

by Damon Wilson

As President Obama prepares to meet the three Baltic presidents on Friday, I am reminded of standing on the floor of the Riigikogu in the summer of 1992: as I watched Estonia's restored parliament conduct business amidst the political jostling in the run-up to the nation's first parliamentary elections since regaining independence, I appreciated as never before the power and importance of American moral and political leadership in the world.

Not even a year earlier, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania regained their independence and restored their state structures that existed during their fleeting independence from 1918-1940. This improbable outcome was more widely accepted and likely facilitated because of a principled American policy that refused to recognize the illegal occupation and annexation of the Baltic republics by the Soviet Union. This non-recognition policy, which seemed archaic if not quaint during the height of the Cold War, laid the basis for Baltic states' rapid return to Europe and frames our relations till today.

I lived in Estonia that summer as part of a research project with Duke University, during which I also had the opportunity to visit Riga, Latvia and Vilnius, Lithuania. These visits taught me the significance of principled US policy helping to make an unimaginable outcome inevitable.

This Friday, August 30, President Obama will host President Toomas Hendrik Ilves of Estonia, President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania, and President Andris Bērziņš of Latvia. Appropriately, this day is exactly the 20-year anniversary of the last Soviet soldier leaving Lithuania (withdrawals from Estonia and Latvia came later).

The visit of these leaders demonstrates the enormous success of the bipartisan US strategy of advancing a Europe whole, free, and at peace, welcoming former adversaries as allies in advancing freedom, security, and prosperity. The White House meeting also reflects the particular historic relationship the United States has with the Baltic States.

The defeat of Nazi Germany at the end of World War II brought victory and peace for the United

States, but ushered in the iron rule of the Soviet Union for the Baltic states. During the ensuing Cold War, Washington refused to recognize the illegal occupation and annexation of the three republics and, against conventional realist wisdom, maintained this principled position throughout the highs and lows of US-Soviet relations.

This moral policy reaped dividends in 1989 as a campaign of civil resistance known as the Singing Revolution began in the Baltic states and grew to the point that in August of that year, two million people linked arms from Tallinn to Vilnius peacefully protesting Soviet communism. This event marked the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union as Soviet leaders recognized the inevitability of Baltic independence which came in 1991.

Beginning with the restoration of the independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, these nations underwent one of the most dramatic transformations in modern history from captive nations to members of NATO and the European Union in just over a decade. Again visionary US policy helped paved the way: in 1998 President Clinton signed the 'Baltic Charter' with his three counterparts, pledging US support for their aspirations to join NATO (which they did in 2004).

Their story offers important lessons for diplomacy today.

First, the Baltic experience underscores that a people's desire for freedom is ultimately stronger than the imposed will of even the mightiest empire.

Second, the Baltic experience of having their fate determined by Germany and Russia in the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact impressed on American policymakers the injustice of great powers deciding the fate of other nations and continues to underscore US commitment to the idea that nations should determine their own destinies, including their own alliances.

Third, the remarkable path of the Baltic nations has taught us that those nations who benefit most from US policies to help consolidate democracy, security, and prosperity become among the most ardent contributors to extend these opportunities to other nations in transition.

This backdrop informs the discussion the four presidents will have on Friday.

Their agenda will likely include:

Middle East. Military action against Syria will be at the top of President Obama's agenda when the leaders meet. The Baltic states, while small actors in the region, understand firsthand the evil of dictatorial repression as well as the importance of moral leadership in the international community. As such, the Baltic presidents will likely offer political support for whatever course the United States decides to pursue in conjunction with its allies and partners, including acting without a United Nations Security Council resolution. The Baltic states are also model partners in sharing the lessons of their transitions with other nations around the world and make modest but valuable contributions to European Union efforts to assist states in the region including Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.

NATO. NATO, representing the transatlantic security link, is the bedrock of the Baltic states' security and defense policy. As such, despite the distance, these small nations have committed forces and resources to NATO's mission in Afghanistan, where Lithuania led a Provincial Reconstruction Team and Baltic ports provide a lifeline for transiting supplies across Russia to American forces. The Baltic leaders are likely to welcome US efforts to help ensure that NATO's commitment to their defense (Article 5 of the Washington Treaty commits each ally to assist the other in the event of an attack) is credible through more rigorous contingency planning and military exercises on the territories.

