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Annual Conference Transcript
Who Cares about Europe? The Future of the West and
Transatlantic Cooperation

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Begin Transcript

JULIANNE SMITH: Good morning. My name is Julie Smith and I'm the director of the Transatlantic Security Program at CNAS. Welcome to all of you here this morning. We're about to launch into a discussion about the future of the West and the Transatlantic relationship. A lot of us have participated in conversations about this subject either in Europe or here with Europeans. And I think many of us have found that as we engage in those types of discussions, often a theme repeats itself, and that is the increasing disconnect between national capitals in Europe and Washington with the general public.

And so with that in mind, Jim Townsend and I – Jim recently joined CNAS as a senior adjunct fellow – we went out on the mall a couple of weeks ago and asked Americans from across the country what they thought about a single piece of the rules-based order, and that's the NATO alliance. So we're going to run a short video for you of what we found on the mall a couple of weeks ago. It might surprise you. And then, after that, we're going to jump right into the discussion. So let's roll the video.

Bold.

Innovative.

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(Beginning of video segment.)

MS. SMITH: We've spent years of our life talking about NATO at conference tables on both sides of the Atlantic.

JIM TOWNSEND: But after years of talking to other NATO experts about the alliance, we decided to broaden the conversation and ask a cross-section of Americans visiting Washington on their summer holiday what they think about NATO. We met folks from –

MAN: Arkansas.

WOMAN: Bellingham, Washington.

MAN: Chattanooga, Tennessee.

MAN: Davenport, Florida, which is near Orlando.

MAN: Here in Washington.

MAN: Houston, Texas.

WOMAN: From Indianapolis.

MAN: Maine.

WOMAN: Utah.

MAN: From New York, but I work here in Virginia.

MS. SMITH: And what we encountered in talking to folks from around the country surprised us.

MR. TOWNSEND: We were accused of being the mainstream media, Washington journalists, or just plain old Washington insiders.

MS. SMITH: In cases where folks were willing to talk to us, we heard four general responses.

MR. TOWNSEND: One was a simple message.

MAN: I think we should get out of it, handle issues ourself.

MR. TOWNSEND: So tell me more about that. Have you always felt that way or just things recently have made you think about doing that?

MAN: No. I've always thought that way. I don't think NATO needs to be the world's police force. I think countries can police themselves.

MR. TOWNSEND: So when I say NATO, what do you think about?

WOMAN: Inefficiency, government bureaucracy, slow.

WOMAN: It's just a bunch of people deciding where Americans should go, where we shouldn't go, what we should do for other countries, or, you know, whether we should stay here and fight our own battles.

MS. SMITH: Some people simply didn't know what we were talking about.

WOMAN: So I'm really honest with you. So I don't feel like I am that educated, like I don't – I'm not even educated enough that much of an opinion about it.

MAN: I know that, you know, in the Balkan conflict, it was heavily involved but since then, I don't hear about it quite as much.

WOMAN: Hi. I actually don't know what you guys are talking about but, I mean, yeah. I guess.

MR. TOWNSEND: In other instances, folks had a generally positive view of the alliance but agreed with the president that the Europeans needed to pay their fair share.

MAN: I think now, my personal stance on it is I would like to still be in it, but I do think everyone needs to pay their share. That's the bottom line.

MR. TOWNSEND: When we talk about NATO, when you think about NATO, what's the first thing that comes to your mind?

MAN: They should pay their share.

MR. TOWNSEND: Yeah. But I think that certainly is what a lot of people have been saying. Well, thank you very much.

MS. SMITH: All in all, though, many of the people we encountered had a positive view of the alliance and wanted the United States to stay engaged, which reflects the Pew survey from May of this year that found that 62 percent of Americans have a favorable view of NATO.

MR. TOWNSEND: When we say NATO, what is the first thing that comes into your minds?

MAN: It's an alliance with the European countries that I think is very important.

MAN: I think we have a history with all the countries of Europe that we have each other's backs. You know, we helped them in World War II, they have helped us. We have trade agreements, we protect each other. They let us have military bases in their country and I think it's worth keeping.

WOMAN: We should stay in it. I think it's important. I think any alliance that strengthens countries working together is important.

MAN: I believe NATO is very helpful. Like that is a commitment to basically our friends. That's a bond that we have amongst friends that we will be there help you in your time of need, you help us.

MS. SMITH: NATO's doing a better job at getting its story out to the public. You would not have seen such a slick video from NATO just a few years ago. But like fire insurance, even with a slick video, it's hard to explain why you need to invest in the alliance until your house actually catches on fire.

MR. TOWNSEND: The nuance that is hardly conveyed in the video is that NATO is more than an insurance policy. It is also a community of nations that not only share values but generally agree on a state of the world and is willing to do something about it.

