

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

The President's News Conference With President Sauli Niinistö of Finland in Helsinki, Finland

July 13, 2023

Moderator. Thank you. Please be seated.

Welcome to this joint press conference by President of the Republic of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, and President of the United States, Joe Biden.

We will begin with statements by the presidents.

President Niinistö. Thank you, and good afternoon.

Excellent that we have this kind of a big hall in the castle. Plenty of you here.

First of all, Joe, Mr. President, I want to thank you for visiting Finland. We have had possibilities of meeting each other quite often during the——

President Biden. And I like it here even better. [*Laughter*]

President Niinistö. Yes. [*Laughter*] And by the way, first time we met, also in Helsinki, I was the Speaker of Parliament when you visited.

President Biden. I remember.

President Niinistö. So we have had a lot of discussions during the last couple years. I want to, once again, thank you for the strong support you have given all the time.

President Biden. It's my honor.

President Niinistö. The new era in Finnish security policy has begun, and you will be one of those who brought it to history.

I also want to thank you for the Vilnius meeting. It was very touching to feel the unity between allies. And I think it was greatly created by you.

We had possibilities of discussing bilaterally today. I took up the negotiations of our defense cooperation agreement. We are going to continue our security discussion bilat, and that is of vital importance to Finland.

In the same time, also, Sweden and Denmark are having similar discussions. And at the end, it seems that all the five Nordic countries will have a bilateral agreement with U.S.A.

Technology is one of the key words for the future. There are elements like artificial intelligence, quantum technology, sky technology. All that is leading our way to the future. And we have to make sure that it's leading our way in a very secure way. And that demands responsibility of those who know how. And that is why it is very important to coordinate and cooperate with our knowledge and resources forward in this sector.

We also had a discussion on our neighbor, and I think that we both share similar views. The war in Ukraine was also discussed. We both see that we will continue support to Ukraine, which is defending not only herself, but also all the values we represent in the western world.

We also had a meeting with the Nordic family. It is a tradition, which started during President Obama's time, and it has been a very valuable tool for us to get—even better understand each other's security and technology. They're also discussed there. And a lot of time and thoughts were presented on environmental issues.

So, once again, it has been great to have you here.

President Biden. Well, thank you, Mr. President. It's been great to be here.

Look, it's an honor to be with you and our other Nordic friends. We just finished, I would suggest, a very productive U.S.-Nordic leaders summit on the heels of the historic NATO summit in Vilnius and—where Finland took its place at the table as an—as our newest ally. We've always been friends, but our newest official ally member of NATO.

And I also want to thank Minister Kristersson of Sweden, who will soon be joining NATO, and Prime Minister Støre of Norway. She—we've had a great relationship. And Frederiksen of Denmark, and the Minister Jakoblindóttir [Jakobsdóttir; White House correction] of Ireland—or—"daughter of Ireland." You can tell that's a Freudian slip; I'm thinking of home. The daughter of Iceland.

And I want to say I think we've had a very productive summit. We discussed, Mr. President, where we stand at an inflection point in history where the decisions we make now are going to determine the course of the history for the next four or five, six decades.

And this week, we affirmed how Finland and the United States, together—together with allies and partners—are working in lockstep to set us on a stronger, safer, and more secure path, not just for Europe, not just for NATO, but for the world.

In Vilnius, NATO met with 33 nations for the first—31 nations for the first time. We showed the world our alliance is more united than ever. And soon, it will be 32 allies, thanks to an agreement with Turkey to move Sweden's accession protocols forward.

And as capable partners and committed democracies, both Finland and Sweden are going to add significantly to the strength, security, and unanimity of NATO. And a stronger NATO makes the entire world stronger.

Mr. President, as your ally, we want the people of Finland to know the United States is committed to Finland, committed to NATO, and those commitments are rock solid; that we will defend every inch of NATO territory, and that includes Finland, obviously.

Second, over the past week, we reaffirmed our unwavering support for the brave people of Ukraine as they defend their country against Russia's brutal and inhumane attacks.

Our allies and partners around the world understand that this fight is not only a fight for the future of Ukraine; it's about sovereignty, security, and freedom itself.

I want you to think about what would happen if we didn't do anything, what is likely to happen in the rest of Europe if we did nothing.

So, this week, NATO has officially elevated our relationship with Ukraine. Allies also agreed to lift the membership action plan that's usually required before you can be admitted and—from Ukraine. And it's created a path for membership for Ukraine as it continues to make progress on the necessary democratic and security reforms required of every NATO member.

