

Baltic Security Challenges

Testimony of Marko Mihkelson

Chair of Foreign Affairs Committee of the Riigikogu (Parliament of Estonia)

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

“GAME-CHANGER”

The Baltics Under Pressure

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Distinguished Members of the Helsinki Commission,

What is the difference between NATO enlargement and the expansion of Russia? While the first takes place on voluntary terms and with the agreement of its members for the sake of defending democratic countries, the second shows an authoritarian nuclear power in the grip of nostalgia for its empire trying to extend its limits (of influence) through a brutal breach and self-serving interpretation of international law.

In all this, Russia has not been provoked by the enlargement of NATO, which has created a peaceful and stable neighbourhood around the Russian borders, but rather by the pain of losing a totalitarian empire and witnessing the success of its former vassals in building democratic and free societies. And that poses an existential threat to the authoritarian regime in Russia.

Through the decades since the end of WWI, Russia has painted the democratic Western countries as a scary enemy figure who is trying to obtain access to its riches and destroy the “thousand year old civilisation”. People have been told since childhood that the United States and NATO are trying to surround Russia on all sides and annihilate its nationhood. This lie has been used to manipulate millions at home and abroad to justify Russia’s aggressive foreign policy vis-à-vis the democratic West.

Historical parallels offer us food for thought. Just like in the 1930s, Russia has come to the realisation that the situation in Europe is ripe for changing the current status quo. In addition to restoring the empire, the totalitarian Russia dreams of forcing its rules on the democratic West, setting up new zones of influence, and marginalising the role of the United States in global politics. To this end, even the nuclear button is not out of bounds, at least in words.

Those who have witnessed the advance of the Russian brutal war machine with their own eyes, are probably keenly aware that it cannot be stopped by gentle words alone. As a young journalist covering the First Chechen War (1994–1996), I learned what Russian authorities were capable of. The carpet bombings of Grozny killed thousands upon thousands of their own citizens. For what? To stop the empire from disintegrating and the free will of the people from becoming the norm.

Just like the destruction of the Chechens benefited from the mass dehumanisation campaign of the entire nation back then, the current propaganda is attempting to obliterate the Ukrainian independence and nation. The Kremlin's appetite has only grown in 30 years and has not been thwarted by Western diplomacy, which is built on good will and hope for peaceful coexistence.

Russian society has been taken hostage by its own history and has not succeeded in breaking free, for objective or subjective reasons, from the repressive grip of the deeply rooted authoritarian regime.

As the Kremlin's intention to destroy the democratic Ukraine is only a part of its quest to erode the European security architecture, it makes it particularly hard to find even a somewhat sustainable *modus vivendi* in the relations between Russia and the West.

What is to be done? Absolutely no country can have the right to hegemony in democratic Europe, nor the veto right when the security of the continent is shaped. The European security architecture has withstood the test of time well and there is no good reason to bring it down. Instead, there are always opportunities to fortify it.

Russia's blatant aggression and military invasion in Ukraine has caused a fundamental shift in the European security architecture and threatens the peace and stability of democratic nations in Europe. I argue that the future of our common security will be decided in Ukraine. This is why the Western allies should do everything to coordinate and supply a wide range of lethal weaponry and other help to Ukraine as long and as much as it is needed. At the same time our leaders should not let Russia feel that it has the green light to destroy one of the biggest democracies in Europe. Putin must be stopped in Ukraine!

In this ongoing crisis we have accomplished stronger Allied unity than ever, despite Russia's attempts to undermine it. I would also like to thank the U.S. for sharing your intelligence and making a part of it public immediately – this shed light on Russia's evil intent and bought time to consolidate ourselves at home.

We took the situation very seriously in Estonia already before the crisis erupted. The first question we asked ourselves was what can we do? For almost a decade, Estonia has spent more than 2 per cent of its GDP on defense. In addition, already before Putin's invasion into Ukraine we decided to allocate an extra one-off 1% of GDP to defense, mostly to increase ammunition stocks and enhance early warning.

Estonia was one of the first European nations that supported Ukraine with lethal aid in cooperation with the United States, the United Kingdom, Latvia, and Lithuania already in December 2021. On that note, I would like to thank the Congress for your support to speeding up the Third Party Transfer process authorizing the transfer.

