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## Lessons from the Enhanced Forward Presence, 2017-2020

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## Lithuania as host nation

*Margarita Šešelgytė*

Located in a geopolitically precarious region, Lithuania has, throughout its history, experienced severe security challenges, some followed by long periods of occupation. This history has impacted how Lithuania has defined its security interests, seeing the state – and sovereignty, specifically – as the main referent object.<sup>1</sup> Article 5 of the Washington Treaty has helped ensure the defence of the Lithuanian state from major external threats since 2004, but its sufficiency has come under question after Russia annexed Crimea and discussion ensued over NATO’s willingness and ability to defend the Baltic states. Lithuanian security documents note that a conventional attack by Russia is one of the most dangerous hypotheticals.<sup>2</sup> Although such an attack is improbable, the dangers remain great because of the severe military balance facing local NATO forces in the Baltic Sea Region. Nevertheless, the eFP deployment, decided at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, improves Lithuanian security. Even the usually reserved former Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė admitted that, in Lithuania’s case, for the “first time after our accession to NATO, we have guaranteed serious and long-term military commitments”.<sup>3</sup> But, from a purely military perspective, the asymmetry between Russia and NATO is still a problem.

This chapter argues that the real value of eFP Battlegroup Lithuania (BG LTU) should be viewed in combination with other measures, such as the increased frequency and intensity of NATO exercises in the region, strengthened air policing, elevated interoperability of NATO forces, and potentially faster reaction times. The eFP presence is symbolically important as, on the one hand, it reassures the Baltic states and Poland that

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1 D. Jakniūnaitė, “Changes in security policy and perceptions of the Baltic States”, *Journal on Baltic Security*, Vol.2, No.2, 2016, p.8; and M. Šešelgytė, “A midget warrior: security choices of Lithuania”, in R. Rublovskis, M. Šešelgytė, and R. Kaljurand (eds.), *Defence and Security for the small: perspective from the Baltic States*, Reykjavik, Centre for Small State Studies, 2013, p.51.

2 *National Security Strategy of Republic of Lithuania*, 17 January 2017, <https://kam.lt/download/57457/2017-nacsaugstrategijaen.pdf>, p.5.

3 “NATO viršūnių susitikime – istorinė diena Lietuvos ir Baltijos regiono saugumui”, *ietuvos Respublikos, Prezidentas*, 8 July 2016, <https://www.lrp.lt/lt/nato-virsuniu-susitikime-istorine-diena-lietuvos-ir-baltijos-regiono-saugumui/25639>

they are full-fledged NATO members whose security concerns are taken seriously, and, on the other hand, it deters Russia. Yet, questions about sufficiency linger. This chapter analyzes BG LTU and discusses its aims, expectations, and the interests involved as well as its achievements, its challenges, and the lessons learned from it.

## Aims and interests

Amid aggressive Russian actions in Ukraine, the Baltic countries worry that Russia might attack them next. Large-scale defence reforms in Russia and its political behavior *vis-à-vis* Lithuania have strengthened this perception even more among political elites and citizens. Eighty-two percent of Lithuanian respondents defined relations with Russia as bad in a recent survey.<sup>4</sup> The existing military imbalance between Russia and NATO made Lithuanian decision-makers fear the worst-case *fait accompli* scenario, where NATO is incapable of reacting in time. A Center for European Policy Analysis report shows that Russia's forces in its European territory outmatch the NATO forces located in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, NATO's ability to defend the Baltic states is aggravated by the Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) bubble and hamstrung by the NATO-Russia Founding Act.<sup>5</sup> Compounding the fear of a *fait accompli* scenario are political considerations about alliance unity and willingness to defend the Baltic states, especially since some NATO members have pursued positive ties with Russia. Therefore, close bilateral military cooperation with Washington has been crucial for Vilnius and so Lithuanian armed forces actively participated in US-led military operations.<sup>6</sup> Lithuania's security stance is strongly pro-Atlanticist, which reflects its politico-strategic calculations, the importance of US hardware for defence procurements, and the need for an integrated regional approach towards defence.

