



## NATO'S ENHANCED FORWARD PRESENCE (EFP) IN THE BALTIC STATES AND POLAND

### ASSETS AND LIMITS OF THE MULTILATERAL CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the limits and assets of conventional deterrence by taking NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltic States and Poland as a case study. This research, based on a qualitative survey conducted at NATO headquarters, focuses on several aspects of the eFP: 1) the choice of a multinational format for this activity, which presents the challenge of interoperability; 2) the different roles of the battlegroups that are not limited to deterrence; 3) developments since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This paper shows that despite reservations about the heterogeneous implementation of the eFP, NATO's deterrence activity has received an overwhelming amount of support from several players: Central and Eastern European member states, which are thus leaving their status as second-tier members and seeing their security concerns considered, and partners who, as demonstrated by the accession process of Sweden and Finland, are looking for NATO's protection.

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## INTRODUCTION

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 led NATO, at the 2016 Warsaw summit, to position troops on its eastern flank: the enhanced Forward Presence (hereafter eFP).<sup>1</sup> Consisting of four battalions, it has been positioned in the three Baltic States and Poland.

This activity corresponds to the primary function of an alliance, i.e., guarantee the security of its member states in the face of an external threat and coordinate their defense policies.<sup>2</sup> It is based on the concept of deterrence, meaning that it is a way of "putting an enemy off an initiative by making it realize that the enterprise it is planning is irrational."<sup>3</sup> In this case, it is a question of dissuading Russia from any invasion towards a State of the Eastern flank after Moscow denied Ukraine's legitimacy as a sovereign nation.

However, in order to be credible and effective, deterrence presents several challenges for the state that employs it. First, it means that the adversary will be effectively sanctioned, that is, it will face reprisals, even if the certainty and nature of this military response may remain somewhat vague. Second, it must implement means that correspond to a given objective. Moreover, to be credible, deterrence must be flexible and able to evolve in order to fit the context in which it is used. The security context on the eastern flank in 2014, after the illegal annexation of Crimea, was not the same as in 2022, after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Finally, the effectiveness of deterrence depends on its non-use: it is considered effective when the means implemented are not used.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, conventional and nuclear deterrence are similar.

Moreover, although the multinational nature of NATO's deterrence activity has many positive aspects, it also makes it more complex to implement. On the one hand, states may decide to turn to a multilateral organization to increase the legal and political legitimacy of their actions since decision-making is collective.<sup>5</sup> Multilateralism also guarantees greater international, and ultimately national, security for states, since cooperation reduces security tensions and improves the interoperability of armed forces through frequent interactions among staff as well as on the ground. On the other hand, resorting to multilateralism raises difficulties, including the lengthy institutional procedures brought on by the number of member states, their different preferences, and the unequal burden-sharing, which undeniably slows down their capacity to respond to crises and can create tensions.<sup>6</sup> As a

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1. This paper is a translation of the Note de l'IRSEM, No. 131, "[La présence avancée renforcée de l'OTAN \(eFP\) dans les pays Baltes et en Pologne: apports et limites de la dissuasion conventionnelle multilatérale](#)". The translation was not made by the author.

2. Olivier Schmitt, "Alliances (coalitions)", in Benoît Durieux, Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer and Frédéric Ramel (eds.), *Dictionnaire de la guerre et de la paix*, Paris, PUF, 2017, p. 56-64.

3. General Lucien Poirier cited by Joseph Henrotin, "Dissuasion", in Benoît Durieux, Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer and Frédéric Ramel (eds.), *Dictionnaire de la guerre et de la paix*, p. 382.

4. Joseph Henrotin, "Dissuasion", p. 382-388.

5. Jan Art Scholte, "Towards Greater Legitimacy in Global Governance", *Review of International Political Economy*, 18:1, 2011, p. 110-120.

6. John Gerard Ruggie, "Multilateralism: the Anatomy of an Institution", *International Organization*, 46:3, 1992, p. 561-598 and Ira William Zartman and Saadia Touval (eds.), *International Cooperation: The Extents and Limits of Multilateralism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

result, the pertinence and effectiveness of this type of collective arrangement in conducting conventional deterrence can be called into question.

This paper therefore examines the advantages and limits of multilateralism in conventional deterrence. Although the multilateral framework presents many challenges at first glance, it demonstrates NATO's solidarity and unity by bringing the majority of member states together in one operational activity. Questioning NATO's decision to implement the eFP thus reveals tension between achieving a political objective and purely operational and military effectiveness.

In order to test these assumptions, this analysis is based on fieldwork carried out between November 2021 and January 2022 at NATO headquarters in Brussels, during which semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of member states participating in the eFP.<sup>7</sup> The objective was to assess all dimensions of the activity by gathering and comparing the perceptions of actors representing the three status types established within the eFP: host nations (States hosting eFP troops, i.e., Poland and the Baltic States), framework nations (States leading the troops in each battlegroup) and contributing nations (States participating in the battlegroups).

This paper is divided into three parts. It begins by explaining the creation of the eFP as a conventional deterrence activity in peacetime. The analysis then focuses on a study of the multinational and heterogeneous nature of this activity. Finally, the evolution of eFP, or its possible conclusion, is considered through the prism of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

## THE eFP: DETERRENCE IN PEACETIME

### The limits of NATO's posture before the illegal annexation of Crimea (2014)

NATO's posture on its eastern flank, until Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, stemmed from NATO-Russia Founding Act signed in 1997.<sup>8</sup> Negotiations preceding the signing of this document had led NATO to make several commitments to Russia. First, the enlargement policy should not lead to any change in the Alliance's nuclear posture: no missiles or nuclear weapon storage sites would be installed on the territory of new members east of Germany. The Act also clearly specified that NATO was committed to carrying out "its collective defense and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces."<sup>9</sup> New NATO bases could not be built on the territory of

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7. The interviews were conducted in English and French (translation by the author) and have been made anonymous at the request of the interviewees.

