Perpetual Conflict and European Security

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Perpetual Conflict: Reflections on the Baltic Defence College's 12th Annual Conference on Russia

The Baltic Defence College's 12th Annual Conference on Russia, held in Estonia, brought together military figures, academics, and policy thinkers from across NATO under the theme 'Perpetual Conflict: Russia and the Struggle for European Security'. Russia was perceived as a serious threat twelve years ago when this conference series began. It remains a threat

today and, by the consensus of virtually every voice in the room, it will continue to be a threat for the foreseeable future.

It was my first time attending, yet over half of all participants were returning delegates and so this was not a room discovering a problem, but one that had been living with it for over a decade, still searching for an answer. And my overall takeaway, was that there isn't really any answer on how to deal with Russia.

Day one

The conference opened with a keynote from Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, the former Secretary General of NATO. His tone was not that of someone preparing for war. He seemed to believe Russia was capable of ending this conflict, crediting Putin with inadvertently uniting NATO allies and arguing that Russia must surely recognise the costs of its isolation against a united Europe. That perspective set a notable tone for what followed, because not everyone in the room shared it.

The sharpest moment of the conference came not from a podium but from the floor. A major in the Lithuanian army made his position plain: he held none of the 'warm and fuzzy' feelings that had coloured the opening address. He was preparing his men for war. There was no wistfulness, no diplomatic hedging. His country borders Russia's ally Belarus and sits close to Kaliningrad. For him, the threat is very real.

This division between those who see Russia through the lens of lost opportunity and those who see it purely as an existential danger, may be the central fault line of European security today. Those at a comfortable geographic remove tend to entertain the possibility of a more cooperative Russia. Those who feel only the threat are Russia's immediate neighbours: smaller, weaker, and acutely aware of it.

The first panel brought together American, British, and Belgian academics to address what the West thinks about Russia. The answer was deeply unclear. On the American position, there was considerable uncertainty whether Washington genuinely intends to support Ukraine or is using the war as a bargaining chip in a transactional foreign policy was left unresolved. The era of automatic US commitment to European security may be drawing to a close.

The British position was more sympathetic but sympathy did not translate into commitment. British delegates acknowledged the threat without indicating what Britain intended to do about it. Britain is a country watching from a cautious distance, aware of the danger but unwilling to lean in. Questions about NATO's credibility ran throughout. By the end of day one, the impression was not of strategic confidence, but of strategic drift.

Day two

If day one was defined by uncertainty, day two attempted something more constructive: a deliberate emphasis on alliance solidarity. A panel made the case that projecting unity among NATO's eastern members was not a natural consequence of shared threat perception but rather, it was an active campaign. Togetherness had to be worked at, communicated, and reinforced, because it was not guaranteed.

Alongside this, a notable development: NATO's eastern members are actively considering a new sub-coalition a tighter grouping seeking a stronger mutual security guarantee. Whether this represents a constructive evolution of European security architecture or reflects deeper doubts about collective defence commitments, the fact that it is being seriously discussed says something significant about where the eastern flank conversation currently stands.

The conference closed with an address from Marina Kaljurand, the Estonian politician and former diplomat, calling for EU solidarity and a single, united European voice on security. It resonated with much of the audience, yet sat in uncomfortable tension with everything that had preceded it. Europe speaking with one voice has been an aspiration at every major security forum for two decades. Americans pulling back, British hedging, eastern members exploring parallel structures, NATO's unity treated as a project rather than a given. None of this pointed toward a continent speaking in unison.

The Absence of Ukraine

There is one observation that warrants serious reflection: Ukraine had no representation at this conference. Not on a panel, not in a keynote, not in any formal capacity. This is a conference dedicated to the threat posed by Russia and the struggle for European security and Ukraine is the country most directly engaged in resisting that threat, at enormous cost, in a live conflict whose outcome will shape European security for a generation.

This felt like a significant and troubling oversight. A conversation about Russian aggression that excludes Ukrainian perspectives is, at best, incomplete. Ukraine's military experience, political insights, and understanding of how Russia actually wages war represent the most relevant body of knowledge on the subject being discussed. Whether the omission was logistical, diplomatic, or a matter of conference design, the effect was the same: the country at the centre of the crisis was discussed, but not consulted.

What next?

'Perpetual Conflict' describes Russia's posture toward Europe with accuracy but it also describes, with uncomfortable precision, the West's inability to reach a settled, collective response to it. Twelve years of this conference, over half the room returning attendees, and still no consensus on the central

question: how serious is the threat, and what is the West prepared to do? The Baltic states have a clear answer to the first part. They continue to wait for a convincing answer to the second. In the meantime, the country most directly living the consequences of that unanswered question was not in the room. That, perhaps more than anything else, encapsulates where European security currently stands.

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