

# Estonia's First Steps in the Direction of NATO and National Defence

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## ABSTRACT

The meeting of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) which was held in December 1991 and attended by the foreign ministers of NATO member states, former members of the Warsaw Treaty Organisation and the Baltic States was a prelude to enlargement. Although the direct threat of an attack in the territories of NATO countries had ceased to exist, armed conflict in the border areas of NATO – especially in the former Yugoslavia – emerged as new threats. The NATO cooperation programme Partnership for Peace (PfP) was launched on the initiative of the US in 1994 and was tasked with preparing the military structures of potential new member states.

Even before the adoption of the new Constitution, Chairman of the Supreme Council of Estonia Ülo Nugis declared in October 1991 that Estonia's goal was to join NATO as soon as possible. Secretary General of NATO Manfred Wörner visited Estonia in March 1992. However, the main task of the Estonian defence policy until 1994 was the withdrawal of Russian forces from the territory of Estonia.

The fundamentals of the Estonian defence policy passed in the Riigikogu in May 1996 stated that the goal of the policy was to join NATO and WEU.

In 1994, Estonian soldiers took part in NATO/PfP training (Cooperative Spirit 94) for the first time. In 1995 Estonia joined the NATO Planning and Review Programme. Estonia has been taking part in NATO peacekeeping missions, initially as part of the Danish battalion, since 1995.

The idea of Estonia becoming a member of NATO seemed utopic at the time the country's independence was restored, but it had already become a serious possibility by the mid-'90s. The events in Europe and around the world, the openness of NATO and Estonia's own determination and efforts helped to achieve this.

Guaranteeing the security of the state became one of the main issues that the young, restored Republic of Estonia had to start dealing with from day one. It soon became clear that guaranteeing security with the state's own means alone was impossible and Estonia had to join the structures that ensure the security of Europe. NATO became the obvious choice. Although NATO membership seemed relatively utopic in a country that had just broken free from the shackles of the Soviet Union, it managed to achieve this goal a mere decade later, in 2004.

This article focuses on the first years after independence was regained (1991–1995/1996), when the foundations of Estonia's movement towards NATO membership were laid. The development of the NATO-related thought in Estonia, the first stages of the cooperation between Estonia and NATO, various types of international cooperation and the domestic activities aimed at supporting Estonia's integration with NATO will be discussed.

## **The general context of NATO enlargement and partnerships in the early 1990s**

### **Period of self-searching in NATO**

The collapse of the Soviet empire opened a completely new era in Europe's security.

At the Rome summit of the 8th of November 1991, NATO declared that the Cold War had ended and adopted a new strategic concept, which called for a broader approach to security where cooperation and dialogue would hold the key roles. The organisation decided to establish a new political relationship with countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

As a follow-up to the decisions made in Rome, a new cooperation forum called the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) was established at the meeting of foreign ministers of NATO and the former Eastern Bloc countries held on the 20th of December 1991 in Brussels. The initial members of the forum were NATO member states, former Warsaw

Pact member states and the Baltic states. The NACC was established at the same time when the Soviet Union was taking its last breaths. In the course of the meeting the Soviet ambassador announced that its country had ceased to exist and he was representing the Russian Federation instead.<sup>1</sup> The NACC became a forum of multilateral political consultations on security issues that were topical at the time, such as the various regional conflicts on the ruins of the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union.

However, the end of the Cold War was also an existential issue for NATO itself. The disappearance of the former enemy raised the question of the role of the Alliance in the changed situation. The bloodshed in former Yugoslavia, which soon required the intervention of NATO itself, indicated that whilst any direct military threat to the territories of NATO member states may have disappeared, the instability on the Alliance's borders and beyond had become a growing security threat. NATO's enlargement to the east became a part of the question of how to advance security and stability in the entire Euro-Atlantic region.

### The emergence of the issue of NATO's enlargement and the birth of PfP

The topic of enlargement itself became a serious item on the Alliance's agenda in 1993. Under the political pressure applied by the so-called Visegrad Group<sup>2</sup> countries of Central Europe, the Allies were forced to start formulating their positions and the approach to the question of how to react to the desire of the former Eastern Bloc countries to become members of NATO. At first, there was no common understanding in NATO about whether the Eastern Enlargement would be beneficial for the Alliance. Supporters emphasised the benefits that the new members would bring to the Alliance; sceptics in their turn pointed out the prob-

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<sup>1</sup> North Atlantic Coordination Council (NACC), [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_69344.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_69344.htm) (accessed 9.2.2014).

<sup>2</sup> Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

lems that the enlargement would cause in relations with Russia as well as in the functioning of NATO itself with a larger number of members.

Although the President of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, had signed a declaration during his visit of Poland on the 25th of August 1993, basically expressing his consent for the potential NATO membership of Poland,<sup>3</sup> he soon changed this position. The representatives of Russia started to constantly describe the negative consequences of NATO's enlargement and threatened to take counteraction. Russia's anti-NATO rhetoric became the background that accompanied the Alliance's enlargement deliberations throughout their various stages.

In 1993, President Clinton's administration in the US was following the so-called 'Russia first' principle, adopted after the collapse of the Soviet empire, in its foreign policy and Washington was therefore not ready to advocate the enlargement. However, it was clear that something had to be done, because the purely consultative NACC was basically nothing more than a talking shop and didn't meet anyone's expectations any longer. This is why the United States came up with the idea of the new cooperation programme called Partnership for Peace (PfP) in autumn 1993. This programme would, instead of enlargement, focus on the development of practical cooperation between NATO and non-member states.

