

**July 20, 1997**  
**Memo from Ronald Asmus to Strobe Talbott,**  
**'Hanseatic Strategy'**

**Citation:**

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**Summary:**

This July 1997 memo outlines a proposed "Hanseatic Strategy" to support future NATO membership for the Baltic states. Acknowledging political resistance within the US and NATO, concerns over defensibility, and Russian opposition, the memo proposes a three-part strategy.

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July 20, 1997

To: ST  
From: RDA  
Subject: The Hanseatic Strategy

Thanks for your note from last week. I'm a bit tardy in responding, in part due to illness. But we have started working on the various strategy papers. I'll start with some thoughts on the Hanseatic strategy and follow up on Southeastern Europe tomorrow.

My premise is that our policy goal is to create the circumstances under which it will be possible to bring the Baltics into NATO based on the Talbott principle that this historical process is not complete unless and until we have included the Balts.

My own sense is that we crossed an important threshold in recent weeks. Heretofore we have had what I would call a passive NATO enlargement strategy where our focus has been to emphasize that the Balts are not excluded. But we did not have an operational strategy aimed at eventually getting them in. We are now moving to a more active strategy designed to create the circumstances under which we could bring the Baltics into NATO. The \$64,000 question is what it will take to make that possible.

### **The Obstacles**

Let's start by acknowledging the obstacles. First, today we have the support for the Baltic membership in NATO neither in the Alliance or at home in the U.S. Senate. The political lineup on the Baltic issue is quite different than, for example, on Poland. (Remember the 'Asmus Four Glass Theory on the Politics of Baltic NATO Membership?') In a nutshell, right-wing Republicans want to bring them in now; Bush Republicans and Democratic defense hawks say never; Democratic internationalist such as you and me say yes in principle but not now; and liberal Democratic arms controllers say it's not worth risking the arms control agenda with Moscow because of the Baltic issue.

As a result, we find ourselves facing opposition on the left and the right-- with some Republicans accusing us of not going far enough and others of

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going too far. Unless and until we can bridge that divide, we will never have 67 votes in the U.S. Senate. The key swing vote is what I have called the "Bush Republicans and Democratic defense hawks."

In the Alliance, the Baltics enjoy the support of the plucky Danes, the reserved Norwegians and will have the support of the Poles once they are in. The UK as well as the Southern tier allies generally oppose it. Germany remains the pivotal state. Kohl opposes it but there are growing noises from in his own party as well as elsewhere that Germany must take a more active stance to help the Balts. At Madrid, Kohl also acknowledged for the first time Germany's historic responsibility resulting from the Hitler-Stalin Pact.

Second, one reason we don't have enough support either at home or in the Alliance is because of the defensibility issue. While NATO enlargement is not aimed against Russia, we have also always said that we must be willing and able to carry out Article V commitments in case something does go wrong. In the Baltic case, their small size, lack of strategic depth and geographic proximity to Russian power all add up to make this a rather daunting task.

Much of mainstream NATO strategic thinking considers the Baltics indefensible. Indeed, this is also why many in our own domestic debate oppose Baltic membership. While acknowledging the difficulty of defending the Baltic states, one should also note that many Nordic strategists do not consider the Baltics indefensible--or at least not more indefensible than they are. (The Chief of Staff of the Finnish Armed Forces, Gustav Haeggglund, always jokes with me that the Nordic countries should form their own 'Indefensibility Club.") These guys think about deterrence in a more subtle way than we do. They also have spent more time looking at Russian capabilities in Northern Europe which are not always as overwhelming as some people assume.

If we want to bring the Balts into NATO, however, we will have to neutralize this issue as much as possible. The best way of doing that is, as we have discussed, to get the Finns and/or Swedes to join NATO themselves which would mitigate the problem of lack of strategic depth, force NATO to think about a defense perimeter that would de facto include the Baltics anyway, etc. At a minimum, we need to get our guys to start

thinking about this issue, and perhaps talking to some Nordic strategists to better understand their thinking.

Third, the Russian factor permeates the Baltic issues. It is not just the fact that Baltic membership is such a neuralgic issue in Russian politics. There are a host of issues that flow from the last fifty years of history-- the borders, the status of the Russian minority, Kaliningrad, etc.--that all impact upon the prospects of eventual Baltic membership. While we say that Russia does not have a veto over enlargement, the political reality is that many allies are loath to push the Baltic issue for fear of the Russian response. One key, therefore, is to get the Russians to stop thinking in zero-sum terms think about NATO enlargement in general as well as vis-à-vis the Baltics in particular.

The end result is that we have a stalemate on the Baltic issue in the Alliance. There is enough support to "do something" for the Balts-- e.g. mention them in the communiqué--but not enough to actually bring them in. Our policy, therefore, must aim at introducing a new dynamic into the equation that makes possible what today seems impossible.