MS. SMITH: And that brings us to the topic of this morning's panel, "Who Care about Europe? The Future of the West and Transatlantic Cooperation."

(End video segment.)

JACKSON DIEHL: Good morning, everyone. I'm Jackson Diehl. It's an honor to be here. We've got about 45 minutes to decide the future of the West, so I'm going to try and move along fairly briskly in journalistic fashion. I've got a great panel here to discuss it. You've already heard from Julianne Smith, who's the director of the Transatlantic program at CNAS. Jim Townsend, who's the adjunct fellow of CNAS and previously was deputy assistant secretary of defense for NATO and European Affairs for eight years during the Obama administration. Robert Kagan, who is a senior fellow at Brookings, a distinguished historian, but, most importantly, a contributing writer to the "Washington Post." And Avril Haines, who most recently was senior deputy national security adviser in the Obama administration and, before that, was deputy director of the CIA.

Now, we've all seen the video here and the views that reflect it about NATO from average Americans down on the Mall. We also heard yesterday from the European side the latest Pew survey, which showed absolutely staggering drops in confidence in the United States and in the president of the United States among key European allies. We've had some awkward interactions – initial interactions between President Trump and senior European leaders in the last couple of months, including in Brussels.

And so I think our first question is, where are we and where do we seem to be headed? Are we in crisis? Are we headed toward crisis? Are the foundations still solid? And so I'd like to turn to the panel on that.

In fact, Jim Townsend, if I could ask you to go first, where are we?

MR. TOWNSEND: Well, thank you very much for the question. You know, I think NATO is always in crisis. It seems that every few years, NATO at a crossroads is the headline of an article somewhere and NATO assumes the lowest position and tries to figure itself out.

So where we are today is not so unusual in terms of how the alliance looks at itself, particularly since the end of the Cold War. I think in terms of the alliance, it's really a quest for relevancy – a continuing quest to try to figure out what role does it need to play in dealing with a lot of new challenges that comes its way. And I think, right now, as we have tried to deal with ISIS and other problems coming around the alliance, NATO has tried to figure out, so what role should it play? I mean, it was the United States that started the counter-ISIL coalition. Well, why didn't NATO do that? So there are questions still about NATO relevancy.

So where we are in the alliance is the continuing quest for trying to figure out its role, and that seems to never end. In terms of where we are here in the United States towards NATO, well, that's evolving and changing and we'll see where that ends up. But NATO is in its perpetual lowest position.

MR. DIEHL: Julianne, we seem to have had a precipitous drop in European support for the United States since Trump took office if you look at that Pew survey, but some people say we were headed for this anyway – that there was trouble brewing all along. Is that right?

MS. SMITH: Yeah. I think there is a lot of truth to that. I think Trump has certainly added to some of the anxiety about the future of the transatlantic relationship because our allies remain uncertain about what his fundamental views towards the rules based order and towards Europe ultimately are. And they'll be looking to his visit to Europe next week for additional clues.

But even if you take the president out of the picture for a minute and just think about the challenges that the transatlantic partners are facing right now, the list is pretty long. And I think irrespective of who's sitting in the Oval Office, we are at a point in history where there are challenges both internally – so Europe is facing a big existential crisis about the future of the European project in the wake of Brexit, and open-ended questions about the ability of the EU to respond to everyday citizens' needs. Then there are external challenges – Russia in particular is actively working to undermine democratic institutions and international institutions across Europe.

And then our citizens on both sides of the Atlantic – I mean, Jim and I were encouraged by this little experiment on the mall and did find some sophisticated views about the utility of the transatlantic relationship. But that said, I do believe that we are at a moment where citizens are

wondering why do we have global trade, what does it say about meeting my own needs in the wake of globalization, in the wake of all these global trade or multilateral trade agreements? There are open-ended questions about NATO's purpose right now. Should it be responding to terrorism or is it just focused on security at home?

So I think we can take the U.S., and that's part of it – and our own partisan divides and debates here in Washington and uncertainty about where the president wants to take the relationship. We can take that as part of the challenge going forward. But, again, I think it would be wrong to assume that that's the nature of the challenge. The nature of the challenge for the transatlantic partners is much greater than what's happening here in Washington.

MR. DIEHL: Bob, could I ask you for some historical perspective? I remember a lot of previous times when transatlantic relations were supposed to be collapsing, the beginning of the Bush administration, for example, where people at the Pentagon used to say, NATO, keep the myth alive; 1983, with the deployment of the intermediate range missiles, NATO, the transatlantic alliance was supposed to be falling apart over that. Not to mention the Vietnam War era. How does this compare to those times? Is it worse? Is it better than some of those previous tests?

ROBERT KAGAN: Well, I think it's useful not to just look at the post-World War II period and the Cold War when despite those crises, there was a whole different attitude on the part of the American people about having a commitment to Europe. There were a lot of arguments about what that meant exactly, but that commitment was there.