The PfP programme was officially launched at the NATO summit held in Brussels from the 10th–11th of January 1994. The PfP was a kind of a compromise between the two sides: firstly those who wanted to avoid aggravating Russia at any cost and secondly those who were in favour of the enlargement. Within the context of enlargement, the programme primarily served two purposes for NATO: firstly, it had to bide its time before making any decisions about enlargement and secondly, it was actually necessary to start preparations for future enlargement to guarantee that new members could join the Alliance and especially its military structures as smoothly as possible.

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 37–40.



*Meeting of NATO Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Sir Brian Kenny and Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Estonia Arnold Rüütel in Kadriorg Palace (25th of February 1992). From the left: Foreign Minister Lennart Meri and Arnold Rüütel; Brian Kenny, 2nd from the right. Erik Prozes/author's private collection*

Whilst the NACC was a political forum created solely for the purpose of the post-Cold War European security environment and contained no bilateral cooperation programmes between NATO and partner states, the PfP was already a tool that could be used for practical cooperation and allowed the partner states to take steps towards NATO membership. The programme made it possible to proceed to direct defence and military cooperation with the Alliance. The future members could familiarise themselves with the way NATO functions via PfP planning, joint training and other activities. On the other hand, participation in the PfP process was supposed to help the partner states reorganise their post-Soviet armed forces to make them comply with the models developed in democratic countries. The PfP gave no guarantees that full membership of the

organisation would be offered, but it was a good opportunity to prepare for this.

Several Central and Eastern European countries had hoped that NATO membership would be granted to them by expedited procedure at the Brussels summit, and although these hopes did not come true, the Alliance reassured them that NATO's doors would remain open for new members. President Clinton explained that when it came to the enlargement, the questions were "when" and "how" and not whether it would take place at all.<sup>4</sup>

## **Gradual emergence of NATO membership as Estonia's security policy option**

### **Estonia's first cautious steps towards NATO**

The first contacts and attempts at cooperation between Estonia and NATO started almost immediately after the restoration of independence in August 1991.

The first Estonian politician to raise the need for NATO membership was Chairman of the Supreme Council Ülo Nugis. Having returned to Tallinn from the Madrid meeting of the North Atlantic Assembly on 24 October 1991, where Estonia was granted the status of observer by this inter-parliamentary organisation of the NATO member states, Nugis declared at the press conference that "Estonia should try to become a member of NATO as soon as possible"<sup>5</sup>. This objective seemed utopic at the time and was purely an expression of Nugis's personal opinion. However, the ice had been broken and on the 17th of November 1991, *Päevaleht* published the article "Estonia should join NATO" by history student Vahur Made, where this idea was backed up by convincing arguments for the first time.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand* (New York: Random House, 2002), 111.

<sup>5</sup> Toomas H. Liiv, "Ülo Nugis: Eesti peab saama NATO liikmeks niipea kui võimalik," *Päevaleht*, 25.10.1991, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Vahur Made, "Eesti peaks ühinema NATOga," *Päevaleht*, 17.11.1991, 3.

NATO membership became a possible security policy choice for Estonia. However, some other concepts were also popular in the first years after the restoration of independence. The most widespread one of them was to remain neutral like Finland and Sweden.<sup>7</sup> It can be assumed that the continued presence of the Russian troops made its own mark on people's way of thinking and, moreover, on the courage of expression: there were fears that putting too much emphasis on the NATO card would give the Russians an excuse to delay the withdrawal of its troops.

However, Estonia was definitely interested in the establishment of contacts and cooperation with NATO. Foreign Minister Lennart Meri was the first member of the Estonian government who officially visited the NATO headquarters on the 12th of November 1991. He met with the Secretary General Manfred Wörner and spoke to the ambassadors of the member states in the North Atlantic Council (NAC). When the NACC was established on the 20th of December in the same year, Estonia was naturally one of its founding members. Relations with NATO developed within the framework of the NACC at first. The representatives of Estonia started taking part in seminars and meetings, and mutual familiarisation visits were organised for both politicians and military staff members. Ambassador Clyde Kull, who was also the Ambassador of Estonia to the Kingdom of Belgium and the Permanent Representative to the European Union, was accredited the Permanent Representative of Estonia to NATO in December 1991.

The first high-ranking NATO officer who visited Estonia was General Sir Brian Kenny, Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (Deputy SACEUR), who came over on the 25th of February 1992. This visit was soon followed by the first visit of the Secretary General of NATO to Estonia: Manfred Wörner was in Tallinn from the 14th–15th of March 1992. Chairman of the NATO Military Committee General Vigleik Eide visited Estonia in October 1992. The warships of NATO member states started port visits to Tallinn – these visits had a symbolic meaning for Estonia that still had foreign troops in its territory. The visit of eight ships and

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<sup>7</sup> An overview of the discussions of security and defence policy trends at the time is given by Hellar Lill in "Eesti riigikaitsepoliitika kujunemisest," *Akadeemia* nr 9 (2009): 1741–1748.

1,300 seamen of the NATO Standing Naval Force Atlantic (STANAVFORLANT) in the beginning of August 1992, which lasted for several days, was particularly impressive.

The representatives of Estonia in their turn started paying frequent visits to NATO headquarters. The commanders of the defence forces of the three Baltic states visited the NATO Brussels headquarters and the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons in July 1992 by invitation of the NATO Military Committee. Chief of the General Staff of the Defence Forces Colonel Ants Laaneots represented Estonia. Lennart Meri visited the headquarters again on the 25th of November 1992 in his new capacity as the President of the Republic of Estonia. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly, where Estonia had been an associate member since May 1992, also became an important forum for explaining Estonia's opinions and aspirations.

