



Neither reckless nor free-riders: auditing the Baltics as US treaty allies

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Abstract

Is it strategically wise for the USA to stretch its protective umbrella over small nations in Eastern Europe? Prominent critics have faulted US allies for acting recklessly and free-riding on US security guarantees. The evidence presented vis-à-vis the Baltic States, however, challenges these assumptions. This study paints a picture of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as loyalty-obsessed small states that diligently seek to meet their patron's behavioural expectations. By word and deed, they back US strategic goals. As such, they have taken on heavy war burdens in US-led campaigns and sided with Washington in its geopolitical struggle against China. What is more, they bring to the table distinctive capabilities in cyber and intelligence. In sum, this paper suggests that the Baltic States have continuously reimbursed the USA for its defence-cover services.

Keywords US alliances · The Baltics · Small-states · Reckless driving · Free-riding

Introduction

Is it strategically wise for the USA to stretch its protective umbrella over small nations in Eastern Europe? What are the costs, risks, and benefits of such an undertaking? An ample body of scholarship has explored Washington's security ties with major European powers, yet few attempts have been made to audit its smaller security partners. This article fills this void. The presented analysis turns away from the "traditional suspects" and instead brings into focus US security relations with states located on NATO's eastern flank. The study aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the behaviour displayed by US allies and the benefits that they provide to the global hegemon. The three Baltic republics, sparsely populated and in

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close proximity of a rival great power, lend us an ideal opportunity to test competing scholarly claims regarding the maintenance of alliances.

Sceptics have charged that small states such as the Baltics are largely disconnected from vital US interests. According to Stephen Walt, a leading realist thinker, these countries should rather be viewed as “one-sided protectorates” that only add to the US government’s defence expenditures.¹ Barry Posen concurs by insisting that “former subjects of the Soviet empire”, now full-fledged NATO members, are security consumers that have contributed “nothing” to US national security.² Even those with generally supportive views of US alliances have tended to justify them on the basis of vaguely phrased benefits or simply “by invoking tradition”.³ As Mira Rapp-Hooper points out, analysts have struggled to specify why superpowers like the USA have alliance networks and what exactly have they accomplished.⁴ Taking this into account, the presented study aims to tease out what kind of treaty allies the three Baltic republics have been; to what extent have they amplified US power position or, on the contrary, jeopardized its strategic interests.

As a theoretical departure point, the article takes on Barry Posen’s conceptualization of two key problems associated with US alliances: “reckless driving” and “free or cheap riding”.⁵ To begin with, Posen laments that allied governments often pursue strategic agenda that is directly at odds with US national interests. Allies fail to show up when their military protector asks them to or are unwilling to side with Washington on issues of great importance. Such reckless behaviour can manifest itself both domestically and on the international scene. What is more, allied governments, in Posen’s telling, have become a financial drag on the USA. He depicts them as free-loaders that for decades have failed to contribute their fair share in monetary terms. Succinctly stated, for Posen, the current gain from US globe-spanning alliances is not commensurate with the costs and risks that they entail.

Contrary to claims of such critics, this article posits that the Baltic states belong neither to the “reckless driver” nor “free or cheap rider” conceptual basket. Stated differently, from the US vantage point, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are not problematic allies. If anything, they are among Washington’s most loyal NATO partners. In their strategic outlook, they constantly look over the shoulder to their security patron, carefully seeking to align policies to its stated objectives. As reputational concerns weigh heavily in the minds of Baltic political elites, they, at all costs, strive to avoid acting in a fashion that would infringe on vital US security interests. To get a better handle of such behaviour, the article draws upon insights developed by small-state status-seeking literature. Scholars working from this perspective have sought to disentangle the puzzle of why some allies tend to display innate loyalty towards the USA and offer it seemingly unconditional support.

¹ Walt (2018), 81.

² Barry R. Posen, ‘Trump Aside, What’s the U.S. Role in NATO?’, *New York Times*, 10 March 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/10/opinion/trump-aside-whats-the-us-role-in-nato.html>

³ Brands and Feaver (2017), 16.

⁴ Rapp-Hooper (2020).

⁵ Posen (2014).



The presented analysis, by utilizing the concept of status, first demonstrates how and why the Baltic States have been such staunch supporters of various US military initiatives. The hegemon, it is being argued here, did not coerce or “twist the arms” of minor powers. Quite the reverse. Sending young men and women into conflict zones were voluntary acts, guided by the notion that such allied activism will generate a greater appreciation for the Baltic States within Washington’s halls of power. This acquired positive social capital, Baltic officials reasoned, could then be used in the context of their own security needs. While the presented thesis draws upon status-seeking literature, it equally turns the research arrow in a slightly different direction. Namely, it suggests that status-related motivations can equally be found, and play an instrumental role, at the domestic policy level. The article details how, in their quest to maximize standing in the eyes of the USA, the Baltic states refused China’s telecommunications equipment company Huawei from operating in their territories. This case study helps to further enrich theoretical understanding regarding the scope and application of status-seeking.

Furthermore, the presented work challenges the notion of Baltic countries as “free or cheap riders”. Over the course of the past few years, they have been bearing an equitable share of NATO’s financial burden. Perhaps even more importantly, despite their diminutive size, they have developed valuable niche capabilities and expertise regarding US geostrategic rival Russia. As Hal Brands and Peter Feaver observe in their work on US alliances: “The dangers and risks inherent in US alliances are mostly obvious and intuitive, whereas the benefits are often subtler, more indirect, or require digging deeper”.⁶ The article, by performing such analytical “digging”, excavates numerous benefits that have generally gone unnoticed in the literature. In sum, the central thread that runs through this paper suggests that the Baltic states, in order to maintain robust security ties with their key ally, have continuously reimbursed the USA for its defence-cover services.

The remaining of the article proceeds as follows. The first section briefly surveys the academic literature on security alliances. A subsequent section then delves deeper into particular criticisms and complaints that scholars have levelled against the Baltic states as US allies. Following that, the article lays out a conceptual framework for how to assess the performance and value of allies. Here, the research absorbs literature regarding small-state status-seeking. On the empirical front, status-seeking motivations are then documented via Baltic contributions to US military campaigns and their decision to block Chinese company Huawei. Next, the article proceeds to make the case that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have generated more security-related benefits for the USA than meets the eye. The article concludes with a summary of the key empirical findings and a short discussion of how they stand up to the debates regarding alliances.

⁶ Brands and Feaver (2017), 30.



Quarrelling about the value of alliances

The burdens and benefits associated with US alliances are a recurring theme both in the academic literature and within policymaking circles. Some scholars have treated alliance networks as the single most important comparative asset that Washington holds over its rivals, while others view them as an unnecessary drain on the American power. Oftentimes, discussions about alliances have been tied into broader themes regarding the US role in the world and the merits of embracing engagement or retrenchment. In their work, alliance advocates point towards a multitude of benefits that the USA extracts from its overseas security commitments.⁷ To begin with, institutionalized alliance networks, supporters claim, provide the USA with critical access to foreign air and naval bases, enable valuable intelligence sharing, and set the foundation for deterring adversaries. For this reason, global alliances have been described as a “force multiplier”.⁸ The benefits further extend into the trade and economic sphere. Scholars have documented the ways in which US officials leverage security guarantees to attain more favourable terms in bilateral trade arrangements.⁹ Moreover, formal allies regularly help to shoulder the burden of war.¹⁰ By doing so, they equally bestow legitimacy for the exercise of US military power.

