

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

“President Trump’s Transatlantic Visit”

Press Call

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2ND Floor, CSIS Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

FEATURING

MODERATOR

Caleb Diamond

Media Relations Coordinator, External Relations, CSIS

CSIS EXPERTS

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Transcript By

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Caleb Diamond: Hello. Thank you for joining today. My name is Caleb Diamond, and I work in the External Relations Department here at CSIS. Welcome to all of our participants on today's press call on Trump's visit to the U.K., France, and Ireland.

I'd like to start off this call by introducing our speaker, Heather Conley, senior vice president for Europe. After Heather finishes, we will open up for questions. And with that, I'll hand it over – hand it over to her.

Heather A. Conley: Caleb, thank you so much. Good afternoon, everyone.

I just thought it might be helpful to take just about 30 minutes to go over the president's itinerary next week and then just to touch on some themes that I'm looking for in the visit, and then I look forward to taking your calls.

I have to say, as I was preparing for this discussion, I have to say I looked through the lens of the trauma of President Trump's visit last year to Europe – the NATO Summit in July and then the working visit to the U.K. and then the Helsinki Summit – and, in fact, thinking about the different parts of that visit as he begins another European trip beginning at the end of the week.

So let me begin with the U.K. As the president noted last year as he was finishing up his working visit, he noted that the U.S.-U.K. relationship was at the, quote, "highest level of special," and I think that's a great place to start because a state visit is very special. It is an honor that is given very selectively to countries. And I think we all have a full appreciation that British soft power in this regard is extremely powerful and at its best. I think President Trump is perhaps looking most forward to his interactions with the royal family and, of course, the highlight of the state dinner.

And so, again, I think, like his visit to Japan last week, this is going to be very focused on the ceremonial. But there will be an opportunity for bilateral discussions with Prime Minister May; of course, this her last week as prime minister before she formally resigns and then becomes a caretaker prime minister.

And when you look at the U.S.-U.K. relationship, there's a lot of bilateral disagreement. And certainly, first and foremost, is on Iran. This is where the U.K. has remained very faithful to its position with the other EU member states, the EU 3, France and Germany with the EU, on preserving the Iran nuclear agreement. And also we had the other week where a British general was expressing skepticism of seeing potentially the uptick in Iranian military activity in the region. So Iran is definitely not a place of agreement in the special relationship.

There's also disagreement on China, and certainly the conversation over Huawei. Secretary Pompeo's visit the other week to London certainly publicly laid out the stakes for the U.K., although the U.K. has not made any decisions, formal decisions, about Huawei. This is going to be a very fine balancing act between maintaining an economic relationship with China in a post-Brexit environment, as well as maintaining close ties to the United States.

On trade, it'll be very interesting to see what either Prime Minister May or President Trump talk about, the potential of the future U.S.-U.K. free-trade agreement. We still have tariffs applied. Certainly if the president in six months were to impose auto tariffs, that would certainly impact the U.K. economy. So this is, again, a very fraught conversation; on the one hand, wanting the benefits of a bilateral free-trade agreement, but seeing where the United States is using all of its leverage with its special relationship to maximize its benefit.

There's, of course, disagreement on the Paris Climate Accords. There's partial disagreement on Syria and the president's very surprising announcement to remove U.S. forces from Syria, to only have U.S. forces remain in Syria. That's put some tension into the relationship, as well as the return of foreign fighters.

And then, finally, on Russia, where the British government and the United States government agree on Russia policy. Certainly President Trump's view of Vladimir Putin is quite different than, I would argue, Prime Minister May's is. And it will be interesting to see if any of that conversation comes forward in the public event.

So after the state visit ends, they travel to Portsmouth, where, again, really the D-Day anniversary events begin. That, again, will be largely ceremonial.

The president then leaves the U.K. and travels to Shannon, Ireland, where he will see the Taoiseach again. He just saw him in March for the St. Patrick's Day festivities. We imagine that there will be some significant demonstrations around Shannon Airport, which is in the VIP lounge, which is where finally both sides agreed to have that meeting.

