

**ORG EXPLAINS #10**

# THE UK'S JOINT EXPEDITIONARY FORCE



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## **Subject:**

This primer describes the new UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), situating it in the context of other European rapid reaction forces and the UK and NATO's expanded military presence in the Baltic Sea region.

## **Context:**

The development of flexible, multinational military forces capable of mounting rapid operations overseas has been a defining feature of European security cooperation in the 2010s. Drivers include financial and manpower constraints since the financial crisis, the drawdown of most NATO forces from Afghanistan, the French experience of intervention in Mali and the Sahel since 2013, and the perceived need to respond to threats from Russia and the Islamic State group since 2014. The JEF is the principal UK initiative, partnering with eight other northern European countries. It aims to leverage British expertise in amphibious operations and to reassert the UK's Cold War role as the primary European player in NATO's northeast. A series of military exercises in summer 2019 will bring a multinational JEF Maritime Task Force of 20 or more vessels into the Baltic Sea for the first time. This follows a significant expansion of NATO's presence in the Baltic region since 2017, with the UK matching the United States as the most active external military actor. Indeed, for a few weeks in 2019, the Baltic Sea will temporarily rival the Eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf for the largest overseas concentration of British military forces.

## **Key points:**

- The JEF is intended to be a flexible, UK-led force of up to 10,000 personnel available for overseas deployment, including combat, peacekeeping and humanitarian operations.
- Other participating countries are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Of these, Dutch forces are easily the most capable and integrated with British forces.
- JEF is a sovereign British capability that could be used as a stand-alone force or to lead or support NATO, UN, or EU operations.
- European states and organisations have been trying to develop rapid response intervention forces for over a decade. There are currently overlapping initiatives from the EU, NATO, France and Italy as well as the UK.
- Since 1990, the strategic geography of the Baltic region has shifted radically from a "Soviet lake" to a primary area of NATO-Russia contestation. Six of nine Baltic states are now NATO members. Since 2017, NATO has established a brigade-strength "Enhanced Forward Presence" spread thinly across Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.
- The UK has over 1,000 troops deployed indefinitely in Estonia and Poland. With the JEF naval presence, two units of Typhoon fighter aircraft and additional armoured and helicopter units deployed for training exercises in summer 2019, this presence has increased to over 3,000.

## What is the Joint Expeditionary Force?

The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) is a British-led initiative to develop a multinational pool of military forces able to contribute rapidly to overseas “contingency operations”. These might include combat, peacekeeping and humanitarian and disaster relief missions. It envisages a flexible force of up to 10,000 personnel drawn from a list of troops and equipment designated by the participant countries.

The concept was originally floated in December 2012 as a revival of a national capacity (the Joint Rapid Reaction Force) that the British Armed Forces had lost through focus on major combat operations in Afghanistan (2001-2014) and Iraq (2003-2009). The new JEF was originally expected to focus on the Middle East and Africa. After the Russian annexation of Crimea, JEF was launched as a multinational initiative at the NATO Summit in Wales in July 2014. It was officially constituted in September 2016.

JEF follows the NATO Framework Nations Concept, whereby a larger member state (e.g. UK, France, Germany, Italy) provides the core of a multinational formation focused on providing a particular military capability. The reframed JEF has an implicit focus on reviving capabilities to confront Russia in Northeast Europe. However, it is conceived to be deployable anywhere in the world and frequent reference has been made to humanitarian missions such as the UK-led response to the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone (Operation Gritrock, 2014-2015), which integrated Dutch, Norwegian, Danish, Canadian and Irish military assistance.

The Force is Joint in the sense that it combines Ground, Maritime and Air forces, rather than multinational. However, the main operational focus has been on developing a maritime task force based on the Royal Navy’s existing Amphibious Task Group. As the Framework Nation, the UK provides the command and control element of the Force (Standing Joint

Force Headquarters) from Northwood, near London. It remains capable of deploying the Force without any additional partner’s forces, but the JEF could not be constituted without UK participation.

