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THE ROLE OF THE BALTIC REGION FOR THE UNITED STATES

AN ANALYSIS OF U.S. PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC FROM
THE REAGAN YEARS TO TODAY



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SUMMARY

The Baltic Sea and the states that surround it comprise an interesting geopolitical area. For the entire post-World War II period the area has been a no-man's zone where East and West meet and interact. After the end of the Cold War, the area around the Baltic Sea became a relative haven of stability. But the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014, and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, have brought about a new era of perceived insecurity.

This working paper illustrates the role that the Baltic region has played in the foreign policy and strategy rhetoric of the United States in the past thirty years. To accomplish this, the Public Papers of the presidents from the Reagan era to the first years of the Obama administration were searched for references to the region itself, the Baltic Sea and the states in the area and their issues. Within the timeline chosen for the analysis, significant policy changes have occurred in US strategy, but are they reflected in the role the Baltic region has been allocated in US foreign policy and, if so, then how?

In times of stability, the Baltic region seems to be almost inconsequential to the US. But a tense security situation – like the one we are experiencing at the time of writing – elevates the region from obscurity and puts it in the spotlight, but only temporarily. The same process occurred briefly when the Baltic states joined NATO.

More than anything, the re-entry of the Baltic region into both US strategy and presidential rhetoric alike during 2014 and 2015 illustrates the fact that the region has become a crisis area within which the US clearly sees a threat to its international interests and its allies.

INTRODUCTION

The Baltic Sea and the states that surround it comprise an interesting geopolitical area. For the entire post-World War II period, the area has been a no-man's zone where East and West meet and interact. For over two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the area was less strongly contested than it was during the Cold War. In those earlier times an almost tangible Iron Curtain divided Europe into the East with the Warsaw Pact states and the West with the NATO states and a couple of non-aligned states balancing on the tightrope of international relations. When the Soviet Union imploded, the Warsaw Pact dissolved and newly independent nations sought their place in world politics, many of them seeking and gaining entry into NATO as new members. The area around the Baltic Sea became a relative haven of stability until the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula, with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine bringing about a new era of perceived insecurity and a rise in the importance of the area for NATO policy.

For those of us living on the shores of the Baltic Sea, its immense importance is self-evident because it is practically a lifeline due to the shipping routes that connect our states to the global system of commerce. Is, however, our vision of the role that the Baltic Sea plays in the wider global maritime strategy environment flawed? Do we automatically attach exaggerated importance to it and consider it to be more relevant than it actually is to the rest of Europe or the world? Several NATO member states are located off the shores of the Baltic Sea and it is worthwhile looking into their importance both directly and through the Trans-Atlantic network of partnerships with the US. Strategy and grand strategy are elusive concepts and their content is often acted out rather than spelled out in documents. To determine how the strategic importance of the Baltic Sea and the states that surround it is depicted in US foreign policy and strategy, this paper turns to their most eloquent orators, the presidents of the United States of America.

To this end, this working paper illustrates the role that the Baltic region has played in US foreign policy and strategy rhetoric in the past thirty years. To accomplish this, the Public Papers of the Presidents from the Reagan era to the first years of the Obama administration were searched for references to the region itself, the Baltic Sea and the states in the area and their issues. Included in this body of data are the words of every speech, proclamation and statement each president has written, signed or uttered in his official capacity. The recent deterioration of the at least perceived, if not actual, security situation in the states bordering Russia has totally shaken up the kaleidoscope and before the bits and pieces fall into place, a coherent picture is difficult to assemble. Hence, I have determined to exclude the latest developments from the discussion.

US strategy and foreign policy is always in flux. Expressions of foreign policy in public policy speeches focus somewhere momentarily, then move to a strategically more important area without pausing. Suffice it to say that in times of stability, the Baltic region seems to be almost inconsequential to the US. A tense security situation like the one we are experiencing at the time of writing elevates the region from obscurity and puts it in the spotlight, but only temporarily. The same process occurred briefly when the Baltic States joined NATO.

The timeline chosen for this analysis includes the final throes of the Cold War and the heightened armaments race leading ultimately to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the

attempts to build the “New World Order” based on the US as the only remaining world power and a hegemon that was supposed to lead by example, and a decade of the “War on Terror”, followed by a shift of strategic focus from land-based forces in Europe to the Asia-Pacific region and the maritime environment. In a relatively short timespan we have seen the US’s self-image undergo several changes: from being the leader of the West to a hegemon able to do anything it chooses, to a global leader that others would choose to follow, and most recently to a superpower upholding its status by balancing the rise of future superpowers. We have also seen the extensive withdrawal of US forces from the terrain of Europe, and it is only the conflict in Ukraine that has served to bring some of those troops back, mostly to the Baltic states. In other words, significant policy changes have occurred in US strategy, but are they reflected in the role that the Baltic region has been allocated in US foreign policy, and if so, then how?

THE REAGAN ERA AND THE FRONTLINE OF THE COLD WAR

During the years of Ronald Reagan's presidency (1981–1989) Finland kept attempting to balance itself between West and East. Sweden was comfortable in its cloak of neutrality, Poland and East Germany were situated on the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain, and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania belonged to the Soviet Union. This resulted in the Soviet Union having a much larger role in the affairs of the Baltic Sea region due to much more extensive control of the shoreline than contemporary Russia has.

