

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Press Conference Call

“Chancellor Angela Merkel's Visit to Washington”

Featuring:

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H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: Thank you very much and good morning to everybody. I see we've got terrific participation. I see we have reporters that – some of you are liked by the White House. I see Steve's (sp) on the line, actually. Some of you are not liked by the White House. We like all of you. So we're happy that you're here.

And we're happy that Heather's here – Heather Conley, our senior vice president for Europe and our Europe program director, and Jeff Rathke, her deputy this year. They're going to give you a rundown. I know time is tight so we're going to jump right into it, as to what we can expect from the Merkel visit. And we're also going to talk a little bit about Dutch politics as well. So, with that, I'll hand it to my colleague, Heather Conley.

HEATHER CONLEY: Andrew, thank you. Good morning, everyone.

Well, what we're going to do is I'll do a preview of the meeting in the Oval Office. Jeff Rathke, my deputy director and senior fellow, will provide a little context, he was just in Berlin a week and a half ago, to give you a sense of where the German thinking is and an election update on the upcoming September German election. And then I'll just do a real quick at the very end—because the day after Chancellor Merkel meets with President Trump we have the Dutch elections. So we just thought we'd take a second in there on those upcoming elections and what they mean for Europe and the transatlantic relationship.

So as we were thinking about this meeting, I have to say, I turned again to President Trump's interview in January with The Times of London and Bild to sort of pull some threads for this upcoming meeting. And I think my favorite line is in a question about Chancellor Merkel, President Trump said: I respect her, I like her, but I don't know her. So Tuesday will give President Trump an opportunity to get to know Chancellor Merkel.

Normally when we prep for these meetings we'll give you a laundry list of the key issues that these leaders are going to have to discuss, work through, agree, agree to disagree. But I – my approach is slightly different for this meeting. I think this is not a meeting to go through the list. It's actually a really important meeting to set up the tone for the relationship in itself, in fact creates a modus vivendi for these two leaders to really create a more stable framework for this critical relationship.

We know in press reports that Chancellor Merkel has been doing her homework on President Trump, reading a lot of his speeches and trying to understand his approach. She is the longest-serving European leader. She has seen European leaders come and go – very charismatic, very dynamic, very boisterous leaders. So she has this history and this approach to leaders that may be in fact very unpredictable.

The stakes for this meeting, I would argue, and for this relationship even more so, are very high. The U.S.-German relationship is one of the most critically important international relationship for the United States, and clearly it's the most critical relationship for the U.S. with a European power. For the past eight years, the U.S. has preferred, quite frankly, to outsource a lot of American – European responsibilities to Berlin and, at the same time, hasn't always been supportive of German economic policies in Europe, whether that's through austerity and its approach to the European economic crisis or whether that's been Germany's very high – historically high current account surplus.

So the task of a new administration is not necessarily to outsource responsibilities to Germany, but to help cultivate the U.S.-German relationship. So I think as I look at this relationship, I'll just another one of President Trump's quotes from that interview. In asking about his own German roots, Mr. Trump suggested that – he said: I like order. I like things done in an orderly manner. And certainly the Germans, that's something they're rather well-known for. But I do. I like order. And I like strength.

And I think this is a great lens to look at this relationship, between order and strength. There is great strength in the German economy. Germany is America's largest European trading partner. It clearly has great export strength, which has caused concern for some in the Trump administration about America's trade deficit with Germany. It's been described as one of our most difficult issues. And certainly, again, Germany's current account surplus, the highest in the world at 8.7 percent of GDP – although, figures today suggest that that is starting to come down and import and domestic demand is starting to increase – this is certainly an aspect of strength that the Trump administration is quite concerned about.

But in order for German economic strength to continue there needs to be order and rules, such as the WTO, and understanding what the Trump's administration's approach to that will be. Germany also wants rules and order when it comes to the eurozone fiscal and debt disciplines. And again, how she sizes up Mr. Trump's view on international trade rules I think will be an interesting outcome of this discussion. Germany also has great economic strength when it comes to China, another cause of concern for the Trump administration. China is now Germany's most important trading partner. So we have a lot of economic strength and vulnerabilities. And this is why the German-U.S. relationship is so vital.

Germany is also – both its strength and its rules-based order is the glue for the European Union's sanctions policy vis-à-vis Russia, and implementation of the Minsk Agreement for both – for eastern Ukraine. And Germany is a vital partner when it comes to Europe's policy approach to Russia. It's important to note that Germany will lead a NATO battalion in Lithuania for NATO's enhanced forward presence. It is helping to train the Peshmerga in Iraq. It has forces in Afghanistan. It is an important partner – a security partner to the United States.

