The American Vision of Baltic Security Architecture: Understanding the Northern Europe Initiative

By Edward Rhodes

In intellectual terms, America’s Northern Europe Initiative (NEI) represents one of the most extraordinary and most exciting conceptual departures in U.S. international security policy undertaken during the Clinton years. The NEI must be viewed not simply as a creative, pragmatic package of policies aimed at encouraging continued and expanded stability in the Baltic basin but as a remarkable, though largely overlooked, revolution in American thinking.

Launched in 1997 with little fanfare and pursued quietly in the years since, the NEI reflects a fundamentally altered conception of the nature of international security and of how this security is to be created. In important regards, the NEI’s architectural blueprint is not simply post-Cold War but post-national in design. It assumes not only that the global distribution of power has shifted in the last decade but that the goals and means of security policy have changed. To use a phrase that slips off the tongues of political scientists far too frequently and far too easily, the NEI represents a paradigm shift.

It is of course possible to discuss the various programs that compose America’s NEI in traditional terms. To do so, however, is to profoundly misunderstand the NEI. The basic vision of the NEI; its conception of what security is and how it is created is profoundly different from the vision that shaped twentieth century approaches to building security. Thus, in addition to representing a practical effort to deal with the unique circumstances
found in northern Europe today, America’s Baltic policies promise to serve as a critical test of an alternative model for building global security in the twenty-first century.

Three Underlying Assumptions of the NEI’s Vision

To understand the NEI’s vision of northern European security architecture, it is necessary to begin by identifying three key assumptions on which the NEI is based.

First, the NEI starts with a broad conception of what security means. Security is taken to mean not simply safety from external aggression, but at least some minimally acceptable level of protection from the range of threats that endanger human welfare for example, from economic deprivation, shortages of energy, infectious disease, environmental toxins and hazards, crime, corrupt political institutions, and the forceful imposition of an alien culture. In other words, the NEI takes as its goal not simply ensuring that the nations of northern Europe are secure from military aggression, but ensuring that individuals in the region have the security necessary to pursue a meaningful, productive life.

Second, in the American perspective, security is not zero-sum. To the contrary, reflecting this broader understanding of security, security is understood as a collective good. To succeed, security policies will have to increase security for all, not the security for some at the expense of others. The NEI argues that the security problems facing the peoples of Northern Europe are ones that can be solved only by thorough cooperation; they cannot be solved competitively.

As troubled as American policymakers are by certain developments in Russia and by certain Russian actions—most obviously, Russian military policies in Chechnya—Russia is seen as a necessary partner, not as an adversary, in the pursuit of security. “The U.S. goal”, the State Department insists, “is to demonstrate that integration and cooperation in the NEI region benefit Russia as well as its Baltic neighbors.... By strengthening the cooperative links between Russia and its neighbors, NEI increases security for all...
and helps build the foundation for greater economic prosperity in the region.”

Third, American thinking starts with the recognition that while individual sovereign states will be important participants in the effort to provide the peoples of the Baltic region with this broadly-defined security, sovereign states will not be and can not be the only important actors in this effort. Rather than focusing exclusively on the role of sovereign states, in designing regional security architecture the NEI expands attention up, down, and out from the state.

The NEI expands attention outward from the state by recognizing that non-governmental actors play a critical role in the provision of security, broadly conceived. Non-governmental actors are not at the margin: they are as integral to the process of building security as are states. The NEI Seeks to energize government agencies, the private sector, and the community of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to build “a culture of cooperation.” “... The Northern Europe Initiative is a conscious effort to develop a more active public-private partnership in the conduct of diplomacy, in which the U.S. Government works closely with the business and NGO community to achieve shared goals.”

The NEI also expands the focus of attention up from the state to a variety of intergovernmental organizations that, like non-governmental actors, are seen as playing a critical role in northern Europe’s security architecture. Far from simply being superstructure in the interaction between sovereign states, these intergovernmental actors are viewed as playing an important, independent, non-sovereign role in regional governance. Although the European Union and NATO are the most obvious among these actors and have certainly dominated the foreign policy agendas of the Baltic states, from the perspective of the NEI they are only two of a wide range of problem-solving intergovernmental institutions able to facilitate discussion of common concerns and to exert pressure on member-states to contribute to common efforts. Other, less widely watched, intergovernmental institutions are seen as also playing an important role in the provision of northern European security: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Partnership for Peace, the Council of Baltic Sea States, the Nordic Council, the U.S.-Baltic Partnership Commission, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, and the Arctic Council. More narrowly defined institutions for cooperation between the three Baltic states for example, the Baltic Defence College, the Baltic Battalion, the Baltic Squadron, and the Baltic Air Defense Network are also regarded as serving a critical function, and are targeted for U.S. political and financial support.

Finally and perhaps most provocatively, the NEI also recognizes the importance of sub-state actors and institutions. The NEI thus expands attention downward from the level of the nation-state to provincial and local governments, seeing these sub-state actors as full and directly engaged partners in the security-building process. They are regarded not merely as the instruments of the central governments of the various sovereign states, but as in-
dependent and critical contributors to the resolution of regional security challenges.

The net impact of this refocusing of attention up, down, and out from the states is to highlight the fundamentally changed picture that has emerged of what security is and how it is created. Security is not seen as simply an absence of violence, nor is it assumed that it can be created simply by states’ recognition of each other’s sovereignty and by their ability to keep order within their boundaries; rather security is seen as a human condition, and it is assumed that it is produced by the interaction and mutual effort of states, NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, and sub-state actors. These players are seen as engaged in complex and constantly evolving functional partnerships designed to meet the emerging challenges to human well being.

The Hanseatic Analogy

Explicitly recalling the Hanseatic tradition of the region, the NEI’s objective is to create a northern European community within which state and national boundaries mean relatively little, a community within which security is provided by a host of interlocking international and transnational institutions. The Hanseatic reference is conceptually quite provocative because this return to the past for a model of the twenty-first century security suggests nothing less than a revolution in international political life. This reference being so provocative, it is useful to underscore two critical ways in which the medieval Hanseatic security architecture differed from modern, twentieth century security architecture.

