



The Future for Macedonia

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Remarks With Macedonian Journalists
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Assistant Secretary Fried: On Friday I attended the ceremony at the White House where President Bush signed the accession protocols for Albania and Croatia's membership in NATO. That was a good day, but it was only two-thirds of a great day. Of course you know what I'm referring to.

President Bush said that we are reserving a place at the NATO table for Macedonia. And let me be clear how much this would mean. Think back 100 years to Macedonia's emergence from the end of the Ottoman Empire. It has been a long and difficult road with war, nationalism, communism, conquest, destruction and uncertainty. But now the future for Macedonia could be very bright indeed.

NATO membership and EU membership after that means that the Macedonian state will not simply exist in isolation, but will exist as part of a united Europe. It would be a huge and historical breakthrough in the Macedonian struggle for identity and for security and for a future for all of the people that live there. That is why we hope that Macedonia's leaders will show the wisdom and courage to resolve the painful and difficult issue of the name.

I was in Bucharest, of course, when there was a lack of consensus at NATO so Macedonia did not receive an invitation. That was painful. And we understand why it's painful, but a solution is possible. The United States supports the efforts of Matt Nimetz. He's a good negotiator; he's a fair negotiator; and he's trying to get this solved.

Time will not make this easier. I hope that Macedonia is able to work with Nimetz based on his most recent proposal and try to resolve this. This has to do with the future of Macedonia. The short term difficulty of a resolution should be seen in terms of the long term gain for the whole nation. I will do my best to help to support Matt Nimetz, working as best I can, but the solution is up to the Government of Macedonia and of course the Government of Greece. I urge Macedonia's leaders to choose Europe and not to choose isolation.

I also want to say we've had excellent relations with Macedonia for years. We appreciate what Macedonia has done to build a truly multinational state and political system. The Ohrid Accords showed a degree of -- not a degree, considerable political wisdom and devotion to democratic norms. The country has done a lot to avoid the catastrophic problems of the Balkans, of nationalism in the Balkans. So that's a good basis to build a good future.

So we look for a bright future for Macedonia. I'll stop here and take your questions.

Question: I think you mentioned that our government, our leaders should work on the last proposal with Nimetz. Probably you heard that both [inaudible] --

Assistant Secretary Fried: I understand.

Question: They agree that this proposal is not acceptable for Macedonia.

You mentioned also that they should use their wisdom. What does it mean? What kind of wisdom they could use in this situation?

Assistant Secretary Fried: I realize that the proposal doesn't meet everything that Macedonia wants. No proposal will satisfy both sides. No proposal can leave both sides with nothing. Everybody must give up something, everybody must get something, or else there's no solution.

I said, on the basis of Nimetz's proposal. If there are, the government should decide what it can accept and what the very few, there have to be a very limited number of things that it needs changed and start working to know the differences. Otherwise we just go in circles, and there's no solution.

I appreciate the strength the leaders of Macedonia have shown in defending your country, but it is also defense of the country to open the door to NATO and the European Union. That also defends Macedonia and promotes its interests, it seems to me.

Question: It is a question of identity. It is not a question only of the name. All the proposals which are coming from the [inaudible], it's really, they [inaudible] nation.

Assistant Secretary Fried: If Macedonia joins NATO and the European Union and develops its democracy and its economy and its institutions and is a success, your identity will develop from that success.

The negotiations aren't going to change Macedonians' internal sense of who they are. Macedonians can have confidence that if they are a successful country the issue of identity will not seem so difficult. If people think -- I believe it is a mistake to think that your identity is a hostage of the negotiations.

My advice is get the best deal you can, get it done, join Europe, and your identity will flow from your success.

Question: So you said there's no solution with which perhaps the two sides would be completely satisfied.

Assistant Secretary Fried: I said that no solution will give either side 100 percent.

Question: However the last proposal of Nimetz only satisfies the Greek side.

Assistant Secretary Fried: I don't think that's true. I think it is a better proposal than that.

I'll tell you a story. I was at a NATO meeting in corridors and [Georgian President] Saakashvili said to me, I wish I had Macedonia's problems for five minutes. [Laughter]. I wish the only thing that kept me out of NATO was the name. I would call Georgia just about anything if I could get it into NATO. I'd call it South Georgia, East Georgia, tiny little Georgia... Can I have their problems for five minutes?

Question: -- said the Georgian people to identify them as Russians, for example.

Assistant Secretary Fried: But nobody's asking you to identify yourselves as Russians, or Greeks.

Question: The last proposal is exactly that. Me as a Northern Macedonian --

Assistant Secretary Fried: No. No, it actually doesn't say that. It doesn't say that. It's actually quite different. But I'm not the negotiator.

Do you know what the official name is of Switzerland? That's right, you don't. And I'm not sure myself. But it's called Switzerland, isn't it? Not the Helvetic Republic. That's the official name. Everybody calls it Switzerland.

Isolation is not going to help. All right?

Look, I understand, it's easy for an American to say this, but I say this as a long-time friend of Macedonia. It's important to think of the opportunity now and not look back in ten years and say oh my God, I wish I could get back to where we were in 2008.

Question: Will it be more difficult to solve the name issue after the elections in the U.S.?

