

New reality: resisting authoritarian regimes

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Honorable Chairman Cardin,
Co-Chairman Cohen,
Members of the Helsinki Commission,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor and a timely opportunity to appear before you today.

Let me start by saying that a global democratic world order in the past decades has been greatly challenged by the autocratic regimes of Russia and China. This competition of powers was shaping the security environment and bringing a lot of tensions over time. Up until the 24th of February. This day not only changed the established but deceptive peace in Europe exposing the real goals of the autocratic state of Russia, but also unified the democratic western world and created the legend of the greatness of the Ukrainian nation.

Over the years, Russia has used its military aggression against its neighbors, violated international law, and spread instability in Eastern Europe and way beyond. New methods of the so-called “borderisation” and the practice of holding rigged referendums in the occupied territories of Georgia and Ukraine became the unstoppable everyday reality and a test for the western world. Putin’s regime, which went unpunished for years, has become indiscriminate in the means it employs to achieve its goals in Ukraine by deliberately killing civilians, laying waste to cities, threatening the world with nuclear weapons, and, more ominously, attacking nuclear facilities. This is all happening right now.

The Baltic States for many years have been the whistleblowers trying to draw the attention of the whole world to Russia’s real intentions and ill perception of the world order. The Russian revisionist policy cannot be eliminated by making concessions or one-sided promises to “reset” the relations.

Today, the Baltic region faces an enormous increase of the Russian military capabilities close to its borders. The Baltic States are surrounded by Belarus, which is now hosting a growing number

of Russian forces, and by the Kaliningrad District, Russia's heavily *militarized region*, where it has deployed missiles, including the nuclear-capable *Iskander* missiles, that could be used to target NATO forces in Europe. Due to geographical considerations and close proximity of the combat-ready Russian forces, the reaction time of NATO Allies in the Baltics has dramatically shortened. If a few years ago NATO/US would have had months and weeks to prepare for any possible contingency, now the time to respond to any Russian military aggression decreased to days or even hours.

It is clear that the division of spheres of influence and the denial of the sovereignty and self-determination of independent states are undermining international law and are detrimental to the entire Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Russia's "ultimatum" to draw new division lines can neither be accepted nor negotiated. However, we should not allow ourselves to venture into wishful thinking, hoping that Russia will withdraw its demands merely based on the fact that they seem ridiculous to us. Russia has been preparing for major confrontation with NATO for a long time. The full-scale military invasion to Ukraine is a proof that our security must not be taken for granted. Russia's actions of despair, which are now causing the loss of human lives, and the nuclear rhetoric are extremely worrisome.

Russia has chosen confrontation with the Western world and will remain a major threat for many years to come. Being on the border with Russia, especially having in mind the geographical circumstances, makes attacks at short notice or without notice our greatest concern. Our priority is to establish a credible deterrence since any conflict on our soil would be too costly not only for our nations, but for the Alliance as well. For many reasons, both geographic and historic ones, the Baltic region was bound to remain the most vulnerable part of the NATO Alliance, which required special attention of NATO military planners and Allies. In addition to the Suwalki Gap issue, Russia's *de facto* absorption of Belarus means more than a double increase in the length of the NATO-Russia border. Increased Russia's military footprint in Belarus and its engagement in the war against Ukraine is a game-changer and significantly affects defense calculus in our region and requires the implementation of additional defense measures.

As we all witness today, the Kremlin employs massive propaganda and disinformation campaigns in an attempt to justify its aggression against Ukraine and to conceal its war crimes and atrocities. Kremlin's anti-Western narratives and its interpretation of the sanctions applied against Russia and of the support provided to Ukraine by the West as an alleged involvement in war against Russia serve the Kremlin as a means of shifting the blame.

That is why we, the Western democratic world, must also change and take unprecedented decisive action to change the normal peacetime order. Leaders of the Western world must take the initiative to take stock of the security world order that has been transformed by the Russian and Belarusian aggression and atrocities of the past weeks, and take leadership that will once again place the historic burden of responsibility on the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and on the entire European Union for European security and for the order of the peaceful world as a whole, including Ukraine's future.

I dare to say that United States of America, which has never recognized Soviet occupation of the Baltic States, do not have more reliable partners and allies committed to the defense of shared

values than the Baltic States. That is why, when we speak before you, we want to be frank in expressing our conviction that the United States of America will defend global democracy in Eastern Europe today and for the foreseeable future. That is why we say that in this new reality the cost and the importance of deterrence have dramatically increased.

But strengthening deterrence is no longer enough. We need to build credible defense before it is too late. We must change our approach by moving from deterrence based on limited forward presence and reinforcement to deterrence by denial and forward defense. This requires not only re-posturing of our forces but also a change in our mindset. The necessary measures should be taken immediately and continue in the long term.

