

# **Center for Strategic and International Studies**

## **Press Conference Call**

**“British Prime Minister Theresa May’s Visit to the United States”**

**Featuring:**

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Europe Program, CSIS;**

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Eurasian Affairs**

**Moderated By:**

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COLM F. QUINN: Thanks, Tanya (sp).

Well, thank you, everyone, for joining us today. I know that it is certainly a busy, busy time.

I'm not going to spend too much time talking, just to give you some of the – some of the housekeeping issues. We'll be putting out a transcript directly after this, so probably early this afternoon just take a look for that in your inbox.

I'm of course with Heather Conley, who's our senior vice president for Europe, Eurasia and the Arctic, and also the director of our Europe Program at CSIS. I'm going to hand over to her, who's going to give a brief overview of the trip and what to expect, and then we will move over to questions.

So, without further ado, I'll hand it over to Heather.

HEATHER CONLEY: Thank you, Colm. Good morning, everyone.

Just – I'll go through just a few things very briefly and then really look forward to your questions. As I was preparing for our discussion this morning, I have to say my mental headline for this trip is "America first meets global Britain." So we will see. And then jokingly I was thinking perhaps the most important question the press pool covering this visit will ask is, has the bust of Winston Churchill been returned to the Oval Office, if you'll all recall that controversy in 2009.

But seriously, this will be a very interesting visit for so many reasons, particularly because it's the first visit for President Trump with a foreign leader. We'll be looking for who exactly will be participating in that meeting. Clearly the discussion is going to be both trade and national security, foreign policy issues. But – so for me that's one issue, who on the American side will be participating.

And secondly, the larger question, which we may not know until well after the meeting, is will Theresa May become an influential voice – a mentor, if you will – to President Trump? In some ways, the – President Trump has mentioned sort of the Reagan-Thatcher dynamic. Will, in fact, Theresa May be able to provide some counsel there? So, a question.

So it seems to me that there's a great deal of interest in putting the "special" back into the special relationship. This relationship has certainly struggled, I would say, really over the last 10 to 15 years, politically struggled through the Iraq War, through – and then I would argue difference and changes in the U.K. government agenda in 2010. But it's just – it might be helpful just to take a step back and review what in fact does make this relationship so special historically.

Well, first and foremost, one of the most unique facets of our relationship is our intelligence-sharing relationship. It's perhaps the strongest in the world. And I think again, some of those issues – we're going to have to continue to watch and understand how that intelligence relationship evolves, particularly in light of President Trump's very bumpy relationship with the intelligence community and of course the question of the dossier. Will in fact this relationship and the intelligence-sharing maintain its strength if not increase it?

The second element of the special relationship is the military relationship. And I think this is where very uniquely Prime Minister May is going to be able to offer President Trump – I hope – a pretty strong description of why NATO is in U.S. strategic and security interests. The U.K. is one of

the five countries that spends over 2 percent of its gross domestic product on defense spending. It is one of the lead members of the four NATO battalions that will be protecting NATO's eastern flank in the Baltic states. It has, of course, always had a very strong view and presence on operations in the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria.

So again, how will that relationship evolve? It's always been very strong. We'll have to see. And there's certainly a very strong nuclear component to that relationship. And, of course, Prime Minister May has been under a bit of a controversy about a failed missile test on their Trident submarine. So that's the second key pillar of the special relationship.

The third pillar, of course, is the economic relationship. And, of course, this is where the thrust of the visit will focus. And again, you have two powerful, important economies both really rethinking their trade and economic approach to the world. The Trump administration clearly are rethinking multilateral trade agreements, whether that's NAFTA, TPP or even potentially TTIP, and taking a more protectionist stance. And you have the U.K. that is, you know, really reorienting its trade in some ways away from Europe, its main trading partner, and to a more bilateral global trade approach.

So that – those are the three key elements of the special relationship, and all three are going to be undergoing some stress and some strain.

So what will come out of today – Friday's meeting? You know, again, we will see if President Trump does in fact state very clearly that the U.S. and the U.K. are going to explore with great enthusiasm a bilateral trade agreement during the two-year period as the U.K. leaves the European Union. And we're looking for signals again on what that trade agreement might contain, again understanding that both parties have different needs out of that trade agreement.

I think there will be some strong messages on the fight against ISIS and terrorism. But again, it will be very interesting on Russia. There will be a divergence of views where President Trump will – has certainly been telling us he will have a better relationship with Russia, still don't have the contents of what that is; and the U.K. has had a very antagonistic relationship with Russia – and how that, again, impacts NATO in its core mission.

Again, also we'll be looking for signs, particularly any statements that President Trump may make, about the European Union. Theresa May said the other day that she wants to reinforce with President Trump the very – the importance of a strong NATO and a strong Europe and to thread this needle very carefully. While she needs a strong U.S. government support for the U.K. and trade and throughout the negotiating process at the EU, she also has to be very concerned that this not become antagonistic towards the EU as she's negotiating simultaneously with the European Union. So a very delicate dance that we will – we will watch very carefully on Friday.

