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Annual Conference Transcript
Welcoming Remarks

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Begin Transcript

MICHÈLE FLOURNOY: Good morning, everyone. I'd like to encourage you to take your seats please. So welcome. Welcome to CNAS's 11th annual conference on national security. I'm so glad to see so many of my colleagues and friends here, old and new, to join us today to discuss and debate the most consequential national security issues we're facing as a nation.

You know, it's actually the case that CNAS's very first public event over 10 years ago was held right here. We had then Admiral Mike Mullen give his inaugural speech as chairman of the Joint Chiefs for CNAS, here, right in this room. So it's great to be back at the Mayflower.

In previous years, we've always kicked off the conference by describing the global security challenges that we face as a nation. And many of you will recall that last year, we had a very daunting list of international challenges that we thought this new administration would face. And I'd like to say that I think it was an understatement even then.

From the persistent threat of terrorism to the nuclear and missile threats posed by North Korea, from the resurgence of a more aggressive Russia to the rise of a very powerful China, to the proliferation of high technologies, to the use of cyber and disinformation and other influence operations against our most vital interests, our very own democracy, we are facing a very complex set of national security challenges.

As they say in the Department of Defense, where, as you know, I spent a number of years, it's a very target rich environment. At the same time, we face a good deal of uncertainty about the future direction of U.S. policy and U.S. leadership. People are asking the question, what will America's role in the world be? We have a new administration that is still assembling its team and finding its footing, a new president who is bucking the traditions and expectations and constraints of his office, and who came into that office with very little foreign policy

Bold.

Innovative.

Bipartisan.

expertise and experience. So those of us serving in the national security domain and many of – that includes most of us here, we’re still struggling to decipher what this administration’s foreign policy will be. We’re still trying to understand what the notion of America first means and how that will be translated into policy in specific national security areas.

Meanwhile, absent a clear strategy, capitals around the world are left trying to read the tea leaves of presidential tweets, of Rose Garden press conferences, of foreign visits, of campaign-style events, of the various statements of administration officials to try to discern what will Trump foreign policy look like. Meanwhile, the slow pace of the nomination and confirmation process in this town means that the administration does not yet have its team in place below the cabinet level. The thing is every administration since President Eisenhower – every single one – has faced a major, sometimes derailing national security crisis in its first year. And this administration may not escape that fate.

So we’re here today to discuss how the new administration can prepare for, maybe even prevent such a crisis, as well as how we as a nation can address the longer term and even more consequential challenges. Whether we are here today as Republicans or Democrats or independents or undeclareds, we can all work to gain some insights and to offer recommendations that will strengthen the national security of the United States. Given this very challenging environment, CNAS is committed to continuing to do its part by sharing rigorous fact-based analysis, by growing the next generation of national security leaders, by offering bold and innovative solutions, and by convening events like this one to bring stakeholders from across the spectrum together to wrestle with the tough problems.

This approach is even more important today, given the increasingly polarized political climate we face not only here in Washington, but really across the country. Hence, this year’s conference theme: navigating the divide. In recent months, we’ve spent a lot of time as a center reflecting on this new context and our role as a national security think tank. And I can assure you that we are committed to continuing to provide strong and pragmatic and principled recommendations, policy recommendations to decision-makers in the executive branch, on the Hill, no matter their political leanings. We remain committed to creating a civil space for dialogue across both sides of the aisle and across the civil-military divide, to allow people to come together to address the most pressing and consequential challenges we face, no matter how controversial the topic may be. And we remain committed to doing our part to protect and advance this nation’s security.

Navigating the divide in our view means holding ground for fact-based policy debate and for bipartisanship at a time when both are increasingly rare. It means fostering constructive dialogue and developing the best possible policy solutions to the issues of greatest import that we face. So, today, we aim to elevate the national security debate on a whole range of topics that you can see outlined in your agenda. And your participation actively will be very much part of that and will determine how successful we are.

We are fortunate today to have several VIP participants from current and former administrations, including National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly, who will be joining us for keynotes this afternoon.

But before we get started, I want to thank our media partner, the “Washington Post,” who’s been a tremendous partner with us, supplying many of our moderators and participants today, but also live streaming today’s proceedings. We also want to thank our sponsors who – without whom this conference would not be possible. You will see their names listed in the materials and on slides and we will acknowledge them again at the end of the day. I also want to thank our CNAS board members who really are the engine behind this organization and provide tremendous support and thank them for their being here too.

Lastly, in the spirit of adopting new technologies and trying to stay on the cutting edge, we have continued to evolve our conference app. So get out your phones and I’m going to ask our social media guru, JaRel Clay, he’s a tremendous leader on our staff to come up and offer you a conference app demonstration. But thank you all for being here. We’re looking forward to the discussion with you today. (Applause.)

JAREL CLAY: Thank you, Michèle. Good morning, everyone. I am JaRel Clay and I’m here to encourage all of you to download this year’s conference app. The app is available for free in the App Store and Google Play by searching CNAS. I think about 250 of you have already downloaded the app. For everyone else that needs to get excited about it, I’ll ask the AV team to bring up my phone so we can run through some of the features.

So the conference app this year features the full schedule, as always, but it also has each speaker affiliated with each session. You also have an opportunity to network with one another if you log into the app. Each session that has a poll associated with it will give you an opportunity to see how your peers and colleagues are also thinking about the most pressing national security challenges.

As you navigate through the app, you’ll notice if you’re new to the Marriot or the Mayflower, we have a floor plan which shows you exactly where your breakout session will be, which is also indicated on your name tag. And we have our Twitter feed, which also represents everyone who is actively engaging on that platform as well.

So for all of you who have downloaded the app, if you’re still downloading the app, we’ll give you some time, but I would like to run through one quick live poll with you all and it’s under welcoming remarks and app introduction in your app. So if everyone can navigate to that, that has the app and scroll down, you’ll see a section that says live poll. One you click on that, you’ll see the first live poll question, which is, in your opinion, what national security issue has the most potential for bipartisan action.

Once the AV team switches over to the live polling results, you’ll be able to see in real time throughout the day how everyone is thinking about those issues. And if you’ve already voted, go ahead and wave your hand or your phone in the air as if you’re in a concert. I’m just

kidding. Don't do that. It's weird. We have – but what isn't weird is being able to see all of the results come in real time and that is one reason why I'm so excited for you all to be here and I hope you enjoy today's conference. We have an exciting lineup for you guys.

And with that, I'd love to invite our "Washington Post" moderator Jackson Diehl as well as our panelists, Julianne Smith, Avril Haines, Robert Kagan, and Jim Townsend to the stage for a discussion on "Who Cares about Europe?" (Applause.)

End Transcript