

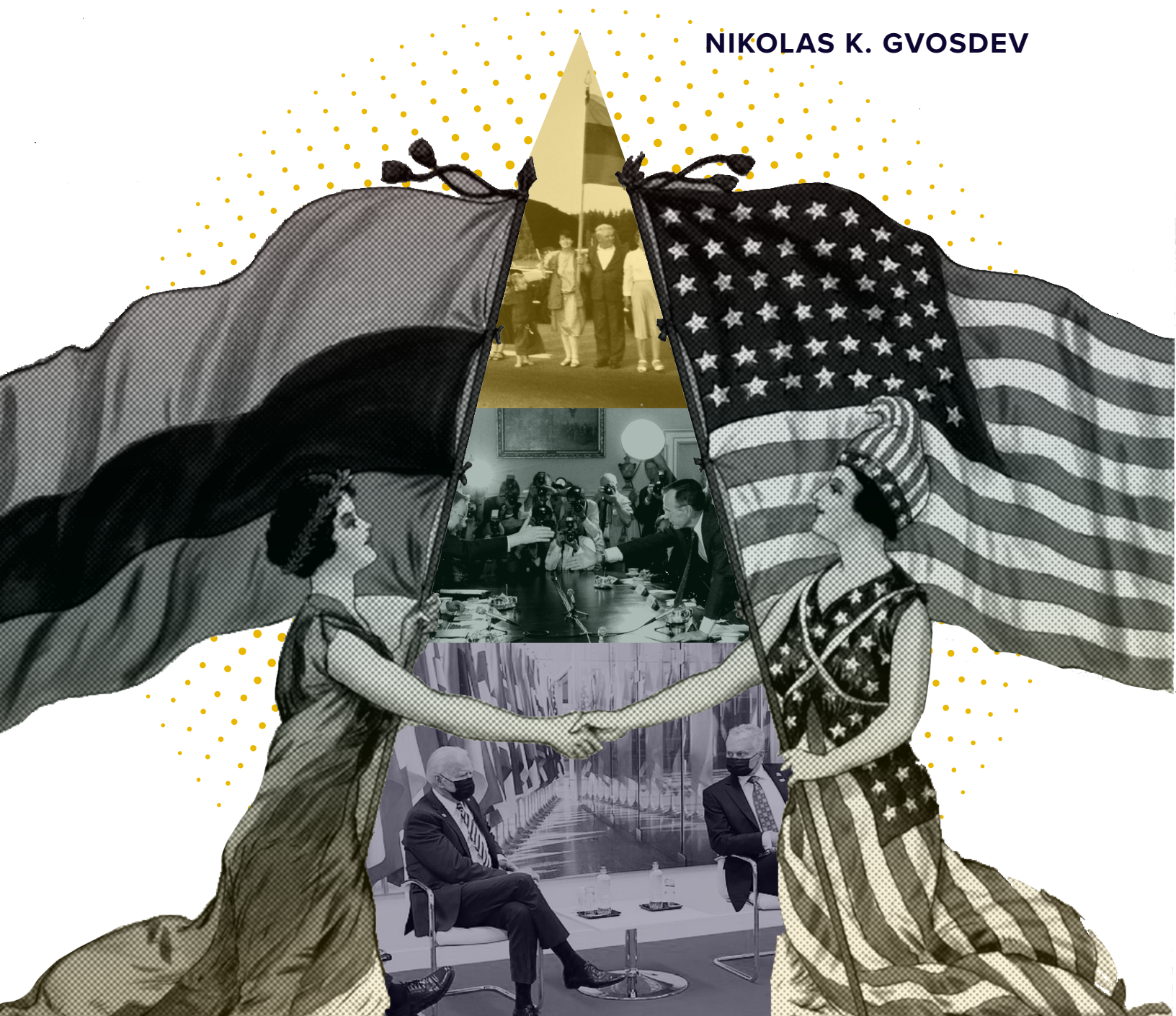
FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



Eastern Europe Studies Centre

# RECONCEPTUALIZING LITHUANIA'S IMPORTANCE FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

NIKOLAS K. GVOSDEV





FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



Eastern Europe Studies Centre

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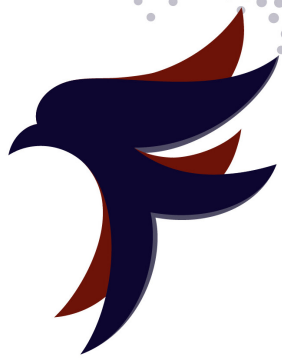
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# Executive Summary

**D**uring the immediate post-Cold War period, the importance of Lithuania, along with other Central-Eastern European countries, to U.S. foreign policy increased. Lithuania became one of the jumping-off points for further “democratic enlargement” in Europe, Eurasia, and the Greater Middle East.

Today, U.S. policy is focused on retrenchment and consolidation—defined by a shift in attention and resources away from the Euro-Atlantic region and the Greater Middle East towards the Indo-Pacific region—as well as the growing priority of climate change and the environment as central organizing principles.

U.S. foreign policy is also increasingly subordinated to domestic political considerations about the costs and benefits of overseas action for constituencies within the United States. In the 2020s, Lithuania’s importance will rest less on the Russia dimension and further Euro-Atlantic enlargement into the post-Soviet space, and more on its ability to play a greater role in European affairs, to assist in the rebalance to Asian affairs more generally, and to contribute to energy, supply chain, and environmental security.



# Introduction

**F**or the last three decades, Lithuania's relationship with the United States has been nested within an overarching post-Cold War American grand strategy predicated on democratic enlargement from a Euro-Atlantic core. Thirty years ago, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War— "The Turn" (to use Don Oberdorfer's description)<sup>1</sup>—saw a dramatic shift in the U.S. approach from containment of the Soviet Union and the preservation of a nucleus of democratic-capitalist states (the so-called "Free World") to enlarging and expanding that core of states into a U.S.-led global order. The post-Cold War period is giving way to a new epoch. The Munich Security Conference (MSC) sees the international system working through a *zeitenwende*: the turn of an era in world politics.<sup>2</sup> Important changes in the global balance of economic, political, and technological power are shifting the center of gravity from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific region, while the rise of other major powers—coupled with technologies that aid and enhance separation and disaggregation, as well as political uncertainty and instability in U.S. domestic politics—is bringing the post-Cold War chapter in American foreign policy to an end.

This changing paradigm has major implications for Lithuania's partnership with the United States and the importance of Vilnius for overall U.S. grand strategy. While often grouped with its two Baltic neighbors, Lithuania also has specific importance given its geographic position linking the Baltic littoral with Central Europe. The country's lack of a large Russian-speaking minority also reduced one key area of friction that Estonia and Latvia have had in their relationship with Moscow, giving Vilnius greater freedom of maneuver. During the period when U.S. policy was predicated on democratic enlargement from a Euro-Atlantic core, Lithuania was a critical U.S. partner. The risk moving forward is that under changed conditions, Lithuania's relative importance to Washington will decline. It also means that the core interests which served as the foundation for close U.S.-Lithuania ties may become less important in the future. Finally, as domestic pressure increases for any U.S. presidential administration to retrench and rebalance its overseas relationships, Lithuania, in turn, will need to reconceptualize its approach and recalibrate both what it asks of the United States and what it can offer in order to create a new partnership relevant to the changed conditions of the 2020s and beyond.

<sup>1</sup> Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era: the United States and the Soviet Union, 1983-1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992)

<sup>2</sup> Tobias Bunde, Laura Hartmann, Franziska Stärk, Randolph Carr, Christoph Erber, Julia Hammelehle, and Juliane Kabus, "Zeitenwende/Wendezeiten," special edition, *Munich Security Report*, October 2020, [https://securityconference.org/assets/01\\_Bilder\\_Inhalte/03\\_Medien/02\\_Publikationen/MSC\\_Germany\\_Report\\_10-2020\\_Engl.pdf](https://securityconference.org/assets/01_Bilder_Inhalte/03_Medien/02_Publikationen/MSC_Germany_Report_10-2020_Engl.pdf).

# 1. Lithuania on Washington's Radar, 1988-2008

**L**ithuania first emerged as a critical issue in its own right in the last years of “The Turn” (1988-1991) as the United States worked first to tamp down the hostilities of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and then to explore how a reformed USSR under the tutelage of Mikhail Gorbachev might become a co-manager (albeit as a junior partner to the United States) of the international order.