Lithuania has pursued several goals for its defence policy since 2014. The first is to mitigate the existing military imbalance in the region and to ensure NATO's timely and adequate reaction against a potential Russian attack. The second is to reassure members of society that NATO protects them. The third is to establish viable conventional deterrence *vis-à-vis* Russia. The fourth is to strengthen resilience against Russian unconventional warfare. After all, Russia has been conducting so-called hybrid operations that encompass information and cyber interference activities. Such efforts against Lithuania have increased since the Ukrainian crisis began, with the Lithuanian State Security Department warning that Russian information campaigns, cyber-attacks, and other influence operations aim

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4 "Apklausa: Lietuvos gyventojai kaip keliančią didžiausią grėsmę įvardijo Rusiją", *DELFI*, 29 January 2019, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/apklausa-lietuvos-gyventojai-kaip-keliancia-didziausia-gresme-ivardina-rusija.d?id=80231873>

5 E. Lucas and A.W. Mitchell, "Central European security after Crimea: the case for strengthening NATO's Eastern Defences", *Center for European Policy Analysis*, No.25, 2014, pp.1-10.

6 Šešelgtė, "A midget warrior", p.33; and *National Security Strategy of Republic of Lithuania*, 2017.

to “antagonize society and reduce its trust in democratic process, state institutions and officials” and to weaken Lithuania’s will to resist. While hybrid offensive activities have been employed across Europe and Eurasia, the Baltic countries are particularly vulnerable to such activities as NATO’s front-line states.<sup>7</sup>

## How BG LTU helps Lithuania to achieve its defence goals

The BG LTU is led by Germany as the Framework Nation and is supported by forces coming from the Netherlands, Norway, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Czech Republic, and Iceland. BG LTU’s main role is to reinforce deterrence provided by NATO and, in the case of conflict, to defend the territory of the Alliance alongside national forces. Although these forces are expected to defend Lithuanian territory should conflict break out, their main function is arguably to ensure deterrence by being a “tripwire”. Dianne Pfundstein Chamberlain argues that “these small forces are intended to serve as ‘tripwires’ signaling to Russia that an attack on one of these states would result in immediate escalation to a full-blown conflict with NATO. That is, the four battalions are supposed to convince Russia that moving against one of its Baltic neighbors would not be worth the risk of a wider war with the United States and its European allies” as this “would inflict substantial costs on an attacker and deny it an ability to quickly achieve its objectives”.<sup>8</sup> BG LTU reduces the possibility that a conventional conflict is localized and NATO is “cut out”, making the worst case scenario of a *fait accompli* even less likely – a view affirmed by the National Threat Assessment Report.<sup>9</sup> Due to deterrence’s psychological nature, even small forces could produce a sufficient effect if the opponent gets a clear signal that an unwanted response would follow any attack. Thus, NATO’s unity is one of the core elements useful for deterring Russia, and so BG LTU might be too small to respond effectively to a Russian conventional attack but just enough to dissuade Russian elite from making it. Reinforcing the deterrence effect of BG LTU are the three other eFP battlegroups, and Allied national armed forces in the region.

BG LTU’s tripwire function positively impacts other, maybe less visible, but still important pillars of Lithuanian security. First, through training and joint exercises, BG LTU contributes to the modernisation and readiness of Lithuanian armed forces via

7 Department of State Security of the Republic of Lithuania, *National Threat Assessment 2018*, 2018, <https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ENG.pdf>, p.58; and E. Lucas, *The coming storm: Baltic Sea security report*, Washington, DC, Center for European Policy Analysis, 2015.

8 D. P. Chamberlain, “NATO’s Baltic tripwire forces won’t stop Russia”, *The National Interest*, 21 July 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/natos-baltic-tripwire-forces-wont-stop-russia-17074>; and W. Clark *et al.*, “Closing NATO’s Baltic Gap”, *International Centre for Defence and Security*, May 2016, [https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2015/ICDS\\_Report-Closing\\_NATO\\_s\\_Baltic\\_Gap.pdf](https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2015/ICDS_Report-Closing_NATO_s_Baltic_Gap.pdf), p.8.

9 Department of State Security, *National threat assessment 2018*, p.58.

improved interoperability and competence in operating military equipment. Second, incoming forces get the opportunity to know the environment and the nature of a threat. With the arrival of eFP forces, the number of exercises has become more frequent and the participants more numerous. The other eFP battlegroups deployed in the region also train together on occasion, thereby enhancing regional cooperation. Third, hosting BG LTU has forced Lithuania to invest more in infrastructure. Between 2016 and 2019, Lithuania has invested around €35 million alone in building the main polygons at Pabradė and Rukla and warehouses in Linkaičiai. Lithuania is planning to invest at least the same amount in the next five years. Fourth, BG LTU has spurred the improvement of administrative procedures for NATO forces to enter Baltic states and to move within them. The permits are now issued in 24 hours for the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), in 48 hours for eFP battlegroups, and in five days for other NATO/EU units.