Others, however, do not share the view of US alliances as indispensable assets. They maintain that the USA derive marginal benefits from some of its security links, whereas the risks associated with them are grave and plentiful.¹¹ The current alliance bargain, Barry Posen asserts, “has become unprofitable to the United States and requires renegotiation”.¹² It is important to add a note of clarification here that from the perspective of alliance critics, not all US treaty allies are alike. Some are inherently worse than others. As Stephen Walt proposes: “The United States should pledge itself to defending another country—and thereby risking the lives of its troops—only when doing so will make a direct and significant contribution to US security and prosperity”.¹³ He thus counsels the US government to be more selective with whom it signs binding defence treaties. The problem, as one analyst puts it, is that the USA has handed out massive nuclear promises like “friendship bracelets” to countries that really do not deserve them.¹⁴ In brief, the academic debate over US alliances remains a thorny and lively topic.

⁷ For literature that explicitly argues in favour of sustaining the current US alliance system, see Brooks et al. (2012); Grygiel and Mitchell (2016); Daalder and Lindsay (2018).

⁸ Nicholas Burns, ‘What America Gets Out of NATO’, *New York Times*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/11/opinion/what-america-gets-out-of-nato.html>

⁹ Norrlof (2010).

¹⁰ Von Hlatky (2013).

¹¹ Preble (2009); Mearsheimer (2018); Carpenter (2019).

¹² Posen (2014), 34.

¹³ Stephen M. Walt, ‘A Manifesto for Restrainers’, *Quincy Institute*, 4 December 2019, <https://responsiblecraft.org/2019/12/04/a-manifesto-for-restrainers/>

¹⁴ Benjamin H. Friedman, ‘America’s Role In The World: The Future Of Alliances’, *Brookings*, 2 October 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/10/03/highlights-experts-debate-the-future-of-americas-alliances/>



The critics' case against the Baltics

The debates surrounding the Baltic states and whether the USA would gain anything of value for wrapping its security blanket around them stretches back to the mid-1990s. During the NATO enlargement talks, a number of scholars asserted that expanding NATO up to Russia's borders did not serve the US national interest. Testifying before the US Committee on Foreign Relations in 1997, Michael Mandelbaum declared that there would be “zero” advantages in letting these small states into NATO.¹⁵ Likewise, Cold War grand strategist George Kennan stood firmly against it, warning that such an outcome would only further inflame already bad US-Russia relations.¹⁶ Arguing passionately on the Senate floor, US Senator Bernie Sanders claimed that by committing to safeguard Baltic territorial integrity the US government would get nothing in return “but a bill”.¹⁷ Russian senior leadership, having always objected to NATO enlargement, later parroted the same lines by insisting that the Baltics are nothing but “consumers of security” and that NATO “risked wasting money by welcoming small states” into the world's leading military club.¹⁸

After clinching NATO membership in 2004, generally two strands of objections have been made apropos the Baltic countries as US allies. To begin with, scholars have insisted that by being located on the northeast frontier of the alliance, their protection, in case of a Russian incursion, would impose high costs on the US government. While collectively NATO fields far greater military capabilities than the Russian Federation, when it comes to the Baltic Sea region, conventional military strength tilts in favour of the latter. Due to lack of own military punching power, the Baltics have been portrayed as a grave strategic liability.¹⁹ Eastern Europeans, the argument goes, have thin local forces, and are most at risk of Russian aggression. For this reason, they should never have been layered with US protection guarantees. Another strand of criticism maintains that these countries are of trivial geostrategic value. In the great strategic scheme of things, the Baltics, critics assert, are without the slightest security utility to America.²⁰ According to Joshua Shiffrin, in crude

¹⁵ Michael Mandelbaum, ‘The Debate on NATO Enlargement: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 105th Congress, 9 October 1997, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-105shrg46832/html/CHRG-105shrg46832.htm>

¹⁶ George F. Kennan, ‘A Fateful Error—Expanding NATO Would Be a Rebuff to Russian Democracy’, *New York Times*, 5 February 1997, www.nytimes.com/1997/02/05/opinion/a-fateful-error.html

¹⁷ Bernie Sanders, ‘If NATO is expanded, our allies must pay more of the costs’, United States Senate, 105th Congress, 10 June 1997, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/1997/06/10/extensions-of-remarks-section/article/E1159-6>

¹⁸ Thom Shanker, ‘Russian Faults NATO Opening to Baltic States’, *New York Times*, 15 August 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/08/15/world/russian-faults-nato-opening-to-baltic-states.html

¹⁹ Matthew Cancian and Mark Cancian, ‘It Is Long Past Time to Stop Expanding NATO’, *War on the Rocks*, 1 March 2019, www.warontherocks.com/2019/03/it-is-long-past-time-to-stop-expanding-nato; William Ruger, ‘We Should Firmly Shut the Open Door’, *Law & Liberty*, 24 April, 2019, www.lawliberty.org/liberty-forum/nato-at-three-score-and-ten-an-anticipatory-elegy

²⁰ Doug Bandow, ‘Donald Trump Asks: Why Should America Defend Europeans Who Won't Defend Themselves?’, *Forbes*, 1 August 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/dougbandow/2016/08/01/donald-trump-asks-why-should-america-defend-europeans-who-wont-defend-themselves/?sh=1ca7d5db71ab



geopolitical terms, they are “among the least important” US allies and could “disappear without compromising the United States’ economic security or NATO’s military viability”.²¹

More recently, these types of arguments have also seeped into the US political arena. The presidency of Donald Trump reignited intense discussions about the wisdom and cost of maintaining alliances. During his 4-year term in office, Trump regularly fulminated about allies and insisted that the USA is treated as “NATO’s piggy bank”. In his view, the US government was not being sufficiently reimbursed for its overseas security commitments. Breaking with previous US foreign policy orthodoxy, Trump publically declared that he would be willing to come to the aid of the Baltics only if they reached the 2% of GDP spending benchmark on defence.²² Soon after, former Republican Speaker of the House, and President Trump supporter Newt Gingrich weighed in by proclaiming that Estonia, which he dubbed “a suburb of St. Petersburg”, was not worth risking a nuclear war.²³ This speaks to the fact that there is a long pedigree of scepticism regarding the value of the US-Baltic security alliance, both in scholarly journals and Washington’s halls of power. To its critics, the Baltics are unworthy allies. They add no capabilities and plenty of vulnerabilities, thus amounting to a net loss for the US side.