So with that, let me pause, and then I will let you all begin with your questions. Again, thank you so much.

OPERATOR: (Gives queuing instructions.)

First question will come from the line of Margaret Talev with Bloomberg. Please go ahead.

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

I wanted to ask you if you can walk us through a little bit what she's going to be doing with the Republicans on Thursday at that retreat, why she's doing that, and whether that's unusual, just a coincidence of timing because they were already going to be there, or, like, whatever. How's that going to work?

And then on the relationship with Trump, I think because Brexit kind of pre-dated Trump's elections, a lot of Americans think that May and Trump are somehow kind of equivalent leaders in terms of upheaval, I'm wondering if you think that's right or whether the Brits are regarding Trump very differently and kind of how the Brits are receiving Trump's first few days in office. Thanks.

MS. CONLEY: Thanks, Margaret.

Yeah, I don't have enormous insights on Prime Minister May's presentation to the Republican Conference in the House in Philadelphia. Again, I totally speculate that this probably was a request that went out after the knowledge that she was coming to visit the president. It was an opportune moment. Obviously, the Conservative Party and the Republican Party are kindred spirits. I would suspect, because it's very important for the prime minister to remain very bipartisan, and I did see that some of the press comments from some Democrats, that there will be, you know, equal overtures to reach out to the Democratic Party. So I tend to believe, because I know how important it is for the U.K., the government to be seen as very strongly bipartisan, that this was an incident of more timing than anything.

Equivalent leaders – it is important to recall that Theresa May was in support of the U.K. remaining in the EU. Now, she was not a vocal nor active remain campaigner, but she, herself, believed that the U.K. would be better remaining in the EU, and hopefully, getting a better reform package. But since becoming prime minister, she has obviously taken the direction of a clear, decisive break. So the equivalent leaders, you know, again, prime minister since July, undertaking a significant directional change for her country economically, in some ways politically. But I actually, to tell you the truth, was very encouraged that this is President Trump's first meeting. The U.K. is our – one of our, if not the closest ally, and in some ways this, to me, is a reassuring message, that this is a leader that stands shoulder to shoulder with the U.S. – and a U.S. that is a strong and engaged leader. So I'm going to take encouragement from that, and I hope the president does, you know, reach out to Theresa May frequently for her guidance and counsel when he has questions, particularly related to NATO, to Russia and to other, you know, global issues.

OPERATOR: Thank you.

Next, we will go to the line of Margaret Warner with "PBS NewsHour." Please go ahead.

Q: Hi, Heather. Another Margaret.

Given what happened this week with the court ruling in London, what does Theresa May most needs from this visit sort of politically as she manages Brexit? And then the flip side, what do you think newly installed President Trump most needs?

MS. CONLEY: Well, thanks, Margaret.

You know, they both need this to be a success. President Trump, I think this meeting needs to demonstrate that he has a command of issues, that he understands the historical significance of the

office he takes and leads, and to be able to conduct, you know – you know, serious foreign trade and security policy.

Prime Minister May equally needs this to be a successful visit. I think she needs to hear strong messages of support for her vision of a Britain that works for everyone, a global Britain, because this is going to be a profound challenge and change as the U.K. proceeds, you know, in this uncharted territory. This is unwinding 40 years of the U.K.'s integration with the EU. This week's court decision – and now it appears on Thursday that the government will produce the bill that will begin the process of triggering Article 50. It's got to go through the House of Commons, which – with some amendments, potentially, and then it goes to the House of Lords. As in fact – the fact that this went to the High Court and the Supreme Court itself was not anticipated by this government. There's going to be twists and turns. Things that we have not anticipated may happen through this court.

But I think there's one thing, for me, that's the hallmark of Theresa May. She is steady. She is clear. She does not get too emotionally – you know, her emotional hackles are normally not raised. And she has determined that she will see this through. So she needs, in some ways, the president to continue to support her through this process. What is going to be very interesting – and this is where sort of the contradiction, if you will – while on the one hand this week has been about ending TPP, perhaps renegotiating NAFTA, the border tax, the protectionism, now we're going to start thinking about how does the U.S. now approach a bilateral free trade agreement? What's in it? Is it about the new economy? Is it about retaining manufacturing? And the questions that I've gotten from reporters already – I wish I had clear answers – but what is going to be in this trade agreement? If both in some ways – Theresa May has instituted a new industrial policy, President Trump in many ways is introducing a new industrial policy – how is this going to work in this bilateral for trade? We simply don't know. We're just going to have to look for early clues. And again, I'm looking at who are the key folks that will be negotiating this agreement and, you know, how focused the Trump administration will be on this, knowing that they have an enormous task of just continuing to appoint officials and begin a new administration. So it will be truly fascinating to watch.

