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The President's News Conference With President Nicolas Sarkozy of France in Strasbourg, France

April 3, 2009

President Sarkozy. Ladies and gentlemen, we apologize for this delay. While we have introduction, I will be very brief.

We have reviewed a certain number of issues—Afghanistan, NATO, Iran, Russia, Middle East—and I think—and I stand to be corrected by the U.S. President, but I think I can say that there is a total identity of views between us, convergence of views.

Insofar as I'm speaking just after the G–20 summit, I would like to say to Barack Obama just how delighted I've been to be able to work hand in hand with him. I want to tell him how much I appreciate his openmindedness and his clear determination to build a new world. And I can say that at this summit there have been no winners, there have been no losers. There were 20 leaders, of course, the leader of the world's number one power, the USA, who shouldered their responsibilities, squared up to their responsibilities, and that all goes well for the months and years to come. We have a hell of a lot of work ahead of us, because there's a hell of a lot of problems we need to deal with.

But for us this is a source of optimism to be able to work with an American administration that is clearly determined to listen to its friends and allies and to solve the problems, buckle down and solve the problems.

So, Barack, welcome to France. Thank you. And I really look forward to the weeks to come, because we're going to take a lot of initiatives; the world needs us to do so.

President Obama. Well, thank you so much for the extraordinary hospitality. And it is thrilling to be part of what is a true celebration: France, which is the United States oldest ally, our first ally, once again taking an extraordinary leadership role in NATO, thanks to the greatest leadership of President Sarkozy.

He's courageous on so many fronts, it's hard to keep up. And the energy that he has brought to foreign affairs is something that I think we've all benefited from. So I'm grateful to his partnership. Had it not been for much of his leadership, I think what emerged from the summit would not have been as significant as it was.

On the issues that we discussed—whether it's Afghanistan, Iran, Russia—he is continually showing initiative, imagination, creativity in trying to solve problems that have been there for a very long time. And America is not only grateful for the friendship with France, but I personally am grateful to the friendship that we've developed, one that lasts before either of us—that actually developed before either of us were even elected to office. And it has only grown stronger since.

So this has been a very productive conversation. I look forward to further productive conversations this evening and tomorrow, surrounding NATO's mission. And I'm confident that when the United States and France are acting in concert, that the prospects for peace and prosperity around the world are strengthened.

With that, why don't we take a couple of questions? Do you want to go first?

President Sarkozy. Of course, I wish to welcome Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Kouchner.

France's Role in NATO

Q. Mr. President, you explained to the French that the return of France to the military and to greater structures of NATO would be offset by enhanced European defense. Have you got guarantees from President Obama, for instance, on the emergence of a planning—autonomous planning unit?

And, Mr. President, will you accept the idea of European pillar, a European caucus with NATO?

President Sarkozy. Well, you know, I've always been convinced that France and the United States belong to the same family. You know, we're in Strasbourg here. I am enamored of history, and I say to the French, never forget what American democracy did for us. On the 6th of June next, the two of us will be walking on the Normandy landing beaches in order to pay tribute to those young Americans who died—fought and died for us, who our children are the same age as they were.

Now, I don't need this kind of rapport with President Obama. I trust him. I don't need guarantees. I trust him, I trust his word, and I trust his intelligence. He doesn't need me in order to understand that a strong Europe, a strong Europe of defense, is the best guarantee for the U.S.A. President Obama's America doesn't want weak allies. They want strong allies who face up to their responsibilities. And we've been discussing this for a long time.

But this hasn't been a negotiation, a bargaining round. It—we have a shared vision of the world. We don't want to impose our values on anybody. But we don't want anybody, anywhere in the world to prevent us from believing in our principles.

And a word to the French. It's extraordinary, you know, for years now we've been sending soldiers to fight under the NATO flag, and yet we have not had anyone participating in those committees that actually lay down the strategy. Now, I wanted to be—I've shouldered the responsibility of my choices. NATO has been around for 60 years. And if there is peace and peace has prevailed, it is no coincidence; it is because we have worked together with our allies, and the first and foremost being the United States, who know perfectly well that France and other allies, this Europe of defense, it will comprise allies and friends, longstanding strong allies and friends.

President Obama. Now, let me just respond to your question very quickly.