And finally, German both economic strength and its rules-based approach will very much shape the future of the European Union. Not only what the EU-U.K. relationship will be after Brexit – German economic policies and its pragmatism will shape that. German policies will shape the future of Turkey's relationship with Europe. And that is a very, very fraught relationship at the moment. German policy is vital to the western Balkans, which I note is a highly unstable region at the moment. And of course, it will be very – German economic support for countries in North Africa and the Middle East, migrant origin countries, this is all extremely vital.

So, as I said, all roads lead to Berlin. That's why this relationship is so important. The Oval Office meeting next week will be the first in a series of meeting that Chancellor Merkel and President Trump will participate in from the G-7 and NATO summit to the G-20, which Angela Merkel will host in July in Hamburg. So this is an important relationship. This will be an important meeting that will set the tone for the entire relationship.

And I will turn this over to Jeff.

JEFFREY RATHKE: Thank you very much, Heather. And thanks, Andrew.

I'll talk for a moment about how Germany sees the U.S. administration, and then we'll shift to the implications for Germany's upcoming elections. I just spent last week back in Berlin and talked with a number of officials, and analysts, and journalists while I was there. And I would characterize it this way: I think Germany views the United States with equal portions of puzzlement and concern at the moment. There are a variety of reasons for this, some of which Heather alluded to: President Trump's open attacks on Chancellor Merkel for her handling of the refugee and migration crisis in 2015; the affinity of the president and some in his inner circle for nationalist and populist movements in Europe raises concern among Germans that the U.S. could support the unraveling of Europe, which would have enormous consequences for Germany; the questioning of U.S. support for NATO, which has been the cornerstone of international security and certainly of European security since 1949; and also allegations from the president and some of his economic advisors that Germany uses the European Union and the euro currency to the detriment of the U.S. economy. This raises concerns about protectionist instincts that ignore the realities of 21st-century value chains and the deep mutual economic interdependence between the United States and Europe.

On the security and defense side, from my discussions, I think the – although they were welcomed, the speeches at the Munich Security Conference by U.S. officials fell a bit flat, and there is still lingering doubt about the – how the U.S. sees European security, and whether the U.S. sees its security and Europe's security as intrinsically linked and inseparable. And I think that will be a key point that the chancellor will want to discuss and get a better sense of, and where I think the president speaking publicly on that topic will make – would make an enormous impact.

Germany itself is raising the amount it spends on defense. Its defense budget grew last year by 8 percent, which, when you consider the – you know, it is still below the 2 percent of GDP target, but when you consider the size of Germany's GDP and, you know, its enormous importance, a rise of 8 percent which will continue into the future is also quite significant.

So I think what Merkel will be looking for in dealing with, you know, her own domestic opinions is to come out of this meeting seen as a steward of the transatlantic relationship, but also not to be too closely identified with any one particular policy or another of the Trump administration because she's got an election coming up in six months, at the end of September, and it has become a neck-and-neck contest. There have been a number of polls come out in recent days. Some of them have Merkel and her party ahead by a point or two. Others have the – or, sorry, her coalition partner, the Social Democrats, ahead by a point or two. The important thing is that the trend over the last two months has been for the Social Democrats to gain in strength. They're up by about 11 percentage points in the last two months. Merkel's Christian Democrats have lost somewhere around 5 percentage points. And the far-right Alternative for Germany, AfD Party, has lost about 4 percentage points in the last couple of months. So you see the Social Democrats taking votes or support away from others.

One open question is whether the decline in support for the far-right AfD is also a sort of anti-Trump effect. Are Germans turning away from the AfD as they observed the beginnings of the Trump administration? It's quite clear that in German public opinion the Trump administration enjoys very low support, about 12 percent support in a recent poll, most Germans not supportive of the early moves of the Trump administration.

What all this means politically is that very likely the alternative that Germany will fact after this election is another grand coalition. You'll have about six parties in parliament. It is hard for any of them to come up with a working majority. There's maybe the possibility of a left-wing coalition, but

even that would be quite tenuous under current you know, public support numbers. So they're probably going to have to govern from the center.

But I think this is an election campaign that's going to be fought to a significant degree by the Social Democrats and others positioning themselves against the policies of President Trump, and against the populist and nationalist tendencies more broadly in Europe. That's, I think, going to be a hallmark of this campaign.