The political elite and members of society appreciate these benefits. A 2017 public survey revealed that over 81 percent of Lithuanians support the permanent presence of NATO Allies on Lithuanian territory and 67 percent believe that BG LTU will help deter adversaries.<sup>10</sup> In 2018, these numbers were, respectively, 83 percent and 76 percent. Strong support for the eFP presence in Lithuania could be partly attributed to society's generally high support for NATO. A 2019 Ministry of the National Defence survey has revealed that 86 percent of Lithuanians positively assess Lithuanian membership in NATO. These numbers were the highest over five years, making Lithuania among the biggest supporters of NATO.<sup>11</sup> Bolstering such positivity is the smart and creative civil-military activities performed by BG LTU. For instance, Dutch soldiers serving in BG LTU on several occasions have provided first aid for civilians.

Going beyond the primary mandate of BG LTU, the role of Germany deserves special attention. Despite various policy differences with Lithuania (e.g., Nord Stream, NATO-Russia Founding Act), Germany has shown strong leadership by assuming the role of Framework Nation. Considering its pacifist strategic culture and powerful pro-Russian lobby, this decision was difficult for Germany and was possible largely due to Chancellor Angela Merkel's strong support. Given these challenges, Germany's participation in the eFP signals Alliance unity and its commitments.

German-Lithuanian cooperation has intensified beyond eFP. With plans to invest over

10 S. Gudavičius, "Lietuviai remia ir narystę NATO, ir Aljanso bataliono", *Verslo Žinios*, 27 January 2017, <https://www.vz.lt/verslo-aplinka/2017/01/27/lietuviai-remia-ir-naryste-nato-ir-aljanso-bataliono-dislokavima#ixzz6DqRoE1dD>

11 "NATO vertinimas Lietuvoje, aukščiausias per penkerius metus", Ministry of National Defence, 9 January 2019, [https://kam.lt/lt/naujienos\\_874/aktualijos\\_875/nato\\_vertinimas\\_lietuvoje\\_\\_auksciausias\\_per\\_penkerius\\_metus](https://kam.lt/lt/naujienos_874/aktualijos_875/nato_vertinimas_lietuvoje__auksciausias_per_penkerius_metus); and M. Fagan and J. Poushter, "NATO Seen Favourably across Member States", Pew Research Center, 9 February 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/09/nato-seen-favorably-across-member-states/>

€100 million, Germany is the biggest investor in Lithuania's eFP infrastructure. Since 2017, Lithuania, together with Germany, has participated in the UN stabilisation operation MINUSMA in Mali. Lithuania has also sent a boat inspection group to a German vessel in the EU-led Operation Sophia. In 2018, it affiliated its Iron Wolf brigade to a German division. In 2020, the Lithuanian and German chiefs of special operations forces agreed on a strategic vision of cooperation. Reinforcing German-Lithuanian military cooperation are procurement contracts. Lithuania and Germany have signed a contract for the procurement of PZH 2000 in 2015 and Boxer fighting vehicles in 2016. The latter is the biggest procurement contract in Lithuania's independent history. Although these decisions were taken prior to BG LTU's deployment and thus not directly linked, defence procurements of this amount usually commit both parties for further cooperation. Moreover, German equipment makes Lithuanian forces more interoperable with their German counterparts. Put together, Germany has improved its standing in Lithuanian society. Opinion surveys demonstrate that Germany occupies first place among Lithuanian strategic partners in defence.<sup>12</sup>

Hybrid threats, involving cyber and information operations, were already a major concern for Lithuania before 2015, but worries about them have intensified ever since. Martin Zapfe has outlined three potential scenarios of Russian hybrid attacks on the eFP battlegroups: crime or accidents, civilian unrest involving Russian-speaking minorities that is Kremlin-supported or directed, and organized violence below the conventional threshold. Still, as Zapfe adds, the eFP battlegroups are not designed for hybrid threats since their "conceptual comfort zone is 'conventional realm'".<sup>13</sup> In Lithuania, dealing with hybrid scenarios is not the responsibility of BG LTU, but rather of the Ministry of Interior, national cyber security or strategic communication capabilities, and crisis management institutions. However, since NATO troops have arrived in Lithuania, they have instantly become targets for Russian hybrid attacks. Two out of Zapfe's three scenarios have already happened in Lithuania. The first incident occurred when the NATO battalion had just arrived in Lithuania. On the eve of Lithuanian Independence Day on 15 February 2017, the speaker of the Lithuanian Parliament received a letter accusing German troops of raping a Lithuanian minor from a foster home. A police investigation determined that this incident was a false provocation. Another incident was directed towards the families of Dutch soldiers who were harassed by telephone calls communicating in English with