I found that video very interesting because the first category of people who were basically saying get out of NATO, it is striking to me how their arguments are exactly the arguments that Henry Cabot Lodge and the other opponents of the League of Nations made in defeating the League of Nations and the Versailles Treaty in 1919: other countries are going to tell us where to send our troops, shouldn't we just be taking care of ourselves, why do we have to be taking care of others.

And I think if you look from a longer perspective on this whole question, the real question of the 20th century repeatedly asked was, was the United States going to make a commitment essentially to European stability and security? The answer in 1919 was, no. And it continued to be no up until World War II. And then because of World War II and the memory of what happened in World War I, the answer became yes.

But the long history of American attitudes towards Europe is one of – it's not even of ambivalence. It's mostly of hostility. What's new are the people saying they're our friends and we should stick together as friends. That's a new development.

But the larger question is why make this commitment? And the problem is even though we try to talk about the relevance of NATO, the commitment is not about the relevance of NATO. The commitment is an understanding, but it's a difficult understanding that world stability depends on America making commitments to other nations. It actually doesn't matter

what those other nations do. And so the whole discussion of should NATO be doing this out there and doing that out there – it's a perfectly reasonable question but it has nothing to do with the underlying world order issues that led to our commitment in the first place.

And so I think right now, what we're facing in America is a very understandable forgetting or at least needing to have explained again why it's necessary for the United States to make that kind of commitment.

MR. DIEHL: Avril Haines, if we're having these difficulties coming together and problems with the public opinion on both sides, what practical impact do you think that's going to have on us working with the Europeans to deal with concrete problems and concrete tasks that we've – for example, continuing on the confidence operations in the Baltics; for example, Ukraine; for example, coming up with a common position on where we go from here on Russia and Russia sanctions, how is that going to affect our practical ability to do things?

AVRIL HAINES: Yeah. It's a good question. And let me just come to it in a slightly circuitous route. I think – I also found the video to be interest and partially what Bob just said. But there was a Pew poll I think last year that indicated that 57 percent of Americans believe that we should deal with our own problems and other countries should deal with theirs. And, you know, I saw some of that reflected in the video and the interviews that we were hearing.

And from my perspective, you know, after 15 years in government, that's really not a possible option. But it's also not a very good option for national security or for other, you know, prosperity for America and otherwise. And it is interesting to me that even all these years later, we're still having that debate at such a strong level and that there is such a sense in the country that, in fact, you know, we should just deal with our own stuff and others should deal with theirs. And, you know, I think if you're here today, for the most part you already have a sense of how impossible that is.

There are really a remarkable number of threats or issues that occur because of events that happen across the world that really have nothing to do with us or may have nothing to do with us and, ultimately, are on our shores within a very short period of time. I think the intelligence community said in their trends report this last year that one of the most disruptive things that could occur is that you have a novel pathogen essentially – respiratory pathogen that occurs someplace and within six months, it could cause death and injury around the world, in every corner in a sense if it actually is capable of causing death and injury to just 1 percent of the people it affects, right?

So it's clear that we need to engage on a multilateral basis and we need to not just do so because we need to detect and disrupt threats that are coming to our shores, but the real game is prevention and creating the kind of networks that actually help us to avoid those problems actually coming to our shores. And, you know, as Bob said, the commitment in many respects is part of what helps us do that. And it's also about the framework that we've established and the mechanisms that we've established.

And the things that you're describing for what's the actual impact, so the things that we rely on them obviously for is helping us to manage aggressive behavior by Russia or by China under certain circumstances. It's about helping us to deal with terrorism, with pandemics, with climate change, with any number of threats and issues, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and so on across the board.

And part of that means that you need a strong partner in Europe. And given the crises that they're facing, that Julie mentioned and so on, frankly, the United States is part of helping them be strong and actually engage, for example, in the structural reforms that are necessary to keep them strong. That's something that I worry that if our relationship isn't as good as it needs to be, we aren't going to be as effective at.

So if Europe is weaker, frankly, we are weaker in some respects. We don't have as strong of a partner as we need in these issues. And, secondly, we need to be able to deal with things not just at the leadership level but across the board.

Now, a lot of that will just continue to happen because we are close to Europe and we have a lot of very strong ties at every level of government. And I think that will occur. But I do think it can have a cost. It's just very hard to tell right now how much.

MR. DIEHL: You know, it seems to me that – it's fairly clear that the Russians are very much enjoying this situation and this trouble we're having, as Putin himself indicated in a recent interview he gave. And I wonder, what is the risk of how the Russians may seek to exploit this situation and what is the chance that we are going to with the Europeans be able to come up with some kind of common response to the things we see the Russians already doing, especially things like electoral interference? Who has thoughts on that?

