

20TH ASIA SECURITY SUMMIT
THE SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE

SIXTH PLENARY SESSION

SUNDAY 4 JUNE 2023

KAJA KALLAS

PRIME MINISTER, ESTONIA

Kaja Kallas, Prime Minister, Estonia

Distinguished ministers, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, it's truly an honour to be here at the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue. Thank you, IISS and Dr Chipman, to bringing us all together.

The idea of 'global village' was coined almost six decades ago. Since then, it has only become clearer how interconnected and interdependent we all are, especially with the rise of digital era. Our destinies are linked more than before. We have seen it with the pandemic. We see it in the connection of supply chains. We see it with climate change and with geopolitics.

Security challenges in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic area are inseparable. For example, aggression by a permanent member of the UN Security Council against its neighbour is a threat that has global implications. That is why Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not only a European issue or a regional conflict. What is at stake in Ukraine are the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and international law – including territorial integrity and sovereignty – that is the right to exist as a country.

Make no mistake, in Russia's vision for security, it is acceptable to conquer and colonise another country. Its vision for security is completely non-compatible with the principle of equal rights of states. Russia does not accept the role of smaller states. It does not accept their independence nor their decision-making power. It is a matter of global security not to let this vision succeed; otherwise, we would all wake up in a much more dangerous world.

Russia isn't typically thought of as a colonial power. It is commonly believed that there were no colonies within Europe after the Second World War. That is why we rarely hear about the Soviet Russia's colonial policy in the Central and Eastern Europe. Instead, Central and Eastern Europe within the Soviet Union is often described in supposedly neutral terms like 'countries within the Soviet Bloc' and 'countries under Soviet influence.'

But what did this entail in reality? My own country went through Russia's colonisation for almost half a century, up until 1991. In the aftermath of the Second World War, wider transatlantic community experienced a period of peace and liberation. However, for Estonia and others, several others, this peace marked the beginning of massive sufferings. Soviet occupation for us meant freedom and independence lost. It meant repressions, mass deportations, mass killings, which resulted in a fifth of Estonian population being either deported or killed.

My grandmother and my own mother were put on a cattle wagon and sent to Siberia and my mother was only a six-month-old baby. Many did not survive the journey.

In an effort to further their Russification policy, the Soviet Union deported Estonians and replaced them with migrants from the Soviet Russia. Russian occupation meant exploiting our resources and economy. Many nations have experienced colonialism and they have seen a similar pattern of mistreatment and exploitation. I recall this because it mirrors the playbook that the Kremlin is using in Ukraine today. In fact, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a continuation of colonialist land grab policy that many thought had ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. And I recall this to demonstrate the human cost of occupation – the cost to those that would be left under Russian occupation if the line were to be drawn in Ukraine today would suffer.

Ladies and gentlemen, truth is an important line of defence. And debunking myths is necessary to tailor a global response to stop Russia conquering its neighbours. For example, I am reading with deep worry how Kremlin sometimes succeeds in spreading lies as if its war of choice against Ukraine had been caused by NATO, or as if NATO members or Russia's neighbours threaten Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In fact, the opposite is true – Russia's war against Ukraine has made it once again crystal clear why countries in the Central and Eastern Europe, after breaking free from the Soviet Union, quickly asked to join NATO. These are the actions of the Soviet Union, and later Russia, that explain why so many countries wanted to join NATO.

The alliance doesn't exist to threaten Russia; it is for defending its members from it. It exists to keep tens of millions of people from being enslaved and slaughtered by Russia.

Finland's and Sweden's complete turnaround in their defence policy is the most recent example of this. With Finland in NATO and Sweden soon on its way, the long tradition of military non-alignment in the Nordics has ended. These were decisions driven by the sharp shifts of public opinion. These were decisions made by the people. We have witnessed democracy in action in its truest form.

And this all makes it clear that NATO poses a threat to Russian colonialism, and not to Russia's security. Defence is not escalation, as you have said, Dr Chipman. And as someone put it simply, 'if I install a security alarm system in my house, it is not a threat to my neighbour, unless the neighbour plans to enter and break into my house.'

Language matters. Those who accuse NATO of 'expansionism' and 'escalation' are adopting the same imperialistic language and ideology promoted by the Kremlin. The viewpoint disregards the right of smaller countries to make their own choices about their foreign policy, about their defence arrangements. It denies their independence and sovereignty.

Living next to an aggressor state left us and several others with no other option but to apply to NATO's security guarantee. We would be living through some really dark times right now if we were not in NATO and EU members. So, it is multilateralism and strong alliances that are yet another stronghold of defence, especially for small states.

Ladies and gentlemen, the international community has given a clear assessment of the Russian aggression via the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). One hundred and forty one member states have deplored in the strongest terms the aggression of Russia against Ukraine and demanded its complete and unconditional withdrawal from the territory of Ukraine.

For the majority, international law and the UN Charter are the first line of defence in protecting their sovereignty and territorial integrity. Lennart Meri, Estonia's president, the first president after restoring our independence, emphasised that for small countries, it is international law that serves as a 'nuclear weapon'. Hence, upholding the central principles of international law are an existential matter to us.

It is also a basis for securing free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific order. And it becomes increasingly important given that global confrontations are on the rise.

I am encouraged by the support of Indo-Pacific countries to international law and the UN Charter. Our host, Singapore, has had a principled response by imposing sanctions and explicitly expressing its condemnation and opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine – not because of Russia but because it's clearly wrong. Like Prime Minister Lee recently said, 'One country cannot invade another with impunity.'

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm a true believer in multilateralism not only as a line of defence, but also a vehicle towards prosperity. As a member state of the EU, Estonia values highly the cooperation with Indo-Pacific. The EU's cooperation with the ASEAN is increasingly significant.

And there are other threats and challenges we in Europe and partners over here are facing together – threats from disinformation, cyber/hybrid attacks, economic coercion, and climate change are on the rise. The resilience of our systems, both digital and physical, are tested on a daily basis, as are international standards and common rules.

One takeaway we can build upon together is that we need to build connections and set standards with those whom we can trust. The EU and ASEAN have a new momentum for further cooperation in the field of global connectivity and reduce dependencies on unreliable partners. That is why European Union's trusted connectivity initiatives will focus on the green transition and sustainable connectivity with Southeast Asia.

Building new trusted connections must go hand-in-hand with cybersecurity. I see good potential for greater cooperation with the European Union and the ASEAN-Singapore Cybersecurity Centre of Excellence (ASCCE).

In conclusion, closer partnership is a great opportunity for learning from each other during these very turbulent times. These examples show how we can build prosperous partnerships together with Indo-Pacific region and safeguard and strengthen international law together.

We may be oceans apart but our security is very closely connected. We shall continue insisting a full respect of the UN Charter and ensure oppression and tyranny do not prevail over freedom and sovereignty. Thank you.