

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
WEBCAST

NATO AT 75: OLD OR BOLD?

WEDNESDAY, JULY 3, 2024

MODERATOR: ASLI AYDINTAŞBAŞ

Visiting Fellow, Center on the United States and Europe, Brookings

JAMES GOLDGEIER

Visiting Fellow, Center on the United States and Europe, Brookings

MICHAEL E. O'HANLON

Philip Knight Chair in Defense and Strategy, Senior Fellow and Director, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology, Brookings

CONSTANZE STELZENMÜLLER

Fritz Stern Chair on Germany and Trans-Atlantic Relations

Senior Fellow and Director, Center on the United States and Europe, Brookings

TARA VARMA

Visiting Fellow, Center on the United States and Europe, Brookings

* * * * *

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Good morning, everyone. My name is Aslı Aydıntaşbaş and on behalf of the center on the United States and Europe at Brookings Institution, I'm delighted to welcome you all for this very timely conversation. The title of our panel, "NATO at 75: Old or Bold," sums up pretty much what we want to talk about the dilemmas and the issues ahead. Next week, Washington will be hosting NATO's 75th anniversary summit, bringing together leaders from now 32 member states, including Sweden and Finland, as well as Indo-Pacific allies. This was, of course, designed as a celebration of Western unity and resolve, showcasing NATO's preparedness for a wide range of threats facing our societies. But instead, of course, the landmark summit is starting off in a somber mood, very much overshadowed by the news cycle. Ukraine's future hangs in the balance. The war in the Middle East continues, and of course, there is nervousness about what is happening politically in Europe and in the United States, with a set of elections now casting a shadow over the themes and messages of the summit. I have an all star cast to discuss all this, with me today. James Goldgeier, a visiting fellow at Brookings and at Stanford University and the author of a number of books on NATO, Michael O'Hanlon, Philip Knight chair in defense and strategy at Brookings, but, of course, also the director of the Strobe Talbott Center for Security and Strategy and Technology here at Brookings, and Constanze Stelzenmüller, our director at the center on the United States and Europe, and Fritz Stern chair on Germany and transatlantic relations. And last but not least, Tara Varma, visiting fellow at CUSE, Center on the United States and Europe here at Brookings. Jim, I'm going to start with you. You just came back from Europe, where you attended an event that Constanze and Tara was also taking part in, our land, our landmark Daimler Forum. What are your thoughts on next week's summit? What will you be watching specifically?

GOLDGEIER: Well, thanks so much. It's great to be included with my Brookings colleagues here. And, I, I mean, it is a quite an occasion to mark 75 years, first of all, because, you know, in 1949 when NATO was founded, this was certainly unprecedented for the United States to form this peacetime alliance given, the history of the United States and the admonition by George Washington in his farewell address not to join permanent alliances. And, I don't think the founders would have really expected this alliance would still be needed 75 years later, or that it would have grown so much. And I think that's the first thing to note for this summit, as you mentioned, Aslı. I mean, you know, this was 12 countries, the U.S., Canada, and ten European countries in 1949, and we are at 32 now with the addition of Sweden and Finland, also something that would have been hard to expect given the history of those countries. So, certainly, we come into this summit with a lot of things that NATO has reason to be proud of, the importance of the institution for the security of its members. And as you said, it is overshadowed by this horrific war by Russia against Ukraine and the need to support Ukraine. And I think, first and foremost, I'll be looking for what is being said about Ukraine and the continued support for the country. And the, the question of how the NATO members move beyond what they said last year regarding future Ukrainian membership, to try to say something a little stronger about Ukraine's future in NATO and more broadly in the Euro-Atlantic community. Second thing, of course, is this question of the, how, the how the NATO leaders look, given the political crosswinds. President Biden is the host. Lots of questions raised at the, at the at the debate last Thursday about him. And I think we will be looking to see what, how he looks, how he sounds. And I'll leave it to Tara to talk about President Macron, but he certainly comes in much less strong than, one might have expected when this summit was first announced. And I think that the, the the standing of the leaders, the elections now between now and next week in the UK, and a change in government there. There is certainly plenty to look for as we go into this summit.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Constanze, let me turn to you. When we were debating what title to have you, finally, you were the one that came up with old and bold, so, it's only appropriate that I tap into you to explain. And also, again, what will you be watching?

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, like Jim, I've been around long enough to remember several iterations of the theory that NATO is obsolete. When I started off my my career as a young journalist 30 years ago, my, my section head in the political section would send me to Social Democratic Party conferences where, where the participants would demand that NATO be abolished and superseded, as I said, by the OSCE, which would be in future the guardian of European security. Those were the days. It was unimaginable then, right, because we all thought that we were heading for political entropy, and everybody wants to be like us, and that Russia would want to be like us, and the rest of the world would want to be like us, and all of us would become liberal market democracies.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: End of history.

