

Interview with the Honorable Arvydas Anušauskas

Minister of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania



PRISM: Sweden is reviving its Total Defense concept and Finland has Comprehensive Defense. What are the fundamental elements of Lithuania’s national strategy?

Anušauskas: Lithuania’s defense policy is based on three pillars. These are the strengthening of the armed forces, a resilient society, and reliance on collective defense. In order to achieve these three, we are increasing our spending on defense. During the last nine years we have increased our spending on defense six times, which now amounts to 2.5 percent of Lithuania’s GDP. Much of that funding goes to modernizing our armed forces; for this purpose, we now allocate 30 percent of our total spending. The second pillar of our national security is societal resilience. For this purpose, we have adopted a civil resilience strategy. To put it briefly the purpose of the strategy is to ensure that citizens are able to operate in times of crisis. When it comes to collective defense, our key interest is enhanced forward defenses and combat credible deterrence. We are really interested in having sufficient NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and also U.S. forces deployed in the region as well as pre-positioning of equipment and air and missile defense. And the regional plans that connect all these in-place forces, reinforcements, command and control elements, capabilities, and enablers across the regions.

PRISM: What are the challenges to interoperability within the Baltic states themselves?

Anušauskas: The ministers of defense of all three Baltic states have a chance to meet within our own forum at least several times per year. At these meetings we discuss the development of our joint capabilities and our joint projects. From these discussions came the acquisition of the HIMARS systems, maritime situational awareness, capabilities development, and we are always looking at joint ways of working together in the future. Just now we are looking at opportunities to acquire radars, sea mines, different types of ammunition. We have a plan for this year across all three Baltic states to use our training grounds for different levels of troop preparation. One breakthrough from the last year is the Baltic states area model to which we try to attract our allies’ air defense capabilities and ensure proper conditions for large-scale air defense exercises in our region.

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This is a huge step forward to help us implement our air defense model, which I think will be approved during the Vilnius summit.

PRISM: What measures has Lithuania taken to contribute to NATO collective defense?

Anušauskas: Let me put it this way: decisions on collective defense are made by the Alliance as a whole and we must always find consensus. Lithuania is among those countries that has always tried to convince the Alliance about the Russian threat. All our efforts as well as investments in our military and capabilities contribute to strengthening collective defense as a whole. So far Lithuania is the only country in the region that is building new training grounds to welcome our Allies, is investing heavily in infrastructure, and is also building several boot camps for Allied forces. These are important steps forward. I already mentioned our air defense model, which with NATO's support will strengthen our air defense capabilities. During the summit will be the first time in the history of Lithuania that we will have so much different air defense capability which will be mutually integrated in a single system.

PRISM: Are there special administrative structures in place for total defense? Who takes the lead on total defense in Lithuania?

Anušauskas: The primary responsibility for total defense is with the Ministry of Defense. But our state authority structure and experience show that whenever a crisis happens all the state institutions must be involved in the response.

The government is responsible for the coordination of the civilian elements of total defense. Earlier I mentioned the civil resistance readiness strategy, which reflects this interoperability among different institutions. The aim of the strategy is to define a role for society with the civil dimension as an indivisible element of the total defense.

Government, together with other institutions and NGOs (non-governmental organization), is in charge of the implementation of this strategy. We also have the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union, which is a voluntary paramilitary organization, and we have significantly increased its funding recently. This Union also contributes to the preparation of citizens for common defense.

To prepare for total defense at the institutional level, we have the mobilization process, which is also a governmental responsibility. We have identified vital state functions, such as continuity of government, functioning of economy and infrastructure, ensuring basic services for society, etc. Various ministries, governmental institutions, municipalities as well as social and economic partners are responsible for the implementation according to their areas of responsibility. The private sector is included in total defense primarily through the mobilization and planning process. A very significant role is played by the municipalities to inventory the resources of the private sector according to requirements and to constantly update information.

During wartime the Lithuanian Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defense, naturally, have primary responsibility for coordination of all defense-related actions. Martial law foresees that to ensure interaction between the armed forces and municipal institutions, bodies, and institutions subordinate to them, the commander of the Lithuanian armed forces appoints and dismisses military commandants and determines the municipality where a specific military commandant will work. They are the key to ensuring that military requirements of civil support will be known and fulfilled in times of war.

