

By David Blair, Tallinn

Interview: President Toomas Hendrik Ilves tells the Telegraph the time has come for Nato to deter Russia by permanently stationing combat units in the Baltic states.

The most sensitive border in Europe lies 130 miles east of Estonia's elegant presidential palace. Elsewhere, the threat posed by Russia might seem academic or even alarmist, but for President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the possibility of Estonia becoming the epicentre of the world's next crisis is very real.

As the smallest Baltic state – and the one possessing the longest frontier with Russia – Estonia is arguably the most exposed country in Europe.

But if the Kremlin were to invade this nation of 1.3 million people in the way it has dismembered Ukraine, the consequences would be infinitely more perilous. Estonia joined Nato 11 years ago – as such, every country in the Atlantic Alliance, including America and Britain, would be obliged to go to war in its defence.

The frontier with Russia, only a two-hour drive from Mr Ilves's office, also amounts to a nuclear tripwire. And yet not a single American or Nato soldier is currently defending that border.

In an interview with The Telegraph, Mr Ilves professes to be at the "calm end of the spectrum". He then provides a list of reasons to be profoundly concerned about Russian intentions.

"We have observed a dramatic increase in military flights," he says. "We have seen massive snap exercises at our borders. We have seen a heightened level of antagonistic rhetoric and threatening rhetoric where Estonia is not singled out, but we are part of a group of countries who are mentioned in a threatening way."

Despite the crisis in Ukraine and the ceaseless belligerence of Vladimir Putin, Nato has not permanently deployed any combat units in Estonia or any other Baltic member.

That is because in 1997, Nato signed a "founding act" with Russia stating that no combat troops would be permanently stationed east of Germany "in the current and foreseeable security environment". In the face of every Russian provocation and threat, Nato is still observing that self-denying ordinance. One company of US infantry, consisting of 150 soldiers, is the sole contingent of Nato troops currently in Estonia – and they are only here temporarily.

Mr Ilves believes the time has come for Nato to point out that the "security environment" has indeed changed since 1997 and permanently deploy at least a brigade in the Baltic states. "One hundred and fifty soldiers is not a lot, so we do think that further stationing of troops at a higher number is only reasonable," he says.

"We get exercises that take place behind our borders that have 40,000 to 80,000 soldiers. Yet we are accused of escalating the situation – or the United States is accused because they are the only ones with boots on the ground here – and Russia says that it will have to take counter-measures."

During the Wales summit last year, Nato leaders offered their most vulnerable allies a series of "assurance measures". They promised that a "very high readiness" task force, comprised of 5,000 troops, would be able to deploy to the Baltic states in the event of an emergency.

But Mr Ilves is unassured. "It would get here in, what, a week? Five days?" he says. "But if you look at the exercises that are done by our neighbour, they're basically instantaneous. They're here and it's over in four hours."

Despite conscription and a defence budget exceeding Nato's target of two per cent of national income, Estonia's army has only 5,300 soldiers. Like the other Baltic states, Estonia does not possess any jet fighters, so it relies entirely on Nato to guard its airspace. Last year, the alliance quadrupled the strength of its Baltic Air Policing Mission - but only from four to 16 warplanes. Russia, meanwhile, possesses 230,000 troops and 1,200 combat aircraft.

In the event of an invasion, Mr Ilves believes that Russia would try to seal off the Baltic states before Nato's "very high readiness" force had a chance to arrive. "It's a great idea but it probably is, in terms of the realities, just too late," he says simply.

Hence the importance of Nato stationing at least a brigade now, as well as pre-positioning equipment and headquarters staff. Estonia is spending £30 million on barracks for allied troops, but without knowing whether they will actually show up on a permanent basis.

Mr Ilves, 61, has been Estonia's president for almost a decade. During the Cold War, he lived in exile in America and worked for Radio Free Europe.

Does the West have the same resolve that it showed during the Cold War? "I'm not convinced," he replies. "There was a certain moral clarity before that is now, I would say, falling apart."

Mr Ilves points to the business links between Gerhard Schroeder, the former German Chancellor, and the Russian state energy giant, Gazprom. "This is the sort of thing that, up until 1991, would never have been possible – never," he says.

Last year, the National Front in France accepted a loan from a Russian bank, apparently in exchange for supporting the Kremlin's seizure of Crimea. "We have the rise of extreme Right-wing parties that are either funded directly by Russia, or are highly pro-Russia," adds Mr Ilves. "There is a difference between the moral fibre, backbone, conscience of countries regarding Soviet behaviour in the 1980s that today is missing when it comes to Russian behaviour."

Europe and America have united over the Ukraine crisis, imposing sanctions that are biting deep into the vitals of Russia's economy. But Mr Ilves believes they should go further by supplying Ukraine with "defensive" weapons, such as Javelin anti-tank missiles.

"Diplomacy between a powerful, victorious army and a side that's losing doesn't really work

well," he says. "You're being attacked with modern weaponry, you need modern weaponry to defend yourself, otherwise you're going to be overrun."

Mr Ilves is equally adamant Britain must keep its nuclear deterrent. "Don't get rid of it," he says, adding that Britain should "maintain its nuclear capability in whatever form it wishes to".

Estonia is a liberal democracy, close to making a net contribution to the EU budget. With its medieval old city and Baltic port, the country's capital, Tallinn, views itself not as an isolated outpost but as part of the European mainstream.

Does Mr Ilves believe the Atlantic Alliance possesses the resolve to defend Estonia?

"If someone says 'no', at that point Nato ceases to exist," he replies. "The minute a collective alliance fails to live up to its agreement to collective defence, then from that moment on, everybody is on the run. Once something like that happens, it's over."

Abandoning Estonia to Russia would mean the death of Nato, so Mr Ilves feels sure it will not be allowed to happen. "As soon as one country is left on its own, no country will feel secure after that," he says. "This is why I'm confident - because it's all self-interest."

Artikkel ajalehe [The Telegraph veebilehel](#) .