

THE SECURITY DIMENSION OF CZECH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD LITHUANIA, LATVIA, AND ESTONIA

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The Czech Republic and Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia share the same foreign policy priorities: membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. This would mean integration in the zone of stability and prosperity and a return to the democratic values which had earlier left imprints in these countries' subconscious historical memory. While the Czech Republic has become a NATO member and started the negotiation process with the EU, the Baltic countries (with the exception of Estonia in respect to the EU) still have a long way to go to meeting these priorities. The foregoing statement may sound self-complacent for the Czech Republic, but it realizes that building a new European security and economic space will not bring the results desired if the ambitions of other European countries are ignored for a long time. Remembering the Baltic countries' integration ambitions and assisting them as much as possible to attain them is a moral obligation for the Czech Republic. It also is a prerequisite for prosperity all over Europe, not only in the space immediately surrounding us.

Czech foreign policy has therefore begun "investing" more attention and efforts into the Baltic states, thereby trying to dismantle the myths that the Baltics are the most guarded secret of Europe. The end of the Cold War has made possible for central Europe the gradual reintegration within the family of advanced European democracies. The end of the Cold War reminded us of the rich ties that had existed between "this space and the rest of Europe" since ancient times. These ties were torn by the forceful union with the former Soviet Union which decimated democratically-minded populations for decades through liquidation and exile. Despite this painful experience of the 20th century Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia step into the next century with a stigma marking them as a region declared to be the object of the Russian Federation's direct security interests. It is the only spot in Europe around which Russian generals organize military exercises directed against NATO. This is also why the Baltics represent the "security seam" of Europe, on the durability and quality of which the stability of the entire continent depends.

The NATO and EU are not "communicating vessels" and it would not be fair to present them as such. Nevertheless, the question asked by the Baltic states ever since they regained their independence has been who will be the first one to let them through an "open" door. They try to go out of their way to meet the requirements for membership and miss no opportunity to test Europe's readiness to open its arms, although the level of their own preparedness varies. For instance, Estonia is objectively the best prepared for entering the EU while Lithuania is more ready to join NATO. The response of both of these organizations has so far been somewhat hesitant. Concerns about Russia's reactions (in the case of NATO) and the need to take over many outstanding problems (in the case of the EU) - such as the Chernobyl-design Ignalina nuclear power plant in Lithuania - may play a role here. The current development of the European security policy, particularly the "thawing" of the Western European Union and the formation of the EU's common security and defense policy brings new life to the three Baltic countries' interest in NATO membership. For the Baltics, the Membership Action Plan adopted at the Alliance's Washington summit meeting has become an impetus to intensify their preparations at home for accession to NATO.

The Baltic states are well aware of their situation, particularly their security situation. They sense that they are a kind of a laboratory because we now want to provide them with security but without jeopardizing our own. They realized some time ago that they would have to rely mainly on their own efforts, and have therefore placed emphasis on mutual cooperation. Over the past few years, they have succeeded in creating a model of ideally functioning regional and sub-regional cooperation. They have managed to involve not only the Scandinavian countries and the U.S. in this scheme, but also the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation. This Baltic cooperation has all but erased the bilateral nature of their mutual relations, replacing it with a trilateral approach. This is not an end in itself but a means for subsequent, as successful as possible, integration into European and Euro-Atlantic economic, political, and defense structures.

Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have achieved good results primarily in the military sphere. They have formed a joint peacekeeping battalion (BALTBAT), a joint navy unit (BALTRON), a joint system of airspace monitoring (BALTNET), and a joint military school (BALTDEFCOL). They have also sent their troops to serve within SFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to their Chiefs of Staff, the recent military exercise of the Baltic countries, "Baltic Hope" (Klaipėda, August 1999), was a promise for future joint action also in armaments procurement for their armies.

All the three states build their forces "on the green field", but there is no question that Lithuania has made the greatest progress in this respect. It can boast of the attention which Lithuanian politicians devote to the development of the armed forces, of the well-defined priorities placing "man" first and "equipment" only second, and also of the funds allocated to support the meeting of such priorities. In December 1998 Lithuania passed a law on the gradual increase in military spending, which is to reach 2 per cent of the GDP by 2001. Estonia and Latvia have recently made commitments to a similar growth: Estonia - 2 per cent by 2002, Latvia - 2 per cent by 2003.

Czech foreign policy closely follows the efforts of the three Baltic countries to join NATO. Despite a logical (or strategic) emphasis on Slovakia, it uses all opportunities to make the Baltics aware of its support for their membership in NATO. In addition to the mentioned primary reasons for its interest in the security dimension of its relations with Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the Czech Republic also has a number of other supporting reasons. It also wants to strengthen the traditional relations between our countries as well as to intensify mutually advantageous trade exchanges. By promoting partnership relations, it wants to lay a solid foundation for our relations as allies, be it in NATO or the EU (the need for small countries to cooperate in these integration groupings is beyond any doubt). The Czech Republic feels the need to define its "eastern policy" also in this way, and through it to promote constructive relations with Russia, but also with the Ukraine and the democratic representatives of Belarus. Finally, a less than modest observation: who else should cooperate with NATO membership applicants (as the Baltics were described at the NATO summit in April) than the new NATO members who by now have formed the most comprehensive picture of what it means not to be born in NATO but to join NATO?!