In the first place, the Hanseatic era was pre-national: politics between communities was conducted with relatively little attention to national identity. As U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott explained in a lecture to an Estonian audience, the Hanseatic League was a concert of city-states precursors of nation-states that felt secure enough in their identities and in their neighborhood to make a virtue of their diversity and derive benefit from their interactions with one another.” In other words, identity did not matter or at least matter very much. What the NEI looks toward is a post-national system of politics in the Baltic region, in which national identity and national rivalries do not preclude cooperation for mutual benefit.

In the second place, the Hanseatic era pre-dates the emergence of modern, sovereign states. In the Hanseatic system interactions between communities were regulated by a range of governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental authorities including, inter alia, guilds, the church, religious military orders, the empire, and civic rulers. In contrast to the modern, Westphalian system in which authority (and responsibility for providing security) has been geographically defined and hierarchically concentrated in the state, in the Hanseatic system authority was embedded in a complex web of institutions.

It is not that nations, states, and sovereignty will wither or disappear in the American vision; it is that they will cease to be of central importance. Observing
that most of the problems facing the region transcend the borders of particular nations and particular sovereign states, the American perspective envisions the development of a dense network of border-spanning political, economic, and social institutions serving legislative, judicial, and executive functions that is, providing governance and regulation, authority to resolve disputes, and the capability to mobilize resources for the common good.

The new security architecture, in the American perspective, will have to be both functional and complex. Institutions will need to be developed to meet specific security needs economic integration, pollution remediation, crime prevention, cultural protection, and so on. No single institution will have the right membership and the right structure to solve all of these problems, so multiple institutions will be needed. And since no single problem dominates the others, no single institution will have primacy: there will be no hierarchy of institutions. Nor will all of the institutions be governmental: in some cases non-governmental organizations and non-governmental modes of problem solving may be more effective than state, intergovernmental, or transgovernmental ones.

A map of problem-solving institutions will not be neat: it will not look like a tidy political map from the 18th, 19th, or 20th centuries, with each piece of territory colored a particular color indicating the sovereign authority in that territory, with solid black lines separating them. It will look more like a medieval map, with overlapping loyalties, duties, and responsibilities. Different aspects of human security will be ensured by different, and in some cases multiple, institutions. Indeed, as in Hanseatic times, maps showing political boundaries may be misleading when it comes to understanding how problems are actually solved.

This security architecture and its network of institutions explicitly will reach into Russia, in some cases engaging the central government, in other cases engaging regional governments or local communities. While the boundaries of the northern European region are vague and blurry, and depend on the specific security issue being addressed, the notion is to be inclusive, not exclusive in building institutions. Common problems require common endeavors, not a division into them and us categories.

Specifically, the NEI is described as pursuing three, integrative objectives: to

- Integrate the Baltic states into a regional network of cooperative programs with their neighbors and support their efforts to prepare for membership in key European and Euro-Atlantic institutions;
- Integrate northwest Russia into the same cooperative regional network to promote democratic, market-oriented development in Russia as well as to enhance Russia’s relations with its northern European neighbors; and
- Strengthen U.S. relations with and regional ties among the Nordic states, Poland, Germany, and the European Union.6

What the U.S. hopes will emerge is a Kantian community of Civil states committed to collective security again, using a broad definition of security and bound
together by innumerable ties in a relationship of perpetual peace.

**The NEI’s Practical Attractions**

This emphasis on the idealistic and visionary qualities of the NEI should not obscure two very practical features that also make it attractive to American policymakers and that make it appealing even to those policymakers who might be troubled by its revolutionary, post-national, non-state-centric conception.

In the first place, the NEI successfully avoids commitment of significant U.S. government resources. The U.S. national security agenda is, and for the foreseeable future will continue to be, dominated by concerns about East Asia and the Korean peninsula, the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, the Balkans, and, to a lesser degree, Latin America. Given the absence of high profile dangers or critical American interests, northern Europe ranks, and will rank, low on the U.S. agenda, despite strong cultural and emotional ties to the region. Critical U.S. resources not least of them, top decision-makers’ time and attention are overstretched already in addressing the problems of other regions. True, the programs lumped together under the umbrella of the Baltic-American Partnership have included financial and political commitments, but these are extraordinarily modest. While at the margin, it is conceivable that resources for the region could and will be increased, but it is unlikely that dramatically greater resources can be found. Thus, from the American perspective the NEI has the desirable quality of being politically, economically, and militarily affordable.

In the second place, the NEI is seen as an important element in U.S. policy toward Russia. The NEI is attractive to U.S. decision-makers not only as a modestly-priced strategy for advancing Baltic security but as a means of contributing to the liberalization and democratization of Russia, a means of trying to bring Russia home to the west. The NEI’s Hanseatic analogy explicitly recalls the fact that the Hanza’s influence extended eastward into Russia. The Hanseatic community not only linked Russia’s northwest to western economies and created a shared prosperity based on the exchange of raw and finished goods, but changed mental geography. Historically, Pskov, Novgorod, and Smolensk all had ties to the Hansa and through it were exposed to western European values and ways of thinking; these Hanseatic outposts provided a window through which the larger Russian nation could be reached.

The NEI thus aims at blurring the border between Western Europe and Russia, not at shifting, strengthening, or reifying that border. “Our hope,” Strobe Talbott has explained, “Is that Russia will come over time to view this region [the Baltic] not as a fortified frontier but as a gateway; not as a buffer against invaders who no longer exist, but as a trading route and a common ground for commerce and economic development in a word, that Russia will come to view the Baltics Hanseatically.”

