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Why Are the Baltic States Reckless Drivers in NATO?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The war in Ukraine has startled much of Europe, but none more so than those states closest to Russia's border. Finland has joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), eschewing decades of neutrality – a model that has commonly been referred to as “Finlandization,” after its most prominent Cold War example. Poland is approaching 4% of GDP spending on its military. And the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have declared Russia to be a state sponsor of terrorism. Lithuania has blocked Russian goods transiting into its enclave in Kaliningrad. Estonia has proposed a plan to deliver frozen Russian assets to serve Ukraine's war effort and reconstruction.

These actions by the Baltic states far exceed those undertaken by larger military and economic powers like Germany, France, the United Kingdom, or the United States. In fact, they are significantly more provocative in scope and rhetoric. Deep-seated animosity in the Baltics towards Russia explains some of this behavior. Soviet rule was unkind in the Baltic Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), with deportations to gulags leaving lasting scars.

But despite widely-held opinions that Russia is a serious threat across the populations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, any concern that these actions could provoke a violent response from Moscow seems to have gone out the window. This is largely explained by a strong sentiment that the United States can and will, in the words of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, “defend every inch of NATO territory.”¹

This blanket claim provides both political and military cover to Baltic policymakers to enact assertive and provocative policies towards their Russian neighbors. But these policies amount to “reckless driving” for the NATO alliance and the United States in particular. If Baltic state policies lead to a militarized response by Moscow, then all of the members of the NATO alliance – America included – will find itself in a difficult situation.

It is essential that the United States starts pursuing policy changes that encourage the Baltics to adjust their actions and de-escalate tensions with Russia. By adjusting Baltic integration efforts with ethnic Russians, re-orienting NATO's forward posture in the Baltics, and shifting the burden of European and Baltic defense to Europeans instead of American forces, Washington can shape the behavior of Riga, Vilnius, and Tallinn.

Introduction

NATO members in the Baltics are significantly and increasingly more assertive in their relations with Russia. The actions Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania take – particularly given their small size, relatively smaller militaries, and unusually compromised strategic position in relation to Russia – could be considered “reckless driving” for the NATO alliance. The United States must define policies that reel in the behavior of its Baltic allies, and permit for a safer and stronger eastern flank for NATO.

When Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined NATO in 2004, their accessions raised questions around how these vulnerable states would be protected, as well as how Russia would behave with the NATO alliance at its doorstep and with former Soviet Socialist Republics integrated into its Cold War nemesis. During the debate in Congress about whether to admit the Baltics to NATO, American policymakers questioned if the negative impact it could have on relations with Moscow was worth the costly admission of the states to the alliance.²

Russia, for its part, has long been deeply skeptical of NATO’s expansion to include states on its borders. Russian policymakers in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse believed that a weakened and vulnerable Russia would lose its sphere of influence and be exposed to hostile forces stationing troops in its near abroad.³ Over the last 19 years, the relationship between Moscow and the Baltic capitals of Riga, Vilnius, and Tallinn has faced serious challenges. Bad behavior on both sides has served to drive a rapidly expanding wedge in diplomatic relations, with the war in Ukraine accelerating the breakdown.

Yet, while there has been much examination of Moscow’s behavior and its views towards the independent activity of its former Soviet subjects, there’s been little examination of the assertive attitude of the relatively smaller and weaker Baltics. Why do these countries take noticeably stronger actions toward Russia than the rest of the NATO alliance, even when those actions can be difficult to square with overall NATO policy? More importantly, how

can the United States dissuade them from continuing to do so, particularly with the danger of a NATO-Russia confrontation escalating around the war in Ukraine?

What is “Reckless Driving?”

