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Transcript

The United States and Europe: A New Era of Engagement

The C Douglas Dillon Lecture on European-American Relations

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Assistant Secretary Gordon:

Thank you. I'm delighted to be back at Chatham House and it's great to see so many good friends here this evening. For ninety years, Chatham House has been an important centre of debate and discussion about the course of world events, and I have fond memories of working closely with colleagues here when I was at IISS. It is also an honour to be giving a lecture named for C. Douglas Dillon, a great patriot, diplomat, and businessman who in his life and work embodied the closeness of the transatlantic relationship.

What I'd like to talk about today is the relationship between the United States and Europe. It is a relationship that defined the last century and produced its signal achievements: the defeat of fascism in Europe, the construction of a post-war order that supported democracy and security in Western Europe, and the peaceful end of the Cold War. In the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States and Europe worked together to spread these achievements throughout the continent, putting an end to 'ethnic cleansing' in the Balkans, nurturing new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, and enlarging the Euro-Atlantic community of nations. Today Europe is more democratic, more secure, more prosperous, and more unified than it has ever been in its history. Though our work in 'completing' Europe is not yet done, this is an extraordinary record. It reflects the labour of generations on both sides of the Atlantic and it is a record in which we can collectively take much pride.

But the question that has been much debated – in Chatham House and many places beyond – has been, what next? What does the US-European relationship mean in an era where the greatest strategic threats to global security no longer emanate from Europe but from elsewhere?

When one considers the issues that have dominated the headlines in recent months – from the war in Afghanistan, to the international effort to address Iran's nuclear program, to the worldwide economic crisis – an answer emerges. These problems are beyond the reach of any one country to solve, even a country as rich and powerful as the United States. Progress on any of these issues requires cooperation with other countries, and, arguably, most of all cooperation with our European partners. The US-European partnership, that has achieved so much in Europe, has now gone global. The record of the Obama administration over the past two years bears this out.

The idea of partnership that animates this administration is particularly worth discussing because, paradoxically, the question of US engagement with Europe has taken on some controversy in recent months. Despite Barack

Obama being the most popular American political leader in Europe in decades, there is a narrative that has played itself out in the press and among certain precincts of the European political elite that says something different. This storyline charges that United States does not value Europe and has not engaged sufficiently with Europe in its first two years. Not to put too fine a point on it, I think this view is flatly wrong and I'd like to explain to you why.

So let me do four things today: First, I'll explain the Obama administration's strategy of engagement and why we believe it's essential to foreign policy. Second, I'd like to describe and assess the false narrative about relations between the United States and Europe. Third, I'll describe the administration's record with Europe in the last two years – a record that in our view clearly demonstrates the virtue of the engagement strategy that we have pursued. Finally, I'll lay out some of the issues on the horizon for us, including four major European summits in the next few weeks.

Barack Obama ran for president in part to restore America's image in the world. Indeed, to an extent that is unusual in American politics, the Obama campaign premised its pitch to voters on restoring diplomatic ties around the world. President Obama did so not just because he wants America to be admired and respected but because he understands that the perception of the United States around the world actually matters for the effective conduct of foreign policy. Nowhere is this more true than in Europe, where successful mobilization of European support means reaching out to democratic publics. And European publics have responded. Polling data showed dramatic positive swings after the 2008 election on the question of whether Europeans approved of US handling of international policy – in some cases on the order of 70 or 80 percentage points.

This change stems from more than the mere fact of President Obama's election. The deeper reason for the sustained shifts in public opinion we have seen comes from the administration's policies and, in particular, its policy of partnership. The premise of the Obama campaign – and since January 2009 the Obama administration – has been that the United States cannot deal with a daunting international agenda alone, and that close consultation and cooperation with our allies will always make any foreign-policy enterprise more successful and more effective. And nowhere around the world are there better allies than in Europe, where we work with democratic, prosperous, militarily-capable countries that share our values and share our interests. We have put this principle into practice every day through our work with our European allies in meeting the most pressing issues on the world stage.

So it has been somewhat of a surprise to us to hear it suggested that the Obama administration is not actually paying much attention to Europe. In a recent column in *The New York Times*, Roger Cohen called this a policy of 'benign neglect' and went on to suggest that the United States and Europe were drifting apart strategically. He begins his article by describing how the clocks in the National Security Council Chief of Staff's office are set to the times in Kabul, Baghdad, Sana, and Tehran and not to London, Paris, and Berlin. He sees this as a symbol that the United States is not spending enough time and energy on Europe and worries that what he terms a 'coolness' toward Europe could come to be reciprocated.

