

NATO, the Baltic States, and Russia

A Framework for Enlargement

*Mark Kramer
Harvard University
February 2002*

In 2002, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will be initiating its second round of enlargement since the end of the Cold War. In the late 1990s, three Central European countries—Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland—were admitted into the alliance. At a summit due to be held in Prague in November 2002, the NATO heads-of-state will likely invite at least two and possibly as many as six or seven additional countries to join. In total, nine former Communist countries have applied for membership. Six of the prospective new members—Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, and Macedonia—lie outside the former Soviet Union. Of these, only Slovakia and Slovenia are likely to receive invitations. The three other aspiring members of NATO—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—normally would stand a good chance of being admitted, but their status has been controversial because they were republics of the Soviet Union until August 1991. Until recently, the Russian government had vehemently objected to the proposed admission of the Baltic states into NATO, and many Western leaders were reluctant to antagonize Moscow.

During the past year-and-a-half, however, the extension of NATO membership to the Baltic states in 2002 has become far more plausible. The various parties involved—NATO, the Baltic states, and Russia—have modified their policies in small but significant ways. Progress in forging a new security arrangement in Europe began before the September 2001 terrorist attacks, but the improved climate of U.S.-Russian relations since the attacks has clearly expedited matters.

If the Baltic states are indeed admitted into NATO, it will be a step forward both for the alliance and for European security. The arguments that are often raised against Baltic membership—that the three countries are not ready to join the alliance, that Baltic territory could not be defended against a Russian attack, and that NATO should defer to Russia's objections—are of little merit and are based on a static notion of the challenges facing NATO in the post-Cold War world. A gradual reorientation of the alliance should accompany the entry of the Baltic states into NATO. Rather than permanently keeping NATO as a predominantly military organization, the member-states should increasingly emphasize its political role. NATO's military functions remain important and must be preserved, but the alliance should also take a greater and more explicit part in the promotion and consolidation of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, including in Russia.

Restructuring NATO along these lines would not confer a special status on Russia. Although Western governments should reach out to Russia, they would be ill advised to adopt a recent British proposal that would give Russia a privileged role in allied decisionmaking. The British proposal makes no sense at a time when Russia has not even applied to join NATO. Rather than treating Russia as a special case, the alliance should encourage the Russian government to apply for NATO membership (as other countries have) and should help Russia carry out far-reaching political and military changes that would eventually qualify it to enter the alliance. The mere prospect of joining NATO would give a salutary fillip to the often-stalled processes of democratization and military reform in Russia and would strengthen the hand of pro-Western forces.

This article will explore the prospects for Baltic membership in NATO and the factors that will guide NATO's decisions. It will begin with a brief overview of Russian policy toward the Baltic states, explaining why the Baltic governments have been motivated to look to NATO as a counterweight. It will then discuss the way NATO has evolved since 1991 and how these changes will affect deliberations at the Prague summit. It will then look at the main issues involved in the prospective membership of the Baltic states, taking as the point of departure the main arguments that are often invoked against their admission. In particular, the article will discuss the political and military qualifications of the Baltic states, the recent changes in Russian policy vis-à-vis NATO enlargement, and the way the alliance should gradually alter its complexion to solidify a new purpose in the post-Cold War era. The final section of the article will offer conclusions and policy recommendations.

Russian-Baltic Relations

Russia's policy toward the Baltic states during the past decade has been cooperative in some respects and confrontational in others. The domineering nature of Russian policy has been largely responsible for the vigorous efforts that Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have made to seek NATO membership. In some important ways, however, Russia has also been cooperative—perhaps more so than one might have expected.

Cooperative Elements

From mid-1990 on the new Russian government under Boris Yeltsin endorsed the Baltic states' aspirations to become independent, and Yeltsin promptly recognized the three as independent countries after the aborted coup attempt in Moscow in August 1991. Although Yeltsin's support for the Baltic states was largely a product of his maneuvering vis-à-vis the Soviet regime, Russia's policy toward the Baltic countries in 1990–1991 laid the basis for what might have been a sound relationship.

Moscow's ties with Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were also helped in the first half of the 1990s by the complete withdrawal of Russian troops in accordance with a schedule established shortly after the demise of the Soviet Union. Although Russian officials frequently threatened to suspend the pullouts unless the Baltic states behaved more deferentially, the removal of troops and weapons was completed on time. The shutdown of Russia's large phased-array radar at Skrunda, Latvia, in September 1998, and the transfer of the last territory around the radar to the Latvian government in October 1999, marked the end of Russia's military presence in the Baltic states.

It is also commendable—though rarely noted—that Russian leaders made no attempt to foment violent unrest or a full-fledged insurgency in Estonia or Latvia in the early 1990s, and they also refrained from any direct threats of military force against the Baltic states. The presence of a large, relatively unassimilated ethnic Russian minority in Estonia created the potential for havoc in the early- to mid-1990s if the Russian government had attempted to stoke violent unrest. Fortunately, no such meddling occurred in the Baltic states, even though Russia actively supported insurgents and separatists elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, notably Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine. By the same token, Russia's eschewal of direct threats of armed intervention against the Baltic states was a notable contrast to the military operations that Russian forces undertook in Moldova, the Caucasus, and Tajikistan. In retrospect, it may not be surprising that Russia did not try to provoke violence or use force in the Baltic states, but in the early 1990s (when Russian troops were still deployed in the region) that outcome was by no means preordained.