The term “reckless driving” refers to states that fall under a more powerful state’s security umbrella and leverage that protection to engage in behavior that could be provocative towards a rival, or detrimental to their ally’s security. Barry Posen of MIT cites the state of Israel as an example of a “reckless driver” ally of the United States.⁴

Israel routinely engages in settlement expansion that riles local Palestinians and neighboring Arab states, as well as forces such as Hamas. These domestic political decisions put the state of Israel in a difficult geopolitical situation that could spark conflict – but the protective umbrella of the United States abates much of that risk. This occurs despite routine outcry in the United States and the United Nations about this settlement expansion. Such “reckless driving” could draw the United States into an armed conflict that does not serve its national interests.

A Rough Track Record of Baltic Behavior

Russia as a State Sponsor of Terrorism

When Russia’s unjust invasion of Ukraine shook Europe in early 2022, European states took a few reasonable actions seeking to punish the Kremlin and weaken Russia’s military. The European Union (EU) and various European states enacted a series of economic restrictions designed to cripple Russia’s economy to punish its act of aggression.⁵ While this activity has generally treaded similar lines across Europe and North America, there have been notably stronger and earlier actions taken by the states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. These harsher actions have covered a wide variety of diplomatic and economic ranges and have at times generated quiet rebukes from the Baltics’ Western allies.

In May of 2022, Lithuania’s Seimas – the nation’s

legislative body – voted to declare the Russian Federation a state sponsor of terrorism. The move called for an international tribunal modeled after the Nuremberg Trials, and accused Russia of deliberately killing civilians, mass rape, and the forcible relocation of civilians from Ukraine to Russia.⁶ Latvia followed suit four months later in August, citing similar concerns regarding the deliberate targeting of civilians.⁷ Finally, Estonia joined its neighbors two months later, at the time making all three Baltic states the only nations to have done so.⁸

The following month, in a largely symbolic move, both NATO’s Parliamentary Assembly and the EU issued their own similar declarations – though neither of these bodies possess actionable authority related to labeling Russia as such, and the legislative bodies of most member states of both organizations, such as the United States, Germany, France, or the United Kingdom have not chosen to independently label Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism.⁹¹⁰ While there are rare exceptions such as Poland joining the Baltics in their designation, the major powers of both the EU and NATO have deliberately chosen not to take the same steps.¹¹

This leaves the Baltics in the awkward position of declaring their large, militarily superior neighbor a state sponsor of terrorism, while the nations they require to ensure their security are hesitant or unwilling to take similar steps.

Blocking Transit and Taking Money

In September of 2022, the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, along with Poland and Finland, closed entry for Russian citizens. This included Russians that had received Schengen visas – the travel visas permitting free travel between EU states – from third party countries.¹² This prompted debate among Western nations, with criticism leveled at the move citing that a “brain drain” on Russia is beneficial to the Ukrainian war effort, and that Russians fleeing the risk of mobilization or state oppression should be treated on a case-by-case basis.¹³

Meanwhile, Estonia began rolling out a proposal to seize frozen Russian assets in their country - totaling some €20 million - to be disbursed to Ukraine for reconstruction. Latvia and Lithuania, as well as

Poland and Slovakia, have made repeated calls for the hundreds of billions of euros worth of Russian assets frozen internationally to be seized for Ukraine’s war and reconstruction effort, with Estonia hoping to set a norm for the rest of the collective West to follow. Major EU and NATO powers like France, Germany, and the United States have opposed this path over concerns about it undermining international law – significant questions remain as to how due process could be carried out in the wake of such seizures, and what kind of chilling effects it could have on private property protections and international investment.¹⁴¹⁵

Perhaps one of the most extreme and dangerous examples of reckless Baltic driving during the war was Lithuania’s efforts during June and July of 2022 to strictly limit Russian goods transiting their territory into the Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia’s enclave adjacent to Lithuania.¹⁶

Ostensibly seeking to enforce EU restrictions on certain types of Russian goods, Lithuanian police and security forces began suspending rail-based transport of goods to Kaliningrad, inspecting cargo, and sending trains back. EU officials were quick to suggest this wasn’t a viable policy, while Moscow for its part threatened to use military force to secure a corridor to Kaliningrad if the restrictions remained in place. Germany applied diplomatic pressure to create a resolution to defuse a potential conflict blossoming from the trade dispute.¹⁷