Annual JEF training exercises have been held since 2016 and the Force was declared to be fully operational in June 2018. Baltic Protector (May-July 2019) is the first deployment of JEF as an operational force.

## Who participates in JEF?

The United Kingdom is the lead, or framework, nation in JEF but the Force is officially a partnership with eight other states:

- Denmark
- Estonia
- Finland
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Netherlands
- Norway
- Sweden

This is not a random grouping of willing states, but a geographic cluster of Northern European states focused on Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea region. They broadly share similar threat perspectives of Russia and many fought together in Afghanistan before 2014.

After the UK, the Netherlands (which is also neither a Nordic nor Baltic state) is the key partner as it has more capable military forces than the others, including three large amphibious assault ships. The Dutch Marine Corps has had a very close relationship with the British Royal Marines since the 1960s and has long been designed to integrate with the British marine infantry brigade. During the Cold War, their combined forces were prioritised, trained and equipped for the defence of Norway, NATO’s ‘Northern Flank’. Such cooperation has been reprioritised since 2017.

Participation of states in the JEF initiative does not bind them to commit personnel to any deployment of the Force. They commit to making certain capabilities ready and available to a JEF pool in the event of a crisis and to joint training exercises to develop interoperability.

### **How does JEF relate to other regional security organisations?**

The JEF is a sovereign British capability but it could be used as part of a NATO, EU or UN intervention force, subject to an appropriate mandate.

JEF is not an official initiative of the **North Atlantic Treaty Organisation** (NATO), although it is designed to be compatible with NATO doctrine and standards and could be used as its “spearhead force”. Finland and Sweden are not members of NATO, although they increasingly train to be interoperable with military forces from Norway, Denmark and Iceland (through **Nordic Defence Cooperation**, launched in 2009) and the rest of NATO.

Another recent British military cooperation initiative known as the **Northern Group**, was formed in late 2010 as a British initiative to provide a forum for NATO’s northern European states to discuss defence and security issues formally with Finland and Sweden. This includes all JEF members plus Germany and Poland. However, there is no official relationship between JEF and the Northern Group.

The JEF is not an initiative of the **European Union**. Norway is not an EU member; Denmark has opted out of all EU defence integration initiatives. While the possibility of JEF deploying as part of an EU-flagged force was originally mooted, this looks unlikely in the event that the UK leaves the EU as planned. Rather, since 2016, JEF has become a mechanism for the UK to reinforce military relationships with European states, especially Sweden and Finland, outside of EU initiatives.

JEF could also be used as part of, or a parallel force to, a **United Nations** peace operation, leveraging faster and heavier deployment capacities. Precedents for this include the UK intervention in Sierra Leone (2000), the EU operation in the DRC (2003) and the French interventions in Côte d’Ivoire (2002) and Mali (2013).

### **How does JEF relate to other rapid response or expeditionary force initiatives?**

Over the past 15 years, attempts to establish multinational standby forces held at high readiness have been a defining characteristic of the European security landscape.

Since 2005, within the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), a **British-led Battlegroup** has been designated for six months every 3-4 years to be the EU’s standby rapid reaction force. This has usually incorporated small units from a shifting coalition of JEF participant states. A **Nordic Battlegroup** of about 2,400 personnel from Nordic and Baltic states (minus Denmark, plus Ireland) is also periodically constituted around Swedish capabilities. Such Battlegroups are intended more for UN peacekeeping and humanitarian missions than for European defence.

For collective defence, NATO created the **Very High Readiness Joint Task Force** (VJTF) in 2014 as a new “spearhead force” for its larger NATO Response Force (NRF). Leadership of the VJTF rotates between NATO member states every six months, with the need to keep at least 3,000 appropriately trained and equipped troops on standby during this period. In the future, the JEF would be held as the core element of VJTF when the UK is its lead country. However, as a NATO formation, VJTF would require the consent of all 29 members in the North Atlantic Council to deploy.

