The Roots and Resilience of Pro-Americanism in the Baltics

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To cite this article: Andris Banka (2022) The Roots and Resilience of Pro-Americanism in the Baltics, The Washington Quarterly, 45:2, 169-183, DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2022.2090757

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2090757

Published online: 14 Jul 2022.

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The US exit from Afghanistan, together with other geopolitical tremors, prompted commentary suggesting that Washington’s credibility had been badly shredded such that its allies no longer view it as a trustworthy partner. Yet despite such dire assessments, the three Baltic states remain confident that in their hour of need, the US would marshal its armed forces and come to their aid. While for many the phrase “indispensable nation” provokes scorn and eye-rolling, a majority of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians view the US precisely in that light. How do we account for the fact that this part of Europe has proven to have such fertile and resilient soil for pro-American sentiment? What explains the remarkable staying power of this phenomenon?

As the US and Baltic republics mark 100 years of established diplomatic relations in the summer of 2022, this is an opportune time to provide a genealogy of pro-Americanism in the Baltics, disentangle the reasons behind its longevity, and assess the likelihood of its endurance in the future. The core thread that runs through this essay argues that, stripped to its fundamentals, Baltic Atlanticism flows from positive historical encounters with Washington, as well as the conviction among contemporary Baltic officials that, today, only the United States possesses an ample military shield and the willingness to use it in defense of small states in a volatile neighborhood.

As this article takes stock of the Baltic states’ pro-Americanism, one important methodological question is in order, namely: is it possible to lump all three Baltic republics together given their cultural and linguistic differences? While clearly

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The Washington Quarterly • 45:2 pp. 169–183
https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2090757
they have certain distinctive traits, when it comes to matters of national security, and specifically the US role in the region, the Baltics exhibit remarkably similar views. This has been true irrespective of the composition of the ruling coalition or political leadership. As elaborated by former Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid: “Our [Baltic] analysis of the security in the region is exactly the same.”\(^1\) Echoing this point, Latvia’s Foreign Minister has emphasized that in foreign affairs the Baltics always seek to work jointly, which allows them to present a stronger united front.\(^2\) While one can always find some national nuances or differences in emphasis, on the whole, US-Baltic relations can be assessed from a common Baltic perspective.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. The first section scrutinizes the historical roots of pro-American sentiment in the Baltics. As such, it argues that the initial seeds of this phenomenon are to be found in Washington’s non-recognition stance regarding the occupation of the Baltic states. The article then documents various instances of the US willingness and ability to shape NATO policies in a direction favorable to the Baltic republics, as well as episodes of bilateral US military assistance to the Baltics during the region’s most critical inflection points. The presented evidence lays bare that Washington, in contrast to European powers, has taken its military protector role seriously. Subsequently, the essay briefly touches upon the “Trump bump” in US-Baltic relations and the extent to which that affected the established security link, and its conclusion sketches out the future outlook of pro-American orientation in the Baltics. It argues that while major European actors, jolted by Vladimir Putin’s brutal aggression against Ukraine, have been forced to become more serious geopolitical players, they are still not perceived as credible alternatives to Washington. This leads to the conclusion that the strategic embrace of the United States in the Baltics is unlikely to dissipate any time soon.

The 1940 Welles Declaration planted the seeds of pro-American sentiment in the Baltics

US-Baltic relations are commonly scrutinized through the lens of NATO membership, and for good reason. The 2004 Baltic inauguration into the alliance was a major geopolitical event, the consequences of which scholars continue to hotly contest today. In light of this bold undertaking, the three Baltic states feel an enormous debt of gratitude to Washington. That being said, the roots of Baltic affection for the United States stretch back far further than 2004. The Welles
Declaration—a non-recognition policy adopted by the US government in 1940 regarding the forcible incorporation of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia into the Soviet Union—planted the initial seeds of pro-American sentiment among the Baltic peoples.

