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Update on the Vilnius Summit: Fireside Chat with **Mircea Geoană**

Mircea Geoană, Deputy Secretary General, North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Moderator: **David Sanger**, White House and National Security Correspondent, *The New York Times*

David Sanger

Great to be back up here on the stage with Mircea I can't think of anybody I'd rather hear from on the topic of the Vilnius Summit. I was there for the Times last week Mircea you were in lots of rooms that I couldn't get into. So we're eager to hear your thoughts. It strikes me that there were sort of three big issues that were up at at the summit. One of them was getting Turkey to accede to agree to Sweden's accession. We think we got that commitment. We'll talk about that in a minute. The second was to get the strategic plan for NATO. And the resources together to make that work. And the third was to define Ukraine's path for an entryway to NATO. Let me start with the third because it led to the tweet heard around the world, which was when we heard President Zelensky on his way to the summit, say that it was absurd that there was not a clear date and entry path for Ukraine. He moderated that a little bit once he was in the presence of President Biden and some of the other leaders, but there was a sense at the end of this, that he hadn't gotten a lot more than the he got that Ukraine got in 2008 in Bucharest, which is to say, everybody was in agreement that there would be no entry until the war ended. And no one could define a timetable because we don't know when the war ends. So tell us how we should think about the way this was carefully worded.

Mircea Geoană

Well thank you, David, and great to be my friends from the Aspen Institute. This was a profoundly transformative summit that we had in Vilnius, and sometimes a bit of drama up to the end is unavoidable. Starting with Ukraine, I think I was Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg put it when he opened the first ever NATO Ukraine Commission, which is a massive upgrade of our relationship with Ukraine. And he said something that he also said to the media I repeated here in Aspen. He said that we are welcoming today in Vilnius, Ukraine as an equal and we're looking forward to welcoming Ukraine as an ally. I come from Romania. I was a very young Romanian Ambassador when we started to fight for getting into into NATO. And many countries from my region after the fall of communism aspired and finally, joined NATO. Why? Because we believe in this alliance and we persevered. First time in Madrid I think you remember Romania was turned down. We continued. So it's true that in Vilnius we, the NATO team and President Biden, Prime Minister Sunak we spent a lot of time with President Zelensky and his team. And basically we said listen, It's up to you, if you will consider for you and for the brave people of Ukraine, that the glass is half full or half empty. I can see that we are way beyond Bucharest

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2008. For obvious reasons, because Europe has changed because Russia is waging this barbaric war, because Ukraine is a different stage and then and we say we cannot extend today and invitation with a clear timetable to Ukraine, because this would mean that NATO would enter war against Russia, which is something it is not our plans. And avoiding escalation is also part of our job. Doesn't mean that Ukraine is not on the way towards membership. I know it, we know it, they know it. How are we defining the right conditions that we let that's of course a political question, but I will say please do not consider that Vilnius We just had a sort of a cosmetical upgrade of our relationship with Ukraine. It's a profound change is a transformation as the whole summit was a transformation.

David Sanger

Well, the Ukraine Council certainly was because the last time you had a council within NATO, it was with Russia. So I'm sure it was

Mircea Geoană

A commission

David Sanger

A commission, right. I'm sure it wasn't lost on on Putin that it was Ukraine Getting that spot. But at the same time by saying that there was no way to have them enter until the war is over, almost seems to create a perverse incentive for Putin to keep the war going. Even at some low level, and you could argue, of course, he was going in a low level between 2014 and the invasion when when it stepped up. So how do you get around the trap of giving Putin a reason to keep the war going, if for no other reason than to keep Ukraine out of NATO?

Mircea Geoană

This is a paradox here. And we say in NATO and also the US led coalition of nations 50 nations, by and large around the world helping Ukraine prevail in this war. And the paradox goes like this, the more we give Ukraine now, the sooner peace will arrive. So it's clear that Mr. Putin would like to basically wait us out. He will probably have the same illusion that he had before starting the second stage of the war because you're right David, the first thing was 2014. Believing that we are not united that we are not ready that we're not ready to sustain such a big effort. So what we are doing now we try to mobilize as much as we possibly can. And Vilnius did also that Ukraine win this war, and also change the strategic calculation of Putin and his regime, about the cost benefit analysis because he can say, let's wait out NATO and American elections and European elections and democracies are no more more more sensitive to these kinds of things. But I believe he is also if he's making that calculation, to the long list of strategic

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mistakes he has done. This will be another one on the long list of strategic mistakes. This is something that will help Ukraine not only win this war, but transform this nation into a successful prosperous democratic country. And when we say that Ukraine needs to do some more reform, not only win the war which they will we say that we know I know from the case of my country and my region that there is a lot of reform that needs to be done. There is still work on on governance, on peace economy, not or not only war economy. So that's why I say with confidence also here in this this great, great forum, that I know that Ukraine will be with us. The fact that the European Union is also giving them an accession pathway, which is far more accelerated than before is also good. So if you put NATO and European Union and our commitment to Ukraine, I will say that they will be with us sooner rather than later. And this is I think, a very good decision that came from Vilnius.

David Sanger

We only have a few more minutes so fortunately short interview and we could go on with you for the longest time but you heard Susan and Colin Kahl talk before about the question of the decisions made about how to arm Ukraine. And of course, just before the Summit, the President made the decision to send the cluster munitions, which most of the NATO members who were there could not have done they had signed the treaty. Obviously. When you were behind closed doors, did you hear criticism of that decision? Did you hear relief that the US had done it? Even if Britain France, Germany, others could not? What was the reaction to it? And how long do you think we're going to need to use these before you can get the traditional unitary munitions?

