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Rippling influence: The rhetorical legacy of the Joint Baltic American National Committee in shaping U.S. foreign policy

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ABSTRACT: The Joint Baltic American National Committee (JBANC), a small diaspora lobbying organization representing Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian Americans, has acted as a non-state political actor in the U.S. foreign policy environment since 1961. While traditional accounts of lobbying often emphasize visible policy outcomes as a sign of political influence, JBANC's influence emerges instead through the persistent and enduring construction of rhetorical frameworks that shape how policymakers interpret the stakes of Eastern European security and the United States' relationship with this region. Drawing on scholarship about ethnic lobbying groups, vernacular publics, and constitutive rhetoric, this piece argues that JBANC's enduring role lies in its ability to offer language, narratives, and interpretive lenses that continually "ripple" outward into policy debates. Through analysis of three geopolitical eras, including the Cold War, NATO enlargement, and post-Crimea Russian aggression, this study demonstrates that Baltic advocates reframed captivity narratives, deterrence logics, and coalition-based security appeals to keep Baltic concerns salient within U.S. strategic discourse. By tracing the evolution of these rhetorical strategies, the study seeks to broaden understandings of diaspora political agency and illustrate that even small ethnic organizations can meaningfully shape the interpretive terrain of U.S. foreign policy.

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1. Introduction

Long before U.S. officials and foreign policy experts first described the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as "frontlines of freedom," the phrase circulated in church basements, advocacy events, and community newsletters across the Baltic diaspora (Jones 2018). Decades later, as Russia's aggression in Ukraine has reshaped U.S. foreign policy debates, the ripples of those conceptual frames continue to move outward, appearing in congressional hearings, policy briefs, and official speeches regarding Baltic security, showcasing how some of the most enduring language used in U.S. Eastern European foreign policy conversations is not necessarily authored by policymakers but rather inherited from the Baltic-American community and its long-standing rhetorical work. In the Baltic diasporas' carefully crafted rhetorical framing, advocates for stronger U.S.-Baltic relations have intentionally characterized the region in a few different ways across more than 60 years—positioning the Baltics as captive nations in need of U.S. intervention, strong democratic bulwarks that can deter Russian aggression, and indispensable states for NATO security. In many ways, the dedication to such language, both inside and outside the Baltic community's circles, has demonstrated the usefulness of this advocacy on behalf of the Baltic-American ethnic diasporic community and its relevance within multiple different geopolitical eras.

The central Baltic lobbying organization in the United States, the Joint Baltic American National Committee (JBANC), has maintained direct access to Capitol Hill since 1961. Despite limited funding, a small staff, and decreasing access as the political environment of the United States changes, JBANC has consistently positioned itself within key political debates about the Baltic region and the United States' relationship with it. While perhaps an unassuming actor within this milieu, JBANC's critical role as a non-state actor (NSA) within these conversations has been built upon its embedded influence and its continual application of pressure within these environments, not necessarily demonstrated by traditional understandings of policy outcomes but rather by offering a persistent interpretative framework that carries a rippling influence on how policymakers understand the stakes of Eastern Europe. Policymakers have consistently engaged with JBANC over the years, treating it as both an authority on historical narratives of Eastern Europe and a source of understanding the Baltic security environment today. They frequently echo the talking points that the Baltic-

American community has cultivated over decades, highlighting the high degree of persistence (and continued relevance) that this smaller ethnic lobbying group with limited resources has maintained. Thus, the linguistic forms and the frameworks articulated by JBANC have permeated policy discourses and elevated the degree to which governmental interactions with this organization and the broader Baltic-American community have generated outcomes.

Such endurance is worth reconsideration within the broader scholarly conversations on how NSAs exercise political agency (Smith 2000; Ambrosio 2002; DeConde 1992; Hanhimäki 2004). For one, traditional approaches tend to equate agency with impactful action by powerful organizations, assuming that the significance of a lobby lies in what it materially achieves. While helpful in explaining why large diasporic coalitions can alter policy outcomes, these models offer little insight into why resource-poor organizations and NSAs, such as smaller ethnic lobbying organizations, persist. By attending to organizations such as these—especially those working in the Central and Eastern European region, a recurrent site of geopolitical contestation—scholars can cultivate a broader understanding of what constitutes NSA political agency and how such actors intervene in foreign policy arenas. As has been posited by Péter Marton, NSAs can be understood as "organisations with plausible political agency of their own" and "probable sites of domain specific agency," not just actors whose influence must be proven solely through tangible results (Marton 2024: 23). Importantly, agency begins with the attempt to shape how other actors perceive the exigence—the possibilities, responsibilities, or challenges—of a situation. For the Baltic-American community, the conviction that unique historical understandings and lived experience carry strategic weight has become foundational for action. Thus, the act of communicating these understandings and experiences becomes the avenue through which influence accumulates.

JBANC's political significance as an NSA can likewise be reflected in its willingness to engage with evolving advocacy modes, highlighting the reality that rhetorical strategies have to change over time when working within the foreign policy decision-making environment. Throughout much of the last six decades, JBANC's influence drew heavily on historical memories regarding the trauma of Soviet occupation, the Baltics' experience with democratic transition, and its understanding of the looming Russian threat. Today, political relevance is especially established through coalition building, transnational coordination, and persistent engagement with questions of regional security, making the argument that the Baltics are among the greatest deterrents to Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. In this way, the evolving communicative strategies and angles of sustained engagement that have been carefully unfurled by JBANC over the years have ensured that the Baltic-American ethnic community has continually raised its concerns and maintained a voice within these broader foreign policy

conversations. The result is a form of NSA political agency premised on communicative participation and obligation. Understanding diaspora advocacy through such communicative persistence has particular importance, then, in the current geopolitical moment that is being shaped by illiberal resurgence and authoritarian threat. As Russia pursues renewed imperial expansion, Eastern European diaspora organizations in the U.S. have emerged as unequivocal translators of this danger.