The main objective of Estonia's security policy until 1994 was to achieve the withdrawal of Russian troops from its territory. This is why one of the main issues raised at the time in all contacts with NATO was the Alliance's possible assistance in making the foreign troops leave. However, the work done to achieve the withdrawal of the Russian troops was channelled into other organisations and formats, and NATO never really played a role in this.

The questions of practical defence assistance raised by Estonia in contacts with NATO included the need of the newly re-established defence force for various training and material support as well as expert assistance. Again, the NATO of those days didn't turn out to be the suitable format for this. However, the Alliance did encourage Estonia to establish direct relationships with its member states, and assistance programmes of specific NATO countries soon followed.

All in all, the contacts between Estonia and NATO in the first years following the restoration of independence remained relatively superficial and on the level of political contacts, military diplomacy and information exchange. Both sides had their reasons for this.

The Estonian foreign and security policy authorities, especially the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Forces, had no connections or expe-

rience, and there was also a lack of people who spoke English as well as of money. When the first meeting of NATO defence ministers with partner states in the NACC format took place in April 1992, Estonia was represented by diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Estonia didn't yet have a Ministry of Defence. The first Defence Minister Ülo Uluots admitted in his so-called political testament, which he left to his successor in the position of minister in autumn 1992, that "good contact with NATO has been established, but we cannot play along due to the lack of staff and money".<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, NATO itself wasn't ready for closer relationships either. The Alliance still hadn't developed a more specific framework for cooperation with the non-member states. As a result a deeper military cooperation with former Eastern Bloc countries was basically out of the question. NATO was interested in security and stability in the Baltic Sea region, and in Estonia and the other Baltic states continuing to exist as independent countries. At the same time, the West was generally still cautious about the Baltic states, as it had no idea how these three would cope. Back then, the Baltic states were still seen as potential sources of conflict because of the presence of Russian troops, potential ethnic tensions, border disputes and a number of other reasons. For example, at the meeting with Ambassador Clyde Kull on the 15th of November 1992, Chairman of the NATO Military Committee General Vigleik Eide mentioned the situation in the Baltic States as a source of tension in Europe that was a concern for NATO in addition to the events in the Balkans and the situation in Russia<sup>9</sup>. The (unofficial) arms embargo implemented by the NATO member states as well as the Nordic countries on the Baltic states at the time was an expression of that fear.

The topic of NATO wasn't really discussed during the Riigikogu and presidential elections of September 1992. However, discussions of NATO membership on the political level started in earnest after the formation of Prime Minister Mart Laar's government in October 1992. The new

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<sup>8</sup> Ülo Uluots, "Poliitiline testament," 1992, KMA 1/18.

<sup>9</sup> Memo of Ambassador Clyde Kull "Meeting with the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee General Eide, Summary", Brussels 15.11.1992, copy in author's possession.

government immediately chose full integration with the West as its clear political direction and this also covered joining the security structures of Europe.<sup>10</sup> NATO was seen as the only functioning security organisation that had the political and military means required to ensure the security of Estonia against the resurgence of the Russian threat. Although this direction of Estonia's security policy was not formally defined anywhere at the time, the country's gradual movement towards NATO membership had started.

The topic of NATO still remained relatively distant for the Defence Forces and national defence on a broader scale. In March 1993, the Government submitted the document "Fundamentals of National Defence", which had been prepared in the Ministry of Defence and constituted the first proposal to formulate a national defence concept, to the Riigikogu. The document declared: "Estonia will integrate into Europe and work with collective security systems that follow the principles of the UN (CSCE, possibly also NATO, WEU)"<sup>11</sup>. This is the only mention of NATO in the document and the topic of NATO was never raised during the discussions in the Riigikogu. In the end, the document itself fell victim to the political battle of those days and was never adopted by the Riigikogu or even properly discussed.

However, the need to develop the Defence Forces in accordance with the standards of NATO began to be mentioned, often without any real knowledge of what these standards were like. For example, the decision to transfer to NATO standards in regard to mutual procedures and topographic maps was adopted at the meeting of Baltic Defence Ministers in February 1993.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, the political decision to transfer to the use of armament corresponding to NATO standards in the Defence Forces, which

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<sup>10</sup> Mart Laar, "Esimesed sammud NATO poole," – *Eesti NATO lugu 1991–2004*, toim. Lauri Lindström, Henrik Praks (Tallinn: Eesti NATO Ühing, 2014), 64–69.

<sup>11</sup> Draft of Riigikogu Resolution No O88 on the Development of National Defence Acts, RA 2/27/1, 64.

<sup>12</sup> Press release of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Defence Ministers on their 24 February 1993 meeting in Tallinn, copy in author's possession.



*Supreme Allied Commander Europe General George A. Joulwan (in the middle) visiting Kalevi Infantry Battalion in Jägala, Estonia. On the right Commander of Defence Forces General Aleksander Einsele (22nd of September 1995). Albert Truuväart/ETA/author's private collection*

was adopted by Mart Laar's government immediately after it stepped into office, was significant. The result was the agreement for purchasing weapons for the Defence Forces from Israel, which was signed in January 1993. The scope of the agreement was unprecedented under the circumstances and its price including interest payments amounted to US \$60 million. Politically, the weapons deal was seen as a part of Estonia's clear intent to break away from its dependence on the East. Prime Minister Laar compared it to the introduction of the country's own currency in term of strategic importance.<sup>13</sup> As a result of the deal, the Defence Forces of Estonia were the first in Central and Eastern Europe that became equipped with weapons that used the same ammunition as NATO member states.

