

Opinion – Estonia’s Kaja Kallas for NATO Secretary-General?

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, JUN 19 2023

As NATO has developed a new sense of purpose and urgency in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the race to be the next secretary-general is likely to be one of the most pivotal in the alliance’s recent history. Current Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg may be asked to stay at the helm for another year given opposing views on who should replace him, but the campaign to be his successor has already begun. Stoltenberg’s term has already been extended three times in order for NATO to show a united front in standing up to Russian aggression, but he is currently due to step down in September after serving as secretary-general for nine years.

Over the course of the past year, the Baltic states and Poland have taken on a new strategic role within NATO given their positions on NATO’s eastern flank, bringing invaluable capabilities and historical perspectives to the alliance. Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas has emerged as a leading voice in European security, even being dubbed Europe’s new Iron Lady in some magazine profiles. The news that Poland plans to support Kallas as NATO’s next Secretary-General over Denmark’s Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen is a major boost to her campaign that now needs support from Western European allies in addition to the US and Canada. Frederiksen, widely viewed as the front-runner, recently visited with President Biden in Washington, as did Stoltenberg.

In addition, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is lobbying for another candidate, his defence secretary, Ben Wallace, who has also been a leading voice in support of arming Ukraine. Thus, Kallas faces an uphill climb in the race to lead NATO, one that is emblematic of the broader strategic shifts taking place in Europe as well as long-held biases by some of NATO’s oldest member states over who is eligible to speak for the alliance.

Nordic chiefs have performed well in leading the alliance, and Estonia would have the unique combination of occupying NATO’s eastern flank while maintaining a Nordic identity and perspective, something former Estonian Prime Minister Toomas Henrik Ilves is fond of reminding his European colleagues. Poland’s support for Kallas stems from wanting a leader from NATO’s eastern flank that also follows through on its defence spending commitments, a task Denmark has fallen short of and Estonia has excelled at over the past year, committing 1% of its entire GDP to Ukraine’s defence.

Another Scandinavian leader would signal stability but not the strategic foresight needed to lead the alliance in a new stage of competition with Russia, when viewed from Warsaw. Critically, there is reason to believe Poland could bring the UK, US, and Canada alongside in its effort. London and Washington have formed a close alliance with Poland and the Baltic states in supporting Ukraine and in taking a hard-line stance towards Russia. British troops lead one of NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup operations in Estonia, and London has forged closer links with Poland through the British-Polish-Ukrainian trilateral pact announced just prior to Russia’s invasion last year.

In an interview with the BBC in late May, Kallas said it was ‘highly unlikely’ she would be chosen as the next NATO Secretary-General precisely because she has been so vocal about the threat from Russia as a member of the alliance’s eastern flank. Kallas added that Denmark is viewed as more ‘eligible’ for the role in the minds of other NATO member states. After serving admirably as a member of NATO for close to 20 years, Estonia’s eligibility should not be in question. However, the short distance across the Gulf of Finland and Baltic Sea still represents an

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ideological dividing line between old and new Europe that is likely to influence the NATO leadership race.

The advanced democracies of the Nordic countries stand on one side while the still vulnerable and fledgling Baltic states struggling to break free from their post-Soviet identities stand on the other. As long as Estonia is viewed as frontline support in need of protection but not as a leader, French or German support for Kallas is unlikely, even if Washington changes course from siding with Frederiksen or Stoltenberg. Paris and Berlin still view a rapprochement with Russia as inevitable at some point, and a NATO leader from a former Soviet republic may be a bridge too far in order to maintain a degree of open dialogue with Moscow.

For Kallas, compromise for the sake of not humiliating Russia defeats the purpose of the transatlantic alliance and the values that Estonia signed up for when it acceded to NATO. As a leader, she has the foresight, humility, and lived experience to take the helm of a defensive alliance that has brought stability and security to its member states for decades. She knows the costs of being outside of the alliance and the risks that position entails, a critical perspective as NATO decides whether to grant Ukraine a formal path to membership at the upcoming Vilnius summit.

For Poland and Estonia, NATO is the pillar of their security rather than one component of a multi-pronged, multi-theatre competition to determine the shape of the global order. Membership is both personal and practical, never to be taken for granted and never guaranteed as the ultimate arbiter of stability on a long-fractured continent. As Ukraine continues with its counter-offensive, this is a year for NATO to take risks and to be bold, both in its choice for the next secretary-general and in deciding on Ukraine’s place within the alliance. As someone who recognises the bold risks regularly taken by Ukraine on behalf of all NATO member states, Kallas is well positioned to lead the alliance into the next stage of what is likely to be a protracted struggle with its original adversary.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for Global Risk Insights and Foreign Brief, two political risk publications, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

He writes in a personal capacity and not with any professional affiliation.