

Research Briefing  
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Number

By Louisa Brooke-Holland

## UK forces in Estonia

Since 2017 the UK has led a multinational battlegroup in Estonia. The battlegroup is one of several established by NATO in 2016 to “enhance” its military footprint in the eastern part of the Alliance.

The UK has regularly deployed an armoured infantry battlegroup, equipped with Challenger 2 tanks and Warrior infantry fighting vehicles, on a six-month rotation, numbering around 900 personnel.

In February 2022, in response to the build-up of Russian forces around Ukraine, the UK doubled the number of personnel deployed to Estonia with the deployment of an additional battlegroup on a bilateral basis.

However, in October the Ministry of Defence (MOD) announced that the additional battlegroup will not be replaced in 2023. The UK will continue to lead the NATO battlegroup. Instead of the additional battlegroup, the UK will hold at high readiness the “balance of a Brigade” in the UK, available to deploy if needed. The UK will also “surge” forces throughout the year for exercises, enhance its headquarters and provide support to Estonian armed forces. In addition, RAF Typhoon aircraft will provide Baltic Air Policing in Estonia from March to July 2023.

As of October 2022, the UK has two separate battlegroups in Estonia:

- The King’s Royal Hussars, which leads the NATO enhanced forward presence multinational battlegroup
- 2 Rifles battlegroup, which is deployed on a bilateral basis

## 1

## Why are UK forces in Estonia?

In the aftermath of Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO adopted a series of measures designed to both reassure those allies who border Russia – like Estonia – and to deter any potential Russian military aggression towards NATO allies.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016 NATO agreed to set up an “enhanced Forward Presence” (eFP) in Poland and the three Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). This takes the form of a multinational battlegroup in each country, led by a framework nation (a lead country). The battlegroups were established in 2017.

The UK is the framework nation for the Estonia-based battlegroup. Since 2017, the UK has deployed an armoured infantry battalion equipped with Challenger 2 tanks and Warrior infantry fighting vehicles, numbering around 800 to 900 personnel, on rotating six-month tours.<sup>2</sup> The UK deployment is based in Tapa and is known as Operation Cabrit.

Denmark and France also contribute to the battlegroup, which is integrated with the Estonian 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade.

The UK also contributes a small force to the US-led battlegroup in Poland.

Separately, RAF Typhoons have deployed to Estonia as part of the Baltic air policing mission in 2015, 2016 and 2019 (and will again in spring 2023). Other parts of the armed forces have also participated in multilateral exercises with Estonian armed forces.



<sup>1</sup> Commons Library briefing CBP-9450, [NATO: Reinforcing its eastern flank](#)

<sup>2</sup> [PQ 129689 \[Eastern Europe: Armed Forces\], 1 March 2018](#)

## 1.1

# Forces doubled in 2022

In response to the build-up of Russian forces around Ukraine in early 2022, members of NATO announced plans [to increase their military presence](#) along the eastern flank of the Alliance.<sup>3</sup>

On 10 February 2022 Boris Johnson, then Prime Minister, said the British presence in Estonia will be doubled.<sup>4</sup>

This was achieved initially by bringing forward the deployment of the incoming **Royal Welsh** battlegroup and extending the tour of the outgoing **Royal Tank Regiment**, so that the battlegroups overlapped. On 25 February James Heapey, the Minister for the Armed Forces, said these doubled-up force levels [“will remain indefinitely”](#). He also said that, when augmented by headquarters of 12 Mechanised Brigade. the UK “will have an armoured brigade in Estonia.”<sup>5</sup>

The early deployment of the Royal Welsh required the battlegroup to move from their pre-training area in Germany through Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, moving 137 armoured vehicles with 700 personnel at speed.<sup>6</sup>

In September, the Royal Welsh completed their six-month tour and were replaced by The **King’s Royal Hussars**, who have assumed leadership of the multinational battlegroup.<sup>7</sup> The King’s Royal Hussars group consists of:

- Two tank squadrons
- An anti-tank company (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Scots Guards) with Javelin weapon system mounted on Mastiff protected mobility vehicles
- MLRS (Multiple Launch Rocket System) and AS90 fire support batteries
- An armoured engineer squadron and an air defence troop.
- Elements of the battlegroup are armed with NLAW (Next generation Light Anti-tank Weapon) to defeat enemy armour.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Library briefing paper [NATO: Reinforcing its eastern flank, 8 April 2022](#), CBP-9450 for a more detailed discussion of the creation and expansion of the enhanced forward presence battlegroups.