I have a couple reactions to this critique. The first has to do with expectations. During the Cold War, Europe was by far the main strategic priority for the United States. But I don't think that's an appropriate standard today – and I think most Europeans would agree. I think Europeans would understand that it's appropriate for the US president to be very much focused on the Middle East, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Asia. But it is precisely because we face such daunting global challenges that we know we need strong European partners. Europe has gone from being the center of global problems to being a major contributor to global solutions. This should be celebrated for the great achievement that it is.

We face another expectations issue, not so much vis-à-vis the United States but with respect to the Obama administration itself. I was with then Senator Obama when he gave his speech in Berlin during the 2008 presidential campaign. Several hundred thousand cheering Europeans came out to see him. We knew then that such an extraordinary level of enthusiasm could never be sustained. That said, the notion that Europeans no longer have confidence in Obama administration has been vastly exaggerated. According to the German Marshall Fund's recently published Transatlantic Trends poll, which looks at public opinion across the Atlantic on a number of issues, the president's favourable rating in a group of 11 EU countries this year was 78 percent, which is extraordinarily high. Admittedly, last year it was 83 percent, leading Reuters to run a headline following the poll's publication that said that 'Europe Cools Toward Obama.' If going from 83 percent to 78 percent is cooling, I suppose that's something we'll have to live with.

Finally, the notion of US 'neglect,' benign or otherwise, does not accord with the reality that I and others live every day. The President constantly engages with his European counterparts. He made six trips to Europe in his first year, the most ever by any president, during which he visited London, Strasbourg, Prague, Ankara, Istanbul, Dresden, Normandy, Rome, L'Aquila, Moscow,

Oslo, and Copenhagen. Beyond that he consults with his European colleagues on every major issue and communicates with them regularly through video conferences and phone calls. Just this week, the president is meeting with his European counterparts at the G20 summit where they will discuss the full range of issues on the global agenda. Secretary Clinton also has kept up an intense schedule of European engagement. She has so far travelled to 19 European countries and talks with her European counterparts almost daily. She has developed a strong working relationship with EU High Representative Ashton. Similarly, my colleagues and I work closely with Europeans on every issue on our agenda. Symbolism and ceremony are important measures of a relationship, but so is intensive, day-to-day policy coordination on the big issues we face.

Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the degree of engagement and common strategy across the Atlantic is unparalleled and has helped produce unprecedentedly close cooperation with Europe on the whole host of issues on the transatlantic and global agendas. This wasn't always the case – and that was true not just during the Bush administration but also during the Clinton administration. I have been working on these issues for quite some time, as I know many in this room have, and my sense is that there hasn't been a time in my professional career where our global strategies with Europeans are as in sync as they are today. A brief look at some of the things we've accomplished with Europe in the last two years makes this abundantly clear and explains why we are as focused on Europe as a global partner.

In Afghanistan, in the wake of the President's speech in November 2009, Europe contributed about 7,000 additional troops, over 100 training teams for the Afghan army and police, and nearly \$300 million for the Afghan National Army trust fund. European countries now have almost 40,000 troops in Afghanistan – more than ever before – and the total European contribution to Afghanistan since 2001 comes to \$14 billion. For all the talk of transatlantic discord or allegedly wavering allies in Afghanistan, this is an impressive commitment nine years into what we all recognize to be a difficult operation. We have a common strategy with Europe, we forged that strategy together, and we are all determined to see it through.

On Iran, in contrast to the past when there were starkly different approaches across the Atlantic, we maintained unity in our efforts to engage and have at the same time seen the strongest-ever set of sanctions adopted by the UN Security Council and an even more robust set of follow-on sanctions adopted by the European Union. These additional measures taken by the EU cover a variety of areas critical to the regime including trade, finance, banking and

insurance, transport, and the gas and oil sectors, in addition to new visa bans and asset freezes. These steps have raised the price of Iran's failure to meet its obligations and we hope will serve to bring them back to the negotiating table. Every diplomatic step on Iran is the product of intensive consultation and coordination with our European partners.