Reagan's rhetoric commonly referred to "the Baltic states" almost as a "trinity", with the names of each nation given as an explanatory note. They were almost unfailingly clustered together and discussed as a whole. This is due to the fact that the majority of references to the Baltic states occurred in relation to signing the "Captive Nations Week" Proclamations on four separate occasions¹ and the "Baltic Freedom Day" for seven consecutive years.² There is no doubt that these proclamations are important political stands, but they should be seen more as a part of the much larger policy realm of fighting communism (which Reagan called "the focus of evil in the modern world") than caring about the liberty and independence of the Baltic states themselves. Furthermore, just to put things into perspective, there were weeks and days designated to stranger topics, such as "Myasthenia Gravis Awareness Week".³

Much of the political importance of the proclamations concerning the Baltic states derived from repetition. They were recurring events. On the one hand, the plight of the Baltic states gained visibility through these proclamations, but on the other hand, they pale in comparison to Poland, which was mentioned in Reagan's public papers by name over six hundred times. Almost five hundred of these mentions took place in the first term and were to a large degree related to Poland becoming a site of major ideological struggle with the rise of the Solidarity movement. Along with Polish Pope John Paul II, Reagan was one of the most fiery orators against Polish premier Wojciech Jaruzelski's government. It can be argued that in the Reagan era, Poland was the most important part of the Baltic region for the US government.

Reagan, as an almost life-long unionist and the only US president who had been a trade-union president himself, spoke vehemently on behalf of the "free trade union movement Solidarity" for essentially the same reason as in the case of the Baltic states, namely, "the rights of workers and other basic human rights as the freedom of speech, assembly, and religions and the right of self-determination".⁴ Even if Poland was independent, according to Reagan it essentially suffered a similar "long dark night of injustice" as the

1 See e.g. Reagan, Ronald (19.7.1982), Remarks on Signing the Captive Nations Week Proclamation. Available at: <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/71982b.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

2 See e.g. Reagan, Ronald (14.6.1982), Proclamation 4948 – Baltic Freedom Day. Available at: <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/61482b.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

3 Reagan, Ronald (22.10.1982), Proclamation 4989 – Myasthenia Gravis Awareness Week, 1982. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/102282a.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

4 Reagan, Ronald (9.12.1983), Proclamation 5135 – Bill of Rights Day and Human Rights Day and Week, 1983. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/120983b.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

Baltic states with their “just aspirations” to regain the “right to determine their own national destiny free of foreign domination”.⁵ Nevertheless, even if the political rhetoric on behalf of the Baltic states was often heated, the US went no further than to clamour that it “has never recognized the forcible incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union, and will not do so in the future”.⁶ The fact that the Baltic states were incorporated into the Soviet Union was “illegal, indefensible, and iniquitous”,⁷ but nevertheless an established fact.

The Baltic states were, in Reagan’s political narration, the “first victims” of Soviet aggression and disregard for state sovereignty, and hence “one of the gravest wrongs of our age”.⁸ Yet the effort on their behalf was purely rhetorical. Poland and the Baltic states were commonly lumped together with countries like Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua or Afghanistan under the label of “captive nations” with comparisons to the effect of the “denial of basic human rights and self-determination in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states”.⁹ In a sense, we can argue that the focus of the Reagan era was not on the Baltic region per se, but rather on the countries along the length of the Iron Curtain. The whole idea behind Captive Nations Week was to recognize all the nations oppressed by the Soviet Union and international Communism in general and to “continue to speak up for their rights and champion their cause”.¹⁰ The division of the world into the “free West” and the “Eastern Bloc” was a recurring theme in Reagan’s rhetoric, and the Baltic states were just handy examples of countries overrun by the “evil empire”.

When it comes to other nations on the shores of the Baltic Sea, Scandinavia gets a few mentions, but they generally relate to cultural issues. Among these were events such as the yearly “Leif Erikson Day”,¹¹ “Nordic-America Week” and “Scandinavia Today” programme of 1982.¹² The sporadic mentions concerning politics and strategy were related to condemnations of the Soviet proposition of “an atom-free Baltic, a Nordic nuclear-free zone”. According to Reagan, a nuclear-free zone should not be one without

5 Reagan, Ronald (14.6.1984), Proclamation 5209 – Baltic Freedom Day, 1984. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/61484b.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

6 Ibid.

7 Reagan, Ronald (12.6.1986), Proclamation 5501 – Baltic Freedom Day, 1986. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/61286f.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

8 Ibid.

9 Reagan, Ronald (10.12.1984), Proclamation 5287 – Bill of Rights Day, Human Rights Day and Week, 1984. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/121084c.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

10 Reagan, Ronald (21.7.1986), Remarks on Signing the Captive Nations Week Proclamation. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/72186a.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

11 See e.g. Reagan, Ronald (6.10.1981), Proclamation 4871 – Leif Erikson Day, 1981. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/100681d.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