More specifically, JBANC's persistent articulation of the memory of captivity, warning against aggression, and the importance of NATO security provides policymakers with language through which to understand and publicly defend support for Eastern European states. This study demonstrates that Eastern European diaspora organizations can exercise meaningful influence as NSAs through established and sustained interpretive frameworks that narrate threats, argue for democratic responsibility, and underscore evolving security obligations. Using the Joint Baltic American National Committee as a case study, the analysis examines three eras in an attempt to better understand its evolving practice over time: (1) Cold War captivity narratives that kept Baltic sovereignty politically imaginable, (2) the NATO enlargement period with the Baltic states being recast as democratic producers of deterrence, and (3) the post-Crimea world where support for Baltic security is reframed as a test of whether defensive international coalitions can still function. Across these periods, JBANC's influence emerges as an NSA that critically defines the rhetorical conditions of U.S. support to Baltic countries and constitutes a persistent framework that policymakers repeatedly draw upon. By examining these practices, this article broadens the understanding of diaspora political agency and contributes to scholarship on NSAs as probable sites of agency whose significance extends beyond instrumental outcomes. To understand how organizations such as these become enduring political participants, it is necessary to first consider the frameworks through which scholarship evaluates NSA and diasporic influence.

2. Rethinking non-state actor agency in diaspora advocacy

Scholarship on lobbying and NSA participation in foreign policy has long centered on examining how advocacy success is usually assessed through the production of measurable policy change. In disciplines such as political science and International Relations (IR), lobbying power is typically identified through demonstrable effects such as shifts in legislative behavior, foreign aid allocations, or policy decisions that were made due to external pressure (Lindsay 1994; Kollman 1998). As a result, NSAs within the foreign policy environment are fre-

quently evaluated by *what they procure* rather than *how they discursively participate*, and influence is often treated as a function of clearly traceable victories based on assessable outcomes. While this is certainly valuable for understanding some of the ways in which actors shape policy, such studies leave less room to account for smaller organizations or NSAs whose work operates through more gradual, interpretive, or symbolic modes of engagement over sustained periods.

Such an emphasis is especially evident in studies of the impact of U.S. ethnic lobbying. Tony Smith's work on foreign policy engagement by diaspora communities, for example, foregrounds lobbying success as a function of electoral leverage and strategic influence over decision-makers, arguing that ethnic groups matter most when they can mobilize constituencies or reward policymakers for supportive positions (Smith 2000). Ethnic communities are seen as especially significant actors within the foreign policy space when they can produce visible policy change that can be attributed to their advocacy. While not all ethnic lobbies are considered to possess the same degree of leverage (Ambrosio 2002), the factors that play into these groups' influence, and the degree to which they are or are not seen as key players in foreign policy discussions, are multifaceted (Haney – Vanderbush 1999). Studies of particularly influential diasporic groups often show their work leads to legislative victories, policy gains, and electoral impacts as the primary indicators of political success (Haney – Vanderbush 1999; McCormick 2012; Leogrande 2020).

Agenda setting matters when considering the viability of ethnic lobbyists, as well—influence is connected not only to the ability to compel policy change but also to the capacity to shape the terms through which political problems are defined and debated. Constructivist approaches in IR highlight that power can operate discursively, through the ability to structure agendas, define legitimate interpretations, and establish the conceptual frameworks within which policy decisions are evaluated (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Guzzini 2005). From this perspective, political influence may emerge not only from material leverage but also from the ability to shape the narratives, categories, and expectations that guide policymaking. Across much of the ethnic lobbying literature, however, power is still primarily measured by what a lobby can compel policymakers to do and how that outcome aligns with the community's desired policy agenda.

General theories of interest-group politics support similar evaluative measures, too. Research on the effectiveness of lobbying strategies frequently assesses whether they lead to policy advantages, the delivery of resources, the mobilization of voters, or the offering of legislative incentives to alter outcomes (Baumgartner – Leech 1998; Hrebenar – Thomas 1992). Even while scholars have slowly expanded their attention to international or transnational advocacy networks, they often retain these same standards of evaluation, interpreting influence through policy responsiveness and quantifiable efficacy. Even scholars

who describe lobbying organizations in more nuanced terms—as actors that are "rarely what they seem" or "wild cards in world politics"—ultimately evaluate their relevance through measurable outcomes (DeMars 2005; Keck – Sikkink 1998). Under this model, lobbyists matter when they produce clear-cut interventions; actors who do not produce such effects are treated as marginal or insignificant. In this way, the production of visible successes is privileged within the literature, but less room is given to organizations that cannot be measured in this way and are smaller or more resource-limited. Yet, there are still NSAs that endure within the foreign policy sphere not because of their quantifiable victories but instead due to their capacity to cause rippling influence that alters how policymakers understand risk and responsibility. Indeed, there is certainly more than one dimension to how NSAs participate in political life; it is important to examine other dimensions regarding how advocacy organizations affect the conditions under which decisions are made and, in the process, shape expectations, circulate interpretations of geopolitical threats, and draw attention to issues that might otherwise be overlooked (Sending – Neumann 2006).

Work on transnational activism and norm advocacy largely reinforces this broader understanding. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink argue that organizations within advocacy networks often rely on symbolic action, information politics, and moral persuasion to enact change and draw policymakers into particular positions (Keck – Sikkink 1998). Such influence frequently operates through the framing of political problems rather than the direct alteration of policies, particularly in contexts where activists lack material leverage. William DeMars similarly suggests that nongovernmental actors frequently function as agenda-setters within foreign policy situations, helping to define which issues become politically salient even when they lack the means to enforce outcomes (DeMars 2005). Collectively, this research highlights how NSAs reshape perceptions of concepts such as security and freedom, obligation and risk, and vulnerability and legitimacy, even when they do not necessarily have a clear view of what the outcomes will be.