NATO is the most successful alliance in modern history. And the basic premise of NATO was that Europe's security was the United States security and vice versa. That's its central tenet; that is a pillar of American foreign policy that has been unchanging over the last 60 years. It is something that I am here to affirm. And with France's reintegration into the highest command structures of NATO, that principle will continue to be upheld.

I want to echo what President Sarkozy just said. We want strong allies. We would like to see Europe have much more robust defense capabilities. That's not something we discourage. We're not looking to be the patron of Europe. We're looking to be partners with Europe. And the more capable they are defensively, the more we can act in concert on the shared challenges that we face.

And so, you know, one of my messages to our NATO allies is going to be, the more capability we see here in Europe, the happier the United States will be, the more effective we will be in coordinating our activities. Okay?

Holly Bailey [Newsweek].

Guantanamo Bay Detainees

Q. Thank you so much. You mentioned earlier, President Sarkozy, talking about having strong allies that own up to responsibilities. You know, President Obama has vowed to close Guantanamo Bay in the next year or so. Would you be willing to take some of the prisoners from there?

And, President Obama, have you addressed this issue with him?

President Sarkozy. Well, there again, you know, I believe democracy makes it incumbent upon heads of state to speak the truth and to live up to what they say. I am a longstanding friend of the United States. But Guantanamo was not in keeping with U.S. values, at least with my perception of what American values were and are. And I was proud and happy that the United States should have taken the decision that we were hoping for, which was to close down that base; we all were, here in Europe.

My deeply held belief is that you don't combat terrorists with terrorist methods. You combat them with the methods and the weapons of democracy. Now, having said that—and I have said that—if then the President of the United States says, I'm going to close down Guantanamo, but I need my allies to take one, in this particular instance, this one person into our prisons, because this is going to help me, the U.S. President, to shut down this base, if we are consistent, then we say yes; otherwise we're inconsistent. We can't condemn the United States to have this camp and then simply wash our hands of the whole business when they close it down. That's not what being an ally, a friend, means, let alone standing up for what we believe in.

France's word is France's bond. We have conducted a line which is strong, honest, and in keeping with democracy, which is what our American friends are doing. Yes, we talked about it. And what I have said in my response is honest and consistent, and that's the way I wish you to see France, honest and consistent.

President Obama. President Sarkozy has been honest, has been consistent. I made the decision to close Guantanamo because I do not think it makes America safer. In doing so, I've been very clear that we're going to do it carefully; we're going to do it thoughtfully. And in order to do it carefully and thoughtfully, we are going to consult with our allies, and, in certain cases, we're going to need help with detainees that may still pose a risk but we may not be able to repatriate to their countries of origin.

And so we have had this discussion. We don't have detailed announcements to make. I just want to express my appreciation to President Sarkozy for being good to his word, as he always is.

Russia/Iran

Q. Christian Mallard. A question to both Presidents. Would you agree to have the Russians join European defense system? And are you expecting the Russians really to exert tough pressures upon Iran to stop their military nuclear program?

President Obama. Why don't I go first on this? I had a terrific meeting, a bilateral meeting, during the summit with President Medvedev. I think there is a great potential to improve U.S.-Russian relations. I think that it is important for NATO allies to engage Russia and to recognize that they have legitimate interests. In some cases we've got common interests, but we also have some core disagreements.

I think that we should be in a dialog with them about how we can maintain stability while respecting the autonomy and independence of all countries in Europe, west, east, central, wherever they are.

I was a critic of the Russian invasion of Georgia. I continue to believe that despite the extraordinary efforts of President Sarkozy to broker a cease-fire that we have not seen a stabilization of that situation. And I think that we have to send a very clear message to Russia that we want to work with them, but that we can't go back to the old ways of doing business.

I do believe that the United States and Russia, the Europeans and the United States, all have an interest in preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and that there should be a mechanism that respects Iran's sovereignty and allows them to develop peaceful nuclear energy, but draws a clear line that we cannot have a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

I brought this up in my conversations with President Medvedev, and it will be an ongoing topic of our bilateral negotiations. We're very excited about working with France and other countries to arrive at a position with respect to Iran that invites them into responsible membership in the international community, but also makes clear that they've got to act in ways that responsible members—what's expected of them, that they meet those standards.