8. For an in-depth analysis of the signing of the Founding Act, see Amélie Zima, "L'Acte fondateur OTAN-Russie: négociations et influences sur la politique d'élargissement de l'OTAN à l'Europe centrale", *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 44:3, 2013, p. 9-34.

9. NATO-Russia Founding Act, May 1997, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm).

new members and relocating NATO commands to this region was not foreseen. However, since their accession, the new members have benefited from the fundamental guarantees of the Alliance. These members are covered by Article 5 on collective defense in the event of attack and by nuclear deterrence.

Formulated before the first post-Cold War enlargement in 1999 to include three Central European countries – Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic – these clauses met with mixed reactions.<sup>10</sup> They thus met the expectations of the Czech government:

NATO clearly did not want troops on our territory. And we said: “We are members, that is enough for us.” And no strategic weapons either. We had no problem saying: “That’s not a problem for us, we don’t want strategic weapons.”<sup>11</sup>

This Czech position, also shared by Slovakia, was tied to the memory of the Warsaw Pact troops’ invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. This argument, which may seem paradoxical, is a constant in the foreign policy of both countries. The issue was so sensitive that an amendment to the Czech Constitution to allow the passing of NATO troops across its territory did not take place until 2001, although the accession was in 1999.<sup>12</sup>

Other new member states, such as Poland, were not satisfied with this solution. Warsaw wanted troops to be stationed on its territory and had great difficulty accepting NATO’s refusal, which was seen as a limitation on its freedom and sovereignty:

I can say that this proposal was very troubling. NATO press release stated that in the current security conditions, NATO would carry out its missions mainly through interoperability and compatibility and not by stationing substantial combat forces on the territory of new members. This meant that there was no plan, if all went well, to station substantial NATO forces on the territory of new members. That was the situation at the time. And of course, we tried to minimize the content of this press release because it was not in our interest to limit our freedom, but in the end, we accepted something similar. It would have been difficult not to... There was no other way out and we didn’t want another membership category. That was a pretty tense conversation between Madeleine Albright and Dariusz Rosati. But for the official record, she said that we wouldn’t do “anything about you without you”. [...] And all in all, it seems that we managed to get everything that it was rationally possible to get at that stage, and it was already a cause for concern for Poland and the Baltic States.<sup>13</sup>

The request for stationing NATO member nations’ forces on the territory of States on the eastern flank became more urgent after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Several Central and Eastern European governments, led by Poland and the Baltic States, began to advocate for projects that would contribute to the security of the eastern flank, and thus to that of the Alliance. These projects would be spread over several years and would

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10. Amélie Zima, “L’Acte fondateur OTAN-Russie”.

11. Interview with Jaroslav Šedivý, Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Belgium, accredited by NATO and the WEU (1995-1997), Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1997 to 1998.

12. Interview with Jan Kavan, Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1998 to 2002, and Jaroslav Šedivý, Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Belgium, accredited by NATO and the WEU (1995-1997), Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1997 to 1998.

13. Interview with Jerzy Koźmiński, Polish ambassador to the United States from 1994 to 2000.

not be limited to the deployment of troops but would also consist of installing infrastructure and implementing activities over decades.<sup>14</sup>

Hence, those governments may have seen the establishment of the eFP three years later as a way to break with the limitations imposed at the time of their accession, namely to fully enjoy the military benefits of NATO membership beyond the guarantee of nuclear deterrence.

## The making of the eFP: a multinational conventional deterrence activity

The eFP stems from the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), adopted at the 2014 Wales Summit in Newport.<sup>15</sup> It led to a series of reassurance measures on NATO's eastern flank following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Ukraine's Donbass region, both actions challenging Ukraine's sovereignty and the inviolability of borders.

The measures adopted particularly included:

- the tripling in size of NATO Response Force (NRF) to 40,000 soldiers;
- the creation of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) with 20,000 soldiers, able to intervene in a few days;
- the establishment of two multinational headquarters in Szczecin, Poland, and Bucharest, Romania, as well as eight Force Integration Units (NFIUs) in Central and Eastern European countries, which must assist in the deployment of NATO forces and help coordinate joint training and exercises;
- the reinforcement of air policing in the Baltic States' airspace.

The 2016 Warsaw Summit strengthened these measures with the decision to launch an enhanced Forward Presence (eFP).<sup>16</sup> Based in the Baltic States and Poland since 2017, this force consists of four multinational battalion-size battlegroups of 1,000 troops with a primarily deterrent goal. However, this form of conventional deterrence raised concerns among some allies. For example, France did not view Russia as a direct conventional threat and regarded post-Crimea developments with caution in the mid-2010s. Moreover, Paris did not want the implementation of a conventional deterrence force to call into question the relevance and position of nuclear deterrence within NATO.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the eFP as a conventional deterrence activity stems from political will, but also from trade-offs and tensions within the Alliance that have limited its scope.

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14. This vision was notably that of Tomasz Siemoniak, Polish Minister of Defense, "Liczba żołnierzy NATO na Wschodzie nie jest miarą bezpieczeństwa", *Wprost*, April 16, 2014, <https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/444447/liczba-zolnierzy-nato-na-wschodzie-nie-jest-miara-bezpieczenstwa.html>.

15. Presentation of the Readiness Action Plan on NATO website: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_119353.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_119353.htm).

16. Presentation of the eFP on NATO website: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_136388.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm).

17. Christelle Calmels, "Influence in a Military Alliance. The Case of France at NATO (2009-2019)", doctoral dissertation defended November 4, 2021, Institut d'études politiques de Paris.