Following the Soviet occupation of the Baltic territory in 1940, the West grappled with how to respond. France, giving in to pressure exerted by Moscow, agreed to close down all functioning Baltic diplomatic posts in the country. Sweden, a close neighbor, already operating from the standpoint that the Baltics “no longer existed and would never exist again,” moved to legally recognize the Soviet takeover. In stark contrast, the US government assumed a principled position: a policy of non-recognition that would be reaffirmed by subsequent US administrations for more than five decades. This stance, first articulated by acting US Secretary of State Sumner Welles, formed an important connective layer between the two sides and seared into Baltic collective memory the notion that the US can be relied upon to keep its word.

America’s stance of non-recognition created an unparalleled diplomatic situation. The national flags of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, banned at home, flew uninterrupted in the main hall of the US State Department. Official US government maps were accompanied by the following explanatory note: “The United States Government has not recognized the incorporation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into the Soviet Union.”

Furthermore, the US side categorically refused to transfer Baltic financial assets into Soviet hands. It was largely due to the Baltic’s protected gold reserves in the Federal Reserve Bank of New York that their consulates could remain open and active in Washington’s political scene. According to Nicholas Burns, a veteran US diplomat, there is no other precedent in modern diplomatic history for the modality in which Baltic ambassadors functioned in Washington. They arrived to work “every day for more than five decades to represent governments that had ceased to exist at the start of World War II,” Burns recalled.

One of the Baltic diplomatic envoys at the time admitted that sometimes they were accused of representing nobody. Yet, in his own telling, these diplomatic posts remained powerful symbols of resistance, and predictably, this non-recognition policy stance was a deeply irritating stone in the Soviet shoe. Its ambassador to the US protested and raised the matter on more than twenty occasions, all to no avail.

Admittedly, throughout the years there were some instances of wavering within certain quarters of the US policy-making apparatus. In 1966, for example, a US Department of State policy memorandum, while ruling out recognition of the Soviet conquest, did lay out options for the gradual phasing-out of Baltic diplomatic accreditation in the US. In the mid-1970s, Henry Kissinger, as part of a wider détente effort with the Soviet Union, nuded President Gerald
Ford to reverse course and drop the Baltics’ diplomatic representation.\textsuperscript{11} This, however, did not come to pass. While at times the US non-recognition policy seemed to be wavering, it was never officially repealed.

Some critics may charge that the US position was just a diplomatic nicety, a policy that was emotionally satisfying to the Balts but devoid of any practical significance. This is not the case. The adopted US stance left an enduring mark on the struggle for Baltic independence. In the early 1990s, it played an instrumental role in advancing legal claims regarding the continuity of statehood of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. American resolve throughout the long decades of the Cold War won the US profound admiration in the eyes of Baltic peoples. It has become a tradition for senior Baltic diplomats to gather annually and lay flowers at the gravesite of Sumner Welles, the initiator of the declaration. Indeed, the spirit of that policy is still very much alive today; in July 2020, the US government invoked the Welles Declaration as a model to follow in the context of Russia’s forcible land takeovers in Ukraine and Georgia.\textsuperscript{12}

The great reservoir of trust that Washington enjoys today stems at least in part from its principled stance of non-recognition. As elaborated by one Lithuanian official: “For many Lithuanians what the Welles declaration signifies is how deep and how enduring the partnership between the US and Baltic states is. It is proof that this partnership is not coincidental … this is why there is this affection for America.”\textsuperscript{13} Echoing this point, the Latvian Minister of Defense has asserted that his country today does not doubt US security commitments because of the historic record of the US government’s attitudes towards the region. As he succinctly put it: “Americans never betrayed us.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Invited Superpower}

A critique that resurfaces with regularity depicts NATO’s eastward enlargement primarily as a function of US expansion designs. The core of that argument can be roughly summarized as follows: the United States actively shopped around and pulled Eastern Europe into its sphere of influence, the ultimate goal being the expansion of its reach right up to Russia’s doorstep.\textsuperscript{15} Recently, Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, crudely described it as a “purely geopolitical project aimed at taking over the territories orphaned by the collapse of the Warsaw Treaty Organisation and the Soviet Union.”\textsuperscript{16}