12 "NATO vertinimas Lietuvoje – aukščiausias per penkerius metus", Ministry of National Defence, 9 January 2019, [https://kam.lt/lt/naujienos\\_874/aktualijos\\_875/nato\\_vertinimas\\_lietuvoje\\_\\_auksciausias\\_per\\_penkerius\\_metus](https://kam.lt/lt/naujienos_874/aktualijos_875/nato_vertinimas_lietuvoje__auksciausias_per_penkerius_metus)

13 M. Zapfe, "Hybrid' threats and NATO's Forward Presence", *Policy Perspectives*, Vol.4, No.7, 2016, pp.1-4.

a strong Russian accent and telling them to leave Lithuania.<sup>14</sup> These scenarios did not generate wider unrest or dissatisfaction with NATO troops in Lithuania but they have clearly demonstrated that BG LTU can be implicated in a hybrid scenario.

## Does BG LTU address the military imbalance?

Although BG LTU might ensure sufficient deterrence *vis-à-vis* Russia through its psychological effect, Russia's A2/AD bubble, which consists of various ranged Russian air defence systems, could pose problems for NATO. A recent FOI (Swedish Defence Agency) report questions the robustness of Russian capabilities, but NATO might still not be able to react in a timely fashion.<sup>15</sup>

The Suwalki Gap is yet another potential challenge for the Baltic states' defensibility. It is a narrow 80-km land strip on the Lithuanian-Polish border "squeezed" between Belarus and Russia's Kaliningrad enclave. If Russia seizes it during the armed conflict, then the Baltic states would be "cut off" from the rest of NATO. Battlegroup Poland is near Suwalki, but small-sized battlegroups may be insufficient against determined Russian forces. Lithuania and Poland have taken other steps to solve the Suwalki problem. In January 2020, they signed an act of affiliation between Lithuania's Iron Wolf Mechanized Brigade and Poland's 15th Mechanized Brigade, with both assigned to NATO's Multinational Division North East headquarters so as to "train and act together in order to protect the Suwalki Gap".<sup>16</sup>

Still, keeping in mind the local military imbalance between NATO and Russia, defensive success might depend on reaction times, which might be hampered either by slow political processes in NATO (and member states) or by the inability of NATO forces to move quickly to the region due to diverging legal systems and unsuitable infrastructure. A RAND study argued that seven brigades "including three heavy armored brigades – adequately supported by airpower, land-based fires, and other enablers on the ground and ready to fight at the onset of hostilities should be deployed in the Baltic states in order to prevent a capture of one of the Baltic capitals during less than 60 hours".<sup>17</sup> Another report more modestly suggested that NATO "must deploy, as a minimum, a multinational 'battalion-plus' battle group with a range of enablers and force multipliers in each of the Baltic states,

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14 "Baltijos šalyse tarnaujančių NATO karių artimiesiems grasinimai telefonu", LRT, 9 August 2019, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/pasaulyje/6/1086830/baltijos-salyse-tarnaujanciu-nato-kariu-artimiesiems-grasinimai-telefonu>

15 R. Dalsjö et al., *Russia A2/AD in the Baltic Sea region: capabilities, countermeasures and implications*, Stockholm, FOI, March 2019.

16 "Poland and Lithuania to plan joint Suwalki Gap Defence", LRT, 29 January 2020, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1137647/poland-and-lithuania-to-plan-joint-suwalki-gap-defence>

17 D. A. Shlapak and M. W. Johnson, *Reinforcing deterrence on NATO's Eastern flank: wargaming the defence of the Baltics*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2016.



with one nation or an established multinational formation providing its core. Together with the additional US Army presence, which should also be built up to a battalion size in each Baltic country, such a NATO force would be able create a ‘speedbump’ for Russia, and not act only as a ‘tripwire’<sup>18</sup>. The solution to the military imbalance and other challenges is substantial US ground forces in the Baltic states.