Assistant Secretary Fried: Well, Macedonia has no enemies in either the McCain or Obama teams. But I guarantee you that the next President will not understand this issue as well as President Bush does for quite a while. This administration has been particularly supportive of Macedonia. I'm not saying the next one won't be, but President Bush really knows this issue personally. He spent about an hour with President Crvenkovski and Prime Minister Gruevski in Bucharest. It's important that we get, if we can get close enough where the two sides aren't that far apart, I know that Secretary Rice and the President are interested in bridging the last gap.

Question: [inaudible]

Assistant Secretary Fried: Oh, come on. Come on. They say lots of things. They also say that the United States is secretly in league with the Macedonian government against Greece. They say all kinds of things.

Sorry. I actually understood --

Question: [inaudible]

Assistant Secretary Fried: I'd put it this way. I think that NATO membership and EU membership benefits everyone. Of course, Albania is coming into NATO and Macedonia is not. It's going to be painful. But painful for both ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians in Macedonia. But perhaps painful in different ways. Painful.

All national identities in the world start off artificial. Why is there France and not Burgundy? Okay? Why are Norway and Sweden two countries instead of one? Why does the United States not include Canada? Because history took that course. Because things happen.

That doesn't mean -- Macedonian nationality isn't artificial. It grows out of history. That's what I mean. It grows out of a real history, and it's real. It grows out of history, but it's a painful history, like histories of all nations. It's got wars in it and uncertainty. The difference is that everybody now remembers. It's your grandfather's stories of the war and the uncertainty, whereas nobody remembers the 14th Century in France.

My point is, if Macedonia, if you do a deal on the name, Macedonia joins NATO and the European Union and in 100 years no one will remember this. All they will know is Macedonia is in Europe. Everyone will say in 100 years, oh yeah, Gruevski, Crvenkovski, they're the people who brought Macedonia to Europe. What great heroes.

Question: However they fear that they will be seen as traitors.

Assistant Secretary Fried: No. You know what I fear? I fear that Macedonia exists in isolation. That's a lot worse. In the Balkans, doing the right thing is usually hard in the short run. I'd rather be a hero in a 100 years rather than a hero for 15 minutes right now. You know what I'm saying.

Question: You said that if the two sides were getting at least close to some point of reaching a solution, that Secretary Rice would make efforts to cross that last gap and have the issue solved. This was in relation to one of the questions, I think.

Assistant Secretary Fried: That's right.

Question: Do you see that there is any chances of, do you see that point of the two sides getting close and having the solution reached? And what happens if that doesn't happen actually and in three or five years we're still without a solution?

Assistant Secretary Fried: Whether it happens or not depends on the actions of both governments. It isn't just up to Macedonia. It isn't just one government's responsibility. It's both. But Macedonia has to make its decisions, and Greece will have to make its decisions. So I don't know how possible that is. That depends on what you do and then what Athens does.

Time is not going to help. There are some problems that are not going to get easier by neglecting them.

Question: Just hypothetically, if Macedonia decides to give up on the negotiation process, what would that mean in your opinion?

Assistant Secretary Fried: Well you tell me what -- this is a rhetorical question -- you tell me what happens to your country if you decide to try to live in isolation from every other country in the region that's moving to NATO and the European Union. You tell me what your future looks like.

Do you want to tell your children that they still have to have visas to go to Europe but everybody else gets to work without visas, without any permission?

EU membership and NATO membership open up a great future. Do you want to tell your children, never mind, you get to live in Macedonia, and you need a visa to travel to Greece? Or Frankfurt or London? Is that what you want? That's a rhetorical question.

Look, I will add one thing. Americans came to this country for a better life, and we all gave up a lot of our former identity. Okay? But nobody's asking Macedonia to give up your identity. If you do a deal you're going to define yourselves. What you call yourselves in reality, I don't mean on the formal pieces of paper. What you call yourselves in reality, you'll just do it.

Question: But you can see that there is a concern in Macedonia about what will change with the name to Northern Macedonia. For everybody here even in this room [inaudible] acceptable. But it's not the end from the [inaudible]. It's not the end of their demands, that is the problem.

Tomorrow Gruevski and Crvenkovski would sign the document, okay? We would be Northern Macedonia, as a member of all the international organizations in the [inaudible] relationship. But it's obvious that that will not be the full stop from the Greek side.

Assistant Secretary Fried: You're asking a question, if we accept the -- basically you're saying if we accept the proposal does that end it, or is it always more, more, more, more.

Question: Nobody will accept it actually.

Assistant Secretary Fried: I think if Macedonia were seen as accepting the Nimetz proposal, there would be huge pressure within Europe for Greece to also accept it and have the issue done. Done. Finished.

I think there are a lot of people in Greece who want this issue resolved. Besides, what have you got to lose? If you accept Nimetz's proposal everybody will see that Macedonia is being responsible, then you will get more support.

Don't lose such a favorable opportunity. NATO Ministers will meet in about five weeks. That's time to do a lot of good.

I'll end with this thought. President Bush said there's a place at the NATO table waiting for Macedonia. Take it. Your children and your grandchildren will thank you.

But good luck.

 [BACK TO TOP](#)

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