Yet despite this broader recognition of what constitutes change, studies of transnational activism have still tended to examine large and well-resourced networks. Even scholarship that puts a great amount of emphasis on symbolic action generally examines cases where framing ultimately leads to clear and/or significant policy outcomes, such as international legal reforms or treaty adoption (Keck – Sikkink 1998). As a result, less attention has been given to smaller diaspora organizations that persist and nevertheless remain active interlocutors within foreign policy spaces. For these organizations, the ability to shift the ways in which U.S. officials frame issues, develop sustained interest in certain concerns, articulate the significance of certain geopolitical events, and circulate curated perspectival language based on history and experience contrib-

utes to their credible position within foreign policy conversations. Thus, a fuller account of NSA agency within foreign policy discourses, including that which surrounds Central and Eastern Europe, should certainly consider not only the strategic impact of such organizations but also the ongoing work that they do in driving argument, fostering recognition, and contributing to how policymakers understand the significance of these states.

Diasporic organizations can especially be seen as exemplars of the importance of this NSA position and understood as strong interlocutors in foreign policy debates, in part due to their connection to unique historical perspectives or personal understanding of authoritarian rule. For many such groups, claims to cultural expertise, historical knowledge, and transnational identity elevate their ability to not only "speak for others" but also to interpret geopolitical risks and shape how they are imagined and translated by others (Alcoff 1991). Yossi Shain and Aharon Barth observe that diasporas are important in this, as they routinely construct themselves as the trustees of national identity and memory within such conversations, positioning themselves as defenders of democratic goals or interpreters of regional needs. They can use their transnational ties to "act as bridges or meditators between their home and host societies, to transmit the values of pluralism and democracy" (Shain – Barth 2003). In this way, diaspora communities can present themselves not only as advocates for bi-national interests but also as shape-shifters who can use their liminal positionality "between" demarcated states to interpret the stakes of geopolitical consequence for policymakers who might otherwise be unfamiliar with such dynamics. Thus, their invaluable contribution lies in their deep reservoir of lived knowledge and collective memory. Even in today's post-Soviet sphere, diasporas frequently gain political relevance by positioning themselves as necessary advocates for the protection of democratization and human rights in their "home" countries, seeing their work as necessary to fighting against the rise of authoritarian ideology more than advancing a strict agenda (Koinova 2018).

Other research that focuses primarily on Central and Eastern Europe reinforces such connections, seeing the political activity enacted by ethnic communities in the United States as especially relying on their public memory of totalitarian rule. As far back as the first few decades of the Cold War, before the formalization of JBANC, Baltic-American activists gained access to congressional debates by translating their exile experience into political legitimacy (L'Hommideau 2012). They presented Soviet occupation as a significant injustice with ongoing implications for U.S. foreign policy as early as the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, the traumatic memories of Soviet and Nazi domination from those decades continued to act as a source of political identity for Baltic advocacy throughout the Cold War and into the post-war years, shaping narratives in an ongoing way and framing the past as instructive for contemporary decision-making

(Assmann 2011; Rothberg 2009). Dovile Budryte notes that this historical framing often plays an important role in the region's "coming to terms with the past," steering the focus of how discussions regarding the countries' histories and identities are developed and reflected upon (Budryte 2005). Such insights suggest that diaspora legitimacy within the foreign policy decision-making milieu can be traced to these communities being bearers of historical knowledge that, when leveraged *kairotically* (at the right moment and right time), can provide great clarity regarding the importance of contemporary geopolitical challenges. Today, diasporic groups from this region continue to cultivate legitimacy not only through the elevation of particular narratives but additionally by sustaining attention to evolving threats, forging partnerships with allied organizations, and elevating the transnational need for strong security and democracy. The rhetorical emphasis that these organizations place on articulating the past, and their ability to tie that past to the future, has set the stage for the further constitution of their agency over time and the development of their positions.

Rhetorical theorists offer a vocabulary for understanding how such interpretive labor becomes a form of political agency. In her seminal piece, "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean," Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's work on rhetorical agency emphasizes that this "capacity to act" emerges when actors are recognized as legitimate contributors that are "recognized or heeded by others in one's community" (Campbell 2005). However, this agentic recognition is both interpretive and relational, communal and participatory, in the way that it emerges and is invested by authors for the sake of articulating concerns, posing judgments, or influencing shared understandings. Similarly, rhetorician Gerard Hauser provides an account of vernacular publics that likewise highlights how political voice forms through ongoing participation in public discourse rather than through formal institutional power (Hauser 1999). Through both of these lenses, scholars can better view the ways in which diaspora organizations may gain political relevance by sustaining visibility and being treated as interlocutors whose interpretations of geopolitics deserve attention.

Within political arenas, identity itself also functions rhetorically and constitutes the very communities to which decision-makers are asked to respond. This concept of constitutive rhetoric demonstrates that collective identity is not merely expressed or developed out of happenstance but communicatively invoked as an invitation to align peoples with distinctive histories, values, and futures (Charland 1987). The intentional language used by diaspora organizations, such as framing the Baltic states in terms that highlight narratives of captivity, deterrence, and collective defense, is useful for more than just describing geopolitical conditions. It also invokes histories that clarify the dangers of authoritarian resurgence and the bounds of today's transnational climates. This invocation constructs a narrative that positions policymakers as actors with responsibilities

toward those values. Thus, the persuasive force of such identity-making and situational construction orients how foreign-policy decision-makers understand what they are protecting and why continued involvement matters.

