

Effectiveness of NATO's Regional Deterrent posture

Kristjan Prikk, Permanent Secretary of the Estonian Ministry of Defence. 2.07.2019

Chairman, distinguished commissioners, let me first thank you for this very positive initiative to hold this field hearing in Europe, to hold it in this distinguished city of Gdansk, and inviting also Estonia to present our views.

NATO's posture in the Baltic region has grown much stronger since 2014. We now have permanently based NATO battlegroups in all Baltic states, an enhanced NATO air policing presence, and more Allied maritime visits to our ports. We see an increased number of NATO and Allied live exercises in the region.

The recently announced additional presence of a larger contingent of American troops in Poland further strengthens NATO's posture regionally. It is important that those troops also have a footprint in the Baltics. This would significantly add credibility to NATO's deterrence in the Baltic states.

However, we all need to understand that the current NATO presence is and was never designed to be militarily a match to what Russia has in Kaliningrad and the western military district and the capabilities that they can mobilize very quickly, as we have seen during the latest large-scale exercises.

The current NATO presence is primarily political, and intended to show that NATO and its members would be involved in any conflict with Russia from day one.

This critical, but nevertheless limited presence, is intended to be complemented by a very quick reinforcement by NATO in case of a crisis. The problem is that the bulk of NATO forces is still far away, and our ability to deploy forces quickly and sustain them has important limitations.

Issues such as the readiness and mobility of our forces, the preparation required by means of detailed advance plans, live exercises and swift decision-making need further work. Today Russia plans and exercises in this region exactly as they fight, and we do not. After all these years in NATO we have yet to tackle the issue of whether we are really able to treat Russia as a potential aggressor.

NATO has discussed the need to improve its ability to defend against air threats and strengthen its maritime posture for years. Despite some steps in the right direction, we are still not very far along.

In particular, NATO has assessed time and again that the Russian air and missile defence and precision strike capabilities would mean a considerable challenge to NATO's lines of communications and reinforcement. The new SSC-8 capability that is in breach of the INF Treaty will add another capability into the Russian hands to attack critical targets in the whole of European theatre. All this affects NATO's ability to guarantee the security of this region.

NATO's posture in itself is an empty shell without real solidarity between Allies. And while we are strengthening collective defence in practice, we must not forget that communication is a critical part of deterrence.

This concerns every Ally, but in particular the American commitment to the Alliance, and its willingness to go to war for maintaining Euro-Atlantic security. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that we – we all, Europeans and North Americans alike – use any opportunity to clearly send the message of unwavering commitment and solidarity to each other. We collectively have benefitted so much from the alliance. We, individually and collectively, have so much to lose from being alone.

Thank you for listening!