So how Chancellor Merkel can maximize her chances in that environment, it's a tightrope walk. She wants – she needs a strong transatlantic relationship, doesn't want to be too close to the U.S. administration. She's done this before. She was chancellor when George W. Bush was president. They had a very productive relationship, even though George W. Bush was very unpopular in Germany, and she was able to get reelected even after having worked in that delicate balance. So there is certainly the possibility, but I think we face a time where Germany's own politics is going to inject a bit of friction in this relationship, regardless of what comes out of Washington.

With that, I'll hand it back to you, Heather.

MS. CONLEY: And very briefly, because we want to get to your questions and we know you've got another (NSC ?) briefing to attend, really next Wednesday the Ides of March, for those who love Shakespeare, is really the kickoff to a very, very significant election year in Europe, with the Dutch elections. We have all, with regard humility, looked at polling data, but we offer our reflections on this. And in some ways it also has an impact on the German elections, to see really where populist/nationalist/Euro-skeptic parties and how well they will fare.

The Dutch elections are extremely difficult to either understand or predict because we have 28 political parties that are part of this process. But the last trends we've seen – and this speaks to Jeff's comment very much on the Trump effect – we are seeing where the Geert Wilders Freedom Party has certainly – again, if polling is to be believed – has been decreasing in popularity from what it was, at least last fall and even earlier this year. So I think we're seeing that there's some reflection about the election of populist and nationalistic parties.

We are seeing a big bounce, if you will, in the green parties in particular, liberal parties, which is D66. But clearly, the parties that have been leading, the establishment parties – which is Mark Rutte's party, VVD, and the other coalition parties – they are going to lose seats in this election, but it looks like there's a little bit of a balancing act from what I could all more liberal, more European-specific and supportive parties.

So this will be a test. We will see. The Freedom Party, the Geert Wilders party, will do better than the last election in 2012, but it's unclear if the party will do as well as had been predicted several months ago.

So this is really going to be an incredibly important year for Europe. And the Dutch elections will sort of send off the gun, which is a warmup act to the main event, which will be the French presidential elections.

So, with that, we welcome your questions. Thanks so much for listening.

OPERATOR: (Gives queuing instructions.)

Our first question will come from the line of George Condon of National Journal. Please go ahead.

Q: Great. Thanks so much.

Two questions, if I could. I doubt that the president will be able to say that he's drawn bigger crowds in Germany than President Obama did, but are we likely to see any big public protests? And secondly, is this also a sort of test of our new secretary of state? Is Europe watching as much as we are to see whether or not he has any role in foreign policy or whether everything comes out of the White House?

MS. CONLEY: George, thanks so much. Obviously, I'm not as concerned about public protests, to be honest with you, for the Oval Office meeting. I think we, although, are watching when – sorry.

Q: I'm sorry. I totally mixed one thing up there, sorry.

MS. CONLEY: Oh, yeah. The question of public protests I think will come when the president does travel to Europe, certainly Brussels I think when he attends the NATO summit at the end of May. I don't know if we're looking at demonstrations. We'll certainly watch that space.

You know, I think in some ways the comparison of when candidate Senator Obama went to the Brandenburg Gate in 2008, I think in some ways that time and era has passed. In any event, I'm not sure it's helpful to suggest that. But I think watching very large demonstrations when President Trump travels later to Europe – later in the year is certainly worth watching.

For me, as far as Secretary Tillerson, I believe he will be in Asia – if I understand his travel schedule correctly. He may not be present for this meeting with Chancellor Merkel. And he was just in Bonn obviously for the foreign minister meeting of the G-20, has met his interlocutors. I think that's a space that we're just continuing the watch, the State Department's role in not only meetings but in shaping a policy.

Q: Well, don't we find it absolutely remarkable that the secretary of state wouldn't be there?

MR. RATHKE: Well, you know, I think in my experience it's a question of when the secretary is traveling as a principal and when he is supporting the president for – you know, in a meeting. It's not – it's not unprecedented in any way for the secretary to be traveling on an overseas mission when at the same time you have a foreign leader visiting the White House. So, you know, I don't think – and in fact, you know, given where the secretary is traveling next week, you know, clearly a high priority on issues that are, you know, at the top of the international agenda, especially dealing with North Korea's recent behavior, missile tests as well as the assassination of Kim Jong-nam, and how we work with our Asian allies to deal with North Korea.

