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**Defense 2030: Transatlantic Security and Strategic  
Competition**

**“Keynote Conversation: Global Threats – The View from  
the United States ”**

DATE:

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FEATURING:

**Jonathon Finer,**

*U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor*

CSIS EXPERTS:

**Heather A. Conley**

*Senior Vice President for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic; and Director, Europe, Russia, and  
Eurasia Program, CSIS*

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Heather A. Conley: Thank you so much. It's wonderful to be with you. And I could not be more grateful that Jon Finer is joining us, deputy national security adviser, to roll up our sleeves and get into this conversation. Jon, first I want to say congratulations on such a successful presidential visit. Four summits? That's a little bit of an overachievement. But we're delighted everyone's back. And now we're sorting out all the work that happened during these summits.

And, you know, the first challenge I think anyone has as they're sitting at the White House looking at all the pressing global challenges is priorities. So, I'd love to hear from you giving your thoughts on – from the White House perspective – really the global strategic priorities. Strategies are about choice. And it's hard to prioritize those challenges, but we would welcome to hear your thoughts from the White House perspective. Over to you.

Jonathon Finer: Well first of all, thanks very much, Heather and CSIS, for having me here. And you're right, I think we set a high bar on this first presidential overseas trip. I think there had been a lot of, frankly, pent-up diplomatic energy based on the lack of ability to engage during the course of the pandemic. And I know the president was really looking to getting overseas and to being able to interact in person with his key counterparts. And we felt good about how that all played out, and happy to talk about it more.

On priorities, I think you're exactly right. For a country like the United States, that has global interests, setting priorities can be both an opportunity and a challenge. But I think what you've seen in the course of this trip in particular is that the President is really making good on his commitment that everything we do in foreign policy is going to be with and through our key partnerships and alliances. That's not just rhetoric, that's really how he sees the world. He sees that as a huge force multiplier and strategic advantage of the United States that, frankly, had been allowed to atrophy during the course of the previous four years before we came back to office.

And so, we talk a lot about China. You know, you hear Secretary Austin in the defense context talk about it as the pacing threat for the country. We definitely declare that as being our top strategic priority, but even our engagement vis-à-vis China is going to have to be conducted in partnership, in close coordination with our key partners and allies. And that really starts in Europe.

Heather A. Conley: Absolutely, Jon. And I think someone who used to be the foreign policy speechwriter for then-Vice President Biden, you have the president's instincts. You know how he thinks about these things. And I have been

struck by President Biden's reframing, I would argue, of sort of the international system as we see it. We have gone from a national security strategy that looks at the world through a great-power competition lens, a strategic competitor. The president is framing this as democracies versus autocracies. Tell us how that reframing—as you think through the priorities, whether it's China, climate change—help us understand that framing and then again place our European Union allies right in that. How does that work?

Jonathon Finer:

Sure. Well, the last two administrations—two U.S. administrations—had prioritized either great-power competition or transnational threats, respectively. You know, our view coming into office in the moment that we find ourselves in is that we didn't have the luxury of picking one of those two challenges. The United States is challenged fundamentally by both, as are our partners and allies, and we needed to key our eye on both balls—not just great-power competition which characterized the Trump administration's approach, but also elevating transnational threats like the pandemic and like climate change, and others, which really was at the forefront of how the Obama administration described this strategic landscape.

And so, you know, I think you saw that play out in the course of the summits. There was quite a bit of discussion about China, quite a bit of discussion about Russia, particularly in the run-up to the president's conversation with President Putin. But also lots of activity, lots of, frankly, progress on climate change and on the pandemic, and particularly the vaccine deliverable that came out of the G7. And I think that's really the core of what the president means when he talks about democracy and autocracy.

He's not talking about a Cold War style kind of twilight struggle between the two systems. He's talking about a competition—essentially about which system can deliver better for our people in our countries, for the world, which system can best address the big problems that we face. And we're making a big bet that that's democracies. The president says often, betting against democracy, betting against the United States has not been a good bet historically. We believe that fundamentally, but we have to put up.