Sources of Tension

Despite these positive developments, the Russian government has taken numerous steps during the past decade that have caused a good deal of unease and acrimony in relations with the Baltic states. From early 1992 on, Russian leaders often employed belligerent rhetoric and made unrealistic demands of the Baltic governments. They also frequently exaggerated the “plight” of Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia. Although the Estonian and Latvian governments have occasionally been clumsy in their handling of the status of ethnic Russians, the treatment of minorities in the Baltic countries has been remarkably lenient overall (especially compared to practices in other former Communist states, including Russia). The Russian government’s shrill rhetoric has distorted the real situation.

Tensions between Russia and the Baltic states also have been piqued by Russia’s periodic use of economic pressure (mainly threats to withhold oil and gas supplies) and by the construction of oil loading facilities at Primorsk and other Russian ports on the Gulf of Finland that will bypass the Baltic states and thereby deprive them of at least some of the lucrative transit fees they have been collecting since 1992 from Russian exporters.¹ In addition, Russia has occasionally resorted to indirect military pressure, most notably by conducting land and sea military exercises near the borders of Latvia and Estonia. The growing reintegration of Belarus with Russia and the fortification of garrisons in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad (including the deployment of 18 nuclear-armed SS-21 missiles) have sparked further anxiety in the Baltic capitals.

The latest source of discord in Russian-Baltic relations has come from disputes about the Soviet past. In June 2000, the Russian government declared that the Baltic republics had “voluntarily” joined the Soviet Union “in accordance with international law” and had “invited” Soviet troops to occupy their territory at the beginning of the 1940s. In a formal statement that was reaffirmed in the spring of 2001, the Russian foreign ministry claimed, “Assertions about the ‘occupation’ and ‘annexation’ of [the Baltic countries] by the Soviet Union ignore the political, historical, and legal realities and are therefore devoid of merit.”² These remarks triggered complaints from Baltic leaders and the Baltic Assembly, a joint

¹ John Varoli, “Russia Is Moving to Ship More of Its Oil,” *The New York Times*, December 25, 2001, pp. W1, W7.

² Viktor Sokolov and Andrei Litvinov, “Moskve pora potrebovat’ ot Vil’nyusa kompensatsii: Mif ob ‘okkupatsii’ Baltii stal ideologicheskim obosnovaniem ne tol’ko litovskikh pretenzii k Rossii, no i massovykh narushenii prav cheloveka,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (Moscow), June 28, 2000, p. 1; and Ivan Andreev, “Baltsovet nas rassudit,” *Kommersant Daily* (Moscow), June 22, 2000, p. 3.

advisory body set up by the three Baltic governments. The assembly expressed “regret that Moscow has not yet offered a formal apology for the crimes committed by the legal predecessor of the Russian Federation, the Soviet Union, against Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians . . . Our appeal to Russia about the past is simultaneously an appeal about the future. Without clearing up the past, the future will have no firm foundation.”³

Moscow’s stance on this matter has been motivated in part by a desire to avoid any liability for reparations (which all three Baltic states have been pursuing), but this does not wholly explain the comments. After all, the Russian government could plausibly argue that post-Soviet Russia should not be held accountable for the crimes of the Soviet regime. The whitewashing of Soviet rule in the Baltics is instead symptomatic of Russia’s broader failure to come to terms with the Soviet past, and it reflects a widespread sense in Moscow that the Baltic states should remain in Russia’s “sphere of influence,” a term used in March 2001 by Russian president Vladimir Putin.

Russia’s misrepresentations of the past, along with many other points of contention during the past decade, have spurred Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania in their drive to join NATO. Their desire for allied membership does not reflect a sense of immediate threat. Baltic officials have often said that they do not expect Russia to attack their countries or to undertake other malevolent actions in the near future. Nonetheless, so long as the Russian government fails to acknowledge that the Baltic countries were victims of Soviet rule and not voluntary participants, suspicions of Moscow’s ultimate intentions will persist. Baltic leaders see NATO membership as the only reliable way over the long term to allay those suspicions and to hedge against a turn for the worse in Moscow.

Enlargement of NATO

During the Cold War, the military functions of NATO were predominant, but the alliance also came to be seen as a political community of democratic states. When the Cold War ended in 1989–1991, the military *raison d’être* of NATO—an alliance formed to prevent Soviet encroachments in Western Europe—largely disappeared, whereas the organization’s political functions (as a grouping of democratic states) still seemed relevant, especially if NATO sought to take in some of the new democracies in Europe. The establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in late 1991 enabled the former Communist

³ “Baltic Assembly Discussed Aspiration to NATO,” in *Estonian Review* (Tallinn) 10, no. 49 (December 4–10, 2000).

states to pursue much closer relations with the alliance. The creation of NACC was followed in 1994 by the establishment of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), an organization intended to help the former Communist states develop professional militaries under firm democratic control and to prepare themselves in other ways for possible membership in NATO.⁴

These initial moves by NATO were relatively modest and did not amount to any basic rethinking of the purpose of the alliance, despite the drastic changes that had occurred in East-West relations after 1989. By the mid-1990s, however, a somewhat greater effort was initiated to recast NATO in accordance with the new, post-Cold War environment. In particular, the allied governments began considering how to expand their membership, a step that, under Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, requires the unanimous approval of existing members. In September 1995, the alliance issued an official set of political and military criteria for new members, including the stipulation that all countries entering NATO must adhere to democratic principles and procedures and must resolve any outstanding border disputes with their neighbors.⁵ (The criteria, it is worth noting, apply only to *new* members. They do not apply to existing members like Turkey and Greece.)