However, it is important to remember that during this period Lithuanian efforts to restore independence were seen as a problem to be managed in the context of the overall U.S. objective of preserving Gorbachev’s tenure as Soviet leader and preventing his replacement by a harder-line regime. Unlike the other two Baltic states, Lithuania pushed for immediate restoration and recognition of its pre-war independent status without waiting for Gorbachev’s approval—and the pro-independence government in Vilnius was not prepared to subordinate its position to Gorbachev’s political survival. There was also concern that the breakup of the USSR would pose significant security challenges to U.S. interests, especially

with regards to control of nuclear weapons and the security of Europe. In short, for the George H.W. Bush administration, Lithuanian aspirations for sovereignty were subordinated to the imperative of managing a stable end to the superpower Cold War, until the collapse of the USSR itself rendered this point moot.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union changed the focus of U.S. policy from preserving a community of Western democracies from Soviet aggression to enlarging and expanding the community of democratic-capitalist states around the world. This was a major shift in U.S. grand strategy. The removal of the USSR as a factor in international politics—and early expectations that a post-Soviet Russian Federation would integrate itself into Western institutions—opened up the possibility of a post-Cold War world with the United States and its allies able to set the global agenda without hindrance. Containment gave way to democratic enlargement as the central organizing principle for U.S. grand strategy, with the first outlines hesitatingly laid by the George H.W. Bush administration and more fully embraced by the successor





Lithuanian citizens gathered to proclaim their independence from the Soviet Union upon the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev for his January 1990 visit. (Source: Wikimedia/Rimantas Lazdynas)

Clinton administration.<sup>3</sup>

The “hub and spokes” approach, as coined by Josef Joffe, argued that the United States could reduce the prospects for international instability and conflict the more that the world’s political and economic linkages were connected via the American hub, and where recalcitrant countries (“rogue states”) could be isolated and cut off by severing the spoke from the whole hub. For this approach to work, the United States would need to build on the existing Euro-Atlantic partnership to serve as the foundation for democratic enlargement. From this expanded base, democratic enlargement would continue to encompass the post-Soviet space, the Middle East, and Africa, and then link up with similar processes in the Pacific Rim and Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

Under such conditions, the geopolitical importance of Lithuania and other Central-Eastern European states to U.S. strategy increased after the collapse of the Soviet Union. No longer on the periphery of superpower conflict, they were now the forward sentinels of democratic enlargement. It became a paramount U.S. objective to, in the assessment of Ambassador Stephen Sestanovich, “create the largest possible bloc of European states committed to principles like democracy and the rule of law . . . to preserve and strengthen America’s place in the post-Cold War balance of power.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, these countries were, in the formulation of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the “new Europe,” where the “center of gravity” of the Euro-Atlantic community had shifted.<sup>6</sup>

3 See, for instance, David Milne, “Grand Strategies (or Ascendant Ideas) Since 1919,” *Rethinking American Grand Strategy*, eds. Elizabeth Borgwardt, Christopher McKnight Nichols, and Andrew Preston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 161-162.

4 See, the overall discussion in Josef Joffe, “Clinton’s World: Purpose, Policy and *Weltanschauung*,” *Washington Quarterly* vol. 24, no. 1 (2001), pp. 141-154.

5 Stephen Sestanovich, “Could It Have Been Otherwise?” *American Interest* vol. 10, no. 5 (2015), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/04/14/could-it-have-been-otherwise/>.

6 Mark Baker, “U.S.: Rumsfeld’s ‘Old’ And ‘New’ Europe Touches On Uneasy Divide,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 24, 2003, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1102012.html>.

**WHEN IT BECAME  
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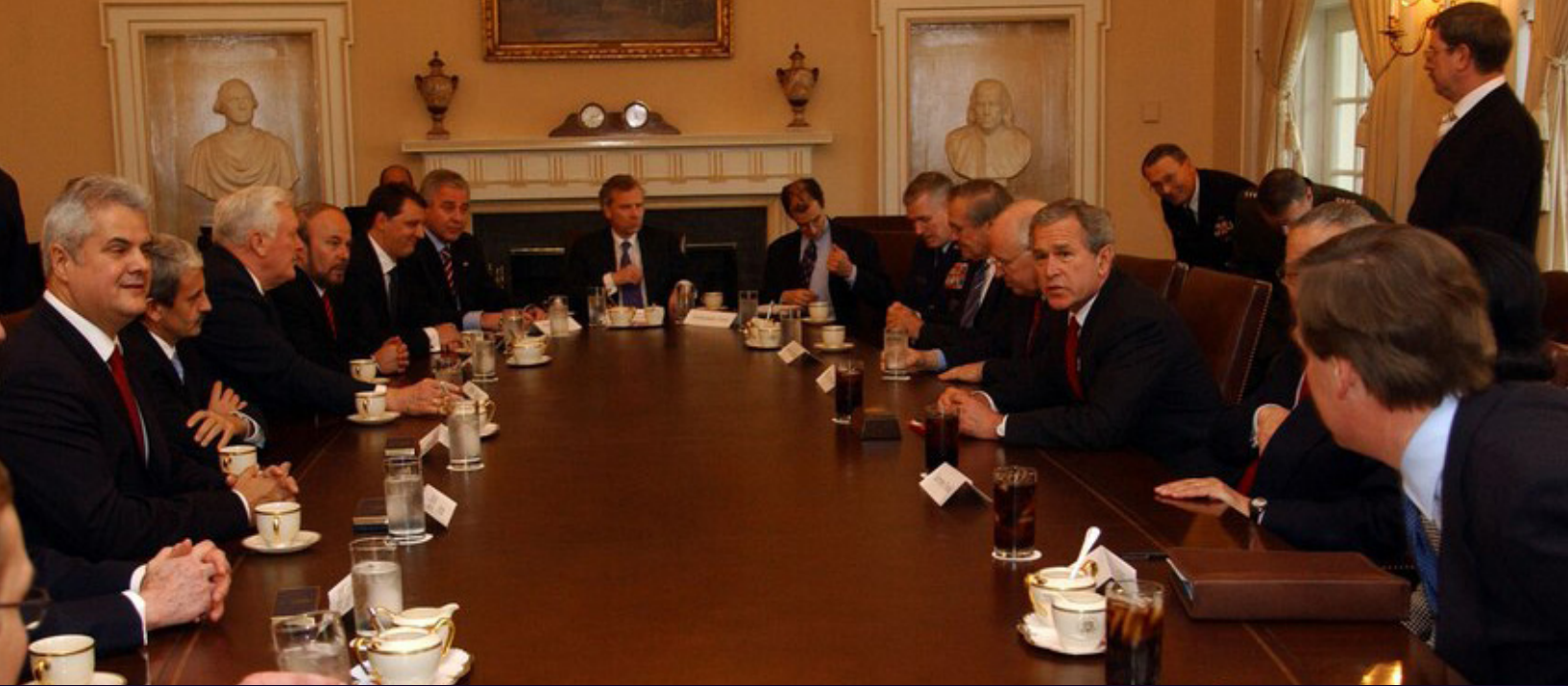
First, these countries were themselves proof of concept that the Euro-Atlantic community could be expanded beyond its Cold War core and that democracy promotion and market reform could work to transform societies. This change validated the central thesis of a democratic enlargement grand strategy, and these new allies and partners could assist with burden-sharing in maintaining the international system. Second, enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic

community to the Baltic and Black Sea littorals was extremely critical to safeguarding the “legacy” members of the Euro-Atlantic community, starting with Germany, which no longer wished to be a “frontline” state of the Atlantic alliance. These states could also act as further “springboards” for enlargement, most immediately to the greater Eurasian space. When it became clear by the late 1990s that hopes for Russia’s own inclusion into the Euro-Atlantic world might not be realized, states like Lithuania acquired new salience in blocking and containing Russian influence from returning to the heart of Europe.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, did not end the strategy of “democratic enlargement” but, under the George W. Bush administration, gave new urgency to democracy promotion as one of the key ways to “drain the swamp” which nurtured the extremism that struck on 9/11.<sup>7</sup> Lithuania and other Central-Eastern European states became active participants in the military missions in Afghanistan and then Iraq and offered their experiences to help with democratic transitions in other parts of the world.

