

Interview with the Honorable Hanno Pevkur

Minister of Defence of Estonia



PRISM: Sweden has Total Defense and Finland has Comprehensive Defense. What are the fundamental principles of Estonia’s strategic paradigm?

Pevkur: We are quite like Finland in the sense that we have a clear understanding that everyone must be involved in protecting the country. We have a conscript service for the reserve army. This is mandatory for all men and voluntary for women. What we have changed since the full-scale war in Ukraine is that we have increased the number of wartime structures. We had 31,000 fighters before, but now we have almost 44,000. Most of those come from the Volunteer Defense League. The Estonian army is based on the regular army, the reserve army, and the Volunteer Defense League which at the moment has 30,000 people of which 10,000 are combatants. This will be increased this year to 20,000, which brings us to 44,000 combatants in our wartime structure.

PRISM: How long would it take to mobilize the full 44,000 strong force?

Pevkur: We train for that constantly, so again like Finland our mobilizing time is very short. We just finished our biggest spring exercise called “Spring Storm,” together with our allies, where we had 14,000 combatants in the forests and the villages. Our approach has always been that we train where we fight. We do not train only in training areas, but we also train in the cities, in the villages, and in the forests. For instance, when a rapid training or exercise is announced, within 15-20 minutes we have our first people where they are supposed to be. Within 24 hours basically everyone is in place.

PRISM: Sweden’s Total Defense and Finland’s Comprehensive Defense involve both companies and even individuals with specific roles should war come. Is that also true in Estonia?

Pevkur: Yes, we call it the “wide approach to defense.” It doesn’t matter what name you use, whether Comprehensive Defense or Total Defense. It is summed up in our slogan “every bush shoots.” This best describes how we see it; everyone has a role. Obviously, we cannot all be part of military actions. Nevertheless,

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everything from food supply to immigration is linked to defense. All the policies we are creating in Estonia must also be integrated into this “wide approach to defense.” This is very important.

PRISM: Does Estonia have management structures in place to administer civil-military collaboration?

Pevkur: On the military side most importantly, we have our Chief of Defense (CHOD) who has under his control the division which we just basically established in January this year; that is the war structure. On top of that we have a civil structure; we have a clear understanding of what the rescue board will do, what the police and border guard will do. There is a clear understanding that everything is under civilian control. This is a democratic country and that means civilian control must be a given.

PRISM: Is that civil authority institutionalized in a separate administrative agency? Is it under the authority of the Prime Ministry?

Pevkur: It is under the Prime Ministry but in close cooperation with the Ministry of Defense. As Estonia is so small, we do not need an independent or separate administration for that. According to the Constitution these issues go ultimately to the President. But the execution plans are developed and approved by the government.

PRISM: Why is Ukraine important for the world?

Pevkur: Why is Ukraine important for the world? We understand that Ukraine is not fighting only for itself or for its people or for Estonia or the Baltics. This is a fight for the free and the rules-based world order. I am more than sure that all the world’s dictators are looking very closely at what happens to Ukraine. Will they find justification for their own autocratic behavior? Or will they get the message that you cannot go to a democratic country and take away the peoples’ freedoms.

PRISM: What are the stakes involved? What would be the consequences of a Russian victory in Ukraine?

Pevkur: The European security architecture is at stake. How the world will take shape in the coming decades, especially here in Europe. Even the United States’ role in the world. As I have discussed with senators and congressmen, Ukraine is providing and will provide critical lessons for the China-Taiwan conflict.

PRISM: Do the Estonian people understand and appreciate the ramifications of collective defense within an alliance as opposed to territorial defense? That Estonian soldiers may be called upon to defend allied nations such as Montenegro, or even Turkey?

Pevkur: We believe in NATO. We strongly support the “one for all, all for one” principle. It is the same understanding here as in the United States or Canada or any other member of the Alliance. This is why this Alliance is the free world or the democracy watchdog. This also means that when there is a need to help someone there is a readiness to do that. But on the other hand, we must understand this is why we have collective defense and regional plans within NATO. First and foremost, Estonia is in the region of the Baltic states and the Baltic Sea. When you speak of international missions Estonia is also there; Estonia is assisting in Iraq and in other international missions. Whether bilateral cooperation or NATO- or EU-sponsored, these are the missions we are participating in. But when you speak of total defense first and foremost Estonia’s armed forces are preparing to defend Estonia.

PRISM: How does the Russian “special military operation” in Ukraine end?

Pevkur: First let’s call it what it is. This is a war, not a special military operation. You can say that the gray thing that catches a mouse is not a cat—but it is a cat. It is the same with the Russia/Ukraine war;

it is a war. Hundreds of thousands have died, many civilians have lost their lives, many have been raped. Many have been deported to Siberia as in the Second World War. So, let's not pretend that this is not a war.

