

Dear friends,

I am very happy to welcome all of you here in Tapa today! The opening ceremony of NATO's enhanced forward presence in Estonia is a truly significant event. For me – this is not only an official occasion, but indeed a very personal one.

I remember, from growing up in Soviet-occupied Estonia, the stories my grandparents told me. Stories about deportations, massive repressions and war. These were tales of freedom we once had, and of mistakes that were made that led to the loss of our independence.

As minister of defense, I find myself often thinking about my distant predecessors. About the men and women who found themselves – in 1939 and 1940 – in an enormously difficult situation. Clouds of war were gathering, and as the Soviets presented an ultimatum that eventually led to the loss of our freedom, we – here in Estonia – found ourselves to be alone.

We found ourselves to be alone, and yet hoped, that somehow, perhaps, these clouds would simply pass. That somehow, not fighting would be the safer option.

We now know what a mistake that was. We now know – after fifty years of brutal occupation, after losing a significant portion of our population, after unspeakable crimes that were committed by occupiers on our territory both during and after the war – we now know that not fighting was not the safer option.

Ladies and gentlemen, the mistakes we've made are history. It's our history. Not just Estonian, or Latvian or Lithuanian – but our European history. And now it is we who have to learn from these mistakes, in order to make sure that the ghosts of the past don't return.

Friends,

The Estonian soldiers standing here today represent our clear conviction to defend ourselves against any and all aggressors, no matter how strong they are. This conviction is strong and deeply-felt, for we know that being prepared to fight is the best guarantee for freedom, and indeed for peace.

We know, that the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing (E. Burke). Make no mistake about it: we have no intention of doing nothing. We will not repeat the mistakes of the past. We will never go quietly again!

This desire for freedom has always lived in Estonian hearts. Throughout our history, we have longed for independence and self-determination, and even during the darkest nights of the Soviet occupation, Estonians were hoping for the best.

We worked hard, and we succeeded! We defeated the occupation.

We worked yet more to reclaim our rightful place in the West, and join NATO and the European Union. And we succeeded in that as well.

All of this – our policy to re-integrate ourselves to the West, and our desire to join in Western institutions, has been framed by one strategic thought: being alone is not an option.

To all my Estonian countrymen- and women! Our Allies' soldiers standing here today mean one thing. Their standing here means, that the mistakes of history will not be repeated. We are not alone, and we will never be alone again!

That is the meaning of today's event. That is the meaning of NATO's enhanced forward presence.

It is not only about being prepared to stand our ground when confronted. It's about standing together. Standing together with our Allies, standing together as NATO, standing together as the free world. And indeed – we are glad to welcome our British, French and Danish colleagues here.

Dear Allies!

Your standing here symbolizes NATO's resolve and unity. Your standing here is a powerful signal, that when we say "all for one, one for all", we mean "all for one, one for all". The free world is united, and the values and principles we're here to defend, are eternal.

We know we can count on you. And you know that you can always count on us.

By standing together, we're strong.

By standing together, we will avoid the mistakes of the past.

And only by standing together, will we be able to keep our people safe. Keep the people of Europe safe. And keep the world safe for freedom.

And stand together we will! Here today, and everywhere, always. From the villages of Helmand to the towns of Central African Republic.

Our forces are united, and our resolve strong!

Thank you!