Framework for evaluating alliances

One of the most authoritative critiques of the US alliance networks has been produced by Barry Posen. In his book *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, he argues that the bulk of current US overseas commitments are inimical to its strategic interests. When it comes to US alliances, Posen identifies two key pathologies: “reckless driving” and “free or cheap riding”.²⁴ As to the first category, he makes the case that allies, particularly smaller ones, have a tendency to behave irresponsibly and do things that cause harm to the US national interests. Despite the US serving as their military protector, they do things that Washington categorically advised them against.²⁵ In later work, Patrick Porter picked up this theme by stressing that junior US allies, with their “spirit of adventure”, regularly embarrass their security guarantor by engaging in reckless behaviour. He further went on to speculate that the Baltic republics may be prone to such misbehaviour.²⁶ The other side of the coin, which Posen terms as “free or cheap riding”, is when allied governments

²¹ Shiffrinson (2017), 111.

²² David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman, ‘Donald Trump Sets Conditions for Defending NATO Allies Against Attack’, *New York Times*, 20 July 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/donald-trump-issues.html

²³ Reena Flores, ‘Newt Gingrich: NATO countries ought to worry about U.S. commitment’, *CBS News*, 21 July 2016, www.cbsnews.com/news/newt-gingrich-trump-would-reconsider-his-obligation-to-nato

²⁴ Posen (2014), 35–50.

²⁵ Barry R. Posen, ‘Why American Restraint Makes Sense in a World Going to Hell’, *Columbia University*, 13 November 2014.

²⁶ Porter (2019), 16–17.



are unwilling to devote adequate finances for their own defence. Posen's outlined categories provide a conceptual roadmap for how to think about alliances. The article goes on to hypothesize that the Baltic countries, contrary to claims of sceptics, do not fit either of these conceptual labels. The following lays out the basis for this claim.

The starting premise of the argument here is that few nations are more dependent on the US security guarantees than Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Located on the edge of Europe and lacking in material power resources, they are unable to secure themselves with individual efforts and thus are heavily reliant on outside parties for their territorial defence. While the Baltics are keen on seeing as robust NATO presence on their soil as possible, they attach the highest premium to the company of US armed forces. As explained by the Lithuanian Defence Minister: "The United States is the main guarantee of the independence of Lithuania".²⁷ Along the same lines, his Estonian counterpart points out that "keeping the Americans in is very important for the other one—keeping the Russians out".²⁸ The sentiment that Washington provides an existential lifeline has been deeply entrenched in the Baltic strategic thinking. It has proven to be a constant feature across numerous Baltic governments, irrespective of their ideological coloration. In order to keep the US anchored in the regional architecture, an overriding concern for the Baltic states has been to make themselves as attractive and trustworthy partners to the alliance lead power as possible. Above all, these countries want to avoid being perceived as reckless actors or laggards, believing that such view of them may endanger US protection guarantees.

In this context, several authors have documented instances of how small states instrumentally seek to generate prestige, status, and visibility in Washington.²⁹ By examining various US war-fighting coalitions they have concluded that junior allies are keen to pay a strikingly high price in order to maximize their standing in the eyes of the USA. The logic underpinning this type of military activism is that great sacrifices and acts of loyalty will be spotted and appreciated by the US side, and eventually lead to greater "influence, agenda-setting power, access, or even material benefits".³⁰ Ringsmose and Henriksen explicate this chain of logic as follows: "A good reputation generally facilitates access to key policy-makers, while access is often a prerequisite for influencing the foreign policy priorities of the superpower".³¹ In this case, actors are operating from their perceived self-interest, assuming that unwavering support for the hegemon may later yield security gains at the "home front". Borrowing this reasoning, the article posits that the three Baltic states attach great importance to what the US government thinks of them. From the Baltic vantage

²⁷ Raimundas Karoblis, 'Lithuania Reassured by NATO Troops, But Prefers Allied Brigade', 11 June 11, 2017, *Defense & Aerospace Report*, www.defaeroreport.com/2017/06/12/lithuania-reassured-nato-troops-prefers-allied-brigade

²⁸ Sven Mikser, 'Panel on Transatlantic Relations: Pivoting Back to Europe?', 26 April 2014, Lennart Meri Conference 2014.

²⁹ Ringsmose and Henriksen (2012); De Carvalho and Neumann (2014); Jakobsen et al. (2018); Pedersen (2020);

³⁰ Jakobsen et al. (2018), 257.

³¹ Ringsmose and Henriksen (2012), 158.



point, there is a clear link between a good ally standing and maintenance of US protection against regional rivals. Subsequently, these states are willing to undertake costly policies, effectively turning into “super atlanticists”.³²

While the presented analysis builds upon the scholarship that has emerged around small-state status-seeking, it equally differs in one notable respect. It is being proposed here that the presence of status concerns can be observed not only in relation to US-led military campaigns but also extend to policy issues in the domestic arena. The first two empirical sections test the status thesis in the context of Baltic states’ military contributions to US interventions as well as their willingness to restrict the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei in their domestic markets. On the methodological front, the article draws upon the work of Jakobsen et al. (2018). The authors, in order to determine whether status-seeking motivations have indeed driven certain policies, propose to inspect senior officials’ statements and look for traces of “a desire to gain prestige and visibility in Washington”. In addition, status-seeking motivations can be identified in instances where lawmakers, in defining the success of a particular policy, emphasize “American praise, access to US decision-makers and influence”.³³ Source-wise, the empirical evidence here has been marshalled from national security documents, policy elite discourse, parliamentary debates, press accounts, and leaked diplomatic cables.

Circling back to Posen’s second criticism vis-à-vis allied governments, he contends that wealthy European states have been persistently “free-riding” on the shoulders of the USA.³⁴ In this context, a great deal of analysis has been devoted to exploring NATO members’ failure to allocate 2% of their GDP on defence. While this one benchmark is helpful in tabulating distributive justice among NATO members, it can equally obscure other forms of value that allies bring to the table. This is particularly the case when considering small-state contributions. Given the diminutive size of their economic output, it makes little difference whether the Baltics allocate 1 or 2.5% of GDP to their militaries. Since 2018, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have all met the 2% NATO spending target, which places them among the alliance’s top-tier. As a result of this, they can legitimately claim that they are carrying an equitable share of the collective alliance burden. On a more practical level though, this spending increase does not translate into significant military capabilities, and as such, is of little value to Washington. Instead of zeroing in on traditional burden-sharing measurement, the article instead proceeds to illustrate what other possible security benefits the Baltics provide to the USA.

³² Wivel and Crandall (2019).

³³ Jakobsen et al. (2018), 264.

³⁴ Posen (2014), 35.