During this period, Lithuania identified and operationalized several key areas in which it could make itself relevant to Washington. The first was completing the process to enter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the

<sup>7</sup> Emiliano Alessandri, Oz Hassan, and Ted Reinert, *U.S. Democracy Promotion from Bush to Obama*, EUSpring Working Paper no. 1 (April 2015), [http://aei.pitt.edu/66143/1/us\\_dem\\_promotion\\_april15.pdf](http://aei.pitt.edu/66143/1/us_dem_promotion_april15.pdf).



Leaders of new and potential NATO members meet with President George W. Bush at the White House on March 29, 2004. (Source: defense.gov)

European Union in 2004. By achieving full membership, Vilnius could help to counterbalance, in the halls of Brussels, a greater skepticism of U.S. efforts on the part of “traditional” Western allies like France, Germany, and Italy. Lithuania also actively aided the effort to extend the zone of the Euro-Atlantic world by supporting efforts to bring in new NATO and EU members from among other post-Soviet countries, to expand the number of billpayers and to help maintain a more pro-American balance in both organizations. Third, Lithuania, along with other Central-Eastern European states, supported the U.S. operations (in both military and non-military means) in Iraq and Afghanistan and other theaters in the “global war against extremism.” Finally, Lithuania worked to help bar a resurgence of Russian influence—composing of a military,

political, economic, and informational threat—in the European core, a task which some of the legacy European states seemed far less concerned about. As long as promoting the “freedom agenda” across the Greater Middle East and the post-Soviet space from an expanded Euro-Atlantic core remained one of the top foreign policy priorities of the United States, countries like Lithuania would rank higher in importance for Washington, as President George W. Bush declared in remarks delivered in Vilnius in November 2002.<sup>8</sup>

8 George W. Bush, “Remarks to the Citizens of Vilnius,” November 23, 2002, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2002/15452.htm>.



## 2. Post-2008: An Aborted Pivot and the Trump Shock

Lithuania's importance to the United States rested, in large part, on its role in facilitating democratic enlargement, but, by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the forward momentum of the freedom agenda slowed. A variety of factors—enlargement fatigue, costs of the Iraq and Afghan wars, an unexpected Russian resurgence, and democratic backsliding, among others—made continuation of the democratic enlargement strategy less attractive. Already, in 2007, Thomas Carothers was predicting: “The United States is not going to embrace a substantially more idealist position with respect to democracy promotion in the world in the next five to 10 years. It has too many substantial realist interests in Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, Ethiopia, and so forth that it is not going to turn its back on.”<sup>9</sup> In that same year, Justine Rosenthal anticipated an emerging “selectivity” in U.S. foreign policy priorities, a greater emphasis on “picking and choosing our

engagements.”<sup>10</sup>

The first waves of democratic enlargement took place in conditions of economic growth in Europe and the United States at a time when Russia was weak and even appeared to be open to reform and joining that community. By 2007, however, Moscow was more committed to stopping further progress in enlargement—and used military force against Georgia in August 2008 as a way to signal that commitment—at a time when economic conditions began to change in the West (for the worse), culminating in the financial crisis of 2008. Moreover, American involvement in the Middle East was seen less in terms of expanding the Euro-Atlantic zone of democratic peace and more as a distraction given the rise of the People's Republic of China in the Indo-Pacific region.

Barack Obama was elected in November 2008 on a message of domestic economic rejuvenation and recalibration

9 Quoted in Alessandri, Hassan, and Reinert, *U.S. Democracy Promotion from Bush to Obama*.

10 Justine Rosenthal, “The Closer,” *National Interest* vol. 92 (November/December 2007), p. 4.





Secretary of State Hillary Clinton with ASEAN leadership. (Source: [asean.usmission.gov](http://asean.usmission.gov))

of American overseas commitments. In terms of prioritizing key regions for U.S. foreign policy, Central-Eastern Europe, including Lithuania, dropped from the first rank of presidential priorities (where they had been under Clinton and Bush). While President Obama pursued a “reset” of relations with Russia in the hopes of getting Moscow’s acquiescence to the broad parameters of the U.S. agenda, it was left to his vice president, Joseph Biden, to reassure the surrounding states of “new Europe” that their core interests would not be neglected.<sup>11</sup>

But the strategy of “democratic enlargement” was slowly giving way towards an assessment that China would not be integrated into the U.S.-led international order as a “responsible stakeholder” but would seek to contest

and compete with the United States for influence. Trends underway since the turn of the millennium raised concerns that the American focus was too Eurocentric and was unprepared for developing and sustaining the security architecture in East and South Asia that would be needed to deter and contain China.<sup>12</sup> Key members of the Obama national security team, from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Deputy National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, argued for a rebalance in U.S. foreign policy attention away from Europe and the Middle East towards East Asia. Initially framed by Clinton in February 2009 during her visit to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Secretariat as an upgrading of the U.S. focus on the Indo-Pacific region, by mid-2011, Clinton was describing a full-fledged pivot of U.S. attention, and by 2014, Secretary of

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Will Biden’s Reassurance Trip Succeed?” Atlantic Council, October 8, 2009, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/will-bidens-reassurance-trip-succeed/>.

<sup>12</sup> The beginnings of this shift were already taking shape in parts of the Pentagon as early as 2000; cf. Thomas Ricks, “For Pentagon, Asia Moving to Forefront,” *Washington Post*, May 26, 2000, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2000/05/26/for-pentagon-asia-moving-to-forefront/c9d63cdd-f913-48e8-8466-163d0ecfe0b2/?utm\\_term=.8195e3219b6b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2000/05/26/for-pentagon-asia-moving-to-forefront/c9d63cdd-f913-48e8-8466-163d0ecfe0b2/?utm_term=.8195e3219b6b).

Defense Chuck Hagel was proclaiming the “beginning” of a U.S. realignment.<sup>13</sup>

This refocus ended up serving as the foundation for the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance. It assumed that the United States could pivot to Asia and simultaneously wind down operations in the Middle East, withdraw forces from Europe, and initiate cuts in overall defense spending (while shifting a greater proportion of assets to the Pacific theater).<sup>14</sup> This pivot was based on the assessment, as Amb. Sestanovich noted, that “the rest of Europe is much easier to defend. The entire continent has fewer flashpoints, fewer unstable ‘gray areas.’ It is more cohesive.”<sup>15</sup>

## **THIS SHIFT IN EMPHASIS WAS KEENLY FELT IN CENTRAL- EASTERN EUROPE...**

This shift in emphasis was keenly felt in Central-Eastern Europe, and was reflected in an “Open Letter” to the

Obama administration, when a group of distinguished former leaders and statesmen openly worried that the “Central and Eastern European countries are no longer at the heart of American foreign policy.”<sup>16</sup> In essence, they cited their actions on behalf of Euro-Atlantic enlargement and democracy promotion and noted that “we have been among your strongest supporters” in these areas. But their overall approach was backwards-looking, attempting to reanimate the partnership as it had existed in the 1990s and early 2000s. The tone of the letter was increasingly out of sync with the perception, as expressed by Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work, that the focal point for U.S. policy had to shift from Europe to Asia and to deal with the unpleasant assessment that incorporating China as a responsible stakeholder in the U.S.-led international system had failed and that “China is truly a competitor, and we need to hedge against future bad behavior.”<sup>17</sup>

The Obama administration was also grappling with the domestic political consequences of enlargement and

13 Hillary Rodham Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, as archived by the U.S. Department of State, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/10/175215.htm>; and Chuck Hagel, “Reagan National Defense Forum Keynote,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, November 15, 2014, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/606635/>.

14 See, for instance, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Two Key Gaps in Obama’s Strategic Defense Guidance,” *World Politics Review*, January 13, 2012, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/11167/the-realist-prism-two-key-gaps-in-obamas-strategic-defense-guidance>.

15 Sestanovich, “Could It Have Been Otherwise?”

16 Translation of the text from *Gazeta Wyborcza* (July 16, 2009), in “An Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 16, 2009, [https://www.rferl.org/a/An\\_Open\\_Letter\\_To\\_The\\_Obama\\_Administration\\_From\\_Central\\_And\\_Eastern\\_Europe/1778449.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/An_Open_Letter_To_The_Obama_Administration_From_Central_And_Eastern_Europe/1778449.html).