How does it end? Of course, this is the million-dollar question nobody can yet answer at the moment. From our vantage point it ends with a Ukrainian "win" where Ukraine reclaims all its territories including Crimea. We just do not know how much time this will take.

PRISM: What more can NATO do to support Ukraine?

Pevkur: At the moment NATO support for Ukraine is managed through the Ramstein format which has 52 member countries including all NATO countries. This U.S.-led forum is where we coordinate all help for Ukraine. We have already trained and equipped nine brigades; we will continue to do that because the war will not be over in a few months. Estonia's contribution for military aid to Ukraine is only .1 percent of the total but constitutes 1 percent of our national GDP. This shows how big Estonia's assistance to Ukraine has been. This is exactly what we all must do. We all must help Ukraine more. There are new proposals on the table which have not been approved yet, such as the provision of Western fighter jets. From the United States definitely ATCAMS. There are many specific assets we can send to Ukraine, but we still must train the Ukrainian army to give them the possibility to win this war, because without Allied help it will be very difficult for them to prevail.

PRISM: Do you think that weapons, training, and intelligence by themselves will be sufficient for Ukrainians alone to drive Russian forces back to the pre-2014 borders?

Pevkur: Ukraine is a big country. Their will to fight is the highest in the world. They are ready to protect their country. They have never asked for people.

They have enough people, so our obligation is to provide all the material support they need.

PRISM: Are you concerned that the present level of support could lead to a frozen conflict as in Moldova or the Republic of Georgia where there is a ceasefire, but Russia remains in possession of significant occupied territory?

Pevkur: That is one possible scenario, but I know that Ukrainians will not accept a frozen conflict. The Ukrainian army is ready to fight for as long as it takes to reclaim their territory. They have lost so many friends, family members and relatives, so many who have lost limbs... They have come too far—they must take back their territory. There is no other way forward for them. A frozen conflict is also something we do not want; this is why we must all support Ukraine.

PRISM: French President Emmanuel Macron recently said that at the coming NATO summit in Vilnius members should lay out a clear roadmap leading to Ukrainian NATO membership. A recent Foreign Affairs article argues in favor of immediate NATO membership for Ukraine. In your opinion should Ukraine become a NATO member now? or in the future? Or never?

Pevkur: Estonia has always taken the position that Ukraine should become a NATO member, it is just a question of timing. Just the day before President Macron's statement I said the same thing on a panel. Earlier I stated that Ukraine needs a clear roadmap from Vilnius to Washington (as the next NATO summit will be in Washington). We cannot keep giving the same message as we gave in Bucharest in 2008. Ukrainians have clearly said that "first we have to win the war." These are the words of President Zelensky. They understand that it is difficult to see Ukraine in NATO while the war is still going on.

PRISM: According to Putin one of the justifications for Russia’s war against Ukraine was fear of NATO expansion. If NATO were to expand to include Ukraine would that not be a further provocation, and assure a future war?

Pevkur: NATO is a defense alliance. NATO defends its members and has no intention of attacking Russia. How can this be a justification for a war? I understand Russia’s foreign policy of maintaining some kind of buffer zone between Russia and NATO, and that NATO should not expand to Russia’s borders. But no country—including Russia—can dictate to any independent country whether it is eligible or has the right to join any alliance of its choosing. This is not for Russia to say. It is up to the country, and up to the 31 countries of the Alliance to determine its membership.

PRISM: If Ukraine does become a member of NATO will this increase the likelihood of future war between NATO and Russia?

Pevkur: Definitely not from our side! I don’t see any reason why Russia has to be so hostile. NATO is not interested in attacking Russia; NATO’s goal is to protect its members.

PRISM: If the Russia/Ukraine war becomes a long-term war of attrition, whose side is time on?

Pevkur: On nobody’s side. There is no point in speculating on who wins or loses more from this long conflict. Nobody wins. Russia will lose economically, internationally; Ukraine definitely will not have stability, prosperity, or options for economic growth. The only solution is for Russia to get out of Ukraine—then we can talk about security guarantees for Ukraine or NATO membership; but first and foremost, Russia must return to its own borders.

PRISM: It has been argued that because Russia remains a nuclear power and because ultimately Russia is not “going away” we will have to live with

Russia, and thus we should find a face-saving off-ramp for Putin. Do you agree?

Pevkur: I agree only that Putin and Russia should leave Ukraine. Why should we think it is acceptable to forcibly go to someone’s home and then say “I am not leaving until I can leave in a face-saving way. Don’t call the police. Don’t ask anything of me—even when I destroy your home. I need to save face.” This is not acceptable. The reality is that people must be held accountable for these criminal acts and the war crimes that have been committed.

PRISM: There is an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court (ICC): should we pursue vigorously this international criminal action against Putin and his lieutenants?