12 Reagan, Ronald (26.8.1982), Proclamation 4959 – Nordic-America Week, 1982. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/82682c.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

such weapons but one in which “nuclear weapons will not be landing and exploding”.¹³ Therefore, a nuclear-free zone would not have increased Scandinavian or Baltic security – only a stronger NATO would have been able to do that.¹⁴

When it comes to the Baltic Sea itself, during the Reagan era just as much as today, it is far too small for US naval forces to operate in. The Baltic Sea, with its limited accessibility through the narrow gap between Denmark and Sweden, is practically an inland sea. The biggest contemporary aircraft carriers would not even be able to enter it. The US navy is a blue water navy, built to operate primarily on the high seas and it traditionally concerns freedom of navigation in international air and sea spaces vital to the task of maintaining peace and security. Therefore air and naval activities in the North Sea, as in Arctic areas, were important to the US and NATO. Just because naval forces have “global, not region-specific, commitments and responsibilities, it would seem inappropriate to regulate their activities in the context of a regional security regime”.¹⁵ This applies to the Baltic Sea even today; it remains too small to allow superpower naval forces sufficient room for tactical or operational manoeuvre or self-protection, and thus such assets will be used mostly outside the Baltic Sea, perhaps to limit access to and from it in the North Sea.

13 Reagan, Ronald (13.6.1983), Remarks at a White House Reception for Baltic Americans. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/61383c.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

14 Reagan, Ronald (22.9.1987) Written Responses to Questions Submitted by the Swedish Newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/092287e.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

15 Reagan, Ronald (19.5.1988), Written Responses to Questions Submitted by the Finnish Newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1988/051988e.htm>. Accessed 2.12.2014.

THE ROLE OF THE BALTIC REGION IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

During the presidency of George H. W. Bush (1989 – 1993) the Baltic states completed their struggle for independence simultaneously with the looming collapse of the Soviet empire. Nevertheless, in its final stages, the Soviet Union attempted a crackdown on the Baltic. Bush viewed it primarily as an internal affair of the Soviet Union and stated that the Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev “knows of my position, that we view the Baltics differently. They were not incorporated”.¹⁶ This was the depth and scope of the support given in presidential rhetoric. The thawing of US-Soviet relations that had started with Reagan’s and Gorbachev’s cordial relations continued during the first years of the Bush presidency, but with the threat and even use of military force in Lithuania and Latvia in response to their declarations of independence, the US-Russia relationship took several steps backwards and threatened to “reverse the process of reform which is so important in the world and the development of the new international order”.¹⁷

The end of the Cold War initiated a period of eagerness to establish “a new world order” under US leadership and thus any international event that threatened the fulfillment of this aspiration was of importance to the US. Even if the focus of US foreign policy was the Persian Gulf, due to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing Gulf War, the European theatre was not overlooked. Bush conceded that “our relationship to the Soviet Union is important, not only to us but to the world. That relationship has helped to shape these and other historic changes”.¹⁸ In a way, then, managing the collapse of the Soviet empire and alleviating the effects it had on the rest of the world was an important policy concern and included issues such as preventing the spread of old Soviet nuclear weapons to the new, soon-to-be independent republics, in order to avoid increasing the number of nuclear states.

The Baltic states were less important, since they were not set to become nuclear states. Since the US never recognized the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union, Bush stated that “we have enormous problems when we see force used against those three Republics. And it is a big problem. And it concerns me deeply”.¹⁹ Nevertheless, beyond the realm of rhetoric and threatening to sever financial aid to the Soviet Union, there was no means of political action available – merely remaining deeply concerned. The choice of policy was to “support a process of change through constructive and fair negotiations” with “the inadmissibility of the use of force”.²⁰ Regarding the Soviets, even if the Baltic issue was spelled out for them, “I want to continue to work with them, and we’ll try very hard to work with them”.²¹ Bush had

16 Bush, George, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1991, in two books, Book I – January 1 to June 30, 1991, United States Government Printing Office, Washington. p. 29.

17 Ibid. p. 39.

18 Ibid. p. 75.

19 Ibid. p. 122.

20 Ibid. p. 483.

21 Ibid. p. 205.

his hands full managing the Gulf War and ensuring that the Soviet dissolution took place peacefully.

Scandinavia had its brief spell in the spotlight. The then Finnish president, Mauno Koivisto, organized a meeting between Bush and Gorbachev in Finland and made a state visit to the White House in 1991. During a similar visit by the prime minister of Sweden, Bush confirmed US involvement in the Baltic Sea region.²² To this end, the three Baltic states became the focus of Bush's European policy. Within a year he met the Baltic leaders six times and assured them that the "fate of freedom in the Baltics will remain high on our agenda".²³

Even when Gorbachev was replaced by Boris Yeltsin, the negotiations between the great powers duly continued and towards the end of his presidency Bush was able use the situation in Eastern Europe, and especially the newly regained independence of the Baltic states, as evidence of the success of the new world order and the spread of freedom. "The captive nations of Eastern Europe and the Baltics are captive no more. And today on the rural streets of Poland, merchants sell cans of air labeled 'the last breath of communism'. If I had stood before you four years ago and described this as the world we would help to build, you would have said, 'George Bush, you must have been smoking something, and you must have inhaled'. This convention is the first at which an American President can say the Cold War is over, and freedom finished first."²⁴

From being captive nations illustrating the oppressive nature of the Soviet Union, the Eastern European nations and the Baltic states turned into showcases of US foreign policy success and continued to be treated in such a manner in presidential rhetoric. Supposedly, these drastic changes brought about by the implosion of the Soviet Union were a triumph of the new world order. "Today, Russia has awakened, democratic, independent, and free. The Baltic states are free, and so too are Ukraine and Armenia and Belarus and Kazakhstan and the other independent states, joining the nations of Central and Eastern Europe in freedom."²⁵ Freedom was being spread, but there were too few people breaking away from Communism to budding capitalist democracies, and the process of increasing security and stability through incorporating the new states into NATO was initiated.