A parallel NATO-compatible initiative to JEF loosely within the EU has been pursued under French leadership since 2017 and known as the

**European Intervention Initiative (E2I).** Despite expecting to leave the EU, the UK has indicated that it wants to remain part of E2I. Denmark, Estonia, Finland and the Netherlands are also official participants in E2I, along with four other EU states. Given French commitments in Africa – where the UK and others already support French operations in Mali – the expectation is that the E2I will focus on boosting capacity for interventions south of Europe.

Italy also presented itself in 2014 as a Framework Nation for a **Stabilisation Force** concept, drawing in Central and Southeast European partners for peace support operations in the Balkans or Southern Mediterranean region. However, this initiative seems to have lost momentum and never involved any of the JEF partners.

There is also a **Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF)** that aims to integrate the global power projection capabilities of the UK and France as a rapid reaction “entry force” of up to 10,000 ahead of less deployable allies. This was an output of the November 2010 Lancaster House Treaties and has occasioned annual joint exercises since 2012. The CJEF includes the **Airborne CJEF (A-CJEF)**, a collaboration between British and French parachute brigades.

This highlights one issue with the various overlapping high readiness forces, being that they largely rely on the same pools of elite or commando forces. Thus, for the UK it is the Royal Marines, Parachute Regiment (16 Air Assault Brigade) and two remaining Armoured Brigades that are relied upon, representing only about one-quarter of ground forces manpower. The situation is similar for Dutch forces, where suitable units are also committed to work within German- and French-led missions as well as, on rotation, various EU Battlegroups and NATO’s VJTF.

### What will the JEF task group be doing in the Baltic region in summer 2019?

The JEF Maritime Task Group was constituted for the first time in late May 2019 off Denmark and will proceed to conduct a series of training operations over a six-week period during a deployment to the Baltic Sea. This will have three main phases:

1. **Baltic Protector** – an exercise around Esbjerg in western Jutland involving some 20 ships and boats and some 3,000 personnel from the UK, Netherlands, Denmark and Norway. This has involved simulated amphibious and parachute landings.
2. **BALTOPS 2019** – a major, annual NATO naval exercise, led by the US Navy in the southern Baltic Sea between Germany, Denmark and Sweden.
3. **JEF (M) Amphibex 19** – a larger amphibious landings exercise of the JEF Maritime Task Group, including elements from Finland, Sweden and the Baltic States in the central Baltic Sea around Estonia and Latvia.

At its peak in late June, the JEF Maritime Task Group will include 20-30 ships and boats from all nine countries and several thousand ground forces, including the battalion-strength Royal Marines 45 Commando. British vessels will include two amphibious assault ships, a cargo ship, hospital ship, tanker, two frigates, a minehunter and seven small patrol craft. Including British Army helicopters already in Estonia, the JEF should also have 15-20 British and Dutch assault and attack helicopters. Combat aircraft from the RAF and regional air forces are also expected to be involved.

### Has NATO changed its presence in the Baltic Sea region?

Separate from the JEF, NATO has greatly increased its military presence in the Baltic Sea region since 2014. It refers to its increased deployments there as ‘reassurance operations’



to deter any Russian actions against the Baltic States or Poland.

This is quite new for NATO as during the Cold War the alliance's only local members (Denmark and West Germany) were at the far southwest extremity of the Baltic; the Soviet Baltic Fleet effectively controlled the rest of the Sea. Following the dissolution of the USSR and Warsaw Pact alliance, Poland joined NATO in 1999 and the three Baltic States followed in 2004. Russia retains access to the Baltic via a small coastline on the Gulf of Finland and, more centrally and strategically, from its exclave of Kaliningrad. While much reduced, it still has easily the largest naval presence in the Baltic.

