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The Baltic States and NATO Membership

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The Baltic States and NATO Membership

Mr. Chairman, it is a great honor and privilege to be invited to testify before this committee on the qualifications of the three Baltic states -- Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania -- for membership in NATO.

Mr. Chairman, I believe that the membership of the Baltic states in NATO is very much in US interest and will significantly contribute to enhancing overall security in Europe. The Baltic states have made significant progress in meeting the economic, political and military requirements for NATO membership since achieving their independence in 1991. All three states have functioning democratic systems and viable market economies. Indeed, growth rates in the Baltic states are among the highest in Europe.

Public support for NATO membership is also strong in all three countries. In Latvia, a poll taken in December 2002 slowed that 68.5 percent of the population supported membership in NATO. Polls n Estonia consistently show support for NATO running about 70 percent, while those in Lithuania indicate that over 75 percent of the population support Lithuania’s membership in NATO.

MILITARY REFORM AND MODERNIZATION

Unlike some other aspirants for NATO membership from Central and Eastern Europe who inherited legacy forces from their membership in the Warsaw Pact, the Baltic states had to create militaries from scratch after achieving independence. Given their small size and limited financial resources, this has not been an easy task. Nonetheless, all three Baltic states have made significant progress in modernizing their military forces and making them capable of operating with NATO forces.

Defense budgets in all three have been rising. Estonia’s defense budget increased from 1.6 percent of the GDP in 2000 to 1.8 percent in 2001 and rose to 2 percent in 2002. Estonia is in the process of creating a small intermediate reaction force; a battalion-size rapid reaction force; and 2 brigades of main defense forces.

Defense spending has also risen in Lithuania. In 2001, all parliamentary parties signed an agreement reaffirming their commitment to devote no less than 2 percent GDP in 2001-2004. To reinforce this commitment, the extension of the accord until 2008 is currently under consideration. Lithuania has also taken important steps to modernize its forces and make them NATO compatible. It plans to have one NATO-interoperable Reaction Brigade by 2006. It has also formed a peacekeeping battalion (LITPOLBAT) with Poland.

In the future, Lithuania plans to have a slightly smaller but more easily deployable force and to move away from the concept of territorial defense. In line with this, it is planning to reduce the number of conscripts and increase the number of professionals in the armed forces as well as restructure the territorial units to provide host nation support, protection of key strategic facilities and assistance to civil authorities. The volunteer and active reserve forces will also be down–sized.

Latvia’s defense spending has been the lowest of the three. However, Latvia has pledged to raise defense spending to 2 percent by 2003. By the end of 2004, Latvia will be able to commit a fully professional Motorized Infantry Battalion, with some Combat Support and Combat Service Support Units, to the Alliance for a full range of NATO missions.

Given the small size of their armed forces and the strong financial constraints they face, the Baltic states cannot hope to build powerful armed forces that can match those of the larger and richer members of the Alliance. Instead they have sought to enhance their value to the Alliance by developing specialized capabilities in certain areas. Latvia, for instance, is developing specialized ordnance and minesweeping units and is condsidering developing a chemical/biological defense unit. Estonia is also developing a minesweeping unit, while Lithuania is creating a medical unit.

SUPPORT FOR THE WAR ON TERRORISM

All three Baltic states, moreover, have shown a willingness to contribute to the war on terrorism. Latvia deployed a special forces unit and demining team in Afghanistan, while Estonia sent an explosive detection dog team. Lithuania deployed a special forces unit and a medical team as well as offered its airspace and airfields for Operation Enduring Freedom. While these contributions were small and largely symbolic, they were an important indication that all three Baltic states were prepared to contribute to the war on terrorism.

All three countries also lent political support to the US-led effort to disarm Iraq. All three signed the letter of the Vilnius 10 calling on Saddam Hussein to disarm. Lithuania has also sent a liaison officer to CENTCOM and provided over-flight and transit for US and Coalition forces in the Iraq campaign.

REGIONAL DEFENSE COOPERATION

The three Baltic states have also taken a number of steps since 1993 to strengthen regional defense cooperation. The most important and successful initiative has been the creation of a joint Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion (BALTBAT). Composed of a company from each of the three Baltic states, BALTBAT has been deployed in Bosnia as part of the Nordic Brigade. The joint peacekeeping battalion is an important expression of the Baltic states' readiness to contribute to international peacekeeping. At the same time, it has helped the Baltic states to gain valuable experience in working closely with NATO.

In addition, several other efforts have been undertaken to enhance regional defense cooperation:

- A joint Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON) has been set up. BALTRON is composed of a combined Lithuanian-Latvian-Estonian staff and national ships from the navies of the three Baltic countries. It is based in Estonia. The long-term goal is to make the Squadron interoperable and compatible with NATO and able to conduct mine countermeasure operations.