Such a Hanseatic view would have two consequences, both positive. First and most immediately, Russian acceptance of a
Hanseatic space would facilitate mutually beneficial Russo-Baltic cooperation and enhanced northern European security, defined both in traditional military terms and in the new, broader conception. Second, though, a Hanseatic highway would facilitate not only the flow of goods but the flow of ideas. For Americans seeking to encourage a changed Russian understanding of the world beyond and seeking to promote liberal, democratic values in Russia, such highways are critical. What the American Hanseatic architecture is designed to facilitate, Talbott has noted, is that a democratic Russia, at peace with itself and its neighbors, integrate itself into an undivided Europe. That is not only desirable, it is possible. The NEI assumes that there are no objective bars to this. In the American view there are no structural issues or unresolvable conflicts that would prevent the peaceful integration of Russia into Europe. The only obstacle to this integration, in the NEI’s analysis, is the Russian mindset: Historically, Russia has tended to define security in zero-sum terms win/lose, or, as Lenin famously put it: kto/kogo. The Soviet Union seemed unable to feel totally secure unless everyone else felt totally insecure. Its pursuit of bezopasnost, or absence of danger, posed a clear and present danger to others, especially small countries on its periphery. The issue on all our minds is whether post-Soviet Russia, as it goes about redefining its political system through elections, will redefine its concept of state security as well. Ultimately then, the security of northern Europe requires a change in how Russian leaders view the world and define security. In place of the Realpolitik lenses for viewing security which both Russian history and the Marxist legacy have imposed, the NEI seeks to use the Hanseatic connection to provide liberal ones.

It is worth recognizing, however, that while the NEI offers an appealing vision from Washington’s perspective it is a vision that may be quite troubling to Russia’s Baltic neighbors. Even while the NEI seeks to anchor the Baltic peoples in a Hanseatic that is, in an Euro-centric, westward-oriented identity, it also assumes and insists that the Baltic States will serve as a bridge eastward to Russia. With perhaps a touch of diplomatic exaggeration reflecting both wishful thinking and gentle pressure, in 2000 Talbott praised Estonia for reaching out to the East; you’re redefining your relationships there not on the basis of a cruel divisive past but on the basis of a cooperative future. For nations only recently freed from Soviet rule, concerned...
with preserving distinct national identities, and painfully aware of the power and size of their eastern neighbor, this vision of blurred borders may be troubling, particularly if it implies relatively uncontrolled movement of people and capital.

The NEI in Practice

Though the vision of the NEI is clear, what the NEI will mean in practice is substantially more difficult to predict. It is difficult to predict for at least three reasons.

First, it is difficult to predict because much will depend on events in Russia. This dependence is not a linear one. Plainly, liberal reforms in Russia permit faster development and expansion of the institutions envisioned by the NEI. Ironically, however, Russian regression may also result in faster progress for NEI, though on a geographically narrower basis, as the United States and its European partners press to solidify progress in anticipation of greater challenges. It is uncertainty about developments in Russia that is likely to encourage more cautious, step-by-step forward movement, avoiding early deepening of those institutional ties that are easiest to create. Ties that exclude Russia lest this sharpen and darken the border between east and west that the NEI would prefer to blur.

Second, exactly how the NEI vision will be operationalized is difficult to predict because of uncertainty about other institutional developments in Europe. In the final analysis, both U.S. Baltic security policies and the emerging northern European security architecture will be critically shaped by three related but nonetheless quite distinct and separable institutional developments; NATO enlargement, European Union (EU) enlargement, and the European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI). While it is possible to treat the NEI and these other three institutional developments as a single package, American decision-makers are unlikely to do so. From the American perspective each of these four issues has its own distinct logic and political imperative. American policies on each are seen as the solution to quite different problems. Thus, while American positions on NATO enlargement, EU enlargement, and ESDI will have a critical impact on how the NEI is implemented, these positions are likely to be adopted without much, or possibly any, regard to that impact.

Third, what the NEI will look like in practice is difficult to predict because the NEI like NATO enlargement, EU enlargement, and ESDI has escaped serious political debate. The discussions that have taken place have been conducted by policy analysts individuals without political responsibility and, as often as not, without political instincts. At times these discussions have been analytically elegant and theoretically sophisticated. But unfortunately they provide no information about the choices America’s political decision-makers will actually make when political decisions are called for (It is useful to recall that American policy analysts were overwhelmingly opposed to moving ahead with the first round of NATO enlargement and are overwhelmingly opposed to national missile defense. Look-
ing at debates among policy analysts for clues about how America will act thus is not a good strategy).

The bottom line is that because none of these four issues, Baltic security architecture, NATO enlargement, EU enlargement, or ESDI has been politically salient in America, it is difficult to guess what conclusions the American political elite and attentive public will actually reach when events confront them with a need to act. There is no serious disagreement within the elite or attentive public over American objectives or stated policies. American objectives and policies are, and will be, quite clear. But how those policies will be implemented is unclear, and they may be implemented in ways that are quite counterintuitive.

It is no accident that serious political debate regarding Baltic security, NATO and EU enlargement, and ESDI has not taken place, and observers should not expect that such debate will ever take place. However important the underlying issues are by any objective measure, they are not politically salient in America. No signifi-
cant economic, ethnic, ideological, or single-issue interest group in American society is particularly concerned about the outcome of any of these four matters. Thus, unlike on issues like the World Trade Organization, the Middle East, relations with repressive regimes like China, or ozone depletion and funding for family planning, the government can proceed safe in the knowledge that it will receive little public scrutiny. Only one of these four issues - NATO enlargement - has any chance at all of ever becoming part of a serious political debate in the United States; and if the first round of NATO enlargement is any indication, even this issue is unlikely to impinge in any significant way on public or Congressional consciousness or to force the administration to examine, explain, or defend its foreign policy.

The fact that northern European security institutions, NATO and EU enlargement, and ESDI are not salient political issues in America has two diametrically opposed consequences.

On the one hand, it means the stated policy of the United States is likely to be quite clear and consistent. There will be little domestic political pressure either to fudge or to change official policy. Neither political party (nor, for that matter, any ambitious politician) is likely to make any of these issues a campaign issue. And election results are not likely to shift America’s stated policy.

