

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

**“A Conversation with Ambassador Julianne Smith, U.S.
Permanent Representative to NATO”**

DATE

Tuesday, December 13, 2022 at 9:00 a.m. ET

FEATURING

Ambassador Julianne Smith

U.S. Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

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Transcript By
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Kathleen
McInnis:

Good morning. I'm Dr. Kathleen McInnis, the director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative, and senior fellow in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

I am delighted to welcome you to this timely Smart Women, Smart Power discussion on the state of the NATO alliance, with none other than Ambassador Julianne Smith, the U.S. permanent representative to NATO and self-professed NATO Nerd. Prior to her current role, she served as the senior advisor to Secretary Blinken at the Department of State. She's directed the Asian and Geopolitical Program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, in addition to directing the Transatlantic Security Program at the Center for a New American Security. From 2012 to 2013, she served as the acting national security adviser and deputy national security adviser to the vice president of the United States, who happened at that time to be Joe Biden. And before her post at the White House, she served for three years as the principal director for European and NATO policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. And she's a CSIS alumna. So, she's done it all.

But Ambassador Smith brings much more than her impressive resume to the table. She is also a mentor and friend to so many people on both sides of the Atlantic. Her ears probably burn quite a lot as people share stories of the advice, she gave them about balancing mommying and professional responsibilities, or how she started the meal train when a colleague was in the hospital or on maternity leave. She works to empower women wherever she goes, so it's an absolute honor to have her here today.

So, I'm going to stop there. Before we begin our conversation, we would like to thank our sponsors at Citi. Because of their generous support we get the opportunity to amplify the voices of changemakers leading the dialogue on critical matters in international affairs and national security. So with that being said, I'd like to turn it over to the director of government affairs at Citi, Kristin Solheim, for some pre-recorded remarks.

Kristen Solheim:

Good morning and thank you for joining us. Here in Washington, we're in the mad dash to finish the end of the legislative year and gearing up for what I hope is a very happy holiday season for you, no matter where you are in the world. Citi has been supporting Smart Women, Smart Power for the last seven years to help bring together women leaders in foreign policy, national security, and the business community to discuss some of the most pressing issues in the world today. We proudly call ourselves the world's global bank, as we're present in nearly 100 countries. Our global footprint gives us a front row seat on some of the most challenging opportunities that exist in various political climates all around the world. And there's certainly no shortage of those.

Today it's an honor to have Ambassador Julianne Smith, the U.S. permanent representative to NATO, to discuss the NATO alliance. Ambassador Smith has an illustrious career and I know we're all eager to hear from her. So let me turn it back to CSIS and we'll jump right into it. Thanks for joining us.

Ms. McInnis: So, to get started, I'd love to learn a bit more about your origin story. What inspired you to enter the world of international affairs?

Ambassador Julianne Smith: Well first, Kathleen, thank you so much to you for welcoming me here. You and your team, CSIS, thanks to Citi for their support. It's great to be back at CSIS. And it's great to see you again, because what you missed in the opening remarks, ticking through my biography, was that we worked together in the Pentagon many moons ago. And it's great to be able to team up here and have this conversation.

So, what inspired me to go into foreign policy? Well, it was – it was a couple of things along the way. First and foremost, as a high school student I did an exchange program where I spent the summer in France with a family. And it was my first introduction at age 15 to Europe, to the world of European policy, history, culture, and I really got the bug right there and then, very interested in European affairs, interested in this place that seemed very similar to the United States and, yet was so different.

Ms. McInnis: (Laughs.) Absolutely. (Laughs.)

Amb. Smith: And they actually, oddly, put me on a farm. So, I spent a lot of time on a working farm, a lot of time to reflect.

Ms. McInnis: Which is very French. (Laughs.)

Amb. Smith: Yes. Exactly. Speaking French to the cows. And it really – it had a huge – a huge impact on me. And then I also had the chance as an undergraduate to study at the Sorbonne. And to date myself, while I was in Paris studying at the Sorbonne the Wall fell and I felt that this was some sort of historic moment. It was – that I needed to be a part of one way or another.

