

Deploying a German Brigade in Lithuania: Your Security is Our Security

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This article is about the 26 June 2023 decision by German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius to permanently station a war-ready heavy combat brigade in Lithuania and its implementation. This decision has become a flagship project of the so-called “Zeitenwende”. Firstly, I will describe the underlying threat, followed by the German-Lithuanian bilateral events that contributed to the deployment decision. Next, I will briefly outline the further stages of deployment and the associated realistic military exercises and maneuvers. It has become clear that with the decision to station a brigade, Lithuania’s security has also become Germany’s security.



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Threat Perception

In a speech to the Lithuanian parliament on 26 September 2024, Defence Minister B. Pistorius warned of the dangers posed by Russia's arms build-up. "We are witnessing how Russia is rapidly ramping up its weapons production and dramatically building up its armed forces. All of this leaves no doubt: for Russia, Putin's Russia, Ukraine is just the beginning". At the same time, not only Germany, but also Lithuania and other NATO and EU countries, are observing the attempts of the leadership in Moscow to undermine social cohesion in Western countries by hybrid means. For Russian President Putin, our free and democratic way of life is the real enemy. "Ukraine was a wake-up call, perhaps the last one we will get," said B. Pistorius in his speech to the Seimas (dpa Deutsche Presseagentur, 26.09.2024, „Pistorius warnt vor dramatischem russischem Truppenaufbau“).

In the same month of this year, Putin increased the number of troops in his armed forces for the third time since the start of the war of aggression against Ukraine that he had ordered. A presidential decree stated that the number of military personnel should be 2.389 million from December onwards, including 1.5 million soldiers. Only last December, Putin had increased the target number of troops in the armed forces to 2.2 million, including 1.33 million soldiers.

Russia is currently equipping its armed forces with around 1,500 additional tanks every year, which are mainly obtained from the depots by repairing old stocks, and is mobilizing around 300,000 new soldiers annually. The Russian war economy now has reached a budget of up to 9 % of GDP. In comparison, at the start of the war in 2022, the number of soldiers in Russia was just over one million.

What does this mean for our security, for the security of Lithuania and Germany?



Change of command ceremony for the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence contingent in Lithuania. *Photo from the archive of the Iron Wolf Brigade of the Lithuanian Armed Forces*

Deterrence and Defense on the Eastern Flank

On 27 February 2022, three days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said in his speech to the German Parliament that Germany would set up a special fund of 100 billion euros for the Bundeswehr. “We will use the funds for necessary investments and armaments projects. From now on, we will invest more than 2 percent of gross domestic product in our defense every year” (Government statement by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, 27.02.2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/regierungserklaerung-von-bundestkanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356>).

With regard to NATO’s eastern flank, Defense Minister B. Pistorius reminded everyone a year later that the Federal Republic of Germany was NATO’s eastern flank until 1990. Germany’s security was guaranteed by its allies. Today, “Poland, the Baltic states and other countries are the eastern flank.” He

emphasized that Germany has “very strong forces there” and “none of the other nations have more than we do, as far as I can see, and above all so consistently,” said B. Pistorius on Germany’s and NATO’s involvement in the Baltic states (dpa Deutsche Presseagentur, 07.03.2023, „Pistorius verspricht Litauen eine Verteidigung, ohne Wenn und Aber“).

However, after the beginning of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the question of a permanent presence of a German combat brigade in Lithuania has led to domestic political discussions in the Baltic country. The government in Vilnius assumed that a complete brigade would be stationed permanently in Lithuania, albeit with changing personnel, while the German government repeatedly stated that a combat-ready brigade would only be kept available for Lithuania, which would be stationed partly in the Baltic state and partly in Germany. In the event of tension, the plan at the time was to be able to deploy the entire brigade to Lithuania within ten days.

Lithuania was not satisfied with this solution. In an interview at the beginning of March 2023, Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis compared the issue of brigade stationing to “catching an eel in the water with your bare hands”. Lithuania would have no choice but to create the infrastructure for the German brigade, although there was no definitive answer as to whether and when it would arrive in Lithuania (dpa Deutsche Presseagentur, 07.03.2023, „Pistorius verspricht Litauen eine Verteidigung, ohne Wenn und Aber“).

This situation, which was as unclear as it was unsatisfactory from a Lithuanian perspective, only changed with the decision by Federal Minister B. Pistorius on 26 June 2023, to not only maintain a Bundeswehr brigade for Lithuania, but to deploy it permanently to the Baltic country. “Germany is prepared to permanently station a robust brigade in Lithuania,” said Defense Minister B. Pistorius during a visit to the Lithuanian capital Vilnius. The prerequisite would be the creation of the necessary infrastructure to accommodate the soldiers and training facilities (Der Spiegel, 26.05.2023,

<https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/boris-pistorius-stellt-dauerhafte-stationierung-einer-brigade-in-litauen-in-aussicht-a-97b2d7bd-429e-4eee-82fb-5db494c28e8f>).

On 18 December 2023, less than six months after this announcement, Germany and Lithuania agreed on the joint roadmap for a fully operational Bundeswehr combat brigade on NATO's eastern flank within four years. Defense Minister B. Pistorius (SPD) described the signing of the roadmap in Vilnius as a "historic moment".

The construction of barracks and residential buildings in Rūdninkai near the capital Vilnius and in Rukla near Kaunas is planned for the announced robust and war-ready brigade. In the roadmap signed in Vilnius, the two ministers reaffirm their states' commitment to "defend each other and every inch of the Alliance's territory at all times and to protect our freedom and democracy in accordance with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty" (dpa Deutsche Presseagentur, 18.12.2023, „Die Bedrohung ist groß“).

