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Remarks before Helsinki Commission - "Baltic Security After the Warsaw NATO Summit"

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By Karl Altau



The following remarks were given on December 7, 2016, at a briefing by the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, better known as the Helsinki Commission). Other experts who spoke at the hearing were Michael Johnson, Senior Defense Analyst at the RAND Corporation, and Magnus Nordenman, Director of the Transatlantic Security Initiative, and Deputy Director of the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security at the Atlantic Council of the United States.

My name is Karl Altau, and I'm the Managing Director of the Joint Baltic American National Committee, Inc., known also by our acronym JBANC. JBANC represents the primary Baltic-American National organizations – the American Latvian Association, the Estonian American National Council, and the Lithuanian American Council. We were founded in 1961 and are celebrating our 55th anniversary this year.

We represent one million Baltic-Americans and have worked closely with Congress, the Administration and its agencies in that half century to enhance United States policy towards Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

I'd like to thank the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe [Helsinki Commission] for hosting this very important and timely briefing focusing on Security and the Baltic countries. We've worked very closely with the Commission on supporting the passage of the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act and the Magnitsky legislation. We are also supporting our Ukrainian friends in their time of need.

Today, however, we need to get back to our Baltic roots, and talk about the new reality of deterring Russian aggression and dealing with the increasing provocations of Moscow. There haven't really been any Baltic-focused public briefings or hearings for a long time, mainly because the region has been a positive model and success story. Today's briefing coincides with a coordinated visit of Baltic parliamentarians to Washington, and to Congress. I'd like to acknowledge some of my Baltic-American colleagues and Baltic embassy representatives who are here today, along with board members of the Baltic American Freedom Foundation, an organization doing great work in providing practical work experience in the United States for young professionals from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

The Baltics have been doing their job – particularly as NATO allies since their admission to NATO in 2004. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been eager and active partners in NATO and with the United States. We see these positive relationships mirrored here in the United States daily.

In the past, we fought for decades to help raise awareness about the Baltic countries and their plight behind the Iron Curtain and to help see the countries of our heritage restore independence. It can't be repeated enough - one of the key elements for the duration of that time was the Welles Declaration, the U.S. policy to not recognize the Soviet annexation of the Baltic countries. It was a principled and morally correct policy that stood for 50 years.

The Baltic-American communities worked very hard to support the aspirations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to become NATO members. One of the highpoints was collecting over 25,000 signatures from all 50 states, plus Washington, DC and Puerto Rico, in a year-long campaign to ask the President to help ensure that the Baltics are invited to join NATO at the 2002 Prague Summit. Baltic-American representatives across the country came to the White House on September 10, 2001, to deliver those petitions. The results of seeing Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania join the Alliance was something we all took great pride and joy in. We are grateful that they have punched above their weight, and that they remain strong adherents of Alliance principles. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are active and capable contributors to our joint defense and defenders of Western standards and democracy.

We've all heard the phrase that "freedom is not free." It is something to constantly improve upon, with many tweaks along the way. We don't want to see those freedoms, Western values, and the framework of the relationship with NATO jeopardized. However, with Russia's revanchist aggression, we are now experiencing the most difficult challenges we have faced in the 25 years of restored independence.

There have been difficult times before with Russia's offensive actions – from energy cutoffs in Lithuania, the 2007 cyber-attacks against Estonia, continuing disinformation campaigns targeting Latvia. Russia's war against Georgia in 2008 was more than an omen. The Kremlin's calculations, it appeared, led down a rocky road which eventually manifested again with the events in Ukraine. Soon, there will be three years of war there – with daily bloodshed and no end in sight. Crimea is occupied, and the info wars have ramped up to new heights. Have we done everything to counter this aggression?

Has NATO met the challenges? While we saw some issues incrementally addressed at previous Summits in Chicago in 2012 and Wales in 2014, the

response from this summer's Warsaw Summit was certainly a more serious adjustment of priorities. There, NATO stated it was fully prepared to defend the alliance and pledged an increase in military spending in response to Russia's unpredictable and aggressive behavior in the region.

I'm sure the other two panelists will give a closer look at the details and how these moves fit.

So, what can WE do? First, we must ensure that U.S. defense funding needs are met. Second is to ensure the transition to a Trump Administration that fully understands and supports these goals. Third is to continue to recognize Russia's threats as a whole and to support U.S. efforts to address these threats.

