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US Military Policy in Poland and the Baltics: To Stay or Not to Stay

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In the decades following the end of the Cold War, relations between the United States and Russia have been anything but warm. While the two countries have found ways to collaborate in areas of mutual interest, leaders have debated over a variety of topics in which the countries have competing interests. These include nuclear proliferation, NATO alliance expansion, involvement in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet sphere, and more recently, obstruction of democratic liberal processes.

One of the main battlegrounds between US and Russian competing interests is the region of Poland and the Baltic States. The tug-of-war for influence in this region dates back to the mid-twentieth century during the Cold War. Poland was under heavy control of the Soviet bloc until 1989 when it was able to break away and create a more independent government. Similarly, the three Baltic States that were occupied by Soviet troops throughout the Cold War gained recognition of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and Soviet troops withdrew from the three countries in the following years. Since then, both Russia and the United States have taken an interest in fostering support from these four countries to assist in their competing interests.

The United States has a vested interest in the success of democracy in Poland and the Baltic States for several reasons. First, the United States has an interest in the success of democracy abroad, which includes Eastern Europe, where democracy is young and not firmly established. Also, since these countries are full NATO members, the United States is obligated to defend them in the event of an invasion from Russia. Finally, the presence of the United States in Poland and the Baltic States is a deterring force against Russian aggression.

Based on these key interests, the United States should increase the number of military troops in the region by 50 percent contingent on the increase of support from Western European

countries and an increase of 50 percent in defense spending in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This new policy will deter Russian aggression, strengthen democratic ties in the region, and reassure allies of the importance of their security from the perspective of the United States. It also has the best chance of limiting Russian counteractions and bolstering Western European support of the current proposed policies.

This paper will proceed as follows. First, I will give a brief background of the history of Poland and the Baltic States as it relates to US and Russian involvement. Then, I will describe the interests the United States has in Poland and the Baltic States and analyze why they are important to US national security. Next, I will outline three potential policies scholars and diplomats have proposed to achieve US interests in the region and describe the potential efficacy of each one. Finally, I will propose the policy that will be in the best interest of the United States and the four regional countries.

Background:

The United States has supported Poland and the three Baltic states since their earliest days of independence in 1918. Throughout the Cold War, the United States voiced its disapproval of the unjust control the Soviet Union held over these countries.¹ US leaders refused to recognize Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as part of the Soviet Union. Instead, they repeatedly referred to these countries as independent countries occupied by Soviet troops.² The United States provided significant support in the 1990s as each of these countries worked to establish liberal democratic governments.

¹ Richard A. Schnorf, "The Baltic States in US-Soviet Relations from Truman to Johnson," *Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1968). https://www.lituanus.org/1968/68_3_03Schnorf.html.

² Ibid.

Part of the US plan to integrate these young democratic countries into the Western world was to provide a clear path for them to accede to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to provide further security protection.³ In 1999, only ten years after freeing itself from the Soviet bloc, Poland joined NATO. Five years later, in 2004, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined as well. This greatly upset Russian leaders, who were under the impression US leaders had promised that NATO would not expand to include former Warsaw Pact countries.⁴ Russia viewed these events as a threat to its regional control. However, Russian troops refused to respond with military action, fearing to spark conflict with NATO member states.

More recently, Russian aggression has grown in the countries bordering Russia. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia to have a deciding hand in the war over Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁵ This caused NATO to respond by increasing navy presence in the Black Sea. In 2014, Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. This followed years of political tension over pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian leadership.⁶ In November 2020, Russian peacekeeping troops returned to the Caucasus region to help settle the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. While the two sides were able to reach a peace agreement, Russian troops have remained in the region and are expected to remain there for at least the next five years.⁷ These events show Russia is ready and willing to deploy troops to foreign countries in order to control its interests in the near abroad.

³ James B. Steinberg and Philip H. Gordon, "NATO Enlargement: Moving Forward; Expanding the Alliance and Completing Europe's Integration," *Brookings Institute*, November 15, 2001. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/nato-enlargement-moving-forward-expanding-the-alliance-and-completing-europe-integration/>.

⁴ Mary Elise Sarotte, "A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion," *Foreign Affairs*, (September/October 2014). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-11/broken-promise>.