These rhetorical perspectives reinforce the idea that agency coexists alongside the ability to shape interpretive frameworks and provide the conceptual grounding for how organizations such as JBANC exercise influence within the foreign policy sphere. Taken together, these interdisciplinary approaches also suggest that the potential agency of NSAs can likewise alter outcomes through the shaping of meaning, interpretation, and orientations of foreign affairs conversations. Diaspora organizations that engage in this space can especially leverage such communicative tactics by calling upon their historical memory and lived experiences in order to cultivate a stronger articulation of why the geopolitical stakes matter and the necessity of sustained attention that must be given to evolving threats. Through the persistent and enduring articulation of identity, memory, and security, a new vocabulary of importance can be given to policymakers who are also invested in these issues.

To examine how such interpretive influence operates in practice, this study adopts an interpretivist approach that traces the circulation and transformation of discourse across institutional contexts. Scholars of foreign policy analysis have demonstrated that ideas often move between intellectual, political, and policy communities through processes that can be observed in the evolution of language and argument. Piki Ish-Shalom describes this process as "discourse-tracing," a method that analyzes how particular conceptual frameworks emerge in one discursive arena and gradually permeate others, reshaping the terms through which political questions are debated (Ish-Shalom 2006). Similarly, Stefano Guzzini argues that interpretivist process tracing can reveal how geopolitical narratives gain authority by structuring the categories through which actors interpret international events (Guzzini 2012; 2017). Rather than seeking to demonstrate direct causal relationships between advocacy and policy outcomes or even assume that this is observable, this study traces how JBANC's rhetoric circulated through congressional testimony, policy reports, commemorative events, and public statements, identifying moments when diaspora framings of Baltic security appeared within broader U.S. foreign policy discourse.

This approach is complemented by rhetorical scholarship that examines how discourse maps geopolitical space and travels across contexts, environments, places, spaces, and actors. Work on rhetorical cartography shows how language constructs the very landscapes that orient political perception by linking places, identities, and threats within shared narratives (Greene 1999; Greene and Kuswa 2012; Hayes 2016). Applying this perspective to the following sites of analysis allows this study to identify how JBANC's advocacy positioned the Baltic states within evolving geopolitical realities. By tracing these

recurring frames across advocacy materials and policy discourse, the study demonstrates how diaspora rhetoric helped structure the interpretive environment within which policymakers understood Baltic security concerns.

This understanding provides a useful framework for examining JBANC's work in the foreign policy sphere during the Cold War, NATO expansion, and post-Crimea phases of attention to Central and Eastern Europe. When one examines the language that it has put forth regarding Baltic security needs and its work with allied individuals and organizations across the United States and the rest of the world, JBANC is manifestly important in shaping how policymakers think and speak about the Baltic region. To understand this influence, the following sections examine how these communicative strategies evolved alongside changing historical and political conditions.

3. Analysis

3.1 Cold War captivity narratives

Since its founding, JBANC has positioned itself as a consistent advocate for stronger U.S.-Baltic relations within a variety of contexts and complexities that have shaped U.S. foreign policy discussions regarding this region. Its origins lie in the principal Baltic organizations in the United States—the American Latvian Association, the Estonian American National Council, and the Lithuanian American Council—which organized it on April 27, 1961, in order to more closely "monitor U.S. government actions on the Baltic States" and to generate and disseminate "information to interested agencies and congressional offices" regarding foreign policy interests involving these three states. Although JBANC came onto the scene at a moment when Baltic independence was not necessarily a near-term objective during the height of the Cold War, nor even a main focus of U.S. strategic foreign policy planning regarding its relationship with the U.S.S.R., the ethnic lobbying organization sought to utilize its historical knowledge and lived experience of communist rule in the Baltics to unite "efforts for the restoration of the independence of the three Baltic states and their re-establishment as free and democratic republics" and to put the plight of these Soviet-occupied countries on the radar of more Americans (JBANC 1961). Over the course of the next 30 years, during the Cold War, it would work to preserve, circulate, and intensify interpretive frameworks that prioritized the Baltics and sustained previously established policies towards these states.

Rather than lobbying for immediate shifts in foreign policy, the Baltic-American community sought to support a more nuanced agenda that advocated for the maintenance of policy and asserted that continued visibility of the Baltics and greater attention to the United States' long history with this region were in and of themselves an important political act. This maintenance was built on the foundation that the United States had already established a firm "non-recognition policy" toward the Soviet annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania during World War II and that they were democracies being held "captive" by the U.S.S.R. (Welles 1940). Through the 1932 Stimson Doctrine and the subsequent Welles Declaration, the U.S. had stated that it would not recognize a change in the political status of the Baltics because of their forcible seizure by the Soviets (U.S. Embassy in Estonia, 2010; U.S. Department of State ND; Vitas 1990). Additionally, the U.S. government affirmed that it would continue to maintain diplomatic relations with representatives of the three countries, who acted as "Keepers of the Flame" and "spokesmen for people who cannot speak for themselves" (Viorst 1973; Keatley 1973). However, this non-recognition stance was sometimes at risk of being compromised during the conflict, seen as a mere symbolic legal position for the U.S. in some Cold War cases and heralded as important policy in others. It was only after the establishment of JBANC that the Baltic-American community took a more vested interest in lobbying the United States to maintain this non-recognition status, understanding that it was important for the United States to sustain the meaning of the Welles Declaration and to insist that U.S. officials treat Soviet occupation of the Baltics as a continuing violation rather than a settled reality, especially in the face of détente.