The battlegroups are composed of troops from NATO member states which make a voluntary contribution. They are led by framework nations: Germany in Lithuania, Canada in Latvia, the United States in Poland, and the United Kingdom in Estonia. As a result, the operational control of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) is limited.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, eFP negotiations led to its exclusion, under French pressure, because this deployment occurs during peacetime.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the eFP is neither a mission nor an operation since the battlegroups do not execute military plans but rather aim to improve interoperability and increase preparedness levels.<sup>20</sup> Its status within the RAP is that of an “activity”, an *ad hoc* category created specifically for the eFP. This name reflects an ambiguous relationship with violence<sup>21</sup> as it makes it invisible and erases the characteristic of an armed defense. A change would nevertheless be possible if the eFP status were modified to allow the troops involved to carry out military plans.

The framework nations were not only chosen because they are considered as military powers, but also because of their capacity to lead military operations abroad, although one initial idea was to put all the nuclear nations of the Alliance at the head of the eFP in order to strengthen its deterrent nature.<sup>22</sup> Thus more than military force, it is also a question of the will of a government to accept to fulfill this role.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, being a framework nation gives the country a leading role in NATO’s activities. It demonstrates a commitment and a contribution to burden-sharing among Allies at a time when the Alliance is engaged in few missions. Finally, for some countries, participating in the eFP as a framework nation makes up for a defense budget that is below the 2% threshold required by NATO.<sup>24</sup>

Troops are replaced on a rotation basis every six months, with the exception of the framework nations, which have not changed since their appointment at the Warsaw Summit. This rotation aims to respect the terms of NATO-Russia agreements, and in particular the Founding Act, according to which the Alliance undertakes not to permanently station troops on the territory of new members. Carrying out the eFP in this way also pleases France, which wanted a light and rotating presence.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, and since the Warsaw Summit in 2016, NATO has established a tailored Forward Presence (tFP) on its southeast flank. It consists of a multinational brigade based in Craiova, Romania. The two missions, eFP and tFP, were not designed to work cooperatively and do not have the same objective. While the eFP has a deterrence goal, the tFP

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18. “Following the Warsaw summit, the Alliance began the implementation phase for the eFP. French representatives insisted here on maintaining a light NATO chain of command, including placing limits on SACEUR’s operational control and mandating NAC agreements before transitioning from peace to crisis activities. The country was also eager to avoid escalating tensions with Russia and warned against exercises with all four battlegroups on Russia’s border. When SACEUR wrote a strategic directive for the eFP in cooperation with participating nations, France thus took steps to maintain political control over eFP activities and to circumscribe SACEUR’s freedom of action. He eventually obtained operational control for situational awareness, strategic communication, and posture management only” (ibid.).

19. Ibid., p. 415.

20. Interview with a Belgian senior officer, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

21. The author thanks Julien Pomarède for drawing our attention to this point.

22. Christelle Calmels, “Influence in a Military Alliance”, dissertation defended November 4, 2021, Institut d’études politiques de Paris.

23. Interview with Polish diplomats, Paris, December 14, 2021.

24. Interview with Canadian members of Task Force Latvia, January 14, 2022, via video-conference.

25. Christelle Calmels, “Influence in a Military Alliance”.

is a mission with air, land and sea components whose purpose is training and exercises.<sup>26</sup> Several factors explain this distinction. Firstly, Romania and Bulgaria mainly wanted cooperation in the air and maritime fields that included exercises.<sup>27</sup> Conversely, Turkey did not want a strong NATO presence in the Black Sea to avoid upsetting Russia.<sup>28</sup>

However, there are ties between the nations that comprise the eFP and the tFP. Romania contributes to the eFP as part of the Polish battlegroup, while Portugal and Poland contribute to the tFP, the latter providing the mission's land component.<sup>29</sup> The forms taken by the eFP and the tFP, as well as their operation, are the result of compromises made between allies aimed at demonstrating NATO's solidarity and respect for the agreements made with Russia concerning the status of peacetime activities through the voluntary and rotating nature of the forces involved.

## THE MULTINATIONAL AND HETEROGENEOUS NATURE OF THE EFP: AN ASSET OR A LIMITATION FOR DETERRENCE?

### A multinational dimension to ensure the political and military credibility of the Alliance

The eFP has political and military symbolic significance because it demonstrates NATO's solidarity and unity through the participation of most of its member states. For example, when the activity was established in 2017, 4,762 soldiers from twenty-two NATO member states were involved in it.<sup>30</sup> Just before the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022, twenty-four nations were contributing to the eFP, with a total of 4,957 soldiers.<sup>31</sup>

This multinational nature aims at proving both the cohesion of the Alliance and the validity of the collective defense clause of Article 5. It has a dual role in portraying the image of a united Alliance working together in the face of a possible aggressor, while the decision-making and actions shared by many states consolidate the activity's international legitimacy. Having a diversity of participants also strengthens the support of local populations in the territories where troops are stationed. This is an important aspect because trust in the security guarantees provided by regional organizations is waning, making it necessary to strengthen relations with certain allies that are considered politically and historically powerful, through bilateral agreements.<sup>32</sup>

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26. Interview with a Romanian diplomat, Brussels, November 11, 2021.

27. Interview with a Belgian senior officer, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

28. Interviews with a Belgian senior officer, Brussels, November 10, 2021, and with French diplomats, Brussels, November 12, 2021.

29. Interview with a Romanian diplomat, Brussels, November 11, 2021.

30. Presentation of the eFP on NATO website, November 2017: [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf/2017/11/1711-factsheet-efp.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf/2017/11/1711-factsheet-efp.pdf).

31. Presentation of the eFP on NATO website, February 2022: [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/2202-factsheet\\_efp\\_en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/2202-factsheet_efp_en.pdf).