We also made clear to President Zelenskyy that we're not waiting for NATO membership to be finalized to commit to the long-term security of Ukraine. The leaders of the G-7 together issued a new Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine, a declaration I was glad to see the Nordic nations immediately welcomed and supported.

It's going to launch a process, open to any nation, to negotiate bilateral security agreements with—Ukraine until they're officially members of NATO. It will not only ensure that Ukraine can defend itself today, but it will deter future aggression as well, with a capable force across land, air, and sea from their friends.

And finally, at every stop of—in every summit on this trip, we focused on using the power of partnership to take on the challenges that matter most to the people's lives in our countries.

In the United Kingdom, we brought together public, private, and philanthropic partners to discuss ways to unlock literally trillions of private dollars in finance to fight climate change.

In Lithuania, NATO allies met, and the EU and our Indo-Pacific partners, to continue advancing our work on terrorism, cyber threats, resilience, and so much more.

And here in Finland, at our U.S.-Nordic leaders summit, we reaffirmed our commitment to stand together, power—to power a clean energy transition; to preserve regional security; to promote democratic values; and to pioneer the technologies of the future, from quantum computing to advanced communications systems. So we did it together.

Mr. President, at this critical moment in history, this inflection point, the world is watching to see: Will we do the hard work that matters to forge a better future? Will we stand together? Will we stand with one another? Will we stay committed to our course?

This week, Finland and the United States and our allies and partners said a resounding, loud "yes." Yes, we'll step up. Yes, we'll stand together. And yes, we'll keep working toward a stronger, safer, and more secure world.

So, Mr. President, thank you again for having me here. As partners, friends, and allies, I look forward to our work together in the years ahead. And it's been a real pleasure getting to know you even better.

Thank you.

Moderator. Thank you. Now we have time for questions.

President Niinistö. Shall we start with YLE, Iida Tikka? You.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Q. Iida Tikka, Finnish Public Broadcasting Service. My question is for Mr. President Biden. The political volatility of U.S. remains a big worry for European partners. Meanwhile, back in Washington, a bipartisan group of Senators has repeatedly failed to pass through Senate a bill that would prevent the U.S. Presidents in the future from withdrawing from NATO without Senate's approval. What actions——

President Biden. Sorry, what, I'm sorry? I didn't hear the last part of your question.

Q. In Washington, a bipartisan group of Senators has repeatedly failed to pass through Senate a law that would prevent future U.S. Presidents from withdrawing from NATO without Senate's approval. What actions will you take to assure Finland that the U.S. will remain a reliable NATO partner for decades to come?

President Biden. I absolutely guarantee it. There is no question. There's overwhelming support from the American people. There's overwhelming support from the Members of the Congress, both House and Senate. In both parties, notwithstanding the fact there are some extreme elements of one party, we will stand together.

The American people have known for the—since the end of World War II and the formation of NATO that our security rests in the unanimity among European and transatlantic partner—us. And so this is—you know, no one can guarantee the future, but this is the best bet anyone could make.

Q. And my second question, on that note, to Mr. President Niinistö. Hearing this answer that no one can guarantee a future, are you worried that the political instability in U.S. will cause issues in the alliance in the future?

President Biden. Let me be clear: I didn't say we didn't guarantee—we couldn't guarantee the future. You can't tell me whether you're going to be able to go home tonight. No one can be sure what they're going to do.

I'm saying, as sure as anything can possibly be said about American foreign policy, we will stay connected to NATO—connected to NATO, beginning, middle, and end. We're a transatlantic partnership. That's what I've said.

President Niinistö. It seems that the President has answered your problems. [*Laughter*]

But I have to tell you that during this process, I met approximately—President many times—but I would say about 50 people from Congress and Senate. And I think the message was quite clear, quite united. And I have no reason to doubt about U.S.A. policies in the future.

President Biden. Let me say one more thing. We learned a hard lesson. Peace and security in Europe is essential to U.S. security and peace. The idea that there could be conflict in Europe among our friends and us not engaged has never happened in modern history. That's why we're staying together.

Moderator. Next question, President Biden.

President Biden. Oh, I have to call on somebody. I'm sorry.

Wall Street Journal. Andrew [Andrew Restuccia].

North Atlantic Treaty Organization/Ukraine/Russia

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. You've said that Ukraine shouldn't enter NATO until after the war is over. Are you concerned at all that those comments could motivate Putin to keep the war going or discourage him from entering peace negotiations?