STELZENMÜLLER: End of history, exactly; Francis Fukuyama. So. I also, you know, remember going a little further back, even, going to law school in what was then the capital of West Germany, at Bonn, in the midst of the massive anti-Pershing demonstrations, where NATO was very much still in the Cold War. And, it was a deterrence and, and defense alliance. And the reason I mention all this is that we have come full circle. I, I covered as a journalist NATO becoming the expeditionary alliance, going first to the Balkans and then to Afghanistan, sending missions to the, maritime missions to the Horn of Africa. And now we are looking at an adversary who is attacking a large democratic country on the borders of Europe, Ukraine, and is interfering on a daily basis with, with cyber attacks, sabotage, espionage and disinformation in the European political space, right. The most people will have heard by now of the, the arson attack on an German armaments firm, Diehl, in, on the outskirts of Berlin a few weeks ago. So which is, interestingly, was attributed very, very quickly to the Russians by the German security services. So NATO, NATO's original defense and deterrence mission has taken on a wholly new urgency, not just because of Ukraine, not just because of the threats on Europe's periphery, but also because of what Russians and others are doing in terms of hybrid warfare within Europe. And so there is going to be a very, very real sense of urgency, and at the same time, as Jim said, a sense of self-questioning, and that's, I think, the old part. The old part is not that not NATO at this point, it's that some of our leaders are looking pretty old. And, and old, either in the physical sense or in the sense that they have overstayed their political welcome, the, like the Tory leader, Rishi Sunak in London. And I expect that we will have a new prime minister in the UK joining us next week for the NATO summit.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Yes, UK elections taking place shortly and expected to lead in a --.

STELZENMÜLLER: Tomorrow.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Labour victory. Exactly. So, Tara, let me turn to you. Bring a European perspective into this. How are Europeans approaching next week's summit? Both Jim and Constanze have mentioned that people will be focusing on President Joe Biden as well. Is he looking focused? Is he energetic? What are, how other world leaders approaching him? But there are also other leaders who are having political difficulties in their homeland. So on to you.

VARMA: Thanks a lot. Very glad to be here. I have to say, being a French person living in DC and following both French and U.S. politics right now is, quite an experience. I don't know if I can recommend it to many people. It's it's a lot. It's a bit overwhelming. And you're right, I think, leaders will be scrutinized and I'll get to how Emmanuel Macron will, will feature in this discussion in a minute, but I just want to say, in terms of a European, larger European perspective, what we've seen is two additional European member states, EU member states who've joined NATO, who've actually reinforced the alliance, strengthened the alliance. We've seen actual NATO enlargement happening, mostly because of Russia's full scale, full scale invasion of Ukraine. And so there has been a form of dynamism in the alliance that we hadn't seen in a while. Macron was known also for having said that he thought NATO was brain-dead. And that was in 2019. I think we've seen a wholly different alliances then, with a lot of political purpose. And there are many questions around the political cohesion of the alliance, the role that Hungary will play in particular; Hungary has just taken over the presidency of the European Union Council. With this motto, "make Europe great again," which is a paraphrase of Donald Trump's motto for America, "make America great again." So we need to see how Europeans will will come in. Will there be unity or fragmentation or diversity of views? I'm guessing it's going to be a bit of all that. Many questions, of course, around U.S. leadership and how U.S. leadership will feature in support for Ukraine in the coming months, because that question is really key. I think one of the main issues that will have to be settled at this summit is the future relationship of Ukraine with NATO. And we'll discuss this further on. Is it full membership, not membership, an invitation. This expression of the bridge, we've heard it, quite a lot, what does the bridge mean? Is it a bridge to NATO? Is it a bridge to a consolidation of Ukraine as a democracy? Secretary Blinken was at Brookings two days ago, and he discussed this publicly. The recording of his intervention is available online on our website. And and what he referred to, he referred to additional air defense support. But I thought it was interesting that he was explaining it as a way of consolidating Ukrainian democracy, reconstructing Ukraine's economy. And so this was military support, but for a political and economic purpose. So I'm guessing we'll hear more of that next week. Let me just do one minute on Macron. I was not going to avoid it, don't worry. I have been trying to avoid it these past days because it's a bit overwhelming. I think, as most of our viewers know, we are in the middle of two rounds of snap parliamentary elections that were called because Emmanuel Macron dissolved the National Assembly on the evening of the results of the European elections, which were not favorable to his party. And so the first round.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: His party did rather poorly.

VARMA: His party did really bad in the European elections. So, the Rassemblement National, the far right, got 32% of the vote share and Emmanuel Macron's party came in second with 14.7% of the vote share. So, you know, not even half, of what Rassemblement National got. And so he decided to dissolve the National Assembly, leading to snap elections. His party did really badly in the snap elections, the first round of which were held last Sunday. So now what we're seeing are basically three blocs in the French political landscape, a far right-right wing bloc; a central bloc, basically led by Emmanuel Macron's party; and the left and the far left together in a coalition. And Macron's party is the third bloc in this. The second round of the elections are happening this Sunday. And it seems likely that his party will lose and the far right is going to come in first. And so the question is, will they be in capacity to form a government with an absolute majority at the National Assembly or not? There are many questions around this. I won't get into it right now, but that's the main issue. If they do, it might be in capacity to form a government. I think that's highly unlikely considering the elections. You know, we'll get the results of the elections on a Sunday

