

## **Policy Review Memo of the Office of the Vice President**

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This memorandum reviews the President's strategy on de-escalating the political crisis in Latvia, engulfed in escalating ethnic tensions, and deterring the Russian aggression in the Baltics, which currently includes a deniable special forces deployment in Latvia, following the National Security Council (NSC) meeting on the issue. The paper outlines the principal goals of the Office of the Vice President in the process and the actions it plans to undertake in line with the President's policy brief and provides further recommendations for presidential review.

### **1. Principal Objectives of the Office of the Vice President**

1.1 The Office of the Vice President has the following three principal objectives in the process of de-escalating the crisis in Latvia and deterring the Russian aggression. First, it aims to work as the conduit between the President and the Congress, working together with POTUS, House Speaker and the political leadership on both sides of the partisan divide to make sure that the President has a free hand in dealing with the crisis the way he deems to be appropriate. Second, the Office aims to work with the President and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) to deliver a clear and strong message of America's resolve to the domestic and international audience. Finally, the Office seeks to provide the President with general advice in his future decisions on the matter, functioning as an independent voice unhinged by loyalties to any institutional agendas.

1.2 With these objectives in mind, the Office will focus on developing a multi-faceted communication campaign aimed at delivering a clear and precise overview of the President's position on the matter to all key figures and groups through all available channels. These include, but are not limited to, personal meetings with the leadership of the Republican and Democratic parties, briefs for the relevant Senate Committees and general meetings, as well as cooperation with the BBG and the mainstream media outlets. The Office will also keep monitoring the situation in Latvia to be able to provide the President with any independent advice he may seek.

### **2. Primary Policies of the Office of the Vice President**

2.1 The Office is to start drafting a plan for an outreach campaign to the leaders across the partisan divide. With the President opting for a moderate response focused on diplomacy rather than a show of muscle, it will be necessary to mitigate the possible outcry from the hawks on both sides. In this respect, the Democratic party may prove to be more problematic given that both its leadership and its voter base seems to be more hostile to Russia and more positive regarding NATO (Hartig et al., 2017) and thus can be expected to call for a more forceful response.

2.2 As follows from the previous paragraph, the administration will need to send a clear message to the hawks that America is not backing out of a fight, but rather seeks to de-escalate the tensions using the limited deployment of special forces and intelligence operators discussed at the NSC meeting. Here, we can point at other examples of failed "little green men" tactics application (Altman, 2016) to demonstrate that we can succeed by committing enough force to eliminate the adversary's assets on the ground while maintaining the fiction of Russian non-involvement and thus forcing it either into a costly escalation beyond the point of deniability or backing out. The doves, on the other side, will need to hear

that the Administration is not planning to drag the country into a war with a nuclear great power, which is consistent with the NSC deliberations on a diplomatic response.

2.3 Maintaining the aforementioned fiction of conflict means that all our public communication initiatives both for the domestic and international audiences should include a degree of ambiguity, especially when it comes to Russia's involvement in the crisis. While there is no doubt that the Administration must condemn the Russian activities in the region, at this point it may be advisable to call Moscow out for sabre-rattling, fear-mongering and support to insurgents rather than for an overt or covert invasion. Similarly, the operation in Latvia should be presented as a counter-insurgency operation (CIO) rather than fighting an invading force. Ideally, this should be done in concert with our other partners in NATO, which may be complicated due to the strong responses from the UK and France, as well as the Baltics.

2.4 The cooperation with Baltic authorities as well as, ideally, the moderate wing of the Harmony party in Latvia would also allow us to turn any progress on the issue of ethnic Russian citizenship into an action-speaks-louder-than-words message for the ethnic Russian population of the Baltics. This would potentially de-escalate the tensions, carve into the insurgents' recruitment base by providing an alternative solution for people to rally behind and thus undercut the Russian influence in the region in the long-term perspective. This action should be supported by the outreach efforts via BBG-affiliated outlets discussed at the NSC meeting, which included providing an alternative coverage of the situation in Russia, training for the local journalists and, potentially, getting the moderate wing of Harmony.

2.5 Combined with the military response on the ground, namely, the deployment of NATO troops and US Special Forces on the border and in the area of the CIO, this Office estimates that the outreach and public diplomacy campaign would force Russia into a situation where it can either withdraw or escalate the tensions to the stage of conventional conflict. The Office believes that Russia's willingness to commit to the conflict is limited by the state of its economy, manifested, among other factors, in its first decrease of military spending in two decades (Kottasova, 2017), and the deterring factor of Latvia's NATO membership. Thus, the Office estimates that Moscow can be expected to choose withdrawal, especially if it is given a chance to walk away without too many reputational losses. To this end, this Office recommends considering positive engagement with Russia via OSCE deployment in the CIO area to ensure that the rights of ethnic Russians are duly protected.

### **3. Further Recommendations**

3.1 The Office has several extra policy recommendations for further consideration by the President. These are aimed at decreasing the risks involved in the current policy and outline the long-term development of some of its branches.

3.2 First, while the Office agrees with the President's plan of action and is positive that Russia can be reasonably expected to back off if the plan is executed properly, it acknowledges that the underlying assumption, namely, Moscow's lack of commitment, may, in fact, be incorrect. This calls for a contingency plan for a situation where Russia decides to raise the stakes and invades the Baltics in a conventional operation. This would represent a major escalation of the conflict and call for a more dramatic response on behalf of the US and its NATO allies.

3.3 Second, while America should prepare for a fight in line with the aforementioned risk, it should do so in a way that would not constitute an immediate escalation and make sure that it fights on its own terms, under favourable conditions. Thus, the Office warns against immediate NATO deployments into the Baltic theatre, one largely unfavourable for NATO forces (Kühn, 2018, p. 29), beyond the scope that has already been discussed. Statements committing the US to any deployments in the Baltics should be avoided. Instead, the Office calls on the President to explore the options of reversing the Russian gains in Syria together with any of our partners on the ground. Counter-balancing action along the Ukrainian front, orchestrated via more lethal and high-tech supplies to Ukraine, could also be on the table, giving Russia an extra threat to respond to.

3.4 While considering any hostilities, however, we should also be wary of the fact that the current Russian military doctrine reserves the right to respond with nuclear weapons even to a conventional offensive as long as it is deemed to pose an existential threat to the Russian Federation. Thus, should NATO go to war, it may be advisable to refrain from any incursions into the Russian territory and unilaterally proclaim it a sanctuary.

3.5 Finally, while the previous sections already established the importance of BBG-affiliated outlets in our outreach efforts, in the long-term perspective it may be advisable to join their experience and capacities with that of their Baltic counterparts to create a Russian-language multimedia outlet covering local and international news from a pro-European and pro-Western perspective. To tailor it to the local audience, it is highly advisable to gain support from journalists and enthusiasts among the ethnic Russian population. This would effectively create a counterweight to the Russian outreach efforts in the region and, thus, undercut Russian influence.

#### **4. Conclusion.**

The Office stands by the President's decision outlined in the relevant memorandum and is ready to work hard on its realization within its own jurisdiction and together with other relevant bodies and agencies. It also suggests that the President consider additional options in case the plan drafted during the NSC meeting fails to deliver the desired outcome.

#### **References**

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