⁵ Grzegorz Kuczynski, "NATO-Russia Relations: The Return of the Enemy," *Warsaw Institute*, April 4, 2019. <https://warsawinstitute.org/nato-russia-relations-return-enemy/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Raja Adulrahim, "Russia's Role in Enforcing Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh Stirs Hopes, Bitterness," *Wall Street Journal*, November 28, 2020.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-role-in-enforcing-peace-in-nagorno-karabakh-stirs-hopes-bitterness-11606572000>.

In response to increased Russian aggression, NATO members agreed in 2016 to send military troops to Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania called the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP).⁸ These troops were to reassure the countries of NATO's willingness to provide protection and deter Russia from further aggression in the region. By the summer of 2017, 1,100 UK-led troops were deployed to Estonia, 1,138 Canadian-led troops were deployed to Latvia, 1,022 German-led troops were sent to Lithuania, and 1,270 US-led troops were sent to Poland.⁹ While the number of EFP troops has increased dramatically in recent years, US military presence in the region is still small compared to the tens of thousands of US troops spread throughout Western Europe. Since the deployment of EFP troops, a debate has arisen among scholars and policymakers over whether more should be done to ensure security in the region.

US Interest in Poland and the Baltic States:

Three Key Interests

US involvement in this region stems from three key interests as well as historic precedence. These key interests include supporting democracy abroad, strengthening relationships with allies, and deterring Russian aggression beyond its borders. First, since Poland and the Baltic States have made clear attempts to establish themselves as strong democratic countries, the United States should help them in their efforts in the interest of supporting democracy.¹⁰ Since the early 20th century and the Wilson administration, the United States has

⁸ Maris Andzans and Ugis Romanovs, "NATO Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia—A Historical Moment, but Not Yet the End of History," *Latvian Institute of International Affairs*, December 20, 2017. <https://liia.lv/en/opinions/nato-enhanced-forward-presence-in-latvia-a-historical-moment-but-not-yet-the-end-of-history-666>.

⁹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization Fact Sheet, "NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence," May 2017. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_05/1705-factsheet-efp.pdf.

¹⁰ Esther Bartl, "Latvia's Integration into NATO," *Latvian Institute of International Affairs*, February 6, 2013. <https://liia.lv/en/opinions/latvias-integration-into-nato-262>.

adopted a policy of “mak[ing] the world safe for democracy.”¹¹ This long-standing tradition continues in Eastern Europe where democracy is young. By helping these countries establish a democratic foundation, the United States will be able to hold them up as examples of how democracy is the most prosperous ideology to adopt. This will help promote democracy in other Eastern European countries where democracy is either weak or weakening. For example, many of the Balkan countries such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Bulgaria have had a complicated relationship with democratic institutions over the past thirty years. If these countries witness a clear success of democracy in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, they may be open to adopting stronger liberal democratic reforms. In addition, strengthened US military defense in the region will allow Poland and the Baltic States to focus on strengthening their own democratic institutions rather than building up their defense forces.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the United States has a key interest in maintaining good relations with its allies in Europe. One of the key security alliances the United States is a part of is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Since Poland and the Baltic States are all full members of this alliance, the United States is obligated to assist them in minimizing security threats from abroad—most importantly, from Russia.¹² Leaders of the Baltic States and Poland have consistently asked for increased assistance from the United States in fighting off a Russian threat. For example, Lithuanian Defense Minister Raimundas Karoblis said the following: “Let me be very clear: The US is the most powerful ally, and its deterrent effect is not comparable to other allies. I am convinced that Russia would not dare to test NATO if US

¹¹ White House, “Woodrow Wilson,”

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/woodrow-wilson/>

¹² Alexander Thalís, “Threat or Threatened? Russia in the Era of NATO Expansion,” *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, June 3, 2018.

<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/threat-or-threatened-russian-foreign-policy-in-the-era-of-na-to-expansion/>.

military units are deployed on a persistent basis in the three Baltic states.”¹³ The United States must take interest in the requests of these foreign leaders and assess whether or not to honor those requests. Failing to be sufficiently involved in these countries has potential ramifications of losing the trust of other allies in the West, hurting the world image of US-led international institutions, and threatening transatlantic economic relations. These negative effects are clearly not in the interests of the United States.