evening and the NATO summit starts next Tuesday. But if they do get an absolute majority, Emmanuel Macron could actually find himself coming in with a far right foreign minister and defense minister who have totally antagonistic views to his in terms of support to Ukraine, European support to Ukraine, NATO support to Ukraine. So we would see a totally bicephalic French perspective; totally contradictory, with no stability, little visibility in terms of who represents France and what France is going to do, which I think will be quite scary both for European and American allies. But the other option is that, and I think the most likely, is that he will show up on his own with no foreign or defense minister, because a government will not have had time to be formed, and then he will actually also seem isolated. And a lot of the work and ideas that he's been putting forward for a stronger Europe might, just, he won't be able to be the person embodying these ideas and fighting for them because of this isolation.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Macron, of course, one of the European leaders pushing for membership, NATO membership for Ukraine. So, Michael, I want to turn to you and pivot back to Ukraine and NATO. Last year at the Vilnius summit, NATO summit in Vilnius, the big debate was, will Ukraine be a member of NATO? Will it be given a membership, prospective membership action plan or not? And that's what the media, what media largely focused on this year. We pretty much knew that it will not have an official membership course. It is what Tara and Jim and, Constanze talked about a bridge. Bridge being a concept, a bridge to membership. So, I want to turn to you. It's not all doom and gloom. There is also commitment for security agreements with Ukraine and allocation of more funds from the Russian assets, 50 billion, and so on. What will you be watching in next week's summit, and how does NATO fit into the whole equation when it comes to Ukraine in your understanding of the endgame?

O'HANLON: Thanks, Aslı. It's great to be with everybody, but let me say a couple of critical things about the summit, but then also some positive things I see happening and try to present a little bit of a balanced perspective as I see things. First of all, I would counsel our friends in government not to use the word celebration any more than they have to, to talk about this gathering. It doesn't feel like a moment for celebration when a war is ongoing in Europe, not to mention Gaza. Not to mention a huge tragedy in Sudan, which is pretty close to NATO as well. And I don't like the term. I know what people mean by it in the sense that, of course, NATO's an amazing alliance and it's been very important for our security, and it's still is relevant and still is, as Constanze was saying, you know, reinvented in ways that are important and contribute substantially to our security. But I just don't like the term celebration when the world is facing what it's facing today. Second, I was at one of NATO's main organizational hubs two weeks ago in Rome, Italy, at the NATO Defense College. And it was a good conversation, good discussion, but some of the mood was, you know, why do we keep having these summits? NATO doesn't have a charter that requires an annual summit. Last year's, as you say, wound up being a fiasco in many ways. Luckily, most of the world doesn't pay that much attention to NATO summits, or at least most publics don't. And so the whole brouhaha over President Zelenskyy being upset that he wasn't getting a clear path to membership was fairly quickly forgotten, I would hazard to guess by most people, except people like us. And, and so in one sense, there's no great harm done. But I don't see quite why we're forcing ourselves to come up with big new initiatives. You mentioned a bridge to membership. I mean, how many more metaphors are we going to use to talk about the fundamental reality, which is that we're not willing to commit? And so I find that conversation borderline useless, maybe even counterproductive. But let me now say a couple more positive things. We had General Eric Smith yesterday at Brookings, the commandant of the Marine Corps. And even though his main focus, like many in the U.S. military, is on China, at least in terms of longer-term preparations, he was

quick to say that a lot of NATO allies are very interested in working with the Marines. You know, we're all trying to learn the lessons of the Ukraine war, but also benefit from this new energy in the alliance to strengthen the 32, make sure we can defend our own territory, absorb now a stronger Nordic contingent, and also just make sure that that eastern flank is prepared against any kind of probing or other mischievous behavior that Putin may contemplate in the future. And there is some positive energy in the alliance at a military planning level and a political level in that regard. Another point that I'm encouraged by is that -- I heard this at the NATO Defense College in conversation, I've heard it elsewhere at the Pentagon and other places recently -- it does appear that the ground that Ukraine was losing through the spring, that that dynamic has been largely stanching, largely stymied. And I think the 61 billion aid package from the Congress, overdue as it was, is beginning to help. Let me also give a big shout out to European allies and Canada because, as we've shown in our Ukraine Index, they're actually doing more for Ukraine than the United States, even counting the 61 billion. Donald Trump was wrong about that in the debate. Europe is really coming through in a burden-sharing way, and the combined effort of all of us is now again helping Ukraine stay on its feet. And the last point I'll make in that same regard, and this is related to an idea that Professor Lise Howard at Georgetown and I have been trying to develop over the last year and a half, thinking about alternative security architectures for Europe. And it also builds, in some ways, it relates to what President Macron has talked about with putting perhaps some NATO troops on Ukrainian territory in a defensive mode. Lise and I aren't necessarily advocating that, but we are thinking about having more Western forces, or at least Western military personnel in uniform someday on Ukrainian soil as a potential alternative to or maybe even a complement to, but we see it first and foremost as a potential alternative to NATO membership in a way that may make a longer-term arrangement with Russia more negotiable. I don't know, I'm not making that claim. Lise and I are trying to develop an alternative concept that may or may not prove useful, but what I like about what I've seen in the news the last three days, and I'll finish on this point, is that NATO now wants to have more presence in Ukraine, it appears, with the idea of having not NATO combat forces, but a NATO political mission and a military liaison mission in Kyiv. And that's the kind of dynamic that I think may provide us an alternative way to ensure that Ukraine is never conquered by Russia in the future. Getting the Western presence inside of Ukraine much denser and partly reflected and manifested in military terms. Again, my preference would not necessarily be through a NATO membership, which is not going to happen soon anyway. But there may be other mechanisms by which we can essentially build a dense presence that serves as a tripwire against Russian attack on the center of parts of Ukraine and that just strengthens our long term relationship. So I see that as potentially interesting. Not a huge development on a par with NATO membership, but still potentially a useful way of ensuring that Ukraine will remain sovereign and independent long term.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Thank you, Mike, Mike, for these interesting ideas. I want to stay with you and go backwards because, while, as you mentioned, there is all these important developments also in support of Ukraine that NATO is being engaged with, liaison and, and obviously, you know, G7 funds and security guarantees. And, and it is the case that the the front lines have stabilized, particularly around Kharkiv, the Russian assault seems to have been stopped for now. But it is also the case that Vladimir Putin seems to have the upper hand psychologically. He he looks comfortable. He looks confident. And the global South outside of Europe and, you know, North America, there is this idea that Russia is not losing. Now, you and I were present when we, last week when we had a chance to speak to a former official, senior official, who described the need to have some sort of a shock effect on the situation, coming up with a policy that would shock, create some sort of a shock in the system so that Putin might be more amenable to, at some future point,

