

LETTER TO THE CHAIR OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL DEFENCE

The Honourable John McKay
Chair
Standing Committee on National Defence
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
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Dear Honourable John McKay,

Pursuant to Standing Order 109 of the House of Commons, I am pleased to respond on behalf of the Government of Canada to the tenth Report of the Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN), titled "On the Frontlines of Democracy: Canada and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Responding to Russia's aggression in Europe", dated February 26, 2024.

First, I would like to thank the Committee for the firsthand observations reported from its visit to NATO's Eastern Flank. They serve as an important reminder of the realities of war faced by Ukrainians, of the fear that this war inspires in the populations of neighboring countries, and of the critical nature of NATO's unity and collective defence against the Russian aggression. As you are aware, on April 8, 2024, I announced an update to our defence policy, *Our North, Strong and Free*. This update reaffirmed our steadfast commitment to NATO and confronting Russian aggression through assurance and deterrence measures. Underpinned by an additional investment of \$8.1 billion over 5 years and \$73 billion over the next 20 years, *Our North, Strong and Free* ensures the Canadian Armed Forces will continue to make valuable contributions to global efforts to deter major power conflict and address instability.

As a result of Russia's brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine, full-scale war has returned to Europe. This war has shown that NATO remains as strategically important and relevant as ever, and has reconfirmed the necessity of collective defence as the primary focus of the NATO Alliance. The Alliance's continued relevancy is reinforced by the fact that it has grown in membership since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with Finland joining in April of 2023, and Sweden in March of 2024.

In preparation for the 2024 NATO Summit in Washington in July, I attended the February NATO Defence Minister's Meeting at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. At this meeting, I had the opportunity to reiterate key messages, including the imperative for NATO solidarity and unity in responding to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Canada's support of NATO's strengthened deterrence and defence posture, and the importance of the ongoing reinforcement of Eastern Europe. Canada is committed to contributing to this last area through its leadership of the

enhanced Forward Presence Latvia as we scale this formation up to a multinational brigade including 2200 persistently deployed CAF members by 2026.

In February, the Prime Minister visited Ukraine to mark the 2nd year anniversary of the war. During this visit, Canada signed a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine, as committed to in the G7 Joint Declaration of Support to Ukraine. The agreement's main objectives are threefold:

- Providing comprehensive assistance to Ukraine for the protection and restoration of its territorial integrity, reconstruction of its national economy, and the protection of its citizens;
- Supporting Ukraine's ability to prevent and deter against further military escalation or new aggression by the Russian Federation; and
- Supporting Ukraine's future integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions by supporting Ukraine's reform plans and building interoperability with NATO.

As part of this commitment, the Government of Canada announced an additional \$3.02 billion in critical financial and military support to Ukraine. Although these security arrangements are not a substitute for Ukraine's NATO membership, they shore up Ukraine's defence while it pursues its path to membership and provide a clear message that we will continue supporting Ukraine as it resists Russia's brutal aggression.

Canada is not immune from the effects of Russia's war against Ukraine. The growing demands for our collective defence will require additional efforts, and as a country with the ninth largest GDP in the world, expectations of Canada are high. The investments announced in Canada's defence policy update, *Our North, Strong and Free* build on the 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure and Engaged* (SSE) and will support CAF members and families, invest in Canada's defence industry, and procure critical capabilities that will help our military defend our country and North America. In addition, Canada remains committed to making effective defence investments in the strategic areas identified in our 2017 defence policy, SSE, including through our commitment to invest in modernizing our contribution to NORAD. Canada's defence spending is expected to reach 1.76% of GDP by 2029-30, making a significant step forward in our efforts to reach the NATO commitment of 2%. Since 2017, we have seen our defence spending increase with progress on important procurements, such as a new fleet of F-35 fighter jets, which will enhance Canada's ability to work closely with our Allies to deter aggression and confront the challenges of our times.

Canada, like other NATO Allies, is seized with the need to increase the production of artillery shells and other ammunition and recognizes that industrial capacity is necessary to continue supplying Ukraine and to replenish our own stockpiles. That is why Canada is investing \$9.5 billion over 20 years through its defence policy update to accelerate the establishment of new artillery ammunition production capacity in Canada and invest in a strategic supply of ammunition. This production capacity will help meet the ammunition demands of Canada and our closest allies, as well as help replenish CAF ammunition previously donated to Ukraine.

Canada is directly supporting the Armed Forces of Ukraine with its military training and capacity-building mission called Operation UNIFIER, launched in 2015. Although UNIFIER is not a NATO mission or operation, it supports Ukraine in defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Since its creation, over 40,000 Armed Forces of Ukraine personnel have been trained under Operation UNIFIER. In addition to supporting Ukraine's defence against Russia's illegal invasion, the training, professionalization, institutional reform, and capacity building provided under UNIFIER also contribute to Ukraine's goals of greater Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership when conditions allow.

The Committee's report details how CAF members are providing Ukrainian recruits with valuable training needed to fight and survive on the battlefield. It also considers the mental health impact on our CAF members of knowing that these recruits, with whom they have built strong bonds, will be sent to the battlefield where they face incredible risk to their safety as they defend their country. The Government of Canada recognizes its responsibility towards CAF members' well-being. CAF members receive resiliency training through the CAF Road to Mental Readiness (R2MR) Program, which is delivered at various points in their career. This is to ensure that members have the tools necessary to manage the various deployment stressors, such as those experienced during the training that is currently being conducted in the United Kingdom. Additionally, there are medical personnel deployed to Op UNIFIER to support members who have mental health concerns. Finally, CAF members are interviewed by medical personnel prior to returning to Canada to determine if they have any medical concerns, including mental health, and an appropriate follow-up is held with a CAF health care provider for when the member returns to Canada, as required.

Canada contributes substantially to NATO's strengthened deterrence and defence through our leadership, since 2017, of the battlegroup in Latvia, which we are scaling up to a multinational brigade. As noted in the report, the Canadian-led battlegroup in Latvia is the most multinational among NATO's eight battlegroups deployed to host countries in Eastern Europe.

The Committee members also rightly point out the inherent challenges with coordinating the expansion of a multilateral force in Latvia. These include a need for adaptability, flexibility, interoperability, and ensuring the sustainment of the brigade. To address these challenges, the Canadian Armed Forces has conducted detailed planning in cooperation with the Latvian Armed Forces as well as NATO Allies who will provide forces to the multinational brigade in Latvia. Beginning in January 2023, the CAF deployed a forward brigade headquarters (HQ) team directly on the ground in Latvia in support of Canada based planners.

As the battlegroup expands to a brigade, Canada and our Allies will apply the lessons we have learned over the last seven years about multinational cooperation in interoperability, tactical activities, and sustainment. As the expansion to a brigade is to be completed in Fall 2024 and holds its first exercise, the CAF expects that integration will continue to strengthen, particularly in the areas of fire support and logistics, as best practices are refined through experience.

Latvia remains an exemplary host, and Canada is grateful and proud to work alongside the

longstanding and new contributors to the battlegroup in Latvia. We look forward to Sweden and Denmark joining our ranks in Latvia soon.

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I thank the Members of the Standing Committee on National Defence for their interest in these challenging yet critical issues. I look forward to continuing to work with the Committee.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'W. Blair', is positioned above the typed name.

The Honourable William Sterling Blair, P.C., C.O.M., M.P.