

Transcript of The Current, on CBC
An Interview with Mr. Clifford Gaddy, Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution
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MS. ANNA MARIA TREMONTI: Is it a military alliance or a political club? As the leaders of NATO countries prepare to meet in Bucharest this week, we're asking about the direction and the very relevance of NATO. That's where The Current begins today.

TREMONTI: Well this week members of NATO (The North Atlantic Treaty Organization) will meet in Bucharest, Romania to decide which countries they want to welcome into the fold. There is a long list that would like to join NATO. But the voting on two of them, former Soviet republics Georgia and Ukraine, is expected to go down to the wire. Each sees NATO membership as the next step in their pro Western revolutions. This is how Georgia's Ambassador to Canada, Vasil Sikharulidze, explains the importance of NATO membership for Georgia.

MR. VASIL SIKHARULIDZE: It's very important for Georgia because Georgia is a democratic country and the NATO, first of all, is alliance of the democratic nations who decided to create this alliance for different purposes. They are one of the most successful organizations of collective defense and the future security of the modern world, and especially the modern democracies, is not divisible. So we can't say that the one country can be secure while other countries feel threatened.

TREMONTI: It's not clear that Georgia and Ukraine will get their wish. NATO wants new members as a way of guaranteeing its survival, but it also doesn't want to aggravate an old nemesis, namely, Russia. It's just one of the dilemmas facing NATO and it's adding to the sense among many observers that the alliance, which is turning 60 next year, is in the throws of a mid-life crisis, unsure of its identity or purpose in a post-Cold War world. For his thoughts on what to expect from this week's summit I am joined by Clifford Gaddy. He is a Russia specialist. He is also a Senior Fellow with the Brookings Institution and he's in Washington. Good morning.

MR. CLIFFORD GADDY: Good morning.

TREMONTI: There is a lot of speculation swirling about what NATO will decide about this membership for Ukraine and Georgia. What do you think will happen?

GADDY: It appears that there is going to be some resistance from, especially the European members of NATO, to the proposal to admit Ukraine and Georgia to the so called fast track to membership. They of course will not be offered, under any circumstances, direct membership at this meeting but what is in question is whether they will be put in a program to eventually become members and even that is highly controversial. In fact, I think controversial enough that I predict that it probably won't happen, but I guess there is a chance that it might.

TREMONTI: Well, let's look at the divisions. First of all, the U.S. administration has sent positive signals to both Ukraine and Georgia. Where are the Americans coming from on this one?

GADDY: Yes, well, what's interesting is that there are divisions between some of the European, especially the Western European allies, and the United States, and not sure where Canada lines up on this issue. But, even within the U.S. administration there are differences of opinion and I guess this has characterized U.S. policy towards Russia more than towards NATO over the past two terms of the Bush presidency. And I think that's in part what's really confusing issues because Mr. Bush is trying to balance between, in thinking about his legacy, as people put it, one of the pillars would be a good relationship or at least a better relationship with Russia, the other would be to continue the support for new democracies in the world, not least in that part of the world, in Central and Eastern Europe. And in this case, those two goals, those two pillars of a proposed legacy are strongly in conflict with each other.

TREMONTI: Now, the Europeans, you mentioned Germany, but Italy, Spain, France, and Germany, all have resistance to this, why?

GADDY: Well, it's often described that they're afraid of angering Russia, as if they are simply being cowards in the face of Russian pressure. I think it's, I mean, I have talked to a lot of Europeans about this and it's much more complicated and I would say much more rational than that. Many of them have reasons to think that regardless of the Russian issue here, that it is early and premature, perhaps hasty, to talk about expanding NATO so much as has happened over the recent period, and that it would be better, more prudent, to have a longer term approach. In other words, certainly not exclude membership for any countries into NATO, but take it easy, go slower. When that coincides with the problems this raises with Russia, it's not necessarily a matter of being intimidated or influenced by Russia, but just simply aware of the fact that this is an issue, this membership of countries in a military bloc, to which they do not belong, Russia, right on their borders is a very very sensitive issue. Especially, when it might involve, in the Russian view, future placement of foreign troops on the soil of these countries or as they have now seen, in the case of Poland and the Czech Republic, deployment of even elements of missile systems that close to their borders. So, they're very nervous about this in purely military terms.

