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Transcript: Ambassador Vershbow on U.S. View of NATO Enlargement

(U.S. Permanent Representative to NATO at Fort McNair conference) (4910)

The Bush Administration considers the enlargement of NATO "a critical and indispensable means to build a united, stable and democratic Europe, which remains a vital and enduring U.S. interest," said Ambassador Alexander Vershbow April 6 during a conference at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C.

NATO members are scheduled to decide at next year's Prague Summit which, if any, of the nine aspirants to NATO membership will be invited to join the transatlantic security alliance.

Vershbow, the U.S. permanent representative on the North Atlantic Council, said the 19 Allies "will need to consider how enlargement in general, and the entry of particular countries, will serve our broader interests. This includes weighing the trade-off between advancing the unification of Europe, and preserving NATO's military strength and credibility." Thus the Bush administration "is making it unambiguously clear that performance in fulfilling the goals of the Membership Action Plan will be central when next steps on enlargement are debated and decided next year."

He added that "none of the candidates has done enough to be considered a sure-thing as of today -- all of them have a long way to go." But "all aspirants will get a fair hearing."

He also cast the debate on enlargement as one affected by four other potentially divisive challenges to the alliance:

The Balkans: "How can we draw down our peacekeeping missions as successfully as we ramped them up?" Vershbow said he is optimistic that the United States and the Allies will be "able to manage the latest crises [in FYR Macedonia and Southern Serbia] and, slowly but surely, begin to draw down NATO's peacekeeping forces."

European Defense: He outlined how the ESDI (European Security and Defense Identity) and ESDP (European Security and Defense Policy) can be a "win-win" for both NATO and the European Union, and emphasized that "the real litmus test of ESDI and ESDP will be capabilities." While the EU's Headline Goal is "a significant start... we still don't see efforts by many EU countries to find the additional resources needed to deliver on their ambitious pledges."

Missile Defense: "I think there has been a slow but steady recognition in Europe that there is a threat and that we must meet it together," he said.

Relations with Russia: "Success in handling missile defense within the Alliance will also enhance our ability to deal with Moscow on this issue," Vershbow said, noting that Russia has now "acknowledged the danger of missile proliferation and the legitimacy of defenses as a response." He characterized the trends in NATO-Russia relations as "favorable -- but far from irreversible."

On the question of Russia's attitude toward NATO enlargement, Vershbow said that steps to mitigate Russian concerns can be taken -- "for example, by reaffirming NATO's unilateral assurances about not deploying nuclear weapons or substantial combat forces on new members' territory, in light of the current security environment in Europe.

"But we must guard against Russian efforts to extract additional 'concessions' from NATO to buy their acquiescence to the addition of new NATO members."

Vershbow added that "all Allies are quite firm that Russia cannot have a veto, and all believe that we can address Russia's concerns -- both real and psychological -- as we did in 1997 without compromising our larger interests and values. Allies will, as in 1997, look to the U.S. to take the lead in Russia management -- and a more clear-eyed, realistic stance toward Russia is the right place to start."

Following is a transcript of his remarks:

(begin transcript)

*NATO Enlargement Conference
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NEXT STEPS IN NATO ENLARGEMENT: THE VIEW FROM BRUSSELS

**Ambassador Alexander Vershbow
U.S. Permanent Representative on the North Atlantic Council**

Thanks for that kind introduction. And thanks to Marco Rimanelli for organizing a conference on what is already shaping up -- a year and a half before the Prague Summit -- to be the summit issue that will have the broadest policy repercussions for NATO and for the U.S. role in European security. My congratulations also for choosing NDU and Fort McNair as the venue. I understand that the first great Republican President, Abraham Lincoln, used to enjoy coming here to observe live ordnance tests of new weaponry. While NATO enlargement is no longer as explosive a subject as it used to be in the American debate -- or among our NATO Allies -- it continues to cause a stir in a place where I have spent a lot of my time since joining the Foreign Service 24 years ago, Russia. I don't plan to set off any bombs here today, but let me see if I can ignite the discussion by introducing a bit more of the Brussels perspective on enlargement -- and its relationship to other hot items on NATO's plate.

At the Washington Summit two years ago this month, Allied leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the Open Door. They formally welcomed Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to the ranks of full NATO members and declared that the Alliance will admit new members in the future. While they deferred decisions on additional invitations, NATO leaders launched the Membership Action Plan as a new and improved mechanism for helping aspiring members better prepare themselves for the burdens, as well as the benefits, of NATO membership.

