

Estonia will Allocate €476 million for Short-to-mid-range Air Defence Systems

WRITTEN BY MARTINA MORABITO

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In a tweet on 24 March, Estonia's Defence Ministry Kalle Laanet announced that Estonia will increase its military spending to €476 million. The more significant part of this budget will be destined to buy short-to mid-range air defence systems, which Estonia hopes to acquire no later than 2025 and estimates the acquisition would be worth about €350 million. The remaining funds will strengthen its "anti-tank, indirect-fire, situational awareness" and host-nation support capabilities and raise the country's "defence spending over 2.5% of GDP" to respect NATO's minimum level annual defence spending requirement. (Adamowski, Estonia increases defense spending to buy air defense systems, more weapons, 2022)

Russia's invasion of Ukraine accelerated the decision to strengthen Estonian defence capabilities and to acquire these air defence systems but Laanet had already planned to purchase them last October when Laanet announced the plan to procure short-to mid-range air defence systems similar to the Norwegian Advanced Surface to Air Missile System (NASAMS) that Lithuania ordered from Kongsberg defence and aerospace. "We would like to start this project in cooperation with the U.S.," Laanet said. (Adamowski, Estonia eyes artillery, missile defense, drones in modernization drive, 2021)

The Commander of the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) Lt. Gen. Martin Herem' contrasted this proposal. According to him, Estonia should better develop short-range anti-aircraft and anti-tank capacity instead of medium-range air defence since covering all the Estonian territory with this air defence system would be hugely expensive. It also would not be a good solution against cruise and ballistic missiles, leaving consistent parts of the country without any defence. "Longer-range air defence and systems capable of intercepting various kinds of weapons is something our allies can provide us with. We must not forget that we have allies," Lt Gen. Herem said. (Voltri, 2022)

Estonia had started many years ago to increase its investments consistently in the defence sector because of potential Russian threats and the membership of NATO and the budget for 2022 is the largest in its independent history since 1991, representing 16 per cent year-on-year nominal increase over 2021. (Darling, 2022)

Given the situation in Ukraine and the current security situation, on 29 March 2022, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas called on all NATO countries to increase their military spending to the minimum requirement of 2 per cent of members' GDP. She also referred to those members who failed to hit the target, such as Canada, which commits just 1.39 per cent. "It is wise even for those countries that have much better neighbours than we do [to] still think about this," Kallas said to CBC News Network's Power & Politics. "If you look at the long-haul missiles, they go pretty far". (MacDonald, 2022)

Estonia is also in the final part of a 10-year National Defence Development Plan, which began in 2013 and will finish in 2022. (Darling, 2022) Among its purposes, the National Defence Development Plan aims to produce rapid military units capable of responding when necessary in the land, air, and sea operations. (Defence Forces, 2013)

In addition, since Estonia is a NATO member state, it commits itself to maintain the minimum level requirement of annual defence spending. Therefore, according to the Plan, military allocations are to remain at or above 2 per cent of national GDP, and any funding for direct infrastructure and maintenance costs related to hosting allied NATO forces has to be added to the 2 per cent earmark. (Darling, 2022)

In January 2022, the Estonian government added €380 million to budgets over the coming years, given the worsening of the security environment along Europe's eastern borders with Russia. "This will improve the speed at which the state is able to respond to both military and hybrid threats". (Government, 2022) Of this funding, 340 million would be destined to reinforce the direct defence capabilities, while the remainder for non-military developments to secure communications solutions for the Foreign Service to ensure resiliency and open lines with allies and foreign embassies during a crisis. (Darling, 2022)

Estonia and the other Baltic States are primarily concerned with potential Russian and Belarusian incursions into their territory by land, air and sea, other non-direct means of destabilising the internal security, and cyberattacks, like the one in 2007. In addition, Estonia fears that Russia could fuel civil discords among the significant ethnic Russian population in Estonia as a pretext for invasion or the break out of separatist conflict, as in the case of the Crimean Peninsula takeover from Ukraine in 2014. Russia justified it as necessary to protect Russian-speaking people's rights outside the Russian Federation's borders. (Darling, 2022)

To face these potential threats, Estonia is improving the readiness of its ground forces by replacing small arms and acquiring night-vision equipment, armoured vehicles and artillery and modernising man-portable anti-tank weaponry. It also started developing defence capacities in response to Russia's actions in the region with multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), air defence systems, coastal missile defence systems, and unmanned and cyber defence capabilities.

There is also a requirement to develop sea surveillance capabilities and an air operations command centre. (Darling, 2022)

These plans of acquisition do not stop at improving air defence. They encompass unmanned, cyber defence systems, and coastal missile defence systems. The latter is particularly on top of the regular defence budget approved through 2026, with acquiring sea mines and anti-ship missiles. Besides, Estonia is looking for a joint effort with neighbours to protect better the Baltic country's 1,242 kilometres of coastline.

However, the coastal-armaments project, which amounts to approximately €50 million, is still at a starting point. The Estonian navy is currently sharpening the requirements to align them with long-term development plans, as told by Asko Kivinuk, strategic category manager for the air force and navy programs at the Estonian Centre for Defence Investment. In addition, the planned fortifications against threats from the Baltic Sea and Lake Peipus, in which there is the internal border that Estonia shares with Russia, follow efforts to boost its ground forces first. (Sprenger, 2021)

In addition, the Estonian National Defence Development Plan for 2031 predicts the procurement of the weapon to increase the country's "capability to influence the enemy with indirect fire from a distance by creating a multiple rocket launcher unit". (Ministry of Defence, 2021)

These weapons could be ordered this year, according to Estonian military officials. (Adamowski, Lithuania accelerates rocket artillery buy amid Russian military buildup, 2022)

Concerning Baltic States' joint efforts in improving the security of the region against potential Russian threats, the Estonian Defence Minister and his two counterparts, Artis Pabriks from Latvia, and Arvydas Anušauskas from Lithuania, announced they would acquire "the MLRS for our militaries" during the first day of the Warsaw Security Forum organised by the Casimir Pulaski Foundation in May 2021. According to Laanet, the Baltic States "should have common capabilities to fight, but also deter any aggressor, so they have to take us seriously".

In addition, the Baltic States are engaged in NATO's Air Policing mission, which was launched on 30 March 2004, the day after they decided to join the alliance.

The NATO Air Policing "is a collective task and a purely defensive mission involving the 24/7 presence of fighter aircraft, which are ready to react quickly to possible airspace violations". (NATO, 2022)

NATO members have to provide the necessary aircraft and assets for conducting the mission in their own airspace. Other NATO members assist those countries without the necessary means to preserve the integrity of their sovereign airspace.

In the case of the mission in the Baltic skies, "NATO member countries that possess an air policing capability voluntarily contribute to the NATO Air Policing mission in the Baltic States and this responsibility is rotated every four months. The capability for the mission in the Baltic States was established by the deployment of NATO fighter aircraft to Šiauliai Air Base in Lithuania. Since 2014, NATO has also been using Ämari Air Base in Estonia for the deployment of additional air policing assets". (NATO, 2022)

However, Baltic States still depend on other allies' assistance, as they lack the capabilities to conduct such missions. (Adamowski, Estonia eyes artillery, missile defense, drones in modernization drive, 2021)

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