32. Interview with a Polish diplomat, Paris, November 2019.

Finally, multilateralism also aims to strengthen deterrence by complicating the calculations of a potential enemy that would find itself facing soldiers from the majority of NATO member countries. This ensures the credibility of the collective defense clause of Article 5, but also its mobilization. The multinational line-up means that in the event of an incident, soldiers from different nations would be affected and decision-making would be facilitated since a large number of allies would be concerned<sup>33</sup>: “This presence should make you think twice, because it’s not just Estonians on the other side.”<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, while the choice of multinational battlegroups asserts the cohesion and political unity of the Alliance, the format brings several challenges, in particular the ability to ensure that all these troops work effectively together.

## Multilateralism: a hindrance to the Alliance’s military effectiveness?

According to some of those who have participated in the eFP, its multilateral nature is not the most optimal in attack or combat situations, but rather is much better suited to peacekeeping missions. The involvement of as many nations as possible has consequences on the activity’s tactical and defensive capabilities.<sup>35</sup>

However, this opinion seems to be in the minority among those interviewed in host, framework and contributing nations, the majority of whom regard the eFP as a positive experience. This positive assessment is based on two factors. First, the eFP is an activity that tests the interoperability of troops.<sup>36</sup> Second, its multilateral nature is framed in order to avoid potential negative side effects such as loss of efficiency.<sup>37</sup>

This multilateral aspect also tests the effectiveness of NATO’s interoperability procedures in real conditions and provides insight into whether member states’ troops can truly operate together.

The eFP tests the evolution of interoperability and is the best way to test the interoperability of armies, as it is the only example of multinational battlegroups.<sup>38</sup>

Everyone knows that interoperability is a challenge, but it is not an obstacle. It is part of the task. There are ten nations in Latvia, which is a lot. It is complicated in theory, but that is part of what NATO is.<sup>39</sup>

This is a key point because NATO’s deterrent force, its operational effectiveness and its ability to defend member states depend mainly on this system of standardization and

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33. Interview with a Belgian senior officer, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

34. Interview with French diplomats, Brussels, November 12, 2021.

35. Interview with a Belgian senior officer, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

36. The importance of interoperability in the discourse of the actors is found for other NATO missions such as Sea Guardian or Active Endeavor where the objective of the fight against terrorism is relegated to the background. (Julien Pomarède, *La Fabrique de l’OTAN. Contre-terrorisme et organisation transnationale de la violence*, Éditions de l’Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2020).

37. Risa A. Brooks and Elizabeth A. Stanley, *Creating Military Power: the Sources of Military Effectiveness*, Stanford University Press, 2007.

38. Interview with French diplomats, Brussels, November 12, 2021.

39. Interview with a Latvian diplomat, Brussels, November 9, 2021.



the sharing of standards between member states. These standards range from the ability to master the official languages of the Alliance to information systems and the colors selected for camouflaging equipment.<sup>40</sup>

The eFP is a valuable experience for NATO troops. They gain regional experience, with the geography, the topography and the climate. They share languages, they are taking language lessons, they are increasing their English capacities, they gain more cultural awareness and all this increases interoperability.<sup>41</sup>

Interoperability is an endless process due to the generational renewal of troops, their learning of standards, but also the diversification of Alliance missions. In the specific context of the eFP, the continuous work-in-progress of achieving interoperability is due to the bi-annual replacement of troops.

But interoperability will never be perfect because of the rotation; so, it's a continuing process.<sup>42</sup>

Certain practical measures have been taken to mitigate the potentially negative effects of multilateralism. Firstly, the choice of a battlegroup as the basic unit of activity is explained by the fact that this is the smallest unit able to operate as a multinational group. A smaller unit, such as a platoon, would make the activity too complex, if not impossible. Additionally, the multinational aspect can be controlled by the limited number of contributing nations – as in the case of the British-led battlegroup in Estonia – or by the stable line-up of battlegroups, as in Lithuania. Three nations currently participate in the eFP in Estonia, four in Poland, six in Lithuania and ten in Latvia.<sup>43</sup>

For Great Britain, it is easier to lead a battlegroup of two or three nations like we have. It was a choice made by the Estonian government to have only a few nations. And it's working very well.<sup>44</sup>

What contributes to the success is that we have a lot of countries in the Latvian battlegroup, but they've been the same for the past five years, so we've all learned together. States carry out their rotation at the same time in Latvia, unlike in Lithuania, where each country does their rotation when they want to, so they don't all work together for six months, but maybe just for two or three. In Latvia, rotations take place from mid-December to mid-June.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, the battlegroups are not intended to work with each other, either in training or in exercise situations. There are only rare cases of cooperation between battlegroups, namely between those of the Baltic States, for carrying out exercises.

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40. NATO Standardization Office website: <https://nso.nato.int/nso/home/main/home>, and examples of NATO standards: <https://nso.nato.int/nso/nsdd/main/list-promulg> (the details of NATO standards are classified).

41. Interview with an American diplomat, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

42. Interview with an Estonian diplomat, Brussels, November 11, 2021.

43. Status of eFP forces in February 2022: [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/2202-fact-sheet\\_efp\\_en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/2202-fact-sheet_efp_en.pdf).

44. Interview with an Estonian diplomat, Brussels, November 11, 2021.

45. Interview with Canadian members of Task Force Latvia, January 14, 2022, via video-conference.

They work together for exercises. A Lithuanian battlegroup may come and play the role of the enemy in Latvia.<sup>46</sup>

The battlegroups are not intended to form a common front in the case of an attack, they are not meant to “create a wall on the eastern border”, but to hold back an attack until NATO machine, particularly the VJTF, is ready to take action.<sup>47</sup> Their working and combat environment is therefore that of the host nation’s army since the battlegroup is integrated into the national army and into the development of the host nation’s defense plans.<sup>48</sup> Each battlegroup is positioned on a different geographical terrain, with regional specialization. Therefore, the twenty-four contributing nations do not really interact beyond the strict framework of their battlegroup.