17 Quoted in Uri Friedman, “The New Concept Everyone in Washington Is Talking About,” *The Atlantic*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/08/what-genesis-great-power-competition/595405/>.



World leaders at the 2017 G7 Summit in Taormina, Italy. (Source: g7italy.it)

intervention fatigue, leading to a “low cost/no casualty” paradigm for conducting U.S. foreign policy. This paradigm sought to reduce both the role and scope of U.S. involvement in the rest of the world.<sup>18</sup> This trend would be radically accelerated by the surprise election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016. In his quest for the Republican nomination, and then in his general election campaign, Trump unleashed a broad, populist critique of the “democratic enlargement” strategy, arguing that it was disconnected from the needs and aspirations of ordinary Americans and even that it actively harmed their economic prospects and well-being. In place of that type of internationalism, he proposed an “America First” orientation. Candidate Trump was particularly scathing in his assessment of NATO partners—countries that he felt were relying on U.S. defense guarantees while they “unfairly” banked

savings on military expenditures to compete with the U.S. or were eschewing buying goods and services from the United States in favor of purchasing from America’s main rivals, starting with China. He was critical of Europe’s seeming unwillingness to help the United States fend off the Chinese challenge and, at the same time, argued that U.S. partners were complicating America’s ability to reach “deals” with Russia and China. Finally, Trump pledged to reduce U.S. involvement in the Middle East, end the Afghan operation, and abandon any last vestiges of the “freedom agenda.”<sup>19</sup>

Trump tapped into a desire for U.S. retrenchment and pledged to take a much more transactional calculus to U.S. foreign policy, whereby everything from trade deals to alliance relationships would need to demonstrate a clear and immediate benefit to the United States. As

18 Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “The Problem Neither Obama nor Bush Could Solve,” *National Interest*, February 23, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-problem-neither-obama-nor-bush-could-solve-15286?page=0%2C3>.

19 Nikolas Gvosdev, “Democracy Promotion and a Trump Administration,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, February 2017, <https://ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2017/democracy-promotion-trump-administration/>.



Lawrence Freedman concluded, Trump has a transactional approach, with outcomes often expressed in zero-sum terms, so that what one gains the other must lose. The framework is always the ‘deal,’ which will be a reflection of negotiating skill and instinctive judgment, as well as the issues at stake and the relevant power balances. Thus, if the country has gone wrong in the past, it was because of bad deals; things will be better in the future because of good deals. . . . He claims he is needed because in the past others have exploited U.S. goodwill and its readiness to accept responsibilities for their prosperity and security. He presents the U.S. as having been suckered by its supposed friends and partners as well as by its enemies and rivals. The U.S. has put disproportionate resources into collective defense and has suffered from unfair trade.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Trump’s defeat in the 2020 election, this perspective has resonance within American domestic politics. It also reflects a key observation made by Evan Sarkey: “Despite America’s advantage

in raw national power, it has repeatedly demonstrated that it lacks the patience and risk tolerance to prevent determined adversaries from making local gains, especially given its commitments elsewhere in the world.”<sup>21</sup>

## **OBAMA’S ATTEMPTED PIVOT TO ASIA AND TRUMP’S TRANSACTIONAL RETRENCHMENT BOTH SERVED TO ERODE THE BASIS OF LITHUANIA’S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNITED STATES.**

Obama’s attempted pivot to Asia and Trump’s transactional retrenchment both served to erode the basis of Lithuania’s relationship with the United States. The agenda laid out by Bush in Vilnius would matter much less if the focal point of U.S. policy shifts to the Indo-Pacific region (with the concurrent assessment that further enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic community was no longer feasible) and U.S. involvement in the Greater Middle East and Eurasian space winds down.

20 Lawrence Freedman, “Authentic Trump Versus The Trump Administration: Donald Trump as Foreign Policy Disrupter,” H-Diplo/ISSF, July 3, 2018, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/1992975/issf-policy-series-authentic-trump-versus-trump-administration>.

21 Evan Sarkey, “Reconsidering Spheres of Influence,” *Survival* vol. 62 (2020), p. 38.



### 3. What about Putin's Indian Summer (*Boby Vasara*)?

**T**he 2009 letter by the Central-Eastern European leaders could not prevent the shifts taking place in U.S. foreign policy. However, in one area, the warnings of the Central Europeans proved prescient: Russia's renewed capabilities to project power did threaten the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area. The Russian seizure of Crimea and subsequent destabilization of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, the Russian intervention in Syria in 2015, and revelations about Russian influence operations designed to impact both the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election, among others, seemed to signal, as Eugene Rumer concluded, that "Russia had recovered the will and the means to oppose [the U.S.-led international] system across a broad spectrum of activities."<sup>22</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin personified this renewed challenge to the United States

and, after four U.S. presidents (Bush, Clinton, Bush, and Obama) had declared the Cold War to be done and buried, Putin's third term as president seemed to usher in a "new Cold War." Under such conditions, therefore, "Europe's eastern borders" regained their geopolitical importance to U.S. foreign policy.<sup>23</sup>

Combined with a resurgence of violence in the Middle East, notably the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the eastward pivot was temporarily halted, and resources and attention flowed back to the European theater, especially in terms of the European Reassurance Initiative. This renewed focus on Russia continued through the Trump administration, particularly in the articulation of a concept of "great power competition," which grouped Russia with China. With Russia explicitly named as a great power competitor in the national security documents of the Trump administration,

<sup>22</sup> Eugene Rumer, "Russia and the West in a New Standoff," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 14, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/14/russia-and-west-in-new-standoff-pub-71250>.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Susan Glaser, "Trump, Putin and the Cold War," *Politico*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-putin-and-the-new-cold-war/>.



President Barack Obama participates in the Nuclear Security Summit Forum in the Netherlands, taking place during March of 2014. (Source: [obamawhitehouse.archives.gov](http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov))

especially the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy, it would appear that one pillar of the U.S.-Lithuania relationship—the need to contain Russian influence—would acquire increased salience.

However, the Russian threat still remains an unreliable foundation for a renewed U.S.-Lithuania partnership. Much of the U.S. national security community sees the challenge posed by Russia as a limited one, that over time Russia's ability to marshal power will run up against negative economic, political, and demographic factors. The overall tone was set by Obama when he declared in 2014 that "Russia is a regional power

that is threatening some of its immediate neighbors, not out of strength but out of weakness."<sup>24</sup> Most analysts accept the conclusions reached by James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, and Ali Wyne, writing for the RAND Corporation, that Russia is a "rogue" but that China is a "peer" to the United States. Under this analysis, "China presents a greater geoeconomic challenge to the United States than Russia does," and "China presents a regional military challenge and a global economic one."<sup>25</sup>

To the extent that "Russia is a more immediate and more proximate military threat to U.S. national security,"<sup>26</sup> the focus is then on strengthening barriers to

24 Scott Wilson, "Obama dismisses Russia as 'regional power' acting out of weakness," *Washington Post*, March 25, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-dismisses-russia-as-regional-power-acting-out-of-weakness/2014/03/25/1e5a678e-b439-11e3-b899-20667de76985\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-dismisses-russia-as-regional-power-acting-out-of-weakness/2014/03/25/1e5a678e-b439-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html).

25 James Dobbins, Howard K. Shatz, and Ali Wyne, "Russia is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China is a Peer, not a Rogue," RAND Corporation, October 2018, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE310.html>.

26 Dobbins, Shatz, and Wyne, "Russia is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China is a Peer, not a Rogue."



A May 2021 tactical military exercise integrating U.S. and Lithuanian Armed Forces in Rukla, Lithuania. (Source: Facebook/U.S. Embassy Vilnius)

Russian expansion and holding the line in Europe while focusing on the larger Indo-Pacific theater. As Herve Lemahieu and Alyssa Leng concluded, “The United States remains the most powerful country in the region but registered the largest fall in relative power of any Indo–Pacific country in 2020. . . . This closing power disparity suggests that Washington, far from being the undisputed unipolar power, can more correctly be described as the first among equals in a bipolar Indo–Pacific.”<sup>27</sup> What this reality means for Europe is that the United States must find ways to either reduce tensions with Russia in order to move Moscow to a position of neutrality in a growing competition with

China or that European allies will have to be able to maintain barriers against Russian movement without automatically assuming large-scale U.S. support.<sup>28</sup>

In essence, the U.S. perspective towards Europe, especially Central-Eastern Europe, is to have a group of reliable partners capable of conducting a holding action to thwart Russian movements westward—maintaining robust “barriers,”<sup>29</sup> rather than to serve as springboards for further enlargement into a Middle East (where the U.S. is withdrawing) and the Eurasian space (which is seen as a distraction from the real center of gravity in South and East Asia). As former Assistant Deputy

27 Herve Lemahieu and Alyssa Leng, *Asia Power Index: Key Findings 2020* (Sydney, Australia: Lowy Institute, 2020), pp. 3, 7.

