

New direction *Vilnius*

We speak to Lithuania's foreign minister about his ambitious blueprint for shaking off the nation's dependency on bad actors. Bigger countries should take heed.

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Until the start of the year, Lithuania's 40-year-old centre-right foreign minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis, presided over the diplomacy of a small European power whose stability kept it largely out of the international headlines. That changed when the nation suddenly found itself in a trade dispute with China over Taiwan. The Baltic nation had allowed the island to open a de facto embassy in its capital, Vilnius, and to call itself the "Taiwanese Representative Office" rather than the "Taipei Representative Office", as its outposts elsewhere in the world are normally named. The wording was enough to irk China, which regards Taiwan as part of its own territory. Beijing reacted by blockading Lithuanian goods and complicating trade moving in the opposite direction.

The China dispute was economically costly but it pales in comparison to the existential threat that Lithuania, a former member of the Soviet bloc, has long felt to the east in the form of Russia. Although it doesn't share a border with Ukraine (it does with Moscow-supporting Belarus), Russia's invasion in February brought the theatre of war much closer to Lithuania's door and revived fears about its safety, despite it being both an EU and a Nato member.

Landsbergis, though, refuses to be cowed. In fact, the trainer-wearing minister, whose grandfather, Vytautas, was the first head of parliament following Lithuania's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1990, is on a mission to strengthen what he calls a "rules-based global order". While talking to MONOCLE, once before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Vilnius in February and then again in April, he sketches out his frank blueprint for 21st-century diplomacy. It involves nations disentangling themselves from undemocratic actors and showing larger countries that disingenuous realpolitik isn't the only way of doing business. Lithuania's current attempts to diminish its reliance on Russia have been in the works for a while. In 2014 it opened a liquefied natural gas terminal – essentially a floating storage ship that stops the need to pipe the fuel from Moscow – in the port of Klaipeda.

Moving away from China for trade, which accounted for just 1 per cent of its pre-spat exports, and Russia for energy means making fresh alliances. Last year, Lithuania



opened an embassy in South Korea, and another in Australia in February. An embassy in Singapore will open and a trade office is coming in Taiwan too. "Making a first step you always have to be prepared for a rough ride," says Landsbergis. "And China and Russia are making that ride as rough as possible." — (M)

What's the Lithuanian message as you travel the world meeting leaders from other nations?

The security situation in the region has changed dramatically since February and it needs to be addressed. That means that there has to be a strategic change in Nato's planning of how the Baltic states could be defended. We're talking to our partners and allies about additional troops and equipment in the region. We're very much looking forward to the Nato summit in Madrid [at the end of June] that will address these issues. On a broader scale, we're seeing the whole rules-based security order being challenged. In the case of Ukraine being forced to capitulate, that order would be ruined for a very long time. And we, as a small country, depend on that order.

Does the arrival of additional Nato troops on the so-called 'eastern flank' help allay your fears?

We're grateful to our allies. We think that the statement made by the US president and other leaders that not an inch would be allowed to Russians inside Nato territory – and especially in the Baltics – is a very strong statement. Because an inch is not so much. And Russia has the means to test that inch. So if we want to stand by this formula, it has to be strengthened with practical means. It's not only troops but the whole strategic attitude towards how to defend a country like Lithuania, which has Kaliningrad to its west and Belarus to its east.

You are sandwiched between a Russian puppet state and a Russian European enclave. How does the threat from east and west dictate your foreign policy?

If Russia were to try anything within Nato, it would be exactly in this area between Belarus and Kaliningrad that we call the Suwalki Gap. It's a vulnerable spot and I would say that it might be tempting for Russia to see how we react. So this has to be calculated into this new strategy that we're asking for so much. You know, there was a strategy during the cold war to defend West Berlin. And we need to blow off some dust from the old books and see how that works.

In April, Lithuania ended natural gas imports from Russia for domestic consumption. How does this affect your decision-making?

We have always seen Russia using leverage to limit the West's foreign policy towards it. We've consistently warned our allies that this is actually happening – with us as the example. Unfortunately we have not been heard. So the only thing that we've managed to do is build our own independence; since 2014, Lithuania has built up its capacity to import liquefied natural gas from anywhere globally. Now we feel much freer when it comes to our foreign-policy decisions. We have much more space to react adequately. The issue is that we are a small actor – but we offer a good example, even for a bigger country.

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Why do you think other European countries have been slower to grasp the importance of energy independence from questionable actors?

I have no easy explanation for this. For us here in Lithuania, it's so obvious that building dependency on aggressive, non-democratic actors is a path not to nowhere but to disaster. There's a lot of similar thinking when we're talking about China because there it's the supply chain. The question is: when will we arrive at a situation where we'll say, OK, our foreign-policy options are limited because we've built so much dependency on another country that we cannot move and our hands are tied?

What other dependencies do you still have on Russia? What about oil and the energy grid itself?

We have switched off gas, we have switched off oil. We will switch off electricity as soon as technical possibilities allow us because we're building a second power line to Poland that will be finished quite soon. And trade-wise, the major changes happened after 2014 and the first invasion of Ukraine [on the Crimean peninsula]. Our businesses adapted; they started looking elsewhere.

Will gas flowing through Lithuania from Russia to Kaliningrad be stopped?

Kaliningrad is a specific issue. Things like passenger crossings from Russia to Kaliningrad are a subject of trilateral agreements between Russia, the EU and Lithuania. Therefore there is no possibility of thinking about any unilateral actions. In principle, the same goes for the goods that travel through Lithuanian territory to Kaliningrad from Russia. The fifth sanction package was adopted quite recently by the EU and it had an exemption for goods going from Russia to Kaliningrad.

Where do the roots of your values-based foreign policy that you often talk about come from?

We still have very fresh memories of what it is like to be a country under occupation. And what it is to break away and recreate your democracy and your institutions and build up your country. So there's this vivid feeling of what it took us and therefore we're very keen to defend it. And this is where our visions about values-based foreign policy come from: limiting our exposure to non-democratic actors who could use our dependencies against us.

With Ukraine dominating the headlines, is China still exerting pressure over the Taiwan dispute?

Even though our dispute was more trade-based, there's a resemblance in what these big international actors are doing. I don't think that China particularly wants to be in a situation where countries are trying to find similarities between it and Russia. But Lithuanian goods still find it very, very difficult to reach Chinese markets.

Is the focus right now on making new alliances?

A big part of my diplomacy will be focused on the Indo-Pacific region. We want to establish ties with countries that are standing in defence of this rules-based global order. There is also a practical need to diversify our supply chain.