And I remember looking back and thinking, well, I'm working on this French degree but now I need a German degree. So, I had to break the news to my parents that I was going to take my French degree and move to Germany, which didn't go down too well.

But I think those two early experiences of spending time in Europe both as a 15-year-old and then later as an undergrad really set me on a course to work somehow in the space of Europe. I hadn't quite figured out the foreign policy piece to it. But I was putting together the building blocks of history, geopolitics, geostrategy, research, writing.

So, I kind of drifted towards journalism, which then landed me in the area of foreign policy eventually.

Ms. McInnis: So, your career started at a significant moment of geopolitical shift across the world and now you are experiencing a similar, I would argue, monumental shift in geopolitics today.

And so, when you look at today's crisis are there – do you look back on your experience and reflections at the fall of the Berlin Wall as you contemplate what's going on today?

Amb. Smith: I do. I kind of – I count my lucky stars that I've had the experience that I've had across the U.S. interagency. So, I've had the good fortune to work at the Pentagon, State, and the White House. I think all of those experiences have given me unique skill sets.

I have never worked in a multilateral environment so that's been new and something that I've had to learn about in this job as the U.S. perm rep. But I look back on a whole array of experiences, whether it's out of government in the think tank world and the opportunities I've had to study Europe and do the research and travel, and then with the policy experience it just seems like in this moment I'm able to draw from those two sets of experiences.

And, lastly, some of the time I've spent working abroad, because I've also worked at European think tanks, I've had the chance to get a little bit of the flavor of how Europe looks at some moments like this. I could predict kind of some of the discussions we were going to have over Ukraine or at least make some good guesses on what those conversations would look like.

So I do. I look back frequently at this whole array of experiences and think I'm positioned now to bring those forward into the NATO alliance at a very pivotal moment.

Ms. McInnis: Well, turning to NATO, the alliance recently held its summit in Madrid. Could you share your assessment of the Madrid summit and what NATO was able to achieve during that time?

Amb. Smith: There's really, one word that I would use to describe that summit and that's historic, and I don't say that lightly. I truly believe it was historic for the alliance and that we'll look back on 2022 as, truly, a pivotal moment for the alliance.

We always knew the Madrid summit was going to be one that carried a lot of importance and would have tremendous impact because last summer in

2021 the alliance decided to rewrite NATO's Strategic Concept, or its mission statement, of sorts.

This is something that's not done frequently, as you well know, at the NATO alliance. It's something that the alliance really only does every 10 years. The last time NATO had drafted a Strategic Concept was in 2010 and we looked at the world through a completely different set of lenses.

We looked at the future relationship with Russia in a much more aspirational way, and if you go back and read that text it's very different from where we landed in 2022. Also, for the first time the NATO alliance and the Strategic Concept mentioned China and the Indo-Pacific and the relationship between China and Russia.

So that piece alone would have been a headline grabber, but then we added some other pieces. One, we had a war that was ongoing in Europe – the first major land war that we had seen in Europe in many, many decades, and the alliance had spent months preparing new posture decisions, deterrence and defense decisions.

We had a whole array of ways in which NATO allies were offering support to Ukraine, and the Ukrainian people, and the Ukrainian forces. We had Zelensky dial into the summit, so that was a huge piece.

And then, no one had predicted that Sweden and Finland would walk through the front door of the alliance and request full-fledged membership. These were two countries that had close partnerships with the alliance, but we always assumed they'd just come up right up to the edge and stop there. Well, the war pushed them over, and so we were able to formally launch the accession process in Madrid.

So taken together, the decisions on posture, the decisions to continue to support the unity that the allies had in supporting Ukraine, this moment with two new members now starting the accession process, and the Strategic Concept that's talking about future challenges like emerging and disruptive technology, and cyber, and space as new domains, all of it together meant that it was hugely consequential. And I think all of us felt quite proud of what NATO was able to achieve in that moment.