Third, the United States has an interest in deterring Russian aggression in the former-Soviet sphere. In the past two decades, President Putin has involved Russia in the domestic issues of several neighboring countries, including Georgia and Ukraine. It has been the strategic policy of the last three US presidential administrations to deter Russian aggression with the goal of limiting the rise of Russia’s geopolitical influence in Eurasia. This can be achieved with significant US involvement in Poland and the Baltic States.¹⁴ As the Lithuanian defense minister noted, and as expressed by Russian scholars, the US military is a strong deterrent force from the Russian perspective.¹⁵ If there is a sufficient number of troops in the region, it is highly unlikely Russia would be willing to invade or attack those countries because it does not want to spark a conflict with the United States. Therefore, increased US military presence in the region will deter Russian aggression not only in Poland and the Baltics, but also in nearby countries such as Ukraine and Georgia. This will help the United States achieve its interests on several fronts.

¹³ Jen Judson, “Do the Baltics Need More US Military Support to Deter Russia?” *Defense News*, July 16, 2019. <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2019/07/15/do-the-baltics-need-more-us-military-support-to-deter-russia/>.

¹⁴ Madeline Roach, “Breaking Down the Complicated Relationship Between Russia and NATO,” *Time*, April 4, 2019. <https://time.com/5564207/russia-nato-relationship/>.

¹⁵ Aleksei K. Pushkov, “Don’t Isolate Us: A Russian View of NATO Expansion,” *The National Interest*, no. 47 (Spring 1997): 59-60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42896937>.

Presidential Administrations and Involvement

A final reason the United States should take interest in Poland and the Baltic States is due to the long tradition of presidential support for these countries. Since the end of the Cold War, every presidential administration has emphasized US involvement in this region with the goal of deterring Russian aggression and limiting the rise of Russia's geopolitical influence in Eurasia.¹⁶ This has set a strong precedence for the United States to continue to take part in security issues for these countries. Since the relationship with these countries has not fundamentally changed, there is no reason the United States should lose interest in their success and security.

Under the Obama administration, President Obama faced the bold task of responding to Russia after the annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine. In September 2014, President Obama traveled to Estonia and met with leaders of the Baltic States to reassure them of the continued support of the United States against potential Russian threats.¹⁷ While many have criticized Obama's response to Russia as being weak and not doing enough for the Ukrainian people, his reassurance to the Baltic States as NATO allies was sufficient for Baltic leaders to trust in the support of the NATO alliance.¹⁸ This highlights a key difference between NATO allies and non-NATO allies. Since the Baltics and Poland are NATO members, the United States holds a greater responsibility in supporting them than it does in supporting other countries such as Ukraine that fall victim to the aggression of great powers such as Russia.

Under the Trump administration, support for Poland and the Baltics continued. Despite the president's strong isolationist rhetoric and policy of "America First," Trump continued to

¹⁶ Anke Schmidt-Felzmann, "The US-Baltic Presidential Summit: 100 Years with Russia," *Foreign Policy Research Institute Eurasia Program*, April 3, 2018.

<https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/04/the-u-s-baltic-presidential-summit-100-years-with-russia/>.

¹⁷ Deutsche Welle News, "Obama's Tallinn Speech Met Baltic Expectations," September 4, 2014.

<https://www.dw.com/en/obamas-tallinn-speech-met-baltic-expectations/a-17898156>. His speech is available at the following URL:

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-people-estonia>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

take interest in bolstering up the security of these foreign countries. For example, in July 2019, President Trump committed an additional 1,000 troops to Poland in addition to the 1,100 US-led troops from NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence.¹⁹ This move clearly emphasized the Trump administration's intent to support Poland against Russian threats. While President Trump refused the offer from Polish leaders to establish a permanent military base in Poland, his commitment of additional troops was a strong move to support allies in a time when the president alienated the United States from many other traditional allies.²⁰

In 2018, President Trump upset NATO allies by threatening to withdraw the United States from NATO if each country did not increase their defense spending to at least 2 percent.²¹ While the demand for increased spending and the threshold of 2 percent were not unique to the Trump administration, the threat of withdrawal angered and scared NATO allies. Later that year, he demanded the benchmark be raised to 4 percent.²² By 2019, the three Baltic states and Poland led in European defense spending as a percentage of GDP with Estonia at 2.1 percent and Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland at 2 percent each. Only four other countries had also met the goal of spending at least 2 percent GDP on defense spending. While Trump recognized these countries for reaching the benchmark, he pushed them to do more.²³ In response to that request, these countries adopted plans to continue to increase spending to 3 percent by 2030. These moves demonstrate that Poland and the Baltic States are deeply committed to having a strong

¹⁹ BBC News, "Trump: US to Send 1,000 Troops to Poland in New Deal," June 12, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48585045>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump Warns NATO Allies to Spend More on Defense, or Else," *New York Times*, July 2, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/02/world/europe/trump-nato.html>.