US-led coalitions: joining in the name of status

When it comes to US-led military interventions, Baltic political elites have time and again converged around a commitment to deploy their armed forces to far-away battlefronts. After the 9/11 attacks, all three Baltic republics swiftly threw their support behind the USA, contributing military personnel to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan and later operation Iraqi Freedom. Counted in absolute numbers their contributions were modest and clearly did not make a decisive difference to the overall outcome.³⁵ However, when measured per capita, the Baltic states did suffer one of the highest ratios of deaths-per-head among coalition partners.³⁶ In Afghanistan alone, nine Estonian soldiers died in action and more than ninety suffered injuries.³⁷ This is primarily due to the fact that they had volunteered to serve with no operational caveats in some of the most hostile combat areas such as the Helmand province, a type of environment where few NATO members wished to see their armed forces deployed.³⁸ In the account of former President of Estonia, the nation's armed forces "were smack in the middle of Taliban land".³⁹ A study measuring country contributions to the war in Afghanistan as the percent of a state's armed forces placed Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania among the top ten coalition contributors.⁴⁰

Why did these small states, with no direct security concerns at stake in the Middle East, willingly and consistently send their military personnel to perilous war zones? The evidence laid out here speaks to the fact that the key driver behind their "over-performance" and willingness to incur high costs was the belief that such unwavering support for Washington's security projects will enhance their status in the eyes of the US government and as such contribute to stronger security ties with it. The mantle of the Baltic states can be summed up as follows: if we want to receive robust US military assistance, we first must demonstrate that we are not merely consumers of security. High-profile international operations lend them an opportunity to do just that. Foreign missions effectively became a vehicle through which they could cultivate good allied relations with the lead NATO power.

It is crucial to recall that Baltic military deployments took place under the shadow of a loud backlash at home as well as fierce objections from some EU capitals. A week after the September 11 attacks, an international Gallup poll revealed that majorities in the Baltics opposed their government's military involvement in Afghanistan.⁴¹ Similarly, a 2003 Gallup survey, just months before the US invasion of Iraq, recorded a deep-seated reluctance on part of the Baltic populations, ranging

³⁵ Coffey (2013), 23–25.

³⁶ *Coalition casualty count: Afghanistan Fatalities*, <http://icasualties.org/App/AfghanFatalities>

³⁷ Gollob and O'Hanlon (2020), 13.

³⁸ McNamara (2017), 77.

³⁹ *PBS News Hour*, 'For tiny Estonia, deterring Russia requires major backup', 7 July 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/for-tiny-estonia-deterring-russia-requires-major-backup>

⁴⁰ Gannon and Kent (2021), 7.

⁴¹ Larson and Savych (2006), 144.



from 73 to 85%,⁴² to directly participate in the war efforts. The removal of Saddam Hussein's government had also stirred an intra-European rift. French President Jacques Chirac, for example, had delivered a scathing criticism against the Baltics and other Eastern European countries. In his view, by appearing at the forefront of supporting the US-led war, these nations had engaged in an “infantile” and “dangerous” behaviour, and missed a good opportunity to keep silent.⁴³

When authorizing force deployment abroad, Baltic parliamentarians had put forward multiple justifications. Some were couched in the language of democracy promotion, advancement of women's rights, and in the case of Iraq, disarmament of a dangerous tyrant. In this context, a note of caution is in order. As Pedersen and Reykers have observed, when it comes to the use of force, state officials often are strongly incentivized to insert a normative dimension in the public discourse rather than simply attempt to justify it on the basis of pure “interest-based arguments” as the latter will not likely be “seen as legitimate by the wider public”.⁴⁴ Indeed, initially Baltic officials resorted to “dressing up” participation in US military campaigns in normative “clothes”. That said, a wealth of evidence presented here attests that status-seeking was the principal driving force behind the Baltic decision to expend blood and treasure in Afghanistan and Iraq.

On the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, a high-ranking Latvian lawmaker reasoned that it was in the country's national interest to back the USA. He laid out the logic as follows: by siding with the anti-war European powers, Riga risked losing its most valued strategic partner, the USA. On the other hand, by supporting Washington, the nation would gain genuine US appreciation which could be of critical importance in a future crises situation.⁴⁵ Equally, former Prime Minister of Latvia, while acknowledging that supporting war efforts without a UN resolution was a rather risky step, went on to suggest that in the end, this was a justified move as support expressed for the USA at a critical time will never be forgotten by the Americans.⁴⁶

In a plain-speaking manner, another member of the Latvian parliament later elaborated: “Everyone knows that we [Latvians] need America. We've got to participate in Iraq for the United States, for our allies. We die for America in hope that they will die for us”.⁴⁷ Similar justification was laid out by then Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who admitted that he had frequently been asked why Estonian citizens had to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq. “But exactly in the same way an Oklahoma farmer may ask why his son should fight, if necessary, somewhere in Estonia

⁴² Hummel Hartwig. 2007. ‘A Survey of involvement of 10 European States in the Iraq War 2003’, Working Paper 9. *Research project on Parliamentary Control of Security Policy*, http://paks.uni-duesseldorf.de/Dokumente/paks_working_paper_9_rev.pdf

⁴³ Ian Black, ‘Furious Chirac hits out at ‘infantile’ easterners’, *The Guardian*, 18 February 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/18/france.iraq>

⁴⁴ Pedersen and Reykers (2020), 22.

⁴⁵ Artis Pabriks, ‘Par mūsu nacionālajām interesēm’, *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, 18 February 2003, <https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/71350>

⁴⁶ Valdis Birkavš, ‘Rīta intervija’, *Latvia's national public-service radio*, 18 March 2003.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Celms, ‘Latvia honors fallen soldiers, maintains policy on Iraq’, *The Baltic Times*, 10 January 2007, <https://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/17095/>



or Latvia. So if we want to be helped when we need help we must be ready to help our allies”, Ilves elaborated.⁴⁸ These official statements strongly mirror how status-seeking motivations have been conceptualized in the scholarly literature. Fighting shoulder to shoulder with US forces abroad, Baltic officials reasoned, was a service that would generate goodwill among US policy elites. This, in turn, would raise the prospects that the superpower, in a hypothetical future crises scenario, would stand by its defence treaty promises.

In the context of the so-called war on terror, the Baltic willingness to impress the superpower was further revealed after Lithuanian senior leadership had secretly granted permission for a CIA prison on its soil. The “black site” was housing high-value detainees, individuals who would be subjected to harsh torture methods. Up to eight foreign citizens were held up for more than a year in facilities near the Lithuanian capital Vilnius. The shadow prison was abolished shortly after reports exposed its existence in 2005.⁴⁹ Years later, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that Lithuania had been a willing co-operator in what amounted to unlawful imprisonment of terror suspects.⁵⁰ The Lithuanian government had violated the prohibition of torture despite being a signatory of both the UN Convention Against Torture as well as the European Convention on Human Rights.

This particular episode is different in that it had transpired in secret. The guiding logic, though, appears to have been the same: to score some loyalty points and ingratiate themselves with the US senior leadership. Richard Clarke, a counterterrorism adviser during the George Bush administration, recalled that new NATO member countries like Lithuania were willing to do “anything the US asked for during that period”.⁵¹ Another former US intelligence official, directly involved in the CIA torture program, affirmed that Lithuania had agreed to operate secret detention facilities on their soil in order to maintain close security links with the USA and “to have their ear”.⁵² A 2005 WikiLeaks cable, out of the US embassy in Lithuania, acknowledged that close relationship with the USA remained “Lithuania’s most prized foreign policy asset” and that Lithuanian officials have been “completely responsive” to the US requests in the war on terror.⁵³ Participation in the notorious CIA interrogation program illustrates just how far one of the Baltic nations were willing to go in order to ensure good working relations with the USA.