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<sup>13</sup> Verbatim report of the 2nd Session of the 7th Parliament, 19 April 1993, <http://www.riigikogu.ee/?op=steno&stcommand=stenoqramm&date=735206400> (accessed 9.2.2014).

The appointment of Retired Colonel of the US Army Aleksander Einseln as the Commander of the Defence Forces of Estonia by the Riigikogu on 4 May 1993 was another expression of the ideology of getting closer to the West and thereby also to NATO.

## **Estonia joins PfP and the political course towards NATO is set**

As NATO started discussing its enlargement options, Estonia started making clear declarations in the second half of 1993 that it wanted to become a member of the Alliance. At the meeting held in Tallinn on the 15th of December 1993, the Baltic presidents confirmed together that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia see NATO as their main security guarantee in the future.<sup>14</sup> The direction of NATO was not just the initiative of the President, Government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but an expression of a wider consensus in Estonian politics.

Estonia emphasised the importance of the European Union's enlargement alongside the Eastern Enlargement of NATO from the very beginning. It was understood that Estonia's chances of NATO accession would improve via the success achieved in the direction of the European Union. In his interview to *Päevaleht* on the 26th of February 1994, Foreign Minister Jüri Luik summed up Estonia's approach as follows: "The main problem of our foreign policy is that we have to keep all of our options open: NATO, EU... No one can predict today when we'll become members of the EU and NATO. It's important that we're prepared, that we're open to these organisations. We don't know when our chance will come"<sup>15</sup>.

When NATO announced its Partnership for Peace programme in January 1994, it created a lot of confusion at first. The launch of the PfP caused significant disappointment in the Visegrad Group, as it had

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<sup>14</sup> Alo Kullamaa, "Balti presidendid näevad NATO-t peamise julgeolekugarantiina," *Päevaleht*, 16.12.1993, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Toomas H. Liiv, "Jüri Luik: poliitika ja armastus on mõlemad hukutavad kired," *Pühapäevaleht*, 26.2.1994, 2–3.

*Presidents of the Baltic States in BALTBAT headquarters in Ādaži, Latvia. President of Estonia Lennart Meri is hammering a nail in a flagpole of the training centre (8th of February 1995). Lembit Michelson/ETA/Estonian Film Archives*



been hoping for much clearer enlargement prospects. Estonia, however, was able to assess its options rationally. It greeted the launch of the programme as a positive, concluding that this was the maximum it could get from NATO at the time. It was also important for Estonia that the candidate countries were not divided into groups and that the Baltic states were therefore not separated from the Visegrad countries in the process.

On the 14th of January 1994, President Lennart Meri and Prime Minister Mart Laar signed their joint letter to the Secretary General of NATO Manfred Wörner to confirm Estonia's wish to join the PfP programme. Foreign Minister Jüri Luik signed the PfP framework document on behalf of Estonia at the ceremony held in Brussels on the 3rd of February 1994.

Estonia was the fourth country to join the Partnership for Peace. In his address to the North Atlantic Council, Minister Luik declared that Estonia had taken the first step towards full NATO membership.<sup>16</sup>

The launch of the Partnership for Peace programme in 1994 opened a new, broader dimension to Estonia's political and practical NATO integration efforts and to the related international cooperation. The departure of the Russian troops in August in the same year alongside the stabilisation of the country's internal security and economic situation also meant that Estonia started feeling more secure as a state and thereby also more confident in its aspirations.

The new government of Prime Minister Tiit Vähi that came to power after the Riigikogu elections in spring 1995 continued with the course towards NATO established by its predecessors. This policy was formally confirmed on the 7th of May 1996 when the Riigikogu unanimously approved "The Fundamentals of Estonian Defence Policy", the first national defence policy concept of Estonia after it regained its independence. This document stated expressly that "Estonia's goal is to become a full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Western European Union (WEU). Cooperation with their defence organisations is our main political and practical opportunity to develop and strengthen the security and national defence of Estonia"<sup>17</sup>.

Estonia's NATO aspirations had gained strong support in political circles as well as in society as a whole. As the actual outlook of accession was still vague this didn't mean that the relevant security debate had completely ended. Possible alternatives to NATO membership continued to be suggested, such as neutrality or perhaps a different organisation, e.g. a military union of the Baltic States.<sup>18</sup> However, these alternatives failed to generate any in-depth political discussions. Estonia's aim was set at NATO.

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<sup>16</sup> Address to the North Atlantic Council by H. E. Jüri Luik, Brussels, NATO, 3.2.1994, copy in author's possession.

<sup>17</sup> "Eesti riigi kaitsepoliitika põhisuunad," RT I 1996, 33, 684, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/13009161> (accessed 27.6.2014).

<sup>18</sup> Hellar Lill, "Eesti riigikaitsepoliitika sõnastamisest 1996–1999: Põhisuundadest NATO-liikmesuse tegevuskavani," *KVÜÖA Toimetised* 17 (2013), 91–96.

## **NATO and the establishment of the Estonian national defence**

Unlike the European Union, NATO does not have any specific criteria for the selection and admission of new members. The enlargement of NATO is a political process and the Alliance wants to preserve its political decision-making and freedom of operation whilst avoiding anything that's automatic.