The Taoiseach is coming on the tail end of a very encouraging victory in the European Parliament elections for his party. And he will certainly want to reemphasize the challenges that Brexit will provide to Ireland. And he will also raise climate issues as well.

After that bilateral meeting, the president then goes on to his resort. And then the president moves on to Normandy, where, of course, again, the events and anniversary celebrations will really focus on those remaining veterans that will be celebrating this extraordinary anniversary and their extraordinary bravery.

The president will see many of the leaders in Normandy just in a few short weeks after this visit at the G-20 summit. And, of course, he returns to France at the end of August for the G-7 summit that is led by France. So let me just very

briefly touch on some themes that I think will be very important as you think about this trip.

Certainly, the 70th anniversary of D-Day is a very powerful reminder of the sacrifice of the Greatest Generation, a generation that is rapidly leaving us. Yet, at the same time as they're leaving us, we're seeing the green shoots of fascism taking root across Europe, and this is, I think, a huge issue of concern. When a German government official has to warn members of the Jewish community not to show any outward signs of their faith, this is again a reminder that we have to remain very vigilant about the forces of darkness that encased Europe prior to the Second World War.

I think it's also important – and I hope President Trump appreciates the full sweep of history when he visits not only Portsmouth, but Normandy – that European unity is very much an American project; that Europeans' prosperity and security are interlinked with America's security and prosperity; and that this is a project that needs America's support, it does not need America's encouragement of its increasing fragility. So I hope those are some themes that are taken to heart.

And I'd just leave you with a quote that Taoiseach Leo Varadkar of Ireland mentioned a few weeks ago. He said: "The president of America is always welcome here. We respect the role no matter what we think of the person themselves." And I think this is, in fact, where there may be demonstrations in the U.K., in Ireland, perhaps even in France, that the role of the United States is what is being honored even if there are strong disagreements with the policies of the president.

So, with that, thank you so much for your patience. I look forward to your questions.

Mr. Diamond: Amy (sp), can we open it up to questions now?

Operator: (Gives queuing instructions.)

Our first question will come from Anne Gearan, Washington Post. Please go ahead.

Q: Hi, yes. So, Heather, could you just expand a bit on that last point there about disagreements with the president? Particularly in the U.K. at this moment with Brexit, in such uncertainty, I mean, it just sort of seems like from the British point of view Donald Trump is likely to stir the pot and make things worse. What do you think about the timing? And what do you think about that idea?

Ms. Conley: Yeah. Hi, Anne. Thanks so much.

Yes. I mean, obviously, this comes at such a difficult moment: the end of Prime Minister May's official tenure; the results of the European Parliament elections, which were absolutely devastating and showed a very divided U.K. And then,

again, what we know is how the president traveled to the U.K. last year, his Sun interview which was so critical of the prime minister and her tactics towards Brexit, very complimentary to Boris Johnson. And so you just – we don't know if there were lessons learned from their approach last year for the working visit and that, you know, we won't have interviews, we won't make things worse or more complicated and difficult inside the U.K. But I think we aren't going to know until the public comments potentially come out or the president provides us with his thinking via Twitter.

And what I'm watching very closely is the breakfast discussion. As part of the visit there will be a discussion with U.S. and U.K. business leaders, and that's exactly where I'm sure the uncertainty of Brexit, where the business community is now increasingly alarmed at a no-deal Brexit.

I'm also very curious to see who, in fact, attends Ambassador Johnson's dinner at the residence. Is this where Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson, perhaps other conservative contenders will be invited? Will the president really begin to weigh in on the conservative leadership contest? What will that do to a deeply divided U.K.?

So I absolutely – I can only sort of see this through the window of last year's visit. It made things more difficult for the government and, as I said, I don't think the U.S. needs to help push in that department. We have a growing list of bilateral disagreements that we have to work very hard and address. But as I said, this visit feels to me much more ceremonial in focus and may try to glide over this growing list of disagreements.