Finally, multilateralism is framed by the stability of the framework nations. Their changes have been considered to accentuate the activity’s genuine multinational nature, especially since a State’s willingness to become a framework nation, or its refusal to do so, is a real policy marker.<sup>49</sup> However, this idea runs counter to the need for stability. While the troops are replaced every six months, the framework nation is the permanent aspect that ensures continuity between the host nation, the framework nation and contributing nations:

Yes, we could change, but this stability has assets. Quite frankly, the idea is to develop interoperability and trust between the host nation and the framework nation. The framework nation also dispels the uncertainty for contributing nations: they know who will lead the battlegroup for the years to come. Permanence also allows for investments – Canada has invested 15 million euros to erect the building that houses Task Force Latvia – but it also allows us to become familiar with the environment in which we operate and therefore have a better understanding of the threat than a soldier who is only there for six months.<sup>50</sup>

Host nations want a long-term approach; they have institutionalized the view that it will be long-term. There are ties between the two, between the host nation and the framework nation in each state and cooperation at several institutional levels. There would be no point in changing the framework nation because all the institutional cooperation would have to be rebuilt. What’s more, no framework nation has said that it wants to end its mission.<sup>51</sup>

They committed to be a framework nation. There are strong institutional ties between each framework nation and the host countries, so changing them would be counter-productive.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, the link between host nation and framework nation is seen as beneficial in both directions. Far from the label of security consumers often put on Central European countries, the exchanges are beneficial for all parties involved:

The relationship with the Latvians is very good at all levels, tactical, operational, political, diplomatic and commercial. Before we had almost nothing, no bilateral defense or political relations. But with the eFP, we have developed diplomatic, military, political and commercial

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46. Ibid.

47. Interview with Polish diplomats, Paris, December 14, 2021.

48. Interview with French diplomats, Brussels, November 12, 2021.

49. Interview with a Belgian diplomat, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

50. Interview with Canadian members of Task Force Latvia, January 14, 2022, via video-conference.

51. Interview with a Latvian diplomat, Brussels, November 9, 2021.

52. Interview with an American diplomat, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

relations. For example, Latvians come to Canada for training, formations, there is a cooperation between the Canadian and Latvian armies. Members of the Canadian government, including Prime Minister Trudeau, have come to Latvia. Latvia is a small country, but without the eFP, Canada would not be as well welcomed.<sup>53</sup>

Multilateralism therefore seems to be the most appropriate choice for the eFP because of the safeguards put in place to control negative effects such as slow progress or loss of efficiency. Lastly, the multilateral nature of the eFP corresponds to the spirit of NATO and is in line with the missions undertaken by the organization:

This is NATO's primary task. It is NATO's job to have all these nations working together. The eFP is not at odds with the general thinking of NATO. A permanent unit in any one place would not do much, as it would become routine. There is also a symbolic value in having this rotation take place.<sup>54</sup>

As an intergovernmental alliance composed of thirty countries, without its own army, NATO's activities never take place on a unilateral or bilateral basis. Multilateralism is the very essence of NATO's action.

### **Deter, socialize, or train? The different roles of the eFP battlegroups**

Although the eFP was initially conceived as a deterrence activity, this characteristic varies from one battlegroup to the other, due to their fragmentation and the dominant role played by the framework nations. For example, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the battlegroup in Estonia had developed an undeniable defensive dimension by focusing on combat readiness, whereas the one in Lithuania continued to concentrate on training and strategic communication. This had a legal impact not only on pay and insurance policies, but also on equipment readiness and, ultimately, on the possible cooperation between units, as they did not have the same equipment or the same objective.<sup>55</sup>

The overall idea is not only training or simply increasing interoperability, but to be battle-ready while being multinational. In Estonia, we focus on combat readiness. So, we don't have the problem of some nations coming here to train and others coming to be battle-ready. The UK is very focused on the most important thing, readiness. It must be a battle-ready tripwire.<sup>56</sup>

Beyond these differences between battlegroups, one question thus remains as to the defensive added-value of the activity.

Therefore, it would be simplistic to think that the role of the eFP is solely deterrent. In practice, it goes far beyond this objective and performs other functions. Even though the activity is designed for deterrence, the opportunity to carry out training brings tactical added value. Training is a major component of the activity of armed forces, because it is a

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53. Interview with Canadian members of Task Force Latvia, January 14, 2022, via video-conference.

54. Interview with a Latvian diplomat, Brussels, November 9, 2021.

55. Interview with a Belgian senior officer, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

56. Interview with an Estonian diplomat, Brussels, November 11, 2021.

way of testing the responsiveness and proficiency of troops and command, as well as rules of engagement and new equipment. The eFP also brings together a mass of personnel and equipment for several months, thereby increasing the operational readiness of a unit.<sup>57</sup> And lastly, through communication, it is an opportunity to show the other states how strong the organizing military force is.<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, for many NATO member states, giving troops the chance to operate in unfamiliar geographical and climatic environments or reinforcing the capabilities of specialized units is an opportunity. The eFP also makes it possible to test scenarios that differ from their other operational commitments, as for France, engaged both in the Sahel and in Estonia.

Cooperation can be useful between battlegroups that do not have much experience of the geographic and climatic environment. This environment is new to the British and the French, so it is good to have interaction between troops that are not familiar with the forest and wild terrain.<sup>59</sup>

The UK and France are satisfied with what they get. This kind of mission is new to them. They are pleased with the experience of humid forests, the weather...<sup>60</sup>

After some hesitation, the armed forces saw the military value of the eFP, and what it allows in terms of training, readiness, or land where you can deploy Leclerc tanks while the army is more focused on high intensity in southern scenarios.<sup>61</sup>

Lastly, the eFP creates cohesion and allows troops from the different member countries to socialize with each other. This is particularly important for an inter-governmental organization that must manage the armed forces of several dozen countries and possibly engage them in combat. It also reinforces the interoperability of troops through both operational and social interactions. For example, this socialization can occur during sports competitions.