At Prague, all our inspirational words about building a Europe whole, free and at peace will be tested, as Allied leaders gather to consider whether to invite new members, in tandem with other decisions to equip NATO for the challenges of the new millennium. All these decisions will have consequences -- for potential new members, for those not invited, and for the Alliance itself. For all nine aspirant nations, Prague will be the culmination of almost a decade of hard work intended to demonstrate they have the will and the resources to contribute to their own security and to a common European defense -- in other words, to act like Allies. The pressure, therefore, is on -- both on the aspirants and on the Allies as well, who have raised hopes and expectations that, at least in the case of some aspirants, may not be fulfilled.

I don't want to dwell today on the strategic rationale for NATO enlargement, which was much debated during the last round and in the process of Senate ratification. Suffice it say that it remains my firm conviction -- and, more importantly, that of the new Administration -- that enlargement offers a critical and indispensable means to build a united, stable and democratic Europe, which remains a vital and enduring U.S. interest. Perhaps even more significantly, this conviction is shared by the other members of the Alliance. This stands in contrast with the situation 6-7 years ago. The experience of the last round has convinced Allies of the importance of continued enlargement to the process of building a Europe whole, free and secure.

But as with so many other aspects of today's Europe, there may be a significant gap between theory and practice when it comes to the next round. Many of the European Allies are already signaling a preference for a very cautious, incremental approach at Prague. Some worry about NATO becoming too unwieldy if it grows much bigger; some wonder aloud about whether the strategic gains of admitting a handful of small Central European countries are worth the costs; some are openly concerned about the Russian reaction, given the chillier wind that has blown through NATO-Russia relations since the Kosovo air campaign and the ascendancy of Vladimir Putin. All the Allies are waiting to see where the United States wants to go -- and, clearly, U.S. leadership will be key.

Dealing with NATO's Other Challenges

The debate on next steps in enlargement will also be affected by how well we do in managing the other major challenges facing the Alliance today. In addition to enlargement, I see four big challenges -- each of which has the potential to divide the Alliance and make it harder to achieve our priority objectives in European security -- including our objectives in NATO enlargement itself. These include the Balkans; the European Security and Defense Policy (which relates to the larger challenge of closing the U.S.-European gap in defense capabilities); relations with Russia; and missile defense. Our challenge for the remainder of this year is to handle each of these potential "wedge" issues skillfully and creatively, so as to clear the field for a positive and successful summit in Prague. Here too, the challenge of translating theory into practice isn't simple. Let me just say a few words on each, and how we and the Allies need to deal with them.

After nearly wrecking the transatlantic relationship in the early 1990s, the Balkans helped redefine NATO's role for the post-Cold War era. The critical difference came when the U.S. decided to exercise leadership -- in the summer and fall of 1995 in ending the Bosnian war, and in early 1999 in confronting Milosevic's brutal repression in Kosovo. Now NATO's challenge is different: How can we draw down our peacekeeping missions as successfully as we ramped them up? The task is to transfer responsibility from our military forces to international civilian agencies and, ultimately, to local governments that are becoming too comfortable as international protectorates.

We are closer to being able to give civilian authorities in Bosnia more responsibility, and thereby reduce our force levels, than in Kosovo. We will not cut and run. As Secretary Powell told the North Atlantic Council on February 27, "we went in together; we'll leave together." But we need to push harder to "civilianize" peace-building in the Balkans, and to continue to place the bulk of international responsibility on the shoulders of our European friends and allies -- albeit without forgetting the unique leverage, credibility and reputation for even-handedness that the U.S. brings to bear in the region.

Doing all this has obviously been complicated by the new troubles that have flared up in Macedonia and Southern Serbia. In both cases, we have to marginalize armed extremists and crack down on their supporters in Kosovo, while encouraging the Macedonian and Serbian governments to follow through on political and economic reforms that address the legitimate aspirations of their Albanian minorities. Having just returned from a visit to the region, I am optimistic that we and the Allies will be able to manage the latest crises and, slowly but surely, begin to draw down NATO's peacekeeping forces.

The situation is a bit more uncertain on the second challenge, ESDI/ESDP. The basis for making the European Security and Defense Identity (or Policy) a "win-win" for NATO and the EU certainly exists. The Administration has made clear how this can be done: ESDI or ESDP must add to our collective capabilities; it must be grounded in joint planning and tightly-knit political consultations between NATO and the EU; and it must ensure the fullest possible participation of non-EU Allies in the EU's defense activities, in keeping with their shared interests and obligations as Alliance members. On the latter issue -- participation of the non-EU Allies -- the U.S. can and will play a facilitating role, but the problem will only be resolved by direct efforts between the EU and Turkey, the most dissatisfied of the non-EU Allies, and only if both sides show more realism and flexibility.