- A Baltic Air Surveillance Network (BALTNET), based in Lithuania, has been established. It is designed to improve international

cooperation between civilian and military authorities in aviation matters and to increase operational effectiveness. The data distributed in BALTNET will be compatible with other European data systems.

- A Baltic Defense College (BALTDEFCOL) has been set up in Tartu, Estonia. Its primary function is to train senior staff officers and civilians from the Baltic states in NATO-based staff procedures, strategic planning and management. In addition to students from the three Baltic states, the first course of BALTDEFCOL also included students from Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Sweden and the U.S.

These initiatives have helped to promote a greater sense of cohesion and regional cooperation among the Baltic states. The three Baltic states are also cooperating in joint arms and equipment purchases in order to save money. In August 2001, Latvia and Estonia agreed to jointly purchase long-range radars from Lockheed Martin. The radars will form part of the Baltic states' joint airspace surveillance system (BALNET), which will be integrated into similar NATO systems in the future.

THE RUSSIAN MINORITY ISSUE

The existence of large Russian-speaking minorities in the territory of the Baltic states has created some tensions with Russia. Moscow has often accused the Baltic states, especially Latvia and Estonia, of discriminating against the minority. However, over the past decade the Baltic states have worked closely with the OSCE and EU to bring their citizenship and electoral laws into conformity with OSCE and EU norms and procedures. Both organizations have certified that the laws of the Baltic states today fully conform to OSCE and EU norms.

However, overall Moscow has much less influence in the Baltic states today than it did five or ten years ago. Russia's influence over the Russian minorities in the Baltic states is declining. While many members of the minority continue to feel that they are second class citizens, few wish to emigrate to Russia. Today a growing number of the younger members of the minority see their fate tied to the process of European integration rather than to Russia's evolution. This has

reduced Russia's ability to use the minority as a means of pressure on the Baltic states.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

The Baltic states have also taken steps to promote religious tolerance and address important historical legacies by creating Holocaust Commissions. Lithuania, for instance, intends to introduce amendments into the existing Law on the Restitution of Religious Property, which would provide a legal mechanism for Jewish property restitution and compensation for lost communal property. These amendments are being drafted in cooperation with the Lithuanian Government Commission, headed by the Minister of Justice, and the International Committee to Represent Jewish Property Claims in Lithuania. In Latvia, the subject of the Holocaust is included in the compulsory history curriculum as a component of general education.

IMPACT OF BALTIC MEMBERSHIP ON RUSSIA-NATO RELATIONS

For a long time Russia strongly opposed Baltic membership in NATO, arguing that Baltic membership in the Alliance would cross a "red line" and lead to a serious deterioration of Russian-NATO relations. At the Helsinki summit in March 1997, President Yeltsin tried to get a private oral agreement from President Clinton -- a "gentleman's agreement that would not be made public -- not to admit the Baltic states into the Alliance. President Clinton flatly refused to make such a commitment.

President Putin, however, played down the Baltic issue. While opposing NATO enlargement in principle, he seemed to recognize that Russia had over-reacted to the first round of enlargement and appeared intent on not allowing the Baltic issue to disrupt his effort to deepen cooperation with NATO. In addition, the closer US-Russian cooperation on terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks helped to defuse the impact of the Baltic issue on NATO-Russian relations.

Some Western observers have expressed fears that Baltic membership in NATO could seriously complicate NATO's relations with Russia. However, this seems unlikely. As noted, Putin played down the Baltic issue in the run-up to the Prague summit. His main goal is to try to

improve ties to NATO. Thus he is unlikely to make Baltic membership a major issue in relations with NATO.

THE POST-PRAGUE AGENDA IN THE BALTIC REGION

Mr. Chairman, the invitations issued at Prague are an important achievement. They help to anchor the Baltic states more firmly in the West and end the debate about their place in the post-Cold War European security order. At the same time, NATO membership will create a new set of strategic challenges, which the US and the Baltic states need to address.

The first challenge is directly related to US policy. For much of the last decade ensuring the security of the Baltic states was an important US priority. Indeed, the Baltic issue spurred some of the innovative security arrangements in the post-Cold War period. However, having succeeded in obtaining invitations to join NATO, the Baltic states now run the risk of becoming victims of their own success. There is a danger that once the Baltic states are members of NATO, the US will essentially regard the Baltic issue as “fixed” and disengage from the region. Indeed, there are signs of this already happening. Momentum behind the Northern European Initiative -- one of the most innovative policy initiatives toward the region, has begun to wane in the last several years.

In short, the strategic framework that shaped Western policy toward the Baltic region is increasingly becoming obsolete and being overtaken by events. That paradigm centered around the integration of Baltic states into NATO and the EU. With the invitations at Prague and Copenhagen, these goals have largely been achieved. Thus the challenge in the post-Prague period is to develop a new paradigm -- a new strategic agenda -- that can keep the US engaged in the Baltic region.