Competitions have been organized between snipers from the different battlegroups. And this is also used as a communication tool for deterrence.<sup>62</sup>

Soldiers organize competitions, sports competitions, between themselves, involving all the nations. This is a great way of building relationships and learning foreign languages, and it's good for NATO in general.<sup>63</sup>

In addition, these sports competitions play a role in communication by portraying a positive image of NATO and the action of its troops. Socialization between troops from different member states also has effects in other spheres. The eFP is an activity that creates solidarity and leads to better mutual understanding of the security issues facing each member country. This can be beneficial for participation in joint operations, even outside NATO framework:

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57. Interview with the Belgian senior officer, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

58. Beatrice Heuser, Tormod Heier, Guillaume Lasconjarias (dir.), *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact*, Forum Paper 26, NATO Defence College, 2018.

59. Interview with Canadian members of Task Force Latvia, January 14, 2022, via video-conference.

60. Interview with an Estonian diplomat, Brussels, November 11, 2021.

61. Interview with French diplomats, Brussels, November 12, 2021.

62. Interview with Canadian members of Task Force Latvia, January 14, 2022, via video-conference.

63. Interview with a Latvian diplomat, Brussels, November 9, 2021.

This deployment increases political and ideological proximity. Estonia takes part in Mali and in the Sahel where 1% of the army is engaged.<sup>64</sup>

However, the eFP is not designed to be an activity for responding to irregular threats.<sup>65</sup> The eFP battlegroups, and by extension NATO, are not really equipped in the field of resilience. Conversely, the European Union and host nations have a lot more assets and experience, since countering these hybrid threats not only requires military operations, but also diplomatic, policing, economic and information responses, and therefore coordination between services that exceeds NATO's scope of action.

However, the nations participating in the eFP have undertaken actions targeting the populations in the host nations. These actions consist of public diplomacy, by explaining what NATO is, and presenting its activity and the special eFP mission to mayors of towns in the host state and in schools. Others involve organizing sports lessons and sports competitions for the residents of areas located near the military bases or offering foreign language classes, especially in English.<sup>66</sup>

In Estonia at least, our communication strategy is very clear. The officers and soldiers go to every possible event in Estonia to popularize the eFP, explain what they do, why they are there, what the UK is doing in Estonia. The idea is to demystify NATO and make it more difficult for Russia to use the eFP for fake news. They do it everywhere, even in the eastern part of Estonia where there is a Russian-speaking minority.<sup>67</sup>

These public diplomacy activities take place primarily in the Baltic countries which have Russian-speaking minorities. These minorities account for 26.5% of the population in Estonia, 26% in Latvia and 5.8% in Lithuania and they are mainly located in border areas with Russia or Belarus in Lithuania, and around the capitals of these three countries.

The minorities were initially assumed to be more receptive to Russian disinformation message. These messages are of different types and include accusing eFP troops of encouraging and making use of prostitution, polluting the environment due to poor management of military bases, contributing to the spread of Covid-19 by disregarding health rules, contributing to the surge in house prices due to the wage gap between troops and local people. However, after several years of NATO presence in these countries, an improvement has been seen. The fight against disinformation is now less necessary as the local population has become used to NATO's presence and is more familiar with its activity.

Disinformation has been less effective since the eFP is here, as the message doesn't stick. Fake news is now seen as blatant lies.<sup>68</sup>

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64. Interview with French diplomats, Brussels, November 12, 2021.

65. NATO uses the term "hybrid threats", particularly in the strategic concept 2010, but the polysemy of this term seems to be an obstacle to analysis (see Elie Tenenbaum, "Le piège de la guerre hybride", Focus stratégique no. 63, IFRI, 2015).

66. Interviews with a Belgian diplomat, Brussels, November 10, 2021, and with Canadian members of Task Force Latvia, January 14, 2022, via video-conference.

67. Interview with an Estonian diplomat, Brussels, November 11, 2021.

68. Interview with an American diplomat, Brussels, November 10, 2021.



So, the eFP plays a number of roles and is not solely a deterrence activity. It contributes both to the socialization of troops and to a better understanding of the security issues of each member state, as well as to improved communication about NATO to local populations. It therefore contributes to cohesion among allies beyond their armed forces.

## WAR IN UKRAINE, NEW STRATEGIC CONCEPT: THE CURRENT EVOLUTIONS OF THE eFP

### A never-ending activity?

Established after NATO Summit in Warsaw, the eFP is now into its fifth year of existence. When it was launched, no clauses specifying its conclusion were stipulated, and the end or suspension of the activity is not currently on the agenda.

Yet, when a decision is taken to engage troops for a deterrence mission, time must be considered for several reasons. First, an operation mobilizes part of the military resources of the contributing nations and can therefore reduce the possibility of taking part in other missions. Second, the development of capabilities is influenced over the long term in order to meet this need for deterrence. Lastly, deterrence imposes its conditions because, in this context, the decision to maintain troops is determined by the adversary's attitude, and its wish to keep the pressure on.<sup>69</sup>

Even before Russia launched its offensive against Ukraine in February 2022, the member states considered that the strategic situation had deteriorated since the launch of the eFP and that this did not plead in favor of its withdrawal:

From a strategic perspective, nothing has changed since Warsaw and it's even more complex. Russia has modernized its weapons and its training, which is now organized on a large scale. Belarus has been integrated into Russian military thinking. In addition to that, there is also the migration crisis, disinformation and fake news.<sup>70</sup>

The question of termination has not been addressed. The security environment is deteriorating with Russia's activities around Ukraine and Belarus, and the more active presence in the Baltic Sea. Our leaders know that Russia is a threat to the Euro-Atlantic community. It determines the deterrence posture we need throughout the Alliance.<sup>71</sup>

