

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

Estonian president: Nato must bolster its eastern flank before it's too late

A permanent allied presence will make clear to Putin that we are poised for a forceful military response

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With new evidence of Putin's recklessness, we need more military muscle to block him © Paulius Peleckis/Getty Images

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The writer is president of Estonia

Seventy three years ago, more than 22,000 people were forcibly taken from my country to Siberia. Half of them were women. A third were children. The youngest of those deported was just three days old.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 left the Baltic states stranded on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Today, we watch as Russia attempts to reestablish this divide. Ukrainian families caught up in the middle of the war are transported to a country that is not their own. A six-year-old boy with shrapnel in his skull describes, without tears, how his mother had burnt to death in their car after it was hit by a Russian shell. This [scene](#) took place just a 90-minute flight from Tallinn, Berlin or Bucharest. This is happening in Europe, and Ukraine needs our help.

In a way, Vladimir Putin has already lost his war, as indicated by the vote at the UN General Assembly, where Russia was supported by just four countries with 141 others demanding an end to hostilities. Even during the cold war, the Soviet Union was never this isolated.

However, a cold war-era economy is exactly where Russia is heading as a result of the far-reaching economic and political sanctions imposed by democratic countries. Our military assistance and weapons are bolstering Ukrainians as they defend their country, its sovereignty and their freedom. But they need more.

Above all, we can help Ukraine by refusing to accept this situation: a state sending in its army to overthrow the legally-elected government of another country and dictating its alliances cannot become the new reality in Europe.

As long as Russia continues to wage its war and until it withdraws its troops, we must be prepared for changes to the lifestyles to which we have become accustomed, of which Russian oil and gas form an integral part in many European countries. Every euro we pay Russia is either directly or indirectly spent on attacking Ukraine, feeding the war effort.

We must also think about what to do if the atrocities of Putin's war do not end. Will we continue to support Ukraine from the sidelines, or will we be prepared to take the next step to end the war? What might that next step be?

In demanding that Nato turn back time to 1997 and ban the alliance's military units from being posted in newer member states, the Kremlin is seeking to erect a new Iron Curtain in Europe.

Estonia is one of the 14 countries — almost half of Nato's current members — which joined the alliance at different stages over the past quarter of a century. All saw membership as a means of protecting themselves against potential Russian aggression. We were accepted into Nato, alongside Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. But some governments did not take our warnings about Russia seriously. Now they see that we were right.

The Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, when the Russian army invaded the Georgian cities of Gori and Poti just outside of South Ossetia, made the west flinch, but it was quickly forgotten. When countries on the eastern flank spoke of strengthening Nato's defences, some dismissed this as tedious complaining. The wake-up call came as late as 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and started lending military support to the separatists in eastern Ukraine. People started to realise that perhaps there was some truth in the warnings issued by Poland and the Baltic states.

The west's deterrence failed in Ukraine. Nato must now be prepared for future threats. Let us acknowledge that Russia's aggression threatens the entire democratic

world, especially those countries that are closest to Russia. Let us acknowledge that Putin poses a military threat to us all.

There is only one answer to this: credible, visible and effective deterrence. Let us establish a strengthened and permanent allied presence in the countries on Nato's eastern flank.

In the Founding Act on Mutual Relations between Nato and Russia, signed in May 1997, Moscow promised to respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states. It also promised to respect the right of all states to choose the means of ensuring their own security. In the last month, Russia has violated this by invading Ukraine and in seeking to dictate which countries can belong to Nato. It is time for us to declare the act null and void.

Currently, a rotating allied presence on Nato's eastern border establishes a clear boundary for the triggering of the alliance's Article Five commitment. However, we now need to move to a new deterrence posture that makes the red line for Moscow even thicker.

A permanent allied presence will underline the fact that the Baltic states and Poland are just as equal as Germany, Italy or the UK — and that a forceful military response begins from the very first centimetre of the alliance's territory.

The UK battle group in Estonia is a strong and efficient one, as is Nato's air policing mission at our Amari air base. Now, with new evidence of Putin's recklessness, we need more military muscle to block him. This means a greater battle-ready Nato presence across all domains: land, air and sea, supported by critical enablers such as air defence. Our governments can take the appropriate decisions at this summer's Nato summit in Madrid.

The task of all allies standing before the mirror of history is to take action now to stop Putin's war machine from rolling any further forward.

