

Remarks by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott

Thank you, Foreign Minister Ilves. And thanks to all of you for being here today to help mark a very important event. I hope it's in the spirit of the occasion if I say a few words in a personal vein. I've been coming to this country, Estonia, and into this region since the 1980's, which is to say I visited here on several occasions before these three countries, represented by these three flags and these delegations, regained their independence. Therefore, I have a deep personal appreciation both of the magnitude of the accomplishments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as an appreciation of the legitimacy of their aspirations.

I was last here quite recently, in fact in this room. Seems like only yesterday. Although there was a lot of snow on the ground and nights were a lot longer; it was in January. I have had a chance to appreciate the beauty of your winter and yesterday, at least the warmth and sunniness and length of the days of your summer. And I want to also, in a personal vein, thank President Meri for the hospitality that he extended to Ambassador Wells and my colleague Dan Hamilton and myself last night. It was not only a very good and warm personal occasion at his residence, but also an extremely intense, and for me, educational discussion of the issues of the day.

I want to say a word about thresholds. Three thresholds in particular: yesterday Ambassador Wells lead me across the threshold of our refurbished Chancery building here in Tallinn, which happens to be the same building that the United States Legation was in when it had to be closed in 1940. So that had a particular symbolic importance for the Ambassador and for me. And it underscored the strengthening of the bilateral relationship not just between the United States and Estonia but also between the United States, and Latvia and Lithuania as well.

Second, yesterday, when our U.S. military aircraft entered Baltic airspace, a little blip appeared on a radar screen at the headquarters of the Baltic Air Surveillance Network, which is a new institution that I have been hearing about, talking about, for the last couple of years and it actually came on line yesterday. So one of the first aircraft it registered was the arrival of our delegation here for this meeting, which I think says a great deal about the practical way in which way we are developing the security relationship.

And then third: there is the multiple threshold that all three of the Baltic states have either crossed, or are approaching and will cross, with respect to all the institutions that protect and advance the values and interests that the United States, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have in common. And it is in that spirit that the U.S.-Baltic Partnership Commission was established to create momentum, to create a sense of continuation in cooperation among our countries, coming out of the important event when our four presidents signed the U.S.-Baltic Charter in Washington in January in 1998.

I think we have made steady progress since then, and I want to particularly emphasize the word steadiness. Steadiness is what this partnership is all about. I think that we have contributed as a commission significantly to the prospects for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as individual, distinct, deserving, European states, and to our common goal of a Europe, whole and free. And that goal was reaffirmed once again by President Clinton just five days ago in his speech in Aachen, Germany. By the way, in that speech and in his statements that he has made subsequently, including in Moscow, including in Kiev, President Clinton has recommitted the United States to the principle of the open door.

And the United States has welcomed the recent Vilnius statement which we see as an inclusive declaration by countries that aspire to membership in NATO. It demonstrates the understanding of the nine signatory countries that NATO is a community of shared values. And it underscores their commitment to work with all European democracies to advance the security of the entire transatlantic community. I think that the Vilnius statement was and will continue to be emblematic of the inclusive spirit of cooperation and integration that is taking hold from the Baltics to the Black Sea. Last week in Florence, Secretary of State Albright strongly supported the Vilnius statement and urged that all our NATO allies be engaged actively to help aspirants become the best and most promising possible candidates.

We have, in the course of this meeting of the commission, as we have in the past, worked to advance the U.S. Northern Europe Initiative which is intended to promote greater cooperation within the Baltic countries and throughout the Baltic region. I might add, having been in Brussels yesterday meeting with a number of the leaders of the European Union, that we feel the U.S. Northern Europe Initiative is highly complementary of the EU's Northern Dimension which we also very much support.

Now we have also in the course of our extremely good meeting chaired by Foreign Minister Iles this morning discussed how to promote greater regional cooperation with Russia. That's a priority with the commission that we identified a year ago when the commission last met.

During the past year the United States has supported the Lithuanian government's efforts to reach out to Kaliningrad for such activities as entrepreneurial training and the development of a regional HIV AIDS strategy.