In the Balkans, the United States' and Europe's common view is that the project of Europe will not be complete until all of the countries of the Western Balkans are full EU members. I was with Secretary Clinton on her recent trip to the Balkans and I can tell you that our policy toward the region is very closely coordinated with the European Union. Secretary Clinton saw High Representative Ashton just before that trip and just after, and I and other colleagues are in constant touch with European colleagues as we chart our way forward. On the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, on the future of Bosnia, on Croatia's path to the EU, we have worked and consulted closely with Europe. Together, we also welcomed Albania and Croatia into NATO, extended Membership Action Plans to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, and Macedonia will join once the dispute over its name is resolved. The intensive joint diplomacy of recent months has shown how closely our visions are aligned, something which is essential for progress in the region.

Finally, we have sought with our European allies to build a more constructive relationship with Russia – a common goal that has started to pay significant dividends for both Europe and the United States. For our part, the United States has made important progress in setting our bilateral relationship on a path of pragmatic cooperation. Most significantly, we have concluded a New START Treaty. The agreement is the most comprehensive arms control agreement in nearly two decades and significantly reduces the number of nuclear weapons and launchers deployed by the United States and Russia while also putting in place a strong verification regime. This is an achievement that has made Europe and the world safer. We have also achieved important cooperation with Russia in advancing our common goals in Afghanistan and in addressing the Iranian nuclear program. And we have done all of this without compromising our principles – in particular our steadfast commitments to human rights and to the defence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all of the nations of Europe.

These are significant accomplishments and they have come about in the course of two years of intense engagement with Europe. We plan to push ahead on all of these fronts in the years ahead. The best way to get a sense of our plans going forward is to look at the four summits between the United

States and Europe that will take place starting next week. President Obama and Secretary Clinton will attend a NATO summit, a NATO-Russia Council Summit, and a US-EU summit in Lisbon and Secretary Clinton will follow that up by going to the OSCE summit in Astana, Kazakhstan. This will be period of extensive engagement with Europe at the highest level and offers a revealing a snapshot of our agenda.

We will together address the global security challenges that we face today and prepare for the threats of tomorrow. We expect that the NATO summit will bolster the mission in Afghanistan and increase the training and equipping of Afghan national security forces so that they can gradually assume lead security responsibility throughout their country and ensure it is never again a haven for terrorists. With respect to Iran, close US-EU cooperation, as I said, has been the essential starting point in putting pressure on the Iranian regime and in seeking to bring them back to the negotiating table. We will also issue a new NATO Strategic Concept that will outline how the alliance will tackle new threats such as ballistic missiles and cyber-attack.

Economic growth and human security is another major pillar of the transatlantic agenda. Europe is a crucial economic partner to the United States and at the US-EU summit we will promote economic recovery and job creation through a focus on regulatory cooperation, innovation, and the reduction of unnecessary barriers to trade. We will also work with the EU to coordinate our responses to development and humanitarian challenges and identify ways to enhance our efforts to counter terrorism and extremism. At the OSCE summit, we will revitalize our joint commitment to human rights in Europe and Eurasia, underscoring the challenges to basic rights that still remain on the continent and the importance of protections for journalists and the freedom of expression.

Finally, we intend to use these summits to continue the transformation of our relationship with Russia from Cold War adversary to partner. We have taken enormous strides to improve our relationship with Russia in the last two years and, with a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, we will seek to take the relationship to a higher level. In addition to cooperation in areas such as counternarcotics, counterterrorism and counterpiracy, we will show allied and Russian publics that we are keeping our promises to make the world a safer place with cooperation on theater missile defence and increased transparency about our military plans and posture. At the same time, we will insist that Russia adheres to the principles of openness and transparency enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and the NATO-Russia Founding Act.

This is what US-European cooperation looks like in a new century. In the last century, we focused our joint efforts on building a democratic, secure, prosperous, and unified Europe. And though there is still important work to be done to extend that vision to every corner of Europe, it is fair to say we succeeded. The task before us now is no less momentous or important to the world. It is to take the transatlantic partnership, which has been such a force for progress in Europe, and turn it toward making progress around the world. This is a daunting task, and we are under no illusions about how challenging the problems are that we all face in the world today. But it is our responsibility as leaders to summon the will, the resources, and the institutions necessary to make the US-European partnership an effective platform for confronting global problems. If we can do that, we will, like our predecessors before us, have risen to the challenge in a time of great crisis.