Ms. McInnis: So, looking forward, what do you think NATO and its member states need to prioritize in terms of implementation?

Amb. Smith: So, after you go through the process of drafting a new Strategic Concept, which in itself is a very intense set of negotiations over many months, you are then faced with the new challenge of implementing it. So, NATO starts slow. It immediately, when it encounters a new challenge, goes into a

process where it assesses the nature of the challenge, and you have to reach some sort of consensus on what the challenge itself is.

Then you have to ensure that that challenge is reflected in all NATO documents. So, for example, the China challenge, we put that in the Strategic Concept, and now we have to go from what we describe as assessing the problem to addressing it.

So, there are a number of things that were laid out in the Strategic Concept that we're going to have to work on implementing. For me, the priority very much is on the new force model. We're moving a tremendous amount of posture into Eastern Europe. We have to sustain it. We're also revisiting and redrafting NATO's regional plans that will have a major impact on defense planning across the alliance.

And then, in addition to the new force model, we will have to move out on how exactly the alliance wants to address the China challenge, and there it gets us into issues like resilience, critical infrastructure, supply chains, cybersecurity. So, we'll be spending the coming months working toward the next summit, which will be in July in Vilnius in Lithuania, trying to identify ways in which the alliance can showcase initiatives and policies tied to the language in the Strategic Concept.

Ms. McInnis: Well, turning to another issue that NATO has been grappling with that keeps hitting the headlines: Putin's repeated nuclear saber rattling with respect to Ukraine. Do you think that there ought to be changes to NATO's nuclear posture or how NATO considers the role of nuclear weapons in its overall posture?

Amb. Smith: I think the language that appears in the new 2022 Strategic Concept makes clear how the allies feel about NATO's nuclear posture, and NATO's nuclear policy more broadly. I think you see a lot of the common themes that appeared in prior strategic concepts that NATO's nuclear posture remains a cornerstone of NATO's deterrence policy.

There have been no major shifts over the recent years as it relates to NATO nuclear policy. However, the alliance is closely monitoring this loose talk about the possible use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine. We've all made clear how worrisome and dangerous we find that rhetoric to be, but I think you've also heard from our intelligence communities that – both in the United States and in the U.K. and elsewhere that, at this point, we don't see an indication that Russia is undertaking steps that would indicate that they are actually preparing to use their nuclear arsenal in any way.

So, we will continue to signal to Russia. You've heard the U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan talk about his messaging to Russia, that there

will be unprecedented consequences for Russia if they chose to do this, and we'll continue to watch the situation closely.

But to your original question about any dramatic changes to the alliance's nuclear posture or policy, I don't see a major shift right now. I think it remains, again, a cornerstone of what we do at NATO as it relates to deterrence.

Ms. McInnis: Ok. And looking more broadly at the alliance, do you believe that the alliance is fully willing to share the burdens – economic, military, and otherwise – of collective defense and security – especially as the definitions of what it means to be secure and what security is – seem to be changing and are much more broader than the actual defense mission?

Amb. Smith: Yeah, I think on the broader question of burden sharing, again, 2022 will be a year that we'll look back and I think study the speed with which allies responded to the war in Ukraine. The number of allies that stepped forward with offers of support to reinforce the eastern flank was really nothing short of remarkable.

I was stunned to see almost, I think, every single member of the alliance that is not on the eastern flank come up with a plan to support those countries that had genuine and legitimate security concerns. So, reinforcing the eastern flank was a moment to watch the alliance come together and share that responsibility, to move posture and equipment and capabilities into the eastern flank so that we could address their deterrence needs.

But you're asking a bigger question about broad responsibilities tied to security as it relates to economic and political assistance, and there, I think, we've really seen the transatlantic partners come together. We've had a remarkable relationship between the EU and the U.S. to manage sanctions and ensure that collectively we're applying maximum pressure on Moscow right now, and that also has been something that I think we'll look back and study a remarkable moment of transatlantic unity.

