The Bucharest Agenda: Time to Speak Up

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NATO foreign ministers will gather in Brussels later this week to set the agenda for the alliance’s April 4-6 Bucharest Summit. Speaking for the host nation, Romanian Foreign Minister Adrian Mihai Cioroianu will wield extra diplomatic clout at this meeting. He should use it to promote alliance enlargement as the leading item on the Bucharest Summit agenda. NATO should invite Albania, Croatia and Macedonia to join the alliance and it should extend Membership Action Plans to Georgia and Ukraine. These steps are in the interest of all 26 NATO members.

Some will object that weighty matters like Afghanistan and Kosovo already pack the NATO Summit agenda. Additionally, if the alliance decides to invite Albania, Croatia and Macedonia, that will take some agenda time. They will use the press of business to sidestep Georgia and Ukraine. Can Romania really influence the agenda?

Yes. If the host nation makes a strong pitch for Georgia and Ukraine, its allies will at least accord it the courtesy of serious consideration. If the foreign ministers cannot resolve the question this week in Brussels, an earnest request from Romania will oblige every foreign ministry to respond and make Membership Action Plans for Georgia and Ukraine a subject of the telephone calls among NATO heads of state that inevitably precede a summit.

Romania cannot alter firm decisions of other NATO governments, but it can focus them on the issue and persuade them. As host nation, Romania has more influence than the leaders of this relatively new NATO ally think.

Cioroianu should tell his colleagues that a packed NATO agenda is normal—the press of events will weigh on future summits too.

Moreover, alliance enlargement is a principle—not just a process—that underpins NATO’s transformation from a Cold War military alliance into the world’s premier security alliance. Looking south and east, undertaking out-of-area and out-of-Europe missions, reaching out to global partners, and consolidating NATO’s democratic European base all go together. Succeeding in Afghanistan and hastening Georgia and Ukraine toward alliance membership are part of the same agenda, as was Romania’s accession in 2004.

This integral approach soon underscored the logic of Romania in NATO. By 2005, the United States signed an agreement for rotational use of Romania’s Kogalniceanu, Babadag, Cincu and Smardan bases. In 2006, America concluded a similar agreement with Bulgaria. Romania and Bulgaria should now become NATO’s windows on a stable Black Sea, not its fortresses on a sea of instability.
Therefore, NATO must not end at Romania’s eastern borders. The alliance must look around and across the Black Sea. Extending the alliance’s hand to Georgia—where 76% voted for NATO membership in a January 5 plebiscite—makes sense.

Georgia offers a unique geostrategic position on the eastern shore of the Black Sea. Sensors emplaced in Georgia, use of its air and seaports, and cooperation with its small but capable Coast Guard would be strong complements to NATO air and sea surveillance.

The benefits to the alliance would be a clear picture of Black Sea air and maritime traffic, timely information, forward protection for other NATO countries, and enhanced capability to react when necessary. These would be a boon not only to military operations, but also to the fight against contraband and terrorism.

Moreover, these benefits would enhance the security of every Black Sea nation, including Russia. Georgia, like Romania, wants to cooperate with Russia however possible and NATO membership would enhance its capabilities to do that. Romania can play a key role by explaining to its NATO allies how best to meet Russian concerns about Georgia’s prospective alliance membership.

Romania can also help explain how a structured path of ever-tougher reforms, culminating in a NATO Membership Action Plan can help push and pull a transitional country toward its goal. Georgia is ready for the challenge.

NATO’s favorable review of its recently published Strategic Defence Review underscores the country’s impressive security sector reforms.

With regard to the military obligations that NATO membership would impose, Georgia already behaves as an ally. A company plus a platoon of Georgian peacekeepers serve in Kosovo, and Georgia contributed to the surge in NATO troops required for the presidential election in Afghanistan.

Of course, NATO membership also requires real progress on challenging reforms at home. The Heritage Foundation/Wall Street Journal Index of Economic Freedom hails Georgia’s “mostly free” economy, behind the United States and the United Kingdom, but par with NATO allies like France and Italy. The World Bank’s Doing Business report ranks Georgia as a leading global reformer.

Although much has been accomplished since the November 2003 Rose Revolution, all Georgians acknowledge that much remains to do, particularly in the field of judicial reform. Some of the NATO foreign ministers will surely raise a variety of concerns at this week’s Brussels meeting.

Fair enough, Cioroianu should respond; further reform is the purpose of a NATO Membership Action Plan. Any concerns that NATO countries have should appear as requirements in Georgia’s Membership Action Plan. It is in the interest of all 26 NATO allies that Georgia succeed with its reforms and join the alliance. The Bucharest Summit is the time and place to say it.

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