

Dan Robinson

WHITE HOUSE — The United States and the three Baltic states - Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania - say they are determined to enhance strategic cooperation and work together on trade and other issues. President Barack Obama and the three Baltic presidents met Friday at the White House.

In remarks before their meeting in the White House Cabinet Room, Obama referred to the deep ties between the United States and the Baltic republics. He noted in particular contributions by each to NATO and the international mission in Afghanistan.

"I want to thank all the presidents who are here and their nations for all that they do to promote democracy, not only in their own countries but around the world. The Baltics are among our most reliable allies in NATO and our commitment to their security is rock solid. Our soldiers sacrificed together in Afghanistan and the Baltic ports continue to help support our troops as we transition the NATO mission," said Obama.

Talks also focused on Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations, energy security, defense and cyber cooperation.

Obama and the three presidents also discussed development assistance projects focused on institution-building and strengthening democracies around the world.

"We know how far Estonia and Latvia and Lithuania have come in just the past two decades, and I know we will accomplish even more in the decades to come," he said.

The White House talks were overshadowed to some degree by Syria, as Obama considered a decision on military action to respond to the chemical weapons attack in Damascus more than a week before.

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves of Estonia said his country agrees on the need for a response. "The main issue on our agenda is global and regional security, and the question of course on everyone's mind is the situation in Syria. For Estonia, the use of chemical weapons is deplorable. The attack demands a response. Those responsible must be held accountable. Violations cannot be overlooked."

Ilves said he looked forward to discussing expanding joint efforts to promote common values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law and helping countries transition from authoritarian to democratic rule.

Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite focused on energy security and the free trade agreement between the United States and European Union, along with cyber defense.

Latvian President Andris Berzins praised support from the United States and NATO, saying the White House meeting with Obama demonstrated the long-term interest of the United States in the Baltics.

A joint statement issued by the White House said the Baltic republics have become "valued members of NATO and the European Union."

It said the United States has a profound and enduring interest in the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

And it referred to the need to sustain adequate levels of investment in NATO in "challenging" economic times, reaffirming the commitment to achieve or maintain defense spending at 2 percent of GDP.

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