

A Moment of Truth in Europe

BY EARLY September, the Free World's response to Russia's assault on Ukraine appeared impotent. Economic sanctions and declarations that Russia's actions were illegal did nothing to alter the status quo. Russian forces poured into Ukraine—cementing their hold on Crimea while making additional inroads in eastern Ukraine.

This troubled the allies that once fell under the domination of the Soviet Union. Led by Vladimir Putin, Russia has repeatedly assaulted nearby nations.

This was through cyber attacks, as in Estonia in 2007, which Russia blamed on patriots it could not control.

It was military, as in the case of the assault on Georgia in 2008.

And it is happening in Ukraine—where Russian forces seized Crimea and pro-Russian “separatists” are supposedly acting on their own in the east.

Other nations along Russia's periphery were legitimately concerned they could be next, so President Obama on Sept. 3 laid out America's commitment to the Baltic NATO states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the clearest possible terms. “The defense of Tallinn and Riga and Vilnius is just as important as the defense of Berlin and Paris and London,” Obama said in Tallinn, the Estonian capital.

Two weeks later, Col. Jaak Tarien, head of the Estonian Air Force, stirring explained the importance of such assurances. “I know there are some places in the world where American troops are not welcomed, probably those nations have not lived without their freedom recently,” he said at the Air Force Association's Air & Space Conference in National Harbor, Md.

“In Estonia, you are very much welcomed. We know that persistent presence of allies on our soil is the best deterrent and the best security guarantee for our region. Now, when I talk about deterrence and security, I would be avoiding talking about the 800-pound bear in the corner if I didn't talk about Russia, so I will go there.”

In 1924, the Soviet Union “sent infiltrators to our young republic, they tried to rally local people to demonstrate” against the government, the colonel explained. The Russians tried to seize “governmental buildings

and take over the post office,” which was “key to their success, because they were supposed to send a telegraph to Moscow asking in the name of the newly formed government,” for Russia to send troops. “Sounds quite familiar, doesn't it?” Tarien asked.

Russian-speaking Estonians “are citizens of Europe, and they want to stay that way, they don't want to be citizens of Russia, but it's irrelevant because to Mr. Putin it doesn't matter,” Tarien said. If Putin wants to “assist somebody, he

Putin will not stop until he is made to stop.

is deciding who to assist, where is the next protest, and where ... the little green men go.”

NATO asked Putin about the “separatists” in Ukraine, “Are you sure they are not yours? I mean, they wear your latest issue army uniform that not all your regular units even have yet. Their weapons are the specs that only your special forces and the airborne units have. And, oh, their personal communication system ... is the very newest edition that only your elite special forces have. Are you sure they are not your guys?” Putin's ludicrous response, Tarien said, was in essence: “No, they bought it all in [a] military store. Not our guys.”

Putin has called the collapse of the Soviet Union the biggest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century, and “it's quite clear, quite evident that he is on a mission to restore the Evil Empire [to] its former glory. Now, I may be the youngest air chief in NATO but I'm old enough to have gone to school in Soviet-occupied Estonia. I remember the Soviet rhetoric that the biggest threat to the world peace is [the] American imperialist,” Tarien explained. What Putin seeks is “Europe without America, Europe which he can dominate.”

How could Putin decouple the US from NATO? “I can see only one theoretical way: if you prove that Article 5 doesn't work,” Tarien said, referring to NATO's collective defense provision. “Article 5 is the bonding glue

of the Alliance. If the trust is broken, the Alliance is gone. So if you send your road circus into a NATO country, just a small border area, [and] create confusion” with little green men who are supposedly locals or responding to a request for help, will NATO respond?

“I'm not saying Estonia is next. But I think all of us need to be on alert while ... the bear there is staring down the West on the border, looking for a weakness to exploit.”

Putin will continue attacking his neighbors, supposedly defending Russian interests, until he is made to stop. Ukraine may face a lengthy Russian occupation.

But for those fortunate enough to be NATO members, Article 5 “is crystal clear. An attack on one is an attack on all,” Obama stated. “So if, in such a moment, you ever ask again who will come to help, you'll know the answer: the NATO Alliance, including the armed forces of the United States of America, right here, present, now.”

This is unequivocal. There can be no backing down from America's commitment to its NATO partners.

After years of assumed affinity, it is now clear that Putin is no friend to the West and Russia is no European partner. “I think the largest changes to NATO in the history of NATO will take effect [over] the next year-and-a-half to two years,” said Air Force Gen. Philip Breedlove, Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, also on Sept. 17.

This is a tall order for an Alliance that outlived the Warsaw Pact, expanded into former Soviet territory, and recently began out-of-area operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Until now, the Alliance has avoided stationing forces in Eastern Europe, for fear of offending Russia. “We believe that there needs to be a forward element of NATO forces in these nations that are most threatened,” Breedlove said.

This is critical. No matter how clear the pronouncements from Obama or military leaders, Putin has to be willing to listen. NATO men and women stationed near the front in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland would send a message of deterrence that not even Putin could ignore. ★