The real litmus test of ESDI and ESDP will be capabilities. The EU's Headline Goal represents a significant start, but we still don't see efforts by many EU countries to find the additional resources needed to deliver on their ambitious pledges. Moreover, resistance in some quarters to common NATO-EU defense planning runs the risk of creating disconnects between NATO and EU force goals. If the Europeans focus mainly on low-end peacekeeping capabilities, ESDP may be declared a success, yet NATO will end up as a two-tiered Alliance, with the gap between U.S. and European forces even wider than it is today.

The third big challenge to the Alliance is, of course, missile defense. While we and our Allies have been on different wavelengths about the threat posed by the proliferation of missile technology and weapons of mass destruction, I think there has been a slow but steady recognition in Europe that there is a threat and that we must meet it together. Allies are in no doubt about the determination of the new Administration to build missile defenses as soon as the technology permits, and to move beyond the Cold War thinking embodied in the ABM Treaty. Allies have also been favorably impressed by the administration's shift in emphasis from the defense of U.S. territory alone to the defense of Allies and deployed forces as well (dropping the "N" in NMD) and are now more inclined to work with us -- through the Alliance -- to develop a common approach to the "when and how." This will take time, and Allies still have many questions and concerns, but I am optimistic that we have launched a process which will allow the Alliance to deal constructively with MD in the same way it handled earlier controversial subjects, like INF.

Success in handling missile defense within the Alliance will also enhance our ability to deal with Moscow on this issue -- which brings me to challenge number four, Russia. Moscow froze the NATO-Russia relationship in response to NATO's decision to launch the Kosovo air campaign. While the Russians remain wary of the Alliance, the perestroika of NATO-Russia relations is well underway. Our military cooperation on the ground in the Balkans is quite good, and modest but useful work is taking place across a broad front in the Permanent Joint Council (in such areas as submarine search and rescue, conventional arms control and military reform). Secretary General Robertson's January visit to Moscow marked the opening of a NATO Information Office in Moscow, which should help us connect with the next generation of Russian leaders who may take a less zero-sum approach to security.

Through their "EuroMD" proposal, the Russians have also acknowledged the danger of missile proliferation and the legitimacy of defenses as a response. They even use the term "rogue states," although their continued military ties with Iran suggest we have a way to go in aligning our threat perceptions. In sum, the trends in NATO-Russia relations are favorable -- but far from irreversible. The challenge is whether we can develop additional areas for tangible cooperation with Moscow so that the Russians feel they have a real stake in working with NATO -- a stake strong enough to withstand the shock the next time NATO does something to which they object. Which brings me back to our main topic and the fifth challenge on my list, NATO enlargement.

The Russian Dimension and the Next Stage of NATO Enlargement

Moscow's response to the next round of enlargement will depend on many factors, including the state of their relations with NATO, the U.S. and other allies -- and, of course, on which countries receive invitations. Moscow has not objected strenuously to the aspirations of many of the Central European countries, but has drawn a "red line" around the Baltic States (even though it acknowledges every country's right under the Helsinki Final act to choose its own security arrangements). We should gird ourselves for a strong reaction -- such as another suspension of cooperation with NATO -- if one or more of the Baltics are among the invitees.

There are, however, boundaries of self-interest that will limit Moscow's inclination to break off ties with NATO; one of our goals should be to search for mutually beneficial areas for cooperation that will give Moscow an even greater stake in its relationship with the Alliance. We can also take steps to mitigate Russian concerns -- for example, by reaffirming NATO's unilateral assurances about not deploying nuclear weapons or substantial combat forces on new members' territory, in light of the current security environment in Europe. But we must guard against Russian efforts to extract additional "concessions" from NATO to buy their acquiescence to the addition of new NATO members. We also must make clear that hostage-taking on issues like missile defense will backfire; the same applies to such tactics as delaying the resolution of bilateral disputes, as we are seeing with the Duma's non-ratification of border treaties with the Baltic States, in the hope that this will deter NATO from issuing invitations.

At the end of the day, the Russia factor will not be the determining factor in the enlargement debate. All Allies are quite firm that Russia cannot have a veto, and all believe that we can address Russia's concerns -- both real and psychological -- as we did in 1997 without compromising our larger interests and values. Allies will, as in 1997, look to the U.S. to take the lead in Russia management -- and a more clear-eyed, realistic stance toward Russia is the right place to start.

Setting the Stage for the Alliance Debate

So what are the other factors that will affect decision-making on enlargement for Prague? Some Allies are already itching to open a debate in Brussels on modalities of the next round in the hopes of pushing Washington to tip its hand on naming names, or to foreclose the possibilities of some candidates early. Some are warning that they aren't going to obediently follow the U.S. lead this time -- reflecting lingering resentment over how the decision was reached to invite three rather than five of the candidates in the month before the Madrid summit in 1997.