²² Ewen MacAskill and Pippa Crerar, "Donald Trump Tells NATO allies to Spend 4% of GDP on Defense," *The Guardian*, July 11, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/11/donald-trump-tells-nato-allies-to-spend-4-of-gdp-on-defence>.

²³ Ibid.

relationship with the United States and are willing to meet demands to please US leaders. In return, the United States should be willing to protect these allies.

While the cost of upsetting Western allies may prove to be severe, increased defense spending from NATO allies will surely alleviate some of the financial burden the United States holds. As NATO members continue to take an increased share of the financial burden of defense spending, it is in the interest of the United States to continue to support its allies with manpower and supplies. Since one of the key security threats to NATO is Russia, it continues to be in the interests of the United States to provide military support in the region of Poland and the Baltics.

President Biden has expressed his desire to strengthen relationships with allies and reassure them of US support for NATO.²⁴ This likely means that the United States will become more involved in Europe than it has been in the past four years. Biden has also emphasized his plan to assist countries who face challenges from great power aggression.²⁵ Thus, we can expect to see an increase of support for Poland and the Baltic States that fits squarely under both of these categories during the Biden administration.

Potential Policy Solutions:

There are three main policy solutions in the current debate of what the correct US involvement is in Poland and the Baltic States. The first is to maintain the status quo, the second is to withdraw military support from the region altogether, and the third is to increase military support.

²⁴ Joe Biden Campaign Website, “The Power of America’s Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century,” July 11, 2019. <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

Maintain the Status Quo

A large portion of scholars and policymakers advocate that the United States should maintain the status quo with its involvement in Poland and the Baltics. Those who support this policy argue that any increased involvement in the region—especially military involvement—will provoke Russia to respond militarily.²⁶ They believe regional dominance is so vital to Russian national interests that Russia will do anything to preserve it.²⁷ In fact, bouts of Russian aggression in the past have been in direct response to perceived outside threats. For example, they argue Russia annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine only after the Euromaidan revolution that was sparked by public interest in joining Western European institutions such as the European Union and NATO. Thus, to prevent further Ukrainian alignment with the West, Russia chose to intervene. However, this argument overlooks the fact that Russian aggression abroad has been on the rise long before the events of 2014, and Russia has intervened militarily in places that are much less aligned with the West, including Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Other supporters of this policy claim the United States should focus on alleviating tensions between Russia through direct diplomatic routes rather than through involvement in Poland and the Baltics.²⁸ While it is true much more could be done to strengthen diplomatic ties with Russia, it is unfair to leave Poland and the Baltics vulnerable to Russian threats while the diplomatic process, which is likely to take a long time, is under way. Thus, while the United

²⁶ Madeline Roach, “Breaking Down the Complicated Relationship Between Russia and NATO,” *Time*, April 4, 2019. <https://time.com/5564207/russia-nato-relationship/>.

²⁷ Stephen Blank, “Russian Policy on NATO Expansion in the Baltics,” *Wilson Center Global Europe Program*, January 27, 1998. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/151-russian-policy-nato-expansion-the-baltics>.

²⁸ Kimberly Marten, “Reducing Tensions Between Russia and NATO,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council Special Report no. 79, March 2017. https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2017/03/CSR_79_Marten_RussiaNATO.pdf.

States should pursue stronger diplomatic relations, it must also fulfill its obligation to protect its allies during the process.

Still others in this group claim the title of NATO membership is enough to keep these countries safe.²⁹ They argue since Russia has never before invaded a NATO country, it will not begin to do so now. They believe the current EFP troops in the Baltics and Poland are sufficient to deter Russia and do not need to be increased. Although it is true Russia has not invaded a NATO country in the past, this is no assurance it will not elect to do so if it is in Russia's best interest in the future. It would be careless to wait to protect against a potential Russian invasion until after the invasion has occurred.