OPERATOR: OK, thank you.

Next, we'll go to the line of Carol Morello with The Washington Post. Please go ahead.

Q: Thanks.

Actually, the first Margaret asked the question that I had, and I didn't know how to get out of queue. So thanks very much. (Laughter.)

MS. CONLEY: Thanks, Carol. (Laughs.)

OPERATOR: Thank you.

Next, we will go to the line of George Condon with National Journal. Please go ahead.

Q: Great, thanks.

Heather, every single – I have one general question and one specific. Every single time that we've talked in the last year, you noted that all across the continent, every leader was baffled by what was going on in the United States campaign and was very concerned about what Trump represents. Is

there a holdover from that? I mean, what is the British attitude and what is her attitude toward this sea change in American governance? And the specific one is, is you've talked about intelligence sharing. Is there a concern on the part of the British that anything they say to President Trump could possibly make its way back to the Russians? I mean, how does – how does the whole Trump and Russia thing factor into this meeting?

MS. CONLEY: Thanks, George. Yes, I think in some ways the U.K. had the first working experience with something that baffled and confused them, which obviously was the unexpected win for leaving the U.K. So perhaps I would suggest that the U.K. is – had a few months under its belt of getting used to the uncertain. But I think, for those leaders – those world leaders that require a very strong relationship with the U.S., they are simply focused on we have to make this work: We're going to make this work. We're going to figure out how to make this work. And, you know, I think you've seen that from whether it's Prime Minister Abe or others. So I think that is the approach that Theresa May is taking.

Now, she has clearly said publicly that she will have very frank conversations. She is not going to be afraid to, you know, share her concerns with President Trump. But as I said, I think the overall pragmatic first order of business, and particularly for the British government right now, is managing a successful Brexit. That's the first order of business.

On the intelligence bit, George, the reason – I always think it's important for everyone to understand what a special relationship, why is it special, and there's those three core elements of the relationship. I do not have any specific information or any sense that there have been concerns expressed by British intelligence. Obviously, the source of the dossier, the former British intelligence official, clearly that may have been a concern. Again, Theresa May has very clearly said that the individual was not in the employment of the British government. But I think, you know, there are certainly statements that have been made anonymously, but publicly that I think, you know, there is some concern about ensuring that there is a proper maintenance of intelligence.

What for me is very interesting, certainly as the Russian hacking issues were coming to the – to the forefront, much of the source of that was from foreign intelligence. And so we do rely on this information, and I think everyone is going to be in a cautious wait-and-see mode with the incoming administration to see how this information is handled, is managed, is reported. And I think now, with the confirmation of Congressman Pompeo at the CIA, I mean, I think this will help to bring a measure of stability. But I think clear there are concerns, but I don't think in any way it has altered the intelligence-sharing relationship, at least to my knowledge.

OPERATOR: OK, thank you.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

Next we will go to the line of Howard LaFranchi with Christian Science. Please go ahead.

Q: Hi, Heather. Thanks for doing this.

You pretty much answered my question, too; goes back to the beginning. But again, if we could just kind of – you know, as you opened, you know, you contrasted “America first” with global Britain. And I'm just wondering if you could, you know, take that a little bit farther and how that circle might be squared or square the circle. And, you know, is it just going to – you know, I'm thinking

back to – you know, to a different situation, but the – you know, the Iraq War. And, you know, Tony Blair sort of conformed to Bush wishes, seeing that as important to – you know, to Britain’s relationship with the United States. And I’m wondering, you know, how far you expect, you know, Theresa May to go in directions she may not really want to, but in the interest of preserving the relationship – you know, the special relationship.

MS. CONLEY: Thanks, Howard.

The Blair-Bush relationship is sort of an interesting one to think about. What I believe is that Theresa May will forge a close relationship, as close as she can, to President Trump and her staff to key members of his staff, and you know, under the, again, the working philosophy of we’re going to make this work, we’re going to work this out. But I believe she will also be quite clear where there are differences. I think she’ll handle them privately to the greatest extent possible, but if required will do so publicly and will not be afraid to do that. So in some ways this is neither Reagan or Thatcher or Bush or Blair. It will be its own unique relationship, and we will see how that begins officially on Friday.

I think both sides want to make this work. So I’m hopeful that, at least through these initial phases, it’ll be in a very positive atmosphere. But I think Prime Minister May will be clear, as she has been clear on many things, where there’s commonality and then where there will be some separation.