We have increased our funding for innovative language programs in Latvia, and I'm happy to announce that we will contribute \$150,000 to a program here in Estonia by the International Organization for Migration that will provide job retraining and language education for Russian speaking workers. We've also pledged to continue working to bring Russian speakers fully into the societies of the Baltic states. I might add that we have also, in looking to the future -- a better future we all hope for all the states in this region -- faced up to some of the tough questions published by the past [sic]. We have discussed the legacy of the Nazis and the Soviet occupations. We have discussed, and I think agreed upon, the importance of bringing to trial accused war criminals regardless of their ideology, and the importance of education to ensure that those tragic lessons are learned by future generations. And I will say that some of what I heard during the course of the morning from my colleagues has been very much in the spirit and very encouraging.

We agreed on the need to sustain the good progress that our Baltic partners have made on social integration, issues such as citizenship, language and education as well as an increased tempo in the activities of the prospective countries' Historical Commissions.

And let me make another point here, too, because others have had other things to say on this whole subject with which we in the United States do not agree. We've heard spokesmen of the Russian Federation and Russian Government issue extremely severe criticisms in recent weeks of social integration issues in Latvia and Estonia, in particular, and made charges about the rise of neo-fascism. We think that these charges, these suggestions, to put it mildly, are not warranted by facts. And we urge Russia to resume full dialogue, full cooperation with the Baltic states. But what we are all about here -- whether it is the U.S.-Baltic Partnership Commission or the Northern Europe Initiative or the Northern Dimension of the EU -- is trying to bring about a better future for everybody in the region. And that means bridge building, not name calling. That means working to enhance common aspirations. It does not mean engaging in divisive and unwarranted accusations.

Let me, if I could, say just a word about the economic spirit. There has been important progress on the economic and commercial side of the commission's work. We very much welcome the Williams Company's investment in Lithuania. I have heard in the last 24 hours reasons to be hopeful that the NRG investment here in Estonia will be completed quickly and we will also be looking hard to find opportunities for similar strategic U.S. investments in Latvia. I think it is important to know that the U.S.-Baltic business government dialogue that was held here in April was very successful. This is a public/private sector mechanism that has provided useful recommendations to both sides. We've welcomed and done our best to spur a variety of other cooperative regional programs that have been launched under the aegis of the Northern Europe Initiative. And work on this is going to continue during the course of the day, and I hope you all pay close attention to the communique and other documents and see the specifics in such areas as health, energy, women's issues, and combating organized crime. I think all of these activities make clear that the U.S. remains committed to the Baltic Charter and its goals and that we are making real progress in real time which will benefit the people of this region in the here and now as well as in the future. And on behalf of President Clinton, and Secretary Albright, I pledge to my colleagues that the United States Government will continue to promote the Baltic Charter goals to the remainder of this administration and also leave the firmest possible base on which our successors can build. Thank you.

QUESTION/ANSWER:

QUESTION: Erkki Bahovski, Postimees daily: I have a question for Mr. Talbott. Yesterday the joint Baltic Air Survey Center was opened in Lithuania and in connection with that our Minister of Defense said that this is a good example of Baltic cooperation and gives a better chance for Estonia to be invited to NATO in 2002. How would you comment on that?

TALBOTT: First, I learned about this important development not aboard the aircraft. I don't know what radar screens we are appearing on as we fly around the world. I learned about it from Defense Minister Luik himself who told me at President Meri's residence last night. I learn a lot from him whenever I talk to him. And I think there is no question that real progress is being made on behalf of all three of the Baltic states in developing not only their own defense capabilities, not only their own willingness and ability to be net contributors to the security of Europe -- as witness their contributions to peacekeeping in the Balkans -- but also on developing a high degree of compatibility with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And I'm joined in my delegation here today by Major General Robert Behler who has come down from Norway to talk in very practical terms with their Baltic colleagues about progress that has been made and areas for further work in the future in this regard. 2002, as Defense Minister Luik properly stressed, is an important upcoming date. Neither I nor anybody else can anticipate what decisions the alliance leadership will make in 2002. The important thing that has happened in the last several weeks is, among other things, the Vilnius meeting and the Vilnius statement, which I hope lay to rest any concern anywhere that the open door was somehow closing or that the geographical orientation of NATO's evolution and NATO's enlargement was somehow shifting to one part of Europe at the expense of the other part of Europe. That is in fact not the case.