to negotiations and ceasefires and so on and so forth. Are you thinking of this new idea in that sense, in that framework?

O'HANLON: That was an interesting comment. And that is perhaps the kind of dynamic that needs to be established to put Putin back on his heels a little bit. I don't know that that is quite as big of a question, however, whether or not such a shock could occur as what happens with European and American politics over the next six months, and where we are collectively as an alliance and our willingness to support Ukraine in 2025. My best guess is that -- I don't claim to make a guess about what Donald Trump would do as president, but if we get into 2025 and support continues, I think we sort of owe it to Ukraine to take one last serious crack at trying to regain as much of its territory as it can. I don't expect that there will be that much success, but I've been wrong about many things in military analysis in my career, and I know it's an inexact science best. So I could be wrong again. And I think, therefore we do owe Ukraine this chance. But then if that doesn't play out very successfully over the spring-summer of 2025, then we're at a crossroads. And as you say, Putin may still be willing to fight for multiple years on end, assuming at that point he could outlast us with or without Trump in the White House. But he may also decide that holding on to whatever fraction of Ukraine he's got at that point -- and right now it's about 18% of pre-2014 Ukraine -- that that's enough, especially if he can keep Ukraine out of NATO long term and maybe you can have a negotiation. I don't know, but I think that's sort of, that's how I expect the next 12 months to play out. And then we'll be at a crossroads where I can better answer your question about the long term. I agree that Putin right now seems to have the upper hand, seems to think he has the upper hand at least. And it would be nice if we could somehow change that psychology, but I'm not sure any one act on the battlefield is going to do it so much as seeing how politics evolve over the next 12 months, and then if and when a Ukrainian counteroffensive is attempted, whether it can really show any success.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Tara, I want to ask you about European contributions to defense spending. That's been an evergreen topic at NATO summits. But now we have 23 allies, 23 NATO members meeting the 2% target. They're not delinquent, in the words of Donald Trump. They have a big stake in Europe's defense. But how is it going? Are they, are Europeans able to ramp up defense production? Are you, are they able to transition to a greater sort of war economy, for lack of a better word?

VARMA: So you're right. They're doing a lot more, even though what's clear now is that the, you know, the 2% goal of spending in defense, 2% of GDP, sorry, in defense spending is is not just a threshold, but it's it's only a ceiling. Now, actually, a lot of experts are calling for 3 or 4%. And we're seeing countries, in Eastern Europe in particular, who are spending actually closer to 3 or 4%.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Including Poland?

VARMA: Including Poland, absolutely. And so we're seeing, I think, a dynamic towards actually more than 2%, because there's a necessity for it now. I think the term war economy is still very much taboo in many places in Europe because, even though there is war in Europe, the European Union, for instance, is not at war with Russia. And so the French president has used it a few times, but a lot of people are, I think, a bit wary of using that term, even though it is quite clear that Vladimir Putin is actually, has put his own country in war economy, he's spending almost 8% of GDP in defense, has totally transformed his industrial base. So he could, you know, Mike and you are absolutely right, he could spend a lot more time at war with Ukraine until he finally gets what he