It is for these reasons that Czech foreign policy seeks to implement a whole range of specific cooperation forms. In respect to the relations between the Czech Republic and Lithuania, these include among others:

- donating military materials for the armed forces (the Czech Government has already endorsed such free-of-charge transfers to Lithuania two times);
- opening positions for students at military colleges (eight or nine Lithuanian officers every year);

- providing available documentation on the activities of the Czech Government's Committee for the Czech Republic's Integration in the NATO (using this documentation, Lithuania has set up its own inter-ministerial coordination commission for NATO);

- consultations on the Lithuanian national program of integration into NATO (response to the Membership Action Plan) as well as providing information about the accession talks between the Czech Republic and NATO; and also

- joint action in the peacekeeping humanitarian operation in Albania (ten Lithuanian medical experts serve with Czech personnel in a military field hospital).

Examples of initiatives planned and/or prepared:

- Long-term visits of a Czech Army military expert to the Lithuanian Ministry of Defense (or rather, consecutive short-term visits by Czech military experts focusing on various areas of the Defense Ministry's preparations for NATO membership);

- Consultations on military legislation (and other events and exchange visits under the program of bilateral cooperation between the Czech and Lithuanian Defense Ministries);

- Exchange of experience between the Security Councils of the two countries;

- Consultations on crisis management issues emphasizing the position and role of the strategic reserves institution;

- Consultations on the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty and the reporting about Czech experience with the operation of the verification center;

- Cooperation between the two National Security Offices focusing on the protection of classified information;

- Cooperation in armaments procurement through future exchanges of relevant information about the potential of the respective domestic defense industries.

In many of these areas and initiatives, Lithuania is the first and/or the only country with which Czech foreign policy has started this form of cooperation. To maintain its current fast pace and to extend it to other areas, the Czech Republic and Lithuania have developed a mechanism of "round tables". In a way, this is a junior form of the highly appreciated Czech-Polish format of 2+2 relations (foreign and defense ministers), whose functioning should help to intensify considerably the influence of Czech foreign policy in Lithuania and, in turn, in the whole region of the Baltic states. Our foreign policy has thus been given a flexible platform for creative brainstorming and the coordination of joint actions. Round tables at the level of Vice-Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense should be held two times a year as a rule. The first such meeting devoted to security issues was hosted by Prague on June 25, 1999. The second will be organized in Vilnius at the end of this year. Many other round table meetings on different issues and at different levels are being prepared and specified in more detail. The addition of the Parliamentary dimension to the round tables is being planned.

When the Czech Republic conducted talks with the Alliance on accession to NATO, our future allies told us: "You will enter a different (new) NATO than you intended." Paradoxically enough, the Czech Republic will be saying the same thing to the Baltic states. This applies not only to new NATO missions but also to relations with the Russian Federation. We face two tasks in this respect. One is to remind the Baltic countries of the need to meet one of the criteria for NATO membership - good relations with neighbors. The other is gradually to convince both Russian politicians and the Russian general public that the Baltic states are for them a gate leading outward rather than a path for invasion directed inward. To convince them to delete gradually the red line they have painted over the western border of the Baltic countries between their

sphere of influence and an expanding NATO. Convincing the Russian Federation about the positive effects of expanding the zone of stability while rejecting its “thinking” that ‘what is positive for the Alliance is negative for Russia’ is the only way to erase this red line completely. In this respect, the Czech Republic follows the pragmatic approach of ‘do unto others as you want others do unto you’, and will therefore refuse any third-party veto concerning any country’s freedom to choose its own security basis.

The Kosovo crisis has shown how unpredictable a partner Russia still remains. However, it has also validated Russia’s role in crisis management and shown that, ultimately, common language with Russia can be found. Russia must not be ignored, if only because the reactions of someone who is cornered are even less predictable. The Baltic countries realize this clearly and for instance Lithuania can boast of its positive cooperation with the Russian Federation by involving Russia’s Kaliningrad Oblast in regional cooperation.

Assuming that NATO enlargement is not the reaction to a threat but the reflection of efforts to expand the zone of stability, the conclusion is very clear: the Baltic states should be given an opportunity to become our allies within the Alliance, while taking into account their will and degree of preparedness, i.e. meeting the relevant criteria. Czech foreign policy should help the Baltic countries smooth out the crooked mirror of their historical destiny. The Czech Republic’s specific importance vis-à-vis this region lies in its special responsibility for keeping up the momentum of NATO enlargement; the Czech Republic also has an opportunity to share its unique experience preparing for NATO membership with the Baltic states. The efforts of the Czech Republic to convince the Alliance to add the status of “NATO Contact Embassy” to our local embassies is yet another concrete manifestation of the active security dimension of the Czech foreign policy to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. At the same time, this approach would not be feasible without the very close and successful cooperation between the Foreign and Defense Ministries in carrying out such policies.