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The Baltic Search for Security

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The Baltic states became the focus of attention as NATO, following its decision to accept new members, turned to the complex problem of defining its relationship with those states that want to join but would not be among the first to begin accession negotiations. In this context the Baltic states are in the unique position of being among the most vulnerable to Russian political, economic, and, potentially, military pressure at the same time that they are most closely linked, bilaterally and multilaterally, to the security and stability of the Northern European region and Europe as a whole.

The abstract idea of a link between Baltic and European security has concrete implications. In the years since Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania regained their independence they have become members of the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the more recently created Council of Baltic Sea States. They have become Associate Members of the European Union and Associate Partners of the Western European Union (WEU), the military arm of the EU with links to NATO. They are participants in several NATO bodies, notably the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). Aggression against the Baltic states would reverberate throughout these institutions. The network of bilateral political and economic relations that the Baltic states have forged with the United States as well as with Europe reinforces their cultural and historic identity with the West and lends substance to the Baltic-European security link.

It is not the geographic proximity to Russia nor the existence of a large Russian population in Estonia and Latvia, the most often cited factors, that in themselves are threatening to Baltic security. The problem is rooted in two related aspects of Russian politics and policy. First, Russians continue to identify their loss of superpower status with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The recent declaration by the Duma that the dissolution of the Union was an illegal act is but one manifestation of what some observers refer to as a resurgence of "imperial" or "proto-imperial" ambitions.(1) It is not surprising that then-Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev's statement that the Russian goal is "gradual reintegration" of the former Soviet Union on a "voluntary and equal" basis(2) was not reassuring to the Baltic states as they remained determined to be left un-integrated.

Second, Russia's declared role as protector of Russian speakers in the "near abroad," however important in its domestic politics, has also been used as a means of exerting pressure on Estonia and Latvia. The Russian government has accused the two states not only of violating the human rights of their Russian-speaking population, but of engaging in "ethnic cleansing," planning "mass deportations" of Russians from Estonia and of forcing tens of thousands of Russians to leave Latvia.(3) Although some of the numerous international observer missions that have been invited to Estonia and Latvia have noted room for improvement, none has found evidence of massive or systematic human rights violations.(4) Nonetheless, throughout the years of negotiations over troop withdrawal--an estimated 200,000 Soviet/Russian troops were stationed in the capital cities of the three Baltic states and throughout their territories at the time of their renewed independence--Russia claimed that its military presence was needed to protect the Russian population in Latvia and Estonia. Similarly, Russia used allegations of human rights violations in an effort to block or delay Estonian and Latvian membership in the Council of Europe.(5) Most recently, Boris Yel'tsin sent a letter, characterized by one diplomat as "standard boilerplate," to President Clinton on the eve of the latter's meeting with the three Baltic presidents alleging mistreatment of Russians in Latvia and Estonia.

When viewed in the light of Russia's new military doctrine, that includes vaguely defined conditions for intervention in the territory of the former Soviet republics, Russia's claim to a right to protect Russian speakers in the "near abroad" as well as a self-image of greatness that is linked to a restored Soviet Union assume a menacing aspect--one that has led the Baltic states to seek assiduously the security of NATO membership.

NATO, the United States, and Northern European states have responded to the Baltic search for security with a variety of proposals, programs, and plans that are intended to reassure them without granting them full membership in the organization. The fragmented bilateral and multilateral approaches reflect, at least in part, the lack of consensus within the alliance on how enlargement ought to proceed,(6) with even greater uncertainty regarding those states that will not be invited to begin negotiating their accession agreements at next year's NATO summit.

Under NATO auspices, the Baltic states, as well as the nearly two dozen other members of the PfP program--including Russia, all former Soviet republics, all former members of the Warsaw Pact, and two European neutrals, Sweden and Finland--are offered a new or enhanced PfP or "PfP Plus." Aside from allowing NATO to postpone the decision on which states to admit as full members of the alliance, PfP was intended, among other things, to assist those states that sought membership to meet the organization's criteria. PfP offered participation in NATO's military exercises and encouraged strengthening civilian control over military forces as well as democratization in general.(7) Perhaps most important, the program facilitated the development of compatibility with NATO--as one Estonian officer put it, to "learn the NATO alphabet."

Although the PfP Plus is still to be completed, the Baltic states consider it as a poor substitute for NATO membership. As with the PfP, they are concerned that the new version is intended to defer indefinitely an invitation to join the alliance.

Speaking to the Paasikivi Society in Helsinki at the beginning of September, Carl Bildt proposed the establishment of a Northern European Partnership for Peace (NEPfP).