The promulgation of these requirements merely codified what the former Communist states had known all along—namely, that they would have to comply with democratic norms and other rigorous standards before they could be considered for admission into NATO. The criteria for aspiring members were valuable in the mid-1990s in spurring changes in civil-military relations in Poland and Hungary, in encouraging democratization throughout Central Europe, and in prompting Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Romania to settle territorial disputes.⁶

The initial post-Cold War enlargement of NATO in 1997–1999, which encompassed Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, marked a further (though still limited) stage in the alliance's post-Cold War transition. At a summit in Madrid in July 1997, the NATO countries formed the Euro-

⁴ "Partnership for Peace: Framework Document Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council," Brussels, January 10, 1994, in *NATO Review* (Brussels) 42, no. 1 (February 1994): 2–5.

⁵ NATO, *Study on NATO Enlargement*, Brussels, September 1995.

⁶ See Mark Kramer, "NATO, Russia, and East European Security," in Kate Martin and Uri Ra'anani, eds., *Russia: A Return to Imperialism?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 105–161, esp. 130–132; and Mark Kramer, "Neorealism, Nuclear Proliferation, and East-Central European State Strategies," in Michael Mastanduno and Ethan B. Kapstein, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies After the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 385–464, esp. 429–431.

Atlantic Partnership Council (which superseded the less ambitious NACC) and extended formal invitations to the Polish, Hungarian, and Czech governments to join the alliance. The allied leaders also issued a declaration affirming that NATO “remains open to new members. ...The Alliance expects to extend further invitations in coming years.”⁷

Two years later, at a summit in Washington, D.C., to mark the fiftieth anniversary of NATO (which coincided with the Kosovo conflict), the assembled leaders renewed their pledge to expand the alliance further. To this end, they issued a Membership Action Plan (MAP) providing for yearly “progress reports” on aspiring members’ success (or lack thereof) in meeting stringent political and military criteria.⁸ The NATO aspirants, for their part, must formulate Annual National Programs laying out the steps they have taken—and other steps they intend to take—to ensure full compliance with NATO’s requirements.

The framework created by the September 1995 report and by the Madrid and Washington summits (especially the provisions of the MAP) will shape NATO’s deliberations in the leadup to the Prague summit in November 2002. If the first round of post-Cold War enlargement offers any guidance, the United States will likely play a disproportionate role in determining which countries are admitted as new members in the second round. During the first round, France insisted that Romania be included, but the U.S. government’s desire to limit the initial enlargement to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic ultimately prevailed. There is little reason to believe that U.S. preferences will carry any less weight in the second round. Although the French and perhaps some other NATO governments will again seek to promote their own lists of candidates, the case for Romania will be far harder to make this time in light of recent political and economic developments in Bucharest. Disputes about the countries to include may therefore be somewhat easier to resolve than in 1997, especially if the United States takes a decisive stance in favor of bringing in no more than five or six new members (Slovakia, Slovenia, the three Baltic countries, and perhaps Bulgaria).

As with the initial round of enlargement, any further expansion of the alliance will require the explicit consent of the U.S. Senate (as well as all other NATO parliaments). In April 1998 the Senate voted by a large margin (80 to 19) to approve the ratification of protocols concerning Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland. Although the senators attached numerous conditions to the resolution of ratification, these provisions did

⁷ “Madrid Declaration on Euro-Atlantic Security and Cooperation Issued by the Heads of State and Government,” July 8, 1997.

⁸ NATO, *Membership Action Plan*, Brussels, April 24, 1999.

not establish requirements for new members that are any more rigorous than the criteria laid out in the MAP. In the future, however, heated debate may well ensue about the provision attached to the 1998 resolution stipulating that the entry of additional countries must “serve the overall political and strategic interests of NATO and the United States.”⁹ This provision, as discussed below, will indeed be fulfilled by the membership of the Baltic states, but there is ample reason to believe that opposition in the Senate to NATO enlargement will be considerably stronger this time than it was in 1998.

U.S. Policy

From 1945 until 1991, the United States officially maintained that Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia had been illegally annexed by the Soviet Union. When the Baltic countries regained their independence in 1991, the U.S. government promptly recognized them. After 1991, however, the United States initially sought to avoid discussing the prospect of Baltic membership in NATO. As the alliance was preparing in 1996 for its first round of post-Cold War enlargement, U.S. defense secretary William Perry argued, “The Baltic states are not ready to join NATO. These countries simply do not meet the alliance’s standards.”¹⁰ The general caution of the U.S. approach continued even after the State Department issued a “Baltic Action Plan” in the fall of 1996. The document committed the United States to promoting the integration of the Baltic states into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions, but it did not signal any near-term prospect of NATO membership.¹¹ Several months later, however, a shift began in U.S. policy, thanks in part to the advent of a new U.S. secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, in 1997. The State Department offered the first indication of a new U.S. approach in March 1997:

Neither the Baltic Action Plan nor this [proposed bilateral] charter is intended to take the place of NATO membership. The U.S. recognizes that membership in NATO is a top foreign policy objective for each of the three Baltic countries. And it is our position that NATO doors, once opened, will remain open to all European democracies that are able to contribute to its goals. We remain committed to continuing

⁹ Sec. 2(7)(a)(iv)(II) of U.S. Congress, Senate, “Resolution of Ratification of the Protocols to the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 on the Accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic,” Washington, D.C., April 30, 1998.