However, some allies are considering the conditions of ending the eFP because "deterrence is a present fact, not a future one"<sup>72</sup>, and "the eFP is under constant assessment and it is this assessment that will determine the end of the eFP."<sup>73</sup> But this will require a positive sign from Russia.<sup>74</sup>

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69. Interview with a Belgian senior officer, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

70. Interview with a Latvian diplomat, Brussels, November 9, 2021.

71. Interview with an Estonian diplomat, Brussels, November 11, 2021.

72. Interview with Canadian members of Task Force Latvia, January 14, 2022, via video-conference.

73. Interview with Polish diplomats, Paris, December 14, 2021.

74. Interview with a Belgian senior officer, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

Tensions between Europe, Russia and Ukraine should wane, there should be no political and/or military integration between Russia and Belarus, and we should come back to the relations that prevailed between the different parties in the 1990s, when there was military cooperation between NATO and Russia, and the latter was part of the G8.<sup>75</sup>

When Ukraine will leave the Russian sphere of influence, that will decide the end of the eFP. But if there is a Russia-Belarus merger and if there are Russian bases, then the eFP will remain. It will have to be maintained and probably adapted so that it is not only present in the Suwalki corridor.<sup>76</sup>

However, the end of the eFP raises several practical and political questions for NATO. The integration of the battlegroups into the host countries' national defense plans means that the latter would have to be reconfigured if the battlegroups were disbanded. This is a particularly important aspect for Estonia and Latvia, whereas Lithuania has not completely integrated the German presence into its defense plans and Poland develops them taking only its own forces into account<sup>77</sup>:

The forces are integrated into the First Latvian Brigade. When the battlegroup arrived, it almost doubled the number of soldiers and capabilities. To ease the integration of the eFP troops into the national framework, the deputy commander of the Latvian brigade is a Canadian. This demonstrates the trust and integration that have been achieved.<sup>78</sup>

In addition, this activity is still of interest to contributing nations. First, NATO currently has few missions, and participating in the eFP gives each nation the chance to show that it is contributing to the burden-sharing:

In addition, it is an opportunity to make an operational contribution to burden-sharing, since there are no other major NATO operations.<sup>79</sup>

Second, they continue to want to take part in the eFP to maintain a certain level of training:

Member-States are always asking to participate in the eFP for several reasons. On the one hand, they are committed because they understand the importance of deterrence and unity within the Alliance. And when they are here, they realize the benefits for their own armies because of the training they receive. For example, a country like Italy changes its contribution according to the season. In winter, they send mountain units and in summer, they send heavy forces. However, since the invasion of Ukraine, Italy has decided to deploy only heavy units to Latvia.<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, one factor linked to painful pasts could explain why the host nations have difficulty accepting the dissolution of the battlegroups. They were caught between Germany and Russia, which have caused their ruin several times in the past, notably during World War II, and then the Baltic States were forced into the USSR and Poland into the Eastern

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75. Interview with Canadian members of Task Force Latvia, January 14, 2022, via video-conference.

76. Interview with Polish diplomats, Paris, December 14, 2021.

77. Interview with Canadian members of Task Force Latvia, January 14, 2022, via video-conference.

78. Ibid.

79. Interview with a Belgian senior officer, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

80. Interview with Canadian members of Task Force Latvia, January 14, 2022, via video-conference.

bloc. Due to their experience in the past, these States seek assurance and guarantees of security from the Euro-Atlantic institutions:

Now that the eFP is here, the Baltic states will not let it go unless something else replaces it. They are very scared, having suffered for a hundred years between Germany and Russia, and they have an aggressive enemy neighbor, so they want reassurance.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, the governments of the Central and Eastern European countries would be reluctant to go back to the previous state of affairs. The eFP has indeed put an end to what some felt was a second-tier membership status. It is therefore very unlikely that they will again accept a NATO military absence on their territories.

## War in Ukraine and transformation of the eFP

Furthermore, NATO's strategy must consider the changing strategic situation in Eastern Europe. For instance, Belarus does have the same role as it did have at the time of the Warsaw Summit in 2016. From a government proposing mediation, particularly via the Minsk agreements, Belarus changed its line and moved closer to Moscow following the rigged elections in summer 2020. NATO had greatly overestimated the role of Belarus as a buffer state in its analyses.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, in February 2022, the Russian and Belarusian armies conducted joint military exercises in Belarus with more than 30,000 Russian soldiers deployed.<sup>83</sup> In addition, the non-nuclear, neutral state status adopted by Belarus in 1990 and enshrined in its constitution in 1994 was removed from the constitutional draft proposed by Alexander Lukashenko's government in December 2021.<sup>84</sup> This proposal for constitutional amendments followed Lukashenko's offers to host Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory if NATO transferred American atomic bombs from Germany to Central Europe.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, the question of maintaining the eFP no longer arises due to the continuing rise in tensions on the eastern flank. This rise was triggered by the winter 2021 publication of Russian red lines regarding the demilitarization of the States that have become members since 1999, i.e., the Central and Eastern European states. But it also stems from Moscow's will that NATO commits never to accept Ukraine as a member. These tensions culminated in the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022.

In response to this aggression, NATO Response Force (NRF), with 40,000 troops, was activated for the first time since its creation. This means that units of the member states'

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81. Ibid.

82. Interview with a Belgian senior officer, Brussels, November 10, 2021.

83. "Crise ukrainienne: la Russie lance des manœuvres militaires en Biélorussie", *Le Monde* with AFP, February 10 2022.

84. "We must ensure that Belarus remains a nuclear-weapon-free and neutral state", meeting between Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the director of ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons), official website of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/c8468707f997306.html>. Also see: the new Belarus Constitution project [https://president.gov.by/en/gosudarstvo/constitution/constitution\\_project](https://president.gov.by/en/gosudarstvo/constitution/constitution_project), official website of the Belarus presidency: [https://president.gov.by/en/gosudarstvo/constitution/constitution\\_project](https://president.gov.by/en/gosudarstvo/constitution/constitution_project).