The Baltic states’ unconditional support for US military interventions was certainly noticed in Washington. In their work on status-seeking, Ringsmose and

⁴⁸ Toomas Hendrik Ilves, ‘President: We Help Allies in Order to Be Helped By Them’, *Estonian Review*, 1 November 2006, <http://www.estonia.or.th/news/news77.html>

⁴⁹ Lefebvre (2012), 574.

⁵⁰ *European Court of Human Rights*, ‘Case of Abu Zubaydah V. Lithuania’, 31 May 2018.

⁵¹ Matthew Cole and Brian Ross, ‘Exclusive: CIA Secret ‘Torture’ Prison Found at Fancy Horseback Riding Academy’, *ABC News*, 18 November 2009, <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/cia-secret-prison-found/story?id=9115978>

⁵² Matthew Cole, ‘Officials: Lithuania Hosted Secret CIA Prison To Get Our Ear’, *ABC News*, 20 August 2009, <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=8373807>

⁵³ *WikiLeaks*, ‘Your Vilnius Visit: Rewarding The Loyal and Calming The Waters’, 13 April 2005, https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05VILNIUS395_a.html



Henriksen suggest that a good indicator for assessing state's reputation with the USA is by exploring the "frequency and character of state visits".⁵⁴ Measuring by this standard, the Baltics did exceptionally well. The US President George Bush alone paid a visit to these small nations on three separate occasions. Because of her staunch pro-American stance, Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga was further invited to address a joint meeting of Congress. The most valuable reward for Baltic "good behaviour", however, came in the form of their accession to NATO in 2004. Steadfast Baltic support for US interventions continued during the Obama and Trump administrations. Despite facing no credible threat of terrorism at home, the Baltics eagerly committed their military forces to the anti-ISIS campaign.⁵⁵ In a 2014 meeting with the Baltic heads of state, Barack Obama commended them for being among the USA "most reliable allies in NATO".⁵⁶ Similarly, then-Vice President Joe Biden, praised Baltic military sacrifices and pointed out that the US-Baltic partnership "has never been more of a two-way street".⁵⁷

Importantly, public expressions of US approval appear to match how the US representatives perceived the Baltics behind closed doors. Leaked diplomatic cables from American embassies in Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius routinely showered them with praise. In them, they are depicted as like-minded allies that punch well above their weight in the "war on terror" and are unshakably committed to "advancing our most important global interests".⁵⁸ As one such cable succinctly summarizes: "Estonian foreign policy largely mirrors US agenda", which makes the country a valuable partner.⁵⁹ What is more, US diplomats also appear to be clear-eyed regarding why the Baltics keep supplying troops to the US war coalitions. In a telling diplomatic cable, the US Ambassador to Latvia writes: "Latvia views Iraq almost exclusively through the prism of relations with the US. They view helping us in Iraq as the way to ensure that we will be there to help them when they need assistance in future. Some political leaders have a broad idea of expanding democracy, but even those who view Iraq through that lens would say that the only reason for Latvia to help out in Iraq is to support the United States".⁶⁰

When in 2021, the USA together with its NATO partners began the troop pull-out out of Afghanistan, Estonian political elites were quick to assure domestic audiences that their national sacrifices in this protracted conflict had not been futile. According

⁵⁴ Ringsmose and Henriksen (2012), 162.

⁵⁵ Banka (2021), 167–169.

⁵⁶ The White House, *Remarks by President Obama and Leaders of Baltic States in Multilateral Meeting*, 3 September 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-and-leaders-baltic-states-multilateral-meeting>

⁵⁷ Joe Biden, 'Joe Biden on Baltic-U.S. Presidents' Meeting: Meeting of Valued Friends', *Latvian Institute*, 30 August 2013.

⁵⁸ *WikiLeaks*, 'Pursuing the U.S. Agenda', 14 February 2008, https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08VILNIUS92_a.html; *Wiki Leaks*, 'U.S.-Baltic Summit: Calming Troubled Waters', 11 April 2005, https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05VILNIUS376_a.html

⁵⁹ *WikiLeaks*, 'Estonian Foreign Policy Largely Mirrors U.S. Agenda', 19 February 2010, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10TALLINN74_a.html

⁶⁰ *WikiLeaks*, 'Latvian Plans In Iraq For 2008 And Beyond', 16 January 2008, https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIGA38_a.html



to Estonian Minister of Defense, the primary rationale for the costly involvement was to display loyalty to allies, “acting on the presumption that the allies will support us if necessary”.⁶¹ That same point was echoed by Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid, who underscored that without the mission the country would not have such excellent relations with NATO allies and that participation in Afghanistan had also made Estonia “safer and better protected”.⁶²

In sum, the presented evidence here suggests that from the US standpoint it is relatively easy to get the Baltic countries to rally behind it vis-à-vis international missions. This is not because they have compatible threat assessments or that they share the same mission objectives. Rather, their willingness to pledge support and assume difficult overseas assignments arises out of the calculation that such service to the hegemon will eventually lead to some future payoffs “at home”. Aware of the fact that they are not in a position to secure their territorial integrity with individual efforts, the Baltics look for any means to strengthen the transatlantic link. Foreign missions, in this context, serve as a tool for allies to demonstrate their value. This accumulated “status capital” can then be directed towards own security needs. By considering US-led military operations, the presented evidence finds no basis for Posen’s “reckless driver” assumption. On the contrary, the Baltics have continually kept their end of the bargain vis-à-vis US military operations.

Linking arms against China

A great power rivalry between the USA and China has become one of the defining features of today’s international order. This competition equally presents an opportunity for the European states to demonstrate their strategic value to Washington. As the US and China square off, Baltic governments have found themselves firmly on the side of their treaty ally. Acutely aware of the importance that the USA assigns to its geopolitical foe, the Baltics have moved to thwart various Chinese initiatives in the region. While multiple motivations may have been at play, the Baltic states’ decision to restrict Chinese-based digital technologies in their critical infrastructure, to a large degree, have been born out of reputational concerns vis-à-vis the USA. Valuing the transatlantic security linkage, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian governments have all adopted a tough line against the People’s Republic of China and denied its tech giant Huawei a foothold into the region.

As of mid-2020, the tide across the European Union began to shift against letting Huawei into European digital-network space. It is important to recall, however, that initially some of the larger members of the bloc had welcomed it and signed up for its equipment offers. In 2019, Estonia was among the first two European states to go in the opposite direction by reaching a bilateral deal with the USA that effectively

⁶¹ ERR, ‘Luik: Afghanistan mission was very important for Estonia’, April 16 2021, <https://news.err.ee/1608180514/luik-afghanistan-mission-was-very-important-for-estonia>

⁶² ERR, ‘President: Afghanistan must not slip off international radar’, April 22, 2021, <https://news.err.ee/1608186499/president-afghanistan-must-not-slip-off-international-radar>



excluded Huawei from its 5G networks.⁶³ Latvia soon followed suit, and in September 2020 Lithuanian and US officials shook hands on an identical memorandum of understanding.⁶⁴ While these declarations fall short of explicitly spelling out a specific country or technology manufacturer, on both sides of the Atlantic there is a clear understanding that in practice this constitutes a pledge on behalf of the Baltic countries to steer clear from using Chinese-based technology in their critical infrastructure.