¹⁰ Cited in Philip Shenon, “U.S. Says Baltic Nations ‘Not Ready’ for NATO Membership,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 1996, sec. A, p. 7.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, “Baltic Action Plan,” Fact Sheet, Washington, D.C., August 31, 1996.

our efforts to help the Baltic countries with their preparations to meet NATO accession requirements.¹²

Shortly before the Madrid summit, Albright herself expanded on these sentiments, calling on NATO to “pledge that the first [new] members will not be the last and that no European democracy will be excluded because of where it sits on the map.”¹³

U.S. policy shifted further in early 1998 with the signing of the Baltic Charter of Partnership.¹⁴ Although the document did not irrevocably guarantee that the Baltic countries would eventually be admitted into NATO, Albright and other senior officials left no doubt that the aim was “to create the conditions under which Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia can one day walk through NATO’s door.”¹⁵ This message was reiterated several times in 1999 and 2000, especially in a statement by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott that the admission of the Baltic states into NATO was “inevitable.”

Thus, by the time President George W. Bush’s administration took office in January 2001, the United States had already gone a long way toward supporting the Baltic states in their quest to join NATO. The Bush administration said relatively little about NATO enlargement for several months, and some observers speculated that the administration was rethinking the whole process, especially with regard to the Baltics. One of the leading officials in the administration, Attorney General John Ashcroft, who had earlier been a U.S. senator, was among the small number in the Senate in 1998 who voted against the first round of NATO enlargement. Although Ashcroft’s position as attorney general did not give him any direct say in policy toward the alliance, the Baltic governments were worried that the Bush administration might not look as favorably on their candidacy.¹⁶

This initial period of hesitation, however, gave way to a strong endorsement of the Baltic states’ aspirations. In a landmark speech at Warsaw University in June 2001, Bush declared, “All of Europe’s new democracies, from the Baltic to the Black Sea and all that lie between,

¹² U.S. Information Agency, “Report on State Department Briefing,” March 28, 1997, State Department Report No. 97-03-28.

¹³ Cited in Michael Dobbs, “U.S. Indicates Preference for Just 3 New NATO States,” *The Washington Post*, May 30, 1997, p. A30.

¹⁴ “A Charter of Partnership Among the United States of America and the Republic of Estonia, Republic of Latvia, and Republic of Lithuania,” Washington, D.C., January 16, 1998.

¹⁵ Remarks by President Bill Clinton at signing ceremony of the U.S.-Baltic Charter of Partnership, Washington, D.C., January 16, 1998.

¹⁶ Conversations between the author and Latvian and Lithuanian foreign ministry officials, in Riga and Vilnius, April 2001.

should have...the same chance to join the institutions of Europe [that] Europe's old democracies have." He pledged to "erase the false lines that have divided Europe for too long" and to support "NATO membership for all of Europe's democracies that seek it and are ready to share the responsibilities that NATO brings. The question of 'when' may still be up for debate within NATO; the question of 'whether' should not be."¹⁷ In subsequent statements and meetings with representatives from the Baltic states and from Baltic-American organizations, senior administration officials have indicated that the United States will support the admission of the Baltic states into NATO.

The speech in Warsaw and the subsequent comments by administration officials have raised widespread hopes in the Baltic countries that they will receive invitations in November 2002 to join NATO. Indeed, expectations are so high at this point that anything short of a commitment to full NATO membership would come as a severe jolt in the Baltic states. Although Baltic officials are not yet ready to assume that everything is "in the bag," their level of confidence as of early 2002 is greater than ever before.

Candidacy of the Baltic States

Western observers who oppose the admission of the Baltic states into NATO have offered three main arguments: (1) that the Baltic states are not—and probably will never be—ready to enter the alliance; (2) that the entry of the Baltic states will cause deep antagonism between Russia and the West; and (3) that the admission of the Baltic states will dilute the military core of the alliance by creating a defense commitment that the member-states will be loath to fulfill. Each of these points will be addressed here seriatim.

Readiness of the Baltic States to Join

Opponents of Baltic membership in NATO have contended that Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia "have not created the conditions necessary to achieve the political and military criteria [for] new members."¹⁸ Specifically, they argue that the Baltic states are deficient in three areas: (1) they allegedly have not resolved external territorial disputes with Russia; (2) they have failed to make "a clear commitment to resolving ethnic disputes within their countries" and are faced with "a large, alienated,

¹⁷ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President in Address to Faculty and Students of Warsaw University," June 15, 2001.

¹⁸ Kent R. Meyer, "U.S. Support for Baltic Membership in NATO: What Ends, What Risks?" *Parameters* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2000–2001): 72.

and embittered Russian minority” that threatens their “internal stability”; and (3) “none of the Baltic republics currently possesses a credible military force capable of adequately defending its own territory or of effectively contributing to NATO’s collective defense.” These claims do not withstand scrutiny.

With regard to external territorial disputes, Lithuania signed border agreements in the 1990s with both Poland and Russia (in the latter case regarding Kaliningrad) and therefore has fully met NATO’s criteria on this matter. Estonia and Latvia have not been able to sign formal border treaties with Russia, but that is solely because the Russian government—in the expectation that NATO will not accept countries if they have not settled their external territorial disputes—has deliberately refused to put a final stamp on agreements that were ready for signing several years ago. Western leaders have already indicated that they will not permit Russia’s stalling tactics to impair the candidacy of the Baltic states. Hence, this is a nonissue for the next round of NATO enlargement.

