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TRANSCRIPT

Event

The Futures Summit: A New Era of Development
Cooperation
**Fireside Chat with Tom Malinowski, Former U.S.
Representative from New Jersey**

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FEATURING

Tom Malinowski (D-NJ)

Former Representative, United States House of Representatives

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Enoh T. Ebong: Pleased to introduce Tom Malinowski – (clears throat) – excuse me – a former diplomat, human rights activist, and member of Congress who represented New Jersey’s Seventh Congressional District between 2019 and 2023. Before Congress, you held a couple of positions within the Obama administration and Clinton administration, first as assistant secretary of state for democracy and human rights and as senior director on President Clinton’s Council – National Security Council. So thank you for joining us today –

Tom Malinowski: Of course.

Ms. Ebong: – to explore the – really, the future of U.S. global leadership at a very critical and turbulent time.

We’ve just had a clear statement of where the Trump administration is going in terms of U.S. commercial diplomacy. It was focused mostly on Africa, and we’ll get to the question of commercial diplomacy, but I want to start with Congress if that’s OK. You know, bipartisan cooperation in Congress is, I would say, a bit frayed but not completely broken. I think that there is an opportunity for Congress to assert itself and restore its role. I do think that the recent passage of the foreign aid bill is a – is a good signal, but really I think the question is, is there a path forward for centrality of Congress, for renewed bipartisan leadership by Congress, and on this issue of development?

Mr. Malinowski: Yeah. Well, thank you, and good to see a lot of old friends in the audience, and happy to try to help you folks understand what’s going on right now in our country at this very, very strange moment.

I would say that Congress – what Congress is trying to assert, even in a situation where the president’s party controls both the House and the Senate, is something a little bit more normal than what we are seeing from the Trump administration. And the foreign aid bill is an example of that, although it did not restore all of the funding that was cut by the little cabal of drunken fraternity boys who are running the State Department for the last year. They did restore, maybe, you know, 70-80 percent, \$9 billion for global health, when the Trump administration was asking for close to zero, significant amounts of funding for democracy assistance around the world. That’s something for which there is still bipartisan consensus on Capitol Hill. Maybe a little less attention to this, but the renewal of AGOA, the African Growth and Opportunity Act, which has also had bipartisan support traditionally. All of that is a good sign.

But I wouldn’t overstate the impact either, because foreign policy is still very much in the hands of the president of the United States and the

executive branch. Funding for these programs is being channeled through an institution, the State Department, that has been essentially broken. And, of course, we had another institution, USAID, which no longer exists. The capacity of the State Department right now to actually execute these programs is lower than it has been in the lifetime of anybody sitting in this room. And so the impact that we have seen, including lost lives, frayed relationships around the world, is not going to be mitigated until we have a new administration. And that's just the reality I think we have to accept.

Ms. Ebong: So, but just on that point of waiting, in a sense, and it's a bit counterintuitive to wait. What would you say can constructively be done in this situation? Do you have a view? Yes, power passes. We all experience it. But how do we prepare, or frame, so that if there is change, when there is change, there is movement forward?

Mr. Malinowski: Well, look, I'm choosing deliberately harsh language because I think it's important not to normalize what has happened. And I am a little bit concerned, you know, even just, like, looking at the description of this Futures Summit, where you're using language like, you know, "new opportunities for development cooperation," and "new direction," and "reform," and "what is the new strategy?" And I think it's a mistake for us to use language that suggests that this is not an absolute catastrophe, what has happened.

I mean, the combined effects of the aid cuts by the United States and by some of its bilateral partners, according to, for example, The Lancet, will result in almost 30 million deaths around the world between now and 2030. I don't know if that number is correct. It's an estimate. Maybe it's twice the real number. But even if it's twice the real number, that's a holocaust. That is the direct result of decisions made by a small number of men in the United States and in other capitals, and defended by some of the people who are speaking to you today.

And so I don't – I don't – I think it's important for us to be very lucid about that, and understand that there's not really much lipstick that can be put on the pig of what the United States government is doing in the world right now. We can get into some of the details of what they say their strategy is. I think perhaps – you know, if there is a new direction, the new direction we need to be thinking about is the one that hopefully will begin at the beginning of 2029.