Yet, with this dedication to the maintenance agenda, it was not simply enough for JBANC to support the U.S. in its preexisting non-recognition position but instead to look for every imaginable way in which the Welles Declaration policy actively was, or could be, violated in order to ensure that the organization served as the strongest voice possible for the Balts and Baltic Americans. A number of events cropped up between the 1970s and the 1990s that threatened this position, including the United States' involvement in the 1973 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), its alleged adoption of the 1975 Sonnenfeldt Doctrine, the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Special Investigations cases of Baltic-Americans accused of Nazi war crimes in the 1970s and 1980s, and the 1986 Jūrmala Conference, which all seemed to showcase U.S. officials wavering on the non-recognition policy and caused JBANC to issue harsh rebukes of the U.S. government and increase its advocacy efforts in order to better represent the desires of the Baltic-American community (Einertson 2024). Each controversy became an occasion in which U.S. recognition of the Baltics was framed as an unwavering position that needed to be fully supported by U.S. governmental

officials and to counteract "Russian objectives to gain approval of their aggression against the Baltic States" (Genys 1978). In all of these instances, the organization's efforts helped prevent non-recognition from fading into the bureaucratic background, with JBANC presenting the "captivity" of the Baltics as not just an unfortunate matter of history or a foregone conclusion but a present and living injustice that required immediate, tangible, and strategic attention.

JBANC's advocacy unfolded through several methods employed within this complex foreign policy terrain. Through congressional testimony, letter-writing campaigns, the elevation of Baltic dissidents, the invention and promotion of Baltic commemorations in both the U.S. and internationally, and joint efforts with groups such as the Ad Hoc Committee on the Baltics and the Ukraine, Baltic advocates emphasized that U.S. policy towards this region carried with it a myriad of responsibilities such as the need for the U.S. to defend independent states, fight for democracy, and stave off of the creep of communism (JBANC 1981). All these opportunities to speak in front of and to U.S. governmental officials also helped position the Baltic issue as more central to U.S. Cold War negotiations, using a persuasive focus on the continued non-recognition of Soviet occupation and the principle of self-determination to do so. JBANC sought to create a stage on which Baltic concerns could be articulated to both American and broader international publics. The Baltic-American community's collaboration in the recognition of Captive Nations Week became one such visible expression of these collective efforts and a push for the "citizens of the free world to honor the citizens of the captive nations" (Riegle 1987). Presidential and congressional statements issued by figures such as Reagan and members of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Baltic States and Ukraine in support of commemorations like Captive Nations Week, Baltic Freedom Day, and the original independence days of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania condemned Soviet domination and regularly echoed terms circulated by Baltic advocates. These terms were either specifically given to them in statements and briefings leading up to these events, such as private briefings at the White House or in front of State Department officials, or picked up over the course of years, sometimes decades, in conversation with Baltic-American advocates (JBANC 1987). The impact of this Baltic-American influence is palpable in, for example, Ronald Reagan's 1987 Proclamation for Baltic Freedom Day, where he asserts that the United States "will continue to use every opportunity to impress upon the Soviet Union our support for the Baltic nations' right to national independence." His reference to Baltic self-determination and the same historical narratives constantly recycled by the Baltic-American community was by no means original to Reagan himself or this specific public address, but rather a hallmark of JBANC's communication with Reagan's administration in the preceding years (Reagan 1987). Language focused on framing, such as "forcible annexation," "captive states," and "denied sovereignty,"

then increasingly appeared in congressional speeches, commemorative proclamations, and public statements, functioning as rhetorical signposts indicating that policymakers would continue to treat Baltic occupation as unresolved and politically meaningful even when immediate action was not feasible (Congress 1965; Reagan 1987).

Language pulled from Baltic narratives and the ethnic community at large was useful in these Cold War foreign policy conversations regarding the "captive nations," as it framed the Soviet control of these democratic states as a threat with far greater global implications than just the Baltic region—such narratives served as a preview of what authoritarian power does when left unchecked. In doing so, Baltic advocates positioned themselves as interpreters of geopolitical danger by elevating certain constructions of history that they hoped would inform policymakers about what they saw as being the *real* concerns of the Cold War (Simutis 1965). In many cases, these communicative acts did not seek to produce immediate change in the region; however, they were still important as they sought to rhetorically foreclose the possibility that occupation could be normalized or that people could be "robbed" of their "desire for freedom" (Bush 1991).

By sustaining the illegitimacy of occupation through various aspects of its public discourse and positionality within D.C., JBANC helped shape the interpretive conditions under which future policy could emerge and the ways in which U.S.-Baltic relations were viewed. Moreover, the dissemination of such language and framing within these political conversations ultimately made a difference, significantly affecting how the U.S. government began to speak about the Baltics in terms of "self-determination" and "freedom" by the end of the 1980s and the end of the Cold War. Although many scholars argue that Baltic resistance and the erosion of Soviet authority contributed to the U.S.S.R.'s collapse in many ways, the restoration of independence in 1990–1991 certainly cannot be attributed solely to lobbying efforts (Lieven 1993; Office of the Historian N.D.). Yet the endurance of U.S. non-recognition and the vocabulary embraced by policymakers—who publicly championed the Baltic States and showcased a stronger commitment to the non-recognition policy than they ever had by the end of the Cold War—was maintained through decades of communicative and interpretive labor by JBANC and its work alongside the Baltic-American ethnic community and other diasporic entities. By preserving a framework through which political alternatives remained imaginable, Baltic advocates exercised influence by shaping the conceptual ground on which later decisions became thinkable and acted upon.

3.2. NATO enlargement as Baltic-led deterrence

As the Cold War's "captive nations" went on to achieve independence in the early 1990s and the Soviet Union fell, Eastern European American advocacy organizations such as JBANC faced a significant rhetorical challenge. They could no longer justify their advocacy for U.S. support of the region solely by invoking narratives of past oppression. Instead, they needed to reframe Baltic security as a forward-looking defense against the potential reassertion of Russian coercive power, presenting NATO enlargement as strategic deterrence rather than historical redress. JBANC articulated this argument directly to Congress many times in the years following "the fall," asserting that enlargement was "necessary for stability" and that delaying Baltic admission would "encourage anti-NATO nationalists in a volatile Russia," framing accession as a necessary safeguard for this fragile region (Kõiva 1998). Policy analysts echoed this logic as well, arguing that enlargement could "anchor these states in the West" and prevent the "provok[ing] of a crisis between the West and Russia," underscoring the exigency of the issue (Asmus – Nurick 1996).