With regard to the treatment of ethnic minorities in Latvia and Estonia, the arguments cited by opponents of NATO enlargement are based on information that is either outdated or inaccurate. In Latvia, a referendum held in 1998 brought the country’s citizenship law into conformity with standards set by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).¹⁹ The OSCE officially closed its mission in Riga in December 2001 after concluding that the Latvian government had fully complied with international norms for the treatment of minorities. Russians in Latvia have no desire to leave; on the contrary, there has been a net inflow of Russians into Latvia rather than a net outflow. Although a modicum of interethnic tension persists, it is little different from—and in some ways less serious than—the problems one finds in other multiethnic democracies such as Belgium, Canada, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom (with Ulster).

In Estonia, ethnic tensions have taken somewhat longer to dissipate, but the situation has improved markedly compared to the early 1990s. The OSCE and other international organizations, including the Helsinki Committee of Finland, have attested that the amended citizenship law and amended language law in Estonia comply fully with international standards.²⁰ The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities has confirmed that Estonia has met the requirements set by the OSCE (regarding the naturalization process, the granting of citizenship to

¹⁹ “Latvia,” in U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices—2000, February 2001, Item 81.

²⁰ “Estonia,” *ibid.*, Item 74; and Don Hill, “Estonia: OSCE Says It Has Fulfilled Its Purpose,” RFE/RL Report, November 23, 2001.

newborns, the teaching of Estonian, the language requirements for parliamentarians, and other matters), and the OSCE felt justified in closing its mission in Tallinn at the end of 2001. The situation is far from perfect in Estonia, but, as in the case of Latvia, the potential for ethnic discord nowadays is no greater in Estonia than in many other NATO states.

Thus, in terms of being politically ready to enter NATO, the Baltic states have done precisely what they were asked to do.

The military contribution that the Baltic countries (with a combined population of only around 7.4 million) can make to NATO is, of course, very limited, but this by no means disqualifies them from membership. NATO's September 1995 report states—without much elaboration—“New members must...be prepared to contribute to collective defense [and] to the alliance's new evolving missions.”²¹ Part II of the MAP (titled “Defense/Security Issues”) provides a more detailed set of requirements and stipulates that aspiring members must display “willingness to commit to gradual improvements in their military capabilities” and “to pursue standardization and/or interoperability” with the alliance's weapons and equipment.²²

The Baltic states had to create their armies from scratch after 1991, a task that would have been difficult even for much larger countries. It is not surprising that progress, especially in the early 1990s, was relatively slow. During the past few years, however, the Baltic governments have moved steadily closer to the military requirements set by NATO. By combining their efforts and resources on important activities, they are better able to “contribute to collective defense and to the Alliance's new missions,” as stated in the MAP.

Among the countries' joint projects is the Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT), which was set up in the mid-1990s with extensive assistance from Denmark and other NATO countries (as well as from two nonmembers, Sweden and Finland).²³ Denmark, Norway, the United States, Germany, and Sweden all have provided sizable quantities of guns, mortars, vehicles, and other weaponry and support equipment for the battalion, which currently consists of three motorized infantry companies (one from each Baltic state), a combined headquarters and logistics company, and a support company. The battalion has contributed units to NATO-led peacekeeping forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, and the Baltic states individually have sent troops to United Nations (UN) monitoring forces in Georgia, the North Caucasus, and southern Lebanon.

²¹ NATO, *Study on NATO Enlargement*, pp. 15, 18.

²² NATO, *Membership Action Plan*, part II, point 1.

²³ For more on the Baltic Battalion, see Estonian Ministry of Defense (EVK), *Baltic Co-operation*, Tallinn, December 2001, part 1.

Initially, the Baltic Battalion faced obstacles because of the limited number of officers and soldiers who knew English (the language of command in NATO) and because of inadequate training for peacekeeping missions.²⁴ Over time, however, English-language education programs and rigorous military and peacekeeping training have ensured an ample supply of qualified troops. The battalion, headquartered in Latvia, is being converted from a peacekeeping unit into a full-fledged infantry battalion replete with integrated antitank and fire-support platoons.²⁵ This upgrading will enable the battalion to take part in all conceivable manner of peacekeeping and peace enforcement actions, precisely the types of “new missions” envisaged in the NATO documents.

Other collaborative military projects established by the Baltic states include:²⁶

- a joint Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON), with bases at Riga, Liepaja, and Ventspils (in Latvia), Tallinn (in Estonia), and Klaipeda (in Lithuania);
- a joint Baltic Air Surveillance Network (BALTNET), which provides wide regional coverage and is interoperable with NATO’s integrated air defense and early-warning system (and will soon be electronically tied into it); and
- the Baltic Defense College (BALTDEFCOL), a military academy established in Tartu, Estonia in 1999 under the command of a Danish general (who eventually will be succeeded by a Baltic general) to train officers for service in their respective ministries of defense as well as in joint Baltic units. The training emphasizes NATO’s standards and procedures, and is conducted mostly in English.

In addition to these joint activities, the Baltic countries individually have been improving their military programs to ensure that they are able to meet NATO’s requirements. Table 1 shows that the efforts undertaken by the Baltic governments are now broadly comparable, on a per-capita basis, to those of several existing NATO countries, including the ones that joined in 1997. The Baltic states’ efforts are also comparable to those of other aspiring NATO members. Because the Baltic states are so small, their combined military contribution to the alliance will necessarily be modest, but on a per-capita basis they are certainly within NATO’s bounds.