However, the Alliance prepared the NATO Enlargement Study in 1995, which stipulated the principles of enlargement, i.e. the general conditions for why and how NATO should enlarge. According to the study, states that want to join NATO have to meet a number of various conditions. Adherence to the principles of democracy, free market and human rights is the main basis for enlargement. As NATO is a military alliance, then defence and military aspects are of particular importance. For example, the study emphasised that the capacity of future members to make military contributions to collective defence and the Alliance's missions will be the factor that will determine whether they will be invited to join. In the practical sense, the countries had to harmonise the principles of their defence planning and the civilian control of armed forces with those of NATO to ensure that their armed forces are interoperable with NATO nations, contribute sufficient resources to their integration into NATO and be able to participate in joint operations, incl. collective defence.<sup>19</sup>

The desire to join NATO gradually started influencing the wider defence policy choices of Estonia. In the beginning of the 1990s, there were still quite a number of people who believed that since Estonia would never be able to put up military resistance against a possible aggressor, then all we needed were police and border guard forces. However, it now became clear that in order to become a member of NATO, Estonia had to have a defence capacity that NATO could count on.

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<sup>19</sup> Study on NATO Enlargement, 3.9.1995, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_24733.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_24733.htm) (accessed 9.2.2014).

In practice, this meant that the country had to develop its own military capabilities and do it in a manner that would guarantee procedural and technical interoperability with NATO. The document “The Fundamentals of Estonian Defence Policy”, adopted in 1996, tried to answer these questions. It declared that national defence would be developed in two main directions that complement each other and are integrally connected: independent defence that is based on national defence forces and international defence cooperation aimed at joint defence activities with European security and defence organisations.<sup>20</sup>

The size of the defence budget was another issue raised in relation to NATO accession. Estonia had to demonstrate to the NATO Allies that it was prepared to contribute to national defence. NATO’s general guideline to its member states is to allocate 2% of their GDP to national defence, but implementing this in Estonia initially remained at the level of wishful thinking. In reality, Estonia’s defence budget in the 1990s reached 1–1.2% of the GDP.<sup>21</sup> National defence wasn’t yet a real priority for the governments of those days.

In building the defence forces with a view towards NATO accession, the state started developing international military cooperation in four closely related areas:

- participation in the Partnership for Peace programme of NATO;
- participation in international peacekeeping and crisis management;
- practical defence cooperation with other Baltic states; and
- bilateral defence cooperation with different Western countries.

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<sup>20</sup> “Eesti riigi kaitsepoliitika põhisuunad,” *RKo RT I* (1996), 33, 684.

<sup>21</sup> *Eesti NATO lävepakul: 80-aastane Eesti Kaitsevägi = Estonia on the threshold of NATO: Estonian Defence Forces 1918–1998*, tõlge: Ilvi J. Cannon, toimetajad Lea Arme jt (Tallinn: Kaitseministeerium, 1999), 15.

## Cooperation network within the scope of the Partnership for Peace programme

The PfP programme became the main driver of the practical cooperation between Estonia and NATO. Estonia made a policy decision that its cooperation with NATO within the scope of the PfP should be seen as the tool that would help it achieve its ultimate goal – NATO membership. It was therefore important for the cooperation to be as close and diverse as possible. After the declaration of the programme, President Lennart Meri compared it poetically to a beautiful empty perfume bottle that had to be filled with content.<sup>22</sup>

The PfP individual cooperation programmes between NATO and the partner countries were set up bilaterally, which meant that the specific features of each country could be considered and the exact content of the cooperation programmes depended on each country's own activity.

Participation in the PfP had various benefits for the security policy and national defence of Estonia:

- it was the best and most specific tool for getting closer to NATO and for cooperation with the defence structures of NATO and its member states that the Alliance offered at the time;
- it provided the opportunity to learn the operating logic of NATO troops, the so-called military English and terminology used in NATO as well as the standards and technical requirements of NATO;
- it offered the opportunity to build Estonia's defence forces and infrastructure in a manner that would allow for cooperation with NATO whenever necessary and for receiving military aid from abroad;
- it enabled Estonia to participate and have a say in global and European security processes, e.g. by participating in international peace missions;
- it became the basis for constant exchange of security and defence information with NATO.

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<sup>22</sup> Kullamaa, "Balti presidendid," 1.

Estonia's participation in PfP had to be made as meaningful as possible in order to maximise the programme's benefits for the development of the defence forces and its capabilities as well as achieving the interoperability with NATO and its member states.

The cooperation network within the scope of the PfP turned out to be diverse, primarily covering two areas – participation in the joint events of NATO/PfP, including military exercises and training; and the development defence interoperability and bringing Estonia's national defence planning procedures closer to those of NATO.

The first practical step in the development of cooperation was sending a liaison officer to the Partnership Coordination Cell (PCC) at Mons. This cell was created for the coordination of cooperation and information exchange with partners. Estonia's Liaison Officer Lieutenant Peeter Läns was sent over in April 1994, and he became the first representative of the Estonian Defence Forces to NATO.

