

NATO – The way to Riga and onward

In the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the highlight of the year 2006 was the Riga Summit on 28–29 November. For Estonia, such a high-level event in our neighbouring country held a special symbolic meaning – this clearly demonstrated how successful NATO enlargement has been, and increased the visibility of all three Baltic states as members of the Alliance. As recently as some ten years ago, it would have been unimaginable that a NATO summit could be held in the capital city of a Baltic state. But the Summit's main theme was, of course, not a contented retrospective review of the Alliance's transformation to date. Of primary importance was, and is, NATO's future, the Alliance's ability to adapt to the challenges of the 21st century. Yet, at the same time, preserving its basic principle – collective defence.

In the process of making preparations for the Summit, numerous meetings were held between diplomats and military officers, between defence and foreign ministers. The foreign ministers of the NATO member states met in Sofia on 27–28 April, and during the United Nations General Assembly session on 21 September, where the main subjects for discussion were NATO operations in Afghanistan and Kosovo, the Alliance's further enlargement, and the development of partnership relations.

One of NATO's central themes is the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) operation in Afghanistan. In October 2006, the operation, in all of Afghanistan, went under NATO leadership. With about 33000 troops and the participation of 37 states, ISAF is the biggest operation in NATO history. For Estonia also, Afghanistan has become the largest foreign mission so far. By the end of 2006, more than 130 Estonian troops were participating in ISAF (mostly in Helmand province, as part of the United Kingdom's contingent). This is almost six times more military personnel than had been our contribution to Afghanistan at the beginning of the year. In addition to the military contribution, ever more attention must be paid to civilian reconstruction, without which it is unimaginable that lasting peace could be created in that country. Therefore, the Foreign Ministry assigned in September a civilian representative to Afghanistan, who in this Yearbook gives an overview of his activities there.

Another issue of focused international attention is the situation in Kosovo, as its legal status is in the process of being defined. At the Riga Summit, the members of the Alliance confirmed NATO's role in the ensuring of a stable security environment there.

In the light of the EU civilian mission that is being created, constructive cooperation between the European Union and NATO is instrumental. In the course of this year, Estonia will continue to contribute to the KFOR (Kosovo Force) operation in Kosovo, as well as to the NATO training mission in Iraq.

Estonia has always held the position that NATO's door must remain open for new members. We have reason to be content, that at the Riga Summit the candidate states of Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia were given a strongly encouraging signal, that accession invitations may be presented already at the 2008 Summit to those candidate countries that have met NATO's performance based standards. We are convinced, on the basis of our own accession experiences, that the decision concerning accession must be based upon the progress made by the individual candidate states. In this process it is essential that the candidate countries receive from their partners, upon request, advice and assistance. The Baltic Charter, concluded with the United States in 1998, provided essential support for Estonia in the course of the Euro-Atlantic integration process. Therefore, we have proceeded to share our accession experiences with the present NATO candidate states, with which the US has concluded for the same purpose the Adriatic Charter. The US-Baltic Charter and US-Adriatic Charter states' foreign and defence ministers' first meeting took place on 24–26 April 2006, in Croatia, on the island of Brijun. Estonia, in turn, invited foreign and defence ministers of the US, the Baltic Charter and Adriatic Charter states, plus Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro as well as Serbia to hold a meeting in Tallinn, on 5–6 February 2007. We wish to make our contribution to NATO's further enlargement by helping the present candidate states to prepare themselves for the responsibilities and obligations of membership. Just as we would like to exchange information with NATO's new candidate countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, as well as Serbia, which were all invited at the Riga Summit to join the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. This decision was in step with our conviction that their joining the PfP would better enable NATO to support democratic forces in those states, and would also promote their integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Just as the head of the Estonian delegation, Prime Minister Andrus Ansip, stressed at the Riga Summit, all the new democracies in Eastern and Southern Europe, including Ukraine and Georgia, should have a chance to join NATO. Although the Ukrainian prime minister has declared that, at this early stage, his country does not wish to move towards the Membership Action Plan (MAP), Ukraine will continue with the present cooperation and Intensified Dialogue with NATO. For a long time, Estonia had been interested in initiating an Intensified Dialogue with Georgia, and an appropriate decision met with favour at the New York NATO foreign ministers' meeting in September. At the Riga Summit, support for Georgia's territorial integrity and peaceful resolution of conflicts was expressed – both the principles that Estonia regards as being essential.

During the year 2006, there were no substantial developments in NATO's partnership relations with the Russian Federation. For Estonia, as a neighbour state, it is important that the Russian people's awareness of NATO's true nature be increased, so as to dispel the prejudices that were so solidly formed in the days of the Cold War. To further this endeavour, Estonia participated, in May 2006, in the NATO-Russia Rally, a public diplomacy campaign organised under the auspices of the NATO-Russia Council, for spreading relevant information among the Russian people. Within this framework, Estonia and Latvia jointly organised an information day in the Russian city of Pskov, which lies fairly close to both the Estonian and Latvian borders.

From the point of view of NATO's future, the development of partnership relations is essential. Decisions adopted at the Riga Summit call for the existing NATO partnership relations to be made more flexible. Also, closer cooperative relations are to be developed with nations who share common values as well as make noteworthy contributions to the Alliance's operations and missions.

Of the decisions that were adopted in Riga, it is also necessary to bring forth Comprehensive Political Guidance. It confirms the principle that 40% of the member states' military forces must be redeployable, and 8% must constantly be on operations abroad, which, among other things, makes it possible to effectively compare the contributions made by various states, irrespective of the size of their populations. Also, the NATO Response Force was declared to be fully operational. In the Riga Summit Declaration, among other things, acknowledgement was given to the Comprehensive Planning, which Estonia has continually supported. This is especially relevant in Afghanistan, where success is possible to achieve only through the coordinated utilisation of both military and civilian measures.

The transformation process of the Alliance is continuing. The implementation of adopted decisions is ensured by the political will of the member countries, which is expressed in the willingness to discuss all questions essential from the Euro-Atlantic security point of view, and to contribute, in accordance with individual capabilities, to the Alliance's cooperative endeavours, based upon the allies' mutual solidarity. Estonia takes this commitment very seriously. We are continuing to increase our defence expenditures, as well as our contributions to NATO operations and missions. Based upon the principle of the indivisibility of the security of NATO's airspace, it is necessary to continue the policing of the airspace over the Baltic states. Since we are one of the 21 nations that, in 2007, are seated at both the EU and the NATO tables, we regard as essential to achieve closer cooperation and political dialogue between the two organisations.