Operator: Thank you. And our next question will come from Margaret Talev from Bloomberg News. Please go ahead.

Q: Hi, Heather. Thanks for doing the call.

I'm wondering how much more you can tell us about what we're expecting with the president's interactions, if any, with Boris, with Farage, with any of those folks you mentioned and any more detail on the Johnson dinner. As you might imagine, the White House has not gone over the schedule with us yet. So we're learning many things from you. But also, more broadly, when you look at the two stops, both in the U.K. and in France, do you think it's possible that the president – that President Trump makes it through without rattling or testing or poking the U.S. alliance?

In other words, if it's the 75th anniversary of D-Day, right, this is an event that's supposed to honor and strengthen and bolster the NATO alliance, and he very often tests the NATO alliance. And I'm just wondering what you're hearing or thinking about how he handles that.

Ms. Conley: Margaret, thank you so much.

And I have to say what I know is from what I'm reading and piecing together from the British press, the Irish press, as far as the details of the visit. So, as I said, I think that the place where it is most likely, should the president have an opportunity to meet with Mr. Farage and Mr. Johnson, it will be at the U.S. ambassador-hosted dinner. I have no idea if it will be invited to that list, but that's my suspicion that that would be the most opportune moment. And as you know, for the state dinner there have been some declines from U.K. political party leaders from Vince Cable of the Lib Dems, of Jeremy Corbyn of course. And then the speaker of the House, John Bercow, has declined that invitation. So I'm watching as closely as you are and, hopefully, the White House can provide those details.

You're absolutely right. These days, from Portsmouth to Normandy, is a celebration of the strength of allies. No one power could have defeated Nazi Germany without the strength of all of our allies. And so, hopefully, the president will focus on the U.S. veterans that are coming to this celebration and honoring American sacrifice, but understanding that we cannot be successful without allies. If he takes the opportunity to raise issues like European defense spending or undercuts NATO, again, this simply undercuts U.S. national security and it's difficult for me to imagine a U.S. commander in chief wishing to do that. I think this'll be carefully scripted to try to prevent that from happening, but the president certainly has many ways of reaching us.

So I'm hopeful that this is a powerful experience for the president in understanding the strength of alliances and it's why the Greatest Generation created NATO. It is what enhances U.S. and European security, particularly as we're hearing announcements that the Russians may be violating the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in addition to their violations of the INF Treaty, as well as a myriad of other international treaties and agreements that have gone to the wayside. We now need our allies more than ever to preserve stability.

Operator: Thank you. Our next question will come from George Condon, National Journal. Please go ahead.

Q: Great. Thanks. Thanks, Heather, for doing this.

First, a logistical question. You mentioned the G-7 in France. Is there confidence in Europe that the president will actually attend that? I understand that he has not yet accepted that. And, secondly, on a broader thing, how awkward is the meeting going to be with Prime Minister May? You mentioned the ill-advised interview last year as he was arriving. Is there resentment on the part of her people and the British about the way he's undercut her throughout his presidency?

Ms. Conley: Hi, George. Thanks so much for the question.

You're right, I am making an assumption that President Trump will attend the G-7. We also are going through the traumatic lens of last year's G-7 in Canada. But as I said, not – I have not heard differently about that, so I will hope that the president will attend.

You know, you're right on Prime Minister May. But I was actually very encouraged; when the prime minister announced her resignation, the president was quite gracious in his public comments about the prime minister, that she was strong, she worked hard, didn't work out as she had planned. These were – these were very gracious comments, particularly in light of the criticism he has sent her way for how she has managed this. I hope in her final week, as well as the graciousness of the state visit, which is the highest honor a country can give to another country, that he reciprocates that graciousness this week. But only time will tell.

Operator: Thank you. And our next question will come from Hannah Monicken, Inside U.S. Trade. Please go ahead.

