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Obama's Trip to Estonia: The Right Visit at the Right Time

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In advance of the NATO summit on September 4–5 in Wales, President Obama will visit Tallinn, Estonia, to meet with leaders from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

This visit is a welcome announcement. Up until the recent events in Ukraine, the importance of the Baltic region to NATO and the threat Russia posed to it was generally overlooked by the Obama Administration. The visit sends an important signal to friends and foes alike in the region that the U.S. takes Baltic security and its obligation under NATO seriously.

The U.S. should seize on the momentum of the President's visit and push for concrete actions to bolster security in NATO's Central and Eastern European member states. As the Afghan mission winds down and Russian aggression increases, getting back to the basics of collective security should be the top priority for the alliance. There is no better place to start than the Baltic region.

The Baltic States: An Example for NATO

The U.S. has a long history of championing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Baltic states dating back to the interwar period of the 1920s. After regaining their independence from Russia in the early 1990s, the Baltic states have been staunch supporters of the transatlantic relationship.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4267>

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Although small in absolute terms, the three Baltic states contribute greatly to NATO in relative terms. Estonia is the regional leader in defense matters and is currently one of only four NATO countries that spend the required 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. All three countries sent troops to Iraq and have troops fighting in Afghanistan. Estonian troops are serving in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan, one of the most deadly areas in the country.

In terms of economic freedom, the Baltic region is a beacon of hope for Europe and the rest of the world. The region is proof that pursuing policies of economic liberalization and growth works. Estonia ranks second in the eurozone and 13th in the world in the *2014 Index of Economic Freedom*, published by The Heritage Foundation and *The Wall Street Journal*.¹

Baltic Security Equals NATO's Security

The U.S. should deepen the U.S.–Baltic defense and security relationship by proactively seeking new areas of cooperation and building on old ties. It is in America's, as well as NATO's, interests to do so. President Obama should ensure that NATO refocuses on collective security and territorial defense. In advance of the summit, the President should use his trip to Estonia to announce concrete actions to bolster Baltic security. Specifically, the President should:

- **Reiterate American support for the Baltics with a major speech in Tallinn.** After a decade of membership in NATO, the Baltics are net contributors to security. The President should reiterate America's commitment to territorial integri-

ty and collective defense while in Estonia. Such a statement in Tallinn, a mere 539 miles from Moscow, would send a powerful message.

- **Announce the establishment of a permanent NATO presence in Eastern Europe.** It makes no sense, either militarily or diplomatically, not to have robust capability in Central and Eastern Europe. It will be far easier to deter threats and defend the region from Russia than it will be to liberate them.
- **Make a short visit to Finland.** Good U.S. relations with the Nordic countries will mean closer relations with the Baltics. Although not a member of NATO, Finland is an important regional ally and contributes troops to Afghanistan. As the domestic debate on possible Finnish membership of NATO heats up, President Obama should visit Helsinki to demonstrate America's support for Finland joining the alliance.
- **Consider pre-positioning equipment in the Baltics.** As General Philip Breedlove, head of U.S. European Command, and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen recently wrote, "Speed is of the essence to deter sudden threats along NATO's borders. We also need to pre-position equipment and supplies, so that they can travel light but strike hard if needed."²
- **Consider establishing a Baltic Sea Rotation Force.** The U.S. Marine Corps currently operates a Black Sea Rotational Force that consists of a special-purpose Marine air-ground task force. The U.S. should consider the value of establishing a similar task force for the Baltic Sea region.
- **Enhance cybersecurity cooperation with the Baltic states.** An increased American contribution to the Estonian Center of Excellence on cyber defense is welcome. However, it represents only a small portion of existing and potential U.S.–Baltic cooperation in this area. The U.S. should explore ways to broaden cooperation in cyber defense, including sharing experience, expanding contingency planning, increasing training and exercises, and developing capabilities.
- **Continue with joint training exercises.** Training exercises with allies are invaluable opportunities to improve interoperability, camaraderie, and success in simulated battle conditions. The U.S. should prioritize training missions in the Baltic region and ensure that defense cuts and sequestration do not impact U.S.–Baltic relations.
- **Commit to a speedy and robust ballistic missile defense in Europe.** The U.S. should commit to robust ballistic missile defense in Europe, including potentially ballistic-missile-defense-capable ships operating in the Baltic region.
- **Facilitate U.S. liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports to the Baltic region.** The security of energy supplies is a serious concern of the Baltic states, all of which rely on Russia for 100 percent of their natural gas supplies. It also has an impact on military readiness, which is why the U.S. and NATO should be concerned. The U.S. should do more to help by providing the Baltic states with access to American LNG.
- **Continue contributions to Baltic air policing.** The Baltic air policing mission is an example of NATO collective security guarantees. In May, in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, NATO tripled the number of aircraft taking part.³ The U.S. should continue contributing to the Baltic air policing mission.

1. Terry Miller, Anthony B. Kim, and Kim R. Holmes, *2014 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation and Dow Jones & Company, Inc., 2014), <http://www.heritage.org/index>.

2. Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Philip M. Breedlove, "A NATO for a Dangerous World," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/anders-fogh-rasmussen-and-philip-m-breedlove-a-nato-for-a-dangerous-world-1408317653> (accessed August 19, 2014).

3. Nicholas de Larrinaga, "NATO's Tripled Baltic Air Policing Mission Begins," *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, April 29, 2014, <http://www.janes.com/article/37253/nato-s-tripled-baltic-air-policing-mission-begins> (accessed August 19, 2014).

Seize the Moment

This visit offers President Obama an opportunity to acknowledge the important contributions of the Baltic states to NATO and highlight how far all three countries have come in embracing economic freedom and democracy since the end of the Cold War. A visit to Estonia sends the right message, but how the U.S. and NATO follow through on their promises will be watched even more closely.

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