Finally, after weeks of impasse, the EU offered a clarification to Lithuania on its sanction program, stating that restrictions should not exist on goods transited via rail. Lithuania suspended its inspection program, averting a potentially dangerous situation.¹⁸ These various spats and altercations deeply soured already salty relations between the Baltics and Russia. In early 2023, Moscow expelled Estonia’s ambassador, with Estonia and Latvia responding in kind.¹⁹ Russian lawmakers have also called for more stringent responses, with a bill in Russia’s Duma – its legislative body – introduced in June of 2022 to call for Russia’s recognition of Lithuanian independence to be revoked in the wake of the Kaliningrad spat.²⁰

Ukraine in NATO

A final example of “reckless driving” from the Baltics

since the war in Ukraine began is their insistence that Ukraine itself be fast-tracked to membership in NATO. Ukraine was given a verbal commitment that it could one day join NATO in 2008 but was never provided with a Membership Action Plan (MAP) pathway to do so. Indeed, many Western European states were skeptical of admitting it to the alliance out of concerns around provoking Russian aggression.²¹

In October of 2022, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined six other Eastern European states in calling for a path to membership for Ukraine in the wake of Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian provinces.²² Alongside Czechia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, the Baltics encouraged the alliance to offer Ukraine a way into the fold despite being engaged in open war with Russia and suffering immense territorial disputes. Such an act would most likely lead to direct conventional involvement of NATO forces in the war in Ukraine and escalate the conflict to a potentially nuclear threshold. For this reason, countries like the United States have since openly opposed these proposals.²³

Why do the Baltics Take These Actions?

Perceptions of Russia

Ultimately, the Baltics' actions during the war in Ukraine are rooted in two sets of strong public perceptions about both Russia as a hostile threat and the United States as a guardian of Baltic sovereignty.

In polling conducted by Kantar Emor, 71% of Estonians cited Russia as a threat to their nation. The same question showed 66% of Lithuanians holding a similar view. Fifty-three percent of Latvians are also wary of their large neighbor.²⁴ Furthermore, the SKDS Research Center polled Latvians on who the "least friendly country" to their nation was and Russia topped the list with 70.5%.²⁵

These views spring forth from a long line of historical grievances between the Baltic people and Russia, particularly during the period of Soviet rule. This historical memory and perceived lessons from the

oppression that the Kremlin applied to the SSRs lead to deep political animosity within the Baltic states. Soviet mass deportations and gulags have left lasting psychological wounds amongst the Baltic people.²⁶

This sentiment has only been exacerbated by Russia's 2008 war in Georgia, and its 2014 seizure of Crimea. Baltic policymakers and citizens were quick to condemn Russia's intervention in Georgia and cited it warning of future expected Russian aggression.²⁷ Many in the Baltics viewed Russia's earlier foray into Ukraine in 2014 as a repetition of their own history when the Soviet Union invaded their states in the 1940s.²⁸

This majority view of Russia would suggest two things about Baltic policymakers: a strong domestic desire to take a hard stance on bad Russian behavior for political reasons, and a reason to be cautious about provoking Russian aggression that is widely considered to be a threat.

The Shield of Uncle Sam

Typically, smaller and militarily weaker states like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania would be hesitant to take actions that could potentially provoke an aggressive and much stronger neighbor, regardless of strong domestic perceptions. Yet the Baltics continue to push the envelope ahead of their stronger Western allies – sometimes putting their polices at odds with NATO and the EU at large. What explains this "reckless driving?"