MS. SMITH: Well, I'll jump in on that. I do think Putin is probably enjoying the position he's in right now in part – well, for a couple of reasons. One, we have distracted partners on both sides of the Atlantic. Brussels is going to be consumed with the Brexit process for quite some time. It doesn't mean that they can't put forward policies, and, certainly, after the German elections I think we'll see efforts to kind of reenergize the old Franco-German engine that has driven a lot of the developments inside the European Union.

But, still, there's no denying that Brexit is going to have an impact on Europe's ability to lift its head and look out at global challenges. Similarly here, I think our own partisan infighting and questions about, again, the future of this administration's policies towards Europe, some uncertainty, some contradiction in their policies is also a distraction. So the transatlantic partners I think are consumed with quite a bit of navel-gazing right now and open-ended questions about what they're going to do about their own future, the future of the West, the future of the transatlantic partnership, the future of NATO, the future of the European Union.

And meanwhile, Putin has basically gotten the message in recent years pretty much since 2014 that he can proceed to use an array of asymmetric and hybrid tactics without too many punitive measures. I mean, we have together imposed sanctions against Russia, but let's admit

that those sanctions have yet to stop very aggressive behavior on the part of the Russian government. In the wake of interfering in our own election, he has not seen too many consequences. That may change. We'll see again what we see at this first meeting between Trump and Putin at the G-20 on July 7th and 8th.

But I do think right now, Putin I'm imagining is feeling a little bit of relief in terms of, boy, I can continue to rely on all of these asymmetric tactics, whether it's energy coercion, cyber hacking, propaganda, the list goes on and on, without suffering too many consequences. And that's where I think collectively the transatlantic partners really have to get their act together.

MR. TOWNSEND: It's interesting too in the sense that it's going to be very complex for Putin because while what Julie says is absolutely right and so many of the victories in a sense that he has had, he hasn't really had to lift a finger. We've kind of done it ourselves.

But if he makes a wrong move, he can also have the opposite effect, where all of a sudden he brings people together. An example certainly is what's happening up in the Baltics right now, where U.S. forces are being reintroduced on a rotational basis into the Baltics. NATO's deployed forces up there. There's a lot of ongoing work and money, U.S. dollars particularly, going into rebuilding somewhat the U.S. force structure in Europe as well as NATO. So that was a result of what happened with Crimea and going into Eastern Ukraine. Georgia as well was part of that.

So if he miscalculates and he tries to take advantage of some of the weaknesses that Julie points out, it could have the opposite impact too, and that could be drawing us closer together. So it's complex for him.

MR. DIEHL: You know, from what I've been hearing both within the Trump administration and in some parts of Europe, especially the German government, there's a kind of a hope that everyone can be brought together, including the Russians, over the issue of Ukraine by reexamining the issue of Ukraine, by trying to make another deal that goes beyond (Minsk II ?) and that provides a basis to solve that problem with the United States playing a larger role in concert with the Germans and the French, and would then lay the basis for some kind of reset initiative, which the Trump administration still seems extremely interested in doing.

And so I'm wondering based on – Avril, you've dealt with this issue for years. I mean, is that plausible at all that that could work?

MS. HAINES: I mean, I'd obviously love to see Ukraine be restored in a sense to its original integrity and to have a deal that, you know, mitigates some of the violence and, frankly, tragedy that the Ukrainian people have had to endure. But the deal that you're describing does not sound particularly plausible. I mean, Russia is – I don't think Putin is going to agree to a deal that doesn't involve the scenario in which he feels as if he has significant influence over the government of Ukraine and is capable of blocking essentially their action to join NATO certainly, but then to also engage in further European integration. And it has not struck me that

that has been the kind of deal that certainly I would support individually, but also that I think the United States should be supporting in that circumstance.

MR. DIEHL: Anybody else have thoughts on this?

MR. KAGAN: The only thing that's hard to read, it seems to me, as far as Putin and Ukraine is whether he believes that even if he strikes some kind of deal, in the long run Ukraine is going to fall into his lap anyway, partly because of the Ukrainians themselves.

If you wanted to bet on Ukrainian stability and sort of getting over corruption and all the things that have plagued Ukraine over the long run, you'd be pretty cautious making that bet. And I think that if he can get us to sort of lose interest in Ukraine by having some kind of on the surface pretty good deal, Donbas is still going to be Donbas, you know. Crimea is still going to be in Russia and his ability to manipulate or at least to try to manipulate the Ukrainian system internally will still be there.

So it's just a question of what his calculation is as to how he best gets what he wants. So that's the only part of it but no part of that is a good outcome from our point of view because if Ukraine ultimately becomes essentially an adjunct to Russia, you have a new strategic situation in Europe. I mean, that's what's at stake here. It's not just, you know, Ukraine independence and Ukrainian democracy. It's actually moving Russia's strategic frontier deeper into Europe which begins to return us back to previous eras, when Russia became more of a threat.