In order to launch substantive cooperation, Estonia first had to submit the PfP Presentation Document, which contained its proposals and requests for cooperation. A workgroup consisting of the representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence and of the Defence Forces was formed for the preparation of this document. The document was completed in summer 1994 and in July, Ambassador Clyde Kull handed it over to NATO. Estonia announced that it was prepared to contribute to the Alliance activities by connecting one company of the Defence Forces with NATO. In return, Estonia hoped for financial support for the construction of an airfield, port and training centre.<sup>23</sup>

The next step was the preparation of the Individual Partnership Programme (IPP) between Estonia and NATO. NATO approved the first IPP of Estonia on the 1st of March 1995. It listed priority areas of cooperation and cooperation events with the Alliance in 20 areas of defence policy and military issues. The areas that Estonia underlined in the first IPP as those of most importance for itself were as follows: 1) airspace control; 2) various exercises with supporting seminars and courses; 3) language

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<sup>23</sup> Estonian Pfp Presentation Document, draft, 30 June 1994, copy in author's possession.

training; 4) peacekeeping cooperation; 5) training in equipment and logistics; 6) development of civil-military cooperation.<sup>24</sup>

## Participation in PfP events

Estonia tried to take part in as many PfP events (seminars, conferences, training and exercises) as possible in light of its limited resources, both human and financial. In addition to the practical benefits, active participation was also politically important and was meant to demonstrate Estonia's will and readiness to join NATO. There was also an opportunity to gain experience from cooperation with troops of NATO Allies. The participation of Estonian servicemen in numerous field and command post exercises of NATO/PfP therefore became one of the main and most visible parts of the cooperation between Estonia and NATO.

The first NATO/PfP training exercise in which Estonian servicemen participated was the peacekeeping exercise Cooperative Spirit 94. An *ad hoc* platoon of 25 men, mainly officers and non-commissioned officers of the peacekeeping company, was created for the exercise.<sup>25</sup> In 1995 the Defence Forces participated in about ten PfP-related training exercises, either with subunits or observers. This included sending an infantry platoon to the Cooperative Nugget peacekeeping exercise in Louisiana, United States. One of the main duties of the Estonian Navy that was re-established in 1994 was to participate in the NATO/PfP naval training exercises. The first exercise Estonia took part in with a ship (EML Sulev) was BALTOPS '95, an exercise organised by the US in the in June 1995. The participation of the Defence Forces in PfP events kept growing in subsequent years. In 1996, for example, they participated in 24 training exercises and 125 other events.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Aruanne Eesti-NATO koostöö arengutest 1994–1998, undated, copy in author's possession.

<sup>25</sup> *Sõdurileht*, nr 1(12), January 1995, 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Estonian Annual National Programme 1999* (Tallinn, 1999), 31.

Lack of money was an obstacle in the development of cooperation with NATO. The support of the United States of America has to be mentioned in this regard. The US provided significant amounts of funding to finance the participation of Estonian representatives in the PfP events. However, Estonia still had many expenses to cover and finding money for this was difficult in the beginning. For example, it became evident in the beginning of 1995 that although Estonia had joined the PfP programme and selected a number of events in which to participate, no money had been allocated for them in the state budget for 1995.<sup>27</sup> Non-participation would have not only meant falling behind in acquiring NATO experience for the Defence Forces – Estonia's reputation in NATO also depended on active participation in PfP events. The necessary money had to be allocated from the government's reserve fund. In order to avoid such embarrassing situations in the future, the budget of the Ministry of Defence had a separate line for PfP participation expenses from 1996.

### National defence planning and the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP)

In January 1995, NATO launched the Planning and Review Programme (PARP) which was aimed at developing the interoperability of the forces of partner states with NATO. This interoperability in its turn was a precondition to becoming a full member. Also, PARP mechanisms were very similar to NATO's own planning procedures. Therefore, the participation in PARP became the first actual step for the development of national defence in Estonia according to the standards of NATO. Within the scope of the PARP, Estonia also started submitting data about the situation and future plans of its Defence Forces as well as the conceptual objectives of national defence.

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<sup>27</sup> Letter of Defence Minister Enn Tupp to Commander of the Defence Forces Aleksander Einsein, no 01-22/555, 28.2.1995, copy in author's possession.

Estonia's first PARP action plan prepared in cooperation with NATO was approved on the 25th of April 1995. Estonia chose 11 of the 25 Interoperability Objectives initially suggested by the Alliance. These objectives covered both the units that had to be prepared for international missions as well as areas related to the development of national defence as a whole, such as the development of infrastructure and logistic support. These first 11 objectives represented a diverse set of various areas, such as the standardisation of fuel types and fuelling equipment according to NATO requirements, the standardisation of the frequencies of means of communication, the creation of English-speaking liaison groups, etc. Estonia decided to create a military unit the size of a company, which had to be prepared to participate in the missions and training exercises of NATO and able to operate as part of the NATO troops.<sup>28</sup>

Estonia's problem back then was the shortage of people who could deal with aspects of NATO in the national defence system. The first cooperation programmes and documents of Estonia and NATO were prepared by a handful of officials and members of the Defence Forces and the Ministry of Defence, and the Defence Forces on a broader scale were still left out of the process. NATO-related work was done in the Defence Forces in addition to other functions and its importance tended to remain secondary, as there was little faith that accession to NATO was actually a possibility.<sup>29</sup>

This is why the impact of NATO on defence planning in Estonia and the development of the structures of its Defence Forces remained rather limited at first. National defence was still developed on the principle that it was necessary to develop a fully independent defence capability. At the same time, planning had to be done in consideration of essential everyday needs and the extreme limitation of resources. Also, NATO's planners did not try to directly influence Estonia as a sovereign state in its decisions and choices.

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<sup>28</sup> Interoperability Objectives – Estonia, Annex to Pfp (PMSC)D(95)8, copy in author's possession.