And is there a serious risk that this war could drag on for years? And do you see any path toward the war ending with Putin still in power?

President Biden. First of all, no one can join NATO while the war—a war is going on, where a NATO nation is being attacked, because that guarantees that we're in a war and we're in a third world war. So that is not about whether or not they should or shouldn't join. It's about when they can join. And they will join NATO.

The issue of whether or not this is going to keep Putin from continuing to fight, the answer is: Putin has already lost the war. Putin has a real problem. How does he move from here? What does he do? And so the idea that there's going to be—what vehicle is used, he could end the war tomorrow; he could just say, "I'm out."

But what agreement is ultimately reached depends upon Putin and what he decides to do. But there is no possibility of him winning the war in Ukraine. He's already lost that war. Imagine if—even if—anyway. He's already lost that war.

Q. And just on the question of a concern about it going on for years: Is there a possibility that there's a stalemate and this becomes——

President Biden. I'm sorry?

Ukraine/Russia

Q. The question of whether the war could go on for years. Is there a possibility there's a stalemate and it can continue for quite some time?

President Biden. Well, I don't think the war can go on for years for two reasons. Number one, I don't think that they—that Russia could maintain the war forever—number one—in terms of their resources and capacity.

Number two, I think that there is going to be a circumstance where, eventually, President Putin is going to decide it's not in the interest of Russia—economically, politically, or otherwise—to continue this war. But I can't predict exactly how that happens.

My hope is, and my expectation is, you'll see that Ukraine makes significant progress on their offensive and that it generates a negotiated settlement somewhere along the line.

U.S. Citizens Detained Abroad

Q. And I have a question for the Finnish President. But I would be remiss if I didn't raise my colleague, Evan Gershkovich, who's been in prison for more than a hundred days. I just wondered if you had an update on the process for trying to get him out of prison and if you're serious about a prisoner exchange.

President Biden. Oh, I'm serious about a prisoner exchange. I'm serious about doing all we can to free Americans who are being illegally held in Russia or anywhere else for that matter. And that process is underway.

Q. And for the Finnish Prime Minister [President; White House correction], do you envision the possibility of the U.S. having a permanent military base in Finland?

President Niinistö. Like I told, we are discussing on DCA, the defense cooperation agreement, and it has a lot of elements. They are still open. But we are open on negotiations, and I know that our counterpart is also very open. So let us see.

Moderator. Next question goes to President Niinistö. Please.

President Niinistö. Yes, it's Helsingin Sanomat, Elina Vääntönen.

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. And my question is for Mr. President Biden. [Laughter]

President Biden. Okay.

Finland's Accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Q. Or should I just say President Biden? [Laughter] You have repeatedly talked about Finlandization becoming NATOization of Finland. Now, based on your—

President Biden. Sorry, I—what nation?

Q. You have repeatedly talked about Finlandization—

President Biden. Oh, I see.

Q. —becoming NATOization of Finland. Based on your long experience, how does that change Finland's place in the world?

President Biden. Well, first of all, the context in which I said that was: The gentleman who occupies a seat on the other side of the—your border, in Moscow, said he wanted—I said he wanted the Finlandization [Finlandization; White House correction] of NATO. I said it was more likely he's going to get the NATOization of Finland. [Laughter] That's what—that's the context in which that was said.

And what was the second part of your question?

Q. I asked: How has Finland's position in the world changed during this——

President Biden. Look——

Q. ——NATO membership process?

President Biden. ——Finland is already a strong, vibrant nation. I think what Finland's joining NATO does—and with Sweden as well—when the Nordic countries are all members of NATO: It just makes the world safer. It significantly increases the prospect that there is less likely to be war.

We'll—we're deadly earnest about the notion. We'll defend every single inch of NATO territory. And now we're going to—we're on the way of getting to 32 NATO nations. That's a significant commitment. And so the likelihood of any nation voluntarily deciding they're going to attack one of the nations or Finland is highly unlikely.

And so—but if it were to, they understand they're not just attacking Finland; they're attacking 31 other countries.

Moderator. Next question, President Biden, please.

President Biden. Oh, I'm sorry. I guess it's Arlette [Arlette Saenz] from CNN.

Russia/Nuclear Weapons/Wagner Group Mercenary Organization Leader Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin of Russia

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. We've seen more disarray with Russian generals, most recently with the firing of a general who criticized the Defense Ministry. This following that rebellion by Prigozhin. Does this raise any new concerns about Putin potentially doing more drastic things regarding Ukraine, like nuclear weapons, or potentially against the U.S., like election interference?