You've also seen the executive branch of the United States government, in the person of Secretary of State Albright, welcoming the Vilnius statement. I'm sure you've noticed that both of the principal candidates for the presidency of the United States welcomed the Vilnius statement. And you've also heard several times President Clinton reassert what is not only a personal principle for him but also a policy of the NATO Alliance, reiterated if I'm not mistaken, by Chancellor Schroeder yesterday -- and that is that the new NATO does not constitute a threat to anybody, and no European democracy should be excluded for reasons of geography or history, and particularly for reasons rooted in the history of the Cold War, from pursuing and fulfilling its legitimate aspirations to be part of the alliance. Timetable? That remains to be seen and will be up to the leadership of the alliance as it continues to work this issue.

Q: Michael Tarm, AP: The Latvian President recently said that Russia made her nervous. She said that "Russia is extremely unpredictable, the country is not very stable and its democratic basis is questionable." Do you agree with this?

TALBOTT: First of all, I had the pleasure and honor working from time to time with President Vike-Freiberga and I have great respect for her. And I don't think she would want me -- nor would anybody else -- want me to react to your characterization of her views on such an important subject. She alone should speak for herself and characterize events in this region, including events and trends in the Russian Federation.

What I can do is to tell you the way we see the situation. And I can only echo what President Clinton said in several public settings over the last couple of days -- he said it when he was in Aachen, he said it in his press conference side by side with President Putin, and he said it in his speech to the Duma: and that is that one of the extraordinary things that has happened over the last fifteen years is the emergence of a new Russia, a Russia that has put behind it its Soviet, communist past. That is a good development; it's an immensely positive and promising thing. It's not without its difficulties, it's not without its complications and it's not without its challenges. That poses many challenges, obviously, to the people of Russia. It poses challenges for the reformers in Russia. It poses challenges for the leaders of Russia. It poses challenges for all the rest of us. What President Clinton has been committed to doing throughout his presidency, and what he will work on right up until his last day in office, is to make sure that the international institutions of which Russia is a part and with which Russia has a cooperative relationship -- and those are two different categories, obviously -- use their own influence to create both an international atmosphere and incentives for what happens inside Russia, so that Russia continues to move in the direction that it has been moving overall for the last fifteen years.

He made a point when he met with President Putin -- and these were very solid, substantive, useful discussions -- to stress that this is not the first time or the last time that he will meet with President Putin. He met with him a couple of times when Putin was Prime Minister and he will be meeting with him at least three more times this year. Interestingly, all three of those meetings will be in multilateral settings: Okinawa -- the G8; UNGA -- UN General Assembly of the millennium summit in the fall; APEC Forum. The point that I make is that Russia is participating with international institutions, it is participating inside international institutions, and the United States is determined to use its own interaction with Russia, both bilaterally and in those contexts, to support those forces and those trends that would be good for the people of Russia and will also be good for Russia's neighbors, notably including the three represented here at this table.

Q: Radio 4: A sociological research was published yesterday in Tallinn which showed that Estonian Russians supported joining NATO because of the war in Chechnya. The numbers have doubled, if you compare it with last year's survey. Mr. Talbott, how important is it to the U.S. that the Russian-language community supports NATO's enlargement in the Baltic States?

TALBOTT: I don't know about the poll that you are referring to and the specific underlying reasons for opinions within any part of the Estonian population, I would say that it would be our hope that there will be continuing support within Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for those countries fully and rapidly integrating into all of the institutions that make up the transatlantic community. Since we support the goal of the Baltic States joining the Alliance, we would certainly therefore also hope that goal would have support across the full range of Estonian society. One of the reasons that we are admiring and supporting all three of the Baltic States represented here is because all three of the states are dedicated to a very simple proposition -- it goes to the heart of American statehood and American democracy. And that is: citizenship is not a matter of blood or where your ancestors come from, it's a matter of shared values, shared ideals and shared commitment to an inclusive, multi-ethnic society and multi-ethnic democracy.

That is one of the undergirding values that we have done our best to support in this commission. I hope, by the way, that over time there will be solid and indeed increasing support in the United States for the three Baltic States becoming not just partners, but also allies.