

NATO must control Kremlin desire to re-occupy its “near abroad”

By Conrad Black

The Prime Minister of Estonia, Kaja Kallas, was one of those who put in for the position of secretary general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a position that will be up for election next month. She has asserted that the Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, has conducted a campaign to prevent her achieving that post.



Kallas says she should be head of NATO, Putin says she is an anti-Russian provocateur (Photo by Pier Marco Tacca/Getty Images)

The very capable Jens Stoltenberg is retiring and, at this point, the principal candidates to replace him seem to be the Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, and the president of Romania, Klaus Johannis.

But both prime minister Kallas and her foreign minister, Taimar Peterkop, have both expressed an interest in the

position. The Prime Minister comes from a renowned and heroic Estonian family. Her father was prime minister of Estonia from 2000 to 2003 and was a European Commissioner from 2004 to 2014. Her paternal grandfather was the commander of the Estonian Defense League during the Estonian war of independence against the Soviet Union and also served as the head of the Estonian police. And her mother, when six months old, was deported to Siberia with the prime minister's grandmother in 1941. The two were only permitted to return in 1951.

The Russian leaders know and could in any case safely assume that she is a fierce proponent of the independence of Estonia and is acutely aware of the vulnerability of that country to Russian expansionist ambitions.

Estonia was incorporated integrally into Russia for over 200 years prior to the Russian revolution, and had been occupied by Danes, Swedes, or Poles for most of the previous 150 years. It was independent for only twenty years between the wars, and then under the Nazi-Soviet pact was reabsorbed by the USSR.

The 33 years since the disintegration of the Soviet Union is the longest period of independence that Estonia has enjoyed in over 350 years. Its population is just 1.4 million and about 20 percent of those are ethnic Russians. Membership in NATO confers upon Estonia a security it has never enjoyed in its history.

From the breakup of the Soviet Union there has been the constant question of when, whether, and to what extent Russia would acquiesce in the authentic sovereignty of the former republics of the USSR (apart from Russia), which the Russian government describes as the "near-abroad."

NATO somewhat insouciantly accepted the applications of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to become NATO members in 2004, and they joined the European Union at the same time and

subsequently adopted the euro as their currency.

There were many who warned at that time that ultimately the NATO Article 5 provision – that an attack upon one is an attack upon all – would not be entirely credible in the case of these three small countries. About a quarter of Latvia's population is ethnically Russian, and there, as in Estonia, the Kremlin possesses the ability to stir up considerable domestic agitation.

It was reasoned that the Kremlin would be unlikely to believe that rebellious activity by Russian citizens of one of the small Baltic republics would receive or deserve the same treatment that would be accorded an outright attack on Paris, London, or the United States.

(The only time in the 75-year history of the Alliance where Article 5 was invoked was after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, when the entire Alliance concluded that all members had been assaulted and all members would join the United States in its response. There is some legitimate question about whether the same urgency and unanimity could be mustered in favour of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, especially if the controversy was triggered by internecine conflict, even if manipulated by the Kremlin.)

Prime Minister Kallas has declared that when the Kremlin placed her on its wanted list as if she were a common criminal and a fugitive from Russian justice, such as it is, the Kremlin was signalling that "Estonia is not a real country," that some Russian laws remain in force there and that she is herself "an anti-Russian provocateur."

It remains a mystery why Putin did not open his campaign for recognition of the pre-Soviet frontiers of Russia with a smaller and more digestible target such as Estonia, rather than Ukraine, a country of 40 million people who had been heavily militarily trained and partially supplied by NATO for

15 years and could reasonably be expected to put up a determined resistance.

Although Putin made errors of sequence and the Ukrainian war has obviously not gone as he had expected, he has again signalled Russia's non-acceptance of the secession of all of the 14 Soviet near-abroad republics apart from Russia.

The semi-isolationist comments in parts of the American political landscape that the U.S. should not be spending such significant sums of money in support of Ukraine while its own southern border has been penetrated by up to 10 million illegal intruders, ignores the strategic significance of Russia's attempts to extend its frontiers back to or at least toward their former limits.

It has been a failure, one of many, of the Biden administration, that it has not gone to greater lengths to establish a bipartisan consensus on a revived containment policy for Russia.

This is a task that the next administration will have to address.

It will require the election to enable policy-makers in Washington to sort this out, but the basic facts are that Trump will end the war quickly by telling Putin that he can keep what the Ukrainians have not been able to expel him from, but join NATO in guarantying the unconditional sovereignty of Ukraine in its new borders, or the U.S. will encourage and empower Ukraine to reply to Russian attacks on Ukraine's civil population with comparable attacks on Russia.

Trump would ignore Putin's threats of nuclear weapon use and reply that any such initiative would be replied to in kind, from nuclear weapons in Europe. French President Macron has implied as much.

Washington has to uncouple Ukraine from Israel, Taiwan and the

Mexican border and stop grumbling about cost. It is only six percent of the U.S. defence budget and 90 percent of that is orders from U.S. armaments and munition-makers.

The U.S will have to go back to acting like a Great Power. It will. It always does. Once Ukraine is resolved, we can resuscitate a good relationship with Russia and extract it from the potentially mortal embrace of China.

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