22 Bush, George, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1992–1993, in two books, Book I – January 1 to July 31, 1992, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 286.

23 Bush, George, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1991, in two books, Book I – January 1 to June 30, 1991, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 654.

24 Bush, George, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1992–1993, in two books, Book II – August 1, 1992 to January 20, 1993, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 1381.

25 Ibid. p. 1599.

CLINTON AND THE WINDS OF CHANGE

George H. W. Bush was succeeded by Bill Clinton (1993–2001). Much of President Clinton’s political agenda focused on the concept of change, and for political purposes the changes needed to be huge. “From Vilnius on the Baltic to Vladivostok on the Pacific, we have witnessed a political miracle, genuinely historic and heroic deeds without precedent in all of human history.”²⁶ Yet the miracle was not complete, since in the first phases of Clinton’s presidency Russian troops were still situated in the Baltic states and the discussion on the conditions and timetable of their withdrawal kept the Baltic question alive in political rhetoric.²⁷

Russian troops withdrew from Lithuania in August 1993 but remained in Estonia and Latvia for a bit longer. According to Russia, the delay was necessary to ensure the rights of the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states. It has become a time-honoured practice in Russian foreign policy to strive to secure the rights of Russian speakers abroad, and it has since been used to justify various political decisions and actions. Nevertheless, in the early 1990s this stance was accepted and reflected in Clinton’s policy as well, since as he argued, “we were for the independence and the freedom of the Baltic nations, but we expect the Russian minorities to be protected. And if we have evidence that they are being abused, it will affect our policies toward them”.²⁸

Nevertheless, the situation developed favourably and Russia continued to agree to pull its troops out of Estonia and Latvia by the end of August 1994. This was hailed by Clinton as “an important contribution to overall stability in the Baltic region and to European security as a whole”.²⁹

Power abhors a vacuum and the US was eager to increase its own influence, if not actual presence, in the Baltic region. As early as the first year of the Clinton presidency, the first tentative steps to expand NATO into the Baltic states were taken by involving the three nations in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme. “So we are giving them a great deal of protection. It just means that they’re not members of NATO right away (...) But there are significant increases in security just for being part of the Partnership for Peace.”³⁰ Initially, the entire PfP programme was introduced as a mental stepping-stone at least towards the NATO membership process. All three Baltic states were among the first to join the programme in search of considerable monetary and security benefits.³¹

26 Clinton, William, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1993, in two books, Book I – January 20, 1993 to July 31, 1993, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 375.

27 Ibid. p. 399.

28 Clinton, William, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1994, in two books, Book I – January 1 to July 31, 1994, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 66.

29 Ibid. p. 811.

30 Ibid. p. 65.

31 Ibid. p. 1202.

In a way, the PfP programme had much broader implications than it is often perceived to have today, perhaps in part because Russia was invited to join the programme as well. For the newly independent nations, membership of the programme was an initiation into NATO's sphere of influence, and joining meant partial security gains, if not proper reassurances. Ultimately, the goal was to ensure that "nations can rest easy that their borders will always be secure".³² Often the actual practices were more down-to-earth such as joint military exercises. For practically the whole of George H. W. Bush's presidency, Poland was excluded from public addresses and only made a return when Clinton and President Lech Walesa of Poland "talked about the security future of Poland. And let me just say that the most important thing for the present is that we are having the first Partnership for Peace military exercises in Poland in September. (...) That is the beginning of a process that will not only eventually lead to an expansion of NATO but much more importantly gives us a chance to have a secure and unified Europe in which, for the first time, all nation states really do respect the territorial integrity of one another".³³

A relatively non-threatening PfP programme sowed the seeds of deeper military and political integration. Participation in it did not mean that the above-mentioned countries would automatically become new members of NATO, but Clinton emphasized that the question was "not if NATO will expand, but when and how".³⁴ The timeline for new members was subsequently set for 1999 and the 50th anniversary of NATO.³⁵ This marked a brief resurgence of Poland's importance to the US, first as a prospective future member and later as a full-fledged NATO member state.

Nevertheless, Clinton was interested in the Baltic region primarily through the role that the Baltic states played in the security structures of the new world order. All in all, the Baltic Sea was mentioned only a handful of times in Clinton's presidential speeches and only once concerning strategic issues. The most significant risk perceived to exist in the Baltic Sea was the environmental one.³⁶ A sense of the US's general interest towards individual small nations on the shores of the Baltic Sea can be inferred from the fact that Clinton was the first US president to visit Denmark in 1997.³⁷ This was more or less a courtesy call due to Denmark's troop involvement in Bosnia and the support Denmark offered to the Baltic states since by "bridging the expanse of the Baltic Sea, you

32 Ibid. p. 1211.

33 Ibid. p. 1208.

34 Clinton, William, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1995, in two books, Book I - January 1 to June 30, 1995, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 45.