Yet, the reasoning behind the Balts needing to be folded into NATO was more complex than just affording them security after such a volatile last century. Instead, Baltic accession was argued to be a necessary investment in the future stability of U.S.–European relations—a rhetorical repositioning that diaspora advocates used to reshape how NATO value could be defined by those outside the system. In this new context, advocates argued that it was not protection that the Baltic states needed as part of membership, but instead the opportunity to strengthen the wider Euro-Atlantic security alliance by serving as an important warning post on the edge of the Western frontier. Rather than depicting the Baltic region as vulnerable and dependent, JBANC emphasized that the extreme progress of Baltic reforms, defense spending, and military partnerships were evidence that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania could be "producers, not just consumers, of security" and were capable of becoming active contributors to the transatlantic alliance and necessary for the success of the entire system, able to force it to take "a step forward" (Kramer 2002; Kõiva 1998). Such narratives became essential to the re-creation of the next rhetorical step in the U.S.-Baltic foreign policy story, with Baltic advocates gesturing to the fact that since the Baltics had learned the costs of freedom, they were well-suited to take an active role in the alliance and better help NATO understand emerging forms of Russian coercion. The question became, then, not about whether the Baltics deserved entry to NATO and if entry would simply be for the sake of security, but whether the critical Eastern European "frontlines of freedom in the modern world" could be fully secure without their accession (Cheney 2006).

This securitized warning frame circulated simultaneously through diaspora lobbying, Baltic state diplomacy, and congressional hearings over the course of debate regarding NATO expansion in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Following high-level comments by U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry questioning Baltic readiness to join the coalition, Baltic leaders publicly recast NATO membership as a necessary check against renewed Russian spheres of control (Executive Office of the President 1996). The Baltics' commitment to joining the transatlantic defense system began to be reinterpreted not merely as a symbolic posture needled by diasporic activists in Washington; instead, their commitment to the goals of NATO was substantiated through significant domestic investment in defense institutions and military modernization that occurred across Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In September 1996, the three Baltic presidents jointly pledged military reforms to "meet NATO standards and defend themselves better" (JBANC 1996). For Lithuania in particular, defense modernization efforts and an increased defense budget were framed as strategic measures needed to deter Russian pressure before the alliance protection was guaranteed (Larrabee 2003). JBANC continually pushed these points in its advocacy, asserting that any undue delay in membership would dangerously "relegate the Baltics to a gray zone of instability," a condition that would "adversely affect the security and economic interests of the United States" (Kõiva 1998). Such logics again advanced a deterrence rationale that asserted that the Baltics' membership was not just for its own sake but for the sake of strengthening the broader Euro-Atlantic security

JBANC amplified this deterrence argument in Washington continually throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, serving as an international voice for the political actions happening on the ground in the Baltics and, in doing so, slightly shifting its function in D.C. At a 1996 White House meeting with seven Baltic American organizations, activists presented the U.S. State Department's newly released "Baltic Action Plan" as a warning that failure to integrate the Baltics in NATO as fast as possible would reopen the region to future Russian aggression (Hamilton – Spohr 2019). Growing Russian anti-NATO campaigns during these years only underscored such points (JBANC N.D.; Wines 2001). With this characterization, discussions of enlargement and the language put forward by JBANC increasingly took on an urgent character and, as had occurred during the Cold War era, sought to tie Baltic interests to U.S. ones, positioning enlargement as a matter of mutual security rather than simply a project that would strengthen Eastern Europe alone.

By 1997, as Baltic American groups lobbied Congress to block Russian veto power over NATO decisions, these earlier-deployed warning frames hardened into a broader discourse of strategic inevitability. JBANC representatives argued in front of Congress that Baltic admission would "make a singular and lasting

contribution toward stability, freedom and peace" and would shore up the alliance's credibility by extending defense commitments to the very states that were seen as most vulnerable to potential authoritarian pressure (H.Con. Res. 10 1997). In a later Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Kõiva reinforced this urgency by warning that Russian "security guarantees" offered to the Baltics resembled the 1939–40 conditions that led to Soviet occupation of the Baltics in the first place, cautioning Congress "not to be lulled into a false sense of security" by Russia's promises (Kõiva 1998). Such reasoning again called upon historical memory to lay claim to its points and framed enlargement as a way to correct a "historical wrong" in which Western Europe "stood by" as the Soviet Union annexed the Baltics in 1940 (JBANC N.D.).

By the early 2000s, the previously lively discussions regarding NATO enlargement, often framed by U.S. officials who cited Russia's objections, had shifted in tone. Leaders now declared that Russia should have "no say" over Baltic admission (JBANC N. D.), and a deterrence frame had taken full rhetorical hold within alliance conversations. Baltic NATO membership was now presented as a precondition for full democratic security of the alliance against authoritarian resurgence, not merely a protection-granting privilege. Baltic American advocacy helped stabilize this future-oriented reasoning with its full-blown support for membership. From petition drives of 25,000 signatures delivered to the White House on September 10, 2001, to expert conferences such as "Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania: The Next Ten Years," which explicitly tied Baltic NATO membership to countering future Russian coercion, JBANC worked to normalize deterrence as the primary logic for Baltic accession rather than viewing enlargement as historical compensation or symbolic justice (Our Life 2001). The Baltics were seen as needing to "be included in the security architecture" of NATO, with supporters often insisting that they "should not be treated any differently" from other candidates because of the previous "non-recognition" status—using such measures to create a durable rhetorical hinge that transformed the Cold War-era Welles Declaration principle into a forward-looking justification for Baltic deterrence (Kõiva 1998).