<sup>29</sup> Margus Kolga, "Rahupartnerlusprogrammist liikmesuse tegevuskavani," – *Eesti NATO lugu 1991–2004*, toim. Lauri Lindström, Henrik Praks (Tallinn: Eesti NATO Ühing, 2014), 82–89.

However, there were exceptions too. The development of the Navy and Air Force that were re-established in 1994 was immediately and closely related to interoperability with and integration into NATO. The activities of these forces focussed largely on the international dimension and the creation of connections with the structures of NATO.

### **International peace missions, Baltic and broader international cooperation**

Estonia declared that each PfP country also had to offer something to NATO instead of just benefitting from the partnership. It would have to produce security in addition to consuming it. This meant the capacity to contribute to regional and international security both independently and in cooperation with neighbour states. Participation in international peace missions became the main output of such contributions.

NATO itself was looking for a new 'idea' after the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the former enemy, and peacekeeping and crisis management started becoming the areas on which the Alliance increasingly focussed its attention. By taking part in international peacekeeping missions, Estonia could demonstrate its capacity for playing a role in guaranteeing peace and security at the international level as well as the actual interoperability of its Defence Forces with the troops of NATO and other partner states.

The idea for the establishment of a joint peacekeeping unit of the Baltic states first appeared in 1993. Things became more specific at the meeting of the commanders of the defence forces of the Baltic states on the 19th of November 1993, where the decision to start the establishment of the Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion (BALTBAT) was made. The official foundation to this was laid on the 13th of September 1994 with a trilateral Baltic agreement about the establishment and formation of a joint peacekeeping unit. Although BALTBAT was formally created for participation in the peacekeeping missions of the United Nations, helping the defence forces of the Baltic states get closer to NATO and thereby

supporting the general NATO integration were seen as the unit's objective from the very beginning. Politically, BALTBAT was the clearest expression of the understanding of the Baltic states that they would have to contribute to international security. It was also aimed at showing NATO and the other partners that the three states are able to cooperate with each other. In practice, the battalion became the tool for channelling Western know-how, military culture, values and standards to the defence forces of the Baltic states.

BALTBAT was also of great interest for NATO and individual Allies. The UN peacekeeping umbrella above the battalion gave the Western nations the opportunity to give military aid without aggravating Russia. This is why BALTBAT became the first unit in the Baltic States that was fully equipped with Western weapons and trained according to Western standards. The Nordic countries, who were the traditional experts in peacekeeping, started supporting the project, and Denmark adopted the role of leading country in the process. In addition to the Nordic countries, leading NATO Allies, the United Kingdom and the United States, also provided significant support. Organisation of the general military training of the new battalion was assigned to the British marines. All of the officers and non-commissioned officers of the military unit were trained by them. This fact in itself demonstrated that the battalion's goal was much bigger than the preparation of the traditional UN Blue Berets that remain strictly neutral in areas of conflict.<sup>30</sup>

Since the formation of the battalion started from zero, it all took time. This is why the soldiers of the Estonian contingent of BALTBAT were not the first members of the Estonian Defence Forces who took part in an international mission. Denmark had proposed back in 1994 that Estonia dispatch an infantry platoon to the UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Force) in Croatia as part of the Danish battalion. The proposal was accepted and an infantry platoon called ESTPLA-1 was formed for the

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<sup>30</sup> An overview of the birth of BALTBAT is given by Pete Ito in "Baltic Military Cooperative Projects: a Record of Success," – *Apprenticeship, Partnership, Membership: Twenty Years of Defence Development in the Baltic States*, ed. by Tony Lawrence and Tomas Jermalavičius (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence Studies, 2013), 246–282.

mission. All that the Estonian Defence Forces gave to the platoon were uniforms; all other equipment and weapons came from the Danes. After some short training, ESTPLA-1 headed to Croatia in February 1995 and the participation of the Defence Forces of Estonia in international operations had started. In the second half of the same year, they were replaced by the new platoon ESTPLA-2, whose mission ended early as the local situation changed and the UN mission was terminated. However, this only meant a very short break in Estonia's peacekeeping activities. The end of the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in autumn 1995 resulted in the dispatch of the NATO Implementation Force (IFOR) to the country. The successful cooperation with the Danish Defence Forces that had started in Croatia also continued in Bosnia. ESTPLA-3 was dispatched there in spring 1996, becoming the first sub-unit of the Estonian Defence Forces that took part in a mission commanded by NATO.<sup>31</sup>

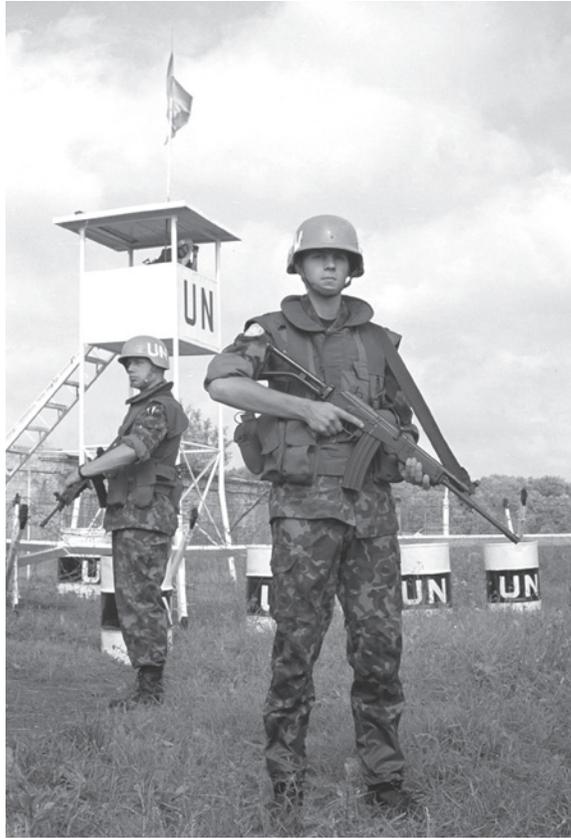
BALTBAT did not remain the only initiative in the Baltic cooperation aimed at NATO. The cooperation between the three Baltic States gave the opportunities to join efforts for the achievement of results that would've been unattainable individually.

