**From the Balkans, to Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond – the Czech Army role in NATO missions**

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**In the spring of 1989, the dissident Václav Havel was in prison and the Czechoslovak army was preparing for a possible clash with Western imperialists under the banner “With the Soviet Union forever.” A decade later, on March 12, 1999, President Havel presided over the Czech Republic’s entry into the NATO military alliance, embracing the collective security while noting it would not come without sacrifice.**

 *“It gives us hope that our country will never succumb, nor will it be sacrificed to any aggressor, and at the same time expresses a clear resolve to be jointly responsible for freedom of nations, human rights, democratic values and peace on our continent,”* President Havel said upon the country’s accession to NATO.

Within months, Czech soldiers were serving under NATO in Kosovo. But in fact, the nation’s servicemen and women had long played a role in the alliance’s missions. On the 20th anniversary of Czech entry into NATO, we present an overview of the country’s participation in the alliance’s foreign missions.

**Czechs in Iraq**

The first engagement of the then Czechoslovak army in a NATO operation was in Iraq. The country sent a force of 200 to take part in Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm in 1991 as part of the Coalition of the Gulf War. Saddam Hussein had used mustard and nerve agents in the Iran–Iraq War, and a Czech anti-biological and chemical weapons unit was deployed to meet any such threat.

The country’s largest involvement in Iraq in a military action took place within the framework of US-led coalition that led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime in 2003. In a period of less than six years, over 2,300 Czech soldiers served in this capacity.

The first in the country were military doctors and medical staff – in Basra, southern Iraq, in a field hospital. Medical workers were later replaced by military police officers, who trained over 12,000 Iraqi policemen at Shaiba base. Other Czech soldiers helped guard the base adjacent to the Basra airport and later began training the Iraqi Army in Baghdad.

Currently, there are about 80 Czech soldiers in Iraq. More than 50 of them are stationed at Balad Air Force, the country’s largest air base, some 50 kilometres north of the capital, Baghdad. Iraqis pilots fly American F-16s and for years have also been training on Czech L-159s.

Other Czech servicemen are stationed at the Taji base northwest of Baghdad. For almost a year, chemists from Liberec have been training Iraqi soldiers from specialised units. In addition, in the capital of Iraq, five members of the Czech Police and seven military policemen are helping to train Iraqi policemen.

**Czechs in the Balkans**

The Czech Army joined several NATO missions in the Balkans already as a force from a non-member state. To the IFOR peacekeeping force in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1995–1996), to implement the Dayton Peace Treaty, Czechs dispatched around 865 personnel, both professional soldiers and reservists.

During the IFOR operation, members of the Czech contingent built five bases, with the battalion headquarters located in the village of Donja Ljubija. The battalion was responsible for keeping the peace on a territory of about 3,600 square kilometres, and its engineers destroyed hundreds of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines.

In addition, they also seized a total of 246 infantry, anti-aircraft and heavy weapons, 65 hand grenades and a great deal of ammunition. Czech pilots also took part in IFOR operations. Crews flew Mi-17 helicopters, and An-26 and L-410 transports and also participated in reconnaissance operations.

When the IFOR mission concluded, Czechs took part in the subsequent SFOR (Stabilization Force, 1996–2004) mission. They were newly incorporated under British command into the Southwest multinational division and carried out tasks in northwest Bosnia. The contingent consisted of a headquarters, a helicopter detachment with 22 soldiers, and the 6th Mechanised Battalion with a force of about 600 soldiers.

The battalion’s main task was to keep territory safe for refugees to return. Part of that service included regular patrols and observation of at-risk areas and objects. In addition, Czechs worked to disarm and demobilise local units of the feuding parties, ensuring they withdrew to the respective barracks.

**Czechs in Afghanistan**

Czech servicemen and women have been in Afghanistan since 2002. More than 9,000 have served in field hospitals there, on patrol units, as part of the anti-biological and chemical weapons team, or in the Logar surgical reconstruction team (2008–2013).

Czechs have deployed mainly in southern Afghanistan, in the provinces of Kandahar, Nangarhar and Helmand. Special combat forces were in Afghanistan several times – in 2004, 2006, 2008–2009 and in 2011–2012. The Czech Armed Forces Task Force began serving in the ISAF operation in 2008; the operation was renamed Resolute Support Mission in 2015.

Today, roughly 170 Czech soldiers are guarding the Bagrám base in the province of Parván, while the Czech headquarters are at the Kabul airport, where there is also an advisory flight team (since 2008 helping train Afghan pilots) and a communication technology team. Czech military policemen also guard the country’s embassy in the capital, Kabul.

The deployment in Afghanistan has cost the lives of 14 soldiers. Five died in a bombing improvised explosive device (IED) in 2014 facility near Bagrám, the largest single loss of Czech soldiers in any peacekeeping mission. Another four were killed in 2018, three of them by a suicide bomber while patrolling near the base.

**Czechs in the Baltics**

The Czech Republic joined two NATO Multinational Battlegroups in the Baltic States deploying a mortar platoon in Latvia and later a reinforced mechanised company in Lithuania, in the summer of 2018.

In the training area of the Lithuanian Army in Rukla, about 70 kilometres northwest of the capital Vilnius, there are 230 soldiers. The core of the Czech unit is a company from the 41st Mechanised battalion of Žatec equipped with 15 Pandur-II Infantry Fighting Vehicles. It is reinforced by an engineering platoon, a logistics unit and medical team.

In neighbouring Latvia, the Czech mortar platoon from the 71st Mechanised Battalion from Hranice operates. In Lithuania, a task force was operating in the V4 and Baltic States under the title "Training Bridge". More than 100 soldiers from the 74th light motorized battalion with 30 vehicles joined the three-month exercise.

In the second half of 2019, Gripen supersonic aircraft of the Czech Air Force will head to the Baltic Sea. As in the years 2009 and 2012, they will protect the airspace of the Baltic States, which do not own fighter of their own and which individual countries of NATO are protecting.

Altogether there are four NATO Multinational Battlegroups of the Enhanced Forward Presences (eFP) in the Baltic States and neighbouring Poland, established in 2017 as part of the alliance’s measures to deter Russia from further aggression following its annexation of Crimea and military actions in eastern Ukraine.