28 Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition,” *Texas National Security Review* vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020), pp. 80-92, <https://tnsr.org/2020/03/one-war-is-not-enough-strategy-and-force-planning-for-great-power-competition/>.

29 Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Russia’s Impact on US National Interests: Maintaining a Balance of Power in Europe and Asia,” *Russia Matters*, August 5, 2020, <https://russiamatters.org/analysis/russias-impact-us-national-interests-maintaining-balance-power-europe-and-asia>.



Secretary of Defense Elbridge Colby described it,

The primary mission for European NATO should be to ensure the effective defense of the NATO area. From the U.S. perspective, Europe remains a vital interest, and NATO is a critical alliance. But the top U.S. priority is ensuring the effective defense of its allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific, including Taiwan, from Chinese attack—not only because of the strategic reasons mentioned above, but also due to the breathtakingly rapid and impressive growth of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Thus, dealing with the PLA will continue to be priority #1 for the U.S. military, as the 2018 National Defense Strategy and U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper made clear. This means that the U.S. military contributions to Europe will necessarily have a ceiling, especially as budget pressures are likely in the 2020s. Given the shared interests of European NATO and the United States in a NATO protected from Russian attack, the best use

of European NATO resources will be to ensure an effective defense of NATO Allies against a Russian theory of victory.<sup>30</sup>

## DOES BIDEN’S ELECTION TO THE PRESIDENCY CHANGE THIS DYNAMIC?

Does Biden’s election to the presidency change this dynamic? One thing that was clear during the 2020 primaries as well as the general election was the sense that Biden himself was personally not committed to deprioritize Central-Eastern Europe as a region of importance to America and much more likely to consider the importance of completing the unfinished business of Euro-Atlantic integration as a priority for U.S. policy—points that were reiterated personally by Biden in June 2021.<sup>31</sup> Biden also has a long history of interaction with Putin and is inclined to see him as a negative figure in international affairs and a threat to U.S. interests and values. Leaving aside a recent comment describing Putin as a “killer,” Biden has consistently viewed Putin as “thuggish—someone who is not confined by any sense of morality” and is not inclined to trust his assurances or his

30 Elbridge A. Colby and Ian Brzezinski, “How NATO Manages the ‘Bear’ and the ‘Dragon,’” *Orbis* vol. 65, no. 1 (Winter 2021), p. 14.

31 Joe Biden, “My Trip to Europe is About Rallying the World’s Democracies,” *Washington Post*, June 5, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/05/joe-biden-europe-trip-agenda/>.





President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva during a U.S.-Russia Summit on Wednesday, June 16, 2021. (Source: Flickr/ The White House)

goodwill.<sup>32</sup>

Rhetoric might lead one to conclude that confronting Russia is Biden's leading policy priority. The U.S. military continues to focus on the immediate challenge posed by Russia. In recent months, key leaders have emphasized that the assessment of Russia as a major threat to the U.S. is defined by a narrow set of military criteria (including both conventional and nuclear capabilities) and that this may not

translate into Russia becoming one of the top priorities for overall U.S. foreign policy.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Biden himself and his close advisors recognize that while "in the short term, the things that are really concerning at an immediate level often emanate from Russia. But it's the long-term challenges of China that are most concerning."<sup>34</sup> This message has come through quite clear: The focus of the new administration is to view all issues related to geopolitics, and international affairs

32 Nahal Toosi, "Biden Disliked Putin Before It Was Cool," *Politico*, June 9, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/09/biden-russia-putin-love-story-492195>.

33 See, for instance, comments by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley on Russia's priority as a military threat, but not necessarily as one of the leading national security problems. Paul D. Shinkman, "Top Military Officer Clarifies Biden's Threat Assessment: Climate Change-But Also China and Russia," *U.S. News and World Report*, June 10, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2021-06-10/top-military-officer-clarifies-bidens-threat-assessment-climate-change-but-also-china-and-russia>.

34 Nahal Toosi, "Biden Fears What 'Best Friends' Xi and Putin Could Do Together," *Politico*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/14/us-officials-russia-links-china-putin-biden-jinping-494314>.

more broadly, through the lens of China.<sup>35</sup> Even the Russians have detected that the dynamics of the U.S.-Russia relationship are being run through a China calculus.<sup>36</sup>

Even to the extent that Russia remains a priority for U.S. foreign policy, the focus on Russia is shifting from Russia as an actor in European security towards a focus on Russia as a global actor (particularly in cyberspace). This was reflected in a conscious decision by the new team to separate out Russia from Europe in the structure of the National Security Council; as one Biden advisor noted, “The split reflects the special emphasis the Biden administration will place on Russia separate from wider European issues.”<sup>37</sup>

Already, within mainstream U.S. foreign policy institutions, the first trial balloons about retrenchment are being deployed. A 2021 proposal from the Brookings Institution authored by Michael O’Hanlon calls for the United States to accept a belt of neutral states between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community. O’Hanlon is proposing

permanent non-alignment for countries of eastern Europe. Ideally, the zone would include Finland and Sweden; Ukraine and Moldova and Belarus; Georgia and Armenia and Azerbaijan; and finally Cyprus plus Serbia. Under such a new construct, these non-aligned countries’ existing security affiliations with NATO and/or Russia could be continued, but formal security commitments would not be extended or expanded by Brussels or Moscow.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, this view does not represent policy, but it does suggest that the search is underway for finding ways to hold the line in Europe in order for the United States to devote much more attention and resources to the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, while the American public has become more attuned to threats emanating from Russia, particularly as they relate to election interference and cyber attacks on infrastructure, there is little enthusiasm for pursuing a major forward

35 Nahal Toosi, “Biden’s nominees will face a China gauntlet,” *Politico*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/12/29/bidens-nominees-face-china-gauntlet-451792>

36 Xie Wenting and Bai Yunyi, “What position would Russia take in case of an armed conflict between China and US?” *Global Times*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202106/1225982.shtml>.

37 Robbie Gramer, Amy Mackinnon, and Jack Detsch, “Familiar Faces Return to State and National Security Council as Biden Staffs Up with Obama Alums,” *Foreign Policy*, January 8, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/08/state-department-national-security-council-biden-staff-announcement/>.

38 Michael O’Hanlon, “To Face Russia and Vladimir Putin, Joe Biden Needs a Smart Strategy,” Brookings Institution, May 28, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/05/28/to-face-russia-and-vladimir-putin-joe-biden-needs-a-smart-strategy/>.

39 See, also, Gvosdev, “Russia’s Impact on US National Interests.”





Presidential Palace, Vilnius. (Adobe Stock)

effort against Russia. Instead, apart from responding to specific incidents, the public attitude leans towards holding the line against Russia.<sup>40</sup>

Just as Trump's personal preferences, especially with regards to Russia, were not translated into concrete policy shifts, Biden's personal ties to Central and Eastern Europe mean that he will retain an interest in the region, but presidential attention cannot substitute for a solid policy foundation for the evolution of U.S.-Lithuania ties, especially since there is no guarantee that subsequent presidents will feel obligated to honor Biden's personal pledges.

At the same time, some of the renewed focus on Russia is due to a set of extraordinary circumstances focused around the role Putin is alleged to have played during the 2016 election and the extent to which many Democrats may blame him for Hillary Clinton's loss, as well as efforts to support Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020.<sup>41</sup> Antipathy towards Putin is an important reason for bipartisan concern about Russia, but Putin's successors are not likely to generate the same level of intensity, and a U.S.-Lithuania relationship predicated primarily on opposition to Putin will not have sustainability in the longer term.

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, Glaser, "Trump, Putin and the Cold War."

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, David Corn, "Putin Shares Blame For 400,000 American Deaths. Should Biden Shake His Hand?" *Mother Jones*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2021/06/putin-shares-blame-for-400000-american-deaths-should-biden-shake-his-hand/>.

