

END NOTE

WESTERN SUPPORT FOR BALTIC MEMBERSHIP IN NATO INCREASES

By Taras Kuzio

Some Western commentators have expressed concern that Russia's inclusion within the international coalition against terrorism will lead

to it demanding concessions from the U.S. in areas such as NATO enlargement. These fears seem to be increasingly unwarranted as the range of Western countries that have voiced their support for the inclusion of the Baltic states continues to grow. There are even indications that Russian President Vladimir Putin may be withdrawing his "red line" to the CIS, which would no longer include the Baltic states within its sphere of influence.

The Baltic states have always feared that NATO enlargement might ignore them because of Russian objections, and they therefore devised the idea of a "big bang" second round of NATO enlargement at the May 2000 meeting in Vilnius of nine aspirant members of NATO in the presence of NATO Secretary-General Lord George Robertson. At that meeting, the representatives of the three Baltic states drafted a position statement that argued that at the summit scheduled for November 2002 in Prague NATO should invite all nine aspirant states to join at the same time and not individually.

The Baltic republics initially looked to the U.S., Scandinavian countries, and Central European NATO members Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary as their main supporters in their bid for NATO membership. On recent visits to the Baltic states, Polish President Aleksandr Kwasniewski and Polish Foreign Minister Wladyslaw Bartoszewski both came out strongly in favor of Baltic membership. These views were also expressed by Hungarian Defense Minister Janos Szabo to the Hungarian parliament earlier this month.

Scandinavia has been at the forefront of promoting the Baltic states within NATO. Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik said that, "For Norway, based as we are up in the high north, it is important for us that there is a northern dimension in the NATO enlargement process." He added, "We are working inside NATO in favor of Lithuania and the other Baltic states' aspirations for membership." At a Helsinki summit in August, Foreign Ministers from Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland expressed their firm support for the Balts to be included within NATO.

Support within NATO has expanded beyond the Central Europe and Scandinavia. Then-Turkish President Suleyman Demirel told his visiting Estonian counterpart as early as October 1998 that he rejected any Russian veto over NATO enlargement and therefore, "I have supported Estonia's wish to become a full member of NATO."

Germany and France initially expressed Russophile views that argued against Baltic membership. Former German Defense Minister Volker

Ruehe opposed NATO enlargement into the Baltic states, while the then-Foreign Minister, Klaus Kinkel, backed enlargement. German officials reiterated that Russian "consent" would be required for further NATO enlargement, a statement in clear contradiction of NATO's "open door" policy. The German position has gradually evolved into cautious support,

and France too now officially supports Baltic membership in NATO.

Ultimately, it will be the United States, the dominant country within NATO, that will have the decisive say in whether the Balts are asked to join next year. Writing in the fall issue of "The National Interest," James Kurth points out that President Bush's foreign policy speech in Warsaw in June had the Balts in mind when he reaffirmed NATO's open door to new members. Canadian Foreign Minister John Manley also ruled out the U.S. abandoning support for Baltic membership of NATO in exchange for Russian concessions on missile defense.

U.S. House of Representatives and Senate advisers told their Lithuanian hosts this year that there is practically no opposition in Congress to Lithuania's membership in NATO. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell advised his Baltic counterparts last month that the United States remains committed to their "full integration into the Trans-Atlantic community," and that the U.S. will continue to assist them in this endeavor through the U.S.-Baltic Charter (U.S.-B C) and the U.S.-Baltic Partnership Commission (U.S.-B PC) established in January 1998 on the basis of the August 1996 Baltic Action Plan.

The U.S.-B Charter is a political document that reaffirms U.S. support for the independence and integration of the Baltic states into the EU and NATO. One key provision envisages consultations in the event that the territorial integrity, independence, or security of one or all of the Baltic states is threatened. The U.S.-B Charter clearly entailed U.S. support for Baltic accession to NATO in any future round of enlargement and the continuation of NATO's open door policy. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton recently told the new Estonian Ambassador to the United States, Sven Jurgenson, that, "the United States welcomes and supports Estonia's aspiration to NATO membership."

The U.S.-B PC has assisted the Balts with their Membership Action Plans (MAP) in preparation for full membership. NATO Deputy Secretary-General Klaus-Peter Kleiber called Estonia's 2001 MAP for joining NATO a realistic, well considered, and constructive document. Latvia's MAP for 2001 was implemented 123 percent by August (in comparison to 88 percent in 2000). All three Baltic states have promised to increase their defense spending next year to 2 percent of GDP, the NATO average.

Multilateral and bilateral cooperation between NATO, individual NATO members and PFP (Partner) countries and the three Baltic states has been extensive in six key areas that contribute toward implementing their MAPs. These have included improving the combat efficiency of their security forces; encouraging them to raise their defense budgets to 2 percent of GDP; funding by the U.S. and Norway of a regional airspace surveillance control center (Baltnet) based at Kamelava, Lithuania; the creation of a Baltic naval squadron Baltron funded by Denmark and based in Estonia; a joint Baltic Defense College (Baltdefcol) that opened in Tartu, Estonia, in 1999 with support from Sweden; assistance in establishing a Lithuanian-Polish battalion; and the development of a joint Baltic battalion (Baltbat) with assistance from the U.K. and the

supply of surplus armaments and military equipment.

Despite fears that the U.S. would make concessions to Russia in its campaign against terrorism in the area of NATO enlargement this does not seem to be occurring. Western support for Baltic membership in NATO, which was thought to be unrealistic in the 1990s, has growing support among the majority of NATO members and even among neutral countries.

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