

NATO, Russia, and the Baltic States

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After the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, Russian president Vladimir Putin was the first foreign leader to phone President George W. Bush to express his condolences. This move appeared to be more than just an isolated symbolic act. It seemed to be a harbinger of a fundamental shift in Russian foreign policy. Putin moved decisively to lower the temperature on issues about which the United States and Russia disagreed, forthrightly declared Russian support for the U.S. war against the Taliban, and even supported the establishment of U.S. military bases in Central Asia. That Putin did all of this in part to try to enlist the United States and NATO as allies in his war in Chechnya does not mean that his policy shift was a cynical ploy. Quite the opposite: Putin seems to be pursuing a general political alliance with the West on the basis of shared national interests—economic as well as strategic ones—and some in Russia’s political class have begun speaking favorably about the idea. Talk about the future possibility of Russian membership in NATO is even increasing despite the existence of contentious issues in U.S.-Russia relations, especially the future status of the ABM Treaty, Russia’s nuclear cooperation with Iran, and Russian opposition to NATO enlargement.

NATO’s 1999 Strategic Concept offers sensible criteria for evaluating enlargement plans. New countries will be invited to join NATO “as NATO determines that the inclusion of these nations would serve the overall political and strategic interests of the Alliance...and enhance overall European security and stability.” By these criteria, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania should not be invited to join at the 2002 NATO summit in Prague. Putin’s move toward a real Russian-Western strategic partnership offers the possibility of building a durable European security system from the Atlantic to the Urals. In the aftermath of Secretary General Lord Robertson’s November visit to Moscow, NATO has begun exploring this possibility, but what is currently on offer—a genuine “voice” for Russia, but only on limited issues—would not be enough to assuage Russian concerns about Baltic membership. Going forward with Baltic membership in such circumstances would therefore discredit Putin’s pro-Western policy, creating a strategic sore point where NATO would border the Russian heartland.

The effect would be to decrease security for Russia, the Baltics, and NATO. Russia does not now pose a military threat to Baltic security, and will not do so in the future except in the unlikely event that a nationalist extremist became Russian president. However spurning Putin’s

tacit offer of alliance by threatening Russia on one of its most sensitive points would increase the likelihood of such an outcome.

Military Problems of Baltic Membership

Since the end of the Cold War, the importance of Article 5, the collective defense provision of the North Atlantic Treaty, has seemed to be on the wane. Article 5 was originally about deterring and defending against a possible Soviet attack. With that threat gone, NATO's rhetoric has focused more on diffuse "security-building" and much less on collective defense. If one inquires, either at NATO's political headquarters in Brussels or at its military headquarters in Mons, one is told that NATO is a political, not a military, alliance. Indeed, to all appearances, NATO planners are simply not preparing for the possibility that NATO might have to defend the Baltic states militarily if they should become members. Nor is there evidence of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff assessing the military requirements of Baltic defense—such an assessment might lead to some politically inconvenient findings.

NATO is still, however, a defensive alliance, and if the Baltics join, the United States and NATO will have to make plans to defend them. Article 5 remains in effect, and indeed the main reason the Baltics want to join NATO is for a sense of security against potential future threats from Russia. To put it less kindly, the Baltics wish to delegate their defense needs to NATO and the United States, because they are too small to be able to defend themselves. The North Atlantic Council's first-ever invocation of Article 5 in the aftermath of September 11 provides further evidence that collective defense is still a core NATO function.

In short, any decision to include Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in NATO must consider the military requirements for a potential NATO defense of the region. However the geography of the region makes the military problem of its defense extremely difficult:

- The Baltic states are geographically tiny, providing no strategic depth. The Russian border is less than 150 miles from Tallinn and Riga. Behind them is the obstacle of the Baltic Sea.
- The region is topographically flat, providing no high ground that could strengthen outnumbered defenders.
- The Baltic states are demographically tiny, with a combined population less than one-tenth that of Russia, and field only battalion-sized armies. Without reinforcement, they could not even pose a "speed bump" against a serious Russian ground attack.
- The region lies next to the Russian heartland: the Estonian-Russian border is less than 100 miles from St. Petersburg.

These geographical realities impose tough strategic dilemmas for military planners. The tiny size of Estonia and Latvia and of their armies means that they have little ability to trade space for time. Ground defenses must be forward defenses, which means that substantial NATO forces would have to rapidly reinforce local ground armies in a crisis to enable them to hold out even temporarily against possible Russian attack. Furthermore, the air element of the NATO operational plan would have to call for the quick achievement of air superiority not only over the Baltic littoral itself, but also deep into Russian territory. NATO forces would be relying on potentially vulnerable sea lines of communication for supply and reinforcement, and defending those lines of communication would require a "cushion" of air defense so that Russian aircraft

could not dart from a nearby Russian territorial sanctuary to attack NATO convoys. Such defense would also require neutralizing Russia's Baltic Sea Fleet early in any conflict.

These requirements, in turn, mean that NATO would have to plan against the possibility of having to face much of the Russian Air Force, even if the area of ground operations were limited to the Baltic states themselves. NATO air forces would not want to limit themselves to the restricted area of the Baltic Sea for overflight corridors, so the powerful temptation would be to request overflight corridors over at least Sweden, if not Finland as well. That consideration leads to another: NATO could gain strategic depth by expanding to include Sweden and Finland, to provide supply and air bases, among other assets, as well as the overflight corridors. However Finland, if included, would add another 600-plus miles of border with Russia for NATO to defend.

The bottom line, with or without Finnish membership, is that incorporating the Baltics into NATO would impose an important new military burden on other NATO member nations. This would not "serve the overall political and strategic interests of the Alliance."