Thus, NATO enlargement rhetoric evolved not just by asserting that the Baltics needed to be admitted to the alliance because of their former captivity but also by centering the Baltics as strategic and necessary security assets for the transatlantic defense system at large. Such discourse matured into a warning narrative in which Baltic membership was argued to be important for the broader mechanism of the alliance and its ability to safeguard against authoritarian resurgence. JBANC's rhetorical innovation during this era lay in reframing the Baltics not as mere recipients of alliance protection but as essential contributors to defense, whose admission would strengthen NATO's ability to detect, and the rest of the alliance's ability to withstand, the very dangers that once subjugated the three

small Baltic states to Russian oppression. Such arguments proved effective, and by 2004, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had formally joined the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Once NATO membership was secured, however, the rhetorical strategies employed by JBANC needed to change once more. Where advocates once had to posit why the Baltics deserved to join NATO, they now needed to emphasize why the rest of NATO had to join the Baltics in upholding the deterrent credibility that their accession had once symbolized. The post-Crimea years brought a distinctive turn from justification to vigilance that would define Baltic diaspora rhetoric in the new era.

3.3. Post-Crimea advocacy and the rhetoric of warning

The decade following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 once again marked a decisive transformation in Baltic diaspora advocacy. Rather than arguing for the Baltics' place within NATO, advocates now needed to argue for the credibility of NATO's commitment to the Baltics and its need for a strong alliance among member states. Baltic advocates faced the task of reminding NATO and its members that it must "simultaneously deter Russia and reassure it and the Baltic states that their security will be enhanced" (Blank 1997) so that it can "fulfill its commitments to allies in other areas of the world" (Duenow 2022). Where the discussions of the enlargement era had framed the Baltic states as deterrence contributors whose accession to the alliance would strengthen it, the post-Crimea era extended that logic forward by treating Baltic security as a test of whether deterrence itself still works in an era of increasing Russian aggression. In this discourse, the Baltics were seen as not merely democratic states within a military coalition but as barometers of NATO reliability, whose security depends on whether the alliance remains capable of resisting "imperial revanchism" (JBANC 2025). This shift is especially visible in JBANC's messaging since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when the organization began to describe U.S. support for Ukraine as a referendum on Washington's resolve to defend NATO's eastern flank. Leading up to the full-fledged "special military operation" in January 2022, JBANC sent a letter to President Biden insisting that the upcoming U.S.–Russia talks must "make crystal clear... that Russia is on the wrong path and must pull back," warning that hesitation would enable "Kremlin creep" and endanger both the Baltics and the United States itself (JBANC 2022).

A March 2024 Baltic Call to Action demonstrates such communicative practices as ones of projected futurity, where the consequences of U.S. inaction regarding Ukraine are cast forward to produce urgency. The 2024 message builds upon earlier concerns, warning that stalled U.S. aid leaves Ukraine facing "an existential threat," and that any wavering on the part of the U.S.

would allow Moscow to "challenge NATO resolve and militarily threaten the Baltics" (American Latvian Association 2024). By treating U.S. inaction as a form of escalation, similar to JBANC's Cold War insistence that Washington actively uphold non-recognition, JBANC warned that failure to support Ukraine would put the United States on the "wrong side of history" and aid Russia's "campaign of terror" (JBANC 2025). Such urgings appeared frequently in public-facing statements made about NATO by Balts and Baltic Americans alike, even before the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The National Defense Minister of Lithuania claimed in an official statement before the full-scale invasion that the Baltics had a major eye on NATO "develop[ing] the capabilities necessary for collective defence (sic)" (Anaušauskas 2021). Fast forwarding to the rhetorical economy of a post-2022 world, the real threat that JBANC argues the Baltics face is not simply increasing Russian aggression but American hesitation in this collective defense, which, in its own way, enables the condition of war. In this model, the political legitimacy of the Baltic diasporic position continues to stem from specialized knowledge and coalition utility within broader Eastern European security networks, with the elevation of past history and experience aiding in its pleas for action.

Such messaging also strongly correlated U.S. aid with security guarantees and presented investment in Eastern European defense as important because it would stop Russian escalation on the periphery of NATO before it must be confronted directly. As the Russian War on Ukraine raged on and stronger arguments needed to be made to encourage U.S. spending, Baltic advocates argued that Ukraine's battlefield success was an American interest because failure to support it would signal U.S. "weakness and embolden" authoritarian rivals "elsewhere" (American Latvian Association 2024). The Baltics thus became both symbolic and strategic terrain in 2020-era geopolitics: advocates perceived that if the U.S. let Ukraine fall, it would not merely represent a humanitarian tragedy in Eastern Europe but damage the narrative of U.S. deterrence capability worldwide. In this way, the Baltics once again took a center stage position in the foreign policy conversations regarding Russian aggression, with their supporters in the US rhetorically leveraging not only narratives of obligatory assistance but also narratives of symbolic deterrence, arguing for the need to fortify the "cornerstone" that "protect[s] Estonia and Latvia from Russian aggression" (Northern Voices 2025). U.S. displays of resolve and commitment to Eastern Europe were framed as important due to their warning against aggression and in reassuring NATO allies that the United States remained invested. Whereas ambiguity in the enlargement era enabled Baltic advocates to leverage uncertainty as grounds for closer integration, ambiguity in the post-Crimea era became framed as a dangerous liability, undermining the very credibility of security that protects the region.