On the other hand, the actual operationalization and implementation of the stated policy is likely to be quite unpredictable, ambiguous, and full of unexpected twists and changes. Since these issues are not at the top of political agendas and the NEI and decisions regarding Baltic security architecture are likely to fall even lower on these agendas than the twin enlargements and ESDI what the United States actually does on a day-to-day or year-to-year basis will depend on chance and circumstances. More specifically, it will depend on the context within which policy questions arise and how these issues are packaged with, or linked to, other more politically salient issues. U.S. actions and reactions on all four issues are also likely to depend very much
on the particular agendas and world-views of the particular officials and bureaus assigned to implement policy. Personalities may play a major role not in determining policy, but in determining what American policy means in practice.

For example, the United States unambiguously supports EU enlargement. But what this unambiguous support will mean in real life is anyone’s guess. Whether U.S. official support for EU enlargement translates into meaningful pressure on EU-member states to move forward with enlargement or, by contrast, turns into tacit support for a go-slow approach may have more to do with beef and bananas, or with who happens to become U.S. Trade Representative, than with the U.S. vision for central Europe and the Baltic region. Similarly, whether the U.S. policy on ESDI equates to meaningful positive support for a separable European military capability or to behind-the-scenes pressure on Britain and Germany to proceed skeptically is likely to be determined as much by French rhetoric, the domestic politics of National Missile Defense in America and the particular sequence of crises in the Balkans as by any long term plan for building a European security architecture.

**The NEI and NATO Enlargement**

With regard to the question of NATO enlargement, the unpredictable nature of American behavior is even more evident. However firm and clear in principle, the American position on NATO enlargement is extraordinarily uncertain and ambiguous in practice.

It must be emphasized that the commitment in principle to further NATO enlargement is crystal clear. As Strobe Talbott put it in Brussels in December 1999, it has always been the U.S. position that NATO enlargement is not a one-time event, but an on-going process. Our newest members must not be the last. Our leaders committed to review enlargement again at our next summit, no later than 2002. This unambiguous commitment explicitly includes the Baltic States. As Talbott reaffirmed to an audience in Tallinn: ”the American desire is that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania become Secure, stable, prosperous democracies integrated into all the structures of the Euro-Atlantic community.... [It] remains a bedrock principle of American foreign policy that no country should be disadvantaged for reasons of history or geography. The Baltic states in particular should not be punished for having prevailed over occupation and dictatorship, nor should you be forgotten or neglected now that you have made such progress in establishing prosperity and openness in your neighborhood”.

Indeed, these commitments are enshrined in international agreements. The Baltic-American Charter officially commits the United States to nothing less: As part of a common vision of a Europe whole and free, the Partners declare that their shared goal is the full integration of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania into European and transatlantic political, economic, security and defense institutions. Europe will not be fully secure unless Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania each are secure.... The Partners
believe that the enlargement of NATO will enhance the security of the United States, Canada, and all the countries in Europe, including those states not immediately invited to membership or not currently interested in membership. The United States of America welcomes the aspirations and supports the efforts of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania to join NATO. It affirms its view that NATO’s partners can become members as each aspirant proves itself able and willing to assume the responsibilities and obligations, and as NATO determines that the inclusion of these nations would serve European stability and the strategic interests of the Alliance.¹⁴

As this language suggests, however, the American perspective is that two criteria need to be met before candidates are accepted into NATO: new members will be admitted only when they are ready and when we judge it to be in the overall interests of the Alliance.¹⁵ It is this second criteria that will make American policy, in practice, so unpredictable.

The American vision looks to create the conditions under which the Baltic states can become members - that is, it seeks not only to ensure that the Baltic states will be ready for membership but to alter European political realities so that their admission enhances their security, the security of the region, and the security of the Alliance as a whole. That the Baltic States will eventually join NATO assuming they continue to desire to join is essentially certain, given U.S. commitments and given support in principle from other NATO members. What is difficult to predict, however, is when Americans conclude that the necessary conditions have been met. American policy presently proceeds on the assumption that NATO membership for the Baltic states is neither in the Alliance’s interest nor in the interest of the Baltic states if it disrupts relations with Russia or if it results in a substantial hardening of Realpolitik thinking in Russian decision-making circles.

As the Baltic Charter and repeated U.S. statements make clear, no non-NATO country has a veto over Alliance decisions.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the NEI’s Hanseatic image of Baltic security envisions bringing Russia in as a partner in the region’s problem-solving and security-building, even while Russia remains excluded from some of the key institutions, such as NATO and the EU. An isolated and angry Russia undermines the region’s security, preventing the widening and deepening of the network of institutions and ties necessary to deal with the real and pressing problems of environmental security, economic security, cultural security, and so on. Even if Russian isolation and anger are entirely self-generated, even if they are entirely unjustified, and even if they are in both the short- and long-run self-destructive, they nonetheless reduce the ability of the nations of the region, and of Europe and the trans-Atlantic community as a whole, to meet shared challenges. Ideally, creating the conditions for Baltic membership thus means shifting Russia from its zero-sum view of security and educating Russians that Baltic membership in NATO is, as Talbott puts it: “Good for everyone - I stress everyone - since it is the best way to ensure that
this region as a whole never again becomes a zone of insecurity and instability.”¹⁷

Again, however, what this will mean in practice is hard to predict, and will certainly depend on developments in Russia, on American perceptions of developments in Russia, and on the sequence and salience of particular political events. Realpolitik is deeply ingrained in Russian thinking, and Americans are not known for their patience. Thus, either a more forthcoming Russia or a clearly less-forthcoming Russia might result in American support in NATO councils for early admission of the Baltic States.

To interpret the American position as giving Russia some sort of back-door veto over NATO enlargement is thus absolutely incorrect. American policy is aimed at bringing the Baltic States into NATO. At least at present, though, the United States appears inclined to be patient and to engage in constructive dialogue with Russia to alleviate concerns that NATO enlargement threatens Russia or its interests, even while recognizing and firmly enunciating that these concerns are objectively groundless. In other words, it is the process of enlargement, not the end state, that is uncertain and that may be influenced by Russia.