wants. He has decided to put his his country in that situation. We can't, I don't think, as Europeans we can decide that we need to be in a war economy, but we can decide to do a lot more. And I think we've done that already. One, one issue that I hope is, I mean, is a pretty nerdy issue, but I hope can bring a bit of glimmer of hope is reinforced EU-NATO cooperation. I think we have -- there are two indications that this might go in, in a much more positive direction right now. First of all, there's an institutional dimension, with the change at the commission and in terms of institutional leadership inside the European Union, we're seeing Kaja Kallas, right now, the head of Estonia, who's going to become the high representative for foreign policy at the European Union, very much a NATO girl. She knows NATO very well, but she knows the EU very well, too. And then, you know, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, formerly prime minister of the Netherlands, who also knows the two institutions very well. And what we've seen is a lot of defiance coming from both institutions for the past three decades, with a lot of reluctance to work together. I'm hoping that with these two new people at the head both of EU diplomacy and NATO, we might see a lot more EU-NATO cooperation. And I think that's quite key. Again, with Sweden and Finland, two EU member states having joined NATO now, we really need it. And the second positive aspect that I see is more concrete in the way than the institutional, though leadership and personal relationship, of course, matter in foreign policy: there's actually willingness from the private sector. So two days ago, the European Investment Fund and NATO Venture Capital Fund have announced that they would co-sponsor programs together to ramp up the defense industrial bases in Europe. This is another, again, pretty nerdy but huge taboo that has been broken. The European Investment Bank didn't want to fund projects linked to defense and security for the past 15 years. It decided to change that and to overthrow that decision in January this year. So we're seeing actually European Union institutions and funds willing to, to fund defense industrial ramp up. This is something that is, of course, due to Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine, and so we're seeing I'm hopeful between, the funding issue that is not totally resolved, but at least a lot more open now, and the institutional dimension, I think, an opportunity for a lot more cooperation between the two institutions. But, you know, there are also politics is is also happening everywhere in Europe. And so we've seen we were warned that that that would be war fatigue coming from European populations in terms of support to Ukraine. We haven't seen that in the past two and a half years, but we're seeing governments who are claiming war fatigue. And I'm actually more scared of certain governments in Europe right now who are going to look at doing everything they can to undermine support to Ukraine. European populations are quite clear in polls that they still support it very much, but I'm more fearful of a number of governments who would feel emboldened by what's happening in France, clearly, what's happening in Italy, you know, little visibility coming from Germany as well. So I think we're at a moment right now where there's a lot of expectations from the UK. I think if the UK can show direction in terms of leadership, but the UK has also a huge defense industrial base. There is a lot that they could do with the continent. I think we need not just one country but several European countries coming together and leading back. I think the UK would be key, but of course the eastern flank is absolutely key there too. Poland has a huge defense industrial base, so I think we're going to look at a reconfiguration also of of where leadership comes in, when it comes to European security and defense.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Constanze, can I ask you to weigh in on the European side of this equation? Particularly on the debate on Trump-proofing NATO. Now, of course, Brookings is an independent nonpartisan organization, and we are not taking part in endorsing a candidate in the elections. But Donald Trump, his name, his, the possibility of a second Trump administration, looms large in any debate on defense and security policy. There's been this idea of Trump-proofing NATO. Share us

your perspective on what's going on in Europe, whether this is possible. And add to it, please, your impressions from Germany, because you also had a chance to spend some time there.

STELZENMÜLLER: Sure. Well, if I may, I'd like to pick up a couple of strands. I am, I'm right now of and frankly in a little bit of a pessimistic mood, although I agree very much with Tara that I think European politicians generally under, underrate the willingness of European publics, from my experience, to make sacrifices for, for, in this particular situation. I think people understand just how serious this is, and I think they understand because it is so clear that Putin is locked in a logic of war, of a, I mean, truly brutal and sadistic war, is engaged in lying all the time, right? His troops are committing horrific crimes in the areas of Ukraine that they have occupied. And this is a movie we've seen before, right? We saw it especially in the the breakup of Yugoslavia, the, the, the genocidal wars that came out of that. And to anybody who's been around a little longer, and that includes me, Putin at this point is very reminiscent of Milosevic or Saddam Hussein in his late years. Right, there is very little realistic hope, right, that any sort of stable equilibrium of, of armistice or peace is possible with a man who is so obsessed, right, not just with eviscerating Ukraine, right, with destroying Ukrainian sovereignty, but also with undermining liberal modernity in Europe. Right. I think that that is a realization that has really hit home in Europe. What I'm slightly more concerned about is the ability of European governments and institutions to to rise to the occasion. And, and I think, for the following reasons. And it starts with Germany. The, I think the only reason we're not seeing German early elections right now, because the coalition of very, the three members, parties, members of the German coalition, are very unhappy with each other. They have been struggling to get their annual budget signed off at the cabinet table. They've had to defer it from last week. Actually, no, from today to in in two weeks. And the only reason why why they're not falling apart at this point is that there is no constitutional or legal or political path to early elections, unlike in France or Britain, where calling snap elections is much easier and constitutionally permissible. It's not in Germany. And the other, the other thing that the coalition but also the opposition are deathly afraid of is, three state elections in the fall where the hard right and the hard left are trending very, very high, between 38% and 49% in the polls right now. And of course, they were the winners of the German part of the European Parliament elections a couple of weeks ago. So what that means, the reason I'm saying all this is that it means that the German leadership also is is fragile and undermined. And in a situation where you have the possibility, as Tara just explained, of a very inward looking France, a new UK prime minister just come on the scene, a very experienced Danish prime minister who's left and being -- not Danish, I'm sorry, a Dutch prime minister -- who has been replaced by a new hard right coalition, a an Italian prime minister, Meloni, who is very angry at having been excluded in the in the negotiations about filling the top positions of the European Commission. There is a lot of political ferment going on in Europe right now. And one last point that I want to make there, and then I'll come to the Trump-proofing point, but it's important to understand the landscape here. After the European Parliament elections, there were about 103 seats of the 702 in the Parliament that were not assigned to European, to a parliamentary group. And right now, it looks as though the hard right is reforming itself on the hard-right margins under the leadership of Viktor Orban. And. Marine Le Pen might be joining that group. It's not clear whether the AfD will. But depending on where that moves, there could be, if worst comes to worst, a an angry, resentful and and quite and much stronger than before hard-right group in the European Parliament which has co-decision making powers with the with the executive and would be, would, I think be quite willing to throw spanners in the works. And this brings me to NATO. These European politics don't stop at NATO's door. They do not stop at the door of the North Atlantic Council. It is, it would be naive to expect that this doesn't translate into into discussions at the at the NAC table, especially in case of a Trumpian win in the U.S.