I mean, the degree to which we have invited the growth of Russian influence in the world is also rather striking. I mean, I do think we practically – we certainly – it's too strong to say we welcomed them into Syria but we really didn't do anything to prevent them from assuming the position that they have in Syria. And that has really strengthened their global position. It strengthened their position in the Middle East.

And it's all part of this general trend which I think we've been in for some time of thinking that just a lot of these things in the world that we used to be so obsessed with just aren't that important. And that's the larger frame in which all these questions are taking place. But the problem is us ultimately.

MR. DIEHL: Julianne, I wanted to come back to something you mentioned because you brought up on the one hand, Brexit, on the other hand, what the German and French may do after the German election. And I wonder if the divide we're talking about to some extent isn't the divide across the Atlantic, but the divide between the Anglo-Saxon West and the continental European West, which seem to be going in rather different direction at the moment. We have, you know, populist forces very strong in Britain and the United States, isolationism growing in both countries, and yet France and Germany kind of rededicating themselves to kind of more centrist policies, rededicating themselves seemingly to Western values. How do we manage that divide?

MS. SMITH: Well, I think it would be a mistake to take the outcome of the French election and assume that, well, that's a wrap, like France has it sorted, you know. I mean, let's not forget that Marine Le Pen had a pretty decent showing, certainly more so than her father in prior attempts to get the National Front to the highest levels.

And so these populist trends are not just we don't find those waves in the U.K. and here in the United States. We find it all across Europe and you find it in Central and Eastern Europe. You find evidence of it in Western Europe. And, yes, France chose a different outcome. They decided to go with the centrist Macron and they're going to give him a chance. We'll see if he can deliver. Right now, people are enthusiastic. There's a lot of excitement, but it's a pretty tough set of issues to deliver on. And, really, if you think about what he wants to do and what Hollande claimed he wanted to try and achieve, there's not a lot of difference there. And yet Hollande found it incredibly challenging to deliver on a lot of those campaign promises.

So I have a hard time saying, oh, well, we have certain trends that are only evident – are present in kind of the Anglo-Saxon side of the transatlantic relationship. I think this is a collective challenge. Personally I hope America will come through. We don't know. We've been surprised many, many times in recent years by polling, by election outcomes. And I've given up on predicting election outcomes for the rest of my life given what's happened in recent years.

So, you know, September is a ways away and let's see what happens. But I think the bigger question is how will national capitals and leaders across Europe and here in the United States address those populist winds and see if they could give the public more faith in governance and international institutions, maybe even in elites, many of whom are present here today, who knows? So it's all – I mean, it will be fascinating to see what happens here in the United States, in Trump's own determination to deliver a very distinct and different set of agenda items to his base. And it will be very interesting to see how now a weakened Theresa May carries on with her own agenda, including Brexit but far beyond that.

So, again, I think this is a collective challenge, and it's not going to go away anytime soon.

MR. DIEHL: Jim, Macron certainly and rather predictably has been talking as one of his priorities to reinforce European security cooperation and build some kind of European security alternative, independent from NATO and the United States. I mean, how plausible is that, especially given the new impetus that they have from uncertainty about us? And are they going to be provided with an excuse to do what Trump wants them to do anyway, which is increase their defense spending?

MR. TOWNSEND: Well, that's a great question and it's something that we're watching very carefully. Macron's position is a standard French position all long. They always have been great supporters of the European project and the EU and champions of an EU defense establishment as well. It's important for EU defense industry what the EU might do. And so

there are national champions there in France who produce equipment. And so it's important for Macron to say what he's been saying.

But, you know, I would say that in 1998, as Saint-Malo took off and they began to develop within the EU this defense capability, with a lot of catcalls from outside the EU about what the EU was doing and a lot of mistakes as well, the environment has shifted in some ways because of the problems that Julie was just laying out and the problems we've talked about, where the EU has got to be player, has got to be a player with NATO, in cooperation with NATO. It's got to be a player within Europe to increase defense spending and this type of thing. And I think there is a greater realization that the time when this was an ideological thing for France or an ideological thing for a lot of the European members of the EU that they wanted to push this, and, in some ways, it was a finger in the eye of the United States, that was a lot of what was the driving things in the early 2000s, aggravated by Iraq and things. It was a bad time.

I think right now, there is enough concern and fear within Europe that the – you know, this kind of motivation for ideological reasons isn't driving it as much as trying to make the EU more effective in dealing with terrorism, more effective in dealing with a lot of the problems coming out of globalization and the movements of people south to north, dealing with the migrant issue and understanding that the EU has got to work with NATO in order to achieve these things, and work with the United States.

