



Weekly Briefing

**Estonia external relations briefing:
A foreign policy strategy of a small liberal democracy
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A foreign policy strategy of a small liberal democracy

In 2020, the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a very important document that, like nothing else of a similar kind, deserves to be singled out – the country’s *Foreign Policy Strategy 2030* (further – FPS 2030). Without speculative exaggeration, the latest decade can **evidently** be treated as the most challenging for the field of international relations from the end of WWII. The near absence of a working international system – the most recent pandemic has just re-confirmed the obvious fact that the UN-bound global framework is failing to deliver – makes the world’s major powers searching for different (not every time mutually compatible) approaches in the process of foreign policy making. As for smaller actors, every next global geo-strategic *perestroika* represents a double-challenge, especially if the ‘rules based international order’ (that is so much treasured by countries like New Zealand or Estonia) is gradually becoming a feature of yet another utopia. Therefore, the logic of drawing up Estonia’s **first ever** FPS is obvious – as it was stated in the introductory part of the document, it was “developed in order to ensure the advancement of Estonia’s interests in a changing environment”¹. The process is declared to be ‘sewn up’ together via the following four different ‘axes’ of foreign policy: **‘Ensuring security, the stability of international relations, sustainable development’**, ‘Strengthening external economic policy’, ‘Engaging the Estonian community abroad and effective consular services’, and ‘Strong foreign service’ (as a cross-cutting area)². In a short summary, it is worth outlining the main analytical clusters of the first axis, because it appears to be the core element of the country’s strategic stance on foreign policy issues.

Estonia understands that **a)** “[t]he global security environment is strained and the number of conflicts, including in Europe and its immediate neighbourhood”, **b)** “[i]deological and religious extremism, the resulting terrorism and autocratic models of governance [...] are increasingly opposed to the democratic world and the fundamentals of its operation”, **c)** “[t]he security of Europe is [...] affected by illegal migration, which in turn is exacerbated by the slow pace of international cooperation and conflict resolution”, and **d)** “[c]limate change affects the integrity of the ecosystem”³. The country’s position is that the COVID-19 pandemic represents

¹ ‘Estonian Foreign Policy Strategy 2030’ in *Välisministeerium*, 2020, p. 3. Available from [https://vm.ee/sites/default/files/Estonia_for_UN/Rasmus/estonian_foreign_policy_strategy_2030_final.pdf].

² ‘Estonian Foreign Policy Strategy 2030’, p. 2.

³ ‘Estonian Foreign Policy Strategy 2030’, p. 8.

an “example of the materialisation of such threats”, which is directly causing “a deep global crisis” with “serious consequences not only for healthcare and the economy but also for security”⁴. Estonia argues that a range of “[a]symmetric threats have emerged which are unconstrained by national borders and the sources of which are difficult to identify, but which have the same security impact as traditional security threats”⁵. At the same time, Estonia as “a country with a high income and a very high human development index” and “a member of 303 international organisations” attempts to internationally “contribute to the eradication of poverty and the achievement of sustainable development goals around the world”⁶, having been focusing its development cooperation on Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Belarus, and Afghanistan.

In conclusion for the general narratives on this particular axis, a real need for Estonia “to cooperate more closely with allies and partners in international organisations, bilaterally and in regional formats” is underlined. More specifically, given the obvious fact that “the common values of Estonia and the United States and the fact that without the United States’ participation it is not possible to manage the most serious threats to Estonia and Europe”, the country’s “main strategic goal must be to ensure United States’ active participation in all aspects of Estonia’s security”⁷. In practical terms, this is a very serious call that Estonia is making, having prioritised the role of the United States as a key actor in the process of challenging different kinds of threats that the European continent (the EU included) is facing. Among them are hybrid and cyber threats, and Estonia, in cooperation with “the world’s economic and technological development leader”, is required to “pay closer attention to these issues and, above all, continue to actively fight hybrid threats, highlight the need to increase the resilience of societies in the face of information attacks and bolster Estonia’s international advocacy role as well as boost the capabilities of the Foreign Service to address cyber issues”⁸.

Operationally, this understanding of the situation, assisted the document to go ahead and formulate a set of objectives for the country in the areas of “security, the stability of international relations and development cooperation and humanitarian aid”, and they are outlined to be as follows:

⁴ ‘Estonian Foreign Policy Strategy 2030’, p. 8.

⁵ ‘Estonian Foreign Policy Strategy 2030’, p. 9.

⁶ ‘Estonian Foreign Policy Strategy 2030’, pp. 10-11.

⁷ ‘Estonian Foreign Policy Strategy 2030’, pp. 11-12.

⁸ ‘Estonian Foreign Policy Strategy 2030’, p. 12.