Lithuanian decision-makers agree that the capabilities, will, and speed of the Russian armed forces makes US military power the only instrument able to ensure credible deterrence in the region, either through NATO or on some bilateral basis. The needed US presence is partially assured through temporary formats such as exercises. A US battalion was deployed to Pabradė from October 2019 to spring 2020 as part of US Army Europe Operation Atlantic Resolve. In 2020, the major military exercise, Defender-Europe 20, was expected to take place partly in Lithuania. However, restrictions imposed by COVID-19 reduced its size and geographical scope. The next cycle of exercises is planned for 2022. Although Lithuanian decision-makers are satisfied with eFP, they still seek more US troops. Former Lithuanian Defence Vice-Minister Giedrimas Jeglinskas and retired General Ben Hodges have urged Lithuania to enhance trilateral American-Lithuanian-Polish military cooperation by joining the already signed Joint Declaration on Advancing Defence Cooperation between the US and Poland.<sup>19</sup> eFP has contributed to Lithuania’s security by providing a tripwire, but NATO must be ready and capable for rapid deployment, neutralizing Russia’s A2/AD capabilities, and defending the Suwalki Gap. US troops in the region and smooth military mobility are essential for these goals.

## Lessons learned

Three peaceful years of BG LTU suggest that its general goal – to ensure deterrence from Russia – has been achieved. The National Threat Assessment Report assesses that the ability of Russian armed forces to initiate military conflict and to achieve desirable results rapidly has been diminished. Members of Lithuanian society feel more secure due to the eFP presence. Admittedly, hosting BG LTU has required much investment and learning at the beginning given the logistical challenges with providing host nation support at very short notice. Currently, although there are still many investment projects being implemented, everything is being conducted as “business as usual”. However, several challenges remain.

First, deterrence even in the form of a tripwire is effective only if all the defensive elements work cohesively. Gaps exist. One is the unclear relationship between eFP and

<sup>18</sup> Clark *et al.*, *Closing NATO’s Baltic gap*.

<sup>19</sup> B. Hodges and G. Jeglinskas “Kosciuszko’s Legacy for the World of Tomorrow”, *15Min*, 20 June 2019, <https://www.15min.lt/en/article/society/kosciuszko-s-legacy-for-the-world-of-tomorrow-528-1162898>

Baltic Air Policing, which has neither a role nor mandate in the case of conflict. If the air-policing mission is absent during the conflict, then eFP forces would lack protection from the air. Lithuania is raising this question on the NATO level and negotiations are ongoing. Second, although the Lithuanian Minister of Defence regulates command and control of eFP forces in peacetime, the NATO Status of Forces Agreement and agreements with the host nation also regulate the status of foreign forces. This legal situation can complicate decision-making during an armed conflict. The North Atlantic Council (NAC) could take the main decisions regarding the use of these forces, but lower-level decision-making might fall under three different commands: host nation, contributing nation, and NATO. Third, although Lithuania prioritizes having US ground forces, implementing this goal is difficult given national infrastructural limits. A US battalion deployed in Lithuania faced challenges using polygons that at once must service national exercise needs and Allies' needs.

Finally, although the security situation has not improved dramatically since 2017, a risk exists that contributing nations' commitments might become subject to political disputes. For instance, had the Exercise Defender-Europe 2020 taken place as planned, Germany would have become a major logistic centre. Bundestag member Alexander Neu harshly criticised the exercise, saying that it "pre-programmed further escalation".<sup>20</sup> Despite a strong commitment to NATO among Germany's security elites, concerns abound that Germany's pacifism and pro-Russian interests might impact German willingness to participate in BG LTU. Over 57 percent of Germans think that their country does not have to send its armed forces in order to protect Baltic states and Poland in the case of Russian attack, 49 percent agree that NATO should not have to launch permanent bases in Eastern Europe and Baltic states.<sup>21</sup> COVID-19 has already undermined regional security, as it reduced the size and territorial scope of Defender-Europe 2020. It might even have a stronger effect if NATO members' economies shrink and defence budgets get cut. Finally, in June 2020, US President Donald Trump announced that the United States will withdraw 9,500 of the US forces deployed in Germany, which, if carried out, might affect Germany's defence considerations and Alliance unity. The eFP may have succeeded so far, but it cannot rest on its laurels.

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20 "JAV planuoja karines pratybas, kur dalyvaus 37 tūkst. karių: repetuos dalinių perkėlimą į Baltijos šalis", LRT, 17 October 2019, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/pasaulyje/6/1104229/jav-planuoja-karines-pratybas-kur-dalyvaus-37-tukst-kariu-repetuos-daliniu-perkelima-i-baltijos-salis>

21 "Iš Vokietijos – nemalonus naujienos Baltijos šalims Skaitykite daugiau", DELFI, 26 April 2016, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/is-vokietijos-nemalonus-naujienos-baltijos-salims.d?id=71097538>