Based on his experience with multilateral NATO peacekeeping operations in Bosnia, his plan would unite Baltic and Nordic countries in a network of military and other cooperation. Working within the broader framework of NATO security cooperation, the NEPfP would prevent, Bildt argued, the Baltic Sea region from becoming a power vacuum in the process of NATO enlargement. More to the point, the NEPfP would counter the effect of the new relationship with Russia that is to be established as part of the NATO enlargement process--politically, Russia would be closer to NATO than Sweden or Finland.(8)

The proposal was rejected quickly and emphatically by Sweden's Prime Minister Goran Persson. His own initiative, introduced a month earlier, stressed the need for an expanded dialogue with Russia, "taking into account its historic interest in the Baltic region." His proposed Baltic Sea Cooperation Council, although introduced as a means of enhancing Baltic regional security, focuses primarily on problems of migration, crime, and the narcotics trade.(9)

Although Bildt's proposal appears to be more consistent with the Clinton administration's emphasis on regionally focused PfP Plus programs, it was the more "neutral" Baltic Sea Cooperation Council that received the president's endorsement when Persson visited the White House in August 1996.

The US administration's own approach, aside from its active encouragement and support of the PfP Plus and various bilateral arrangements between the Baltic states and other European countries--for example, the Polish-Lithuanian and Polish-Latvian initiatives for military cooperation and the mentoring arrangements between Nordic countries and Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the context of NATO peacekeeping in Bosnia--centers on the Baltic Action Plan (BAP) and Charter. Introduced to the Baltic ambassadors by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott at the end of August 1996, the BAP is intended to convey the idea that the United States has a serious interest in the security of the Baltic states. Although the administration sought to avoid creating the impression that the BAP was a "consolation prize" for not being included in the first

round of NATO enlargement, it is a work-in-progress the completion of which is to coincide roughly with the expected announcement naming those states that are to be invited to begin accession negotiations.

Underscoring the significance it attaches to the plan, the administration dispatched a multi-agency delegation headed by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs, Marshall Adair, on a tour of Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius to brief and solicit views from all three Baltic governments. Based on a three-track approach, the BAP focuses on: a) helping the Baltic states to prepare for integration into multilateral and regional institutions; b) encouraging an improvement in relations between Russia and the Baltic states; and c) strengthening the US-Baltic bilateral relationship.

The first part is essentially a summary of already existing programs and will vary in detail to reflect differences among the three Baltic states. The second part is an expression of US willingness to facilitate contacts between Russian and Baltic officials. The third, and what the Baltic states consider the most important, part of the BAP envisions signing a charter on US cooperation with the Baltic states. It is in the charter that two important points could be given substance: Adair's assurance that Clinton has "resolved to support the shaping of Baltic regional security" and that the door to NATO "will always stay open."(10)

Although initially the Baltic states responded unilaterally to the administration's invitation to submit observations and suggestions for the BAP--the Foreign Ministry of Latvia submitted a detailed twelve-point recommendation--toward the end of November Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania agreed on a joint "food for thought" proposal. Several events led up to the agreement on a common text. First, the BAP, especially since it included the charter idea that would be signed by all three, required a consensus among the Baltic states. Second, in response to US Secretary of Defense William Perry's statement on 27 September 1996, the President of Estonia Lennart Meri, Latvia's President Guntis Ulmanis, and the President of Lithuania Algirdas Brazauskas,

issued a statement that pledged, among other things, a joint approach in their effort to seek NATO membership.

Secretary of Defense Perry, in an address to a meeting of Northern European and Baltic defense ministers in Copenhagen, stated that while the Baltic states were "not yet" ready to fulfill the collective security obligations (Article V) of NATO membership, they "are making very good progress in that direction" and "we should all work to hasten the day that they will be ready for membership."⁽¹¹⁾ What reverberated through the capitals of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, however, was the "not yet" expression that Perry used in his press conference. That the Baltic states were not being considered for admission in the first phase on NATO enlargement could not have been a surprise; however, the naming of the three states was unwelcome and unexpected. The report galvanized the Baltic presidents to issue a statement that stressed, in considerably less general terms than in previous statements, their joint commitment to seek "peace and friendship with all our neighbors" while seeking to "provide for our security both through our own efforts and through membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization." Perhaps more important, the presidents made a pledge: "[W]e commit ourselves and our peoples to the sacrifices necessary to upgrade our defense forces to bring them into line with NATO standards."⁽¹²⁾ The statement was an obvious acknowledgment of the substantive accuracy of the "not" and a hopeful emphasis on the "yet."

Finally, the joint paper was prepared in response to what had become clear: The Baltic states had not mustered sufficient support among NATO members to be invited to join the alliance in 1997. There was, however, a consensus among the allies on the need to avoid undermining the security of the Baltic states without admitting them to full NATO membership. In effect, NATO as well as Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania were in search of an approach, a formula that would reflect that consensus. The conversations between Baltic diplomats and Pentagon and other officials in Washington and in European capitals revolved, to a great extent, around a RAND study addressing precisely this issue.⁽¹³⁾ In the course of these discussions Baltic policy makers gained a sense of what might be desirable and what might be feasible in the face of NATO enlargement.

Short of NATO membership, the Baltic States want to avoid the establishment of a dividing line between themselves and states that will be invited to begin accession talks in 1997. They have been arguing that a phased NATO enlargement would have precisely this effect--with predictably dire consequences. It would create a Korea syndrome with the Baltic countries left outside the Western sphere of interest, encouraging Russian ambitions in the Baltic region. It also would undermine the political argument, and political leaders, in favor of further economic, political, and military reforms undertaken, to a great extent, as part of the Baltic States' pursuit of integration into European economic and security institutions.