Withdraw Military Completely

A smaller group of researchers and policymakers propose a complete withdrawal of US troops from the region of Poland and the Baltics. Some who support this policy are isolationists who believe the United States is far too overstretched in its interests abroad.³⁰ They claim it would be best to retrench from frivolous security alliances that bleed the United States dry of resources, military, and money. In their view, the countries of Europe have benefitted from security and protection at little or no cost to them.³¹ This is indicated by the low percentage of defense spending in many European countries. For them, European countries should be able to take care of themselves without US involvement. This argument is concerning because it underplays the threat Russia may pose to US national security in the future. If the United States

²⁹ Alexander Thalys, "Threat or Threatened? Russia in the Era of NATO Expansion," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, June 3, 2018. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/threat-or-threatened-russian-foreign-policy-in-the-era-of-na-to-expansion/>.

³⁰ Kimberly Marten, "Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s," *European Journal of International Security* 3, no. 2, June 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.16>.

³¹ Ewen MacAskill and Pippa Crerar, "Donald Trump Tells NATO allies to Spend 4% of GDP on Defense," *The Guardian*, July 11, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/11/donald-trump-tells-nato-allies-to-spend-4-of-gdp-on-defence>.

can mitigate Russian aggression and expansion, it is in its interest to do so to limit Russian influence before it ever threatens the United States.

On the opposite side of this group, non-isolationists believe the United States has more important threats to national security elsewhere in the world. They argue that sending excessive troops and resources to Eastern Europe where there is only an indirect threat to US national security is unwise, and the United States should re-allocate its manpower and resources to regions in the world where it will provide direct protection to the US homeland.³² These regions include the Middle East and East Asia. This group similarly underestimates the threat Russia poses to US national security. They also fail to consider that the more that NATO member states increase their defense spending, the less the United States will pay in terms of resources and money. Troops will still be deployed in the region, but the cost of these troops' presence will be much lower to the American people.

Increase Military Support

The final group of scholars and policymakers, many of whom are native to the region, support a policy where the United States increases military troops and support in Poland and the Baltic States. Members of this group believe the success of NATO is so important to US interests that it is worth any effort to protect against existential threats such as Russian aggression.³³ Many claim the number of troops should be at least double the current amount.³⁴ While not all of these troops must come from the United States, these scholars believe that the United States is the most capable country of sparing additional troops because its military apparatus and defense

³² Kimberly Marten, "Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s," *European Journal of International Security* 3, no. 2, June 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.16>.

³³ Maris Andzans and Ugis Romanovs, "Maris Andzans and Ugis Romanovs, "NATO Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia—A Historical Moment, but Not Yet the End of History," *Latvian Institute of International Affairs*, December 20, 2017.

<https://liia.lv/en/opinions/nato-enhanced-forward-presence-in-latvia-a-historical-moment-but-not-yet-the-end-of-history-666>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

budget is already much stronger than most of its European allies. Additionally, they advocate for the establishment of a permanent US military presence in Poland.³⁵ Doing so will signal to Russia the severity that a response to a security threat in the region will hold.

In addition to the increase of military troops in the region, scholars and policymakers who promote this policy push for all NATO member states to continue to increase defense spending. Some even support an effort to double defense spending from 2 percent to 4 percent GDP.³⁶ They believe if all NATO members—including Poland and the Baltic States—are willing to robustly enhance their military forces, this, in addition to increased US military troops, will be sufficient to deter any perceived Russian threats in the future. Anything less than these policy changes will leave border countries of NATO such as Poland and the Baltic States susceptible to Russian security threats.

The arguments in support of this policy are not without merit. Doubling both troops and defense spending in the region would certainly make the region safer against potential Russian threats. However, the potential cost of the deterioration of US-Russian diplomatic relations as a result of this robust military increase in the region may be too high to justify the means.³⁷ This course of action could potentially spark a new arms race as Russia tries to counteract and build up its own military capabilities. Also, such a robust buildup of military in the region would leave little room for the United States to gain leverage over Russia if future tensions were to escalate.

³⁵ BBC News, “Trump: US to Send 1,000 Troops to Poland in New Deal,” June 12, 2019.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48585045>.