35 Clinton, William, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1995, in two books, Book II - July 1 to December 31, 1995, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 1896.

36 Clinton, William, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2000, in three books, Book II - June 27 to October 11, 2000, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1555.

37 Clinton, William, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1997, in two books, Book II - July 1 to December 31, 1997, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 955.

helped to close a great gap in history”.³⁸ In actual fact, the Baltic Sea was of secondary importance, and it was the Baltic states that were the primary focus of US interest.

Clinton also became the first US president to visit the “free” Baltic nations when he visited Riga in 1994. There was a strategic objective to this visit. In rhetorical terms, it was expressed as the need to meet with all three heads of state to “discuss how America can work with the Baltic countries to help bolster your security and prosperity into the next century”.³⁹

Clinton’s rhetoric tied Russia very closely to the security of the Baltic region through different means of co-operation. Indeed, in the early stages of his presidency Clinton noted that as the Russian troops had vacated Lithuania, were moving out of Latvia and, despite minority rights issues, looked set to leave Estonia as well, “I think you’ll have all the Baltics free, independent, and without foreign troops on their soil pretty soon, and the Russians have been pretty consistent in supporting that”.⁴⁰ The troop removals were used in the political rhetoric as evidence that “provides hope that the new democratic Russia, unlike the Soviet Union, can work with the Baltic countries for peace in the region”.⁴¹ Russia was certainly not seen as an enemy in this era, but remained a formidable “other”, while the Baltic states were increasingly being bound to the West. The “special” treatment offered to the Baltic states was sealed with a charter of partnership between the three countries and the US, signed in 1998.⁴²

The Clinton era in general focused on bringing about security and prosperity through increasing commerce, trade, and economic co-operation, and this is what he had in mind not only for the Baltic states, but for Poland as well.⁴³ The US was the biggest foreign investor in Poland.⁴⁴ It can be argued that Clinton’s worldview relied on minimizing threats of conflict by building economic ties that bound and interconnected nations. Even if Clinton decried any idea of the “sphere-of-influence concept”, he simultaneously argued that the goal of US Baltic policy was to “expand democracy, security, and the broad integration of the Baltic countries with the West”.⁴⁵ According to Clinton, it should be “obvious from all the actions the United States has taken on

38 Ibid. p. 957.

39 Clinton, William, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1994, in two books, Book I – January 1 to July 31, 1994, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, pp. 1146, 1201.

40 Ibid. p. 1189.

41 Ibid. p. 1202.

42 Clinton, William, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1998, in two books, Book I – January 1 to June 30, 1998, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, pp. 69–75.

43 Ibid.

44 Clinton, William, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1994, in two books, Book I – January 1 to July 31, 1994, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, pp. 1195, 1210.

45 Ibid. pp. 1191, 1202.

security, on political matters, on economic matters, that we are trying to do everything we can to secure the independence of the Baltics”.⁴⁶

Viewed in this sense, the US was committed to securing the entire Baltic region, but through more comprehensive means than that of traditional hard power. Furthermore, based on the number of speaking occasions and the content of the speeches, Clinton elevated Poland in importance above the Baltic states in accordance with US foreign policy priorities since the Reagan era.⁴⁷ The Baltic states were not able to fulfil the promise of becoming NATO members during the Clinton presidency but Poland, along with Hungary and the Czech Republic as the first former Warsaw Pact states, gained full membership of NATO. Thus Poland became a showcase for the spread of security and freedom.

Nevertheless, presidential rhetoric aside, it remained a fact in the Clinton era, just as it does today, that NATO membership confers heightened security through the commitment of the other member states, which is something that the US concurs with. “Peace and security are not available on the cheap. Enlargement will mean extending the most solemn security guarantee to our new allies. To be a NATO member means that all the other members make a commitment to treat an attack on one as an attack on all.”⁴⁸

In other words, the US has understood the binding nature of Article Five in the NATO charter since the outset. Even if the Baltic Sea region has never been a high-priority area in US geostrategy, the superstructure of NATO ties the US to its stability to such a large degree that, should the US fail to protect its allies in the area, the whole credibility of its foreign policy and strategy would collapse. Even if the Baltic Sea region is not of direct importance to the US, it cannot afford to stand on the sidelines.

Clinton’s aim was to ensure that Poland or any other country in the region should “never again have its fate decided for it by others. No democracy in the region should ever be consigned to a gray area or a buffer zone”.⁴⁹ While this was certainly a lofty goal and a strong rhetorical statement, the reality has been different. To some degree the rebalancing towards Asia and the Pacific region deepened during the Clinton era, but he emphasized that the US would remain involved in Europe. “But make no mistake about it, our commitment to the security and future, to the democracy and freedom of Europe remains. Our security and our prosperity depend upon it.”⁵⁰

In the Clinton era, the Baltic states were used to showcase the success of Western values and the triumph of capitalism and democracy. They were “models of free market

46 Ibid. p. 1204.

47 Ibid. pp. 1207–1213.

48 Clinton, William, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1995, in two books, Book II – July 1 to December 31, 1995, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 1896.