However, in the context of the Baltic states, this narrative is deeply ahistorical. It is critical to recognize that the US military footprint in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania has always been welcomed and appreciated by the local sovereign authority. It was not Washington’s dictate that dragged these nations into NATO. On the contrary, their road to this military alliance was organic, stemming from loud
and persistent demands by the Baltic peoples themselves. As scholar Hal Brands put it, “the states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union were desperate to join America’s sphere of influence, because they were desperate to leave Moscow’s.”

As elaborated by Lithuania’s minister of defense, the country considers itself to be “a natural location for an enduring US military presence.” Indeed, over the years, Baltic lawmakers have continued to plead for a permanent US troop involvement in their territories. Today, as mythology continues to grow around NATO’s enlargement process, it is worth keeping in perspective that the US presence in the Baltics has always been consensual in nature. To slightly paraphrase Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad, in this region, the US is an invited superpower.

That clarified, a non-sanitized account of US-Baltic relations must equally account for Washington’s darker underbelly. While Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania plainly prefer the US-led international order, there is no denying that a close association with the US can have its own pernicious effects. Strategically hitched to Washington, junior treaty allies can end up becoming complicit in their patron’s worst foreign policy missteps. It is useful to recall that all three Baltic republics, despite the absence of a UN authorization, swiftly threw their support behind the US invasion of Iraq.

Even more troubling, during the height of the so-called war on terror, upon Washington’s request, Lithuanian soil played host to a CIA black site, where terrorism suspects underwent gruesome torture methods. Known as the “Site Violet,” this massive steel barn just outside Vilnius at one point housed high-ranking Al-Qaeda members including Abu Zubaydah and 9-11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. In the case of Zubaydah, the Lithuanian government eventually ended up compensating him with €100,000 for subjecting him to torture. Such a willingness to risk one’s own reputation springs from what the Baltics perceive as an existential need to maintain close bilateral relations with the lead NATO power. In other words, Baltic lawmakers are well aware that sheltering under the US protective umbrella is not entirely free, and is at times even fraught with certain contradictions. But as small nations with little margin for error in international affairs, they have chosen to stick with their great power protector at all costs.

The Paradox of US Power

If one were to administer a truth serum to Baltic policy elites, they would likely admit that at times they are not fully on board with America’s overly militaristic
approach to solving international problems, much as their other European peers would. By the same token, however, they have a deep-seated belief that US power is what could save them in their own darkest hour. In his work, scholar Robert Kagan puts a finger on this phenomenon by contending that allies who have welcomed US power have done so not because of some kind of admiration for Washington, but simply due to calculations of self-interest: “They need it [US power] or at least they feel they may need it in the future.” This certainly rings true in the case of the Baltics, who perceive the US as the sole geopolitical counterweight to Russia.

Unlike the Germans or the French, whose instinctive reaction in a crisis traditionally has been to reach out to Moscow and seek accommodation, the US government has demonstrated the ability to organize military support swiftly and unilaterally. It is this specific blend of qualities, most notably the capacity to go it alone if necessary, that makes it a distinctly different ally. When in 2014 Russia forcibly redrew Ukraine’s borders, it was the United States, not NATO, that reacted first in the Baltics. Per the account of Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the former Estonian President, the US stepped up to the plate in a rapid fashion while other NATO countries were “far, far slower” in their response time. As proof of this, he points out that after Russia’s invasion of Crimea, he had reached out to Washington for greater military assistance and “90 hours later we had [US] planes on our military airfield.” For this reason, high-ranking Baltic officials have not shied away from underscoring that “if we have to choose to stand with Americans in the crises or to stand with somebody else, then this choice is definitely on the American side.”