Q: Yes. Good afternoon. I was just going off – wanted to go off of a little bit of what you said about the timing of the visit and prospects for bilateral discussion. I mean, given Theresa May's, you know, resignation, and some Trump officials who have, you know, kind of come out in support of a harder Brexit, you know, to secure sort of a more comprehensive U.S.-U.K. trade deal, I mean, what kind of discussions on particularly – (clears throat) – excuse me – trade issues are possible sort of given those extenuating factors and some of what's been talked about with, you know, Trump's past comments?

Ms. Conley: Yes, thank you so much. It's interesting that, again, last year when President Trump was visiting the U.K., he talked about a quick, very massive U.S.-U.K. trade deal. I think a year later we just – we remain in limbo, although bilaterally USTR and the U.K.'s department for exiting – sorry, the International Trade Department have been working in working groups and doing as much as they can to outline the parameters or the framework of a bilateral agreement, but they simply will not be able to proceed until there's clarity on the future relationship between the U.S. – sorry, the U.K. and the EU.

I think, though, our British colleagues have gotten a foretaste of the very difficult negotiating tactics that the U.S. is using, whether it's on agriculture and elsewhere. This is not about, I think, seeing where the U.K. is vulnerable in a post-EU environment and buttressing it; I think this is using U.S. trade leverage to get – receive as many gains as possible. So I think this puts the U.K., actually, in a – in quite a difficult position of having to make some choices between the EU market and potentially U.S. trade engagement.

So I think no decisions can be made. I think the president can talk up a very – you know, a massive, a big deal. But I think that the pragmatic issues, we simply won't know what we will be able to do until there's a little more clarity on the future relationship between the EU and the U.K.

Operator: Thank you. We have no further questions at this time.

Mr. Diamond: Sure. I think if there are no other questions I think we're going to end here. We'll have a transcript posted to our website shortly.

Oh, it looks like we have two more.

Ms. Conley: Good.

Operator: We have a follow-up from George Condon, National Journal.

Q: Right. Hi. Sorry to jump in again, but the – can you talk a little bit about – the Irish visit seems so at odds with how American presidents usually go to Ireland. He’s so intensely unpopular, and the leadup to the visit about how much it would be based at his golf course seems to have caused problems. Is this anything more than just a “I want to visit my golf course” stop?

Ms. Conley: Well, George, I mean, this has really been a fraught stop. If you’ll recall, last year it was a very surprise announcement by the White House a visit to Ireland was in the works. It was very quickly sort of out of the blue withdrawn, I think leaving some Irish government officials quite surprised and scrambling. And then absolutely you had this challenge of where to hold the meeting, the president wanting it to be at his golf resort, and the government insisting that it be at a place, as they are the host, of their choosing. And so the VIP lounge at the Shannon Airport was ultimately selected.

You know, what strikes me about this – I have to go back in the record books, but the fact of the matter is we have not had a U.S. ambassador in Dublin for two years. We have a charge d’affaires. This is extraordinary for a relationship, an Irish-American relationship that is so strong and so profound. The fact that we don’t have a U.S. ambassador to me underscores that, you know, this has just been a problematic issue that we cannot seem to resolve.

You know, again, bilaterally the issues are not great. The taoiseach was just meeting with the president in March. There are true disagreements about the EU and the value of the EU to both Ireland and to the United States. Quite frankly, I think there’s concern that the U.S. underappreciates the destabilizing role of Brexit for Northern Ireland and the Good Friday peace accord, which was such a product of U.S. leadership.

So I think there has been a drift in this relationship. I mean, this is important symbolically for an American president to visit Ireland. But you’re absolutely right. The demonstrations will be there. In fact, the taoiseach was quite clear that he said in a democracy it is fine to promote, you know, demonstrations. That’s democracy in action. And, of course, that does not make the president very happy when he sees demonstrators. So it’ll be an interesting visit. But this has certainly been a fraught stop to schedule in a place where it should be quite easy to do so.