So I don't think that specifically is a concern. I think the next – the next big issue for Secretary Tillerson probably will be – you know, the NATO foreign ministers are going to meet in April. That will be the next stage of preparing for the end of May NATO mini-summit or leaders meeting, whatever you want to call it. And so I think, you know, that's going to be another important meeting to watch.

OPERATOR: Our next question will come from the line of Howard LaFranchi of Christian Science Monitor. Please go ahead.

Q: Hi. Thanks for doing this.

Heather, you mentioned the relationship between Merkel and George W. Bush. And I take it you don't expect Trump to massage Merkel's shoulders, but I'm wondering what – you know, what kind of hints, both in terms of, you know, Trump's position on – you know, where he really is on, like, the European Union and nationalism in Europe and support for NATO – you know, what kind of hints or – you know, he's kind of said things on both sides. So I'm wondering what – you know, if you expect we might really get some clarity or what you'll be looking for.

MS. CONLEY: So I'm not – thanks, Howard. I'm not entirely sure if we know if the two leaders will be doing a brief summary, I mean, how they're going to handle the public part of the discussion of the meeting—whether they'll take two questions or something more formal, as we saw with – when Theresa May met with President Trump. I think some things that I'm looking for is certainly not the more provocative statements that we've seen from Mr. Navarro about the economic issues, you know, something more pointed about the immigration issues. I think we'd like to see some reassuring statements of the importance of the trading partnership, wanting to work with Germany very, very carefully.

We have issues that we need to address. But again, creating that framework, and to try to get this a little less so acerbic in these statements, which again require German leaders to publicly make defensive statements – it enters into their domestic election environment as well – is just not helpful to both sides. This relationship is too important. We have to find the way through it. And I think – so I'm looking for those sort of statements of we're working our way through this and not having the more inflammatory statements about the catastrophe of Germany's decision on immigration – this currency manipulation issue on the euro is just not factually correct. So making sure that we – that Mr. Trump understands this is a vital year, Europe is vital to the U.S. strategic interest, and we need to find that path forward.

I was very heartened after the May meeting that in some ways I think Mr. Trump has heard from a variety of European leaders that he's spoken to, either by the phone or that in-person meeting with May, that a strong EU, a strong Europe is very important to the U.S. as well. So hopefully we'll hear some of that reflected as well.

MR. RATHKE: I would – I would just add to that – I agree with that, and I would just add that I think – I think the chancellor is going to be prepared to – you know, to talk about her advocacy for NATO reform, including for increased sharing of the defense burden and Germany's, you know, needing to do its part. I think that's something that she'll be ready to say, and I think that'll probably help the president, since he has emphasized that issue to such a great degree. But in return, I think the chancellor will want to hear a clear commitment, you know, not just to Europeans spending more, but to the U.S. ongoing support for NATO.

Q: Thank you.

OPERATOR: (Gives queuing instructions.)

And we have a question from the line of Guy Taylor of The Washington Times. Please go ahead.

Q: Yeah. Hi, guys. Thanks so much for doing this. I'm sorry I joined the call a little bit late.

I wanted to – if you already covered this, I imagine there will be a recording or transcript maybe, but I wanted to ask a little bit about the domestic political situation more in Germany and this perception that the Trump administration is showing overtures, at a minimum, and possibly more support for political – nationalist political parties and sentiment, not just in Germany but around Europe. And how – that maybe you could lend a little bit of insight into how that impacts the German preparations for this, and Angela Merkel's whole perspective towards the Trump administration. And I apologize; that's very broad, but I think you probably know what I'm getting at.

MS. CONLEY: Thanks, Guy. I'll handle sort of the broader sort of political alignment, if you will, with more far-right parties in Europe, and I'll leave it Jeff to talk about the domestic environment within Germany.

I mean, clearly we have been watching whether the president's several meetings with Nigel Farage, the former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party, whether there's – obviously, the opening of new media outlets, new Breitbart media outlets in Europe, that there's some view of sort of connecting political parties that have similar views on immigration, nationalism, economic issues. I would argue there's a common strain of more of a pro-Russian approach through those parties, that – in fact, President Trump's own words that he was encouraged that there would be more Brexits and that would be a good thing for the United States. So this has led EU officials, and I would argue Chancellor Merkel, to be increasingly concerned that – in fact, Donald Tusk in a letter said that this actually was a threat – the U.S. was a threat to the future of the EU's unity for suggesting that it was a positive thing for there to be more EU countries that will leave the EU.