Baltic representatives have offered mixed public justifications for the barring of Huawei. For one, the authorities have asserted that this company effectively is an outpost of the Chinese Communist Party and thus could conceivably serve as China's intelligence arm. The decision regarding the removal of Huawei came on the heels of Baltic States' national threat assessments which had declared that Chinese technologies posed significant security risks.⁶⁵ In addition, some lawmakers also pointed a finger at Beijing's dismal human rights record and connected that to the unwillingness to do business with the East Asian power. Indeed, the final outcome may have been the accumulative result of various considerations. That stated, the evidence presented here indicates that one of the key "ingredients" in the decision to block Huawei was reputation-based. Baltic lawmakers approached the rolling back of Chinese ambitions in the region as means to further cement their stalwart NATO ally status.

On its part, the USA has actively nudged allies to scrap Chinese investment offers. Senior Trump administration officials, for example, repeatedly urged Europeans to refrain from adopting Huawei-based technology, warning that its presence in allied territories would make it harder for the USA to partner with them.⁶⁶ In the Baltics, US representatives likewise conveyed the message that China's 5G equipment endangered their own security and "United States' security as an ally".⁶⁷ Aiming to win approval in the eyes of Washington, the Baltics heed the call. Upon signing the bilateral declaration on 5G security, Estonian Prime Minister went on to stress that the USA is "our most important ally in the security field" and that the agreement sends a strong signal that "Estonia shares a similar understanding of security with its allies".⁶⁸ In its dealings with China, Baltic leaders have regularly

⁶³ *U.S. Embassy in Estonia*, 'United States–Estonia Joint Declaration on 5G Security', 1 November 2019, <https://ee.usembassy.gov/joint-declaration-on-5g/>

⁶⁴ LSM, 'Latvia sides with US in Huawei 5G fight', 20 February 2020, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/economy/latvia-sides-with-us-in-huawei-5g-fight.a349114/>

⁶⁵ *Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service*, 'International Security and Estonia: 2020', 77; *Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence*, 'National Threat Assessment: 2020', 35–36.

⁶⁶ Mark T. Esper, 'As Prepared Remarks by Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper at the Munich Security Conference', *US Department of Defense*, 15 February 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/2085577/as-prepared-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-mark-t-esper-at-the-munich-security/>

⁶⁷ *The Baltic Times*, 'US wants Lithuania to take care of 5G security, assess China risks', 27 February 2020, https://www.baltictimes.com/us_wants_lithuania_to_take_care_of_5g_security__assess_china_risks/

⁶⁸ ERR, 'Ratas, Pence issue statement on joint 5G approach', 11 December 2019, <https://news.err.ee/998499/ratas-pence-issue-statement-on-joint-5g-approach>



compared notes with the US government and emphasized the need for a joint transatlantic approach.⁶⁹

As one senior Estonian diplomat put it: “Inevitably, the US will judge its European allies according to the level of support they offer in countering the rise of China”.⁷⁰ In this context, he went on to counsel that “small vulnerable countries in need of American attention” must utilize all of “the straws they have”.⁷¹ Simply put, the Huawei case, from the Baltic standpoint, was utilized instrumentally to showcase their staunch pro-American stance. Similar recognition-based logic was echoed by former Latvian Minister of Defence, who pointed out that Latvia’s decision to distance itself from Chinese-produced technologies helped the country to gain “positive traction in Washington” and placed it “firmly in the US camp at a time when it still seemed unclear how other European countries would react on the Huawei and 5G issue”.⁷² These statements speak directly to the status-seeking as a central motivator for siding with Washington.

Such acts of loyalty did not go unnoticed by US officials. In 2021, the Lithuanian government proceeded to block Chinese state-owned equipment from its airports by emphasizing that it did not meet “the trans-Atlantic security criteria”.⁷³ The decision was cheered on by the US embassy in Lithuania.⁷⁴ Asked directly if the Baltic states are useful partners when it comes to competition with China, the US ambassador to Latvia went on to suggest that it is an easy question to answer since the Baltic states are “extremely good friends with the US” and appear to be on the “same page when it comes to geopolitical issues”.⁷⁵ Conversely, policies by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have angered the Chinese Communist Party. Writing for the Communist Party’s flagship newspaper, a representative of the Chinese Academy of Sciences opined that the Baltics are “playing hardball with China” in order to impress the USA.⁷⁶ Similarly, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson dubbed them as politically motivated America’s “minions”.⁷⁷

⁶⁹ *Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, ‘Lithuania’s Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis discussed the situation in the region with the U.S. Senator Durbin’, 3 February 2021, <http://urm.lt/default/en/news/lithuanias-foreign-minister-gabrielius-landsbergis-discussed-the-situation-in-the-region-with-the-us-senator-durbin>

⁷⁰ Sakkov (2020), 28–29.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Liegis (2021), 32.

⁷³ *Associated Press*, ‘Lithuania set to block Chinese airport scanner firm Nuctech’, 29 January 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/technology-lithuania-china-national-security-vilnius-2de4d8fb709dab4e854c6844a29d27de>

⁷⁴ *The Straits Times*, ‘Lithuania blocks Chinese airport screening equipment’, 30 January 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/lithuania-blocks-chinese-airport-screening-equipment>

⁷⁵ John Carwile, ‘US-Latvia Relations in the Context of ‘New Realities’, Podcast interview, 2 March 2021, <https://www.liia.lv/en/news/talk-series-new-us-administration-perspectives-for-the-baltic-region-911>

⁷⁶ *Global Times*, ‘China’s Nuctech calls Lithuania’s ban politically motivated’, 19 February 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1215905.shtml>

⁷⁷ *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference’, July 16, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1798268.shtml



Scholars like Stephen Walt have advanced the argument that the challenge of China potentially holds the promise of a new trans-Atlantic bargain. Walt writes: “If Europe agrees to align with the United States in the emerging Sino-American security competition, then Washington could agree to leave some US troops in Europe and remain an active member of NATO”.⁷⁸ The evidence presented here suggests that in the case of the Baltic states, they are willing to strike such a bargain and that enlisting their support is not going to be a challenge for the USA. From the vantage point of security-dependent small states, maintaining good relations with Washington outstrips whatever trade and investment benefits China may put on the table. When charting the China policy course, US strategic interests and concerns were clearly present in the back of Baltic statesmen’s minds. The Huawei example attests that Baltic responsiveness to US national interests goes beyond taking on difficult military assignments abroad but can also extend into the domestic arena.

