

At the opening of the NATO air force base runway in Ämari in Harju County today, Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves described the event as one of great military and political significance.

The head of state said that the completion of the air base would make it much easier to bring allied troops and their equipment to Estonia in the event of a crisis situation. "It is obvious that a small country like Estonia would need the help of its allies in the event of a serious military crisis. Likewise, it is obvious that no matter how willing someone is to provide this help, they cannot do so without the proper infrastructure. Let's be honest: until today our ability to accept the airborne help of our allies has been extremely limited."

President Ilves underscored the fact that from 2012, when the complex as a whole is due for completion, NATO will have one of the most modern air force bases in the region at its disposal, which will undoubtedly contribute to the efficiency of the alliance's air security mission.

"The construction of the Ämari Air Base, which was jointly financed by the Estonian state and NATO, is a perfect expression of the solidarity between allies in everyday life," said the president. "As we know, NATO covered almost 35% of the cost of the project – which is a considerable sum, given that the total cost of the project is more than a billion kroons. This shows that NATO's allies understand the importance to the alliance as a whole of ensuring the security of its new Member States. NATO's decision to cofinance the construction of the air base is also significant in the sense that it was made in a situation where the alliance's budget was under a lot of pressure due to the complex and expensive mission in Afghanistan."

President Ilves stressed that NATO's readiness to support Estonia was dependent on the country's own readiness to work hard in the interests of national security and to finance it at an acceptable level.

"What is important here is that Estonia has been able to keep its national security expenditure close to the level of two percent of GDP during the recession, and that the government has set itself the objective of achieving this level in the state budget by 2012. The more a country invests in its own national security, the more seriously its views will be taken in terms of security policy – not just in NATO, but in other organisations as well."

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