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**The NEI in American Grand Strategy**

How exactly the NEI fits into overall American grand strategy, and whether this is a comfortable or uncomfortable fit, will depend on certain fundamental political choices facing the American nation in coming years. While policies and institutions have considerable inertia and, as a consequence, we are unlikely to see dramatic, immediate changes in either of these even if a major shift in underlying conceptions of American identity and interests were to occur, the direction in which U.S. policies and trans-Atlantic institutions evolve will clearly be strongly influenced by how the American people come to understand themselves and the world around them. It is therefore both useful and necessary to consider American commitment to northern European security, and to the particular vision of northern European security embodied in the NEI, in the broader context of America’s historically problematic engagement with the world and to be aware how changes in Americans’ self-conception are likely to impact these.

With only an acceptable degree of oversimplification, it is possible to argue that American society and leaders have historically moved uneasily between two competing visions of the world.¹⁸ The first is the Realist vision. This account of international life starts from the observation that politics between sovereign states takes place in an anarchic setting that is, it takes place in the absence of any higher, super-sovereign power with the capacity to impose authoritative judgments on competing states. As a result, interstate politics is one of self-help. While states can frequently resolve their differences through bargaining or negotiation, military power remains the ultimate arbiter of interstate disagreements, and war the final court of appeal. Thus, in the Realist view, military conflict is an unfortunate but nonetheless
inevitable fact of international life. However pacific a particular nation may be, and however willing it may be to try to resolve disputes through peaceful means, in the end the international system is inherently conflictual and participation in international politics will involve even pacific states in violent conflict.

In this vision of the world, a state’s policies must proceed, as George W. Bush’s foreign policy advisor, Condoleezza Rice, recently explained, from the firm ground of the national interest, not from the interests of an illusory international community. States must look out for their particular nation’s interests because no one else will. If this pursuit of one’s own self-interest also happens to bring benefits to others - as Americans believe the U.S. pursuit of a liberal international political and economic order does - so much the better, but making sacrifices for the good of others is a dangerous business. Again in Rice’s words, to be sure, there is nothing wrong with doing something that benefits all humanity, but that is, in a sense, a second-order effect.

The second and competing vision of the world in American thought is the Liberal one. In this vision, conflict is not inevitable. Yes, the international system is anarchic, but this, in the Liberal view, does not necessarily imply disorder and violence. It is, the Liberals argue, possible to imagine a well-ordered international society composed of peaceful republics that have created the international institutions necessary to resolve conflicts of interest on the basis of the rule of law rather than through an appeal to raw power. Just as in well-regulated families and domestic societies order is based on communication, consent, and accepted rules of behavior, not on raw violence and open intimidation, in well-regulated international societies order can be based on negotiation and law rather than brute power. While the absence of a super-sovereign authority, with the ability to adjudicate disputes definitively and punish transgressors, makes international order more difficult to achieve, Liberals contend that the international realm, like the domestic one, can be one of peace. Realists are unnecessarily pessimistic, Liberals argue, and their pessimism is a self-fulfilling prophecy, preventing the creation of the institutions - ranging from a free trade regime and international courts of arbitration to a more powerful UN and a better-financed IMF - that would facilitate a mutually beneficial international order.

At the same time that America has moved back and forth between Realist and Liberal visions of the world, it has also moved back and forth between two competing visions of how America should engage that world. The two visions of America’s role are usually termed internationalist and isolationist, but these terms, especially the latter, are quite misleading. The latter vision, the isolationist one, does not imagine a hermit America that eschews contact with the external world. To the contrary, like the internationalist vision, the isolationist vision assumes that America will be integrated into the world economy and that Americans will travel, trade, and invest in the outside world. Nonetheless, in a key aspect the isolation-
ists and internationalists part, and this is on the desirability of politico-military involvement and commitments in the world - what George Washington in his Farewell Address termed “Entangling alliances.” At heart is the question: Does the use of force or the commitment to use force, except in self-defense, threaten the basic nature of a democratic republic?

For internationalists, the answer is no. Like any great nation, America must compete on the world stage (in fact, has a duty to compete on that stage) either to make sure that stage remains safe (that is, embodies an acceptable balance of power) or to make sure that stage incorporates the values and rules the nation believes necessary or desirable (that is, has the institutions necessary for a peaceful order). Indeed, at its root, the internationalist vision defines American identity in terms of the nation’s external relations. Who Americans are, and the pride they can take in that identity, depends on America’s place in the world and the role that Americans play in improving and transforming that world or in shaping that world’s future. To achieve their full nature, the American state and American nation must participate in the full range of global politics and be active players on the world stage. However different America may be from other nations internally, internationalists believe the United States has to engage externally just as other states do - using the same means (e.g., war, alliance, intimidation, and intervention), though perhaps with different goals.

The isolationist vision, by contrast, answers the question in the negative and has an inwardly focused construction of identity. The essence of America is its domestic society, and the principal goal of the American people and of the American state needs to be the perfection of that society. While Americans wish others well, and will exchange ideas, goods, and investments with them, the isolationists argue that Americans must not confuse other peoples’ political struggles with their own. Their fights are theirs to wage. While isolationists are delighted if America serves as a beacon on the hill - a role model for other societies - and while they hope others will walk down the same liberal, democratic path that America has chosen, this is their decision. So long as other nations do not seek to impose their rule or their values on America, the American state should not use military force against them or involve itself in their political affairs. In some sense the isolationist vision might be better described as a “republican vision, with a small r”. It is the vision of an independent republic without external claims.

**Four Visions of American Foreign Policy**

Obviously, if one combines the two possible worldviews with the two possible views of America, one ends up with four possible visions of American foreign policy; Realist isolationist, Realist internationalist, Liberal internationalist, and Liberal isolationist. Looking across American history, it is possible to find periods in which each of these was dominant, and in today’s political discourse it is possible to see at least three of these compet-
ing for predominance. Which vision comes to dominate American thinking has had, and will have, enormous consequence for the broad shape of America’s engagement with the world.