In sum, the first two empirical sections lend evidence to the fact that on issues of great importance to Washington, the Baltic States actively seek to be in lock-step with their principal security ally. Their propensity to consistently back the USA stems from the belief that such demonstrations of loyalty will be noticed and appreciated on the other side of the Atlantic, and eventually positively impact their own national security needs. The evidence laid out here contests Barry Posen’s bottom line that small-state allies, “secure in the knowledge that the United States will serve as the military lender of last resort”, tend to behave in a reckless manner.⁷⁹ On the contrary, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have continuously operated from the assumption that they cannot afford not to side with Washington on matters of geopolitical importance.

Free-riders no more?

“Have they fulfilled their [financial] obligations to us”, Donald Trump wondered aloud during a 2016 New York Times interview when discussing the Baltics.⁸⁰ He went on to suggest that the value of US NATO partners essentially boiled down to one metric—whether or not they allocated at least 2% of GDP on their militaries. Underpaying allies, in his view, were not defence worthy. As of 2018, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are among those NATO countries that devote 2% or more of their gross domestic product on defence, an undertaking for which they even received praise from Trump himself later in his presidency. If this benchmark serves as the sole litmus test, then clearly these countries fare well in comparison with their larger EU peers. Practically speaking though, the USA gains little from the fact that the Baltics are honouring their financial pledges. Even Baltic representatives acknowledge this. As former Estonian Minister of Defence noted: “When it comes to input

⁷⁸ Stephen M. Walt, ‘Exactly How Helpless Is Europe?’, *Foreign Policy*, May 21 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/21/exactly-how-helpless-is-europe/>

⁷⁹ Posen (2014), 66.

⁸⁰ Sanger and Haberman, 2016.



and output measurement, it is absolutely clear that Estonian 2% gives you much less output than let's say French 2%".⁸¹ That being said, there are other ways in which the Baltics meaningfully contribute to US security objectives.

A great deal of scholarly literature has treated Baltic States' physical proximity to Russia as their Achilles heel. The conventional wisdom holds that due to the force imbalance in the region, which heavily favours the Russian side, Baltic republics are hard to defend territories.⁸² While this assumption is certainly valid, there is, however, a flip side to this predicament. Situated at a geopolitical crossroads, these small nations are in an advantageous position to produce valuable insights into Kremlin's statecraft. As James Carafano suggests: "To a major power, a country's greatest asset might be its map coordinates rather than the size of its arsenal or bank account".⁸³ Similarly, Brands and Feaver have noted that some of the most valued US intelligence assets stem from allied partners "geographical capability" and "proximity to the theater of interest".⁸⁴ Lacking in material power resources, the Baltic States, within the past decade, have made a concerted effort to set up "knowledge hubs" that excel in analysing their much larger eastern neighbour.

Having been subjected to Russian-directed gray zone tactics for decades, the Baltics have amassed valuable regional expertise. Testifying before the US Committee on Foreign Affairs, a prominent Russia-observer explained: "They [the Baltics] see things that we don't see. They can go to places that we don't go. They understand things that we don't in cyber and intelligence".⁸⁵ Retired Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, who commanded the US Army Europe, concurs by emphasizing that the Baltic republics, due to their location, "know more what is happening in Russia, than any American will ever know".⁸⁶ Indeed, the Baltics fill in critical gaps in fields such as cyberwarfare, intelligence gathering, and disinformation, actively sharing this "know-how" with their US counterparts. The following details such contributions.

The Republic of Estonia was the first known victim of a state-directed cyberattack. The 2007 incident, widely attributed to the Russian Federation, for weeks incapacitated Estonian governmental structures. Somewhat paradoxically, in the long run, the event turned out to have a positive impact as it propelled the nation of 1.3 million people to treat the cyber domain as an intricate part of its national security. Subsequently, the country set up the Tallinn-based NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence. According to the Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid,

⁸¹ Jüri Luik, 'Ways to strengthen European defence', *Inter-parliamentary Conference for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy*, 8 September 2017.

⁸² Shlapak and Johnson (2016).

⁸³ James Jay Carafano, 'Why Small States Matter to Big Powers', *The National Interest*, 10 August 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-small-states-matter-big-powers-283362>

⁸⁴ Brands and Feaver (2017), 24.

⁸⁵ Edward Lucas, 'U.S. policy toward the Baltic States', Hearing Before the Subcommittee On Europe, Eurasia, And Emerging Threats of the Committee On Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, 22 March 2017, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=801601>

⁸⁶ Ben Hodges, 'Re-building Transatlantic Security Link?', *Latvian Institute of International Affairs*, Podcast interview, 4 March 2021.



this was a smart way for a small country to demonstrate its contributions to allies.⁸⁷ Understanding that it has little to offer in hard-power deliverables, Estonian leadership chose instead to focus on the cyber domain. In the words of Kaljulaid's predecessor, Toomas Ilves, the IT field served as “the great equalizer”, allowing a small nation to contribute considerably more than one “would expect by looking at the map, population, and GDP per capita”.⁸⁸ Today, Estonia has a well-established reputation among its peers as the lead authority for devising cybersecurity-related solutions.

When it comes to countering cyber threats, Tallinn and Washington have forged a close bilateral relationship on various departmental levels. In 2020, the two governments set up a joint cyber-threat intelligence-sharing platform.⁸⁹ In addition, the US Army and Estonia's Ministry of Defence entered into an agreement for collaborative research on cyber defence matters.⁹⁰ Such joint initiatives have already borne fruit. In the run-up to the 2020 US Presidential election, in order to learn more about Russian hacking methods, the USA dispatched its cyber force operatives to Estonia.⁹¹ For the USA, this allowed to observe the work of Kremlin-linked agents and bolster its own election defences. Commenting on this deployment, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Cyber Policy pointed out: “Cyber is a team sport—when it comes to halting threats from cyberspace, no one can go it alone”.⁹² Such operations illustrate how small states can amplify the reach of the USA and effectively complement its capabilities.

Estonian authorities have regularly received praise for the provision of such services. James Mattis, US Secretary of Defense in the Trump administration, upon meeting his Estonian counterpart underscored that Washington highly appreciates Estonian leadership in this new area of competition, and that its positive example speaks to the fact that the size of the country does not necessarily determine its contributions to collective security.⁹³ In a similar vein, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has spoken highly of Estonia for its efforts in training and educating NATO military staff.⁹⁴ After being the first victim of a Russian-linked cyberattack,

⁸⁷ Kaljulaid (2017).

⁸⁸ Ilves (2013).

⁸⁹ ERR, ‘Estonia and the US to build joint cyber threat intelligence platform’, 14 January 2020, <https://news.err.ee/1023833/estonia-and-the-us-to-build-joint-cyber-threat-intelligence-platform>

⁹⁰ Edric Thompson, ‘US Army, Estonia sign historic agreement for collaborative research in cyber defense’, *U.S. Army*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.army.mil/article/239023>

⁹¹ Julian E. Barnes, ‘U.S. Cyberforce Was Deployed to Estonia to Hunt for Russian Hackers’, *New York Times*, 3 December, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/us/politics/cyber-command-elections-estonia.html>

⁹² *US Cyber Command*, ‘Hunt Forward Estonia: Estonia, US strengthen partnership in cyber domain with joint operation’, 3 December 2020, <https://www.cybercom.mil/Media/News/Article/2433245/hunt-forward-estonia-estonia-us-strengthen-partnership-in-cyber-domain-with-joi/>

⁹³ *US Department of Defense*, ‘Secretary Mattis Hosts Enhanced Honor Cordon Welcoming Minister of Defence Jüri Luik of Estonia to the Pentagon’, 7 March 2018.