### **The Scenarios**

You asked me to spell out some illustrative scenarios under which it might be possible to bring the Baltics into NATO. Let me just mention three and then transition to the elements of our strategy.

#### **Scenario 1: Chubaisism Triumphs.**

We discussed this scenario at Madrid. It would be wonderful. It is one of the few scenarios I can imagine where we could bring the Balts in without the help of the Nordics. Unfortunately, it is not very likely. And it means that in practice the Russians do have a veto.

#### **Scenario 2: Russia Goes Sour.**

The other extreme, is a scenario where Russia turns nationalist and revanchist. This could conceivably create a new coalition in the Alliance in favor of bringing the Balts, who would presumably now be directly threatened, into NATO. But my fear is that such a scenario would only

further polarize the West, highlight the defensibility dilemma and leave the Alliance more divided than ever on what to do.

### **Scenario 3: Muddling Through**

This scenario would have Russia stumbling forward in its reform efforts while remaining skeptical about NATO enlargement and specifically opposed to Baltic entry. This is perhaps the most likely scenario. It means that we cannot expect a sea change in Russian attitudes to solve the Baltic issue for us. Instead, we have to try to engineer that sea change ourselves while also working two additional independent variables in the equation.

### **The Strategy**

Our strategy should have three components: 1) make the Balts the strongest possible candidates in the years ahead by helping them address their own political and military shortcomings; 2) woo the Nordics into possibly joining the Alliance both to change the political dynamics of the debate and to mitigate the defensibility issue; and 3) implement the Hanseatic strategy to take the sting out of possible Baltic entry into NATO with the Russians *and* get them to start thinking in non-zero sum terms.

On the first, we will need ongoing and clear support for Baltic aspirations to join NATO along with an active policy of helping them to qualify under both baskets of criteria--domestic reform aimed at strengthening their democratic institutions, including the full integration of the Russian minority, as well as helping them build the willingness and capability to become real contributors to NATO.

Of all the Partner countries, these countries have the furthest to go in terms of their own military. What should we do? My own menu consists of the following: 1) upgrade BALTBAT into a brigade-equivalent force as evidence that they can be producers as well as consumers of security; 2) a parallel program to help the Baltics upgrade their national defense forces; and 3) bring them into CFE and use the negotiations to help stabilize the Northern region. (In particular, this means not exempting Russian TLE in Kaliningrad and ensuring that constraints on temporary deployed forces not be so low as to preclude reinforcement to the Baltic states from, for

example, Poland.) Bringing them into CFE which will establish low but internationally sanctioned TLE limits for their national defense forces.

Second, I have followed up on your conversations with Lipponen, Haekkerup et al on the desirability of Finland and Sweden joining NATO with some lower-level discussions of my own. I sense some possible movement. At a minimum, these issues are now under active review. We need to develop a subtle approach that encourages such movement while avoiding any trace of real or imagined U.S. pressure.

Third, we need to develop our own thinking on the Hanseatic strategy as quickly as possible and then establish a work plan to implement it. Initial responses from a variety of sources have been quite positive. Before we go any further, we need to get a better sense of precisely what kinds of initiatives we want to support. More on this later.

### **Next Steps**

1) This strategy has to be up and running this fall. The clock is ticking on 1999. In order to avoid a Baltic panic regarding the second round of enlargement, we have to have a tangible strategy in place and yielding concrete fruit in order to give them the confidence to sit our round two and wait for round three.

2) The right place and time to officially launch our strategy *is* Bergen in September. The agenda for the meeting already includes our issues: the post-Madrid agenda, regional cooperation, Russia, etc. I think the 5+3+1 format is ideal doe the first step in launching this strategy.

I still favor asking the Norwegians to move the date a couple of days to accommodate MKA or you. But we can certainly work your idea of a speech via video with me or someone else on the ground for Q and A. I do not think it makes sense to send either Stu or Tim until we have established the foundation of our strategy. They should then follow up on specific pieces of the agenda. Bergen is too early for that

3) I will be in Denmark August 11-12 and may add brief stops in Oslo, Sweden and Helsinki. I would like to use this trip to get briefed up on their experiences in cross-border cooperation with Russia (i.e., what works and

what does not) as well as better understand their views on defensibility. If we are going to launch in early September, this is also the time to pre-brief and consult with key friends whose support we will need. We should also be talking to the UK, German and Poles--and, of course, the Russians.

I will share this memo with Toria. The next step is to develop a real strategy paper that could serve as the basis for a Bergen speech. We will then develop talking points to use for discussions. The Nordic concern, especially in the Swedish and Finnish cases, will be the fear that this is (again) a kind of regionalization of Nordic security that will saddle them with responsibilities and guarantees that are not willing or able to assume. That will need to be countered by a sense of high level U.S. commitment. That's why I think it is essential at this juncture to lay out our strategy in its totality--and then follow up with individual parts. If we try to push segment so of our agenda without our interlocutors comprehending the full picture, we will run into trouble.