49 Clinton, William, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1994, in two books, Book I – January 1 to July 31, 1994, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 1210.

50 Ibid. p. 1241.

and democratic reform”.⁵¹ In a rousing speech to citizens in Riga, Clinton found the common denominator between the countries. “Vabadus! Laisves! Briviba! Freedom! No matter what the language, it is the link that unites the peoples of our nations, Estonian, Lithuanian, Latvian, and American. No matter the century, no matter the invader, you have proved that freedom never dies when it lives in the hearts of men and women. You have taught us never to give up. You have inspired the world. And America has kept faith with you.”⁵² Indeed, Baltic freedom and Central and Eastern European participation in the PfP programme were Clinton’s foreign policy successes that he used as rallying points or evidence of his presidential leadership when the time came for re-election campaigning.⁵³

Times change and policies remain in flux. In 1997 Clinton argued that Russia was on a path of deepening integration with Europe through the PfP programme and increased economic ties, and that the solidification of democratic values would mean that Russian politicians “are not going to define their greatness in terms of territorial dominance”. Even when asked directly whether this direction could change, he answered, “of course, it could happen. Is it likely? I don’t think so”.⁵⁴ Little did he know that the future would hold displays of power for territorial dominance and disregard for the principle of state sovereignty for various strategic reasons.

51 Clinton, William, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1998*, in two books, Book II – July 1 to December 31, 1998, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 1350.

52 Clinton, William, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1994*, in two books, Book I – January 1 to July 31, 1994, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 1206.

53 Clinton, William, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1995*, in two books, Book II – July 1 to December 31, 1995, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 1766.

54 Clinton, William, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1997*, in two books, Book II – July 1 to December 31, 1997, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 912.

THE BALTIC REGION AS A SIDESHOW IN THE WAR ON TERROR

During the presidency of George W. Bush (2001–2009), which was excessively characterized by fighting the global war on terror, the Baltic region actually gained some prime time as well. This was due to the enlargement of NATO in Eastern Europe. As Bush put it, “the expansion of NATO has fulfilled NATO’s promise, and that promise now leads eastward and southward, northward and onward”.⁵⁵ From early on in his presidency, Bush was adamant about NATO and its task of stabilization. “We must take on new members, securing freedom from the Baltic to the Black Sea. And NATO must forge a new relationship with Russia that is even more constructive, so that we can finally and forever abolish the divisions that are relics of a previous era.”⁵⁶ With regard to NATO, the Baltic states were all “about the invigoration of the soul of NATO. That’s what I think about when I think about the Baltics”.⁵⁷

It was initially George Bush Senior who recognized the Baltic states as independent nations, and while his son reminisced warmly about the issue, for him the best days were yet to come. As George Bush Junior put it with his characteristic eloquence, “when the people of the Baltics realize the world has changed dramatically, and it finally has changed dramatically in many ways, that Russia is not an enemy, that the United States is not an enemy of Russia, that the United States is still a friend of the Baltics. But most importantly, the Baltic people have got an opportunity now to realize their full potential”.⁵⁸

Perhaps Russia was not an enemy of the US at the time, but in the Baltic states the feeling of insecurity continued. Russia still loomed as a threatening mental image in the minds of many in the former Soviet republics. Some of the ideas expressed in Bush’s speeches hardly resonated with the nations in the Baltic region. His state visit to Russia was intended to “make it clear to the Russians and to Vladimir Putin, they have nothing to fear from NATO expansion, that a Baltic – the Baltics in NATO are positive for Russia”.⁵⁹ Needless to say, his words did little to convince audiences.

Nevertheless, the idea of Russia being a friend of the US was understandable in the framework of the war on terror, since the Russian attitude towards it (with its own operations in Chechnya, for example) empowered the US with freedom of action. This led Bush to claim, “I’ve got a good friend in the fight against terrorism in Vladimir Putin.

55 Bush, George W., *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2001*, in two books, Book I – January 20 to June 30, 2001, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 680.

56 Bush, George W., *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2002*, in two books, Book I – January 1 to June 30, 2002, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 596.

57 Bush, George W., *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2002*, in two books, Book II – July 1 to December 31, 2002, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 2087.

58 *Ibid.* p. 2083.

59 *Ibid.* p. 2084.

He understands the stakes”.⁶⁰ The common fear among the Cold War veterans in the Baltic region was that the stakes were too high for the small nations.