⁹⁴ Jens Stoltenberg, ‘Joint press event with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid’, *NATO*, 18 November 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/ru/natohq/opinions_170912.htm?selectedLocale=ru



Estonian leadership managed to turn the incident into a certain asset. By studying its lessons and building resilience, it gradually emerged as the lead cyber-knowledge exporter.

For many, Russia's abilities to effectively plant disinformation campaigns overseas came into sharper focus during the 2016 US presidential election. For the Baltics, however, such malign interference and attempts to sow societal divisions were hardly anything new. Lawmakers in the region have been sounding the alarm about it ever since regaining independence in the early 1990s. However, it was only in 2014 that Latvia opened the NATO Centre of Excellence devoted to the exploration of such issues. Its central analytical focus is on tracking and analysing Russia's digital footprint. Since its establishment, the research institution has produced innovative studies regarding information-warfare efforts employed by Kremlin-linked actors and experimental takes on societal vulnerabilities. Such analysis has often been shared with the US government via testimonies before the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and briefings with the US military staff.⁹⁵ Commenting on the centre's work, a senior US Congressman pointed out that because of their "first-hand experience with the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia", the Baltics have become "a valuable source of insight" for the US government.⁹⁶

Critics have often claimed that by taking on Eastern European countries, NATO only diluted its defensive capacity.⁹⁷ Going strictly by conventional power metrics, it is of course true that the Baltics do not and will never be able to match the military inputs of major European powers. Yet despite their "smallness", they have found a way to make meaningful contributions vis-à-vis modern tools of statecraft. They bring to the table valuable knowledge related to Russian grey-zone techniques and cyber activities, skills that do not appear on standard alliance balance sheets. In addition to meeting their defence spending pledges, the Baltic states have become producers of valuable niche expertise. Put differently, the charges of "free-riding" do not stand up to the current day developments.

Limitations of the study

This study has depicted the Baltic countries as actors that actively seek to align their policies to US national interests. In this context, it might be useful to note here that their willingness to be in sync with Washington, of course, is not entirely absolute. As sovereign nations, they can have diverging interests that interfere with US policy preferences. To illustrate this with a concrete example, in 2017, despite stern

⁹⁵ Prepared Statement of Janis Sarts, Director of NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence on Russian Interference in European Elections United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 28 June 2017, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sfr-jsarts-062817b.pdf>

⁹⁶ Prepared Remarks by Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa Co-Chairman of the Senate Baltic Freedom Caucus For the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 14 February 2019, <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/grassley-remarks-seminar-nato-stratcom-centre-excellence>

⁹⁷ Ashford (2019), 4.



warnings from US senior diplomats that “names will be taken”,⁹⁸ Estonia and Lithuania refused to go along with the stated US policy and recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel during a United Nations vote.⁹⁹ On the balance, however, such policy disagreements have been rare as Baltic political elites have gone to great lengths to ensure they act in harmony with vital US national interests. To clarify, the key analytical takeaway here is that on first-order strategic matters for the USA, the Baltics are a dependable source of support.

Another research limitation here has to do with a third party, namely the Russian Federation. One can, for example, reasonably argue that the risk of a great power collision over the Baltics outweighs any other benefits that the USA derives from its relations with these small nations. After all, Washington, as the ultimate guarantor of Baltic territorial integrity, in the most extreme of circumstances has promised to respond to any aggressor with an overwhelming force, inclusive of the use of nuclear weapons. Stated differently, the judgment about the threat level that Moscow poses and whether it is actually “detractable”, could be part of the alliance costs and benefits equation here.

This particular dimension is beyond the remit of this article. However, some limited points are in order. A number of observers have indeed warned that sweeping US security assurances to allies hold the potential of entrapping or “chain-ganging” the USA into an unwanted conflict.¹⁰⁰ While one cannot rule out such an occurrence entirely, the evidence in the international relations literature for a superpower being dragged into a conflict by a lesser power is not compelling.¹⁰¹ If anything, the evidence points in the opposite direction. NATO’s Article 5 has only been evoked on behalf of the USA itself. Subsequently, the idea that the Baltics could enmesh the USA in a regional fight with Russia, does not come across as very likely. Future scholarship, however, may want to explore this particular dimension in greater detail.

Conclusions

This article assumed the task of evaluating the performance of the Baltic states as US treaty allies. Critics have faulted US partner governments for acting recklessly and free-riding on US security guarantees. The evidence presented vis-à-vis the Baltic States, however, challenges these assumptions. It paints a picture of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as loyalty-obsessed small states that, in order to remain attractive allies, diligently seek to meet their patron’s behavioural expectations. By word and deed, they back US strategic goals. As such, they have taken on heavy war burdens in various US-led campaigns and sided with Washington in its geopolitical struggle

⁹⁸ Laurel Wamsley, ‘U.S. ‘Will Be Taking Names’ Of U.N. Votes On Jerusalem Resolution’, *NPR*, 20 December 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/12/20/572314356/u-s-will-be-taking-names-of-u-n-votes-on-jerusalem-resolution?t=1630361751618&t=1630607456305>

⁹⁹ *United Nations*, ‘General Assembly Overwhelmingly Adopts Resolution Asking Nations Not to Locate Diplomatic Missions in Jerusalem’, December 21 2017, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/ga11995.doc.htm>

¹⁰⁰ Christensen and Snyder (1990), 141.

¹⁰¹ See Michael Beckley, ‘The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts’, *International Security*, 39:4 (Spring 2015), pp. 7–48.



against China. Furthermore, contrary to conventional wisdom, they are not “free riders”. The Baltic republics are among a handful of NATO members that meet the agreed-upon defence spending benchmark. What is more, by virtue of their geography, they bring to the table distinctive capabilities in cyber, intelligence, and strategic communications. Bluntly stated, the security guarantor role that the USA has assumed over these nations is by no means an act of philanthropy.

This is not to say that critics have it all wrong and that formal alliances should be treated as sacrosanct objects. As Kori Schake has aptly pointed out, despite his many flaws, President Trump was actually quite good at “poking holes in pieties” and provoking important questions regarding America’s sprawling alliances.¹⁰² Most certainly, alliances do impose certain costs on the US taxpayer and there are inherent risks to their maintenance. Small frontline states, in particular, may require regular US demonstrations of resolve vis-à-vis their regional challengers. On the balance, however, the depiction of the US-Baltic alliance as a one-sided construct, where the Gulliver protects the Lilliput and gets nothing in return for that, misses the mark entirely. Legitimate points over various flaws of alliances should not obscure the fact that the USA receives significant dividends from them. The presented analysis has hopefully enriched the conversation by specifying numerous forms of value that junior allies provide for the USA.

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