Over the last weeks Estonia has provided or is in the process of providing Ukraine with military aid with the total replacement cost of approximately 221 million dollars. Estonia continues to provide lethal and non-lethal aid to Ukraine, including additional Javelin missiles, 122mm howitzers with ammunition, anti-tank mines, anti-tank grenade launchers with ammunition, rifles, as well as helmets, medical supplies, MRE¹-s etc. Most of this has already reached Ukraine, but the list is being updated constantly.

Dear Colleagues, Putin's war against Ukraine is the biggest threat to the Euro-Atlantic security since the End of WWII. What we need the most now is a strong and loud Allied message that is not only loud in words but will decisively strengthen the deterrence and defense posture on the Eastern flank of NATO.

¹ MRE – *meal, ready-to-eat*

Russian military forces in the Western Military District and Kaliningrad hold a geographic advantage and outnumber NATO forces postured in the Baltic region. Russia's permanent deployment of land forces, fighter jets and air defense assets in Belarus will strengthen Russia's force advantage even further. It remains the only part of NATO where Russia can create credible military strategic dilemmas for the Alliance, even during this crisis and with short notice, if necessary. This is the region of greatest risk of further Russian aggression.

Taking into account the precarious security situation on the borders of NATO's Eastern flank, I would like to highlight that continuous U.S. engagement and presence in the Baltics is of paramount importance, given the vulnerabilities of the region. We welcome the efforts already made by the U.S. and NATO to bolster the deterrence and defense posture in the Baltic region, but more is needed to effectively deter Russia and avoid the risk of miscalculation, and we rely on your support for this.

President Biden's decision to reinforce the Baltic region with various assets and personnel has been much appreciated and the recent deployments have been of crucial importance in maintaining a credible deterrence posture.

We are doing a lot for our own self-defense. All three Baltic states have their annual defense budgets above 2 % of GDP and defense cooperation between our countries is at historical high.

However, the worsening security situation has highlighted the need for further U.S. support to immediately fill out a number of critical capability gaps in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

I would like to thank the Congress for increasing the resources for Baltic Security Initiative for this year and hopefully also in the future. This sends a strong message to our citizens of U.S. support to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and, more importantly, it enables us to continue our critical regional capability development projects.

We need your support with Ground Based Air Defense (Patriot) as the Baltics should not be left out as the only region in NATO still uncovered by air defense. We are also in need of a long-range fires (MLRS – *Multiple Launch Rocket System*) capability. These are capabilities that the Baltic states plan to develop on their own with the help U.S. security assistance, but such large-scale capability developments take time and the shortfalls in our defense need to be addressed expeditiously.

These are shared objectives among the Baltics that are endorsed by the United States European Command (EUCOM). We hope for the United States' substantial and consistent security assistance on this, on top of the on-going projects under the Baltic Security Initiative, such as maritime domain awareness, C4I² and secure communications, stockpiling of large caliber ammunition stocks, and Special Forces.

Allow me to add that we would also request the U.S. to swiftly restock our Javelin anti-tank missiles, as a large part of our current stocks is being donated to Ukraine.

Large-scale capability developments take time, but I would like to emphasize that strengthening our regional capabilities will also strengthen the Alliance. I also welcome the steps that NATO has taken so far in response to this situation. However, the Allies should voice their expectation more actively to increase the credibility of NATO's deterrence and defense posture.

We need to keep bolstering NATO's deterrence and defense posture also in the long term. NATO needs a forward defense strategy. This requires strong political will as well as courage to take action. It is detrimental that the U.S. as the most credible deterrent would take leadership

² C4I - *command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence*

role in bolstering the NATO's eastern flank. We consider it critical to have the U.S. presence in the Baltics through NATO framework.

NATO should prepare to defend the most vulnerable part of the Alliance – the Baltic states. This includes:

1. Establishing a permanent increased Allied forward presence in the Baltic states in the land domain;
2. Establishing a sound and appropriate NATO Command and Control (C2) structure, that is able to plan and conduct military operations with the Baltic states national home defense forces and Allied reinforcement forces;
3. Establishing a credible air defense posture, with additional fighter aircraft and ground-based air defense assets.

Thank you to this Commission for the service that you provide for security and stability in the transatlantic community, including the Baltic region. I look forward to your questions.