Mircea Geoană

No. Our leaders have not touched upon the subject but they decided speaking of transformation and the transformative nature of our summit, as you mentioned, we decided to have the most profound transformation of our defense and deterrence. Planning for structure command and control in 40 years. That's in itself is a massive deterrence message. Secondly, we decided, and that's something that I think us for many, many, many, many years, many long administrations and Congress, they've been asking European Allies and Canada to spend more on defense it was not fair to have this kind of asymmetry of burden sharing. And all allies decided in Vilnius deal is that we'll be spending at least 2% of GDP. We also.

Mircea Geoană

And is 2% enough under these conditions you think?

Mircea Geoană

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I think I think it's a it's the minimum and you see, I don't know my country, Romania 2.5%. But the fact that big economies like Germany, like Italy, like the Netherlands, like many others, like Spain, would be going to 2% or more, which in itself is a massive investment. We also decided and our leaders except we decided to have an industrial action plan. What the Colin was discussing in the previous so what I'm saying that cluster ammunition or not we are ramping up production. We are revitalizing our industrial base. And what NATO does superbly well, is to send a demand signal to both defense industry because through NATO, you can see through our defense planning processes, what NATO is about and we'll be investing in and we are sending a signal not only to the defense traditional defense sector, but also to the technological sector, to the companies in technology, because the beauty of NATO that we are also helping allies avoid a false dilemma. Now with war in Ukraine, and in Europe, that we should invest in conventional high intensity warfare issues. That's correct. And also or, or to invest in high end capabilities. In NATO, we help allies all allies, big and small, not to make this mistake. We have to do them both what we call multi dimensional operations means that we need conventional high end and digitalized NATO. So this Vilnius is summit was truly transformative, transformative.

David Sanger

So we're sure you've only been in this job since 2019 although it probably

Mircea Geoană

On this very stage Jens Stoltenberg at the security forum announced that he was picking me as his deputy. And I think he did a pretty good choice.

David Sanger

Right. So So you're a creature of Aspen now, right?

Mircea Geoană

I'm a founder of aspen in Romania. 20 years.

David Sanger

So, but so you were not around in 2014 when NATO had to go decide how to go respond to the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in the south. But we know that a year after that was when Germany actually signed the Nord Stream 2 agreement. So Putin was probably guessing that the reaction for NATO would be the same. And that after a year, all would be forgotten and we'd sort of go back to times usual. How do you persuade him now that this change is here to stay? Cause he must be betting the europe will crack. The United States will

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elect a president who does not believe in pursuing this war the way President Biden has or the Ukrainians are going to run out of ammunition.

Mircea Geoană

Listen, I think that the consequences of this formidable strategic error mistake by Mr. Putin and his regime look now the geography of Europe at the NATO. Finland and Sweden they are adding to the northern flank and to the eastern flank, and to the to the 1 billion citizens of this alliance, something that, you know, Sweden has been neutral since 1812. 1812. After the the Napoleonic Wars. Finland has been neutral since the Second World War. And and what kind of mistake can you make to convince profoundly neutral in the depth of the democracies when Sweden Finland to join NATO? We're happy to have them with us. And then I think he's also looking to the decisions that we are taking, in a way he is making NATO become become strong. Let me say something about the summit, because we also had a component which was probably not as prominent and the other decisions our leaders. I chaired a meeting with the foreign ministers of Moldova, Georgia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. So while we're doing this, we also know that is immense pressure, shorter war, but against Moldova, there is a total hybrid warfare against Maia Sandu's regime. And we're together with the EU in the position to try to help. And then we have the second time in a row after our summit in Madrid, the leader of our four Indo Pacific partners, the Prime Minister's of Japan, and Korea and New Zealand, and the president of South Korea. So, we are now developing a system of partnerships, which is growing more global. So in a way, as the world is transforming, NATO is transforming. And we will be celebrating and I hope, and I know we'll have a great summit in next year in Washington, our 75th anniversary. The transformation of NATO is ongoing because these great alliances of ours we have in our genes in our DNA, that that see the transformation. And I have to say that I'm very proud. I was not in 2014. Nobody's perfect. But I think myself and our Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, I think we should be proud of seeing this alliance all these allies. new allies, committing more to our transatlantic friendship and to our global system of norms and values.

David Sanger

We are running out of time I want for a quick last question for you. One of the remarkable things about this war so far defied are the expectations because we haven't seen vertical escalation which is to say nuclear. We haven't seen horizontal escalation, which is to say, taking the war beyond the Ukrain's borders, beyond the Moldova example. But certainly not into NATO territory. How long can that last? If you're Putin do you calculate that is an indefinite set where that's his last move?

Mircea Geoană

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We mentioned that the war against his neighbors started with Georgia in 2008 and then 2014. And now, the hybrid warfare against the West has never stopped. Intelligence, subversion of our democracies, critical infrastructures, cyber attacks, I also run cyber adaptation innovation at NATO. We're not speaking that much publicly about things that are going on. So this is nothing new and we are also preparing ourselves for that kind of horizontal escalation. We are working together with the European Union on undersea critical infrastructures and resilience together. So what we are also very vigilant in is there is making sure that of course, deterrence and defense in the more traditional sense, but I think and also there are lots of business leaders here in this audience watching us. There will be a premium on economic security in the years to come. As we had the peace dividend collected for decades after the fall of communism and Soviet Soviet empire, we are now in a situation to look into a new generation of supply chain of technologies of security of resilience. And this is something that we also have to calculate and include in our bottom lines, because this is and as we say, NATO resilience is the first line of defense of our societies and economies.

David Sanger

Well Mircea we could do this forever. You and I have been known to do that. But you have another panel to go on. The good news for everybody here is you're on that next panel. So I'm gonna get out of your way and let others get up here. And thank you very much.