On the “America first meets global Britain,” I guess very selfishly what I hope Prime Minister May is able to share with President Trump is that a strong NATO and a strong Europe is in America’s strategic interest – it is “America first” because it strengthens the United States economically, politically and militarily; and not, as President Trump’s interview in The Times of London suggested, that the U.S. really doesn’t have a significant issue if there are, quote, “more Brexits” or Europe disintegrates; that, in fact, America is stronger if Europe is strong, and to begin to talk about that in very pragmatic and tangible ways. So I don’t think there is incompatibility at all with an “America first” strategy because the safety of the United States and the economic prosperity of the United States is very much linked with a strong and capable NATO and a strong, capable Europe. So they are actually quite compatible. I think we just have to help President Trump see it in a different way.

I think this first meeting on Friday is an important start to that. And as he will likely – President Trump will likely travel to Europe several times this year, whether that’s for the G-20, the G-7 and perhaps other opportunities, I hope that message is one that will continue. But we’ll have to see. We’ll perhaps have to compare – we’ll all have to compare some notes after Friday’s meeting.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Next we’ll go to the line of Bryant Harris, and that’s with Yomiuri Shimbun. Please go ahead.

Q: I have another question about the intelligence relationship. It looks like President Trump is going to soon sign an executive order reinstating CIA black sites, or at least looking at doing that, and enhanced interrogation techniques. I’m wondering, would that affect the intelligence-sharing relationship between the U.S. and Britain at all? And how would the British public react to that?

MS. CONLEY: So I don’t have great insights on the – you know, what the response would be from British intelligence related to that. Clearly, there would be a strong public – British public response, as there would be a strong, I’m sure, American public response to that. If that, in fact, becomes an issue that might be on the conversation on Friday, I think you would – you would have

Prime Minister May probably having to provide a public statement about her government's position on that.

So I wasn't aware of that, but thank you very much. That will be a very important thing to watch, and it I would – I would assume likely compel Prime Minister May to make a public statement.

OPERATOR: Thank you. We'll go back to the line of George Condon with National Journal. Please go ahead.

Q: Hi. Thanks much.

The president's relationship with Nigel Farage has gotten a lot of attention in Britain. He's offered to be a, quote, "bridge" between Trump and May, and she hasn't seemed really eager to do that. I mean, how does it factor into the relationship between the two leaders that Trump so loves Farage?

MS. CONLEY: Well, George, you I think state it correctly. I think that the British government has been very clear that they can have – they are able to have strong relations with President Trump and his administration. Look, it's a factor that is not going away. It does not necessarily have to be a problem as long as everyone's channels of communications remain open. But, you know, obviously there was some initial bumpiness when then-President-elect Trump suggested that Mr. Farage would be a welcome British ambassador to the U.S., and I thought the retort by our British colleagues was quite perfect: that position's already been filled.

So I think this can be done with levity. But, having said that, it is a factor. But I think now that everyone is in their official capacity, these channels will be conducted in official channels. There will always be that informal process, of course, but I feel that in some ways now that the administration is getting in place that will settle down a little bit.

OPERATOR: Thank you.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

We do have a question from the line of Stephen Collinson with CNN. Please go ahead.

Q: Hey, Heather.

What role do you think the British will play as a sort of bridge between the other NATO countries and the U.S.? I mean, they've sort of been on the side of people should, you know, reach their 2 percent in defense spending. And given the fact that they're leaving Europe, you know, NATO is clearly very important to the U.S. role, both in Europe and around the world. Do you think that they can sort of act as a sort of a go-between between Trump and NATO, and try and sort of bring the positions closer together?

MS. CONLEY: Thanks, Stephen.

I don't know I would necessarily call it a bridge, but I think Theresa May can help the president understand the importance of NATO not only to her country, but to our collective countries. Really, post-Brexit – and you are absolutely correct – we – really, I'll step back a little bit.



The British defense cuts in 2010 were fairly devastating. And in 2015, with the then-Cameron government, began to rebuild significantly what had been reduced. Now, this takes a while. We also certainly appreciate that the British did make their 2 percent defense commitment.

I think what Theresa May's message is, that NATO allies are meaningfully increasing their defense spending. It can be more, it can be faster, but that has turned significantly. NATO is important to U.S. security. And I'm sure she can helpfully give Secretary-General Stoltenberg and other NATO leaders a sense of the meeting that she had on Friday.

But NATO will have a direct relationship with the Trump administration. I just hope that Theresa May can help reframe this for the president so – in his recent statements and his view that NATO is obsolete. But important to me, I'm hoping Theresa May stresses why it's important and why the considerations of why it is obsolete, that they are being addressed. And so it's more of providing some insight and advice rather than a bridge.

OPERATOR: Thank you, speakers. There's no further questions in queue.

MR. QUINN: OK, folks. So, with that, I want to say thank you very much for joining us. As I said before, we will be sending out the transcript as well as the audio of this call, in case you need it. Please take a look for that in your inbox.

I want to thank Heather Conley for giving her time today. And, of course, thank you all for giving yours.

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