Probably every intelligent person who has been a supporter of development assistance and humanitarian assistance would have a critique of how it had been done in the past. It could have been improved, and so we will have an opportunity starting basically from

scratch in 2029 to put the lessons that we've all learned in our careers to good use and, hopefully, find ways to do things better than they were done before.

But until then, we are struggling to save as many people on a sinking ship as possible, recognizing that we will not be able to save everybody.

Ms. Ebong: Thank you for that. It is very sobering, but it's important to keep in mind the cost and also to keep in mind how we maintain the structures so that, again, it's possible to build forward.

So I definitely appreciate the reminder. I think, going along those lines, just to think a little bit about how, for example, I would say the human rights agenda in this context is challenged.

So I think you've been a very strong advocate of human rights as a sort of fundamental component of U.S. foreign policy, of our national interests, even of U.S. investments. That agenda has been completely curtailed, damaged.

Mr. Malinowski: Yes.

Ms. Ebong: So how can it be brought back? And, you know, we're in a moment where there is even question of the respect of the Geneva Convention. So even in that context, how do we maintain, build, bring back this concept?

Mr. Malinowski: Well, yes, it has been not irrevocably but very significantly damaged, and, yes, this has been a big part of my career. I believe very, very strongly that one of America's comparative advantages historically has been that, as imperfect as we are, as inconsistent as we may be, we are associated around the world with an idea that is inspiring to many, many people, an idea that is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions and human rights treaties that have been championed by good people all around the world.

The fact that there is one great power or there has been one great power in the world willing to use its influence and authority on behalf of those values is something that America has benefited from greatly, and we now have an administration that has actively chosen to squander that comparative advantage.

If you look at the administration's National Security Strategy, you will see that they believe that the greatest threat to human rights in the world comes from European democracies because they allegedly censor or persecute right-wing neo-Nazi parties such as the AfD in Germany.

The prime agenda of my former bureau, the human rights bureau, in the State Department is to support those far-right-wing movements in Europe and in other countries. That's basically it.

The refugee policy of the United States right now, as you know, consists solely of admitting white South Africans to this country. No other victim of persecution anywhere in the world is welcome in the United States, and people who have been admitted to this country lawfully over the years are being deported because of things that they have said and written that are critical of the Trump administration.

We are modeling the very behavior that we used to criticize. And you mentioned the Geneva Conventions. We have a secretary of defense whose only ideological commitment is to eliminate restrictions on the U.S. military killing civilians.

It's the only thing he seems to be passionate about, that he cares about, and he has tried to actually put that – put those beliefs into practice, as we've seen in the so-called boat strikes in the Caribbean and the dismantlement of offices and institutions in the Defense Department designed to protect civilians.

I've always believed that the work of defending human rights around the world, the struggle for human rights, is basically an intellectual argument between two different visions of how we should live, how we should relate to – how people, how citizens should relate to governments. There are a lot of tools the U.S. government has used – foreign assistance tools, sanctions tools, diplomatic tools – in support of those objectives. But the most fundamental, the most important thing that the United States government does, and has done in the past in that cause, is to tell a story. It's to make an argument. And right now, we are making the contrary argument. We are making essentially the same argument that President Putin of Russia, that President Xi of China has made, that the world really has no rules, that we should live in a world in which might makes right, and that makes me incredibly sad.

You ask what could be done about this? Choose new leaders. Again, I'm going to be very brutally honest with you. There's nothing that can be done as long as the person who is the voice for America around the world is openly talking about conquering other countries, destroying other civilizations, stealing other countries' natural resources, "we should take their oil." If that is the image, if that is the voice of America in the world, the only way to change it is to change the people who are making the policy and making the statements.

Individual members of Congress, of course, can try to be an alternative voice for America in the world. Congress can pass legislation. It can pass resolutions. It can do things that I think are very, very significant, and I think we'll see more of that, starting next January. But in the meantime, this is the situation we're in. And I'll keep coming back to this. We have to be very honest and lucid about it.