And then across a whole array of other issues, I mean we've come together to look at the brewing instability in the western Balkans. We've turned our attention to that. We're looking at critical infrastructure in light of the explosion on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

I think this is an alliance that can lift its head and look at an array of challenges in the Euro Atlantic area that stretch beyond the war in Ukraine and the importance of reinforcing the eastern flank. We are simultaneously taking on a whole array of other challenges.

We're moving out new policies as it relates to cybersecurity, and again, taking on emerging and disruptive technologies. We're working on climate security; women peace insecurity.

So, it feels like all engines are firing. Of course there will be debates about one ally or the other. Can you do a little more here or a little more in this category? And the U.S. will continue to push and lead a lot of that process.

But this has been just an incredible year for transatlantic allies to come together and share the responsibilities and burdens of maintaining security.

Ms. McInnis: It is remarkable to see how the alliance has been able to adapt to all of these different challenges, and to not just be a one trick pony, right?

Amb. Smith: Yes, exactly.

Ms. McInnis: It's amazing.

Amb. Smith: Yes, exactly.

Ms. McInnis: To make all of this stuff work, especially on the defense side, international defense industrial cooperation will be necessary to replenish stocks, munitions, systems that have been sent to Ukraine by allies. I'd love your view on those conversations.

Where are they today? How are we thinking about that problem of supplies, and munitions, and industrial capacity across the alliance?

Amb. Smith: This is a very serious challenge, both for NATO allies that are giving serious commitment, significant military assistance, lethal assistance, to the Ukrainian military forces, but it is a significant challenge for the Ukrainian military forces themselves that are facing shortfalls and declining stockpiles.

So, in essence, what has happened over the last couple of weeks and months is that three separate efforts have gotten underway.

So, you have the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, the UDCG, which is a U.S.-led effort to coordinate lethal assistance going into Ukraine. That group, which is about fifty nations – it's not just NATO allies. It actually includes friends in the Indo-Pacific that are all supporting Ukraine. They're beginning to look at the question of declining stockpiles inside Ukraine. And they meet monthly. They're bringing in industry and trying to determine how they can send the right signals to industry to give them the assurance they need to reopen production lines. And so that's the team that's taking on Ukraine.

In Brussels, there's two separate efforts. At NATO proper, we have convened what is called the CNAD, C-N-A-D. It's a group of armaments directors that come together from all 30 countries. They meet with industry. They're also trying to look at things like multinational buys, pooled purchases, things that you and I worked on many years ago at CSIS. (Laughter.) All of those ideas are back in the mix because you want to send industry the strongest signal possible so, again, they have the confidence that when they turn one of these production lines back on, there'll be sustained interest. And so that effort is focused on declining stockpiles across the NATO alliance. For a country like Estonia that has given an enormous amount of security assistance to Ukraine, they're facing some very real shortfalls. And they're not alone. We see that across the alliance, writ large.

Separately, the European Union, who – an organization that has also become much more directly engaged in providing lethal assistance to Ukraine, has started its own effort to also address EU member states that are facing declining stockpiles. And the key here is to find some connective tissue and make sure that the EU and NATO are talking to each other in some of these efforts, and not sending mixed signals to industry. But the good news is that lots of flowers are blooming here as it relates to this particular challenge. And the hope is that in the months ahead these institutions, the EU and NATO, and the group of countries meeting in the contact group, can work with industry to ensure that they have the confidence to up production and increase production as soon as humanly possible.

Ms. McInnis: You mentioned Sweden and Finland earlier. If and when they become a part of the NATO alliance, how do you think it's going to change NATO, if at all? I'm thinking things like command structures, or concepts of operations, or how the alliance contemplates its security?

Amb. Smith: Well, it changes a lot for the alliance, and it changes a lot for these countries. I mean, we are now – they have gotten to the point where they are officially called invitees, which allows them to join a limited number of NAC, North Atlantic Council, meetings. They are present in NATO HQ. They have found office space. So, at the very basic level –

Ms. McInnis: (Laughs.) They've arrived!