PRISM: What makes Ukraine important to Lithuania?

Anušauskas: First of all, Ukraine is important because it is a democratic country which became a target of Russian aggression, which is a way of

testing whether democracies will defend themselves. This is important to Lithuania because a Ukrainian victory in this war is another victory against the Russian/Soviet mode of behavior in international relations. We remember well the days of the occupation and forced influence on Lithuania—even today we are still called “former Soviet republics” even though we were independent states that were occupied by the Soviets. If Ukraine achieves victory this means we have fewer gray zones, and the fewer gray zones we have in which a Kremlin regime can apply hybrid warfare measures and aggression, the fewer gray zones we have the better for Lithuanian and European security.

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

Anušauskas: I can tell you that in the context of the current war Russia cannot achieve any sort of victory. For this aggression Russia has done everything it could to push Ukraine toward the West. In this case this the war solves the dilemma whether democracies can stand up to totalitarian or even regimes with so called controlled “democracies.” Even though I am saying that Russia cannot achieve victory Russia can claim that it is victorious at any time, even now, which it is constantly doing, despite all the losses it incurs. Now we are talking about the new Ukrainian counter-offensive, but this is actually Ukraine’s fourth counter-offensive, and the three previous counter-offensives were successful. They were never treated this way—Russia would say this is a sign of good will or they were making some changes in terms of a troop redeployment around the front-lines, but they would never admit a loss.

PRISM: What is the future of Russia if Russian forces are forced to retreat to pre-2014 lines; meaning if Russia must give up Crimea and the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Anušauskas: In this case Russia might face some regime changes, but perhaps not the drastic kind some might wish. We would have to consider the possibility that Russia would become even more radicalized. As a historian I see similarities between today’s Russia and Nazi Germany of 1938-1939. At that time expanding step by step aggression tested the resilience of democratic Western states.

PRISM: Is one possible outcome that the Russian Federation itself might break up?

Anušauskas: There may be such scenarios but let us wait and see what the future brings. Even though there are such scenarios, I personally do not see this as reflecting reality. I do not like to contemplate possible scenarios—any might happen. Everyone should be interested primarily in a Ukrainian victory rather than in Putin’s political survival.

PRISM: What more can NATO do to support Ukraine?

Anušauskas: First, we should talk about material support. Ninety percent of NATO member states are providing military and other kinds of support to Ukraine. During the Vilnius summit the NATO-Ukraine Council will gather for the first time. As a practical action NATO could gradually begin integrating Ukraine into NATO structures and offer a clear answer regarding a pathway to future membership.

PRISM: Should Ukraine be invited to join NATO immediately—at the Vilnius summit—or should a formal invitation wait?

Anušauskas: A formal invitation may be offered later, but at least at the summit a clear pathway must be granted now, in Vilnius.

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?

Anušauskas: Such scenarios are always possible, but nobody wants such a scenario. I think we should do even more than we are doing right now. No state wants or is ready for prolonged war, which is why we should continue to increase and enhance military support sufficiently for Ukraine to prevail.

PRISM: Are Russia's implied threats to use nuclear weapons credible?

Anušauskas: Of course, we take Russian capabilities and Russia's official announcements seriously. However, we are also able to verify their official narrative aligns with reality. Let me put it this way, public statements cannot be left without our response. We already have tactical nuclear weapons deployed 100 kilometers west of the Lithuanian border in Kaliningrad. If Russia redeploys tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus they will be 500 kilometers closer to the Lithuanian and NATO border than before. Knowing what Russia is doing in Belarus—namely, the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons—we must show some kind of response. But it shouldn't stop us from supporting Ukraine.

PRISM: Should that support extend to supporting Ukrainian counterattacks on Russian territory?

Anušauskas: What is already happening within Russia's territory is a consequence of the current war, a war that Russia itself started. It proves Russia's weaknesses.

PRISM: What is the future of Belarus?

Anušauskas: In our view Belarus is already integrated into Russia in military terms. Unfortunately, Belarusian society is held hostage by their own dictator. When we along with our neighboring countries are forced to prevent Belarusian regime hybrid attacks—for example, the influx of illegal

immigration through our borders—we understand these actions are not carried out by Belarusian society—that the society is not responsible. So, we still have this exception that we let people in if they leave Belarus for political reasons.

