Powering Ahead

27 FEBRUARY 2023

Bartlomiej Kupiec and Steffen Meyer



The Eastern Flank: Concrete Figures, Hypothetical Rhetorics

Introduction:

On April 8th, 2025, a rumor surfaced on the news headlines of the biggest publications in Europe and across the Atlantic: *Pentagon considering proposal to cut thousands of troops from Europe. This news came both as a surprise and expectation from the incumbent US Presidential Administration. On one hand, such considerations came in almost complete accordance with the fiery claims of NATO withdrawal during Trump's presidential campaign trail. On the other, United States: the strongest ally of Europe, is considering*

a troop pull-out. How can this happen? Well, so far nothing happened, but it sent a clear message: the US will do anything in its power to reach this Administration's goals, one of the them being a peace deal in Ukraine. The troop withdrawal would target the troops currently stationed on the Eastern flank of the NATO alliance, therefore the focus of this month's brief on the region. This brief will inform on both what the NATO Eastern Flank is, what a US withdrawal would mean, the current troop numbers of the eastern European states, the current NATO troop deployments in the region, and possible takeaways from current Administration's behavior.

Defining NATO's Eastern Flank:

The NATO Eastern Flank is composed of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. What makes this region special, is the border-like nature it represents for the North-Atlantic alliance. Countries like Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Lithuania have a direct border with the propagator of the Ukraine invasion, the latter two even bordering Belarus, a strong Russian ally and host of Russian troops which have played an important role in the conflict.

The Eastern Flank grew in heightened importance as soon as the NATO 2016 Warsaw Summit, in which states agreed to bolster its security, amidst growing threats. The *NATO Forward Presence expanded as Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, growing to the current formation of 8 battlegroups, with the intent, that if needed, they could grow up to brigade-size.*

The current NATO Command structure is divided between 4 divisions: Multinational Division Northeast (MND-NE), Multinational Division North (MND-N), Multinational Division Centre (MND-C), Multinational Division Southeast (MND-SE).

Implications of a Potential US Withdrawal:

First, what are the numbers behind the potential US withdrawal? The Department of Defense officials underscored that the US withdrawal would target the 20,000 extra troops which have been deployed by the Biden Administration back in 2022 with the sole purpose of strengthening the countries bordering Ukraine. Out of these 20,000 troops, the plans would have entailed an estimate of ±10,000 troops to be called for better use in the Indo-Pacific.

Depending on the lens through which it is being looked at, the potential troop withdrawal, would have weighed harder in political significance rather than in a strategic one. It tells the world: the US is no longer committed to enabling the framing of this war as an imperialist Russian tale, but rather as a soon to be resolved conflict confined to the geographical borders of Ukraine.

If the US would remain part of the North Atlantic Alliance, it would have the Article 5 commitment on its shoulders, and thus the eastern flank would

still fall under the security umbrella of the United States. The degree to which this confidence can still be relied upon is a matter of debate on its own standing.

What about troops? On what can the Eastern Flank rely if not on the US? Well, Bruegel underlines that for the US to be replaced entirely when it comes to financial support for Ukraine, Europe would only have to increase its GPD spending by 0.12%. In terms of troops however, the calculations are worrying as the US has close to 100,000 troops deployed in all of Europe, with more than double being sidelined as reinforcements. It would mean that if the US was to withdraw from all of Europe, Europe would need to fill in 50 new brigades. **Current Troop Numbers of Eastern Flank Nations & NATO Troop Deployments on the Eastern Flank**

How do the national militaries of the countries bordering the war stack up? First, this brief only covers, troop numbers, and dismisses any mention of fighting equipment. It can be said right out of the gate, that countries, especially on the southern part of the flank have been dealing with obsolete means such as Su-25 and MiG 29 fighter, however, all ministries of defense from eastern flank countries have expressed their willingness to modernize and invest in their military capacity. With new programs such as the *ReArm Europe Plan-Readiness 2030, and discussion to boost GPD spending on defense among NATO countries, outlook on defense investments are promising. As a result, here is rundown of troop numbers, by country:*

Romania: ± 90 000
Bulgaria: ± 37 000
Hungary: ± 41 600
Slovakia: ± 19 500
Poland: ± 202 100
Lithuania: ± 23 000
Latvia: ± 17 250
Estonia: ± 7 700

*Troop numbers can be procured from Global Firepower – numbers may be skewed (when referring to troop, we refer to active military personnel)

Romania: 4 700
Bulgaria: 1 650
Hungary: 900
Slovakia: 1 100
Poland: 11 600
Lithuania: 3 700
Latvia: 4 000
Estonia: 2 200

Conclusion:

As a result, NATO troops, on average represent an addition of 11.4% on top of the national contingency of each country. While this number does not

directly link to any insight into the actual impact of the US troop withdrawal, it does show the numbers holding the constructive signaling by NATO.

NATO with, or without the US are strengthening the Eastern Flank, and looking at the figurative numbers from the media, a 10,000-troop withdrawal, primarily targeting Poland and Romania does not look as worrying when averaging it out across the countries of the Eastern flank.

It is fair to say, that the concern does not lie in the effective military numbers, but rather in the continued step-back in military commitments the US has been continuing to signal without much concrete action. It places Europe in uncertainty, but it also gives Europe the space to act quickly and build itself. With, or without 10,000 US troops, Europe can stand strong, and newfound investment signals, which came from the Commission, should represent an upcoming more resilient, more efficient and more pragmatic NATO Alliance and European Union.

DOI 10.69790/epis02.2

EPIS