Nevertheless, the Bush administration pushed through the eastern expansion of NATO and was able to welcome the three Baltic states into the alliance. For Bush, this meant that the last traces of the Iron Curtain were erased. For others, perhaps the lines had simply been drawn anew – only further to the east. “We knew that arbitrary lines drawn by dictators would be erased, and those lines are now gone. No more Munichs. No more Yaltas. The long night of fear, uncertainty, and loneliness is over. You’re joining the strong and growing family of NATO. Our Alliance has made a solemn pledge of protection, and anyone who would choose Lithuania as an enemy has also made an enemy of the United States of America. In the face of aggression, the brave people of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia will never again stand alone.”⁶¹

Whatever else the new memberships meant to the collective security situation in the Baltic Sea region, there was no doubt that Article Five of the NATO charter made the three states safer than ever. Even if the rest of the states in the Baltic Sea region were left on the sidelines, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were practically depicted as exemplary nations to the rest of the world, and the fulfillment of the American Dream. Their peoples “have known cruel oppression and withstood it. You were held captive by an empire, and you outlived it. And because you have paid its cost, you know the value of human freedom... The recent history of the Baltic states truly is a miracle. You’ve gained your freedom. You have won your independence. You now join a great Alliance, and your miracle goes on”.⁶²

All the emphasis Bush placed on the Baltic states was NATO-oriented. Bush was the first US President to visit Estonia⁶³, and Lithuania even twice, but the rationale and purpose was always linked to NATO proceedings. Just like Reagan before him, whenever Bush was asked a question about one of the Baltic states, his answer always lumped the three states together into a unity, and when talking about one nation he even used examples that related to the others.⁶⁴ To all intents and purposes, one state could be used to represent the others as well. So much for detailed foreign policy concerning the region.

This naiveté was evident in Bush’s reasoning to Putin on the enlargement of NATO to the Baltic states. “I explained to him that it’s best that there be democracies on his border, free countries, because free countries don’t attack people; free countries listen to the hopes and aspirations of people. I don’t know if I’ve made any progress with him or not,

60 Ibid. p. 2084.

61 Ibid. p. 2117.

62 Ibid. p. 2118.

63 Bush, George W., Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2006, in two books, Book II – July 1 to December 31, 2006, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 2122.

64 See e.g. Bush, George W., Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2005, in two books, Book I – January 1 to June 30, 2005, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 745.

but I have made my position clear.”⁶⁵ Sometimes a reader despairs of Bush’s treatment of nuances in politics. “And my job at times is to send a message that says, ‘Look, treat your neighbors with respect. Free nations, democracies on your border are good for you, whether that be, by the way, in the Baltics or in Ukraine [–]or Georgia.”⁶⁶ Georgia was attacked in 2008, Ukraine in 2014. Coincidentally, these nations were on track for discussions about possible NATO membership. Clearly Putin did not get the message that democracies are non-threatening.

Nevertheless, at least at the rhetorical level, the Baltic states were supposed to be, for both Russia and especially the US, “three close allies and friends, such incredibly important symbols of what freedom can mean to this neighborhood and to countries in the world”.⁶⁷ Bush wanted to use them as an example of moving “beyond the past” and learning the lesson from “that painful history, that tyranny is evil and people deserve to live in a free society”. Therefore the three Baltic states were viewed as “great partners in doing what I think is our duty to spread democracy and freedom”.⁶⁸ Poland appeared in Bush’s speeches in the same manner. Poland’s name was mentioned in passing among the other relatively recent NATO members only to illustrate the progress of Western values and security, while the characteristics of each nation were not discussed in any deeper detail.

Certainly one reason for Bush’s praise was the fact that the Baltic states participated, each according to its own capabilities, in the US-led wars and occupations in both Iraq and Afghanistan.⁶⁹ During a state visit to Estonia, he called the country a “strong ally in this war on terror”.⁷⁰ Each of the countries was praised in turn.⁷¹ The Baltic states paid for the respect they received with burden-sharing troop contributions to the war effort. In return, they were assured that as “NATO allies, you will never again stand alone in defense of your freedom, and you’ll never be occupied by a foreign power”.⁷² Perhaps their most prestigious moment was hosting the NATO summit in Riga in 2006.⁷³

65 Ibid. p. 754.

66 Ibid. p. 754.

67 Ibid. p. 761.

68 Ibid. pp. 763–764.

69 Ibid. p. 770.

70 Bush, George W., *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2006*, in two books, Book II – July 1 to December 31, 2006, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, pp. 2122–2123.

71 Bush, George W., *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2007*, in two books, Book I – January 1 to June 30, 2007, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 124.

72 Bush, George W., *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2006*, in two books, Book II – July 1 to December 31, 2006, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 2129.

73 Ibid. p. 2130.

Among US presidents past and present, it would be difficult to credit Bush with the deepest political insights and visions of future developments, but he seemed to inadvertently hit the mark by claiming that “Putin recently stated that Russia’s future lies within Europe, and America agrees. He also stated that Russia’s democratic future will not be determined by outsiders, and America agrees as well. That nation will follow its own course according to its own history”.⁷⁴ Russian history has perhaps never been excessively peaceful and democracy has not been considered an ideal to strive for – unless defined in Russian terms. Then again, for Bush, “Russia is not an enemy. Russia is our friend”.⁷⁵

74 Bush, George W., *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2005*, in two books, Book I – January 1 to June 30, 2005, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 769.

75 *Ibid.* p. 785.