So I think there's more – there is more of a sober-minded approach in downtown Brussels on trying to make this work. Whether they're going to be able to do that, I don't know, because there is the inherent flaw that certainly is within large organizations, such as the EU, where you can only go so far in this kind of collective approach to something like security.

But I think at least if we can wring the ideology out of it and try to make it more practical and make it more oriented towards achieving increased defense spending and cooperation with NATO, maybe it will be effective, but I think the jury is still out.

MR. DIEHL: What's your guess, Avril Haines on that? Are they really – do you think they're likely to step up in response to the pressure that's coming from us or their uncertainty about whether or not they can depend on us?

MS. HAINES: I think Jim's really about right. I don't have much to add to that. I think it's going to be very difficult for them to pull it together at this stage given the additional challenges that they're facing right now.

MR. DIEHL: Bob, if the United States doesn't defend democratic values and traditional Western values, can Europeans fill the gap? Can Angela Merkel, assuming she gets reelected, become leader of the free world as some of the people are calling her?

MR. KAGAN: No. (Laughter.) And, you know, Jim has just gotten out of the government so he – you still sound like you're in the government, and, you know, things are

going to be okay because, you see, you can't work in the government unless you say things are going to be okay. I'm much more – I'm much more –

MR. TOWNSEND: That's why we're sitting next to each other.

MR. KAGAN: It's going to get easier. It's going to get easier. (Laughter.) Look, the bottom line is Europe – in my view – the bottom line is that Europe is getting weaker, not stronger. And the biggest factor of its getting weaker is that Britain has basically ceased to be a great power, partly by choice, partly because of the internal political conflicts. Leaving Europe weakens Britain ultimately as a power, but so does their existing defense budgets, and so does the attitude of Britain. I mean, the whole sense that Britain had to be a great power on the international scene, which, you know, was a sort of – which lasted through most of the 20th century, even as Britain steadily declined in its ability to do so, I think that's mostly gone. I don't think Britons think of themselves as people who should play a big role on the world stage. So that's a big subtraction from Europe.

I think that Europe is going to be concerned with their domestic problems. They are not used to – we've been trying to get them to be a global factor for a long time in cooperation with us. They've not been interested in doing that. I don't think they think that most of the threats that they face have anything to do with military capability. It has to do with immigration and their own domestic issues.

Germany, I think we should say happily, is very afraid of becoming a great power again and is self-constrained in that way. So I think it's just – it's highly unlikely that – and we certainly have heard the rhetoric of the EU has to get its act together, independent force, et cetera, et cetera, at a time when Europe was incredibly optimistic about itself, in the late '90s and early 2000s. Now Europe is incredibly pessimistic about itself, it seems to me that that's just unlikely.

So the absence of us is the absence of anything holding the order together.

MS. HAINES: Can I add to that, and also to I think what was said before? I agree Europe is weaker right now and I think it's much more than the U.K. leaving in many respects. So they have a sovereign debt crisis, unemployment is topical. I think within the last 15 years, they've had declining productivity as compared to other developing economies. They have an aging demographic issue. We're not – I'm not suggesting that we're in perfect shape, my God, but I do see significant challenges for Europe in this respect. And I think that's a big piece of the puzzle that needs to be thought about as we're thinking about how it is that we move forward.

And when we look at what's happening in Asia and in India and we see how the next few decades are going to evolve, I think it's another reason for why it's so important for us to be banding together in effect to try to address the challenges we're addressing. And I think your point earlier about are we safe on the EU in a sense, you know, because, in fact, there are a number of countries, as you point out, not the U.K., obviously, but in many other countries, I think it was – Pew also had some statistics on this that indicated that it was like 18 percent more

of the population in France today as compared to a year ago is for staying in the EU. We see a bump in the number of other European countries.

At the same time, I thought it was very interesting that most of these same countries believe, while they say this, right, that their own country should be making the decisions when it comes to migration and when it comes to trade, right? These are critical issues that are relevant to EU integration. So saying both things at the same time doesn't necessarily give you the same comfort that the first statistic gives you about the future of the EU.

And I think they've got still many significant challenges. And, frankly, we have a number of the same challenges when it comes to essentially economic disadvantages to globalization and to technology trends. And if we're working this through with Europe, I think we're probably stronger in doing that. And I think those are things we're going to need to address in the next few decades.

MR. DIEHL: I'm wondering, if we're going to have trouble at the top in the relationship, which so far we sort of have between President Trump and senior European leaders, and if there's doubt being cast from the White House on the value of NATO, the value of those traditional ties, how strong are these bonds that have been created over the years beneath that top level and what effect can they have? I've been struck, by the way, that to some extent, Congress has been asserting itself a little bit more on transatlantic policy passing the – the Senate passing a bill by 98 to two or something like that to reinforce the Russia sanctions, the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee lecturing Tillerson about the budget. Can those things get us through for a while, Jim?