TREMONTI: And, in your view, is Russia justified in being nervous?

GADDY: I personally think they are. I mean, I think that military people, I like to ask the question what would the United States do if Russia or some other foreign power, if China, for instance, decided that they could conclude an agreement with Cuba and place missiles in Cuba. I think we've been through that process before and I know there would be absolute panic and hysteria in the United States even at the discussion of that.

TREMONTI: Now, we spoke to Angela Stent, the director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies at Georgetown University. She says Russia's reservations about Ukraine joining NATO are actually echoed by many Ukrainians. Listen to what she says.

MS. ANGELA STENT: The majority of the Ukrainian population doesn't want NATO membership right now. The Ukrainian government has signed a letter saying that it wants the membership action plan. But the problem is that the population isn't there. 60% of the Ukrainian population doesn't favor NATO membership. Their view of NATO is still formed from the Soviet Union that NATO was an enemy organization and I think they don't know much about NATO and a lot of what they hear is negative. It comes from Russia and it comes from people who are opposed to it.

TREMONTI: That's an interesting twist. Clifford Gaddy what role do you think that Ukrainian population, popular opinion would play in this discussion?

GADDY: Professor Stent is absolutely correct. The majority of the Ukrainian population, by public opinion polls, and just on personal observation, I think is opposed to NATO membership. And I think there is a variety of reasons why they are, some of those, or the ones mentioned by Professor Stent, and others may be just more, the same sort of hesitations that some Western Europeans have about NATO, its role its mission, the unclarity of what this is all about. Is this an organization that now, as the Georgian ambassador to Canada, who you quoted earlier in the program says, it's now a club of democracies or is this still an organization whose ultimate reason for existence is the threat of Russia, formerly the Soviet Union, now a "resurgent Russia"? Certainly there are many many people, political figures and members of the population in Eastern Europe who do see it as a protection against Russia. The official description by NATO leaders, leaders of NATO countries, is usually quite different and they stress that no, no, no, this has nothing to do with Russia. So there is confusion on that point, both at the highest levels and then of course that is reflected in confusion among the population as well.

TREMONTI: And I noticed that last week, U.S. Defense Secretary, former, Donald Rumsfeld, wrote an article for the Wall Street Journal, and he said, "silence on the issue of Georgia and Ukraine in Bucharest would amount to a rejection of Georgia's and Ukraine's international aspirations." He went on to say, "it would prove disillusioning to their people it would serve as a green light to Russia to continue the tired rhetoric of the Cold War." What do you think of that kind of argument?

GADDY: Well, I think that's painting the picture too much in black and white terms and the decision, let's assume that there is a decision to kick the ball down the road, to postpone a decision about offering this fast track membership to Ukraine and Georgia, believe me it will be done in a way that is not just slamming the door in their face. It will be done in, the words, the rhetoric, will be highly accommodating, and praising them for their progress that they have made, and that expectations are they will continue to make that progress, etcetera, etcetera, that they are part of the Western community, it's only a matter of time... And, so, with that kind of rhetoric it's not going to be perceived as, it will be disillusioning, I am sure, because unfortunately I believe the hopes have been pumped up too far prior to this event. That's typical of course of political developments, but I think NATO will try to do this in a way that does not appear to be simply slamming the door in the face of these countries and these populations.

TREMONTI: But you seem to be suggesting they won't quite open it as far as others would like them to.

GADDY: That's still my sense right now. I think that it's not going to be a clear cut decision one way or the other and ultimately there will be a sense of, "let's continue to talk about this, and move in this direction."

TREMONTI: Okay, Clifford Gaddy, thanks for weighing in on this one with us.

GADDY: You're welcome.

TREMONTI: Clifford Gaddy is a Russia specialist. He is also a Senior Fellow with the Brookings Institution and he spoke to us from our Washington studio.