The next specific area where the issue of Baltic cooperation arose was air surveillance. The first goal was to establish a joint Baltic airspace surveillance and control system in accordance with NATO standards. The existence of such an air surveillance system was seen as a precondition to NATO membership. In 1994 the Baltic air forces already started cooperating with the NATO Air Defence Committee (NADC). As this area is technologically very complicated and extremely expensive, the activities remained at the conceptual level at first. Things really started moving after the US suggested in 1995 that the Baltic States join the Regional Airspace Initiative (RAI) developed by the Americans for Central European countries. The objective of the RAI was to develop air surveillance and

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<sup>31</sup> An overview of the participation of Estonia and the other Baltic States in international peacekeeping missions is given by Piret Paljak in "Participation in International Military Operations," – *Apprenticeship, Partnership, Membership: Twenty Years of Defence Development in the Baltic States*, ed. by Tony Lawrence and Tomas Jermalavičius (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence Studies, 2013), 202–245.

*Troops of the Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion (BALTBAT) on training in Paldiski, Estonia (1995). Tõnu Noorits/author's private collection*



control systems compatible with NATO, which could be connected to the general air defence system of NATO in the future. The joint Baltic air surveillance system BALTNET grew out of this project in the subsequent years.

The joint Baltic Naval Squadron BALTRON and the Baltic Defence College in Tartu were added to the list of common Baltic defence cooperation projects in the second half of the 1990s.

All of these projects were carried out with the strong support and assistance of a number of Western states. The role of Denmark was particularly significant – from the very beginning, it became the strongest supporter and adviser of the NATO aspirations of the Baltic states. In

addition to the active political support provided by other NATO Allies, Denmark also started supporting the development of the Baltic defence forces and their becoming eligible for NATO membership on the initiative of the Danish Defence Minister Hans Hækkerup. Denmark was the leading country in the BALTBAT project and oversaw the participation of the Baltic sub-units in international missions, played the key role in the launch of the Baltic Defence College, gave advice in PARP issues, etc.

In addition to the activities within the scope of the PfP, general bilateral and multilateral international defence cooperation also supported Estonia's NATO aspirations. The first bilateral defence framework agreements were signed in 1994 with Denmark, Ukraine, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. By 1996, Estonia already had such agreements with 12 states. Practical defence cooperation was based on annual cooperation plans, which by 1996 had been signed with Denmark, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Poland. In addition, the activities of the Military Liaison Team of the National Guard of the State of Maryland, US, in Estonia were very active – 84 events were organised by this group in 1996 alone.<sup>32</sup> Non-NATO countries, particularly Finland and Sweden, but also Switzerland, deserve a mention for their practical support as well.

One of the central areas of the bilateral defence cooperation was the organisation of training programmes for members of the Defence Forces. General advice on building the Defence Forces and the national defence system was also extremely valuable. For example, the group of retired high-ranking officers called the International Defence Advisory Board (IDAB), which was led by General Sir Garry Johnson, the former Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces Northern Europe, operated in this field. There was also significant material assistance from the Western nations, which at first didn't include any weapons. However, Estonia also started receiving donations of arms from the second half of the 1990s.

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<sup>32</sup> *Eesti kaitsejõud 1991–1996 = Estonian defence forces 1991–1996*, väljaandjad Eesti Vabariigi Kaitseministeerium, Kaitsejõudude Peastaap (Tallinn: Kaitseministeerium, 1996), 21–22.

## Conclusion

Estonia had different options to consider in its security and defence policy after regaining its independence. The lesson taught by the events of 1939/1940 was that Estonia should never again find itself in the situation where the state has no allies and has to stand up against a formidable enemy on its own. The logical choice in this light was to try and join NATO, the central defence organisation of the free and democratic Europe.

Achievement of NATO membership seemed utopic in the very first years after regaining independence. First of all, Estonia had to solve more urgent security issues, especially the achievement of the departure of Russian troops from the country. In national defence, NATO was mainly a background topic at first that didn't have much impact on practical developments. The breakthrough arrived in 1994, when Estonia focussed firmly on NATO membership. At the same time, NATO itself started taking the first specific steps towards opening the organisation. These steps were rather timid at first and focussed on the establishment of partnership relations within the scope of the Partnership for Peace programme. The PfP, however, gave the Estonian Defence Forces and national defence system as a whole the first chances to gain some real NATO experience. The North Atlantic Alliance was no longer *terra incognita* – Estonia started acquiring experience from the activities of NATO and the first plans for bringing Estonia closer to the Alliance were born. There was also the growing bilateral and multilateral international defence cooperation network.

By the mid-1990s, the Republic of Estonia was in the situation where speaking about NATO membership didn't necessarily sound like a fantasy any more. This objective was also conceptually cemented with the document on the fundamentals of defence policy in 1996. Many years of growing and expanding efforts were yet to follow, but a foundation for Estonia's NATO aspirations had been created.

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