

Winning hearts and minds the Canadian way: The eFP battlegroup and public opinion

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Abstract

Should foreign-based troops actively integrate into host nations' social fabric? Does personal contact between allied service members and local citizens result in greater public acceptance of foreign military presence? Substantial scholarly literature has probed these types of questions in the context of US-globe spanning military deployments. This study, however, departs from the US-centric approach. In the presented analysis, we examine the Canadian approach to "winning hearts and minds" in Latvia. Using original survey data, we measure local citizens' attitudes towards the Canadian-led battlegroup in Latvia. The decision to form this military mission was reached at NATO's Warsaw summit in 2016. As part of NATO's designed enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) model, Canada assumed the lead framework nation status. Today, upwards of 700 Canadian troops together with other NATO armed forces are stationed at Camp Adazi, just outside the capital Riga. Similar eFP formations in Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland are led respectively by the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States.

The paper proceeds in the following steps. We first survey the broader literature concerning foreign troop deployments and their often fraught relations with citizens of the hosting country. In doing so, we identify an understudied dimension in the scholarship, namely the lack of case studies that go beyond the United States. To address this shortcoming, we instead propose to evaluate Canadian troop relations with their hosts. The empirical analysis then details the approach that Canada has assumed to "win over" the Latvian population. As such, it sheds light on the public diplomacy campaign launched by Canadian representatives, aimed at engaging the local civilian population. Moreover, the analysis also discusses Russian active attempts to put the mission in a negative light as well as Canadian efforts to counter such malign narratives. In order to test the success or failure of Canada's taken approach, we then introduce our original survey data that reveal local citizens' attitudes towards the Canadian and foreign military personnel presence in the country.