The power of each of these visions to seize the American imagination, however, depends on how Americans define themselves - that is, on the identity Americans construct for themselves. Thus, at the present time much hinges on the stories Americans devise, and come to believe, about what makes them a single nation despite the increasingly multi-cultural composition of American society, despite the widening social and economic polarization created by movement to an information-based post-industrial economy, despite the growing gap between sectors of society subscribing to traditional religiously-based value systems and those subscribing to liberal ones, and despite widespread de facto racial segregation.

The Realist isolationist vision dominated American thinking in the early republic and shaped U.S. foreign and defense policies for the first century of America’s independence. Americans, in this view, are a unique (indeed in some accounts, chosen) people guided by a firm and unchanging set of values, forever threatened by the darkness that lies outside. In the Realist isolationist perspective, the world is an evil and dangerous place, in which imperial or expansionist powers will inevitably war with each other as they seek to conquer weaker states; the best course of action for a liberal, democratic republic such as America is to avoid getting dragged into these quarrels and to guard against the menacing basic feature of world politics. The prescription is to create a “Fortress America” - to raise the barriers high against the various evils, contaminations, and dangers posed by the corrupt world outside the nation’s borders, to eschew alliances, and to reserve the use of military force for self-defense.

Since the 1890s, Realist isolationism has never dominated American thinking, but it remains a powerful undercurrent. In the 1920s, it was the vision of the handful of Irreconcilables in the U.S. Senate, who opposed Woodrow Wilson and his League, tooth and claw. In America today, this is the intellectual grounding of political spokesmen on the far right of the spectrum, individuals such as Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan.

Realist isolationism gave way, in the late 1880s and early 1890s, to Realist internationalism. Industrialization, immigration, urbanization, and the reincorporation of the Southern states back into the Union created enormous social and domestic political challenges for America. The effectiveness of any solution to these problems hinged on creating some sort of unifying national identity that included old Americans, the new urban immigrant proletariat, and Southerners. The Progressive solution was to rebuild American identity around a stronger central government and to turn the republic’s attention outward. Using the iron of traditional America, the trace metals of the new immigrants, and the heat and oxygen of the state, the melting pot would yield a new, beautiful steel, strong enough to stand up to foreign nations in the clash
of blades on the world stage. The American nation, in this conception, was strengthened by the addition of the best of other national groups - the strongest, the most determined, the most intelligent - but these individuals then had to surrender themselves and become or be made into Americans. In this Progressive view, membership in the national community was defined by loyalty and service to the national state. What justified such loyalty and service - that is, what made the state the worthy object of veneration - was the American state's greatness and, by implication, the nation's greatness, evidenced by its role in world politics and by its ability to defeat other states in the great global struggles between nations.

Thus beginning with the Harrison administration in 1889, the United States pursued a foreign policy that was premised on the assumption that while the world was a hostile and inevitably violent place in which great powers competed for primacy, American domestic order required that the American state join in this great social Darwinist competition. No lasting international order was possible, and American policy did not aim at creating a lasting peace. Rather, in this Realist internationalist vision, American military power was needed to protect America's global interests from the imperial claims of other great powers and to maintain a global balance of power. Though sometimes couched in terms of America's special mission or American exceptionalism, in practical terms Realist internationalism embraced a policy of Realpolitik. The creation of an American sphere of influence and the balancing of the European great powers replaced Fortress America as the central principle of foreign policy.

This Realist internationalist vision went into eclipse in 1913 with the Wilson presidency. It returned, however, in 1946 with Truman, and was the vision that shaped American policy to contain the Soviet Union, to intervene in politico-military struggles across the third world, and to pursue tripolar balancing with China. Although the end of the Cold War led to another eclipse of this Realist internationalist vision, this vision remains a powerfully attractive one today. Advisors surrounding George W. Bush, for example, explicitly describe American foreign policy in Realist internationalist terms.21

What displaced the Realist internationalist vision in 1913 and again in the 1990s, and also dominated American thinking for a short period in the early 1940s, was a Liberal internationalist one. This is the vision of American foreign policy popularized by Woodrow Wilson, resurrected by Franklin Roosevelt, and flirted with by Bill Clinton. The Liberal perspective, unlike the Realist one, does not assume that difference implies conflict. Rather, it assumes that so long as liberal, democratic institutions exist, different cultures can live peacefully, side by side, within...
America and in the world as a whole. Indeed, the task of building these liberal, democratic institutions itself serves as a source of common identity. The Liberal internationalist vision thus links American national identity to moral purpose: at its heart, it is a crusading vision, defining American identity in terms of a commitment to a noble, transformative goal, abroad as well as at home.

This Liberal internationalist vision holds out the prospect of a meaningful peace. It argues that if two conditions are met, a stable global order based on law and not on power, is possible. First, there must be a spread liberal democracy: liberal, democratic states will by their nature tend to be peace-loving and to prefer trade and negotiation to conquest and war. Second, the necessary international institutions must be built to facilitate the orderly and peaceful resolution of such disputes as do arise. The liberal internationalist vision then makes two assumptions. The first is that American power can and must be used to achieve these changes to spread liberal democracy and to construct and empower international institutions. The second is that if international institutions and democracy are in place, reason and rule of law will be secure: that is, it assumes that shortsightedness or passions or ethnic identities will not be a problem.

The implications of this vision for American policy are interesting. Though the goal is the creation of a millennial, peaceful world order, based on democracy and law, Liberal internationalists tend to accept the use of force as necessary to achieve this. Hence we have Wilson’s interventions in Mexico and Latin America and his interest in transforming World War I into a struggle to make the world safe for democracy, and we have Bill Clinton’s Liberal internationalist advisors pressing him to intervene in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Balkans. It is not entirely unfair to suggest that the Liberal internationalist notion is that democracy and the international institutions necessary for harmonious cooperation can be created at the point of a gun.