So while I think there is reason for us to explore and to understand what exactly the ideological outreach is to these parties that are both anti-European – I would argue many of them are anti-American in their view and anti-NATO, which works against U.S. security interests – I don't think we really have a full appreciation and understanding if this is symbolic of similar views on a whole lot of issues, or that there's a concerted effort to link these groups.

And I'll turn it to Jeff for the domestic issues.

MR. RATHKE: Thanks, Heather. And good to talk to you, Guy.

You know, when I was in Berlin last week, I talked with a number of people about whether they saw any evidence of contacts between either people in the White House or people in that orbit with the AfD, to get specifically to the Germany question. And, you know, there don't seem to be such contacts, although there are clearly some – you know, there have been a couple of members of Congress from the Republican Party who have traveled to Europe recently and have tried to, you know, advocate for more contact between the U.S. and those parties. But I don't think there's any evidence of it at this stage.

If there – if there were, of course that would be – that would be taken very seriously by Chancellor Merkel, but I think also by all parties in Germany. They would see it as extremely unfriendly for the United States to be interfering, in a way, in an election in support of one particular

party. And, I would also add, even if some folks in the United States got the idea that they could – they could help these far-right parties, you got to keep in mind that the Trump administration is so deeply unpopular right now in Germany that it would probably be counterproductive if there was any attempt to provide public or tacit support to them. So I think there are some real limits to what the U.S. could do, and there's not any evidence right now of any – of any significant concerted effort to develop ties with the AfD.

If you look where the AfD is building out its ties, it just – they just had all their senior leaders in Moscow, where they signed a cooperation agreement, if I'm not mistaken, with Vladimir Putin's party. I'd have to go back and check that, but I'm – they certainly had meetings in Moscow with representatives of the Russian Duma, and the AfD was heavily criticized when they came back to Germany because that meeting in Moscow included Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, ultranationalist Russian party leader. So, again, there are – the postwar democratic Western-oriented consensus in Germany is still extremely strong, and you see it, you know, coming out against a number of these steps by the AfD.

OPERATOR: And we have a follow-up question from the line of George Condon of the National Journal. Please go ahead.

Q: Right, thanks. Heather, you mentioned how high the stakes were, but have expectations ever been lower in Europe for a – for a president? Even when we had governors whom they didn't know or didn't think were experienced – you know, whether it was Carter in the Trilateral Commission or of the other governors and deep travel – they all had made efforts to show that they had a mastery of the issues. We haven't seen that this time.

MS. CONLEY: You know, I think it's – I don't know if I'd phrase it, George, as sort of expectations. I think it's trying to – trying to start a relationship knowing that there is great turbulence within the administration as it continues to appoint people and reflect on a lot of policies. I think in some ways it's managing through these meetings, getting some strong messages of assurance that we understand where the Trump administration's policies will be despite a lot of contradictory statements. So I'm not even sure expectation is the right word. I would say we have to think about these things as managing through a fairly turbulent moment, trying to begin to establish that relationship and that framework, and setting down a clear set of markers of values and principles.

I think it's important to note that in Chancellor Merkel's congratulatory note to then-President-elect Trump, she did something that was, I think, a little unusual for leaders: she stated she looked forward to the cooperation – the continued cooperation based on a set of values. And it is extraordinary that our partners have to reaffirm that we have this relationship based on those values, but I think that is very much the lens through which Chancellor Merkel views not only the U.S. relationship, European relationship – whether that's on the four freedoms – and in some ways her restatement of those values speaks to how far I think we have slid in our own assessment and analysis of where policy needs to be.

So in some ways she's a reminder of our principles and our values. She does not do this in an arrogant way. She does not do this in a wagging a finger, if you will. But reaffirming that's the basis on which this relationship has continued and will continue to be, and any movement away from that will reduce the relationship by definition. So, in some ways, I think she's a steady – she's an anchor to this. Whether we choose to anchor our own policy based on those principles is something that we're watching very closely.

MR. RATHKE: If I could just add, I want to clarify one thing I said in response to Guy's question, which was about connections between the AfD and Russia. It is the youth wing of the AfD which signed a cooperation agreement with the youth wing of President Putin's United Russia Party. So that's – I just wanted to be more specific about that. That was not part of AfD leader Petry's recent trip to Moscow, which involved contacts with Russian parliamentary leaders.

OPERATOR: Next question in queue is also a follow up, from the line of Howard LaFranchi of the Christian Science Monitor. Please go ahead.