PRISM: During the Cold War there was great concern about Soviet tanks swarming through the Fulda Gap. Today we hear about the Suwalki Gap. Can you describe the strategic significance of the Suwalki Gap?

Anušauskas: The Suwalki Corridor is the only land pathway from the Baltic countries to our NATO allies. Accordingly, the Suwalki is of strategic significance and NATO as an alliance has plans to defend it. But Sweden's accession to NATO will bring changes to the Baltic Sea region security.

PRISM: Is Sweden's membership in NATO still a high priority now that Finland has already become a NATO member?

Anušauskas: Yes, Swedish membership is of crucial importance. Along with Finland's membership they bring very strong military capabilities to the region that changes the security situation significantly.

PRISM: What can we do if Turkey or Hungary continue to obstruct Sweden's membership?

Anušauskas: I personally believe that all the obstacles to Sweden's NATO membership will be removed by the time of the Vilnius summit. A few days ago, I met with the Turkish Minister of Defense, and though he did not commit to any details, from what I heard I remain optimistic.

PRISM: How can NATO turn Kaliningrad into a strategic benefit? Is Kaliningrad a Russian vulnerability?

Anušauskas: Kaliningrad is a significant factor. This area is highly militarized. Russia is doing its utmost to ensure self-sufficiency or survival of

Kaliningrad since it is isolated from the mainland of Russia. Lithuania is not doing anything so that Russia may say that we are isolating the Kaliningrad Oblast. The only thing we are doing is to enforce NATO sanctions against Russia including Kaliningrad. From a military perspective, persistent NATO and U.S. bilateral presence on land, in the air, and on the Baltic Sea; the enhancement of defensive capabilities in the Baltic region vis-a-vi anti-access/area denial (A2AD) in Kaliningrad; Allied combined, joint exercises, based on realistic scenarios—all are visible demonstrations that Kaliningrad shouldn't be regarded as a strategic advantage by Russia.

PRISM: Is gray zone conflict—sometimes referred to as hybrid warfare—a significant threat in Lithuania?

Anušauskas: We call these measures tools of hybrid warfare. Russia used to apply, is applying, and in the future will apply such measures. If we talk about neutralization or elimination of hybrid warfare, we have been getting ready for these scenarios for at least 10 years—for example making sure Russia cannot impose energy blackmail against us. This applies to both the electricity market and the supply of natural gas. The elimination of dependencies measures that we adopted a while ago helped us in the difficult conditions when the war started and some of the Western European countries had a tough time to reorient themselves to abandon Russian oil and gas. We were ready for this. When it comes to information warfare, we take these things very seriously.

PRISM: Does Russia attempt to exploit the Russian speakers in Lithuania?

Anušauskas: Thirty-three years ago Lithuania was still occupied by the Soviet Union, and I would be lying if I were to say that there are no consequences of the former Russian occupation and influences at all. Russia's influence campaigns are intense, and tools

are trying to target both Lithuanian and Russian parts of civil society, both citizens of Lithuania.

PRISM: When Lithuania approved the opening of a Taiwan Representative Office, China was very angry and took certain measures against Lithuania. Do you view China as a security threat?

Anušauskas: China's military stance and rhetoric has not changed. This was recently proven by China's Minister of Defense who at the recent Shangri-La Dialog Conference said there is a need to renew the international security architecture. Lithuania was among the first countries in the region to include China in the national security threats assessment. China is following our response as well as Russia's vulnerabilities and also learning lessons from their mistakes, however still choosing to oppose Western democracies.

PRISM: Is the Chinese security model a threat to democracies?

Anušauskas: Yes, China supports other values than those embraced by the democratic countries. In the past Lithuania tried to make a dialog with China, but after opening the Taiwan Representative Office in Lithuania we felt the harsh measures taken by China against us. We had to appeal against these measures and looked for support among our allies and in international organizations such as the World Trade Organization.

PRISM: Is the world entering a second Cold War?

Anušauskas: I think that war in Ukraine and China's behavior vis-a-vis Taiwan demonstrate that for Russia and China Cold War never ended as much as we wanted to believe.