Their suggested solution, however, for NATO to invite all states that are eligible in principle to begin the accession process together while staggering the actual admission, (14) has not received much support. The central objection is that an invitation to begin talks on accession would be a commitment to accept the state for admission. Most NATO members are not prepared to make such a commitment. They prefer the more indefinite approach of the Partnership for Peace Plus.

In their joint paper the Baltic states address the objection only partially. They point out that while an enhanced PfP would contribute to security in Europe, it would not address the core of their security problem, the dividing line. But to avoid rendering the invitation to accession meaningless--if it were extended to all possible candidates, whether they are strongly committed to join or not--or to commit the alliance to a specific date for admission (1999 is the year proposed for the first phase of NATO enlargement) the paper proposes the decidedly un-soundbite solution of "Differentiation Based on Self-Differentiation."

States, to be referred to as "European democracies sharing the basic values of the Alliance," would be placed in a separate category of countries that would be distinguished from other PfP Plus participants on the basis of their "Self-differentiation." The differentiation would be based on the facts that they have made clear their wish to gain full NATO membership and that they are making significant progress toward that

goal. This approach would distinguish clearly the Baltic states from the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, most importantly Russia, and serve as a recognition of their special status in relation to NATO, a status they want formally recognized. They would be designated as "Applicant Partners" and regarded as "prime candidates for future membership." The paper proposes that at the forthcoming NATO summit an "Atlantic Accord" would be signed with the Applicant Partners that would be named and with whom the alliance would begin preparatory negotiations "with a view of their future membership." Finally, to ensure that the "Atlantic Accord" would not remain a paper-reality only, they request that the progress of the preparatory negotiations be reviewed at North Atlantic Council meetings and special review conferences.

What the proposal does not request is either the start of accession negotiations with all potential members at the same time or a specific date by which the "preparatory negotiations about enlargement" should be completed. In effect, the Baltic states want NATO to establish an ongoing process regarding their accession without asking for a definite commitment on the timing for the beginning of accession negotiations. This, essentially, is the approach to Baltic Security that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania want the December NATO ministerial meeting to consider and forward to the 1997 summit conference.

What choices and commitments NATO makes at the summit will influence strongly how effectively the allies will be able to carry out NATO enlargement without undermining Baltic state and regional security.

Notes:

1 Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Premature Partnership," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73 (March/April 1994). For Russian intervention and re-integration efforts in the area of the former Soviet Union, see Fiona Hill and Pamela Jewett, "'Back in the USSR,' Russia's Intervention in the Internal Affairs of the Former Soviet Republics and the Implications for United States Policy Toward Russia" (Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government, January 1994). Sweden's former Prime Minister Carl Bildt addresses the

implications of potential Russian intervention in the Baltic states in "The Baltic Litmus Test," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73 (September/October 1994).

2 Andrei Kozyrev, "The Lagging Partnership," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73 (May-June 1994).

3 Yuly Vorontsov, "Letter dated 19 July 1994 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary General" (UN Document A/49/265).

4 See, for example, Ibrahima Fall, "Summary of the Report on a Fact-Finding Mission to Latvia," as received by Latvia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, 27 November 1992; and FBIS-SOV-94-037, 24 February 1994, p. 58.

5 Rita Peters, "Small-State Diplomacy in International Organizations: The Baltic States and the United Nations," paper presented at the First Conference on Baltic Studies in Europe, University of Latvia, Riga, 15-18 June 1995. For a discussion of Russian pressure politics against the Baltic states, see Rita Peters, "Russia, the Baltic States and the West," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, vol. II (Fall 1994); and Rita Peters, "Russia Pressures the Baltic States," *Perspective*, vol. IV, no. 4 (February-March 1994).

6 For a brief discussion, see Ronald D. Asmus and F. Stephen Larrabee, "NATO and the Have-Nots: Reassurances After Enlargement," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 75 (November/December 1996).

7 For a useful discussion, see Mark Kramer, "NATO and East European Security," in Uri Ra'anani and Kate Martin, eds., *Russia: A Return to Imperialism?* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

8 Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in Finland, "Service Information," 3 September 1996.

9 *Diena* (Riga, Latvia), 8 August 1996.

10 As quoted in Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, "Current Latvia: Information Bulletin," 9-16 September 1996 (No. 37/96 [170]).

11 Federal Department and Agency Documents, "Secretary of Defense William J. Perry Addresses Baltic NATO Membership," 27 September 1996.

12 Provided by Estonian Embassy in Washington, "Statement on Security in the Baltic Region by Three Baltic Presidents," Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius, 27/27 September 1996.

13 Ronald D. Asmus and Robert C. Nurick, "NATO Enlargement and the Baltic States," *Survival*, vol. 38 (Summer 1996). Earlier drafts of this RAND study circulated in Europe and Washington since late 1995.

14 Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in Washington, "How NATO Can Avoid Dividing Europe in 1997," [Draft Document], n.d.. A similar proposal was made earlier by Lithuania's Foreign Minister, Povilas Gylys.

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