THE ASIAN PIVOT WITH ONE FOOT IN EUROPE

Just to illustrate the role of the Baltic region in the first years of the presidency of Barack Obama (2009–), suffice it to say that in the first three years of Obama’s term Lithuania was mentioned only twice and then in relation to its National Day,⁷⁶ Estonia was not mentioned at all, and there is only a fleeting mention in an appendix of a phone call made to congratulate the Latvian Prime Minister, Valdis Dombrovskis, on his re-election in 2010.⁷⁷ Finland was not mentioned at all and Sweden elicited short remarks from Obama after his meeting with Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt in 2009.⁷⁸ While Poland, again, was mentioned several times, its significance can be inferred from the fact that during the first three years of the Obama presidency there is one mention of the Baltic Sea, none of the Baltic states or, indeed, of the word “Baltic” itself. The Baltic region was no longer in the front line of the Cold War and since the situation seemed to be stable, US attention shifted elsewhere almost entirely.

During the past year, with the developing crisis first in Crimea and then in the eastern part of Ukraine, US rhetoric has increasingly begun to include and insert Europe into the strategic discourse once again. However, since one of the Russian objectives in the annexation of Crimea was to increase its influence over the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, the Baltic Sea was initially relegated to the role of a secondary theatre in the political rhetoric of the US and Russia alike. However, with the escalation of the crisis in Eastern Ukraine, insecurity understandably spread into the Baltic states as well and the relocation of NATO fighters, special forces and main battle tanks in the Baltic states are evidence of reignited US interest in the region.

Contemporary Baltic security is being discussed again in depth in Europe and the US alike, but the temporary nature of this discussion cannot be overemphasized. Furthermore, it is highly perspectival in character. From our perspective, living in the states surrounding the Baltic Sea, it is of vital importance. To the US, it has practically no importance as long as stability reigns in the area.

If we take the theory of flows and access to the global commons that Mika Aaltola et al. have developed in their book,⁷⁹ it is easy to extrapolate that should a crisis in the Baltic area occur, the US would be interested in keeping the supply flows open to nations belonging to NATO. The Nord Stream submarine gas pipeline as well as data cables running through Finland are of vital importance to Russia. Nevertheless, they pale in comparison to the essential need to maintain the sea routes that bring in supplies through the Gulf of Finland, not only to the metropolis of St. Petersburg but also to a

76 See e.g. Obama, Barack, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2011, in two books, Book I – January 1 to June 30, 2011, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 131.

77 Obama, Barack, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2010, in two books, Book II – July 1 to December 31, 2010, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 1973.

78 Obama, Barack, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2009, in two books, Book II, – July 1 to December 31, 2009, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 1625.

79 Aaltola, Mika, Käpylä, Juha and Vuorisalo, Valtteri (2014), The Challenge of Global Commons and Flows for US Power – The Perils of Missing the Human Domain. Farnham: Ashgate.

huge proportion of the entire Russian population. In other words, keeping the flows through the Baltic Sea area open is of paramount importance to Russia in a time of crisis. Those flows could to some degree be redirected through Murmansk or the Mediterranean and Black Sea routes, but the latter would require stability in that region and to some degree the de-escalation of the Ukrainian situation.

The idea of flows emerges from two crucial strategic documents published by the US, namely the National Security Strategy⁸⁰ and a document called Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defence.⁸¹ These documents discuss the importance of the global commons and securing the flows, and highlight the importance of the Asia-Pacific region and using naval power to secure points of entry. These points of entry refer not only to geographical areas, but to the flows as well. Therefore, in the near future just as in the past, the focus of US naval power in Northern Europe lies in the Atlantic and the North Sea, controlling the entry to the Baltic Sea, but not the Baltic Sea itself.

To illustrate the importance of the Baltic Sea in the strategy of Barack Obama's presidency, suffice it to say that in the first two years of his administration that led to the publication of the aforementioned strategic documents there is only one reference to the Baltic Sea. In this case it was a fleeting mention to the effect that with 28 member states ranging from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, NATO is the strongest alliance in world history.⁸² Perhaps this illustrates the degree of interest the US invests in the Baltic Sea region during those times when its stability is not threatened. With the growing number of airspace violations the Russians have committed in 2014, the US and other NATO allies have already relocated some combat aircraft to the Baltic states for air policing purposes.

The US will likely never truly focus on the Baltic Sea region. Yet its involvement in the area is not binary but scalar. It cannot stay either "in" or "out" of the area. The US will, out of necessity, remain involved in securing the area to some degree – but perhaps only if the states situated on the shores of the Baltic are not up to the task of securitization themselves. There are no free riders in regional security and all actors must pitch in. NATO is a powerful guarantee of regional stability, but it doesn't exclude other regional security arrangements and the US supports such policy initiatives. European and Baltic security is primarily a regional responsibility, and the US has for a long time called for European NATO members to shoulder a larger part of the burden. When the situation is stable, the US will remain at a distance, but will increase its level of participation as the securing of its national interests dictates, and is likely to do so through the NATO structure.

80 National Security Strategy (NSS) (2010), White House, Washington.

81 Department of Defense (DoD) (2012), Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense.

82 Obama, Barack (2010), Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 2009, in two books, Book I – January 20 to June 30, 2009, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 416.

More than anything else, the re-entry of the Baltic region into both US strategy and presidential rhetoric alike during 2014 and 2015 can be used to illustrate that the region has become a crisis area in which the US clearly sees a threat to its international interests and its allies in the area.

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