

The Speech by Prime Minister Ingrida ŠIMONYTĖ at the Baltic Military Conference ‘Reinforcing NATO’s Deterrence and Defence Posture: Military-Strategic Perspective’.

March 24, 2023, Vilnius

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking the organizers for convening us here — in the heart of Vilnius — to discuss practical steps on how to bolster our security at this critical time.

The time when European security is being safeguarded by Ukraine on the battlefield. The time when bravery and immense sacrifice of Ukrainians are buying us time to wake up, face reality and make critical decisions to stop the aggressor, to safeguard peace in Europe not for a month or a year but for years to come.

We need to be brutally honest and aware that we are living in times of war. This is not crisis management, nor a territorial dispute. Though geographically contained, this is a full-scale war. Our actions must reflect this reality. We need swift and foresightful decisions. Decisions based not on wishful thinking or academic debate but on the reality that the aggressor won’t stop unless he is defeated.

There is no alternative to Ukraine’s victory, for it is a victory for the whole democratic world. To win the war, Ukraine needs artillery, more tanks. Ukraine needs air defence and fighter jets. Every delayed day in delivering weapons costs human lives, including the lives of the innocent civilians. Do we really want to pay so dearly for our hesitations?

I am proud that the Western democracies showed unprecedented unity in helping Ukraine. But we could have acted swifter and bolder. We are always one step behind in terms of what Ukraine needs. To end this war sooner, we urgently need to give Ukraine the weapons faster.

At the same time, today I am worried about a fatigue. Not the fatigue of Ukrainian soldiers fighting through the rain of bullets, but the fatigue in Western societies. I am worried about the calls for a compromise or a quick pseudo-peace. We — politicians — should be tireless in explaining our societies that, unfortunately, there are no easy short-cuts to peace.

We do not need 21st century Chamberlains. We do not need a false peace that would give the aggressor the time to regroup, re-arm, and prepare for a potentially wider and more devastating war. Only our determination, strength and solidarity can prevail against an aggressor who neither respects democracy nor human life.

Only full defeat and full accountability can help break this cycle of Russia’s wars in the future.

In Madrid, NATO named Russia “*the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.*”

We, the governments of NATO, have a responsibility to protect our people from all security threats and build such a security architecture that corresponds to the level of threats our citizens face.

The alliance must be so strong and so prepared that Russia would never not even think to challenge us.

Yes, today the transatlantic Alliance is stronger than ever. Stronger, but not strong enough — at least in the eastern flank.

This is not acceptable. The security of the Alliance is indivisible, and this principle shall be implemented in practice. We are as strong as our weakest link is.

The security of the Baltic States and that of the whole of eastern flank is key to Euro-Atlantic security. Our region is the one that is bordering what NATO calls “the most significant and direct threat.” But inadequate ground forces and gaps yet in air defence do not reflect that.

The decisions taken at NATO Summit in Madrid were very important initial steps. It is key that we deliver on these promises. This is an absolute minimum.

Moreover, the security calculations have already changed since Madrid. And, I am afraid, not for the better.

Today we have even less hope that Russia wants peace. Putin prepares for a long war in Ukraine, hoping that the war of attrition will wear down Ukrainian defence and the patience of democratic governments.

Since Madrid, Russia has declared the reorganization of its military, and announced the formation of new divisions and an army corps. We might debate how realistic these goals are, but there is a clear intent of Russia to pursue the belligerent path.

We, as the Alliance, and as individual nations, made progress, but not a breakthrough in how we address defence and security challenges. In times of war, incremental changes are not enough. Stock-taking summits are not enough.

Vilnius NATO Summit must be transformative and historic in its nature.

First of all, we need ambitious steps that fundamentally strengthen deterrence and *forward defence*.

I hope that defence plans will fill the gaps and will ensure a quick reinforcement. It should be practised in peacetime in all domains: land, sea and air. In this regard, quick and smooth transition from Air Policing to Air Defence is of particular importance.

As with regard to *in place forces*, heavily militarised Kaliningrad and Belarus, which became de facto part of Russia, enhance Russia’s ability to deploy forces on very short notice on our borders. We need at least a brigade size in place forces to deter and defend every inch of the Alliance’s territory not to allow even a possibility of thinking to test the Alliance.

We appreciate Germany’s assumed responsibility to lead eFP, as well as brigade size force in Lithuania. I hope that with the German leadership we can create a success story and prove NATO’s effectiveness, adaptability, and credibility. As a host nation, Lithuania will build all necessary infrastructure.

On a national level, Lithuanian government is in the final phase of discussions to create a full Lithuanian division. So, we are and will remain committed to pursue policies that strengthen our national defence to the core.

Another key NATO decision awaiting us in Vilnius Summit is a new defence investment pledge. Allies agreed on 2% even before Russia unleashed its full-scale war on Ukraine. The security environment has changed dramatically, so 2% can be only the floor, not the ceiling. All three Baltic States are already spending 2.5% and will further increase defence spending in the future.

Without larger investments all our concerns, declarations, and plans will be nothing but words on paper. Moreover, Russia’s war in Europe shows that today it is more important than ever for NATO countries to strengthen and develop defence industries.

Vilnius Summit will be a historic one as we are looking forward to welcome Finland, and hopefully Sweden, as new members of the Alliance, which will substantially strengthen the security of the Baltic Sea region, and that of the whole Alliance.

And I very much hope that Vilnius Summit will be on the right side of history with the strength of NATO's response to Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

I will not speak about our moral obligations to Ukraine, nor about historic chance to fix the strategic mistake done in Bucharest in 2008 that created a grey zone in Europe.

I am convinced that NATO membership for Ukraine is the best way to lock in and enforce peace in Europe. Maybe it is too much of an ask this year, but it should not be brushed off to the side-lines.

NATO has already stated on numerous occasions that Ukraine will become a member of NATO. Having said A, we have to say B. Otherwise, the vicious circle of instability because of grey zones will continue to haunt the European continent.

Vilnius Summit needs to provide a real path and benchmarks for Ukraine to advance toward NATO. The worst-case scenario would be to show Russia that it does de facto have a veto over Ukraine's perspective membership.

I also hear different proposals regarding security guarantees for Ukraine. Whatever security guarantees are provided, they should not be viewed as a substitute for NATO membership. There can be no substitution for Ukraine's NATO membership in the future.

The developments in the recent years (and Xi's visit to Russia) show that Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security have never been closer interlinked. I hope that Vilnius Summit will serve to further strengthen NATO's relations with the AP4 countries: Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea.

The outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine will shape not only Euro-Atlantic, but global security order. No nation will be safe in a world where one country can violate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of another; where a country with imperialist ambitions threatens its neighbours; and where massive atrocities of war go unpunished.

Silence and neutrality always favour the aggressor, never the victim. So-called neutrality, in the case of Russia's war against Ukraine, endangers global peace.

NATO is about safeguarding our shared values. We will always be on the side of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. So, I would like to conclude by paying respect to Ukraine, which is now defending freedom for us all and wishing that, after Vilnius Summit, we can say with calm hearts that we had the courage to take responsibility, adopt the necessary decisions and leave a better world for the next generation, and not simply shift our problems onto their shoulders.

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