Heather A. Conley:

Absolutely.

Jon I was really struck, again, the sequencing of the president's trip. We met with our G7 allies and then with our allies at the NATO table, at the U.S.-EU table, before he went to Geneva to meet with President Putin. There has been an extraordinary amount of coordination and

collaboration between the United States and the European Union vis-à-vis- Russia, vis-à-vis Belarus. After our conversation, our next panel is going to be exactly on this topic. And specifically, hybrid warfare, cyber, disinformation, illicit financing—something that I know, particularly anti-corruption—the Biden administration is really focusing on. Help us understand again in security and defense—which is a large basket—where can the U.S. and the EU play an even more productive role when it comes to addressing the challenges that Russia poses.

Jonathon Finer:

So, I think you're absolutely right about the sequencing which, as you know, is never accidental. I think we believed it was critically important. We talk often in this administration about engaging the world from a position of strength. For the United States, that meant getting our arms around the pandemic inside our own country, it meant getting our economy on stronger footing. And frankly, fundamentally, it meant getting our partnerships and alliances into a better condition even as we, and even in some cases before, we started to engage countries with which we have a much more challenging relationship.

And so, I think you saw that play out both thematically and substantively in the course of the president's visit to Europe. He saw the G-7, he saw his European Union counterparts, he saw his NATO counterparts, and then he went into the conversation with President Putin able to say, look you know the West is aligned and is on the same page with regard to both the opportunities and the threats posed by Russia, and Russia has now the ability to decide what sort of relationship it wants with us. And that is going to fundamentally play out over the course of the coming months.

The president was extremely clear with President Putin, as he had been in their telephone conversations, that there are certain aspects of Russia's behavior that not only the United States, but our partners and allies find fundamentally unacceptable. That is, to a large extent, steps that have been taken in the cyber domain. It is aggressive actions that Russia has taken in its near abroad. It is its treatment of dissidents both at home and abroad. And the president is able to engage very directly, very candidly, while also offering Russia the opportunity to try to find areas in which we can work together, and we are going to test that proposition.

You know that coming out of the conversation with the Russians we are planning to launch these strategic stability talks. We think that is fundamentally in our interest, in all of our partners' and allies' interests, to be able to have arms-control conversations with the Russians. We are going to need to show progress on the set of cyber issues, in which there has been, frankly, some very disturbing events that have taken place in recent months, and we are going to be testing the proposition that Russia is able to actually bring about change that is positive in that area. We will

hold them accountable, frankly, for actions that take place from their territory, whether they are state actions or conducted by criminals.

Heather A. Conley: Yeah. Those strong messages, those red lines are very powerful, and they take all of us with our allies in holding leaders to account.

Let me turn to China. We talked about how important the economic relationship is. Where would you like to prioritize the U.S.-EU relationship? Vis-à-vis China, we now have a Trade and Technology Council. We know, again, that technology is so important. But would love to hear your thoughts on that.

Jonathon Finer: Yeah. So, on China and to some extent on Russia, the U.S. engagement with the EU and with Europe broadly is about who is writing the rules by which responsible states, you know, will behave. In the cyber domain, you know, the United States has updated its cyber policy—NATO and the United States put together their cyber policy for the first time in seven years, which is, frankly, a big step towards how these issues should be engaged in by, again, responsible countries. And that will then be extended to conversations with our adversaries as well.

On the set of economic issues, as you say, the launch of this Trade and Technology Council is fundamentally about two things. One, the United States has some differences with our European partners and allies. It is working through them, and you saw a major step forward in working through those differences with the Boeing-Airbus set of agreements that were reached in the context of that summit.

But it's also about writing rules—rules for how technology will be regulated, rules for how trade will be governed going forward. And as long as the United States and the European countries are converging, and we've seen a high degree of convergence on this set of issues during the first five months of this administration, it will strengthen our hand in dealing with China and anyone else who, frankly, has a fundamentally different concept for how the international system should work than the nations in the West.