Strategic Dilemmas of Baltic Membership

The scenario of a Russian military attack on the Baltic states is, of course, impossible under current circumstances and extremely unlikely in the foreseeable future. Considering this unlikely scenario, however, is still important because both sides' military planners will have to go through these calculations if the Baltic states joined NATO, and the result of the planning process would be a serious security dilemma. The new Baltic members of NATO would surely demand that NATO make contingency plans to defend them, just in case—again, that is a key reason they want to join. As NATO begins making it possible to carry out such plans—by improving infrastructure in the region, for example—strategic dilemmas start to crop up. From the Russian point of view, NATO in recent years has been militarily assertive. The air war in Kosovo in 1999 represented its first military operation, and it was not defensive: it was fought, as Russians remind us, without UN sanction and for the purpose of securing a Serbian military withdrawal from a territory that was legally part of Serbia. No responsible Russian military planner could ignore the potential military threat to Russia posed by NATO plans and capabilities for defense of the Baltic states—especially the requirement for air superiority over part of the Russian heartland.

A reasonable first Russian reaction would be to demand that the Baltics join the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, agreeing to strict limits on the deployment of forces and equipment on their territory. The Baltics—and therefore NATO—would insist at least on allowing high ceilings for temporary deployments, but Russia would argue that such high ceilings threatened its security. Issues like this one are critically important because they set the overall tone for NATO-Russian and U.S.-Russia relations. Reassurances that NATO is merely a "political" alliance would lack credibility as NATO began making plans to defend the Baltics. Russian military planners would therefore make plans to preempt such plans. Because the whole point of NATO enlargement is supposed to be to expand the zone of "democratic peace" where war is unthinkable, its purpose would thus be defeated from the beginning. The inclination on both sides to think of the other as an enemy would be reinforced.

This is the nub of the policy dilemma: in current circumstances, in which the Baltic states are not in NATO, the Russian president feels able to propose a close NATO-Russian partnership,

starting with a sort of alliance against the common enemy of terrorism. NATO enlargement to the Baltic would probably change that dynamic, impelling both sides to resume thinking more seriously of the other as a possible adversary.

Policy Alternatives

The boldest policy alternative aimed at promoting Russia-NATO cooperation would be to move toward incorporating Russia into NATO. Such a move might take the form of adding Russia to the list of NATO aspirants, and synchronizing timetables so that the Baltic states would not become members before Russia was at least officially invited to join. The post-September 11 shifts make such a move less improbable than before because, at least for a time, the war on terrorism gives Russia and NATO a common enemy, which should make it easier for them to resolve other disagreements. This is easier said than done, though. NATO accession requirements include democracy, which Putin has done much to undermine with his attacks on the independent media; the rule of law, which is largely absent in Russia; and respect for human rights, which Russia makes no pretense of demonstrating in Chechnya. Russia, for its part, remains resentful of Western double standards (Turkish depredations against Kurds receive less criticism than Russia receives for its handling of Chechnya), and disquieted by the Bush administration's abrogation of the ABM Treaty. Furthermore, the Russians' self-image as a great power does not allow them to submit to the humiliating scrutiny directed toward NATO aspirants. Russian admission to NATO, therefore, although no longer unthinkable for the long run, is still not practical in the next few years.

The alternative of simply letting the Baltics into NATO, and assuming Russia will get used to it, makes even less strategic sense after September 11 than it did before. Putin's pro-Western initiative has provoked grumbling among some in Russia's political class, and he needs to be able to show some gains for Russia if it is to be sustained. Baltic inclusion in NATO would, on the contrary, be a loss for Russia, and would result in significant new NATO-Russia tensions. More to the point, infringing on one of Russia's most neuralgic points in this context would mean throwing Putin's initiative back in his face, forcing Putin and Russia to consider other, less attractive strategic options. Especially if NATO enlargement to the Baltic States is combined with U.S. abrogation of the ABM Treaty, Russia's pro-Western option would be dead, probably for the rest of Putin's administration.

These problems would not arise if NATO really were the purely political alliance some claim it is becoming—that is, if enlargement meant the end of Article 5. But that is not realistic: joint military planning must assume common defense, and such planning is a core NATO function. Indeed, joint military planning contributes more than anything else to NATO's greatest achievement—making war among its key members unthinkable.

NATO, in short, should not let the Baltic states in without a comprehensive deal with Russia, and it cannot reach such a deal with Russia before Prague. Because Bush has already publicly forsworn the "zero option," the only alternative for NATO is to proceed with a smaller enlargement, probably including Slovenia and Slovakia, and perhaps Bulgaria and Romania. NATO's road to the Baltic must run first through the establishment of a political alliance and a reconciliation of competing interests with Russia. Many of the outlines of such a deal are clear. Bush's announced withdrawal from the ABM Treaty has already added an

important strain to the relationship, but one whose main consequences will be seen in the long term rather than the short term. For now, however, the decision does make it impossible to push for more Russian restraint on nuclear sales to Iran. The U.S. will have to accept that Iran will get nuclear capabilities (gambling that reform can tame Iran's Revolutionary Guards before they get such weapons). Putin must restrain his antidemocratic tendencies in Moscow, and his violent ones in Chechnya, creating an opening for a political settlement there. The dilemmas of explosive ethnic conflicts in the Balkans and the South Caucasus, Saddam Hussein's nuclear ambitions, and other regional issues will remain, but on these issues at least Russian and U.S. interests are generally compatible. The possibility of a comprehensive U.S.-Russia deal is present.

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