Operator: Thank you.

The next question will come from Gabby Orr, Politico. Please go ahead.

Q: Hi. Thanks for doing this.

I just wanted to ask you to talk a little bit about the president's relationship with Macron and what their bilateral discussions are going to look like. It seems as though there's going to be, you know, an attempt on the French part to play up this idea of Remembrance Day and the 200-year alliance between the U.S. and France. And I'm wondering just how much you think that they'll sort of use that to cover the fraught relationship between the U.S. and France right now.

Ms. Conley: Thank you, Gabby. It's a great question.

I mean, in some ways, speaking of state visits – (laughs) – it was a year ago that President Trump was welcoming President Macron to Washington in this full celebration of that relationship. And over the ensuing months, President Macron has in some ways become the polar opposite of the president. When the president speaks of sovereignty, President Macron speaks of multilateralism. Obviously the focus on climate and wanting to seek a European renaissance and being sort of – like the term the populist dragon slayer. You know, this is – President Macron is playing the antithesis to President Trump.

I think the personalities will be a bit subdued, as you rightly said, to keep the focus on this event, the liberation – the beginning of the liberation of France. Of course, this is an incredibly difficult period of reflection for France and the Vichy regime. And there's some historical reflection – you know, President Macron with some historical reflection about that period.

But again, all of these leaders, both Prime Minister May, the taoiseach, President Macron, are coming to this visit on the heels of European Parliament elections, which saw Marine Le Pen squeak by as leading the French and the European Parliament elections. It has been a very difficult six-month period for Macron with the gilets jaunes movement. He's had to make some significant adjustments to his reform agenda. He's continuing to plow ahead. So these are difficult moments.

And again, it gets back to does the president want to highlight the difficulties and make it more difficult for these leaders, or does he want to lift them up and try to encourage them in their pursuits? And hopefully this is an occasion that's so important that he will resist his temptation to weigh in and perhaps make things worse. But we will just have to see.

On the one hand, the president prides himself on having great personal relationships with leaders, but yet their interactions with him on substance are so very difficult and challenging. And you sort of have to separate those two streams a little bit. I believe at the end of the day leaders have to move substance forward. They have to work on the great issues and endeavors of the day, and that's what these meetings are about and the symbolism is about. And I think we're just seeing where there's just very little movement on the substantive agenda. If anything, sometimes things appear to fall and take a few steps backwards.

Operator: Thank you. And we have a follow-up question from Margaret Talev, Bloomberg News. Please go ahead.

Q: Hi. I had actually just wanted to ask about the Macron piece too, so I think you've answered it pretty well. Just from what we knew that the very brief, almost like blink-of-an-eye moment, unless there's something we're – (laughs) – not aware of.

Ms. Conley: You know, Margaret, I think, again, you know, it is all about body language. So I think the Normandy event is, you know, how are the leaders interacting? How is the president – you know, is there smiles and handshakes and, you know, again, good personal rapport? Are we seeing difficult moments and tensions, sort of all of that famous photo from the G-7 meeting in Canada, sort of the look of tension? I think that's all we will have to go on, as well as sort of reflections from the meeting.

As I said, I – my greatest hope is this – the president and all the leaders stay focused on the extraordinary heroism of that – of D-Day and focusing on what brought allies to that position; that it seems to me that it's – that we have these – these dark clouds are forming once again in Europe, and rather than encourage those forces we need to find much better tools to defeat them. So, you know, I just hope this is a very powerful experience for the president, and we will see.

Great question. We'll all be watching, and you all will have a front-row seat in watching this trip unfold. You have to keep us all informed.

Operator: Thank you. No further questions at this time.

Mr. Diamond: Sure. So, as I was saying, we'll have a transcript posted on our website shortly and we'll email it to you all as well. Thank you, everyone, for listening in. And again, thank you to Heather for joining us today.

(END)