Heather A. Conley: Jon, I think many of our listeners would be surprised to know the depth of the U.S.-EU security agenda, particularly when it comes to thinking about migration, climate, Africa. That's going to be some of the discussions we're going to have tomorrow throughout this Defense Forum. And while I just have you here for a few minutes, again, getting back to strategy and priorities, I'd love your thoughts thinking about both Africa, not only the pandemic but we see climate, we see conflict. How can we work more purposefully with our EU colleagues across the board on those challenges?

Jonathon Finer: Absolutely. So, in Africa we see, obviously, enormous opportunities, opportunities to engage economically with African economies, also really challenges, fundamental security challenges in places like the Sahel and then increasingly in Ethiopia. And actually, I would point you to the fact that the G7 really elevated the prominence of what is transpiring now in Ethiopia, which has been described as famine, which is described as atrocities being perpetrated. And the G7 actually focusing on that issue, we think, was critically important, putting that issue higher up on the international agenda.

But I think too often we kind of describe Western engagement, U.S. engagement here, pan engagement with Africa through primarily a human lens. There are huge economic opportunities, frankly, for both the nations of Africa but also for the United States and the Europeans in that continent as well, and we are going to be working together to pursue those going forward.

Heather A. Conley: Fantastic.

Last, let's talk a little bit about climate. We saw the White House's climate summit in April. Of course, the G7 focused on this. We're on the road to COP-26. The EU has been a climate leader in prioritizing this and seeing it as a national security imperative. Would love your thoughts on, again, climate as security. We do a lot of focus on the Arctic. I know Secretary Blinken was just in the Arctic region. Help us understand where again the EU-U.S. relationship will be a driver on climate security.

Jonathon Finer: Yes, absolutely. And look, there is, in many ways, no higher priority for all of us in the near and medium term than getting a better approach globally to issues of climate change. This is why President Biden, in his first few months in office, hosted the Climate Leaders Summit. All of our climate work obviously is in service of having a successful conference in Glasgow in the fall and actually increasing the ambition globally of countries in terms of their commitments to reduce emissions. That is what Secretary Kerry, now our special envoy for climate, is traveling all over the world trying to encourage. The United States has put down a new emissions target and updated emissions target after, frankly, four years of not only not focusing on these issues but in some sense kind of undermining the global efforts on this. We know we've got a big hole to dig out of here, and we are truly committed to leading on this set of issues.

I guess the other thing I would say on climate in particular is this shows, frankly, the importance of the EU continuing to engage on security issues. There are certain issues that sort of cross the boundaries of traditional kind of alliance work, obviously NATO being our foremost

transatlantic security institution, and that touch on economic issues, that touch on issues like climate change that don't just confine themselves to simply economic but are also fundamentally security issues as well. And so, making sure that the EU's approach is coordinated to a large extent with NATO on some of these things. And cyber is another one of these areas that has an economic dimension, has security dimension—underscores sort of the importance of making sure that there is security work going on in the context of the EU, which has developed significantly in recent years, but also that's coordinated closely with NATO.

You know, the Arctic, as you say is an increasing area of security concern and even competition, with an increased Russian and Chinese presence. But it's also fundamentally about an area in which we are focused on the climate dimension, focused on the economic dimension. All this has to be integrated in our approach.

Heather A. Conley: Well, Jon, not only did we just go through the agenda for the EU-Washington Defense Forum, that we're going to dive deeply into all of those issues, but you've really given us a fantastic overview of the breadth and depth of the U.S.-EU security and defense agenda. We love this allied-centric approach. It's really giving us a boost to the work and research that we are doing. So, thank you so much for taking time out of your very busy schedule with the very complex global challenges ahead of us. And we look forward to continuing our conversation throughout the Defense Forum. Thank you again for joining us.

Jonathon Finer: Thank you, Heather. Good luck with the rest of this event.

Heather A. Conley: Thank you.

(End.)