<sup>4</sup> [Press conference with with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom](#), Boris Johnson, NATO, 10 February 2022

<sup>5</sup> [HC Deb 25 February 2022 \[Ukraine\]](#)

<sup>6</sup> Corporal Stephens briefing on a RUSI hosted webinar [Operation CABRIT: The British Army's Contribution to Deterrence in the Baltic States](#), 26 July 2022

<sup>7</sup> [Armyrotates troops on NATO duties in Estonia](#), Forces News, 24 September 2022; [Royal Welsh battlegroup conducts final exercise in Estonia](#), British Army, 2 September 2022

<sup>8</sup> [British Armyrotates troops in Estonia continuing support of NATO](#), British Army, 23 September 2022

Although the Royal Tank Regiment's tour was extended, the formal leadership of the NATO battlegroup passed to the Royal Welsh in March 2022.<sup>9</sup>

## 1.2 Extending the doubling of personnel

The Royal Tank Regiment returned to the UK in June 2022, having been in Estonia since September 2021.<sup>10</sup> They were replaced by **2 Rifles battlegroup**.

On 6 June Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas announced that the UK "has doubled the number of troops in NATO's eFP in Estonia for a further six months." The statement also mentioned further cooperation through the Joint Expeditionary Force,<sup>11</sup> military exercises, and NATO's Baltic air policing, to which the RAF contribute.<sup>12</sup>

### 2 Rifles battlegroup deploys

2 Rifles battlegroup deployed to Estonia in June 2022, replacing the Royal Tank Regiment.

They are not part of the enhanced forward presence battlegroup and are under UK, not NATO, command.<sup>13</sup> The Army said the battlegroup is deployed under a bilateral agreement with Estonia to bolster defence forces in the country and will be integrated with Estonia's 2<sup>nd</sup> infantry brigade.<sup>14</sup> They are expected to train beyond Estonia, and in a tweet on 4 September, 2 Rifles said its troops were training in Finland, Latvia and Poland.<sup>15</sup>

2 Rifles was not a like-for-like replacement for the Royal Tank Regiment. 2 Rifles are light infantry – they are not equipped with the Challenger 2 tanks of the Royal Tank Regiment. The battlegroup deployed to Estonia is described by the Army as comprising three infantry companies, a fire support company (which directs artillery fire and air support onto enemy

<sup>9</sup> [The Royal Welsh take the lead for NATO in Estonia](#), British Army, 18 March 2022

<sup>10</sup> [Royal Tank Regiment return home after extended deployment](#), British Army, 21 June 2022

<sup>11</sup> The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) is a UK-led military grouping of predominantly Northern Europe countries. It is separate to but intended to complement NATO.

<sup>12</sup> [Joint leaders statement by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the Rt Hon Boris Johnson and the Prime Minister of Estonia](#), Mrs Kaja Kallas, 6 June (PDF).

<sup>13</sup> Confirmed with the Ministry of Defence by the author, 11 October 2022

<sup>14</sup> [2 Rifles battlegroup arrives in Estonia to strengthen European security](#), British Army, 23 June 2022

<sup>15</sup> 2 Rifles (@CO\_2Rifles) "C Company have been training with Swedish and Finnish forces in Finland, sharing knowledge and experience. The 2 RIFLES Battlegroup, which makes up the Agile Task Force based in Estonia, currently has troops deployed to FI, LV and PL!" (Twitter) 4 September 2022 [Accessed 11 October 2022]. Available from:

[https://twitter.com/CO\\_2RIFLES/status/1566421933838712834](https://twitter.com/CO_2RIFLES/status/1566421933838712834)

positions) and attached artillery, engineering, logistic and medical support elements.<sup>16</sup>