²⁴ Vera Rich, “Delays as BALTBAT Proves Ineffective,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* 10, no. 3 (March 1998), Pointer Supplement, p. 2.

²⁵ Latvian Ministry of Defense (LRAM), *Report of the Minister of Defense to the Saeima on State Defense Policy and Armed Forces Development for the Year 2001*, Riga, ch. 2.

²⁶ Ibid., and EVK, *Baltic Cooperation*, parts 2, 3, and 4.

Table 1: Comparative Sizes of Armed Forces and Defense Spending in Four Groups of Countries as of 2000:

- (1) Baltic States,
 (2) Other Plausible Candidates for NATO Membership,
 (3) Newest NATO Members, and
 (4) Selected Other NATO Members

	Country	Troops in Armed Forces, Total	Troops in Armed Forces per million residents	First-Line Reserves	Defense Spending as % of GDP	Population (million)
Baltic States	Estonia	4,450	3,225	14,000	1.5	1.38
	Latvia	6,500	2,814	14,400	1.0	2.31
	Lithuania	12,190	3,331	27,800	1.8	3.66
Other Nato Aspirants	Slovakia	33,000	6,122	20,000	1.2	5.39
	Slovenia	7,600	3,838	61,000	1.7	1.98
Newest Nato Members	Czech Rep.	35,400	3,464	18,200	2.1	10.22
	Hungary	33,810	3,381	90,300	1.6	10.00
	Poland	206,045	5,307	406,000	2.1	38.82
Selected Other Nato Members	Belgium	39,420	3,872	100,500	1.3	10.18
	Canada	56,800	1,789	35,400	1.1	31.75
	Denmark	21,400	4,030	64,900	1.5	5.31
	Iceland	0	0	0	0	0.28
	Luxembourg	900	2,045	0	0.8	0.44
	Netherlands	50,430	3,181	32,200	1.8	15.85
	Norway	26,700	5,946	139,000	1.8	4.49

Source: Calculated from data in International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2001–2002* (London: IISS, Autumn 2001), pp. 48–51, 60–61, 64–67, 88–89, 92–93, and 97–99.

Moreover, Table 1 understates the efforts that the Baltic countries are actually making because it does not reflect the increased spending they allocated to defense in 2001 and the further increases they have projected for 2002. Under the MAP, Lithuania and Estonia have pledged to devote 2 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) to military spending in

2002 and have structured their budgets accordingly, and Latvia has pledged to reach that figure by 2003.²⁷ This level of expenditure is well above the current average in NATO. The additional spending will permit the acquisition of Javelin antitank missiles and Stinger surface-to-air missiles from the United States as well as RBS-70 and Mistral anti-aircraft missiles from Sweden and France, respectively. Although Norway earlier supplied hundreds of antitank missiles to the battalion, the purchase of longer-range Javelins will be a major step forward for the Baltic states, as will the purchase of Stingers and RBS-70s.

Even with these improvements under way, the Baltic armies still need to acquire longer-range air defense systems, and they must increase their efforts to attain true interoperability with NATO and to reach the force levels they have set in their Annual National Programs. The countries that were admitted during the first round of NATO's post-Cold War enlargement—Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland—have not yet achieved the force targets they originally set, and there is no ironclad guarantee that the Baltic states will implement all the measures they have proposed. Nonetheless, the steps that the Baltic governments have taken during the past few years to comply with the military provisions of the MAP have already made a big difference. Moreover, it is worth noting that almost all of the NATO countries repeatedly fell short of their projected force levels and interoperability goals during the Cold War, without any fatal effects on the alliance.

It is true that the Baltic states on their own will never be able to repulse an all-out military attack launched by hundreds of thousands of troops (assuming, for the sake of argument, that a neighboring state could and would wage such an attack). The ability to withstand a full-scale onslaught is not, however, and never has been, a requirement for NATO membership. Indeed, the main reason that countries have joined NATO—in recent years as well as in the more distant past—is precisely that they are *not* capable of dealing with this sort of contingency on their own. The Baltic states, even when combining their efforts, are smaller than most of the other NATO members (Iceland and Luxembourg are the two exceptions), but their military role in the alliance will not be different in kind.

Hence, it is a red herring to claim that the Baltic states' inability to defend themselves against all comers disqualifies them from membership. From the military standpoint, the only real question is whether they have lived up to Part II of the MAP. The evidence suggests that they have and that they will be increasing their efforts in the future.

²⁷ LRAM, *Latvijas 2002. gada Rīcības plāns dalībai NATO*, Riga, pp. 1, 3.

Russia's Position on NATO Enlargement

Opponents of Baltic membership in NATO have argued, "Any NATO movement into the Baltic region is likely to aggravate [anti-Western] attitudes [in Moscow] and create an irreconcilably suspicious and hostile atmosphere between Russia and the West—one that could result in a Russian return to Cold War postures and policies."²⁸ To avoid provoking a rift, the argument goes, NATO should give Russia a de facto veto over the selection of new members for the alliance.

There are two basic problems with these arguments: They greatly overstate the damaging effect that the admission of the Baltic states will have on Russian-Western relations, even in the near term (not to mention the longer term); and they overlook the risks of giving Russia a de facto veto over NATO membership.