Ms. Ebong: You talk about a response being choose new leaders. It kind of leads me to think about how we are communicating to the American people and engaging with the American people on these subjects. I wonder, as a former representative, if you can speak to that, because it's something that I have spent a lot of time thinking about in terms of how everything has unfolded, and how we as Americans see ourselves, see our country, see our role in the world, and see our future. And I'd really be interested in your thoughts on that.

Mr. Malinowski: I think one piece of good news is that what this administration has been doing around the world is very unpopular with the American people. Most Americans – and I'd say this now with the perspective of having been a politician, campaigning, winning and losing elections, including in a congressional district that is more Republican than Democratic – most of my former constituents, I would say the overwhelming majority of my former constituents, support Ukraine over Russia, which I think is symbolic of a set of values about how the world should be organized.

No one was clamoring to eliminate humanitarian assistance, to allow poor kids to die in refugee camps around the world. No one ever came to any of my town halls saying I'd like to see that. There were plenty of people who would have supported a tough policy towards Iran, towards what is perceived as a terrorist state, but very few people I know, who I met campaigning, would be comfortable with the rhetoric of the president of the United States around destroying a civilization, bombing them to the stone age. Things like that are not where the American people are. And the polls, I think, reflect that.

I think if I had to describe where most Americans are on foreign policy, they think it's complicated. They think it's sometimes confusing. They're willing to be led in one direction or another, because things are very complicated. But, bottom line, they want America to be strong, and they want America to be good. Those are the two basic values. And I don't think they're getting that from this administration, and I think there's an opportunity for people running for office, both in the midterm elections this year and in the presidential election that we'll have in 2028 to appeal to those basic desires that America be strong, yes, but that we also should be good.

Ms. Ebong: But how would you – and I think the good goes to that. But with respect to foreign assistance in particular, because I think that often – or, there have been misconceptions of how much, for example, we provide in foreign assistance. And really, honestly, I think sometimes not having a clear view of what we are doing and how it's impacting people. Is there an opportunity going forward to be able to give better understanding of that?

Mr. Malinowski: Yeah. Well, I think, one, because Trump has gone so far, there's an opportunity to capitalize from what I think will be some buyer's remorse among Americans. There are plenty of good arguments that you can make, that have been made successfully by both Democrats and Republicans committed to international assistance and international engagement. The fact that these programs, at their height, represented less than 1 percent of the U.S. national budget. The argument that we can spend, you know, a few tens of billions of dollars on diplomacy and foreign assistance or trillions of dollars on military engagement that most Americans don't want. That's an argument that resonates.

But I think even more, just at a moral and emotional level, Americans want to be aligned with the good guys and not with the bad guys. Like there's just something creepy to most Americans about the fact that we have a leader who seems to just instinctively agree with guys like Putin in Russia, while abandoning genuine friends of the United States who share our values. It's just not something that sits well with most of the people who I used to represent. And so I think you will see – and I think Democrats are going to win the midterms. I think that's absolutely – that's almost a given at this point. But I do hope and believe that in 2029 we're also going to see a significant course correction in the executive branch.

Ms. Ebong: So let's go a little bit deeper into some of the policies and see if we can unpack those and get your views. With respect to the America first global health policy, there's an emphasis on building government-to-government relationships as the new model, as well as obtaining higher co-investment from partner countries, deepening the private sector role, and then investing in promising technological innovations, and securing access to things like critical minerals. So what do you make of the model? And how would you think through what and how – what would what it would take to succeed? If you assume – if you are coming from the place that it's a model that should be followed either in whole or in part?

Mr. Malinowski: Right. So, remember, the original model was to get rid of all of it. That was the administration's intention. They ran into resistance, both from the Congress and the courts. And so we're now at a place where there is

still foreign assistance. There are still a handful of people at the State Department who are ostensibly responsible for administering it. And they've tried to attach some names and words to what they are doing. There's no model. There's no actual strategy. The people you've heard from at this conference have no authority within the Trump administration. The fact that they are senior bureau officials also should tell you something about their role in this administration. These are not people who have actually a significant amount of influence.