Political leaders in Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius have spent much of the time since their nations' accession into the NATO alliance making the case that their countries are now safer than they have been at any point in their history. Indeed, while the Baltics stand on the front line of any potential conflict with Moscow, the intense political and military reassurances that the United States and many powerful Western EU states make within the European alliance structure have served to make Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania feel that they have the freedom to act as they see fit.²⁹

The increased military presence and planning in the wake of the 2014 Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, as well as a restructuring of NATO's

security commitments in Eastern Europe, have helped reinforce this perspective. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken toured the Baltic capitals during the early stages of the war in Ukraine to reassure Baltic leaders that America would “defend every inch of NATO territory if it comes under attack,” and described the alliance as “sacrosanct.”³⁰ If anything, this has encouraged the Baltics to take hard lines on policy that otherwise would have appeared unwise or even dangerous.

Additionally, Lithuania’s Ministry of National Defence facilitated a poll in early 2022, before the invasion, that suggested a deep support for NATO and foreign military forces in the country. Eighty-nine percent of respondents had a positive view of the NATO alliance, and 88% supported a NATO military presence on their soil. Furthermore, 78% of respondents said that NATO deterred aggressive states.³¹

This breadth of support and political positioning creates strong incentives for Baltic governments to take domestically popular political actions that could potentially pull the larger NATO alliance into a direct conflict with Russia. The perception that Western European powers and Uncle Sam will come to the rescue – and indeed even act as the first line of defense if continued eastward shifts in NATO’s defense posture occur – allows for public acceptance of this “reckless driving” among the Baltic people.

Yet there are murmurs of discontent among the Baltic population. In 2017, an international Gallup opinion poll across the Baltic states still showed majorities or pluralities believing NATO provided guaranteed protection, but the numbers were significantly lower than the Lithuanian Ministry of Defence’s polling. The numbers came out to 57% of Lithuanians, 52% of Estonians, and 49% of Latvians agreeing with the proposition.³² These numbers suggest a tentative acceptance only of the idea that NATO ensures freedom of action for the Baltic states.

A larger poll from the Pew Research Center in 2020 provides further evidence that there should be some concern among Baltic policymakers. While the poll only polled one of the Baltic states, Lithuania, the larger aggregate across multiple NATO members is illustrative as to alliance cohesion. When asked if

the respondent’s country should use military force to defend a NATO ally attacked by Russia, only five of the sixteen polled countries responded with more than 50% in favor. In fact, across all sixteen nations polled, a median of 50% says that their country should not use military force to respond.³³ This suggests a potentially serious risk to the Baltic states should their “reckless driving” cause a military response from Moscow.

Yet the Pew Research poll also presents data that suggests why Baltic policymakers ignore these statistics, and also presents an opportunity to explore how the United States can reorient their views. Respondents across all 16 polled nations overwhelmingly said that the United States would use military force to defend a NATO ally under attack by Russia, with a median response of 60% holding the view. This stark contrast with the question about their own nations committing military resources suggests a rather one-sided view of NATO alliance commitments and serves to help explain the policy behavior of the Baltic states. With this implication in mind, there are a few potential ways to bring Baltic policy back in line with the alliance at large, and Washington in particular.

Policy Recommendations and Proposals

Realigning Baltic Incentives

Ultimately, the Baltic states are sovereign nations, and policymakers in Washington can only do so much to influence their behavior and choices. But the reasons for their actions explored above present some opportunities to set guardrails that could help prevent political or military escalation with Moscow.

A commonly cited pain point from Russian diplomats about the Baltics, rightly or wrongly, is the perceived treatment of ethnic Russians in the three states. While there is deep debate about whether integration is the right path, and how to go about such a process in a sensitive way, Baltic policymakers can nevertheless take care to reduce this political lever for Moscow to incite domestic support for militarized intervention. In particular, the United States, perhaps in conjunction with the EU and NATO, could directly

fund integration efforts and push for voluntary self-reporting mechanisms that provide clear accountability to help alleviate Russian discontent.³⁴

The Lithuanian Ministry of Defence's poll suggested that the forward deployment of American and NATO forces into the Baltics acts a political shield for Baltic policymakers to make reckless decisions. In the wake of Russia's seizure of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, NATO began restructuring its forward deployment posture. As a result, in 2017 it forward deployed multinational battalion-sized battlegroups, with three of them stationed in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. At a 2022 NATO summit in Madrid, the parties decided to begin increasing the battlegroup sizes from battalions to brigades.³⁵ These choices strengthen perceptions in the Baltics that NATO and the United States will subsidize the defense of their bad actions. Rolling back these alternations to NATO's forward defense posture, or conditionalizing them based on certain political actions that the Baltics could take, would serve to severely undercut a source of bad behavior coming out of Baltic policymakers.