Well before the events of September 2001, there were signs that Russian leaders had come to believe that the Baltic states would be admitted into NATO, and had therefore concluded—if only grudgingly—that Russia would be wise to avoid expending too much political capital on a futile quest to prevent that outcome. The "Foreign Policy Concept" promulgated by the Russian government in July 2000 affirmed, "Russia sees good prospects for the development of relations with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Russia is for guiding these relations toward good-neighborliness and mutually beneficial cooperation."²⁹ The document set two preconditions for good relations with the Baltic states—first, that Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania must respect Russian interests (though the concept did not promise that Russia would respect Baltic interests), and second, that the Baltic governments must uphold the rights of Russian and Russian-speaking minorities—but the tone of the concept was conciliatory enough to prompt statements of guarded approval in all three Baltic capitals.³⁰

Signs of progress in Russian-Baltic relations were also evident during a visit by Lithuanian president Valdas Adamkus to Moscow in March 2001. With considerable fanfare, Adamkus and Putin signed a joint declaration pledging that each side "recognizes the right of every country to choose the way to ensure its security along with the commitment not to strengthen its own security at the expense of the security of other

²⁸ Meyer, "U.S. Support for Baltic Membership in NATO," p. 72.

²⁹ "Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki RF," *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (Moscow), July 11, 2000, p. 1.

³⁰ "Latvia Hopeful About New Russian Foreign Policy Concept," "Russia's New Foreign Policy More Pragmatic—Estonian Official," and "Lithuania Applauds Russian Plans to Boost Baltic Ties," all in Daily News report, July 11, 2001, of BNS Baltic News Service. For a more skeptical reaction, see "Landsbergis Soldiers on Despite Opposition," *The Baltic Times*, July 19, 2001, p. 2.

countries.”³¹ Adamkus stressed in his own remarks in Moscow that “no one will lose from NATO enlargement. I repeat once again that Lithuania’s membership in NATO is not directed against any country. On the contrary, NATO’s door never has been and, I am convinced, never will be shut to Russia.”³²

In the wake of Adamkus’s visit, Russian policy continued to shift in a more accommodating direction. On the one hand, Russian officials still insisted that NATO should not grant membership to the Baltic states, and some officials in the Russian defense ministry warned of “dangerous consequences” if the alliance failed to heed Russia’s objections.³³ On the other hand, Putin himself seemed to have concluded that the Baltic states would eventually join NATO regardless of what Russia did. This sentiment predated the attacks of September 11, and it gained pace afterward, as U.S.-Russian relations quickly improved. Although Putin offered conflicting statements about NATO enlargement in late 2001, the main message that came through was relatively simple—namely, that Russia still opposed the admission of the Baltic states into NATO, but would not stake its whole relationship with the West on this issue.³⁴

Effect on NATO

One of the most outspoken opponents of Baltic membership in NATO, Colonel Kent Meyer of the U.S. Army, has claimed that NATO’s “mission [is] to defend the territory of its members against Russia” and that letting the Baltic states into NATO will “jeopardize vital U.S. national interests” and “seriously undermine the alliance’s ability to perform its Article 5 mission” of collective defense. Meyer concedes that “Baltic membership in NATO may help spread democracy and prosperity” in the former communist states, but he argues that the harm that the admission of the Baltic countries will supposedly inflict on “NATO’s traditional defense mission” will outweigh this benefit.³⁵ This argument has several problems.

First, for the reasons cited above, there is no convincing evidence that the admission of the Baltic states into NATO will fundamentally change the alliance’s basic military tasks. During the Cold War, collective defense against an all-out Warsaw Pact offensive would have been extremely difficult. No mission in the post-Cold War era—at least up to now—has

³¹ “Novye usloviya diktuyut novyi podkhod,” *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (Moscow), April 3, 2001, p. 1.

³² “LR Prezidento Valdo Adamkaus kalba Maskvos valstybiniam tarptautiniø santykiø institute,” *Lietuvos rytas* (Vilnius), March 30, 2001, pp. 1–2.

³³ See, for example, the interview with General Leonid Ivashov in “Boi s ten’yu,” *Sovetskaya Rossiya* (Moscow), September 20, 2001, p. 2.

³⁴ Vladimir Zmeyushchenko, “Rokirovka v dlinnuyu storonu,” *Profil’* (Moscow), No. 48 (24 December 2001), pp. 14–17.

³⁵ Meyer, “U.S. Support for Baltic Membership in NATO,” pp. 67, 69.

been even remotely as perilous or uncertain. The notion that the entry of the Baltic states into NATO will leave the alliance worse off militarily than it was during the Cold War is untenable.

Second, Meyer's conception of NATO takes almost no account of the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. He uses "Russia" and the "Soviet Union" interchangeably, and he claims that, for the indefinite future, the alliance must commit itself to deterring—or, if necessary, defending against—Russia. In the absence of a drastic turn for the worse in Moscow (a scenario that seems less plausible as time passes), however, regarding NATO as being permanently directed against Russia is neither desirable nor practical. Western leaders should be under no illusions that liberal democracy is about to take firm root in Russia, but neither should they simply act as though the Cold War never ended.

Third, Meyer implies that the political dimension of NATO is and must remain largely peripheral. The reality, however, as noted earlier, is that NATO has always had a political *raison d'être* as well as a military purpose. The military mission necessarily predominated during the Cold War, and the Clinton administration affirmed as recently as 1998 (during the Senate's deliberations on the first round of enlargement) that "NATO's core mission will remain the same—the defense of the territory of its members."³⁶ Yet, in the absence of a clear-cut threat from Russia, the relevance of NATO for collective defense is bound to diminish over time. Even the peace enforcement operation that NATO undertook vis-à-vis Kosovo in 1999—the only time the alliance has ever been used in combat—may be the exception, rather than the norm, in light of the problems that U.S. commanders faced when dealing with multiple heads-of-state and multiple defense ministers who all wanted a say in targeting choices and strategy.³⁷ It comes as little surprise that the Bush administration sedulously avoided using NATO as the vehicle for fighting the war in Afghanistan.