85. "Belarus president offers to host Russian nuclear weapons", Associated Press News, November 30, 2021.

armed forces are made available to reinforce the deterrence posture and, if necessary, to be able to intervene rapidly to defend member states territory. The eastern flank was also considerably reinforced. The number of aircraft assigned to air policing was increased and additional ships were deployed to the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean (130 aircraft and 140 ships). Additional personnel have also been assigned to the eFP.<sup>86</sup> In February 2022, the total number of eFP forces was 4,957. The mid-March reinforcement of the deterrence posture brought the number of Allied troops up to 18,200 for the eFP, 4,200 for the tFP and an additional 2,900 in Hungary and Slovakia. By comparison, estimates for Kaliningrad Oblast, a Russian enclave between the Baltic states and Poland, are 30,000 personnel (15,000 Russian land forces, 10,000 naval forces and 5,000 air forces).

This effort also includes the tFP, stationed in Craiova, Romania, and covering the Black Sea region. The gradual rise in tensions in Europe, which led to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, led to a reassessment of the tFP. In the context of the VJTF, of which France is a framework nation in 2022, the Belgian and French governments have sent hundreds of soldiers.<sup>87</sup> Paris has also confirmed that it is prepared to become a framework nation in Romania if NATO member states wanted the tFP to evolve in this direction.<sup>88</sup>

Finally, multinational battlegroups have also been positioned in Hungary and Slovakia. In Hungary, Budapest acts as the framework and host nation and the contributing nations are Croatia, the United States and Turkey (900 soldiers). In Slovakia, the Czech Republic is the host nation and the contributing nations are Germany, Holland and Slovenia (643 soldiers). The establishment of these two battlegroups has brought about a unification, since all the troops present on the eastern flank of NATO now make up NATO's forward presence.<sup>89</sup>

However, for some Alliance member countries, the format of the mission should be revised. Polish President Andrzej Duda has proposed changing the function of the eFP from enhanced forward presence to enhanced forward defense.<sup>90</sup> This new name would result in a substantial increase in the number of troops and a change in the equipment assigned to the mission. All the battlegroups would therefore abandon the logic of training and deterrence and adopt a posture that would ensure the effective defense of the member states' territory by positioning credible combat forces. It would also mean that the eFP would no longer have status as an activity, but as a NATO mission or operation.

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86. See the map on NATO website "NATO's Eastern Flank: stronger defence and deterrence", March 16, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/3/pdf/2203-map-det-def-east.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/3/pdf/2203-map-det-def-east.pdf).

87. In Estonia, France participates in the eFP (Lynx mission) and the air policing mission (eAP). Since the invasion of Ukraine, France has also been involved in air policing in Poland and Romania, with 500 French soldiers contributing to the reinforcement of the tFP. Finally, French ships are participating in the deterrence and surveillance mission as well as in the air policing of Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia through the deployment of a naval air group (Reinforcement of NATO's defense and deterrence posture on the eastern flank of Europe, French Ministry of Defense, March 16, 2022, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/europe/europe-du-nord-lest/otan/renforcement-du-flanc-est-lotan>).

88. "La Roumanie compte sur le soutien des États-Unis et de l'OTAN", *Le Monde*, February 4, 2022. Also see the speech by Florence Parly, French Minister of the Armed Forces, in Bucharest on January 27, 2022: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/283573-florence-parly-27012022-france-roumanie>.

89. NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance: [https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics\\_136388.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics_136388.htm?selectedLocale=en).

90. Interview with Polish President Andrzej Duda by Konrad Piasecki, TVN24, March 26, 2022, <https://tvn24.pl/go/programy,7/opinie-i-wydarzenia-odcinki,16593/odcinek-2247,S00E2247,736436>.

A notable development in this direction has been made at NATO Summit in Madrid in June 2022. To reinforce the eastern flank, the allies took two main steps: increasing NATO Response Force to more than 300,000 personnel and turning the battlegroups positioned on the eastern flank, including those of the eFP, into brigades.<sup>91</sup> This would mean a major increase in troops compared to the initial format, since a battlegroup has about 1,000 members while a brigade can have between 7,000 and 8,000 soldiers. In June 2022, the Allied presence on the entire eastern flank, i.e., in the Baltic States, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria, amounted to 9,641 soldiers.<sup>92</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Created in a European security context that became more threatening after Russia's annexation of Crimea, the eFP does not offer any real strategic innovation. Moreover, it has several limits due to the heterogeneity of its implementation, being a training activity, a defense mission and a socialization tool altogether.

While its multilateral nature corresponds to NATO's modus operandi and practices, the eFP is the result of a bargain between the different member states. It is also an activity that corresponds to the objectives of NATO, an intergovernmental alliance whose effectiveness is based on interoperability and therefore on the ability to make the armies of 30 member states work together.

Despite its limits, the eFP is an activity that is part of the Alliance's long-term approach. Hence, it is in constant evolution and has been transformed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine to prevent any spillover effect into the territory of member states.

In addition, NATO's deterrence capability, which the eFP embodies, is sought after by partner states. Indeed, in the spring of 2022, Sweden and Finland have asked to join NATO, thus abandoning their status as neutral States. This strengthens the legitimacy of NATO for more than one reason as an effective military organization and as the only European regional alliance that it is able to defend and protect its members. As a result, despite its limits, the eFP is establishing the North Atlantic Alliance as a key player in guaranteeing the security, integrity and sovereignty of European nations.

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91. Madrid Summit Declaration, June 29, 2022: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_196951.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm).

92. Numbers on the eastern flank of NATO, June 2022: [https://shape.nato.int/resources/site16187/General/factsheets/2206-factsheet\\_efp\\_en.pdf](https://shape.nato.int/resources/site16187/General/factsheets/2206-factsheet_efp_en.pdf).



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