elections in November, right. NATO, the, so NATO politics aren't Trump-proof, and before that, before that panorama, the question of whether we can we can organize our defense and deterrence plans, right, and our support for Ukraine in a way that is effective against a Russian aggressor is is a very big question mark. And and I am like, I mean, I'm on the other side of Mike and the question of Ukrainian membership. I am a not a membership ultra. I'm a pragmatist, but I do think that I what I would not like to see is a Ukrainian, a pseudo, a false promise of membership or a false membership bridge that ends up like Turkey's, the promise of bringing Turkey into the European Union. Aslı, I'm sure you will remember that, right. And and I think that would undermine the credibility of NATO and it would undermine the security not just of Ukraine, but also of, of Europe. Sorry, that was a long answer.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: No, it was a great answer. And you you actually took the conversation to where I want to go. First I will say that we had a number of audience, questions from the audience, and you'll be interested to know that there's been a lot of questions about the meaning of NATO, its vision, its, what is it good for at this point? These are not anti-NATO questions. They're not coming from sort of pro-Russian perspective. But what does it stand for in today's world? Or, you know, should should it should we get rid of it once the war with Ukraine is won by, in favor of Ukraine and replace it with a pan-European security structure? Or should it expand to be a security, security style institution for Northeast Asia? Should we include the Middle East in NATO, and so on? So I realize that there is a good deal of question that people have in their minds about NATO's purpose. And I will also flag that Jim Goldgeier has an explainer, "What is NATO?," which is up on our website as part of our explainer series. But, Jim, I know you, like Constanze, believe that membership for Ukraine would have been a good idea and, to deter also Russia. But I want to you to respond to something else. Robert O'Brien, one of, the national security advisor for former President Donald Trump has written a piece for Foreign Affairs. And what he says is that Trump, for his part, has made clear that he would like to see a negotiated settlement, negotiated settlement to the war that ends in Ukraine, that is that ends the killing and preserves the security of Ukraine. His approach would be to continue to provide lethal aid to Ukraine, financed by European countries, he notes, while keeping the door open to diplomacy with Russia. He would also push NATO to rotate ground and air forces to Poland to augment its capacities, he says. But it's more the point about negotiations in Russia and how to deal with Russia. What do you expect would happen if Trump was elected? And, if anything, you want to add to the whole membership end game debate that Mike and Costanze have started.

GOLDGEIER: Sure. Well I'd like to get, you mentioned some of these questions about what NATO's good for, and I think it's all tied together because, at least to date, the NATO members see their security as intertwined. They see a value in being part of this larger grouping, a military alliance that's there to look out for the security of all the member states and to do it together. And this is fundamentally a question as to whether Donald Trump believes in that premise. And I, you know, the Robert O'Brien Foreign Affairs piece seemed to be an attempt to put a coherence on a Trump worldview. But I don't think anybody else speaks for Donald Trump. And I think we don't know whether he will in fact, remain committed to the Alliance. Worth noting that the U.S. Congress in, last December, in the passage of the National Defense Authorization Act, the NDAA, included a provision that a U.S. president can't withdraw from NATO without a two thirds vote of the U.S. Senate or an act of Congress. This was a bipartisan effort to try to ensure that the United States would remain in NATO. But the U.S. president is pretty unconstrained in foreign policy. And even without a formal withdrawal, there are lots of things the U.S. can do to weaken the alliance. We have seen how important U.S. leadership is. Mike mentioned how much the Europeans are

doing, which is true, but Ukraine was also really dependent on getting that aid package through the Congress, on the U.S. getting that aid package through the Congress in March, because the U.S. has capabilities that the other countries in Europe do not. The United States has played this important leadership role. I think this war has shown how dependent Europe remains on the United States for security against external aggression. And so, U.S. leadership remains important, but again, so does this idea that our security is intertwined. And, you mentioned countries in, in, the Indo-Pacific, the last several years have seen the heads of state of the so-called IP4, Indo-Pacific Four -- Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand -- participating in the NATO summit because there is increasing recognition that there are connections across these theaters. It's not that these countries in the Indo-Pacific, are going to come to the defense of of NATO countries in Europe, or that there's an expectation that Europe would come to their defense if needed in the Indo-Pacific, but that these, these theaters are connected and that U.S., these, these alliances of these democracies is important for continued security, especially at a time when Iran and North Korea and China and Russia are increasingly, are increasing their cooperation. Russia couldn't prosecute this war without Chinese support. The Chinese are enabling the Russian Russian economy to to survive these sanctions. We saw President Putin go to North Korea, a place he hadn't visited in 24 years -- and in that, at 24 years ago, it was a stopover. This was a, I need your support, ammunition for this war and, offered cooperation, technical cooperation in return. And the Iranian support for the war as well. So, so we are in this situation where, I think we do need to recognize how intertwined our security is with our allies, from a U.S. perspective, with our allies in both, in both the Asia and Indo-Pacific and European theaters. And it would be great to have a negotiated solution to this war and for the killing to stop. But what kind of negotiated solution and, is Vladimir Putin even interested in a serious negotiation? He has given no indication that he is interested in a serious negotiation, and a negotiated outcome where Ukraine is being asked to cede the territory that Russian occupies to Russia, is politically very difficult and would require that Ukraine have a, a guarantee, that what remains of Ukraine is secure from future Russian aggression. And that's why I support the idea of of Ukraine joining NATO, particularly as part of a negotiated solution to this war so that at least what the sovereign Ukraine that remains would be able to have a, would be confident that, that Russia would not simply resume its aggression down the road. And I think what we've seen from the United States and Canada and Europe to date is, is a recognition that a secure Ukraine is fundamental to the security of Europe. That a Vladimir Putin who just can continue on in the way that he has, in seeking to conquer Ukraine, is then, truly a threat to the rest of Europe as well.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Thank you. Mike. I want to stay on China because, well, Indo-Pacific, because we also have a number of questions about that. The Biden administration has obviously described China as the pacing challenge, the country with the intent and ability to challenge the rules-based order. And it's very much been the focus of the administration's efforts and on the security domain. How do we think of China in the context of NATO, Indo-Pacific in the context of NATO? And, where do you see the dilemma, the issues and dilemmas in this, in this framing?