MR. TOWNSEND: Going back to what Bob Kagan said, you know, I've just been out of government, and so one thing that keeps me hopeful at least over the past few months is we've seen this from the very top, this questioning about a lot of things that we've assumed for years were the pillars of this – of the transatlantic relationship with the West has been that second layer, where whether it's the bureaucracy itself, which I know in a lot of ways it's a dirty term for some, but in fact whether it is that solid effort being made to keep things going as well as people like General Mattis, General McMaster, who we'll see today, and others who on a day-to-day basis are doing the things that are keeping the ties very strong, very vibrant, and very cooperative in trying to move forward and take on problems.

So while when you read tweets and you hear pontification from the White House about NATO and this type of thing, right under the surface there's a lot of work still being done keeping things going. And so where Trump goes in his views about the West, his views about NATO, his views about the transatlantic relationship, wherever that goes, I'm hoping it's going to over time maybe come more closer to the mainstream. I'm not going to bet on that.

But I do know underneath that is a very solid structure that we've all been part of at one point or another that's going to keep things going until we can sort out where Trump and the White House are on these kinds of issues.

MR. DIEHL: Julie, is there a muddle-through factor here that we –

MS. SMITH: Yeah. I think Jim's right that in certain ways the relationship is kept alive because of so many different levels inside government and the people that are committed to the relationship. And there are people settling into some positions, particularly in the Defense Department, that are committed Atlanticists, that have ideas, that want to carry the relationship forward. And that's reassuring.

But what's not reassuring is the fact that when you've got to make a really tough ask of an ally, you have to do it at the head of state level. So let's assume that the United States is going to move forward with, say, 4,000 or 5,000 more troops in Afghanistan, and the allies already know that that will likely mean very specific asks for them in terms of adding more troops to the mission in Afghanistan, NATO's mission there. And that ask really needs to be made between Trump and another head of state.

And if the personal relationship is not there at all or if it's sour for some reason because of these prior engagements haven't quite gone as planned or because the president's tweeting and naming-and-shaming particular leaders, then that makes that ask very difficult. And Mattis could ask 1,000 times and people – you know, Europeans could love engaging with him, other ministers of defense, but they really want to hear from the president and from a president that has already shown some fundamental commitment to the relationship and to the values that we share.

And so, right now, we're in a situation – and, again, this may change – but we are in a situation where I fear that if the president did start calling around to make an ask, either on Afghanistan or say something else hits the headlines in the next couple of days that none of us are talking about here today, then that makes that ask that much harder.

And the other thing I would say is the contradiction that seems to be ever present between what's coming out of the White House and what's coming out of State and DOD can be tolerated to a certain extent. And I think our allies are adjusting to that reality and people are told, oh, don't follow the tweets, don't pay attention, really focus on the policies and the actions we're taking.

But the reality is that it matters. It matters when allies feel that they're constantly left in this state of kind of strategic ambiguity, of we don't know fundamentally where the White House stands, where the president stands, and who's in charge. And even though Mattis and Tillerson are telling us very reassuring things, it leaves us deeply uncomfortable and uncertain to the point in some cases where I think they're afraid to move forward because they're not sure what to take seriously or what to trust.

So I do think Jim's right. Certain bilateral and multi-lateral conversations will continue. There's a NATO defense ministerial tomorrow, I believe, which is great and will no doubt carry on the NATO agenda and do great things. But there's kind of a ceiling you hit with progress if the White House is not behind the world that's going on at that level.

MR. TOWNSEND: That's right.

MS. HAINES: I'd just add to what Julie is saying. I think another aspect of it, too, is related to the poll that you mentioned before, which is the public perception of America in those countries. And I think when – for example, when we're talking about Russia and sanctions against Russia, which we found to be so much more effective when Europe does with us, right, the reality is there are a number of countries in Europe that have significant economic ties and others with Russia. It's very politically difficult for them to take steps under those circumstances. Italy is a good example of this.

If their population is feeling less and less favorable towards the United States and there are other implications to the relationship and they see, for example, the United States say things about their country that they don't like or that they perceive as insulting, it has an impact on the degree to which their politicians can essentially push forward on things that are otherwise domestically controversial.

So it's a – there's another additional space to it. I think that's important from that perspective. It's also just a question of leadership issues too, right? I mean, I think there's possible to maintain things that are already existing mechanisms that are currently in place essentially through our continued contacts and that muscle memory is there. But when you actually want to initiate new things, it becomes much more difficult if you don't have those relationships at the top.