There is an argument that could theoretically be made that foreign assistance should be structured in a way that incentivizes developing country governments to take greater responsibility for taking care of their people. There is an argument that foreign assistance should be better tied to benchmarks of good governance and anticorruption, that we shouldn't simply be fostering dependence among developing country governments that enable those governments to continue to govern poorly. That's an argument that is a coherent argument which some of these guys are now using to justify the chaos that they've unleashed.

But if that were the argument, kind of a more traditional Republican conservative approach to foreign aid, then why the hell are you imposing 50 percent tariffs on the countries that you're ostensibly trying to encourage kind of market business-oriented development? Makes absolutely no sense. Fifty percent tariffs on Lesotho. Like, what is the America first strategy that explains that? There's nothing. That was a temper tantrum by the president of the United States based on a complete misunderstanding of how tariffs actually operate. The belief that – well, anyway, I won't even – won't get too much further into that.

If that is your strategy, why do you try to eliminate the Millennium Challenge Corporation – which was a very good conservative Republican innovation under the Bush administration that aimed to tie more U.S. assistance, development assistance, to good democracy, governance, anticorruption benchmarks. In the end, they didn't eliminate it because, again, they had to retreat from some of their actual goals. But there have been significant cuts to those programs. Entire countries have been taken off of the list of those who might be eligible for Millennium Challenge grant assistance.

If you believe in better stewardship, more responsible behavior by governments around the world that are recipients of development assistance, why do you tell the Justice Department to stop enforcing the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act? Why is it now the policy of the United States to encourage American companies to bribe foreign governments

to get contracts? None of that makes sense if the strategy is what some of these kids that you've heard from say it is.

The actual strategy is better encapsulated by what the president of the United States actually says when he says things like, well, we want to take your oil. And, why should we help anybody if we can't be making money? And by "we," he often is referring to himself, and to his family, and to people he knows who are actually trying to get these critical mineral deals in country after country around the world.

So I'm very, very cynical about it. I think there is a – there is an intellectually defensible conservative approach to foreign assistance, to development assistance, which appears in some of the documents that the Trump administration puts out. But the reality is there is no strategy. There is no plan. The State Department has virtually no role in what happens. You have a small group of people at the very top making decisions that are somewhat random, that are based on the impulses of the president on any given moment, and very highly influenced by corruption.

Ms. Ebong: Let me just, on that point – because we haven't, and I think sometimes we should be particularly conscious of understanding exactly what then our partners in developing countries, in emerging economies, see and understand and want. I think often we articulate on their behalf, or we assume. And I think it's very important in this moment to be factoring that in, and understanding where they are. I wonder if you can share your view on this moment. How, you know, our administration is engaging with developing and emerging economies. and other partners around the world. How do we understand exactly the approach, the reaction, and the engagement? Because it is ongoing.

Mr. Malinowski: Yeah. Well, I can't speak to the reaction because I can't – I mean, I'm not going to speak for other governments around the world. I can say something about the engagement. You know, we still have formally an institution called the State Department. There is no policy process within the administration. In past administrations there was something called the National Security Council, which would convene different agencies in determining, say, what our policy towards a particular country or region in the world should be. All the agencies would give their input. When there would be differences of opinion they would be resolved by senior officials. Policies would then be set. And they would then be understood to all the players within those institutions. And then they would be executed.

None of that is happening right now. There are five or six, maybe seven or eight people in this administration making decisions, sometimes

together, sometimes in opposition to one another. The State Department has been sidelined, the State Department bureaucracy – the people who work there, the people who might come to a conference like this. The National Security Council barely exists. Marco Rubio, as you know, is the national security advisor, but doesn't seem to be playing a coordinating role.

In terms of engagement with foreign states, you know, the State – there are still ambassadors around the world. The State Department has officials who travel. But then there are all these people who kind of report directly to the president who are members of his family, who are former business partners, who play special roles in special situations, who are deployed by him to make deals including on issues like critical minerals and investment, export controls. And then there is kind of a whole kind of underground influence economy that has arisen in Washington, D.C., that is primarily aimed at those people around the president.