Sharing and Shifting Burdens

Finally, a policy approach that may reap the most rewards in this situation is one of rigorous burden shifting of European defense to Europe. As was previously addressed, NATO populations strongly believe that the United States will rush to NATO allies' defense but are far more skeptical of intervening themselves. A policy of drawing down American forces in Europe would not only strengthen America's force posture in more important regions such as Southeast Asia but would reduce the perception among Baltic policymakers that the United States will safeguard them from undesirable outcomes of their provocative policies towards Russia.³⁶

The actual troop commitment that America could reduce in the Baltics themselves is limited, but similar actions across the European continent would carry a similar impact, such as the drawdown of American troops in Germany or a reversal of a sizeable commitment in Poland. These actions would force the Baltics to reconsider their perception of a guaranteed swift and overwhelming American response in the face of Russian aggression, muting their willingness to en-

gage in political actions that could result in avoidable and unnecessary conflict.

As the war in Ukraine has shown, the conventional forces and capabilities that Russia can bring to bear are limited and flawed. While Russia's armed forces present some measure of risk to the Baltics and greater Europe, their poor performance in Ukraine suggests that a united military response from the EU and NATO would be more than capable of crippling a conventional attacking force from Moscow. While support from the United States may be useful in such an effort, American policymakers should be confident that U.S. armed forces can act as a balancer of last resort instead of a frontline defender.

Indeed, this burden shifting of European defense to the Europeans may be essential for American security interests. As tensions between the United States and China over Taiwan continue to mount, a growing flashpoint may emerge in the Indo-Pacific half a world away from Eastern Europe. Any conflict between the United States and China will consume immense resources and will force American resources and equipment out of Europe to contend with China's capable armed forces.³⁷ Hard choices need to be made – it is better to make them while at peace than at war.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the diplomatic actions of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania present challenges for the EU, NATO, and the United States. While the Baltic states are sovereign nations and can conduct diplomacy as they see fit, their hardline approaches, which increase hostility and resentment with Moscow, have cascading implications for the Baltics' allies.

It is understandable that domestic support for these hardline stances is strong among the Baltic people – the long shadow of Soviet occupation, deportations, gulags, and other travesties is doubtless to inspire these policy choices. Yet nations as relatively weak as the Baltic states should be more cautious.

American policymakers have a variety of reasons to support reorienting NATO's force posture, supporting equitable and transparent integration efforts for ethnic Russians, and, most importantly, shifting burdens for

Baltic defense to Europeans. Congress and the White House can and should solve these problems – the reasons to do so beyond reorienting Baltic policy alone are numerous. Washington can alleviate fiscal deficits, address compounding equipment and manpower shortages, pivot to America’s peer competitor in Asia, and address rising public sentiment that Europe is not carrying its own share of the defense burden with these efforts.

Policy changes that encourage adjustments in Baltic behavior are increasingly important with the recent addition of Finland to NATO. A larger, better equipped country than its Baltic neighbors that also carries a harsh history of grievances with Russia, Finland possesses similarly strong inclinations to use the perceived cover provided by the United States to engage in “reckless driving.” American and NATO policymakers should take the opportunity to learn the muscle memory of reining in these risky behaviors with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania now so that they’re prepared should it become necessary with Finland.

The Baltics will oppose many of these changes, and American diplomats will be put in a difficult position – but as the risk of outright conflict between NATO and Russia continues to rise as the war in Ukraine progresses, defusing risks elsewhere remains critical. Shaking Baltic confidence in the United States’ commitment to their security is a key step towards reining in their “reckless driving.”

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