Indeed, despite geographical proximity and cultural commonality, the Baltics have little faith in their European partners. In 2003, when distinguished European philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida published a manifesto that denounced the US invasion of Iraq and called for Europe to “throw its weight on the scales to counterbalance the hegemonic unilateralism of the United States,” then-President of Estonia Toomas Ilves hit back, penning an op-ed in response which critiqued Europe’s inability to allocate adequate resources on defense and equally rejected the notion that Europe should pull away from the US strategically. Nearly two decades later, not much has changed. There is an acute recognition among the Baltics that European military ambitions without adequate resources are a mere mirage. Living with the memory of a long Russian occupation, the Baltics never really bought into Western European professions of progress in promoting perpetual peace or transformation through trade. For this reason, they
have scrupulously avoided even entertaining the possibility of a strategic decoupling from Washington.

In sum, the Baltics are content with the bargain they have struck. They are aware that the application of US power can at times be the source of pain and destruction somewhere around the world. Still, when it comes to their own neighborhood, they assume that it is the US flag that keeps Russia at bay. While Baltic lawmakers appreciate other NATO governments’ assistance and military presence on their territory, they also assign different value to the United States. As one US embassy cable out of Tallinn put it: “Estonians are happy to be in NATO, but many believe only the US can keep them free.”29 After conducting a listening tour in the region, a prominent US scholar shared a similar view of Baltic policy elites: “Everybody understands the difference between the Americans and any other NATO ally. Americans are the ones that have the weight. They are the ones that, in the words of one Lithuanian official, and he meant this as a compliment, are a little crazy, in that they actually might fight.”30 This quote neatly captures why these countries have placed their strategic bets on Washington.

**Misplaced Faith?**

While the Baltic countries have staked their security on Washington, a host of critics in the US have advanced the opposite argument, namely that it is not at all prudent to count on the backing of the United States. The US, the argument goes, is increasingly drawn toward the Indo-Pacific, and its foundational promise of collective defense means little to nothing. When the US withdrew from northeast Syria in 2019 during the Trump administration, well-known scholars declared that US credibility had suffered a significant blow. According to Richard Haass, the move had sent the message worldwide that Washington is “no longer reliable” and that “you are on your own.”31 The same charges of tarnished credibility followed the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. An editorial in The Financial Times, for instance, contended that US force extrication will surely have cascading effects and that “the Baltic states may now question how the US would respond to a triggering of article 5 in the event of a Russian attack.”32

Along similar lines, Ted Galen Carpenter asserts that the US pledge to undertake grave risks on behalf of “trivial US allies” like the Baltics is simply not credible.33 More recently, during the Russian military build-up around Ukraine in early February 2022, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman intoned that Americans are never going to go to war to protect countries such as Lithuania “when the crunch time comes.”34 Perhaps then, it is the Baltic lawmakers that have lulled themselves into a false sense of security in naively assuming that the
US will honor its security covenants when push comes to shove? While no one has a crystal ball that can foresee precisely how the United States would react to an Article 5 situation, from the Baltic vantage point, their faith in the US government stems from numerous positive encounters with Washington during the region’s defining inflection points. And in each instance, the US actually delivered on its promises.

One such inflection point occurred during the mid-1990s, when the Clinton administration masterfully negotiated an orderly Russian-Baltic divorce. At the time, the Baltic states still hosted thousands of former Red Army officers, together with a substantial number of Soviet-era military objects. The Russian side insisted on holding on to these installations for ten more years. Using carrots—namely, money to finance housing units in Russia for the returning troops—Clinton managed to persuade his counterpart Yeltsin to withdraw the bulk of Russia’s forces by 1994.35

Initially cautious, Washington subsequently emerged as the principal supporter of Baltic aspirations to join NATO. At the time, it was the European capitals that were reluctant to let Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into the military bloc. Newly declassified German government documents attest to just how clearly Berlin opposed NATO enlargement to the east. In one such instance, German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher is recorded as stating that while these countries clearly had the right to join NATO, Germany should seek ways to ensure “that they don’t exercise this right.”36 It was largely due to US backing that NATO opened its door to the Baltic Republics in 2004.37 In this context, political analysts Ronald Asmus and Alexandr Vondra made an excellent point when they noted that Eastern Europe’s positive historical experience with the United States “stands in sharp contrast… to their disappointing historical experiences with other leading Western powers.”38