(1) JBANC has been urging swift passage of the \$3.4 billion European Reassurance Initiative in the Defense bill, and we're happy to see additional funding being provided for Overseas contingencies. ERI has been a response to increasing Russian aggression and supports increased U.S. investment in five areas: 1) presence, 2) training and exercises, 3) infrastructure, 4) prepositioned equipment, and 5) building partner capacity.

We aren't excited about the prospect of a Continuing Resolution lasting well into spring - we'd prefer longer-term planning and commitment – but we do see ample evidence that there is overwhelming support in Congress for addressing Russia's rising militarism. It is imperative to send the message that the United States means business and that we will continue to stand against tyranny. While our NATO allies Britain, Canada, and Germany are establishing high readiness combat battalions in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, respectively, it is vital to continue showing the U.S. flag in the Baltic countries as well, with ongoing increased forward presence - regular rotational deployments, operations, exercises, and more. We can't forget the key National Guard relationships. Nor the important Nordic relationships.

(2) As we reach out to the new Trump administration, we are reminded about statements made which question the purpose and existence of NATO, and the commitment of its members. JBANC stands firm in its belief that NATO and America's commitment to its NATO allies is fundamental to ensuring U.S. and European security, and urges the next Administration to continue to support all NATO allies, including the Baltic countries, and reaffirm commitment to the Treaty's Article V.

The Baltic countries are undeniably strong in their commitments to NATO and fully understand what is at stake. Although challenged in fully rebuilding their militaries over the past 25 years, they have worked to fulfill their NATO obligations. Estonia spends over 2% of GDP of pledged defensive expenditures, and while currently just under 2%, Latvia and Lithuania have been increasing their military budgets more rapidly than any of the other NATO members over the past few years, and will be reaching that threshold soon. There has been rock-solid commitment and engagement by the Baltic countries in supporting NATO and U.S.-led actions.

The Alliance faces increasing unconventional threats. It is imperative for allies to share their collective knowledge in key security areas – whether cyber, strategic communication, or in the energy security sphere. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania make substantial contributions in all of these areas.

The United States cannot allow any weakening of resolve or commitment to our allies. The ironclad long-lasting leadership of the United States in NATO is critically important. Baltic-Americans particularly understand the importance of effective U.S. leadership in supporting these alliances.

Together with our partners, the Central and East European Coalition, we represent not just three, but 13 communities in the U.S. and more than 20 million Central and Eastern European Americans. Together, we strongly back the United States' continued unconditional commitment to upholding the NATO Treaty as well as U.S. support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all Central and Eastern European nations. The organization stands firm in its belief that America's close cooperation with all NATO allies and partners is fundamental to ensuring U.S. and European security.

We are reminded of the words of then-NATO Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Philip Breedlove, who stated at a hearing of the U.S. House Armed Services Committee in February this year that "Russia has chosen to be an adversary and poses a long-term existential threat to the United States and to our European allies and partners." Earlier this year the CEEC sponsored a policy forum on NATO's stance on Russia on Capitol Hill. A major theme of the discussion characterized Russia's increasing aggression since 2008 not only in terms of fanning regional conflicts but as a fundamental assault on the post-World War II international order.

(3) Russia's ongoing wars are of the greatest concern. I personally feel that the Putin and Assad regimes should be investigated for war crimes in their bombing campaigns in Syria. However, Moscow's crimes against Ukraine are also horrible and must not be ignored. Having Russian missiles deployed to Kaliningrad within striking distance of capitals in Poland, Germany, the Baltics, and Belarus is very worrying. Russia's actions have the potential to escalate to a wider European conflict. Our efforts to deter such threats now are critical. In addition, Russia's unrelenting disinformation campaign and other hybrid threats of destabilization put all of our allies at great peril.

While the legislation to support military funding is finalized, we must also remember to support efforts to stymie Russian disinformation, to support sanctions against the Putin regime to uphold human rights through the Global Magnitsky Act, and to support Ukraine, particularly now via H.R. 5094, the Stability and Democracy (STAND) for Ukraine Act. This helps push for sanctions against Russia and supports Ukraine's territorial integrity, particularly the non-recognition of Crimea's annexation.

We look forward to working with all of you in the coming year to ensure the continued security, stability, and well-being of the Baltic countries as NATO allies and partners. Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.

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Photo: Alex Tiersky (CSCE), Magnus Nordenman, Karl Altau, Michael Johnson, Scott Rauland (CSCE). Courtesy Peter Ragauss.