While the Baltic leaders recognize the reality of defense cutbacks in the United States, they will likely ask for continued US engagement in NATO exercises in their region, as well as long-term US participation in NATO's mission to provide air policing in their skies. President Obama will want to see his counterparts commit to restore their own investment in defense to the NATO standard of 2 percent of GDP, which only Estonia meets today.

Europe's East. While Russia unfortunately is moving further away from European norms and values under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, the Baltic leaders have done their part to pursue normal relations with their big neighbor while advancing policies within NATO and the European Union that strengthen ties with other post-Soviet states. The Baltic presidents are likely to underscore the strategic importance of US support for struggling nations in Europe's East, as well as specifically for the EU's Eastern Partnership, an initiative designed to strengthen links between the EU with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The

Lithuanians, who hold the rotating EU presidency, will host an Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius this November which is designed to help ensure that other European nations of the former Soviet Union have the same opportunity as the Baltic states to join the European mainstream economically and politically if they pursue the necessary reforms.

Each of the Baltics has provided leadership in reaching out to East: Estonia has led efforts to assist Georgia in implementing far-reaching reforms and assisted Georgia in defending against cyber attacks; Latvia partners with the United States to support justice sector reform in Moldova; and Lithuania hosts the European Humanities University, a university in exile training future leaders of Belarus. Similarly, the Baltic leaders are among the most active in supporting the aspirations of Georgia and Balkan states to join the NATO alliance. At the same, President Obama may gain support for standing firm in the face of objectionable Russian policies, whether protecting Bashar al-Assad or promoting instability in its neighbors.

Economic Growth and Security. Against a backdrop of economic stagnation and the Eurozone crisis, the Baltic states represent a healthy exception – a bright spot for growth, innovation, and competitiveness in Europe. They boast among the most open economies in Europe. Hit staggeringly hard at the start of the economic crisis, Latvia in particular undertook significant reforms to recover and is now on the path to join the OECD and the Eurozone. (Estonia adopted the Euro in 2011 and has been among the most resilient economies during the crisis, and Lithuania aims to adopt the Euro in 2015.) These nations now are among the most innovative, entrepreneurial, and technologically advanced economies in Europe.

As such, they are leaders on issues such as cyber security and energy security; Estonia hosts the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence and Lithuania hosts the NATO Energy Security Center of Excellence. These leaders strongly back US support to diversify Europe's energy supplies. They also endorse a comprehensive and ambitious Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the European Union and the United States as their open economies stand to benefit, and are likely to encourage President Obama's personal leadership as these difficult negotiations intensify.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are each distinct nations with particular strengths, national characters, and attributes. Yet they recognize that they are stronger and their reach is greater when they work together in pursuit of common goals. This explains why President Obama is meeting them as a group, and why they are increasingly cooperating with their Nordic counterparts.

In fact, after meeting the three Baltic presidents on August 30, President Obama will meet the five Nordic prime ministers in Stockholm, Sweden on September 4. These meetings reflect the concerted US effort to engage the Nordic-Baltic nations as coherent regional grouping of like-minded states (known as E-PINE or the Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe in State Department jargon). When acting together, these nations carry as much weight as any one European power. These nations, for example, are ideal partners for a new US-Nordic-Baltic initiative on cyber security and Internet freedom.

What unites each of these three Baltic presidents is their profound, firsthand understanding of the importance of principled and strong US leadership and engagement in Europe and the broader world today in support of the common values and interests we share with our NATO allies. These once captive nations – today part of a Europe whole, free, and at peace – are now among America's closest allies, ready to stand by our side in a crisis as we are committed to defend their security. They are also among the most effective advocates for other peoples struggling to determine their own futures and to join the community of democracies. Each in their own way demonstrates that leadership and impact does not necessarily depend on size.

Original article on the Atlantic Council [webpage](#) .