

The Baltic States in NATO's Enlargement Strategy

Klaus-Peter Klaiber*

Every time I come here I can witness firsthand the dynamics of change - positive change. The regeneration of the old town in Vilnius is indeed a marvel. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union the Baltic Sea region has become an ever more vibrant region - politically, socially and economically. New relationships have been forged not only with the littoral states of the Baltic Sea, but indeed between the Baltic states and the wider world. It is with no exaggeration that the area can be termed a model for regional cooperation. This intensifying regional cooperation testifies to the new dynamics, as does the U.S.-Baltic Charter, the involvement of the OSCE and the Council of Europe, and, of course, of the European Union and NATO.

In the case of Lithuania and the Baltic states generally the integration process has already progressed far. Their Europe Association agreements with the EU, their active participation in Partnership for Peace, their close association with the Western European Union, and their membership in the Council of Europe - all these are signs that the Baltic states are becoming a visible part of a successful and cooperative Euro-Atlantic area. In other words, the integration process is well underway. Today, the Baltic area is firmly linked to the dynamics of European integration.

While the speed of these developments is still surprising, the overall thrust is only logical. After all, the Baltic states are part of Europe. Their forced inclusion into the Soviet Union did not change this fact. We all remember that even before the final disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Baltic states were the first countries to successfully reassert their identity and independence. With such a strong attachment to the European values of freedom and independence, it was clear that the Baltic states would quickly re-establish political, cultural, and economic ties with all European countries, as befits their historic European heritage.

But Europe is more than a concept, or a geographic space. The Europe of today also expresses itself in the institutions it has created. Belonging to Europe, therefore, inevitably raises the question of membership in institutions - in the European Union, and, of course, in NATO.

This brings me to the main part of my remarks, NATO's enlargement process. I would like to focus on three aspects of this process: its rationale, its evolution, and the role of the Baltic states in it. In such an audience, I do not have to dwell at length on NATO's rationale for enlargement. Suffice it to say that enlargement and an enlarged alliance is an integral part of a new Europe. A Europe in which the ideological and military dividing lines have been removed will naturally grow together, and we see the admission of new members to NATO as part of this process. Indeed, not to enlarge would be to perpetuate an implicit division of Europe - between a self-confident, secure West, and an uncertain, insecure East. That would be a bad omen for Europe's future.

So much for the objectives. Now to the process. Again, you know the basic facts. At our Madrid Summit last year we invited the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to join. Ratification in our member parliaments is well underway, with only three outstanding ratifications. Next year, at our Washington Summit, we hope to formally welcome the three invitees into NATO.

* Ambassador, NATO Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs.

At this Summit we will also consider future direction. It is too early to speculate on the outcome. Yet a few things are clear.

First, NATO enlargement is an open process, not an overnight event. This means that enlargement will not “end” after the first three new members have joined. It also means that each country will be considered on its merits, regardless of its geographical location. And it means that the Individual Dialogue will continue.

Second, NATO enlargement does not take place without reference to other European developments.

The enlargement of the European Union is one such development. We have consistently said that the enlargement of the European Union and the enlargement of NATO are parallel and complementary processes. Not, perhaps, in exact timing or in how the decision-making processes work, but certainly in terms of overall objectives.

The NATO-Russia relationship is another critical development. We at NATO must continue to work with Russia to ensure that Russia understands the role we seek to play and to help Russia come to grips with its post-Soviet reality. Fortunately, after a long period of hesitation, we have moved in the direction we desired. The NATO-Russia Founding Act and the Permanent Joint Council have set the stage for a new era of NATO-Russia relations.

Russia is going through a daunting period of transition. Events over the last few days have demonstrated that once again with brutal reality. I do not believe, however, that the current changes should lead Russia away from its path of cooperation with the West. As far as NATO is concerned, we believe that cooperation is the only option to cope with the challenges we face.

Third, enlargement is only one part of NATO’s adaptation. By no means must it assume the role of a “single overriding issue.” Indeed, a look to the Balkans demonstrates the need for NATO and non-nations to act together in a concrete crisis situation. We thus have to develop the mechanisms that allow for such cooperation irrespective of membership. In other words, enlargement must and has been accompanied by a parallel strengthening of the PfP and the EAPC.

Finally, let me now turn to the role of the Baltic states in NATO’s enlargement process. Although they were not invited to join the Alliance at Madrid, the Summit Declaration noted the progress made towards greater stability and cooperation by the states in the Baltic region. Indeed, the steps that the Baltic States have taken are impressive:

First of all, the Baltic States remain committed to the Individual Dialogue with NATO. As a forum for providing high-quality enlargement related information to the Allies, on issues such as relations with neighbors and progress in defense reforms, it is invaluable. All three Baltic States have held intensified dialogue sessions this year with both a NATO Team led by myself and also with the North Atlantic Council.

Second, the Baltic States have improved their relations with the EU to the point of Estonia entering into accession negotiations. There can also be no doubt of their commitment to improving relations with Russia. And the Baltic States and their partners have set a model for multinational military cooperation through pioneering initiatives such as the Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion, BALTBAT. The formation of this Peacekeeping Battalion and the other important initiatives undertaken have been a demonstration that the Baltic states have made regional and international cooperation an integral part of their security policy. When we also consider the very active engagement of the Baltic States in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and Partnership for Peace, the record is impressive.

The Baltic States have also proved their commitment to wider security concerns through their contribution on the ground in Bosnia. The role of the Baltic states in the NATO enlargement process is thus a special one. The commitment of the Baltic states to European and Atlantic values and their commitment to continue on the path of ever closer cooperation, both regionally and internationally, is beyond doubt.

As promised at last year's Madrid Summit, NATO is committed to reviewing the enlargement process at next year's Washington Summit. All the factors that were mentioned will be carefully considered as part of that review process.

The three Baltic states are located at the northern edge of Europe. This location has brought many invasions and occupations over the course of history. But geography is no longer destiny. The Baltic States' journey is not yet complete. But the course is clear - and irreversible.