If you are a developing country government right now and you absolutely need something from the United States, something life or death, my advice would be, sure, you should talk to the State Department and to the American ambassador in that country, but what unfortunately you really need to be doing is to spend about \$100,000 a month on a lobbyist who is aligned with some member of the Trump family, or with a senior White House official, or who perhaps has Donald Trump's cellphone number and can text him. A lot of business in Washington is being done in this way. So if a country wants to get out from a particularly onerous tariff decision, or wants to cut an investment deal with the United States, or to offer up critical minerals as part of some diplomatic bargain, that is the way in which that business is being done right now, not through the normal official channels but through these informal economies that, unfortunately, are making the United States, again, resemble some of the countries that we have criticized in the past.

Again, I'm trying to be very brutally frank and honest with you guys, but this is what we see happening. And it can be changed and it will be changed. (Laughs.) This is still the United States of America. This is not the way most members of Congress want us to be functioning. It's certainly not the way most Americans want us to be functioning. But the president has a lot of power, and we have to – we have to deal with that for the time being.

Ms. Ebong:

So to the last point you made about change, you know, the world is still going on, and there is work being done as we speak around the world to be able to address and move forward in some ways even in the – in the

circumstances. I think that the spring meetings that will start next week will sort of bring all that into focus. We do still have agencies – you mentioned MCC. We have, of course, agencies like the DFC, Ex-Im, U.S. EDA that can all be harnessed, including in this moment. How should we think about making best use of these capabilities that both we have internally and across the world as well?

Mr. Malinowski: Well, they still exist, fortunately, and there's still some funding. And that funding, despite everything I said, can still do some good. So we should all be trying to make the best of the terrible situation in that way.

I think there is a lot of thought being given around the world to decoupling or at least derisking from the United States, a lot of thought being given to new partnerships and new arrangements that don't depend on American leadership and participation. It makes me sad to even say those words, but I think that's – that is a rational reaction to what's going on. We're seeing it in the security space as European countries, for example, are thinking about building the European Union up as kind of an alternative to NATO. Perhaps there are conversations in the development space as well to, along similar lines, establishing new alliances, new partnerships that can function even if the United States is where we currently are.

I don't think any of that precludes the United States resuming some version of the role that it used to play and in fact maybe the most optimistic thing I can say is that in 2029, 2030 the United States will have sane leadership again and we will find a more capable set of partners that have become more capable because they've had to survive for at least four years without the security blanket and the financing that the United States – that they sort of have taken for granted from the United States for many, many years.

I do believe, more optimistically, although, you know, it's not like we can flip the switch in 2029 and everything would be fine and forgotten, I do think – I believe in the law of supply and demand.

As long as there is a demand in the world for a great power that stands for something larger than itself and is willing to mobilize power and resources on behalf of the common good, as long as that demand exists and the United States is willing to supply some part of that demand, then I think a lot of good can be done and a lot of good can come out of it.

I just don't want us to pretend in the meantime that things are other than what they clearly are. So, yeah.

Ms. Ebong: No, thank you.

Actually, my last question was going to be what gives you optimism and hope and you answered that to some degree. Is there a last word that you would want to add to that?

Mr. Malinowski: Yeah. Look, I still don't think there's an alternative to the United States playing that role. Clearly, other great powers like Russia and China are going to try to take advantage of this vacuum of moral leadership that has been created by the Trump administration.

But, you know, at the end of the day, I don't think China is willing to or capable of providing what the United States used to provide. I certainly hope most countries around the world see that, even if there may be kind of a sentiment that one way to teach the Americans a lesson is to go and do business with the Chinese.

I think that – I think governments and countries that do that will regret it because I don't think the Communist Party of China is in fact capable of or interested in advancing the common good in the way that the United States and its allies used to be.

So my hope is that we survive the next three years with as little damage as possible, that the countries committed to the causes that we believe in increase their capacity to act without American assistance.

That would be a good thing, something past American administrations wanted, by the way, and that in 2029 they will have an American partner again, and that perhaps when we rebuild the house that burned down we'll build it back better than it was before.

Ms. Ebong: Mr. Malinowski, thank you so much.

Mr. Malinowski: Thank you.

Ms. Ebong: You have given us a very clear-eyed view, so thank you. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

I'm going to ask you, the audience, to just stay tight again for another shift of the stage and we'll be back shortly. Thank you.

(END.)