According to Janes Defence Weekly, Army sources said the change would “provide commanders with a more flexible force configuration as a result of changes to the threat”. Janes also notes it reduces the pressure on the army’s armoured infantry battalions operating Warrior fighting vehicles by giving them a rest from back-to-back deployments.<sup>17</sup>

The Army has used the term “Agile Task Force” to describe the 2 Rifles battlegroup. This was the same term used to describe the Royal Tank Regiment’s extended tour after it handed over leadership of the NATO battlegroup.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.3 Personnel numbers

The overlapping of the Royal Tank Regiment with the Royal Welsh in spring 2022 meant that the number of Army personnel in Estonia increased from around 800 to 900 personnel deployed in previous rotations to around 1,700 personnel.<sup>19</sup>

This includes those attached to NATO’s enhanced forward presence and those deployed on a bilateral basis.

James Heapey, the Minister for the Armed Forces, differentiated between the two deployments when responding to a written question about troop numbers in Estonia:

As of 29 June 2022 there are 833 members of the UK Armed Forces deployed to Estonia as part of the UK’s contribution to enhanced Forward Presence. Additionally, the UK has deployed a further 652 personnel to Estonia on a bilateral basis.<sup>20</sup>

When the Minister visited Tapa in August, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) said there were more than 1,600 UK personnel there, 800 in each battlegroup.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> [2 Rifles battlegroup arrives in Estonia to strengthen European security](#), British Army, 23 June 2022

<sup>17</sup> “Ukraine conflict: British Army deploys tank-heavy EFP battlegroup to Estonia”, Janes Defence Weekly, 27 September 2022

<sup>18</sup> See for example the briefing given by Lieutenant Colonel Gerry McKay, Europe Operations Team Leader, Land Operations Command, at a RUSI hosted Webinar [Operation CABRIT: The British Army’s Contribution to Deterrence in the Baltic States](#), 26 July 2022

<sup>19</sup> [PQ 126543 \[Estonia: Armed Forces\], 24 February 2022](#)

<sup>20</sup> [PQ 27513 \[Estonia: Armed Forces\], 4 July 2022](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Armed Forces Minister meets UK troops in Estonia](#), Ministry of Defence, 24 August 2022

NATO enhanced forward presence factsheets also includes only the armoured infantry battalion, plus support elements. A comparison of the battlegroup size in February and June 2022 is provided in the table at the end of the paper (page 9).

## 1.4 Deployments in 2023

In September 2022 the Times reported that only the King's Royal Hussars will remain in Estonia from January 2023. A source told the Times troops would instead be held on standby to head to Estonia, rather than being based in the country. The MOD was quoted in the article as saying that the additional battlegroup "was always a temporary deployment."<sup>22</sup>

James Heapey confirmed the Times report in response to a written question on 21 October 2022. He said the UK's future force posture will consist of:

- One battlegroup
- An enhanced headquarters with around 35 personnel
- "Surge deployments" of additional personnel and capabilities throughout the year (later identified as including Chinook and Apache helicopters<sup>23</sup>)
- Personnel numbers will fluctuate, expecting to increase from the current 994 personnel to around 1020 when the battlegroup rotates in March
- A balance of a brigade will be held at high readiness in the UK, ready to reinforce the region.<sup>24</sup>

The Defence Secretary has confirmed the second battlegroup will return to the UK in December 2022.<sup>25</sup>

In an oral question, Lord Coaker, the Shadow Spokesperson for Defence, suggested the Estonian Government is "extremely disappointed" with the UK for halving the number of troops.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Britain to halve soldiers in Estonia force amid rising tension with Russia, The Times, 28 September 2022

<sup>23</sup> [Joint statement between the UK MOD and the Estonian MOD](#), Ministry of Defence, 8 November 2022

<sup>24</sup> [PQ 62722 \[Estonia: Armed Forces\], 21 October 2022](#)

<sup>25</sup> [Joint statement between the UK MOD and the Estonian MOD](#), Ministry of Defence, 8 November 2022

<sup>26</sup> [HL Deb 31 October 2022 c2](#)

The MOD has since provided more details of future plans:

- Three Chinook, four Apache and four Wildcat helicopters will be deployed over separate deployments between January and June 2023.<sup>27</sup>
- In addition to the approximate 950 personnel on Operation Cabrit as the enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup, a total of up to 1,120 additional personnel will be deployed between January and June 2023.<sup>28</sup>

## 2 Additional support to Estonia

In June 2022 the Defence Secretary announced plans to expand the UK's existing HQ in Estonia. The MOD said it will support the rapid deployment of high readiness forces at the brigade level. The MOD also described plans to support Estonia's armed forces:

The UK will also support Estonia with training and logistics, the development of its first divisional-level HQ, as well as developing new ways of fighting through their joint hosting of the Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic European HQ, and supporting innovative dual use start-ups through the NATO Innovation Fund.<sup>29</sup>

### The Defence Innovation Accelerator

The Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA) programme was announced in April 2022 by the NATO Secretary General. The UK and Estonia will host the European HQ for the programme, which is intended to “accelerate, test, evaluate and validate new technologies, addressing critical defence challenges and contributing to alliance deterrence.”<sup>30</sup>

### Agreement on a “Defence Roadmap”

Ben Wallace and his Estonian counterpart, Hanno Pevkur, committed to “ever stronger ties” and signed a “Defence Roadmap” on 8 November 2022.

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<sup>27</sup> [PQ 83525 \[Estonia: Helicopters\]](#), 15 November 2022

<sup>28</sup> [PQ 83524 \[Estonia: Armed Forces\]](#), 15 November 2022

<sup>29</sup> [UK to make more forces available to NATO to counter future threats](#), Ministry of Defence, 29 June 2022

<sup>30</sup> [UK to host world-leading NATO defence innovation headquarters](#), Ministry of Defence, 5 April 2022

In a joint statement they outlined several initiatives, including:

- Estonia to start the development of an Estonian warfighting Division. This will command in-place national and Allied forces from 2024.
- The UK will support the development of Estonia's national Divisional Headquarters.
- The UK will maintain Divisional-level assets (short range air defence and multiple launch rocket systems) in Estonia
- The UK will periodically deploy additional capabilities and enablers, including Apache and Chinook helicopters (the latter will deploy in January 2023)
- From April 2023 the UK's headquarters will be led by a Brigadier
- The UK will hold the balance of a Brigade at high readiness in the UK
- The UK will regularly exercise the reinforcement of UK forces in Estonia up to Brigade-level, starting with Exercise Spring Storm in May 2023
- Estonia will improve its host nation support for UK surge forces with additional accommodation halls and support facilities at Tapa Camp, with an additional reception staging onward movement assembly area in the south of Estonia, with work beginning on a new permanent camp and enlarged training area
- UK will provide Baltic Air Policing in Estonia from March to July 2023 with Typhoon aircraft<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> [Joint statement between the UK MOD and the Estonian MOD](#), Ministry of Defence, 8 November 2022



UK-led NATO battlegroup in Estonia		
Contributor (February 2022)	Troops	Forces
UK	808	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 x armoured infantry battalion with main battle tanks and armoured fighting vehicles</li> <li>Self-propelled artillery, air defence assets and engineers</li> <li>Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance group</li> <li>Logistic support elements</li> </ul>
France	337	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 x tank squadron with main battle tanks and armoured fighting vehicles</li> <li>Supported by an engineer platoon and national support elements</li> </ul>
Iceland	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 strategic communications specialist (civilian)</li> </ul>
Approximate total troop number: 1,146		
Contributor (June 2022)	Troops	Forces
UK	993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 x armoured infantry battalion with main battle tanks and armoured fighting vehicles</li> <li>Self-propelled artillery, air defence assets and engineers</li> <li>Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance group</li> <li>Logistic support elements</li> </ul>
France	219	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 x Light infantry company</li> </ul>
Denmark	217	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 x Mechanised infantry company</li> </ul>
Iceland	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 strategic communications specialist (civilian)</li> </ul>
Approximate total troop number: 1,430		

Source: NATO factsheets [February 2022](#) (PDF) and [June 2022](#) (PDF)

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