Others are trying to influence our decision-making process by raising concerns about the implications of enlargement for the cohesion and efficient functioning of the Alliance on both the political and military level. Will the North Atlantic Council become bogged down in endless discussions when it grows to 21, 22, 25, or even 28 members? Will it be more susceptible to the formation of regional caucuses, or an EU caucus? Will the political-military character that has been the foundation of the organization be weakened by having too many members?

The European Union has, of course, been wrestling for the past few years with how to maintain effective decision-making as it prepares to grow from 15 to as many as 28 members. From where I sit, the complexity of NATO decision-making has not increased to any significant degree since the three newest members joined in March 1999, and I don't see any inherent reason why it would be that much harder when additional democratic nations join the club. Difficulty in reaching consensus is more often the consequence of U.S. disagreements with other major Allies than a function of the number of members. Clearly, if NATO is going to remain capable of reaching consensus, democratic values must be shared by all and there can be no internal caucuses. But consensus will have to remain the rule in an organization that is focused on security.

Achieving consensus in the future may be more difficult not because of an increase in numbers, but because the Alliance's future tasks will consist primarily of non-Article 5 operations in which NATO action is discretionary and individual nations' participation voluntary. The 1999 Strategic Concept, however, already acknowledges that Allies may need to resort to coalitions of the willing for some out-of-area efforts. Moreover, NATO has demonstrated an ability to conduct such operations when some Allies "opt out" -- without blocking consensus, but also without providing forces or politically unpalatable assistance like use of bases. In my view NATO, will be able to function with more members as long as the U.S. continues to exert leadership and remains effective in coalition building.

For real-world illustrations, we need only look at the record of the three newest members and their experience in the run-up to accession and since. Two years after accession, it is my judgment that all three of the new entrants deserve good marks, even if there is plenty of scope for improvement. Defense reforms and military modernization were always understood to be a decade-long process, and all three countries are more or less on track despite resource constraints. All three are contributing to NATO's Balkan operations -- Polish forces, in particular, have been singled out by U.S. and NATO commanders for their excellent performance in KFOR and SFOR, notwithstanding their antiquated equipment. All three have been active and constructive contributors to NATO debates and have taken Atlanticist positions on key issues like ESDI.

By the same token, the shock of joining the Alliance and, within a week, being asked to participate in decisions on combat operations did cause some erosion in public support for NATO

in Hungary and the Czech Republic. But public support rebounded quickly in both countries and looks solid once again. My bottom-line assessment -- one with which I don't think the three themselves would disagree -- remains that all three new allies have a lot of work ahead of them, but their performance does not justify a "go slow" approach to further enlargement. Performance will, however, be key to deciding which of the next group of aspirants might receive invitations at Prague. This brings me to the focus of work on enlargement in Brussels today, the Membership Action Plan, or MAP.

The MAP: The Key to the Credibility of the Enlargement Process

The U.S. designed and championed the MAP, and has succeeded in keeping the process more or less on track since its launch two years ago. It is no secret that many of the aspirants viewed the MAP as a delaying tactic when it was unveiled at the Washington Summit. But we have proved the skeptics wrong. We have worked intensively with all the aspirants to help them improve their qualifications across the board (and bear in mind that the MAP covers not just defense restructuring and modernization, but political and economic factors as well). We have lent our political support to their sometimes painful and politically unpopular efforts at reform. Through the MAP's frequent cycles of 19+1 consultations and other feedback mechanisms, we have advised them on how to reshape their policies and doctrines to today's security environment. We have driven home the importance of setting realistic priorities and then building public and parliamentary support.

The candidates understand that the MAP is not a definitive checklist that leads to membership. At the end of the day, we and the other 18 Allies will need to consider how enlargement in general, and the entry of particular countries, will serve our broader interests. This includes weighing the trade-off between advancing the unification of Europe, and preserving NATO's military strength and credibility. But the more that aspirants are able to provide forces and capabilities for collective defense and the full spectrum of other Alliance missions, the less of a political/military trade-off there will be. That is why the new Administration, in its first meetings with Ministers from aspirant countries, is making it unambiguously clear that performance in fulfilling the goals of the Membership Action Plan will be central when next steps on enlargement are debated and decided next year.