# 4. The World that Biden Confronts

**A**t the end of 2020, the Munich Security Conference released its assessment of international relations for the upcoming decade. One of its key conclusions was to point out “a gradual reorientation of the United States . . . now both less able to be a guarantor of the international order and less willing to make overproportionate contributions.”<sup>42</sup> The MSC did not change its assessment simply because of Biden’s election, even given Biden’s personal commitment to American global engagement. Indeed, the President’s national security team is acutely aware that there is little public support for robust, forward U.S. action in Europe or Asia. When faced with hypothetical scenarios about responses to Russian probes in Europe, the preference was for European allies to take the lead in responding and for the U.S. not to engage in military action.<sup>43</sup>

## **THE PRESIDENT’S NATIONAL SECURITY TEAM IS ACUTELY AWARE THAT THERE IS LITTLE PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR ROBUST, FORWARD U.S. ACTION IN EUROPE OR ASIA**

Extensive polling data conducted during the first months of the Biden administration confirms that aspects of Trump’s “America First” approach still resonate with broad segments of the American public. Protecting American jobs (e.g., safeguarding the health of the American economy) was by far the most important U.S. foreign policy priority, followed by dealing with immigration. Mitigating and

42 Bunde, Hartmann, Stärk, Carr, Erber, Hammelehle, and Kabus, “Zeitenwende/Wendezeiten,” special edition, *Munich Security Report*.

43 See, for instance, the discussion in Nikolas Gvosdev, “Vox Populi, Eurasia Group Foundation and Narratives,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, December 2019, <https://ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2019/vox-populi-eurasia-group-foundation-and-narratives/>; and “Vox Populi: After the Event,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, June 2020, <https://ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2020/vox-populi-after-the-event/>.





U.S. Army loadmaster in CH-47F Chinook flying over Kabul, Afghanistan in 2017. (Source: defense.gov)

coping with climate change (including the transition from hydrocarbons to green energy) has emerged as a rising issue, while concerns about foreign terrorism have been steadily dropping, along with growth in support for disengagement from the Middle East. Improving relations with allies is also one of the top priorities, but it is important to note that this is within the context of increasing cooperation on such matters as supply chain security, given the vulnerabilities that were exposed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the risk of overdependence on China for critical goods and services. The Russian question, which is ranked ninth and is behind the priority assigned to the threat from China, is viewed primarily in the context of thwarting Russian interference in domestic U.S. politics rather than redrawing the Eurasian balance of power. Democracy promotion was at the absolute bottom of the list.<sup>44</sup>

Based on these assessments, the Biden foreign policy team, especially Secretary of State Tony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, along with Ambassador Susan Rice (as head of the Domestic Policy Council), are formulating metrics for what Biden calls a “foreign policy for the middle class”—that American overseas action must have a direct connection “to make life better, safer, and easier for working families.”<sup>45</sup> Part of that process has been to rebrand U.S. allies, not as regional security consumers (drawing upon U.S. resources) but as global security providers in partnership with the United States. In a tacit acknowledgment that the Trump critique of NATO and other alliances still finds support within U.S. politics, Sullivan made a point of stressing via Twitter, “Great to see Allies making solid progress on more equitable sharing of responsibilities. Seven straight years

44 John Halpin, Brian Katulis, Peter Juuil, Karl Agne, and Nisha Jain, “How Americans Envision a More Perfect Union,” Center for American Progress, May 26, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/politics-and-elections/reports/2021/05/26/499742/americans-envision-perfect-union/>.

45 Elisa Labott, “The Sullivan Model,” *Foreign Policy*, April 9, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/09/the-sullivan-model-jake-nsc-biden-adviser-middle-class/>.

of defense spending increases since the Wales Pledge adopted during Obama-Biden Administration.”<sup>46</sup>

## **THE TWO OVERARCHING PRIORITIES OF THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION MIGHT BE SUMMARIZED AS “CHINA” AND “CLIMATE CHANGE.”**

The Biden team also sees that the U.S. must deal with changes in international politics, which have moved beyond the “hub and spokes” conception of the 1990s. Writing in *Orbis*, Parag Khanna, drawing on observations made by the former director of national intelligence and retired general James Clapper, described the conception of the environment as follows: “We are in the midst of an irreversible shift in the global economic center of gravity eastward, from the trans-Atlantic basin to Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific rim, which in turn is laying the geopolitical foundations for international relations in the coming decades. At the same time, to avoid the worst effects of climate change, the world’s top climate scientists say we must halve greenhouse gas emissions within the next 10 years, and achieve net zero emissions by 2050.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the

two overarching priorities of the Biden administration might be summarized as “China” and “climate change.”

The emerging foreign policy narrative might be termed the “democratic community” approach, in which enlargement takes a secondary position to consolidation and where the emphasis is on deepening of ties within the community, especially in terms of adjusting dependence on China and Chinese supply chains and in coping with climate change and other transnational issues, rather than to focus on its willy-nilly expansion. This might be framed as a “deepening” rather than as a “broadening.” As Ash Jain explains, the democratic community approach is designed to bring together

a coalition of allies and partners to address those challenges. . . . We are in a much stronger position if we have partners who see the world in similar ways and are prepared to act with us to leverage our own influence. . . . It’s in our interest to find other nations, to work with other nations to solve some of the challenges that we are trying to face which we know in a globalized world we can’t do by ourselves—whether it’s the pandemic and

46 Jake Sullivan, tweet from @JakeSullivan46, Twitter, June 13, 2021, <https://twitter.com/JakeSullivan46/status/1404194729915564050>.

47 Parag Khanna, “The Biden Administration Faces China and Climate Change,” *Orbis* vol. 65, no. 2 (Spring 2021), p. 214.



Pennsylvania National Guard's Joint Force Headquarters have partnered with Lithuania through the National Guard's State Partnership Program since 1993. (Source: pa.ng.mil)

the scourge of the coronavirus . . . whether it's terrorism as we have seen over the years, nuclear proliferation, climate change, or building an open global economy.<sup>48</sup>

But an important part of the “democratic community” approach, in contrast to “democratic enlargement,” is the emphasis on showing how U.S. cooperation leads to positive impacts on “Americans in their everyday lives” rather than on more nebulous pronouncements about a global order.<sup>49</sup>

This approach may serve as the basis of a new bipartisan consensus to replace the democratic enlargement approach of the immediate post-Cold War period. Moreover, survey data collected by the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs suggest it would find support among American voters.<sup>50</sup>

48 “The Democratic Community: A Path for U.S. Engagement? With Ash Jain,” Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, October 15, 2020, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20201015-democratic-community-usa-engagement-ash-jain>.

49 “The Democratic Community: A Path for U.S. Engagement? With Ash Jain.”

50 *The Public Responds: Contributing to a New Narrative on the Future of U.S. Global Engagement* (New York: Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, December 2020), [https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles\\_papers\\_reports/the-public-responds-contributing-to-a-new-narrative-on-the-future-of-us-global-engagement](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/the-public-responds-contributing-to-a-new-narrative-on-the-future-of-us-global-engagement).

## **IN CONTRAST TO THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION, THIS STRATEGY NO LONGER EXPLICITLY GROUPS RUSSIA ALONGSIDE CHINA AS A “NAMED” CHALLENGER TO U.S. INTERESTS.**

On March 3, 2021, the Biden administration released its Interim National Security Guidance.<sup>51</sup> In contrast to documents released by the Trump administration, this strategy no longer explicitly groups Russia alongside China as a “named” challenger to U.S. interests. In perusing this guidance:

The document explicitly rejects any notion of ‘restoration’ to a pre-2016 condition; promises to terminate so-called ‘forever wars’ in places like Afghanistan; and reiterates a commitment to a U.S. role in the world—including in its advocacy of fair trade with other states—

that defends the interests of American workers and middle class families. It is a much more polite document, in that it repudiates the brash language of ‘America First’ and the much more explicit transactional approach that we saw in the Trump years. The guidance stresses the importance of allies and partners in finding joint, collective solutions to global problems that impact American security—but also suggests that, in building back American leadership in international institutions, the United States will not be writing blank checks. President Biden wants America to lead, but the document’s explicit linkage that the U.S. role in the world is connected to and must support the domestic U.S. economic recovery highlights that the Biden administration is well aware of the importance of connecting what happens overseas to the doorstep of average Americans.<sup>52</sup>

The Guidance does not name Russia as a distinct threat (although Russia is implied as one of the “other” revisionist powers);

<sup>51</sup> The interim guidance can be found at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>. Sources with knowledge of the Biden administration’s foreign policy team have indicated that this guidance will be used to formulate the longer, more formal National Security Strategy and thus should be considered authoritative.