O'HANLON: Thanks, Aslı. And let me say, Jim's answer was excellent. And I agree with 100% a bit, with one asterisk about the NATO question. I'm not principally opposed at this point to Ukraine being a NATO, I just don't know what's going to be pragmatic in negotiations. And if an alternative architecture that looks comparably robust can be more negotiable, I just want to preserve that option. That's the, that's the way I think about it here in 2024. But on to China, first of all, you, you mentioned earlier that some people are wondering if NATO should extend its purview to East Asia. My sense is, no, that it should not extend article five to allies in Asia. I think NATO has enough to

do and it's a complicated enough organization with enough members. All NATO countries have to think about China, but it doesn't mean the alliance is the right convening location or institution to develop policy, especially military policy. So my instinct is, is to keep NATO focused on Europe and the near abroad. But again, I'll be curious if others might disagree with that. In terms of how we're thinking about China in the United States more generally right now, I think that there is, at the Pentagon at least, and I think elsewhere in parts of the government, a sense that we are making progress in improving our deterrent and our focus on the Asia Pacific, even as we cope with tragedy and crisis and conflict in Europe and the Middle East. Some of the defense investments that have been made, as the Marine Corps commandant discussed yesterday at Brookings, are now panning out. It's not just a Biden administration thing, by the way, it's the Trump and Biden administrations, which, ironically, on this issue, have actually had a great deal of continuity at the Pentagon in particular, but maybe even more broadly than that. And so there is a sense that through a military but also economic instruments and especially through tightened alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, that we are in fact, shoring up our position. But people are still very nervous. They're very nervous about how China is treating the Philippines and the South China Sea. Aggressive actions that have bordered on, that have included, actually, violent acts that have injured, seriously injured Filipinos in recent weeks and that threaten to do so and perhaps even, you know, lead to loss of life in the future. Obviously, the Taiwan issue remains fraught, and China didn't much like the inaugural address by President Lai in Taiwan back in May, although I thought it was pretty reasonable. But China decided to show some objections, so everyone's still nervous and watching very carefully, but feeling like perhaps at least as a government and even as a bipartisan, you know, initiative across governments and across different administrations, but it's certainly within the Congress that we are finding our sort of finding our feet and developing a grand strategy towards China that has some staying power and some prospects for success.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Constanze and Tara, I want to give you an opportunity to weigh in on the Indo-Pacific debate, since it is pretty much an obsession in Washington. Tara, do you want to go?

VARMA: Sure. I totally agree with what Mike just said. I think that I think all NATO allies, and actually a lot of countries in the world think about China, both as a challenge, as an opportunity. I think in the U.S., it's mostly as a challenge. And in Europe right now, it's also a more and more seen as a challenge. I think China's support to Russia in its war against Ukraine is now leading Europeans to think of China as, almost a national or international security issue, which it, it didn't before. It really thought of it as an economic security issue. But I think we're seeing an evolution from a European perspective still. But Europeans are still very dependent on the Chinese markets, you know, so I think that they're going to try and find a way to remain both close to the U.S. and diversify away from China, all the while not giving up on the Chinese market for a while, as long as they can. Probably, you know, as long as China supports Russia on this very fine balance that the Europeans are working out is probably not going to be workable, in the near future. But I think NATO is not the place to discuss this. You can discuss common challenges, you know, a shared assessment of what China's trajectory is right now and what it's doing in the Indo-Pacific, how it's affecting American and European allies in Asia. I think that's absolutely, that's why it's really interesting that for the past three NATO summits, the IP, so-called IP4 -- Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan -- have been invited to come to the summit, because I think they also, they also need to see what NATO discussions on European security and North Atlantic security are. And I'm really struck that both Japan and South Korea have supported sanctions against Russia. They've been thinking about how to provide weapons to Ukraine. South Korea has a provision in its constitution that it cannot send or provide weapons to a conflict zone, an active conflict zone.

And the South Koreans are thinking about how to move this or how to circumvent it a little bit, because they do see that security in Asia and security in Europe are intertwined, interlinked, and that actually you cannot separate the two theatres right now, especially with, a huge China-Russia rapprochement that is not just conjectural, that is, it's not going to be a short term -- I don't want to call it an alliance because I don't think it is that, but it's a very strong partnership. And so this is a reality that Europeans and Americans will have to face together, I think, with slightly different perspectives. But we'll have to accept both Europeans and Americans that, even if we have slightly different perspectives, we need to be able to discuss it. So I don't think NATO is meant to deal with the Indo-Pacific, but we need to discuss it. And maybe one word on old and bold, because I think the questions that we got from the alliance -- from the audience, sorry -- really pertain to this, to this debate. And this is the question also that in a way, this summit and future NATO summits will have to answer regardless of the U.S. presidential election, which is, how does it remain relevant to its core mission, which is the defense of the North Atlantic region, and how does it remain relevant to today's challenges, all the while not superseding or, you know, subduing one to the other? How do you do both? How do you think about them? How do you find this common shared assessment of what today's challenges are? I think this is where NATO will manage to remain relevant. And this is why I also agree with what Mike said. I think the idea of a celebration is makes me really uneasy. I understand why we need to mention it, but I think with the current context in Europe, what's really important is about, you know, acknowledging everything that NATO has done in the past 75 years and looking at how it can prepare itself for the coming decades. And I think if NATO is able to demonstrate that to the American public, to the European publics, then it will have truly won.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Constanze, let me turn to you. Any aspect of this conversation, indo-Pacific and old and bold, that you want to share in your position as final comment, but --