To the extent that the core military function of NATO is likely to wane—though certainly not disappear—over time, the alliance itself will be hard to sustain as a vibrant, meaningful organization unless its political content increases. Both the September 1995 report and the MAP underscored the crucial role of democratic values in the selection of new NATO members. The NATO states should take this further at the Prague summit by inviting the Baltic states to join and by then strongly emphasizing that they will welcome the membership of all European

³⁶ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President on the National Interest for Enlarging NATO," March 20, 1998.

³⁷ The constraints posed by NATO (and by the Clinton administration) are vividly recounted in the memoir by the commander of allied forces during the conflict, General Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001).

countries that want to participate in the alliance and that are able to meet the strenuous criteria for new members. In particular, the prospect of eventual Russian membership is something that NATO should publicly encourage. At present, Russia does not come close to meeting the requirements—either militarily or politically—and many years may pass before Russia does indeed qualify, if it ever does. There is no question, however, that if Russia does someday get to the point of fulfilling all the criteria for new members and wants to join the alliance, NATO should welcome it with open arms.

What this means in the near term is that NATO should encourage Russia to aspire to membership in the alliance and should—to the extent possible—work with the Russian government in carrying out the far-reaching reforms that are needed in Russia's polity, legal system, and armed forces. Although Russia has generally been loath to take part in PfP activities, this undoubtedly would change if a greater role in the PfP were linked with a realistic prospect of one day becoming a member of NATO. If Russia did apply to join—with NATO's encouragement—that step itself would facilitate the adoption of political and legal measures that conform to the alliance's criteria. Even if Russia cannot actually become a member of NATO for many years to come, the reforms that would lead to that goal would be uniformly positive from the West's perspective.

Conclusion

Five conclusions emerge from this discussion:

First, by any fair standard, the Baltic states have met the criteria for membership in NATO. The admission of the three countries into the alliance at the Prague summit will mark a true end to the Cold War and will underscore the importance of the requirements laid out in the MAP. Conversely, if the Baltic states are not admitted into the alliance, they will be dealt a serious blow, and the sincerity of the MAP will be thrown into doubt. This outcome might endanger the political stability of the Baltic countries, and it will bolster the impression that the three states are within a Russian sphere of influence. That impression, in turn, might encourage Russian leaders to adopt a more minatory policy vis-à-vis the Baltic governments.

Second, the admission of the Baltic states into NATO, far from harming the alliance, will help it adjust to the post-Cold War era. The military functions of NATO are and will remain crucial, but, in the absence of a catastrophic political setback in Russia, the alliance must give considerably more weight to its role in promoting and consolidating democracy. Even during the Cold War, NATO served this political function (as the examples of Greece, Turkey, Spain, and Portugal show), but it is clear that the organization cannot thrive in the post-Cold War

unless it takes on a more salient mantle as a community of democracies qua democracies.

Third, the admission of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia will strengthen NATO's internal cohesion. The initial round of post-Cold War enlargement was not entirely satisfactory in this regard. Both Poland and Hungary have been strongly supportive of NATO's activities, but problems have arisen with the Czech Republic, most notably during the Kosovo conflict. Czech prime minister Miloš Zeman repeatedly condemned the "warmongers" and "primitive troglodytes" in NATO who were responsible for the war against Serbia, and he compared the operation to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.³⁸ These comments, and the public protests that occurred in the Czech Republic (much larger protests than in any other NATO country, including Greece), had a jarring effect in many NATO capitals. By contrast, NATO officials are confident that the Baltic governments will be staunchly supportive of the alliance's actions. Although public backing for NATO membership in the Baltic states (especially Lithuania) has sometimes been lukewarm, this undoubtedly would change once the prospect of joining the alliance becomes real. Moreover, the consensus among Baltic political elites—all across the spectrum—is that NATO membership is the only desirable alternative for their countries. No Baltic government would do anything to jeopardize that status. Hence, the entry of the Baltic countries into NATO will reinforce the alliance, not weaken it.

Fourth, Baltic membership in NATO will also bolster regional stability. Although some observers have argued that Russian policy will become more confrontational if the Baltic states are admitted into NATO, there is ample reason to believe that the opposite will be the case. After Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic entered NATO, they experienced significant improvements in their bilateral relations with Russia. No doubt, the same can happen with Russian-Baltic relations, especially if NATO seeks to reach out to Russia.

Fifth, "reaching out to Russia" does not mean treating the country as a special case deserving of a privileged role in the alliance before it has even applied to join. Instead, the NATO governments should announce at the Prague summit that they hope Russia will someday become a member of the alliance, and they should encourage it to apply. They should then work with Russia so that it can gradually bring itself into compliance with the MAP. This effort may take a decade or longer, but the sooner it begins, the better.

³⁸ See, for example, Karol Wolf, "Kosovo ukazuje myšlení politiků," *Mladá fronta dnes* (Prague), April 6, 1999, p. 3; and "Premiér ČR si získal poslance čtyřiceti zemí RE otevřeností a neformálností svého vystupování – Úspěšný vstup Miloše Zemana do Evropy," *Hospodářské noviny* (Prague), April 27, 1999, p. 1.