The costs of Liberal internationalism, being the need to intervene politically and militarily in areas in which American strategic interests are not engaged have made this a hard vision to sustain. Nonetheless, much of the American elite continues to subscribe to it today, and polls suggest that it continues to shape the views of much of the general public; certainly this vision found its way into Al Gore’s campaign rhetoric. Where Realist isolationism looks to build a Fortress America in a hostile world and Realist internationalism seeks to create an American sphere of influence and satisfactory balance of power, Liberal internationalism aims to impose, crusader-style, a democratic, liberal peace on a backward world.

The fourth vision, Liberal isolationism, dominated American thinking during the 1920s and early 1930s, defining the policies of successive Republican administrations. It starts from an image of America that denies American exceptionalism or, rather, asserts every nation’s exceptionalism: every nation can and must strive to create and to maintain its own political institutions that allow it calmly and rationally to advance the public interest in the face of ever-changing social, technological, and economic chal-
lenges. Because these challenges will be different in different nations at any given time, every nation will have its own unique institutions, and the paths to stable, liberal order will be as varied as the nations themselves.

For Liberal isolationists, membership in any community - national or international - is defined by submission to the rule of that particular community’s law and by a willingness to accept short-term individual sacrifices for the long-term collective good. American identity is thus rooted not in a particular set of American values, in a melting pot designed to produce a nation stronger than any of its adversaries, or in a covenant to undertake a great moral crusade, but in a commitment to a rational pursuit of the public interest.

Liberal isolationists share the Liberal internationalist ideal of global order based on law, not power, and on a community of liberal democracies. They assume, however, that such an order depends on the natural evolution of mature, liberal societies around the world. While economic and cultural contact can encourage such development, Liberal isolationists conclude that in the end democracy and stable liberal domestic institutions can not be imposed from outside or from above, but must grow organically from the culture of individual nations. Indeed, by destroying the delicate political plants that are beginning to grow and the ecosystem that is emerging around them, politico-military crusades to impose a liberal, democratic world order are likely to set back progress, rather than to advance it. Further, the Liberal isolationist argument suggests, in the absence of mature, stable democracies, international institutions of the sort championed by Wilson and FDR are mere superstructure and will be unable to preserve or impose peace. Only if nations possess the maturity and the democratic domestic institutions that allow them to comprehend that their best interests are served by submitting themselves to the rule of law will international institutions be able to resolve conflicts of interest.

In this Liberal isolationist vision, American politico-military power can thus do little to speed or make more likely the emergence of a stable international order. By unnecessarily threatening and provoking other nations, however, it can make progress more difficult. Intervention and war may be necessary in self-defense when America is threatened by non-liberal powers (most Liberal isolationists supported U.S. entry into World War I, for example), but they are not useful tools for advancing the millennium. Hence, a key element in the Liberal isolationist vision is to avoid displays or uses of American military power that would stimulate militarism or excessively nationalistic responses. At the same time, in contrast to the Realist isolationist vision, the Liberal isolationist vision underscores the importance of economic and cultural openness, seeing the outside world not as a dangerous and evil place, but as a potential partner in the construction of peace. In sum, the underlying aim in this vision is to create a peaceful world order through simultaneous economic and cultural engagement and politico-military nonintervention.
Competing Visions and the NEI

Obviously, each of these four competing visions has very different implications for U.S. policies in the Baltic region, as in the world as a whole. Realist isolationism implies a return to Fortress America; Realist internationalism calls for an aggressive pursuit of American national interest and containment of or balancing against potential adversaries such as Russia, China, rogue states, and radical ideologies; Liberal internationalism calls for active, crusading employment of American power, military as well as economic and political, to protect liberal, democratic governments and to roll back illiberal forces in the world; Liberal isolationism calls for the maintenance of economic and cultural openness while resisting military involvement. Which of these competing visions emerges triumphant in tomorrow’s America will depend on the outcome of the soul-searching and identity-construction efforts now underway in American society. The election of 2000 has revealed just how divided Americans still are and how difficult a prediction about the future will be.

Since the end of the Cold War, America has flirted with a return to Liberal internationalism. It has, however, repeatedly shied away from the apparently open-ended price of actually carrying through with this vision. At the same time, this Liberal internationalist vision has faced two challenges, one from the center-right of the American ideological spectrum and the other from the far right.

From the far right of the ideological spectrum, Realist isolationist voices continue to demand that America turn inward and wash its hands of a world that they describe as corrupt and evil. At the extreme, these voices are at times xenophobic and reactionary, looking backward to some sort of idealized past when everyone in America was white and Christian, or wanted to be.

The more serious challenge to the Liberal internationalist vision of foreign policy comes from Realist internationalism. A large section of the American political mainstream, including much of the Republican party, is skeptical of the notion of a multi-cultural rainbow America and sees the need to return to a common, melting pot construction of identity that would produce a distinct, singular American culture. For Realist internationalists, cultures inevitably clash rather than coexist harmoniously. Logically, this vision implies an inevitable clash of cultures, liberal-western versus others, in the world as a whole. This is a struggle that America can not shy away from. Thus, though the communist threat has collapsed, this broad section of the elite and mass public continues to view the world through the Realist internationalist lenses of the Cold War. The notion of a peaceful world order is regarded as a self-delusion: enemies exist or will arise, and America must combat these enemies. While the identity of the principal enemy is still unclear - perhaps a non-western Russia but, if not, then China, or Arab nationalism, or Islamic fundamentalism - an activist foreign policy is necessary, designed to protect America and its friends from the dan-
gers that will surely emerge, as they always have in the past.