STELZENMÜLLER: Do we have another hour?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: -- I have a final question for each panelist to answer. You are invited to the White House gala dinner next week with the NATO heads of state. And you get to sit, you get to pick your own table. You can sit next to whoever you want in terms of world leaders. Who do you want to sit next to and what do you want to raise?

STELZENMÜLLER: Is that to me now?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: That's to you and to everyone else. But, to you.

STELZENMÜLLER: All right, very simple, I -- and I would have a lot to say about the other topics, but I won't because of time. I think I'd want to sit next to Giorgia Meloni.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Interesting.

STELZENMÜLLER: For the reason that I would really, I would like to engage in conversation, find out what makes her tick. She would be the least predictable, most likely to surprise in conversation. Maybe it would even be funny. What do I know? Certainly not Viktor Orban. Let me just say that.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: I think Giorgia Meloni can be a fun dinner partner, it sounds like. But, any message that you would share with her, or is it would it be your old journalist hat and interview?

STELZENMÜLLER: I think it would be in listening mode. Right. I, I, I don't, I don't feel like, I mean, who knows, maybe she would be interested in what I have to say about living in Washington as a German. But I doubt that. And I think I would not want to waste the time in in trying to tell her things. I would want to learn how she, she thinks. That's it.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Jim?

GOLDGEIER: Yeah, well I, I, I would also say Meloni and and the reason is --.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Wow!

GOLDGEIER: -- building on, on what Constanze said. Well because it's so interesting. I mean, we thought when she came in we were worried how pro-Russian she might be. We would never have expected how supportive she would be of Ukraine. She has called out Putin recently on his so-called peace plan. She rightly called it propaganda. I mean, it's nonsense, you know, it's, he's not serious. And she, and she is, relative to other European leaders, she looks pretty strong. So, it would be, it would be interesting. I would like to talk to her about the need for Ukraine to be able to strike targets in Russia, and would hope that she could come around to, to support that. It would be an honor to be invited. I would come in from California for the dinner, if I were allowed to pick a table and it wasn't a round table, I would have to take one of the two left-handed seats. For those of you who never think about that, you got to take one of the two corners if you're a lefty and, which means that would only have one person to sit next to in that case. And if Constanze was already sitting next to her, I would probably, then want to catch up, with, well, with the roundtable, I'd want to be seated next to another lefty on my on my left side, but, but then I'd want to catch up with, either Trudeau, Prime Minister Trudeau or, or Mr. Rutte because, when I was dean at the School of International Service, I was honored to host both of them at SIS. So, it would be nice to catch up.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: That's excellent. Mike?

STELZENMÜLLER: Mike?

O'HANLON: Sorry, clicking my audio back on. Well, since. Meloni's been spoken for, and since Sanna Marin is no longer prime minister of Finland, I would I would fall back on President Zelenskyy, and I would just --

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: You picked the fun guy.

O'HANLON: -- and I would just have one question: tell me how this ends and how we can work together to make it end the best way possible relatively soon.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: I'm surprised nobody wants to sit next to President Erdogan, but he actually doesn't speak English, so that may be --

STELZENMÜLLER: Is he any fun at all in conversation?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: I will, I will not comment on it, Constanze. But Tara, who's your, who who do you want on your dance card? Who do you want to sit next to?

VARMA: Well, you won't be surprised if I say Kaja Kallas and Mark Rutte and get them to talk about EU-NATO stuff and you know, Joe Biden, if if this is a fantasy dinner, I mean, you know, it doesn't happen many times in your life. If I can sit next to the American president, I wouldn't say no to that. But talk about more, you know, Euro-Atlantic cooperation in the future and look towards the future, would be really my my advice, future for Ukraine, future for Europe, future for the U.S..

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Thank you. Well, I do hope -- yes, Constanze?

STELZENMÜLLER: I just wanted to say I actually was at a summit dinner once in Prague 2002, because so many delegations had left, they brought in think tankers from a parallel summit. And that was very memorable, not least because the Czechs have a very, very funky sense of humor. And I saw, and this is, I will never forget this. I saw General Wesley -- what's his name? Wesley Clark, and Condi Rice, Condi Rice, crying with laughter, with tears streaming down their faces after the Czech cultural program. I doubt that we're going to see that here, though.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Well, let this be, let this be a message to the planners for next week's summit, our panelists are free next week. If you want to give them a call and invite them over for the gala dinner, please do so. I want to thank you all for this very interesting, provocative, and fun conversation. And I want to thank our listeners on behalf of Brookings Institution for staying with us. Thank you.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank you.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Have a good day.

VARMA: Bye.