President Biden. Well, first of all, they already interfered in American elections. So that would not be anything new. They did that last time—they tried to.

But with regard to—I don't think there's any real prospect—you never know—but of Putin using nuclear weapons. Not only has the West, but China and the rest of the world has said: "That's—don't go there. Don't go there." Number two.

Number three, I think that determining what happens to Prigozhin and what happens to Vilnius—I mean—excuse me, what happens when we discussed this in Vilnius is, God only knows what he's likely to do. Well, I'm not even sure—we're not even sure where he is and what relationship he has. If I were he, I'd be careful what I ate. I'd be keeping my eye on my menu.

But all kidding aside, I who knows? I don't know. I don't think any of us know for sure what the future of Prigozhin is in Russia. And so I don't know how to answer that question beyond that.

Senator Thomas H. Tuberville/U.S. Military Promotions

Q. And if I could also ask you something about—happening back home. You're seeing the GOP grappling with tying abortion rights to defense issues, including a block on military promotions by Senator Tuberville. What does this say about U.S. military readiness? And would you be willing to talk with Tuberville to try to work out some solution?

President Biden. I'd be willing to talk to him if I thought there was any possibility of him changing this ridiculous position he has. He's jeopardizing U.S. security by what he's doing.

I expect the Republican Party to stand up—stand up—and do something about it. They—it's within their power to do that.

The idea that we don't have a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the idea that we have all these—all these promotions that are in abeyance right now and we don't know what's going to happen; the idea that we're injecting into fundamental foreign policy decisions what, in fact, is a domestic social debate on social issues is bizarre.

I don't ever recall that happening, ever. And it's just totally irresponsible, in my view.

And I just think that—I mean, I'm confident that the mainstream Republican Party no longer—does not support what he's doing. But they've got to stand up and be counted. That's how it ends.

Q. And for President Niinistö, you've been working on fortifying the fence along the border between Finland and Russia. Is there anything that you're seeing recently that concerns you? And also, as a leader who shares a border with Russia, what more do you want to see done to deter Putin?

President Niinistö. During the beginning of our application process, surely, we had to make sure, first, trying to figure out every possible negative action we might meet and, surely, how we response from that. And we were very careful on that work.

So, at the moment, the situation is quite calm. Hope it remains as such.

But I just want to tell you that Finnish people do feel more secure. At the moment, we have 80 percent of our population supporting NATO membership and more than 80 percent who say that we will also protect our allies. That's the Finnish position.

Moderator. Thank you. This concludes the press conference.

President Biden. Thank you very much.

Q. Do have a response to—[inaudible]?

Q. Mr. President, are you satisfied with—[inaudible]?

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 5:39 p.m. at the Presidential Palace. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen of Denmark. Reporters referred to Evan Gershkovich, a Wall Street Journal reporter who was arrested by Russian authorities on March 29; and Maj. Gen. Ivan Popov, commander, Russia's 58th Combined Arms Army. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on July 14.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Joint news conferences, Finland, President Niinistö.

Locations: Helsinki, Finland.

Names: Frederiksen, Mette; Jakobsdóttir, Katrin; Kristersson, Ulf; Niinistö, Sauli; Prigozhin, Yevgeniy Viktorovich; Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich; Støre, Jonas Gahr; Tuberville, Thomas H.; Zelenskyy, Volodymyr.

Subjects: Clean energy transition in developing countries, international assistance; Climate change; Counterterrorism efforts; Cybersecurity, strengthening efforts; Denmark, Prime Minister; Finland, North Atlantic Treaty Organization accession; Finland, President; Finland, President Biden's visit; Finland, relations with U.S.; Group of Seven (G-7) nations; Hostages and U.S. nationals detained overseas, repatriation efforts; Iceland, Prime Minister; Joint Chiefs of Staff; Military promotions, Senate confirmation process; Nordic States, relations with U.S.; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Norway, Prime Minister; Russia, conflict in Ukraine; Russia, interference in U.S. elections; Russia, international diplomatic efforts; Russia, President; Russia, Wagner Group, attempted armed rebellion; Sweden, North Atlantic Treaty Organization

accession bid; Sweden, Prime Minister; Ukraine, President; Ukraine, Russian invasion and airstrikes.

DCPD Number: DCPD202300625.