Even after the Baltic republics’ accession to NATO, the United States has continued to play the role of primary strategic partner. It is worth remembering that the alliance had no contingency plans in place to defend the Baltics for about five years following their entrance into NATO, as such plans were deemed to be too provocative toward Russia.39 Following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Baltic representatives began to actively call upon the allied governments to design regional military backup plans. It was only repeated US insistence and pressure that eventually overcame initial French and German objections. In late 2009, behind closed doors, NATO drafted and approved a formal defense plan for the Baltic states.
In early 2022, as Russian troops encircled Ukraine, the United States once again acted as a first responder. Two days before the eventual Russian invasion, US President Joe Biden announced a surge of US military assets—F-35 fighter jets and Apache helicopters—into the three Baltic states. At the time, Germany was preoccupied with compiling a list of all the things it would not do for Ukraine, even going so far as to block Estonian attempts to transfer weapons of German origin to Kyiv. This episode caused a rare public spat in the usually friendly German-Baltic relationship, as Latvia’s defense minister called out Berlin in no uncertain terms: “They’ve been living in peace for years. They think about gas, exports and cooperation. For us border countries, it’s different. For us it’s existential. Our past doesn’t give much chance of just trusting [Russia]. It would be death for us.” Another seasoned Baltic diplomat voiced similar concerns by declaring that she was not sure what the German government would do if one of the Baltic nations came under direct attack.

Eventually, Germany did engineer a major policy course correction: the nullification of Nord Stream 2, a considerable increase of its defense budget, and arming Ukraine. Still, from the Baltic standpoint, European powers are far from capable of assuming ownership of regional security matters. Speaking candidly at an international conference after Russia’s invasion, Latvia’s defense minister drew a clear line of distinction between Washington and Berlin: “There are certain fundamental differences between the United States and Germany. When I was waking up in the morning of February 24 at 4 AM when the war started, 4 hours later American planes with American soldiers were landing in my country just to ensure there is a larger presence … [W]hen I was approaching Berlin before with similar proposals, the answer was we cannot do this because we do not have such a tradition. Today the trust in Germany is coming very close to 0.”

What is more, the Baltic states are cognizant that Europe's fecklessness cannot simply be reduced to a problem of the political elite's hesitancy. Wider segments of German society, for example, have for years dismissed the notion that military assistance should be provided to defend treaty allies. In 2017 a mere 40 percent of the German public agreed that their country should intervene on behalf of their allies in a conflict with Russia. In contrast, a majority (59 percent) of Americans at the time thought that Washington should back the Baltics in case of military aggression by Russia. This difference in attitude on the part of both societal and political elites has laid bare why pro-American sentiment is so deeply entrenched in this part of Europe. The United States simply has a greater resolve when it comes to making good on its collective defense promises. In light of this, it is difficult to argue that the Baltic states' favorable attitudes toward the US
are rooted in some kind of naïveté or delusion. Rather, they stem from Washington’s policy record vis-à-vis the Baltics.

The Trump Test

The one event that seemingly held the potential to derail the US-Baltic partnership was the presidency of Donald Trump. His constant verbal abuse of US allies clearly rubbed NATO governments the wrong way, and the Baltics were no exception. As a presidential candidate, he openly questioned whether he would come to the defense of the Baltic countries in a hypothetical conflict with Russia.48 Once an occupant of the White House, Trump proceeded to mix up the Baltics with the Balkans, in the process blaming the former for the war in Yugoslavia.49 Yet despite his personal tirades and lack of basic knowledge about these countries and regions, the US role in the regional security architecture during his tenure stayed intact and, by some measures, even grew.

