

Bruce Jones

Estonia boasts a much stronger economy than many in the region, and is also one of the most advanced in terms of information technology. Politically, Russia looms large and has strong connections with the opposition Centre Party (Eesti Keskerakond: EK), which draws much of its support from the country's 30%-plus Russianspeaking population.

Discussing the challenges facing the region and beyond, particularly in light of Estonia's experience of the world's first state-level cyber attacks in 2007, for which many analysts have blamed Russia, Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said: "The threats have changed onto a global scale. More nations are getting nasty wake-up calls and are forced to start doing their homework. My biggest worry is insufficient co-operation between democratic states, and between public and private sectors nationally. This, more than anything, comes down to trust."

Ilves would not be drawn on the key issue of his country's relations with Russia. However, he said: "I would not forecast a full-scale cyber war between states any time soon and I dare not visualise it. We will see more examples, though, of the type of cyber operations launched against Georgia in 2008, with cyber attacks integrated into a wider propaganda and conventional war. Although it is doubtful whether you can call the Georgian campaign 'conventional' at all – Russia used plenty of asymmetric and irregular warfare."

The Moscow-based Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), comprising Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan, agreed in August to develop a treaty-wide system of countermeasures against the "threat" of social networks. Ilves said the news had given him pause. "I would rather that CSTO members became more active in fighting cyber crime emanating from within their own countries and joining the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime. The US after all has identified some CSTO members as the greatest miscreants [sic] in cyber-crime and cyber-espionage."

He added: "The internet and social media have brought enormous positive changes but they

also pose dilemmas for politicians and for the state. The UK riots [in August] were a case in point, but perhaps a more dangerous example is mass murderer Anders Breivik in Norway, who actively promoted his cause on the internet. So as states, we must constantly ask ourselves how far and on what basis we should go in restricting access to the internet. After all, democracies are democracies."

Ilves sees his country as an "active and responsible ally as possible in NATO". About potential Swedish and Finnish NATO membership, he said: "I applaud their co-operation."

He was also forthright about the difficulties experienced by the alliance, saying: "As we approach NATO's Chicago summit [in May 2012], we need to take a moment to reflect on where transatlantic relations stand. Estonia is one of only four allies to spend [the NATO stipulated] 2% of GDP [gross domestic product] on defence in 2012. I understand criticism in Washington, but the picture in Europe is not black or white. It does not help if all countries are tarred with the same brush.

"What we need most is reassurance that the US will not leave Europe, either physically or mentally. At the same time, however, Washington needs to be assured that Europe is there for the US. Stability in international security requires strong transatlantic ties."

On the planned withdrawal from Afghanistan of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2014, he promised: "We will stay in Afghanistan as long as necessary. We have years of close experience... in Helmand province. Our troops continue to fight there, alongside the British and Danes, without caveats, making very painful sacrifices."

On the progress of the EU's Common Defence and Security Policy (CSDP), Ilves said: "Many good ideas, including the recently proposed Weimar initiative [of July 2011 between France, Germany and Poland, which calls for stronger co-operation between the EU and NATO on military capabilities], boost the CSDP. We support a permanent civil-military planning unit in CSDP and the use of EU battle-groups in [combat] operations. Multinational co-operation, which for us has not been a choice but a necessity, is the key."

He concluded: "Europeans lack certain high-end capabilities and often have out-of-date force structures. What we lack most is a readiness to use those forces."

Toomas Hendrik Ilves was born in Stockholm in 1953 to Estonian refugees and was raised in the United States. He attained a master's degree in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania in 1978, before becoming a broadcast journalist with Radio Free Europe (RFE).

Involved in Estonian politics before the country regained independence in 1991, Ilves went on to become Estonian ambassador to the US, and the country's Foreign Minister from 1996 to 1998 and again from 1999 to 2002. He started the negotiations that led to Estonia's EU accession in 2004, when he was elected as an MEP for the Social Democratic Party (Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond: SDE), part of the current centre-right coalition government. Ilves was elected president by the parliament for the first time in 2006 and re-elected in 2011.

Bruce Jones is is an adviser and writer who specialises in security issues in the Baltic states and former Soviet Union.