Amb. Smith: Yes, they've arrived! You now have Swedish and Finnish diplomats running around trying to navigate how you establish a mission at NATO HQ. All 30 allies have what is, in essence, an embassy. And they'll have to set up a presence. They'll have to understand NATO process, which is bureaucratic at times and complicated. And they'll have to navigate that and determine how to staff. So, at that level there's some learning going on of just what meetings do you go to, which committee meetings do you join, at what level. And so, there's a lot of questions, a lot of back and forth.

In a much broader, geostrategic sense, this is going to change the feel of the North Atlantic Council meetings. It already does. We have a much stronger signal coming from the north. We have two countries that are going to bring an enormous amount of capacity and know-how to managing the Baltic region, the kind of Nordic-Baltic relationship that already exists but will be bolstered by their presence inside the alliance. These are two countries that already have superb militaries. They've exercised and operated with NATO allies. But that will be a net plus for the alliance. Politically, they'll bring in their own unique views and perspectives on everything, from the Arctic and the high north, to terrorism, to the war in Ukraine.

So, it will be a different dynamic. I think it's one we all welcome. I know that, particularly for those in the Nordic-Baltic region, they're excited about having new voices from that neighborhood join alliance discussions. But you're right, there are other questions about command structure. There'll be questions about whether or not they want to host someday a Center of Excellence, which are these little posts that the alliance sets up to take on specific challenges. And so we'll watch that unfold, but with great pride and excitement because, again, these are two countries that we already know very well but they – instead of being invited in as a partner they will sit at the table as 32 members of the alliance. And I think it's going to be a remarkable moment, and I hope that they will join as full-fledged members in 2023.

Ms. McInnis: Taking a step back and looking at U.S. positioning towards the NATO alliance, there's some that maintain that Russia's military incompetence, as demonstrated so far, has neutralized it as a threat in Europe, and that as a result the United States really ought to start, you know, diverting its attention from Europe to the Indo-Pacific theater. Others maintain that, you know, Russia's demonstrated incompetence may induce Putin to take greater strategic risks; and oh, by the way, Russia has a track record historically of learning how to adapt after military failures; and that, therefore, Europe might be under greater threat today and tomorrow than it was before the Ukraine war began.

You have looked at the China question in Europe. You've looked at U.S. policy. You've looked at NATO. I'm just curious as to your views on that debate.

Amb. Smith: Well, the first thing I would say is it's clear that Russia has been incapable of meeting its strategic objectives on the ground. And I don't think any of us predicted some of these struggles that we're watching unfold in real time.

Ms. McInnis: Right.

Amb. Smith: When we saw them move quickly towards Kyiv, there were mixed guesses or estimates on how quickly they would be able to achieve that objective, but largely –

Ms. McInnis: Mostly in days, right? Yeah.

Amb. Smith: Yes, in days/weeks. I think the feeling was that they had made significant investments in modernization, that Russia had learned some lessons from 2008 in Georgia where it did not perform particularly well on the ground, and that those investments would pay dividends in their efforts inside Ukraine. We saw that they were assembling massive amounts of forces on the border. And watching it actually unfold in real time served as a surprise to many of us just the way in which they were unable to handle simple things like logistics, clearly command-and-control issues, a whole array of challenges.

So there have been surprises along the way. And what we've learned is that despite some investments in modernization, it's not paying dividends for them. And in fact, many of those investments never came to fruition; they went into someone's pocket, clearly.

Ms. McInnis: Right.

Amb. Smith: So we –

Ms. McInnis: It turns out you actually have to invest – (laughs) – for it to work.

Amb. Smith: Yes, they need to be real, proper investments, and we haven't – obviously, we have evidence that those were never made.

Ms. McInnis: Right.

Amb. Smith: So, it does give all of us pause to step back and say: What can we learn from their performance on the battlefield and this inability, again, to meet their strategic objectives? And it leads people to different conclusions.

