the world stage. These are valuable lessons the Baltic states, Canada and their NATO allies need to incorporate in their operational and strategic planning, and in the training of their forces.

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