We have already taken robust measures to improve the Host Nation Support capacity and are ready to host United States and NATO forces by providing infrastructure, which would enable rapid and smooth deployment of forces and their operation on the territory of our countries and necessary training conditions. We call on the USA to step up its deterrence efforts in the Baltic States by stationing additional substantial permanent combat forces, increasing the size, scope and frequency of military exercises, sustaining NATO nuclear policies, including the U.S. extended deterrence assurances to NATO Allies and, in particular, preserving the nuclear sharing arrangements in Europe. Becoming a permanent location for U.S. battalion size units' deployments is the level of ambition that our countries seek. Prepositioning of U.S. military equipment and enhancement of our region's air defense would significantly improve our security.

In our region, air defense with anti-aircraft and long-range missile defense assets is crucial. We need our own Iron Dome, both technical and political, to protect the Baltics. Despite Russia's A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad, NATO must minimize and deny Russia the advantage of control over the airspace. Air defense over the Baltic States has to be enhanced, including by deploying necessary assets such as combat aviation and surface-based air defense of short, medium and long ranges in and around the Baltic States. It would show a political backbone of NATO and give us credibility that NATO is ready to and will indeed protect every inch of its territory. For that, we need a strong political will from the U.S. side.

Firm support of the U.S. Congress for a persistent rotational U.S. military presence and capability development in the Baltic region is crucial for deterring our adversaries. Appropriations by the Congress and the launch of the Baltic Security Initiative in the Department of Defense Appropriations Bill Fiscal Year 2021 and 2022 enable us to bolster regional capabilities and to build our muscles to deter both Russia and China.

Lithuania remains committed to the principle of fair burden sharing. We stick to the NATO-agreed defense spending guidelines. This year, our defense spending will reach two point five percent of our GDP. However, we will not stop at that. It is a major financial commitment for our country, but it is vital today.

Whilst Russia remains the biggest and the most imminent conventional threat to the Baltic States, China is becoming a pacing threat to our national security. China is increasingly shaping global agenda to its own benefit. While Putin's regime is using heavy weaponry in its attempt to undermine the right and ability of sovereign states to determine their own national development,

China is weaponizing cross-border economic and trade relations. China is eager to dominate, not to cooperate.

We have always backed U.S. efforts in defending our common democratic values and containing China's global ambitions. Lithuania is, therefore, now facing unprecedented China's political and economic pressure and suffering significant economic losses. China is targeting the Lithuanian economy with "undeclared sanctions" and applying various trade restrictions over deepening ties with Taiwan.

Having withdrawn from the (17+1) format that was created by China and designed to divide the European Union, and having called on the EU to create a unified (27+1) EU format for cooperation with China, as well as considering that the Belt and Road Initiative, the so called "global infrastructure development strategy towards "brighter future", is China's de-atlantization project aimed at setting strategic partners – the European Union and the United States – against each other, at undermining the transatlantic link and consequently dominating in the world, Lithuania has made it clear that it considers such a manipulative Chinese policy to be contrary to our democratic values and a security challenge.

Huge China looks relatively small in Lithuania: our businesses have invested in China 10 times more than China invested in Lithuania. Lithuania has resisted major investments from China in strategic infrastructure that could have undermined our country's economy and national security. Lithuania has decided to develop relations with Taiwan and allow the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius while not violating our commitment to the One China policy. But Lithuania is part of the global market. Therefore, China started exerting diplomatic pressure and imposing massive undeclared economic measures against all Lithuanian businesses. On top of blocking the bilateral trade, China took an unprecedented step of weaponizing global supply chains and pressurizing multinational companies working with Lithuania into getting rid of their Lithuanian supplies in return for access to Chinese market. That is why, together with the United States, we are turning to the Indo-Pacific region and making great efforts to diversify our export markets and economic ties in the region.

The case of Lithuania is a test for the entire democratic world of our ability to withstand economic coercion and to deter China from moving ahead with its red lines and from using coercion as a regular foreign policy tool to advance its goals. Enhanced coordination of actions with international allies, including in WTO, is needed to respond to economic coercion, find systemic long-term solutions and send a message to China that such coercive actions will not be tolerated.

Lithuania is not stepping back. Engagement with democratic Taiwan is in our direct interest. China's aggressive actions, including its threats to Taiwan, more than ever before, may have a direct impact on European security.

We thank the U.S. for its strong support to Lithuania in the face of pressure by China, including also in offsetting the effects of China's economic coercion. In addition, we call on the United States to lead the efforts to encourage our common Allies to take a more resolute stance against China's intimidations.

Mr. Chairman, thank you once again for giving me the opportunity to address this distinguished group of U.S. Congressmen; and I very much look forward to my colleagues statements and follow-on discussions.