<sup>52</sup> Nikolas K. Gvosdev and Derek S. Reveron, “Continuity in the National Interest? Assessing the Biden Administration’s Interim National Security Guidance,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 8, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/03/continuity-in-the-national-interest-assessing-the-biden-administrations-interim-national-security-guidance/>.





Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and European External Action Service Secretary General Stefano Sannino in Brussels during May 2021 for a meeting to reaffirm U.S.-EU partnership. (Source: useu.usmission.gov)

downgrades operations in the Greater Middle East as critical to U.S. security; and overall endorses the pivot to Asia as well as the primacy of climate change as a national security issue. It lays the groundwork to reconfigure U.S. partnerships as alliances meant to safeguard and improve the biological, economic, environmental, and cyber security of both Americans and their partners, especially against the challenges of a changing climate and a rising China. In such an environment, Russia is an important, but not the central, player. Indeed, as Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman told the German Marshall Fund, the “relationship between the United States, the European Union

and China will define the course of the 21st century.”<sup>53</sup>

One line of effort based on this Guidance is to find ways to reduce tensions within Europe and with European partners so that more attention can be focused on the Indo-Pacific region. This was reflected in the U.S. push to get NATO to formally and publicly declare that Chinese activities and ambitions pose a risk to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area at the June 2021 summit.<sup>54</sup> In keeping with that approach, the June 2021 announcement on a U.S.-EU framework for making progress on solving the long-standing commercial dispute between Airbus and Boeing

<sup>53</sup> Remarks of Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, “Transatlantic Trends 2021,” German Marshall Fund, June 9, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Dan Sabbagh and Julian Borger, “NATO Summit: Leaders Declare China Presents Security Risk,” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/14/nato-summit-china-russia-biden-cyber-attacks>.

explicitly referenced the need for U.S. and European partners to come together to stem the challenge posed by China, and now cooperation between American and European partners would bring economic benefits to both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>55</sup>

## **U.S. ACTION VIS-À-VIS RUSSIA WILL BE ASSESSED NOT SOLELY IN ITS OWN RIGHT, BUT IN RELATION TO ITS IMPACT ON MORE IMPORTANT PRIORITIES.**

In much the same vein, one of the motivating reasons for going ahead with the Biden-Putin meeting in June 2021—despite calls for Biden to cancel given a series of Russian provocative measures—was, as a senior advisor to the president noted, to find a way to “avoid the kind of ramping up of tensions that have marked U.S.-Russia relations over the course of the last 15 or 20 years.”<sup>56</sup> In its first months in office, the Biden administration has signaled that it will subordinate concerns about Russia if that supports advancing

other interests.<sup>57</sup> In other words, while containing Russian influence remains an important mission, U.S. action vis-à-vis Russia will be assessed not solely in its own right, but in relation to its impact on more important priorities.

We use the shorthand “China and climate” to suggest the two emerging organizing principles for U.S. foreign policy, but certainly, the U.S. will not want to create strains in developing a coalition of states to balance, contain, and shape Chinese behavior, while also taking steps to move an agenda focused on mitigating climate change. For instance, there are indications that the decision not to sanction the overarching holding company of the Nord Stream II pipeline—despite stated U.S. opposition to this pipeline that would bypass Ukraine and other Central European transit countries and maintain Russian energy leverage in Europe—came because of concerns that sanctioning Nord Stream AG would open a major rift with Germany and hamstring U.S. efforts to forge a more durable Western coalition vis-à-vis China. A secondary consideration, apparently pushed from the office of the U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry, was that interruption of the line might complicate Germany’s ability to reach the

55 Tweet of Finbarr Bermingham @fbermingham, *South China Morning Post* correspondent in Brussels, Twitter, June 15, 2021, <https://twitter.com/fbermingham/status/1404797139306356736>.

56 Toosi, “Biden Disliked Putin.”

57 See, for instance, Zachary Basu, “Why Biden Wants to Sit Down With Putin,” *Axios*, June 5, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/joe-biden-putin-summit-a7900a9f-44ba-422c-9757-6cd69e6e91a0.html>; and Jonathan Swan and Dave Lawler, “Exclusive: Zelensky ‘Surprised’ and ‘Disappointed’ by Biden Pipeline Move,” *Axios*, June 6, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/zelensky-biden-ukraine-russia-nord-stream-pipeline-fe50756b-6b82-43f0-b390-734ea3e95de0.html>.



Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry in Seoul for a Media Roundtable in April 2021. (Source: [kr.usembassy.gov](https://kr.usembassy.gov))

targets for decarbonization of its power generation sector (by 2028). All of this, in turn, must help to sustain domestic American economic growth or not impose major costs.

Thus, the United States under the Biden administration (and beyond) may conceive of “containing” Russia in far less expansive terms than in ways that might fit the preferences of Central and Eastern European allies—and even members of the U.S. Congress and some of the senior figures in the U.S. State Department, certainly not in terms of responding to every Russian action, or even being prepared to live with the results of Russian activity which allies might find less palatable. In overriding the preferences of close advisors who wanted stronger action on Russia, Biden

has indicated that he “wants to stabilize the relationship while focusing on bigger 21st-century challenges.”<sup>58</sup>

U.S. foreign policy is in the midst of another major cyclical shift, and a country like Lithuania, as well as its partners in Central-Eastern Europe, must likewise make the shift from a relationship based on legacy items of the 1990s and early 2000s in favor of the defining issues of the mid-21st century. As Jain notes, the United States is currently engaged in the effort to identify “partners who can help us achieve the goals that we are seeking.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> John Hudson, “Amid internal disputes over Russia policy, Biden has chosen a mix of confrontation and cooperation,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-putin-summit/2021/06/15/19657e2c-cd44-11eb-9b7e-e06f6cfdece8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-putin-summit/2021/06/15/19657e2c-cd44-11eb-9b7e-e06f6cfdece8_story.html).

<sup>59</sup> “The Democratic Community: A Path for U.S. Engagement? With Ash Jain.”







# 5. Developing a New Agenda for U.S.-Lithuania Relations

Since taking office, the Biden administration has been developing the narrative that U.S. global engagement is essential for America's security, its economic well-being, and its health. Rather than viewing foreign policy as astute moves on the global chessboard, the language has shifted; the discussion is now on how coordination with other democratic states in Europe and Asia deliver tangible benefits to average Americans. The Biden administration accepts this political reality that "vague platitudes about American leadership are no longer sufficient to sustain public support. If, however, Americans see the trans-Atlantic community as vital to their personal health, then their paychecks, even the security of their smartphones, [they] can build a new foundation for the Euro-Atlantic community to endure to the mid-twenty-first century."<sup>60</sup>

In the 1990s, Lithuanian leaders, along with their counterparts elsewhere in Central-Eastern Europe, understood the importance of making tangible contributions to key U.S. foreign policy priorities to signal their interest in a mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationship with Washington. Even if the individual national contributions were small in nature, the bundling effect of collective regional action created in Washington an appreciation for the importance of the region as a whole to U.S. national security. The challenge now is to position Central-Eastern Europe, including the Baltic littoral and Lithuania specifically, as a vital region which can support the U.S. "China and climate" focus, rather than wrapping up a legacy agenda dealing with the aftermath of the Cold War. This creates an imperative for Lithuania to be the mobilizer of regional partners able to demonstrate continued relevance to overall U.S. global strategy, which, in turn, cements U.S. support for Lithuanian interests.

60 Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "These NATO Nuances Create National Security Issues," *National Interest*, October 11, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/these-nato-nuances-create-national-security-issues-170460>.