MR. DIEHL: You know, we're just about out of time, but I'd like to end just by asking you, because I think Michèle Flournoy said it very well, we're really uncertain where policy is going, what the administration's policy is really going to be and how – and, therefore, how this relationship with Europe is really going to develop over the next year or two.

So I'd like to ask each of you to say what should we be watching to know where things are really going to go? What are the canaries in the coal mine? What are the key tests – is it Baltics, Ukraine, Russia? How will we know where the relationship is going?

MS. SMITH: I'll start. I think there's a couple of ways to know where an administration is headed. There's trips, there's the appointment of various personnel and then there's a crisis. And we've had a couple of trips. We've had one big trip to the Middle East and Europe where we were able to get some clues. And we're lacking in the appointments department. And, again, some folks are settling into their seats, but State Department continues to be kind of an open book in terms of what types of personalities are going to settle into those assistant secretary positions and undersecretary positions in the months ahead.

So, for me, it's really – I mean, you can watch a lot of things. I'll be interested in looking at the Trump and Putin meeting next week, but I'm really – I don't want to say I'm looking forward to a crisis but I do believe that whatever crisis erupts this year – and there will be one – I think it will lend itself to some real lessons. I think we'll all be able to draw lessons from that experience to understand how this White House looks at the network of allies and partners and

alliances we have, to what extent did he rely on that network? Did he have a more favorable view of that network after the experience of the crisis, and what did we learn collectively from going through that?

And I think even the Obama administration – I mean, let's be clear. Obama came in a self-declared Pacific president, remember. I don't think he really would have branded himself in the early days as a big transatlantic expert or Atlanticist. And, over time, I think Obama also came to appreciate more some of those relationships in Europe, the alliances in Europe, the network of institutions. He was the one that tried to make the case for the U.K. to stay in the European Union when no other European leader seemed to be willing to make that case.

And so you could see kind of President Obama's view towards those partners and allies evolve and maybe with this president we will also see an evolution, God forbid, through a series of crises in the months ahead.

MR. TOWNSEND: I think for me in terms of looking at what's the canary in the mine shaft is engagement by senior European leaders with the president. I think right now there is a great nervousness not just about what's coming out of the White House, what's being said, what does this mean about how the U.S. might work with Europe or not.

But there's a nervousness about just engaging with the president because whether it's the handshake photo op or it's other things that are small but resonate at home quite a bit, I think a lot of the senior leadership are going to not want to come to Washington or certainly not invite the president. And so what we were just saying, what Julie was saying about that senior level relationship – Avril was talking about this, too – the senior level relationships that have to develop so that you can make the big ask, so that you can deal with the crisis – if we're not having the engagement that helps build that senior level relationship, then we're going to start seeing that the way the European nations are responding is by stepping back, keeping him at arm's length and waiting him out.

And so that to me, if we start really seeing that, the numbers of visits dropping, a lot of work being done at that second level or third level instead, then I think that's going to show us – the canary will show us that we've got some major problems here and that the decision by the European allies is we're just going to wait him out. We're not going to engage with the U.S. now. It's too risky.

MR. KAGAN: The canary is already dead. (Laughter, applause.) We're running out of time, right, so I don't want to take too long. (Laughter.) I mean, look, first of all, in terms of – I know we're bad shape. We all know how the American government works. I know we're in bad shape when we're saying, I think Congress is in a good place, I think the bureaucracy is in a good place, it's only the president that's a problem.

The president's made very clear what he thinks about the world. He makes it clear every day. And including when there are crises, which we've already seen some minor crises. His response to crises is to take the narrowest conceivable view of American interests. North Korea

might be able to hit us with a missile, therefore I'm now going to completely reverse or at least seem to completely reverse the policy that I had toward China a week earlier. Germany sells too many cars, so the U.S.-German relationship in his mind is about trade. The Middle East is important because there are terrorists there.

So it's all – if you want to understand what this administration is going to do, you just need to take the narrowest, most self-interested view of American foreign policy, and that is President Trump's basic position. And all the guys can run around saying, no, no, no, no. We care about world order and all that kind of stuff, but it's baloney and everybody is going to figure that it's baloney if they haven't already.

MR. DIEHL: Avril, you've got the last word.

MS. HAINES: It's hard to follow that. (Laughter.) I don't think I can resuscitate the canary on this. (Laughter.) All right. As the optimist in me, I don't actually entirely disagree with what Bob said, unfortunately.

MR. KAGAN: As the optimist.

MS. HAINES: Right. Even as the optimist. But here's the thing. I think to Julie and Jim's point, I think we're hoping that through crises actually, which we all know will happen as much as we don't wish them, that there will be a recognition of the value of the relationship that isn't there right now. And I think that's the – the question is can the canary be resuscitated. In any event, I'm ending on that one.

MR. DIEHL: Well, thank you to all of you and thank you to the audience. A good discussion. (Applause.)

End Transcript