A second component of the post-Crimea shift was the rhetorical elevation of Baltic military capacity to construct a techno-strategic ethos of this region, highlighting the need for increased U.S. support of NATO because of the Baltics' expertise. In a move that echoes JBANC's 1990s insistence that the Baltics would be "producers, not consumers, of security," activists in the modern day once again began to foreground how Baltic states would continue to supply strategic value to the alliance that could not be found elsewhere. Advocacy materials highlight not only the Baltics' defense investment in the alliance, noting they spend well over 2% of GDP towards defense, but also highlighting the region's specialized technical contributions and the importance of its reserve forces (Davis 2006). These materials further note that the Baltics "provide valuable insights for NATO" with NATO's STRATCOM in Latvia, NATO's Cyber Defense Center in Estonia, and NATO's Energy Security Center in Lithuania (JBANC 2025). This level of technical capacity is especially important to the United States, a point frequently raised by advocates for greater support, as evidenced by the remarks made by Congressman Don Bacon, co-chair of the House Baltic Caucus, who spoke of "America's unwavering support for these vital NATO partners" and the states' ongoing fight against "military, cyber, and hybrid threats" (Bacon 2025). By emphasizing cyber infrastructure, hybrid warfare specialization, and joint training value that cannot be "replicated anywhere in the U.S.," the diaspora sought to reframe the Baltic states as once again security exporters rather than dependents within NATO, thus underscoring the need for other partners in the alliance to fulfill their commitments (JBANC 2025). This extends not only to the United States and its need to provide greater support to NATO during such a vulnerable time in the Eastern European region, but also to other countries of Europe that have historically failed to meet NATO's military spending quotas.

Finally, a central factor shaping this post-Crimea advocacy landscape is the changing communicative character of diasporic participation itself. JBANC no longer represents a mass ethnic community, as it did during the Cold War and the NATO enlargement eras, as generational distance, demographic dispersion, and the limited size of Baltic American communities mean that numerical advocacy power is now improbable. Instead of such changes weakening advocacy, however, this shift has fostered coalition-driven strategies through organizations like the Central and East European Coalition (CEEC), which joins thirteen diasporic communities under a single group and has strengthened JBANC's coordinated campaigns and its expanding membership in the House and Senate Baltic Caucuses (JBANC 2025). For example, JBANC's involvement in the CEEC advocacy days continually prioritizes increased support for Ukraine and additional "security assistance to the Baltic countries and other allies and partners" (JBANC 2023). These relations build upon earlier successes and the strong alliances JBANC first curated during the Cold War. However, they also represent a

fundamental shift in diasporic rhetoric and how security-based expertise and strategic partnership have become the primary lenses through which the region is now advocated.

Taken together, these changes in the post-Crimea era of diaspora advocacy and the various tactics employed by Baltic-Americans reveal a complex transformation in security rhetoric. Rather than amplifying the Baltics' vulnerability, as happened during the Cold War, JBANC has sought to more strategically emphasize their indispensability. Rather than exclusively pleading for aid to support Ukraine, JBANC has gone further to warn against the dangers of American inactivity. In doing so, Baltic advocacy has demonstrated an evolving rhetorical model where changes to the framing of geopolitical strategy become an important and persistent interpretive part of its capacity to shape policy and influence the conditions of security itself.

4. Conclusion

The history of Baltic–American advocacy reveals how NSAs can exercise political agency through the ongoing labor of defining the salience of geopolitical issues. Across six decades, JBANC has remained a repeat player in foreign policy debates regarding the Baltics because it continually offers policymakers language through which to understand the stakes of Eastern European security. This interpretive leverage, that is, the ability to identify concerns for the U.S., articulate democratic obligations, and narrate a credible and coherent future of Baltic-U.S. relations, has been influential in the ways in which policymakers understand and speak about the Baltic region, reflecting a communicative presence whose effects continue to ripple across shifting geopolitical eras.

Across each of the three geopolitical eras that this article has explored—the Cold War, NATO enlargement, and post-Crimea Russian aggression—JBANC's communicative practices have consistently foregrounded a particular mode of NSA agency. During the Cold War, captivity discourse worked to prevent Soviet domination from becoming a settled fact in the American political imagination and to ensure intensified support for the Baltics as they fought to regain independence and continue as "recognized" states within U.S.-U.S.S.R. foreign policy. In the NATO enlargement period, rhetorical reframing meant that Baltic security was recast as a value to the alliance rather than a dependent liability, transforming the Baltics from symbolic beneficiaries into producers of deterrence. In the post-Crimea present, Baltic advocacy once again shifted to focus on the necessity of NATO strength and the need for vigilant action on the part of the U.S., with Baltic supporters no longer calling for Eastern European admission into Western institutions but instead urging Western institutions to uphold the

credibility that accession once symbolized. In each case, the rhetorical angles of Baltic advocacy did not follow policy change or serve as secondary to action but instead helped to prescribe the very language through which change came.

These communicative practices come together to constitute strong arguments about the necessity of Baltic security to the U.S. and the future of the relationship between all of these long-intertwined states. By framing security inaction in Eastern Europe as escalation, uncertainty as risk, and waning commitment as vulnerability, diaspora actors continue to leverage security politics in a way that is meant to garner further support for the Baltic region. Baltic deterrence and its role in protecting Europe and U.S. interests in this way becomes an argument performed through congressional testimony, coalition advocacy days, and persistent inscriptions of threat into the vocabulary of U.S. foreign policy by the Baltic-American community.

Recognizing Baltic advocacy as an important communicative strategy enacted on behalf of this diasporic organization expands how scholars conceptualize NSA political agency. This account demonstrates how even small ethnic organizations can contribute to the conditions under which foreign affairs take shape and how endurance, interpretive lenses, and the use of language have a significant impact on how issues are viewed and acted upon. Organizations such as JBANC sustain the salience of issues and offer experiential authority grounded in historical knowledge, ethnic identity, and accumulated expertise. Far from peripheral, these actors inhabit a constitutive role in the foreign policy arena that places them in the middle of decision-making, where they play an invaluable role in rendering geopolitical crises intelligible, urgent, and narratively consequential. In a moment marked by renewed authoritarian ambition by Russia on the world stage, JBANC's persistence and continual voice within the U.S. foreign policy arena offer a model of how non-state agency can endure over time and work to keep threats visible so as to garner greater support and sustain a picture of the politically imaginable and democratic future of these states.

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