

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Vice President Pence's Trip: An Opportunity to Advance U.S. Leadership in Europe

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From July 30 to August 2, Vice President Mike Pence will travel to Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro. This trip is the perfect follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Poland for the "Three Seas" conference—a meeting focused on the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas—in early July. Vice President Pence should use his trip to affirm U.S. commitment to these three important countries, and to strengthen U.S. focus on the key regions in which they reside. While in Europe, it is important for the Vice President to underscore U.S. commitment to NATO, Baltic security, and U.S. engagement in the Balkans and the Black Sea region, while taking a hard line on Russian aggression.

### The Baltic Sea

In Estonia, Vice President Pence will meet with Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas as well as the three Baltic leaders, President Kersti Kaljulaid of Estonia, President Raimonds Vējonis of Latvia, and President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania.

The U.S. has a long history of championing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Baltic states dating back to the interwar period of the 1920s. After regaining their independence from Russia in the early 1990s, the Baltic states

have been staunch supporters of the transatlantic relationship.

Estonia is the regional leader in defense matters and is currently one of only five NATO countries that spend the required 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. In terms of economic freedom, the Baltic region is a beacon of hope for Europe and the rest of the world. The region is proof that pursuing policies of economic liberalization and growth works. Estonia ranks first in the eurozone, and sixth in the world, in the *2017 Index of Economic Freedom*, published by The Heritage Foundation.

The Baltic states face an existential threat from Russia, and are concerned about the upcoming Russian Zapad 17 exercises. In addition to Zapad, the Vice President's arrival will come just as Russia and China will have wrapped up joint exercises in the Baltic Sea.<sup>1</sup> The keystone of NATO's new deterrence measures are multinational battalions stationed in each of the Baltic countries and Poland to deter Russian aggression. The Alliance has also increased the number of aircraft taking part in Baltic Air Policing. While in Estonia, Vice President Pence should reiterate U.S. commitment to the transatlantic alliance, NATO, and the Article V security guarantee.

### The Black Sea

In Georgia, the Vice President will meet with President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. In addition, he will visit U.S. and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner exercise. Vice President Pence's visit provides a perfect opportunity to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Tbilisi.

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4738>

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Georgia is a staunch ally of the United States. Since regaining its independence in 1991, successive Georgian governments have pursued an agenda of liberalizing the economy, cutting bureaucracy, fighting corruption, and embracing democracy—and in doing so, Georgia and its people have shown a firm and unwavering commitment to the transatlantic community.

Georgia is located in a dangerous and important geopolitical neighborhood for NATO. After the Russian invasion in 2008 and the subsequent Russian occupation of 20 percent of Georgia's territory, Georgia has transformed its military and has been steadfast in its support of overseas security operations. Georgia has contributed thousands of troops to Afghanistan (with 870 currently serving there) and Iraq, and hundreds of peacekeepers to the Balkans and in the Central African Republic.

### The Adriatic Sea

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the Vice President will meet with Montenegrin President Filip Vujanović and Prime Minister Duško Marković. Vice President Pence will also participate with leaders from across the western Balkans in an Adriatic Charter Summit. Montenegro is the newest member of NATO, and an important U.S. ally in a region that is becoming increasingly unstable due to malign Russian influence, poor economic opportunities, and the rise of Islamist extremism.

The Balkans is home to unfinished business in Europe. In addition to historic, ethnic, religious, and cultural tensions, the Balkans are caught between Russia's destabilizing influence and pockets of Islamist extremism in the region. Montenegro is a poignant example.

Over the past seven years, Montenegro—a U.S. ally—has reformed itself in preparation for NATO membership. Last year, Russia, not happy with Montenegro's decision to join NATO, was suspected of having been behind a failed plot to break into parliament on election day, assassinate the former prime minister, and install a pro-Russian government in Podgorica, the nation's capital.

The U.S. has invested heavily in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War. Tens of thousands of U.S. service members have served in the Balkans, and

billions of dollars in aid has been spent there, all in the hope of creating a secure and prosperous region that will someday be part of the transatlantic community. The Administration should articulate why the Balkan region remains important to the United States, and set out a clear policy to counter threats to the region.

### The Way Forward

This trip offers a great opportunity to deepen three very important bilateral relations. To make this visit a success, Vice President Pence should:

- **Reiterate America's commitment to NATO's Article V.** The Vice President should echo President Trump's commitment made in Warsaw to NATO's Article V. The ultimate guarantor of security and stability in the Baltic region is the knowledge that the U.S. stands firmly by its mutual defense commitments as a member of NATO.
- **Make the case for a permanent military presence in the Baltic region.** The U.S. and NATO need to show an enduring commitment to the region by permanently stationing armed forces in the Baltics and maintaining a robust maritime presence in the region.
- **Forcefully condemn Russian disinformation.** Russia's disinformation measures are especially active in the region. In part, Russia has sought to undermine support for NATO's enhanced forward deployments by propagating false stories of abuse by troops serving in the multinational battalions, such as Canadian, British, or German soldiers. U.S. troops stationed in Poland for NATO's enhanced forward presence there have been targeted by similar Russian disinformation. Russia has also sought to delegitimize the Baltic nations as independent countries. The U.S. should forcefully condemn Russian disinformation and consider becoming a sponsoring nation at the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Riga, the Latvian capital.
- **Empower global free-market energy policy.** The U.S. should work immediately and compre-

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1. Damien Sharkov, "Russia and China to Send 10 Warships to Baltic for Military Drill," *Newsweek*, July 18, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-and-china-send-10-warships-baltic-military-drill-638398> (accessed July 20, 2017).

hensively to eliminate remaining barriers to U.S. energy exports.

- **Push back against Nord Stream II.** The Nord Stream II pipeline project that would connect Germany with Russia is neither economically necessary, nor is it geopolitically prudent. Vice President Pence should declare U.S. opposition to the pipeline, which in particular threatens allies in Eastern and Central Europe.
- **Ensure that the U.S. is clear on Georgia's future NATO membership.** Vice President Pence should make it clear that Georgia's successful completion of subsequent Annual National Programs, the close relationship through the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package are the true markers of progress that will bring Georgia closer to ultimate membership.
- **Help the Georgians defend themselves.** Georgia has the inherent right to self-defense. The U.S. should sell defensive anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry to Georgia.
- **Refer to the Russian military presence in Georgia as an occupation.** During his visit, the Vice President should call the presence of several thousand Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia what it is: an illegal occupation.
- **Keep a focus on the Balkans.** The Balkan nations are facing increased Russian interference and pressure with the aim of regional destabilization. In addition, the threat from Islamist ideology has not abated. The U.S. should look to take on a larger role within the region, and should seek to collaborate with NATO allies in the region to address growing instability.

- **Offer political support for the Southern Gas Corridor project.** As Europe seeks alternatives to Russian gas, the Southern Gas Corridor, which in part will run through Georgia and the Balkans, will play an important role.
- **Keep the door open to further NATO enlargement in the Balkans.** NATO has helped promote democracy, stability, and security in the Balkans. It has also been a catalyst for reforms within candidate countries. Montenegro is just the latest example of this. The U.S. should ensure the door remains open to deserving Balkan nations, including Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## Conclusion

Vice President Pence's trip, during which he will visit allies in the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Sea regions, dovetails with President Trump's recent trip to Warsaw where he took part in the Three Seas conference. While each region faces threats from Russia, each also presents unique challenges, which demand robust attention. Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro are important U.S. allies with basic common values. The success of the Trump Administration's policy in Europe will rest in large part on its ability to secure these important regions.

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