Because of the rigors of the MAP over its first two annual cycles, it is already possible to say that we will have a stronger pool of candidates among which to choose next year. In saying this, let me make clear that none of the candidates has done enough to be considered a sure-thing as of today -- all of them have a long way to go. [NATO] Secretary General Robertson has made it a personal crusade when he visits aspirant countries to hammer home the message that greater military efforts are needed to qualify. In fact, some countries may have become overly complacent. They wrongly assumed that the flip side of the NATO mantra that "no Euro-Atlantic country will be excluded on the basis of geography" was also true -- i.e., that distance from Russia means that they can coast to the finish line without making a serious effort in the defense sphere.

I can report that, based on this winter's round of NATO team visits to capitals and the cold shower all aspirants received over their shortcomings in defense capabilities, it is now very clear to aspirants that MAP performance matters. They are all working flat out, taking full advantage of the feedback and assistance NATO can provide. The Pentagon and EUCOM remain actively engaged on a bilateral basis in reinforcing NATO's efforts. Whatever is decided in Prague, the aspirants are all becoming better Partners, with armed forces better able to operate alongside NATO's and to protect their own nations' security. Keeping the competition

merit-based, I would add, keeps the playing field level for the Baltic States, which obviously raise more difficult political questions than the other candidates in the minds of some allies. Thanks to the MAP, all aspirants will get a fair hearing, even if this discomfits those most nervous about Russia's reaction.

Preparing for the Endgame

All of these steps will lead us, I believe, toward a less-chaotic decision-making process than in 1997. So when should we open the debate about candidates? I think it is still much too early to begin formal discussions. If Madrid is any guide, we will have a politically charged debate, at the end of which it will not be possible to satisfy all Allies on all issues. To start debating specific membership scenarios and combinations more than a year before Prague risks provoking transatlantic quarrels -- which will inevitably leak -- and diverting the aspirants' attention from the hard work we're asking them to do under the MAP. And even more importantly, it will make it harder to manage the other challenges facing the Alliance I mentioned earlier -- which is, as I stressed, crucial before we start a serious debate on enlargement next year.

As you know, there are many different options for handling invitations when the time comes, ranging from taking just a few to taking them all (the Big Bang). We might opt for inviting a large number of new members but stretch out their accessions over time, fast-tracking those doing better in a regatta-like process analogous to the approach the EU has adopted. We might limit ourselves to a small group, taking into account regional interests and geographic diversity as well as MAP performance. Or we could take the decision not to invite any countries at all in 2002 if none of them is really ready, but set an early date for a follow-on summit. The "zero option" may be the secret favorite of a few Allies, but it would run the risk of demoralizing the aspirants, undercutting pro-Western reformers, and eroding support for U.S. and NATO policies; but, on the other hand, it could be just as damaging to invite borderline candidates that might not pass muster in the U.S. Senate or other NATO parliaments. Fortunately, I believe we can already say that the MAP is working: we can be reasonably confident that at least a few aspirants could be credible contenders 18 months from now -- as long as they keep their shoulders to the wheel.

Initial Conclusions

The enlargement debate, when it comes, will pose many vexing questions, beyond to whom we should issue invitations. How should we manage the disappointment of countries not issued invitations? How would we rebut charges of a Russian veto if we were to take none of the Baltic States? How to cushion the blow to Russia if we were to take one or more of the Balts? A broad discussion will be needed on what the next round of enlargement will mean in terms of strategy and capabilities for extending Article 5 commitments and for the Alliance's day-to-day methods of doing business. For example, our most important weekly forum, the PermReps lunch, will run up against the fact that most Ambassadors' tables can't seat more than 20 PermReps! One downside of the last expansion is that our North Atlantic Council meetings usually run an extra hour longer because of the extra voices in the debate -- a small price to pay, to be sure, for the privilege of living in beautiful Brussels. Perhaps we'll have to introduce the 7th-inning stretch to NATO.

In the end, I think all practical concerns about NATO enlargement can easily be addressed. Decisions in Prague will hinge on the more fundamental questions that guided NATO's founding fathers in 1949, and which have guided our leaders during and after the Cold War.

In 1991 in Skenderbeg Square in downtown Tirana, Albania, Secretary of State James Baker told the crowd: "Freedom works." He was right. But for it to work, Allies who have sacrificed for decades to enjoy freedom's benefits need to stand with other nations that not only honor and respect those sacrifices, but are ready to make their own as part of our great North Atlantic Alliance. Like them, we must neither forget our history, nor the principles which have given it meaning. We need to be true to the words of the Washington Treaty, which established the Open Door. Otherwise, all that we have achieved in collective security over a half century will be diminished. As we have for over 50 years, I am confident that we and our Allies will not shrink from our responsibility for extending the Alliance's original vision across the entire North Atlantic area.

(end transcript)

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