Tangible manifestations of this staying power included the increased frequency of US-led military exercises in the Baltics, continuous rotational force presence, and allocation of finances for Baltic deterrence purposes.50 When challenged publicly about Trump’s view of alliances, an often deployed tactic among Baltic officials was to draw a line of distinction between his rhetoric and the totality of his administration’s policies on the ground. In a 2019 interview, the Lithuanian foreign minister proposed: “Let’s judge by the developments on the ground—what is visible, what is tangible…let’s not judge just by personalities or tweets.”51 Admittedly, during the Trump era there was a great deal of daylight between White House statements and the actions of the US Congress and military vis-à-vis the Baltics.

This resilience should not obscure the fact that Trump’s four-year tenure was an unnerving moment in the history of US-Baltic relations. A 2017 poll in Lithuania, for instance, revealed that two-thirds of Lithuanians had no confidence in Trump’s individual leadership qualities.52 Nevertheless, a 2020 Pew research poll found that 70 percent of Lithuanians still held a favorable view of the United States, thus suggesting a willingness to distinguish between the occupant of the White House and the country at large.53 One can only speculate now what Trump’s second term in office would have meant for transatlantic ties. According to some accounts, he envisioned the withdrawal of the United States from NATO during his second go-
around.\textsuperscript{54} In such a scenario, it is conceivable that pro-Americanism in the Baltics might have eventually cracked under the considerable weight of Trump’s “America First” policy views. A mere four years of his presidency, however, did not manage to burn up the goodwill that the US government had previously accrued.

**Peering Into the Future**

At the sidelines of the 2002 Prague NATO summit, a renowned historian openly questioned whether the newly invited East European member states, “so proud of their pro-American orientation,” would still remain Atlanticist in the next ten years.\textsuperscript{55} Curiously, American officials themselves have at times pondered whether this part of Europe might eventually drift away from Washington’s orbit and instead come to embrace a different set of strategic partnerships. A review of diplomatic cables out of the US embassies in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius speak to the US diplomats’ concerns that this staunch pro-Americanism may one day wear off. Reporting back to Washington in 2007, the US Ambassador to Latvia cautioned: “Today’s Latvian youth are more connected with Europe, especially through culture and education, than their predecessors. The significance of the US policy of non-recognition of the Soviet occupation diminishes over time.”\textsuperscript{56} Likewise, US representatives in Estonia had telegraphed that the affinity for the US might fade away among the rising generation of Estonians.\textsuperscript{57}

It would, of course, be a fallacy to assume that pro-Americanism in this region is somehow inevitable and permanent. Yet the prognosis of its likely erosion appears to be equally misplaced. As documented here, favorable Baltic attitudes toward the US have proven to be resilient and are unlikely to unravel any time soon. In fields such as education, business, and culture, deeply-rooted and institutionalized relationships between the Baltic states and America abide. Meanwhile, the US-Baltic security link forms the backbone of this relationship, effectively ensuring that pro-Americanism remains deeply wired into these societies.

In conclusion, is worth noting that after Russia’s 2022 full-scale attack against Ukraine, lead European powers have come together in previously unseen ways to push against the Kremlin’s revisionism. The long-standing pillars of German foreign policy concerning Moscow, for example, appear to have crumbled. However, while Berlin managed to surprise many with a pledge to inject an additional €100 billion into the Bundeswehr armed forces, it subsequently has dithered on its strategic role and slow-walked military assistance to Ukraine. As put by one leading Germany analyst, “once again Germany is not leading, it is being dragged.”\textsuperscript{58} From the Baltic vantage point, European governments
still carry too many asterisks related to both their resolve and capacity. The US, on the other hand, remains the foremost military power with a proven track record. As long as the United States continues to assume the role of lead military protector in the region, the Baltic states, politicians and people alike, will continue to look upon Washington in a highly favorable light.

Notes


31. Richard Haass, “U.S. abandoning Kurdish allies shows Trump admin. can’t be relied on,” MSNBC, October 8, 2019,
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