³⁶ Ewen MacAskill and Pippa Crerar, “Donald Trump Tells NATO allies to Spend 4% of GDP on Defense,” *The Guardian*, July 11, 2018.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/11/donald-trump-tells-nato-allies-to-spend-4-of-gdp-on-defence>.

³⁷ Grzegorz Kuczynski, “NATO-Russia Relations: The Return of the Enemy,” *Warsaw Institute*, April 4, 2019.
<https://warsawinstitute.org/nato-russia-relations-return-enemy/>. See also, Kimberly Marten, “Reducing Tensions Between Russia and NATO,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council Special Report no. 79, March 2017.
https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2017/03/CSR_79_Marten_RussiaNATO.pdf.

Proposed Policy Solution:

Due to the factors discussed earlier, the best course of action for the United States to take in Poland and the Baltic States is a moderate increase of military troops and support. This policy is built on three parts: increase of US military troops, increase of NATO defense spending, and creation of a security committee. NATO should increase military troops in each of these four countries by 50 percent over the next five years. In Poland, where there are currently just over 2,000 US-led troops, the United States should commit an additional 1,000 troops by the year 2026. These troops should continue to be sent on a rotational basis rather than establishing a permanent US military presence in Poland. In Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, where there are currently about 1,000 NATO troops each, NATO should commit at least 500 troops to each country by 2026. Of these 500, at least 200 should be US troops to show the Baltic States the United States is committed to help protect them. While the increase of troops in the region may concern Russia, the gradual nature of the increase will not spark a direct counteraction from Russia.

The United States should also push for an increase of defense spending from each NATO member state to 3 percent by 2030. This is a 50 percent increase from the current benchmark. Poland and the Baltic States are already on track to reach this goal. The inclusion of other Western European countries in this goal will greatly increase Europe's ability to fund military and security efforts against Russian threats and decrease the cost of US military involvement. In conjunction with this effort, the United States should encourage the European Union to take a more direct interest in the security of Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, who have all been EU members for 16 years. This will better balance the burden of defending the region between

the two organizations who have the strongest interests in protecting its outer borders from Russian security threats.

Finally, the United States should advocate the creation of the Poland-Baltic Security Committee as a branch of the larger NATO Security Committee. This committee will be made up of defense experts from Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as well as the four countries who lead EFP troops (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany). These experts will meet every five years to review and assess the security of Poland and the Baltic States. If they determine security threats have grown over the past five years, they may suggest to the NATO Security Committee an additional increase in troops and support. Similarly, if they find security threats have weakened, they may request a decrease of military presence in the region. Such a committee is an important aspect of the policy because it recognizes security threats are always changing, and it can adjust resources accordingly to optimize the use of military troops and spending in the areas that are the most urgent.

Conclusion:

US-Russian relations have always been complicated. In recent years, Russia has tried to show its great power dominance in the countries along its borders. This has negatively impacted efforts to strengthen democracy abroad, a vital US interest. The United States made clear its commitment to Poland and the Baltic States in its 2018 US National Defense Strategy: “Russia has violated the borders of nearby nations and pursues veto power over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighbors.... A robust constellation of allies and

partners will sustain American influence and ensure favorable balances of power that safeguard the free and open international order.”³⁸

The best way to respond to Russian aggression and preserve US interests in the region is by increasing support for Poland and the Baltics. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, former Secretary General of NATO stated, “The U.S. and Europe need to take a firm stance because the only language Putin understands is the language of power.”³⁹ The proposed policy of a gradual increase of military support and the creation of a security committee is the best option for defending US interests in the region and preserving the security of US allies. This policy, while strong-handed, will not incite Russia to respond militarily. It is also adaptable, allowing countries to change the military presence in the region as the security environment changes in future years.

While the future of US-Russia relations promises to be complex and difficult, the strengthening of the security in the region of Poland and the Baltics will be an important step in keeping Russian aggression at bay and strengthening other important security allies.

³⁸ US 2018 National Defense Strategy Summary, “Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge,” pp. 1. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

³⁹ Madeline Roach, “Breaking Down the Complicated Relationship Between Russia and NATO,” *Time*, April 4, 2019. <https://time.com/5564207/russia-nato-relationship/>.

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