

Canada to jointly lead NATO's new "advanced force" against Russia

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Ahead of next week's NATO summit in Warsaw, Poland, where the US-led alliance will further ratchet up pressure on Russia, Canada's Liberal government has unveiled plans to deploy up to a thousand troops to the Baltic.

The Canadian Armed Forces' battalion will be part of a NATO "high-readiness," "advanced deployment force" of 4,000 soldiers. The United States, United Kingdom and Germany have already pledged to commit one battalion each to the force, which will operate in the three Baltic republics, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and in Poland. It is to complement NATO's larger Rapid Reaction Force of up to 40,000 soldiers, which is capable of deploying to the region in a matter of days.

"As part of NATO we were giving assurance to member states there, but now this has evolved to deterrence," said Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan in announcing the deployment Thursday. He also added that the 220 Canadian troops already in Poland would change their posture so as to be ready for potential attacks. Previously they had been engaged only in training exercises.

The new Canadian deployment is open ended, i.e., effectively permanent. This is a clear violation of the pledge NATO made in order to secure Moscow's acquiescence to its incorporation of the Baltic States and former Warsaw Pact members that NATO would not permanently deploy forces on Russia's borders.

Ottawa and NATO are claiming that the "advanced force" will not violate that pledge, because every six months or so the forces comprising it will be rotated out and replaced with others.

Sajjan's announcement came just 24 hours after US President Barack Obama travelled to Canada and delivered a speech to parliament in which he urged Ottawa to play a greater role in NATO and spend more on its military. Referring explicitly to the need to stand united against "Russian aggression," Obama declared to

rapturous applause, "As your ally and as your friend, let me say that we'll be more secure when every NATO member including Canada contributes its full share to our common security." "The world," he continued, "needs more Canada. NATO needs more Canada."

The timing of the announcement appears to have resulted from US pressure to demonstrate NATO "unity" in the wake of last week's referendum vote in favour of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, Brexit. Earlier in June, sources close to Justin Trudeau's Liberal government indicated that some in the cabinet were reluctant to commit troops to Eastern Europe because of long-standing plans to deploy a so-called peacekeeping mission to West Africa. Senior military officials reportedly reassured the government that it would be feasible to pursue both deployments.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reportedly called Sajjan directly to press for a positive decision. "We are very grateful for the contributions from Canada, which we [have] already received, but we would welcome even more," Stoltenberg said in a CBC interview.

Canada's military-security apparatus and ruling elite have also been pressing the Trudeau government to play a more prominent role in the US-led offensive against Russia. Last week, former Progressive Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney gave a bellicose speech in which he said Canada must join the NATO force, hike military spending to at least 2 percent of GNP per year, and otherwise prepare for war. Earlier in June, Canada's premier intelligence agency, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), issued a report in which it charged Russia is "mobilizing for war" with NATO.

Canada has played a prominent and inflammatory role in the anti-Russian coalition in Eastern Europe from the outset of the build-up of military forces following the US- and German-sponsored, fascist-led coup in Kiev in February 2014. The Conservative government of Stephen

Harper sent CF-18 fighter jets to exercise in Romania and participate in air patrols over the Baltic, deployed a frigate to the Black Sea, and sent soldiers to Poland. Harper also struck a bellicose tone towards Russia and was one of the closest allies of the far-right regime in Kiev, famously telling Russian President Vladimir Putin at a G-20 summit to “get out of Ukraine!”

This hardline stance has persisted unabated since the coming to power of Justin Trudeau last October. Early on, Trudeau vowed to implement a free trade deal with Ukraine that Harper had struck and retained the deployment of Canadian troops and ships in Europe, including 200 soldiers in western Ukraine who are training Ukrainian Army and National Guard units in collaboration with the US. Earlier this year, after withdrawing CF-18 fighter jets from the air war in Syria and Iraq, the Trudeau government ordered four of them to Romania, which borders Ukraine to the south, to conduct exercises with the NATO member’s air force.

Last week, Trudeau gave his full support to Washington’s false narrative about Russian “aggression,” claiming Moscow is fomenting conflict in Ukraine and describing its actions as “illegitimate and irresponsible.” “We have real concerns,” he told a press conference, “about Russia and about its actions and we will be thoughtful and firm, as I have always been, on how we engage with Russia.”

Trudeau also made an appearance before the right-wing, ultra-nationalist Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC), which collaborated closely with the Canadian state during the Cold War and has worked hand-in-glove with Liberal and Conservative governments over the past 20 years to harness independent Ukraine to western imperialism. To a standing ovation of UCC members and visiting Ukrainian politicians, Trudeau declared, “Canada will continue to defend Ukraine’s sovereignty in response to Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea as well as its support to insurgents in Eastern Ukraine.”

Paul Wells, writing in the *Toronto Star*, could not help opening his article on Trudeau’s speech with the revealing remark, “Some days it’s as though Stephen Harper never lost the election.”

UCC members have been heavily involved in directly supplying military equipment, including arms, to volunteer battalions in the Ukrainian civil war, many of which are dominated by extreme right-wing, and openly fascist, forces.

Immediately after the NATO summit next week, Trudeau will travel to Kiev for two days of meetings with

the Ukrainian government.

Over the past 25 years, Canada has strengthened its longstanding military-security alliance with Washington and done so as US imperialism has increasingly resorted toward aggression and war to prop up its global hegemony.

Since 1991 Canada has participated in all of the US’s long series of wars, with the sole exception of its illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq, and even then, as Washington conceded, Canada provided more military support than many of the members of Bush’s “coalition of the willing.”

Currently, Canadian forces are deployed in the Mideast war, which is aimed at toppling the Assad regime in Damascus and shoring up US dominance over the world’s most important oil-exporting region. Canada is also deeply implicated in the Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia,” its economic and military-strategic offensive against China.

The Trudeau government’s decision to deploy troops to the Baltic States enjoys overwhelming support within the political and media establishment, which see it as a means of further strengthening the Canada-US alliance and more aggressively asserting the interests of Canadian imperialism on the world stage.

The Liberals are currently conducting a defence policy review with the aim of corralling public opinion behind plans to make Canada’s military a “global policeman” and vastly increase its weaponry and resources.

These sentiments were summed up in an article by Stephen Saideman, the chair of the international affairs program at Carleton University, that appeared in the *Globe and Mail* just prior to the announcement of the new NATO deployment. Saideman urged the government to rapidly agree to lead the fourth battalion of the new NATO force, writing that it would put Canada on a par with “the big heavy hitters in the alliance.”

By taking a leading role in the new “high-readiness” force, Canada would, argued Saideman, gain “a much more visible role in Europe which would give Canada more heft within NATO discussions. This would be, in the parlance of these things, big bang for the buck.”



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