It is hardly surprising that the NEI emerged during an American flirtation with Liberal internationalism. The NEI, with its emphasis on the non-zero-sum nature of security, on the importance of constructing institutions, on the significant role of non-state actors, and on the need to commit America’s politico-military power to the task of building global order, fits squarely within the Liberal internationalist vision of American engagement in world affairs. It co-exists less comfortably with other visions of American engagement. Indeed, if America’s flirtation with Liberal internationalist ideas does not yield a more permanent commitment, the NEI will increasingly stick out as an oddity or inconsistency in American foreign policy. The NEI is nonetheless likely to remain in place, both because of inertia and because northern Europe (or at least the non-Russian portions of it) lies safely inside the “us” side of Realism’s “us”/”them” divide, if Realist internationalism or Realist isolationism comes to dominate American thinking it would not be surprising to see a gradual evolution of the NEI.

The direction of such evolution is quite predictable. If Realist internationalist thinking emerges triumphant, the NEI is likely gradually to focus more narrowly on military concerns and on state-to-state contacts; unless Russia moves quickly in the direction of liberalism, the NEI is likely also to become geographically narrower. In this scenario, NATO enlargement is likely to proceed more rapidly, limited principally only by the perceived ability of the applicants to contribute meaningfully to NATO’s strength. By contrast, in the less likely case that Realist isolationism emerges triumphant, American commitment to the NEI will wane, as European security is defined as a matter of European, not American concern; support for NATO is also likely to decline. Although, it is difficult to discern voices advocating Liberal isolationism in America today, it is easy to see what such a vision would imply for the NEI: were Liberal isolationism to emerge as a dominant vision of foreign policy, American support for the NEI, minus its implicit military guarantees, would grow, while American support for NATO activities, particularly out-of-area military interventions, would decline.

It deserves to be underscored, however, that these changes would come only at the margin. Particularly given the low political salience of the NEI and its low costs, regardless of the direction in which American foreign policy as a whole moves, the natural inertia of policies and institutions means that American commitment to the NEI and its vision of northern European security architecture are likely to endure.

Conclusions

In its underlying premises, the NEI steps outside what could be characterized as the traditional or modern, national framework for conceptualizing security, rooted in three-and-a-half centuries of experience with the Westphalian sovereign-state system of international politics. Implicitly, the NEI is grounded in a post-Westphalian vision of how international order can best be constructed, a vision
that differs from the traditional, modern one in two key regards. First, where tra-
ditional thinking about international se-
curity has focused on the security of sover-
eign states, this post-Westphalian approach 
is concerned with the security of indivi-
duals. Second, where traditional Westphalian 
models of international security have fo-
cused narrowly on security from physical vio-
ence, this new vision focuses on security to pursue a meaningful, productive life. The NEI 
envisions security, defined in this broader 
manner, as a collective good and reasons 
that its provision will depend on a com-
plex network of institutions including sover-
eign states, non-governmental organiza-
tions, international agencies, and local gov-
ernments.

The image that the NEI’s authors have 
is the Hanseatic one, in which national 
identities are relatively unimportant and 
international interactions are regulated by 
a number of overlapping and interlock-
ing institutions, not simply by sovereign 
states. In this model, borders blur. In par-
ticular, the NEI hopes to encourage the 
blurring of the border between northwest Russia and the rest of northern Europe. This would have two consequences: in the first place, it would improve Baltic security by facilitat-
ing regional cooperation and the resolu-
tion of shared problems; in the second 
place, it would facilitate the transformative flow of liberal, democratic ideas into Russia.

While the NEI explicitly anticipates the 
enlargement of NATO to include the Baltic States, it hopes to accomplish this enlarge-
ment without hardening Russian Realpolitik views and without deepening the divide between east and west within the region. What this will mean in prac-
tice remains uncertain.

The fit between the NEI and the gen-
eral thrust of American foreign policy also 
remains uncertain, largely because the lat-
ter itself is uncertain. As in the past, how 
the American public and policymakers 
come to view the world and America’s role in it is likely to depend on how, in 
the face of problems that divide Ameri-
can society and threaten to tear it apart, Americans come to define their own iden-
tity. America’s movement to a post-indus-
trial economy, the resulting growing di-
vide between a highly educated class and 
a less well educated one, new patterns of 
communication, and alienation from tra-
ditional sources of social and political 
authority all challenge both the cohesion of American society and the cultural bases 
for this cohesion. Elites are now strug-
gling, as during the Progressive era, to cre-
ate new cultural foundations for a cohe-
sive American society. Public debates over 
values, lifestyles, and multi-culturalism re-
fect elements in this struggle. Thus, the 
outcome of today’s efforts to redefine American identity will powerfully shape 
how Americans view their world and how American leaders define the goals of Ameri-
can foreign policy. This said, at least in its 
general form and at least for the foresee-
able future, the NEI seems likely to en-
dure regardless of larger shifts in Ameri-
can foreign policy: the NEI’s low politi-
cal salience and low cost offer it a sub-
stantial degree of immunity from change.

More interestingly, the success or fail-
ure of the NEI may provide important lessons to policymakers as they wrestle with 
the meaning of globalization and with the 
problem of providing meaningful human 
security in the new era. In its backward 
glance to the Hanseatic League, the NEI
explicitly looks for an alternative model of order and governance. Whether or not this model proves to be a good one may well have significant consequences for the construction of international order in the coming century.

1 Overview of the Northern Europe Initiative: Fact Sheet released by the Bureau of European Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC, May 1, 2000, p. 1. (http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eur/nei/fs_000501_nei.html; downloaded 7/24/00)
2 Ibid., p. 4.
3 Ibid., pp. 1, 3.
5 Ibid., p. 2.
6 Overview of the Northern Europe Initiative: Fact Sheet released by the Bureau of European Affairs, U.S. Department of State, op. cit., p. 1.
9 Ibid., p. 2.
10 Ibid., p. 3.
11 Ibid., p. 2.
18 For a more detailed discussion see, for example, Edward Rhodes, Constructing Peace and War: An Analysis of the Power of Ideas to Shape American Military Power, Millennium Journal of International Studies (Spring 1995).
20 Ibid., p. 47.
21 See, for example, Rice, op. cit., and Robert B. Zoellick, AA Republican Foreign Policy, Foreign Affairs (January/February 2000).