Q: Yeah, thanks. So I guess, Jeffrey, what you were just saying, though, it reminded me, I mean, kind of the place of Russia and Putin in this conversation hasn't come up. And I'm wondering if that's something that, you know, in Germany has been discussed, either in the press or if there's any indication that Merkel will bring this to the conversation, because I know there is concern in Europe about Russia's, you know, perhaps meddling in the electoral processes that are – that, Heather, as you explained are, you know, very important in Europe this year. So I just wonder if we have any sense of what place Russia and Putin might have in this conversation.

MR. RATHKE: Yeah. Well, certainly Russia policy is at the top of Germany's list when it comes to European security, and the election of President Trump led to some uncertainty in Germany about whether U.S. policy toward Russia would be changing. It seems for the time being that basically President Trump, willingly or unwillingly, is continuing the Obama administration's policy toward Russia for the time being, and I think that's something that Germany welcomes. Germany is extremely concerned about Russia's intervention in eastern Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea; also, as you – as you pointed out, Howard, their attempts at interference in German domestic politics. There have been several, including supposed hacking of the Bundestag by the same organization that was hacking the Democratic National Committee, among other things. So there is – there is real concern about Russia's role, and that is shared – it's not just in Chancellor Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, it is – it is shared by other – by other parties.

And I think, you know, as an indicator of how seriously Germany takes this, if you go back to the Munich Security Conference and look at what German Defense Minister von der Leyen said, you know, she warned against the United States seeking a separate deal with Russia. Which is a pretty remarkable statement, because for decades it's been Americans saying that about Germany: don't seek a separate deal with Russia; we need to – we need to remain united with regard to Russia. And the fact that the German defense minister felt enough concern to say that publicly I think indicates the level of sensitivity that they have.

But I think for the time being, you know, it appears the policy is not going to change. Germany seems not to be backing off the sanctions policy with regard to Russia. And so it looks at the moment as if that will continue, but it'll certainly be on the agenda for the discussion with the president I'm sure.

OPERATOR: And our next question in queue comes from the line of Guy Taylor of The Washington Times. Please go ahead.

Q: Thanks again. Thank you again. This is so helpful.

Back on this domestic politics stuff, I am wondering if you both feel that there's real domestic political risk for Angela Merkel to be appearing to pander to Trump on this trip. I mean, it seems as if the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats are polling way out in front ahead of Germany's parliamentary elections. So I'm trying to figure out, you know, does she stand to take a hit politically by showing up with Trump? I'm thinking about how it went for Theresa May and her visit.

And attached to that is, do you have any idea who else she's going to be meeting with? Is there a chance that she'll try to make some kind of media splash with Democrats, perhaps on Capitol Hill, particularly if the Trump White House puts a real clampdown on any Q&A with reporters during her visit with President Trump? Thanks.

MS. CONLEY: Thanks, Guy. You know, there is always a risk when two leaders meet that there will be a disagreement, that something will be said at the press conference that will be used by different forces politically. That is true even in the best of relationships.

I don't believe Angela Merkel is assessing her domestic risk by coming through this meeting. This relationship – the United States is a critical actor for Germany economically, and from a security standpoint this relationship is so important that we – I am encouraged that these two leaders are meeting. I was extremely encouraged that Theresa May was the first leader in the Oval Office to meet with the president. The president should meet with our key allies: Japan, the U.K., Germany, others. This is really important. We've got to get this relationship right, these two leaders. While a personal relationship isn't the be all, end all, it's important. It sets a tone. She's doing the right thing by coming here.

But absolutely there is always a risk of things that have nothing to do with the bilateral relationship happening, something being said that actually takes all the energy away from the importance of the meeting into something else. But she's coming here for the right reasons. She will manage these issues. But this is a relationship that requires the highest level, and I'm glad she's here early and will have a chance to get to know Mr. Trump.

MR. RATHKE: I think the only risk to her would be if she failed to – if she were not seen as advocating Germany's interests, which are also European interests. So there's not – there's not a risk in coming. I agree completely. If something crazy happens and the president says something that takes her by surprise, then that'll be the challenge to her to think on her feet and to stand for Germany's interests. But I think she's somebody who has a lot of experience in dealing with those kinds of situations, so I think that's how she'll look at it.

OPERATOR: There are no further questions in queue at this time.

BRANDON SCHWARTZ: All right. This is Brandon from CSIS. Thanks for joining the call. We're going to have a transcript made up and it'll be sent to all of you fairly shortly, in the next couple hours. Thanks again.

MR. RATHKE: Thanks. Good talking to you.

(END)