- There is a strong world order based on rules and international law.
- The security arrangements for the Euro-Atlantic area are secure and indivisible.
- The EU is functional, influential and cohesive and Estonia is at its core.
- Bilateral and regional relations ensure an international environment conducive to Estonia's interests.
- Estonia is an international advocate for cyber issues.
- Development cooperation focuses on conveying Estonia's strengths, and the contribution and impact of development cooperation has increased (the share of development cooperation will grow to 0.33% of GNI).
- Estonia's reputation and influence have grown.
- The coherence of foreign policy and foreign relations has improved.⁹

Considering such a comprehensive set of objectives, one presumes that a number of fundamental improvements or changes are required to be made by Estonian policy-makers in order to be in the line with what has been planned for achieving by 2030. Addressing this particular need, the document specifies that, in the near future, Estonia will:

- enhance [its] presence in countries of economic importance that have an influence on world politics and in as many NATO and EU member states as possible;
- bolster [its] foreign missions in the Baltic Sea region and step up thematic coordination domestically;
- significantly increase cyber security capabilities and set up a cyber competence centre to secure Estonia's international advocacy role;
- expand development cooperation to Africa, separate policy-making and administration and focus more on prevention in the provision of humanitarian aid;
- design and implement an international personnel policy on new bases in order to support the successful candidacy of Estonians for strategic posts in international organisations;
- establish the foundations for impact analyses, research and scholarships.
- pay more attention to communication in order to raise awareness of foreign policy and strengthen Estonia's image.¹⁰

Further on, the document goes into 'down-to-earth' specifics, underscoring a high-number of particularities of the process and clarifying the country's vision on the next decade in more details. In the context of the present day, it is important to detect that the newly

⁹ 'Estonian Foreign Policy Strategy 2030', pp. 12-13.

¹⁰ 'Estonian Foreign Policy Strategy 2030', p. 13.

appointed Government of Estonia has already made some steps towards implementing the FPS 2030. For example, Eva-Maria Liimets, the country's Minister of Foreign Affairs as of 26 January 2021, stated that Estonia "is prepared to move forward"¹¹ in terms of taking steps towards finalisation of the ratification process for the 2014 Estonia-Russia border agreement. The final wrap-up of the process has been delayed because of a number of obvious internal and external reasons (discussed extensively in some of the previous briefs), but, these days, as Minister Liimets noted, "[p]reparations are being made on the diplomatic level [...] [and the Estonian side] will have to wait and see when it comes to the other side's willingness"¹². Even though, according to Liimets, Estonia "cannot accept Russia's violation of international law, possible use of chemical weapons and human rights violations", the Minister believes that her country "has chosen a balanced and sensible long-term policy [on Russia]", because "Russia is Estonia's neighbo[u]r and having good relations matters a great deal to Estonia"¹³.

Evidently, this is notwithstanding with Estonia's very articulate and unchanged position on the Russian Federation's 2014 illegal occupation of the Crimea, and this position was clearly reiterated by Minister Liimets during the UN Security Council's video meeting on the topic, on 12 March 2021:

Whereas a year ago, we had seven co-sponsors [in condemning the Crimean annexation], this year, 23 countries supported the meeting – a historic number, which sends a clear signal of condemnation to Russia. Many countries care about what is happening in Crimea. [...] The pressure by the occupying forces on the Crimean Tatar people and Ukrainians living on the peninsula is becoming increasingly oppressive. [...] The aim of this persecution is, on the one hand, to suppress any kind of civil activism and, on the other, to pressure native inhabitants into leaving the peninsula.¹⁴

In a significant addition, it appears that Estonia is now adopting a leading role in the context of re-engaging the post-Brexit UK with the Baltics. On 10 March, during the first ever visit of Dominic Raab (in his capacity of Foreign Secretary of the UK) to Estonia, the country managed to re-frame this important meeting into a platform for communication between Britain

¹¹ Eva-Maria Liimets as cited in Nele Kullerkupp, 'Liimets: Preparations underway for ratification of border agreement', *Postimees*, 10 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7198911/liimets-preparations-underway-for-ratification-of-border-agreement>].

¹² Liimets as cited in Kullerkupp.

¹³ Liimets as cited in Kullerkupp.

¹⁴ 'Minister: Number of states condemning Russia over Crimea at record level' in *ERR*, 13 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608141217/minister-number-of-states-condemning-russia-over-crimea-at-record-level>].

and the Baltic trio, having invited Latvian and Lithuanian Foreign Ministers, Edgars Rinkēvičs and Gabrielius Landsbergis, to join the discussion¹⁵. As reported the four sides discussed a wide range of issues of international significance, namely the Baltics-UK inter-relations, European security (including Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine), cyber security as well as transatlantic relations and China¹⁶. In fact, the future of the EU-China and the US-China cooperative linkages can be instrumental for Estonia in establishing the country's vision on the 17+1 framework, which now has a vague-leaning-to-negative connotation in Estonian politics¹⁷. Arguably, it is going to be one of the most intriguing and challenging issues for Estonia to face in the process of implementing the FPS 2030.

¹⁵ 'Gallery: Baltic, UK foreign ministers hold meeting in Tallinn' in *ERR*, 11 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608138160/gallery-baltic-uk-foreign-ministers-hold-meeting-in-tallinn>].

¹⁶ 'Gallery: Baltic, UK foreign ministers hold meeting in Tallinn'.

¹⁷ 'MEP: Estonia needs to leave 17+1 cooperation format' in *ERR*, 23 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608152824/mep-estonia-needs-to-leave-17-1-cooperation-format>].