

Building NATO's new eastern front: The eFP in Europe

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In 2016 NATO leaders agreed to despatch multinational battlegroups to the Baltic states and Poland under the enhanced Forward Presence initiative. Since then NATO deployments to Eastern Europe have accelerated. *Tim Ripley* charts the progress of efforts to build up allied defences in the region

In February 2014 Russian troops launched an operation to seize control of the Crimean Peninsula. By the end of March that year Ukrainian troops had surrendered and handed full control of the peninsula to Moscow's now-infamous 'little green men'. Events moved quickly and within weeks Russian forces were waging an undeclared war in Ukraine's Donbass region.

For NATO leaders the shock of these events took time to digest. At the September 2014 NATO summit in Wales initial moves were made to reassure alliance members in Eastern Europe that they would be protected from any future Russian 'hybrid' attacks. However, it was not until the July 2016 Warsaw Summit that the alliance formally committed to deploying troops into Eastern Europe to set up a 'trip wire' to demonstrate NATO's Article 5 commitment to its threatened members. The enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) was set to go live in early 2017 with the deployment of four multinational battlegroups to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.



Soldiers wearing no identifying insignia, who declined to say whether they were Russian or Ukrainian, patrolling outside Simferopol International Airport in Ukraine on 28 February 2014. By the end of March that year Moscow's 'little green men' had taken full control of Crimea. (Sean Gallup/Getty Images)

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These deployments were fraught with political and diplomatic sensitivities. Although the alliance was keen to show resolve in the face of Russia's newly belligerent foreign policy, many NATO members were also concerned that the response itself would be considered by Moscow to be a provocation, which would provide the Kremlin with a new propaganda weapon to use against the West. There are minorities of Russian speakers in the Baltic countries and NATO was keen not to allow its troop deployments to be used by the Kremlin to whip up anti-Western protests among these minorities. As a result the eFP battlegroups have been equipped purely for defensive operations and not in any way that could be interpreted as provocative by Russia.

At the same time NATO members in southern Europe have argued that emerging threats in their region should be given greater prominence and resources. Moreover, some members have warned that the alliance should not embark on a potentially expensive new commitment so soon after its operations in Afghanistan.

New European scenario

Russia's seizure of Crimea and incursion into the Donbass set off alarm bells across NATO for several reasons. Firstly, since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent implosion of the Warsaw Pact, NATO had become used to a situation where none of its members faced an external military threat. Following Russia's actions during 2014, however, this was clearly no longer the case.

Secondly, and particularly worrying, was the rhetoric coming out of the Kremlin declaring that the Russian government was the protector of Russian speakers in former Soviet republics. This made the three Baltic states feel particularly vulnerable because they were the only NATO members that had formally been part of the Soviet Union and had populations containing significant minorities of Russian speakers. During this time Russian media regularly contained reports about how these minorities were discriminated against, while the internal security agencies of the three Baltic states reported attempts by Kremlin-linked individuals to activate pro-Russian community groups. Then, when a senior Estonian intelligence operative was kidnapped from inside Estonia in 2014 and later appeared under arrest in Moscow, it added to the impression that the Kremlin was trying to destabilise the region.

Furthermore, there was a distinct spike in incidents between Russian aircraft and NATO air policing patrols over the Baltic Sea. After neutral Sweden also began to report increasing incursions by Russian aircraft and warships into its airspace and territorial waters, fears of a Russian military build-up were further increased.

Battlegroups deploy

In the immediate aftermath of the seizure of Crimea in 2014 NATO launched a programme of reassurance measures for its members in the east. These measures were based on a rolling series of military training exercises across the region, coupled with a stepping-up of the number of aircraft assigned to air policing patrols in Eastern Europe.

Continued Russian involvement in the simmering conflict in the Donbass and Moscow's major intervention in Syria in September 2015 led NATO leaders to consider further responses. In early 2016 proposals to base NATO troops in the Baltic states began to emerge, which culminated in the decision at the July 2016 NATO summit to formally launch the eFP troop deployments. The plan

was for four multinational battlegroups to be based in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. These would be provided on a rotational basis by more than a dozen NATO members with troops serving several months at a time on duty under the eFP.

The United Kingdom assumed the role of lead nation of the Estonian battlegroup at Tapa, with supporting personnel from Denmark and, initially, France. Canada became the lead nation of the battlegroup base at Adazi in Latvia, supported by troops from Albania, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain. The Lithuanian battlegroup, meanwhile, was based at Rukla and led by Germany with troops provided by Croatia, France, the Netherlands, and Norway. The final battlegroup was based in Orzysz, Poland, under the leadership of the United States with supporting elements provided by Croatia, Romania, and the United Kingdom.

Each battlegroup initially mustered just greater than 1,000 troops and, according to an announcement by the alliance, by February this year there were slightly fewer than 4,700 NATO troops taking part in the deployment.

The composition of the battlegroups reflected the sensitivities of the mission. They were all based around units the size of armoured-infantry battalions, with attached artillery, reconnaissance, and engineering subunits. Additionally, the battlegroups stationed in the Baltic states each included a tank company. Then, in the run-up to the deployment of the British Army contingent to Estonia, the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) announced that the Royal Artillery's Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (GMLRS) would be part of the mission. However, this was subsequently "unannounced" after media coverage suggested that the rocket launchers might be used to target Russian troops inside Russia.

The chain of command of the eFP troops was also designed to assuage concerns that it was an "offensive NATO mission", according to senior alliance officers involved in planning the deployment. Each eFP battlegroup was placed under the immediate command of a host nation brigade headquarters, which meant that they could be portrayed as contributing to each host's national defence plans, rather than as part of a NATO-controlled brigade or division.

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(1040 of 3544 words)

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