## DETERMINING THE FUTURE OF NATO

First, given the expansion of U.S. strategic interest across a much broader Indo-Pacific region, Lithuania and other partners need to be able to take over missions, not only along the “eastern flank” but also “in North Africa and the Near East, as well as backfill U.S. forces in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf area in the event of conflict in the Pacific.” European partners should strengthen their relationships and ties with U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, such as “Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Mongolia,” and for NATO allies like Lithuania to back closer institutional ties with America’s Asian partners.<sup>61</sup>

## LITHUANIA CAN TAKE THE LEAD IN DEVELOPING AND MANUFACTURING SO-CALLED “PORCUPINE DEFENSE” CAPABILITIES...

Second, Lithuania can take the lead in developing and manufacturing so-called “porcupine defense” capabilities that would increase the region’s ability to deter outside aggression and meddling by utilizing “fourth industrial revolution” technologies. This would focus defense spending on items such as inexpensive unmanned vehicles (aerial, land, surface, and subsurface maritime), electronic and information warfare systems, and mobile and autonomous systems for maintaining communications and surveillance. As Harlan Ullman has noted, a porcupine defense strategy is “predicated on finishing the transformation of a largely 20th century industrial base military to a 21st century information-based structure. One reason is to outflank Russian (and Chinese) ‘conventional’ and industrial based capabilities with unmanned systems; long range strike; electronic and information warfare; standoff weapons; deception; decoys; diesel submarines; and other pain imposing capabilities to blunt any potential attack reversing the cost exchange ratio to our favor.”<sup>62</sup>

Robust porcupine capabilities would, in the assessment of T.X. Hammes, ensure that Russia remains deterred and allow for NATO security and free up the United States to remain focused in the event of a crisis in the Indo-Pacific region. As he pointed out, with specific reference to the Baltic states,

61 Colby and Brzezinski, “How NATO Manages the ‘Bear’ and the ‘Dragon,’” pp. 15-18.

62 Testimony of Harlan Ullman before the House of Commons Defence Select Committee, Whitehall, London, March 20, 2020, pp. 5-6, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/743/pdf/>.

New and updated technologies could provide with an affordable and efficient solution. 3D printing for example, would allow the creation of cheap, fast, drones quickly and at low cost. Small warheads carried by these drones could cause massive damage to Russian forces. New technology from the fourth industrial revolution would also allow the Baltic states' forces to disperse widely and create too many targets for Russia. Baltic states could mobilize in hours instead of days, and if Western Europeans buy long-range cruise missiles, which are 'cheaper and more survivable than air forces', they could launch them from their own territory, partially solving the time-distance problem of deploying forces to the Baltic Sea region.<sup>63</sup>

Taking the lead on such a project would be crucial because the U.S. ability to simultaneously take the lead in managing multiple crises—in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia—has eroded.<sup>64</sup> Not only developing these capabilities but helping neighbors and partners acquire and use them would continue to assist Lithuania in transforming its position from being a security “consumer” in Europe to a security

“provider.” Even in non-military areas, Lithuania's willingness to be a “provider” helps to change the narrative. Vilnius' decision to share COVID vaccines—to Taiwan, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, alongside the U.S. effort—reinforces the perception of shared burdens in common cause.<sup>65</sup>

## LITHUANIA WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Lithuania, on its own, will not be a major partner of the United States, but it can gain greater influence in terms of how it shapes the overall European Union agenda. A quiet but nevertheless real concern in the United States is that the push for European “strategic autonomy” and the possibility of European “equidistance” between China and the United States will undermine the effort to deepen the connectivity among the “democratic community.” With the departure of Britain from the EU, the U.S. needs a bloc of states who collectively can act as a counterweight against political tendencies, particularly in larger countries within the bloc, that might support a loosening of trans-Atlantic ties.

First, the United States needs supporters within the EU who will continue and extend Chancellor Angela Merkel's assertion that the trans-Atlantic community “as a

63 Comments made at the event, “Baltic Porcupine: Harnessing the Fourth Industrial Revolution to Defend the Baltic States,” Atlantic Council, July 11, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/event-recap/baltic-porcupine-harnessing-the-fourth-industrial-revolution-to-defend-the-baltic-states/>.

64 Brands and Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition.”

65 Stuart Lau, “Lithuania sends jabs to Taiwan amid pressure from Beijing,” *Politico*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/lithuania-sends-jabs-to-taiwan-amid-pressure-from-beijing/>.





Delegates attend a forum of the China-Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) Forum in Lithuania during November of 2019. (Source: china-ceec.org)

whole, [is] also a Pacific nation.”<sup>66</sup> This also includes coordination on a common approach to China, particularly in terms of trade. Biden has made clear that he would like to see more trans-Atlantic unity on dealing with China, especially on human rights abuses and unfair economic practices.<sup>67</sup> Lithuania’s withdrawal from the China-Central East European Countries (CEEC) forum (the 17+1 group) in May 2021 was welcomed, especially Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis’s assertion that China’s relations with

Europe should be conducted via the “EU27 united in solidarity and purpose.”<sup>68</sup> In turn, helping to ensure that the EU stands with the United States in using their combined leverage to get Chinese acquiescence to international rules and standards would be an important part of the future U.S.-Lithuania relationship.

Second, Lithuania needs to identify where it can function as a node along the proposed reoriented supply chains for the health, technological, and

66 Quoted in David M. Herszenhorn and Rym Momtaz, “NATO leaders see rising threats from China, but not eye to eye with each other,” *Politico*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-leaders-see-rising-threats-from-china-but-not-eye-to-eye-with-each-other/>.

67 Stuart Lau, “US and Europe Converge on Historic Rebuke of China,” *Politico*, June 13, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-europe-rebuke-china-economic-practices-g7-human-rights-xinjiang-coronavirus/>.

68 Quoted in Stuart Lau, “Lithuania Pulls Out of China’s ‘17+1’ Bloc in Eastern Europe,” *Politico*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/lithuania-pulls-out-china-17-1-bloc-eastern-central-europe-foreign-minister-gabrielius-landsbergis/>.



energy security of the entire democratic community. The pandemic highlighted the risks of overdependence on China for critical goods and services. Continuing with an effort that started during the Trump administration, President Biden promulgated an executive order to assess America's supply chains and noted that "close cooperation on resilient supply chains with allies and partners who share our values will foster collective economic and national security and strengthen the capacity to respond to international disasters and emergencies."<sup>69</sup> There are openings at this point for exploring ways to "onshore and nearshore manufacturing supply chains in electronics, pharmaceuticals and other sectors" back to the Europe-North America area, while also seeing whether these efforts can connect with the "Resilient Supply Chain" Initiative with Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia, as well as other Southeast Asian states, to get countries to be able to move to a "China plus one" option for obtaining supplies of critical raw materials and manufactured components.<sup>70</sup> In some ways, an EU interface with the Resilient Supply Chain Initiative would parallel closer NATO cooperation with Indo-Pacific allies.

Finding ways to contribute to the goal of transitioning from hydrocarbons to "green" energy is also a new area for cooperation. In particular, as International Energy Agency Executive Director Fatih Birol observed, "Hydrogen, offshore wind and batteries can be real game-changers in the context of Lithuania's clean energy transition."<sup>71</sup> To the extent that Lithuania can spearhead the energy transition in the region as a whole, the country could emerge as a major climate partner with the United States and also help to spearhead efforts in other parts of the European Union.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHT

For the United States, Russia will remain an important but diminishing priority in the coming decades. Given the new agenda that is emerging for U.S. foreign policy, Vilnius' importance to the United States will increasingly rest less on its eastward focus and much more on its westward relationships, where Lithuania can help develop and sustain the emerging democratic community of the 21st century.



69 "Executive Order on America's Supply Chains," February 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/24/executive-order-on-americas-supply-chains/>.

70 See, the discussion in Parag Khanna, "The next wave of globalization: Asia in the cockpit," *Nikkei Asia*, January 13, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/The-next-wave-of-globalization-Asia-in-the-cockpit>.

71 "Lithuania is well placed to lead on clean energy and energy security in the Baltic region," *Modern Diplomacy*, May 4, 2021, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/05/04/lithuania-is-well-placed-to-lead-on-clean-energy-and-energy-security-in-the-baltic-region/>.

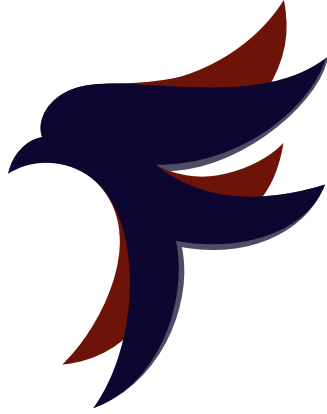
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