Upon signing the roadmap, the then Lithuanian Defense Minister Arvydas Anušauskas said that Russia was the greatest threat to the Baltic states after the war of aggression against Ukraine and could be capable of aggression in three, eight or ten years, depending on various scenarios. "The threat is great and no matter how we assess the time frame, we must prepare ourselves". Between the Russian Baltic Sea enclave of Kaliningrad and Russia's ally Belarus runs a narrow land corridor to the west – the so-called Suwalki Gap – which would have to be forcefully kept open in the event of a Russian attack in order to secure the supply and defense of Lithuania. For the Lithuanians, Germany's brigade deployment in Lithuania is a desired reassurance of the NATO commitment and means a great deal of support for the Lithuanian armed forces. The Lithuanian armed forces employ only 15,000 soldiers, including 3,500 conscripts. By 2030, this figure is expected to rise to between 17,000 and 18,000 soldiers.



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Deployment of a Bundeswehr Brigade

The German brigade in Lithuania is to be combat-ready and capable of fighting independently by 2027. A permanent presence of up to 5,000 soldiers is planned at the fixed locations of Rūdninkai and Rukla. Initially, a temporary solution is to take effect in Lithuanian barracks in Nemenčinė and Rokantiškės near the capital Vilnius. The new army unit in Lithuania is set up as Panzerbrigade 45. It is the first time that armed forces on this scale and in this number will be stationed outside Germany.

On April 8, 2024, the Bundeswehr began a permanent deployment on NATO's eastern flank with the transfer of the first soldiers from the Lithuanian brigade. Defense Minister B. Pistorius spoke of a significant step for the Alliance's defense capability and an important day for the Bundeswehr as he bid farewell to the 21 men and women of the brigade's advance party.

The advance party was welcomed in Vilnius by the then newly appointed Lithuanian Defense Minister Laurynas Kasčiūnas, who said that the deployment was "very important" for Lithuania and assured that the Lithuanian government would do everything in

its power to build the necessary infrastructure on time. 85 percent of Lithuanian society supported the project, he said and Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė is coordinating an inter-institutional group to implement the project. No one should get the idea that they could test the assistance obligations in NATO (dpa Deutsche Presseagentur, 08.04.2024, “Abschreckung an der Ostflanke: Deutsches Vorkommando in Litauen”).

On 23 September 2024, the designated new commander of the Panzerbrigade 45, Brigadier General Christoph Huber, took up his post in the NATO country. He will lead the unit’s deployment staff and is to complete the preparations for the deployment of the armored brigade itself. His staff is set to grow to around 150 men and women by the fourth quarter of 2024. Next year, around 500 German soldiers will be stationed in Lithuania, and in 2026, the multinational enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group, consisting of around 900 soldiers will be placed under the command of Panzerbrigade 45. The brigade will then continue to grow steadily. The aim is to establish the operational capability of the Brigade by the end of 2027.

Needless to say, realistic exercises and maneuvers are an important milestone on the way to operational capability.



Exercises

The first of these training milestones marked the Bundeswehr's major exercise Grand Quadriga in Lithuania in May 2024. For the German land forces, it was the largest exercise since the Russian attack on Ukraine: as part of the NATO exercise Steadfast Defender, the Bundeswehr practiced alerting, deploying 12,000 soldiers to NATO's eastern flank, and combat.

The Bundeswehr's Chief of Defense (CHOD), Carsten Breuer, reaffirmed Germany's special responsibility within NATO before the start of the exercise. "Germany is the backbone of Europe's defense," C. Breuer said. "The Quadriga exercise is an important step towards war readiness with the aim of deterring an opponent" (dpa Deutsche Presseagentur, 30.01.2024, „Bundeswehr vor Großübung Quadriga – Schritt zur Kriegstüchtigkeit“).

Along with the obvious training effect, deterrence is the main objective of not only these but all future exercises in Lithuania - amid increasing warnings that Russia could be ready to test NATO's will to join forces in a few years' time.

Inspector General C Breuer has reaffirmed Germany's determination to deter and defend Lithuania within the NATO alliance at the end of the month-long exercise Quadriga 2024. Quadriga is "our collective response to the dramatically growing threat from Russia," he said on 29 May 2024 at the Pabradė military training area, where the 10th Armored Division of the Bundeswehr practiced fighting against attackers with its NATO partners and in live fire.

The maneuver thus ended almost at the easternmost end of NATO's eastern flank. "Here in Pabradė, Putin's sphere of influence is only 15 kilometers away," said C. Breuer. "During this exercise, we have showed that we NATO-allies can and will defend ourselves. We have proven that we are ready for war." According to the German CHOD, analysts say that the Russian armed forces need five to eight years to be capable of attacking NATO territory. For our own military build-up, this means that "we have to be ready in

five years, and that is 2029”, said C. Breuer. “We have set ourselves this target and I believe we are well on the way to achieving it” (dpa Deutsche Presseagentur, 29.05.2024, “Generalinspekteur in Litauen: ‘Wir haben Kriegstüchtigkeit bewiesen’”).

The permanent deployment of a Bundeswehr-Brigade in Lithuania proves three claims. Firstly, NATO allies are capable of swift decision making and a remarkably fast planning and implementation speed, if needed. Secondly, the stationing of a fully combat capable brigade has turned into a deeply integrated, bilateral project of Lithuania and Germany, acting on par with each other. Both nations are equally distributing ownership and responsibility to make this project a success. Finally, Germany and Lithuania show that European NATO allies are willing and able to assume a larger share in leadership for their defense and security in Europe. The message is clear: Your security is our security.



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