Pevkur: When Putin goes to any country that is a member of the ICC they must accept the decision of the ICC and bring Putin under ICC jurisdiction. We have all seen the evidence of criminal acts in Ukraine. Estonia has always said that those responsible for this war must be held accountable. But our first priority remains that Russia should withdraw its forces from Ukrainian territory.

PRISM: Some speculate that if Putin were to retreat from all the Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine it would be his end in the Kremlin. What do you think would be the ramifications within Russia of a Russian defeat in Ukraine?

Pevkur: It is up to the Russian people to decide, but as long as Putin remains in power nothing will change in Russia. There might even be a new Putin who is even worse. Of course, we really hope there will be a democracy one day in Russia. But honestly, I do not see that happening in the near future. Russian power has always been like a pyramid, like a mafia organization that starts at the top. In Russia no one wants to hear about corruption—they want to be part of it.

PRISM: According to a recent article “NATO no longer harbors illusions about the nature of Russia.” How would you describe the nature of Russia?

Pevkur: Sometimes I have given the example that Russian behavior is like nightclub fighting behavior. If you get into an argument with a Russian at a nightclub and he punches you, you cannot say “Let’s talk,” because he will just punch you a second and then a third time. The only option is to punch him back, then he will say “Let’s talk.” This is the mentality of Russian behavior; always show force. The anti-force or reaction is to show a bigger force—a deterrent. And this is exactly what Russia has to know—that NATO has more power.

PRISM: Is Russia a redeemable country? Can you see Russia becoming a responsible stakeholder in a rules-based global order?

Pevkur: The answer lies in history. Have we seen a democratic Russia? Yeltsin tried to push Russia in this direction, but then he was moved aside by Putin.

PRISM: Is it feasible for NATO countries to de-couple from Russia economically, as we were de-coupled during the Cold War?

Pevkur: Of course it is possible. I do not believe any discussion in that matter when somebody says we cannot decouple from Russia. As close as Russia is in our economy, they were only the 8th or 9th largest trade partner even before the war—they were never one of the top three. Russia must understand that they need the West far more than the West needs Russia. Economically Europe and the world can easily survive without Russia.

PRISM: Is Sweden’s membership of NATO important?

Pevkur: Of course, especially for our region. Finland is already in, and we were expecting they would join together. This would bring to our region a lot more security. With their membership NATO would

then have a NATO lake in the Baltic Sea region. We would have two very strong armies joining NATO.

PRISM: What does a NATO lake mean?

Pevkur: It means that we would have total control in the region with respect to the A2AD model, with respect to cooperation—not only civil but all the necessary military cooperation. Sweden’s NATO membership will give us the opportunity to share more data and information with each other, so obviously this is very important. But first and foremost, we must control the Baltic Sea.

PRISM: What if Hungary and Turkey continue to block Sweden’s membership?

Pevkur: For Hungary and Turkey it is vital that NATO as an alliance is stronger. And as Finland and Sweden will make NATO stronger it is to the advantage of both.

PRISM: What can NATO do to make deterrence more effective?

Pevkur: The answer is quite simple. We need to have and to show our enemy that we have superior power. And this brings the enemy to the position that they will not even think of attacking the Alliance. When you talk about the Alliance, NATO has greater air power, greater naval power, and when you take all the land components of all the Allies NATO has greater land power.

PRISM: Should NATO be more pro-active?

Pevkur: We are doing that. As we discussed during the Spring Storm exercise here in Estonia, we had 14,000 Estonian soldiers along with over 3,000 allied soldiers. At this very moment we are participating in a major naval exercise in the Baltic Sea with 30 naval ships including from UK, the United States, Sweden, Belgium, and others.

PRISM: do you think Russia's implied nuclear threats are credible?

Pevkur: There is no advantage to using nuclear weapons. The only thing those can do is to kill thousands of people, but the international impact would be huge. Not only among the Western powers, but politically the cost would be too high. Moscow knows what the costs would be.

PRISM: Do you think that the current structure of the Russian Federation can endure indefinitely?

Pevkur: The current structure of the Russian Federation is not very sustainable. If they want to continue as the Russia we have known since 1991 they will have to make very big changes. Russia is also afraid of China; there are many cities in eastern Russia where the population is largely Chinese. The threat for Russia is that they are losing by fact many parts of Russia to China. There are many different nations within Russia; the question is whether these nations are ready to act as independent countries? This will be a challenge. Some parts of Russia are rich in resources, but in other parts there is not much to build a sustainable country. Why should we listen to Putin when he talks about old Russia. It is vice versa; old Russia started from Ukraine. It is a question of how far back we should go in history. Shall we go back to the Ottoman Empire? How much Russia did we see then? You do not get to pick your favorite historical moment to start from. We have to choose today. This is why Estonia supports Ukraine; we believe they deserve to be a peaceful and prosperous country.