Between 2004 and 2014, the main standing NATO presence was a token force of four fighter aircraft flying **Air Patrols** of the Baltic States' airspace from Lithuania. Naval patrols of the **Standing NATO Maritime Group 1** (SNMG1), usually comprised of five frigates or destroyers and a tanker, would be present in the Baltic for, at most, a few months per year. A similar sized group of minehunters organised as the **Standing NATO Mine Counter-Measures Group 1** (SNMCG1) would also visit the Baltic for patrols and exercises. In the two decades to 2014, Russia was usually invited to join in with NATO naval exercises in the Baltic.

More controversial from 2002 to 2009 were US plans to build a **facility to intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles** at Rezikowo on the Polish coast, ostensibly aimed at a potential threat from Iran. The Obama administration replaced this plan with a less capable Aegis air and missile defence facility.

In response to Russian actions in Ukraine in 2014, NATO established its **Enhanced Forward Presence** (eFP) as a standing presence of almost 5,000 alliance ground forces in the Baltic States and Poland. Under eFP there are four multinational Battlegroups of 900-1,400 personnel each in the four countries. Including host country forces, these currently include troops from 22 of 29 NATO countries led by the

UK (Estonia), Canada (Latvia), Germany (Lithuania) and the United States (Poland).

The **Baltic Air Policing** mission was also expanded in May 2014 from 4 to 16 aircraft, adding air bases in Estonia and northern Poland. This has reduced to 8 to 12 aircraft since late 2015. The United States also sends occasional deployments of fighter aircraft to the region, as with its most advanced F-22 fighters sent to Lithuania in April 2016. Its long-range maritime surveillance aircraft also operate very regularly over the Baltic.

**BALTOPS** is NATO's largest exercise in the region. Whereas an annual maritime exercise has been held since 1972 in the Baltic, BALTOPS has grown considerably since 2015. In June 2019, some 56 vessels from 18 countries are expected, including amphibious assault and command ships from the US, UK, Spanish, Dutch and Danish navies. About one-third of the assembled force will be from the JEF task group.

BALTOPS 2019 is particularly significant for the US Navy as it represents the first exercise organised by the **US Second Fleet**. This was re-established in Virginia in 2018 specifically to command US and NATO expeditionary operations in the North Atlantic, Arctic and Baltic Sea in response to a perceived increase in threat from Russia.

### **Does the UK have other military forces deployed in the Baltic region?**

Prior to 2014, the UK had no forces assigned to the Baltic region other than periodic SNMG1 and SNMCG1 patrols and a single contribution to Baltic Air Patrol in 2004-2005. Since 2017 there have been around 1,000 British military personnel continuously in the region. During the JEF deployment in May-July 2019, this figure will be well over 3,000.

With the United States, the UK is the largest contributor to NATO's **eFP** mission. It has had about 900 personnel and over 300 vehicles stationed long-term in Tapa, Estonia (700-800)

and Orzysz, **Poland** (150) since 2017. These include tanks, heavy artillery and armoured fighting and reconnaissance vehicles.

Since April 2019, five Army Air Corps Apache attack and four Wildcat reconnaissance helicopters have also been based in **Estonia** to participate in training exercises. Additionally, from May to August 2019, the RAF is one of three states contributing to Baltic Air Policing with four Typhoon FGR.4 jets based in Estonia. From 2014 to 2016 this was an annual deployment for the RAF, but this is the first deployment since then.

Joint exercises with **Finland** and Estonia have been prioritised in 2019. British Army armoured vehicles were sent to Finland in May to participate in that country's Exercise Arrow 19. During April and May, Army and RAF personnel participated in the US-organised Bold Quest exercise in northern Finland.

An additional five Typhoons plus one tanker and one transport aircraft were deployed by the RAF to northern **Sweden** in May-June 2019 to participate in the Arctic Challenge exercise. This has been a regular biennial exercise for the RAF since 2013, hosted by Finland, Norway and Sweden.

With the exception of the eFP forces in Estonia and Poland, all these additional British units are expected to return to the UK by September 2019.

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