

Development of the Lithuanian Armed Forces - an Important Step for Regional Security and Stability

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I am pleased to represent Lithuania's Ministry of Defense at this conference and to present to this distinguished audience a summary of the progress our young armed forces have made over the last year in building a credible defense force which will meet NATO standards.

Lithuania views NATO as the primary institution, which guarantees the security and stability of its member states as well as the European continent. Lithuania formally applied for NATO membership in January 1994. We were the second country to enter the Partnership for Peace program and have fully and enthusiastically participated in PfP activities.

At the same time Lithuania has pursued a balanced and comprehensive program of national security. In building our armed forces - the best defense forces we can create - we are devoting a substantial amount of our energy to fully training the young men and women who bear the burden of the defense of their country, and providing them with a talented leadership that will make wise judgments. To that end 490 of our military personnel have attended extended terms at various schools in the West and 135 at short-term training courses. We also have a moral obligation to provide them with the best equipment to do their job, while fulfilling our obligation to the taxpayers. We have procured and continue to field state of the art communications equipment, fully meeting all NATO requirements and an effective anti-tank weapon the Karl Gustaf, has been procured and fielded. As one of the smaller states, Lithuania cannot ensure its security only through the use of its armed forces. It must have a strong economy integrated into European and global markets. It must have highly skilled diplomats and political leaders who will steer Lithuania's defense and foreign policy through the rocky shoals of international crises. Our security strategy, national legislation, foreign and defense policy as well as the process of building our defense capability all reflect this "Realpolitik".

We support all processes and mechanisms which could contribute to our security. NATO membership is the most effective instrument because it is based on the principle of a collective defense, and has developed a capacity for crisis management and peace operations. NATO's values are Lithuania's values and the political leadership of Lithuania would be doing an injustice to its citizens if it did not seek membership in this western defense alliance.

The decision to aim for NATO membership has political advantages for the region and implications for our internal decisions in building our defense capability. First let me mention the three most important political advantages:

1. The accession of Lithuania and the other two Baltic States to the Alliance will enlarge the area of stability in Europe.

2. NATO integration helps to guarantee internal political stability and provides confidence for economic development for young democracies such as Lithuania.

3. Even the anticipation of NATO membership has improved relations between states in Central and Eastern Europe. For instance, since 1993 significant progress has been made in the Polish-Lithuanian relations. Poland and Lithuania now view

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each other as strategic partners and have created a combined Lithuanian-Polish Battalion.

While seeking NATO membership, Lithuania maintains good neighbor relations with Belarus and Russia as evidenced by Lithuania's treaties with these two countries on border demarcation and delineation, our national policy of guaranteeing the civil rights of all ethnic minorities, as well as our extensive economic relations with them.

Our aim is to create an armed forces based on the Western model, which can be integrated with NATO forces and also function independently in defense of the country. Two important tasks, required by NATO, have already been accomplished: the democratic, civilian control over the armed forces; and, the adoption of a comprehensive national security strategy which has led to the revision of the military strategy and the creation of a new force structure. In order to optimize command and control of combat units, strengthen their combat potential, improve interoperability with NATO command structures and operational procedures, as well as to assure independent capability to accomplish combat assignments, a Unified command and territorial defense concepts have been adopted creating three military regions. This territorial defense concept will provide a good framework for flexible defense. It will facilitate the integration of the National Defense Volunteer Force into the overall Military Defense Strategy as a component of a single force.

This is a long process, but the first steps have yielded tangible results. Lithuania's successful participation in the NATO led peace-enforcement and stabilization mission in Bosnia as well as the recent Baltic Challenge exercise and Cooperative Assembly exercise in Albania show that Lithuania's military units can effectively perform tasks under NATO command.

Now, I would like to turn to an evaluation of the military preparedness of Lithuania's armed forces. Lithuania has made significant progress in the development of infrastructure by: establishing a clear and effective chain of command; bringing order to the planning, programming and budgeting process; as well as improving military training and the quality of life of the soldiers and officers. Quality of life for our soldiers is at the top of our priorities. This summer we opened a battalion-sized installation, in the port city of Klaipėda, which fully meets western standards. In the first quarter of next year a second installation in Panevėžys will reach those standards. An entirely new installation will begin construction in the year 2000. All of our installations are undergoing some level of renovation. We care for our soldiers and will look after their welfare as much as their combat preparedness.

Training and education of soldiers and officers to assume their responsibilities is a critical component of preparedness. Therefore, we have established a Training and Doctrine Command which assumes the responsibility of planning, organizing and coordinating all aspects of military training to assure that resources are most effectively used to produce highly qualified officers and soldiers. A Basic Training Center is in the process of construction and will become operational in the first quarter of next year. Danish and British officers will introduce Western doctrine and training techniques when the Center becomes operational. Instructor training has already been initiated.

All of this institution building would be impossible without the assistance of partner countries. Danish and British officers have been providing training on a continuous basis for our officers in Western leadership principles, and just recently the British assumed major responsibility for training our cadets at the Military Academy. We highly appreciate all of the technical expertise and material

contributions by Denmark, Norway, the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany and other states which participate in both Baltic regional and Lithuanian-based projects.

One might ask: "Can a small country like Lithuania afford an army?" The answer is "Yes", provided defense expenditures are planned taking into account major economic indicators. Because of the growth of Lithuania's GDP and government revenues Lithuania has increased its defense budget by 50 percent in the past year. Currently, it is 1.5 percent of GDP. With balanced growth, we expect to be spending 2 percent of GDP by 2001. This is the level of defense spending by most NATO members and which appears to satisfy the needs of a developing defense system. We continue to prepare our armed forces for NATO integration. This is why Lithuania has actively participated in the creation of Baltic regional defense structures such as the Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion (BALTBAT), the Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON), the Baltic Air Surveillance Network (BALTNET) and the Baltic Defense College (BALTDEFCOL). It is our hope that these projects will become an integral part of NATO's infrastructure in the future, and they will be part of our contribution to the military strength of the Alliance.

Our citizens support our efforts to build a credible armed force and recent public opinion polls have shown that over 56 percent of the population supports Lithuania's membership in NATO.

Foreign experts have favorably evaluated Lithuania's recent military progress. The U.S. military team led by General Kievenaar confirmed that we are on the right track in building a defense capability. Lithuania strongly supports the idea that at least one Baltic State should be invited to join when NATO begins the second round of enlargement. The Washington Summit next April should launch an accession process which would eventually admit the best-prepared candidates, including Lithuania.

The tragic events of 58 years ago reduced Lithuania's population by a third. A hard lesson has been learned: if Lithuania's statehood is threatened, we will defend ourselves, with or without NATO. We seek admission to NATO mainly because it would greatly reduce the likelihood of such a tragic event. An armed conflict in our sensitive region would seriously undermine the stability of Europe and would potentially spill over into other countries.

NATO is a defensive organization and no one can reasonably fear its enlargement to the Baltic region. On the contrary, such enlargement would enhance the stability and security not only of the Baltic countries, but also of their neighbors. It is not a secret that there are those who proclaim fear of NATO enlargement. To deny Lithuania NATO membership because of such voices would send a completely wrong signal. Rather than to appease, it would give credence to their view.

I would like to conclude with the observation that the integration process to NATO has already favorably affected security and stability in the region. However, it would be wrong to stop here and be content with only intensive cooperation within PfP. For us, there can be no substitute for NATO membership. We feel strongly that in taking the next step, the security, stability and prosperity of Europe and the Transatlantic community will be enhanced.