For the United States, our policy, you've heard us talk about the fact that Russia is the acute threat. And for that reason, we have moved 20,000 additional U.S. troops into Europe, we have applied enormous pressure on Moscow to end the war today, and we have moved heaven and earth to support the Ukrainian military forces through direct lethal support.

I think while they have been unable to achieve their strategic objectives on the ground, we also recognize that Putin does not always match his strategic objectives and his intent with capacity or capability. So, for that reason, I think you have to be careful about any rational judgments you're putting on

him. He has shown us to be quite reckless, unpredictable, and for that reason I think we have to be prepared for all contingencies.

And so, the United States and I think across the NATO alliance, we believe that we shouldn't draw quick conclusions that somehow this doesn't deserve all of our attention right now. Clearly, the United States is focused also on the pacing threat with China and everything that could unfold in the Pacific in the months and years ahead. But we need to do both, and the United States is trying to lead the alliance and ensure that we keep our eye on what is happening in Russia and what is happening in Ukraine. And I don't expect that to change.

But I could predict that years from now loads of books will be written about what lessons can be drawn from their performance. But while their land forces and the army – the Russian land forces aren't performing well the reality is they still have a lot that they could throw at other challenges. They have an air force. They have strategic forces. They – I mean, there's a lot at play here. So, we want to be cautious about jumping to too many conclusions about what they could or could not do. And that's why we've reinforced the eastern flank and increased our commitment to deterrence and defense inside the NATO alliance.

Ms. McInnis: Well, as we wrap up today, but we're almost – it's almost time. (Laughs.) We're Smart Women, Smart Power. And I'm wondering if you might share your views on the extent to which you feel that being a woman has impacted your approach to this position and the others you've taken over your career. And if so, why? And if not, why not?

Amb. Smith: I'm a big believer in the importance of having diverse views at the table. You do not want to have everybody at the table look exactly the same, and you do not want to have at any table – whether it's in the situation room or in some back office in some layer of the Pentagon – you don't want everybody to come to the table with the same set of life experiences and professional experiences. Teams excel when there's diverse views at the table. I feel like I've had the opportunity to bring my experiences to the table, my unique views, my network, my exposure to working in Europe to a variety of discussions across the U.S. interagency. And I rejoice when I see that diversity represented at the table.

And you can define diversity in lots of different ways. There's the gender piece, but there's a whole array of other ways to represent diversity at our table. Again, whether it's in the sit room or in a meeting somewhere across town. So, I always support efforts to bring more diverse views to the table. I think there have been countless studies in the past that show in the private sector and the public sector the value of those diverse views. I've made it a mission of mine to bring those diverse voices.

And I've witnessed it firsthand. If you're the only woman at the table and it's all men, it's sometimes hard to get your point across and to insert an alternative viewpoint. But when I see multiple people bringing diverse perspectives to the table, it's a much richer set of conversations. And we ultimately, as a government or as a corporation, you benefit from that. So, I will continue to stay focused on that day after day, and support efforts that can showcase the value of diversity.

Ms. McInnis: Ambassador Smith, thank you so much for your – sharing your perspective on NATO, and your life, and your career with us this morning. We really appreciate it. To our online audience, thank you so much for joining us. Feel free to poke around the CSIS website. There's lots of interesting stuff to take a look at. And have a wonderful morning.

Amb. Smith: I just have to jump in at the very end, if I can.

Ms. McInnis: Of course!

Amb. Smith: So, Kathleen, you said at the top – you noted that I am a self-professed NATO Nerd. But I regret to inform you, that you are too. (Laughter.) So I have brought a NATO Nerd mug for you, because you are an honorary member of the club, whether you like it or not.

Ms. McInnis: (Laughs.) I love it!

Amb. Smith: And so welcome to the NATO Nerd club. And enjoy it. (Laughs.)

Ms McInnis: Oh, thank you! I feel like I've just achieved a life goal. (Laughter.) Thank you.

Amb. Smith: Thanks for the interview.

Ms. McInnis: Have a wonderful day. (Laughter.)

(END)