The pre-Prague agenda centered around stabilizing the Baltic region. In the post-Prague period, the strategic agenda should shift from stabilizing the Baltic region to stabilizing the immediate neighborhood. The new agenda should include 4 elements: 1) enhancing cooperation with Russia; 2) helping to stabilize the situation around Kaliningrad; 3) promoting the democratization of Belarus; 4) supporting

Ukraine's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. At the same time, some of the mechanisms for US-Baltic cooperation may need to be revamped to give a larger role to NGO's and the private sector.

The second key challenge is to ensure that Article 5 is not a "hollow" paper commitment. While enlargement to the Baltic states is largely being carried out for political reasons, the military dimensions remain important. Thus in the post-Prague period the US and its NATO allies will need to give more attention to the military dimensions of carrying out an Article 5 commitment to the Baltic states.

Lacking any clear conceptual thinking about how to defend the Baltic states, NATO planners may be tempted to dust off the plans for defending Poland and use them as a model for defending the Baltic states. However, it is not clear that the "Polish Model" -- i.e., large indigenous land and air forces, plus a robust NATO reinforcement package -- is the right defense model for the Baltic region. The Baltic region lacks the strategic depth and large military forces that were available in the Polish case. In addition, Russian forces are closer and Belarus does not provide a strategic buffer as Ukraine does in the Polish case. Finally, Western reinforcements are not next door as is the case in Poland. Thus getting reinforcements to the Baltic states will be much harder and take longer.

At the same time, changes in warfare and technology -- above all precision-guided weapons and network centric warfare -- may give the United States and NATO new options for defending the Baltic states which don't require large reinforcements stationed on Baltic territory. Such options would also reduce the relevance of CFE since these options would not require large amounts of TLE (Treaty-Limited Equipment) on Baltic soil.

This is all the more important because Russia may try to use CFE to constrain the ability of NATO -- and especially the U.S. -- to carry out an Article 5 commitment to the Baltic states by limiting NATO's ability to temporarily station forces on the territory of the Baltic states. NATO's reinforcement capacity was a major issue in the first round of enlargement and it could be an issue in the second round of enlargement as well in regard to the Baltic states. Thus the Alliance will need to

devise a CFE strategy that assures that the interests of the Baltic states are adequately protected.

Moreover, the Baltic states cannot be expected to announce their TLE levels until they know how they will be defended and how much TLE they will need. This highlights the need for NATO to begin to develop its plans for defending the Baltic states now. Otherwise, there is a danger that the Alliance's CFE policy and its Baltic policy could operate at cross-purposes, leading to strains in relations with the Baltic states.

At the same time, to defuse Russian concerns about the military impact of Baltic membership, NATO could make a unilateral statement that it does not intend to deploy nuclear weapons or permanently station major combat troops on Baltic soil as long as there is not a significant deterioration in the security environment. NATO made such a unilateral statement during the first round of NATO enlargement and repeating such a statement when the Baltic states enter the Alliance could help to ease Russian anxiety about NATO's intentions.

These pledges could be accompanied by proposals for confidence-building measures. One idea worth considering would be to expand the German-Danish-Polish Corps in Szczecin (Stettin) to include units from the Baltic states and eventually perhaps even Russian forces from Kaliningrad. Initially, cooperation could begin with joint exercises on an *ad hoc* basis. But as mutual confidence increased, the cooperation could be expanded and institutionalized.

The third challenge concerns relations with Russia. In the pre-Prague period, the main challenge was to overcome Russia's opposition to Baltic membership. This was successfully accomplished. However, in the post-Prague period, the key challenge will be to improve cooperation between the Baltic states and Russia.

Some observers worry that NATO membership will make this task harder. The opposite, however, is likely to be the case. Rather than leading to a deterioration in Baltic-Russian relations, as some fear, Baltic membership in NATO is likely to lead to the gradual improvement of Baltic-Russian relations. Now that the basic battle for the long-

term security orientation of the Baltic states has been resolved, Moscow is likely to stop its bully tactics and show greater interest in improving ties to the Baltic states -- just as happened with Poland after Poland entered NATO. At the same time, NATO membership is likely to increase the self-confidence of the Baltic states and allow them to expand ties to Moscow.

Fourth, US policymakers need to ensure that there is no backsliding away from democratic reform and social tolerance in the Baltic states. All three Baltic states need to continue to make an honest reckoning with the past, including the Holocaust. In addition, they need to intensify efforts to root out corruption.

Finally, US policymakers should continue to encourage the Baltic states to promote the integration of the Russian minority more fully into Baltic political and social life. The social integration of the Russian minority is an important prerequisite for long-term political stability in the Baltic states as well as for maintaining cordial relations with Russia.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my testimony. Thank you for your attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other Committee members may have.