President Sarkozy. Very simply, I have always said to President Medvedev that the days of the USSR are over, that the Berlin Wall had come down, and that around Russia there were no satellite states any longer, and that he needed to respect that.

But by the same token, with the problems the world faces today, we're not going to reinvent the cold war. So it's excellent news, this proposal that President Obama has made to reengage with President Medvedev, to come up with new agreements between Russia and the United States. We don't need—the last thing we need is a new cold war. We need the world getting together; we need the world to unite. And we need Russia to shoulder its responsibilities—because it is a great country, a great power—to help us find a solution to the Iranian crisis.

So there again I think I can say that France and the United States are on the same—working on the same page. We are not against Russia. I mean, the Warsaw Pact is way behind us. We want to work with anyone who's prepared to work with us, very honestly, very openly, to have a security zone or area and, I hope very shortly between Europe and Russia, a common economic space.

Yes.

North Korea/Military Operations in Afghanistan/France's Role in Afghanistan

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. As you just said, you've tried to take a step forward this week with Russia in trying to take nuclear warheads out there and make it safer around the world. North Korea seems to be going in the other direction. Do you have a message or maybe even a warning to North Korea about what consequences they'll face if they go ahead with this missile test?

And, President Sarkozy, you spoke about honesty and consistency, and you're about to reenter NATO as a military partner. I wonder what you say to the President's message about bringing troops forward, maybe military training, helping in Afghanistan.

President Obama. We have made very clear to the North Koreans that their missile launch is provocative, it puts enormous strains on the six-party talks, and that they should stop the launch. The response so far from the North Koreans has been not just unhelpful, but has resorted to the sort of language that has led to North Korea's isolation in the international community for a very long time.

It is not just us that has said that North Korea should not launch. Japan, Korea, Russia, China, the other members of the six-party talks have all indicated that this launch should not go forward. And so should North Korea decide to take this action, we will work with all interested parties in the international community to take appropriate steps to let North Korea know that it can't threaten the safety and security of other countries with impunity.

Now, just one last thing I want to say. I think that France has already been a stalwart ally when it comes to Afghanistan. So we discussed the possibilities of all the NATO allies reengaging in a more effective mission in Afghanistan, which is military, diplomatic, deals with the development needs of both Pakistan and India. So it's not just a matter of more resources, it's also a matter of more effectively using the resources we have.

And on this, I think, once again, France and the United States are on the same page. But I just wanted to—before Nicolas answered the question directed at him, I just wanted to publicly thank and praise France once again for its outstanding leadership when it comes to Afghanistan. I've not had to drag France kicking and screaming into Afghanistan, because France recognizes that having Al Qaida operate safe havens that can be used to launch attacks is a threat not just to the United States, but to Europe. In fact, it is probably more likely that Al Qaida would be able to launch a serious terrorist attack in Europe than in the United States because of proximity. And so this is not an American mission, this is a NATO mission, this is an international mission. And France has always understood that, and for that I am very grateful.

President Sarkozy. Well, we totally endorse and support America's new strategy in Afghanistan. And I want to say to my fellow Frenchmen that when New York was crucified, this could have happened in any other capital city of any democratic state. It wasn't New York that was being targeted, it was democracies at large. Now, either we as democracies stand by our allies in the face of extremists and terrorists and fanatics—and we will win. And that is what is at stake there. Secondly, this is something we talked about with President Obama, there will be no extra troops, French troops, because the decision to step up our troop presence was taken already last year. Thirdly, we are prepared to do more in terms of police, of the gendarmes, the military police, in terms of economic aid, in order to train Afghans and Afghanize Afghanistan. We are not waging a war against Afghanistan; we are helping Afghanistan rebuild. We don't support any given candidate; we support the right of young Afghans to look to a future, to have a future.

And on this, as on other matters, we sat down, we talked, I listened to President Obama, he listened to my problems and issues, and we tried to find solutions. That is exactly how we proceeded, that is how we intend to proceed. We will continue to work that way. And I would like to say all French men and women who are proud and happy that the President of the United States should be standing here in our country—and he'll be returning on the 6th of June—and that we will welcome him magnificently in this Normandy, where there are so many young men from your country who are buried.

But people must regain confidence. We are aware of the difficulties. We know what the difficulties are. We know that we need global responses, respond together to these issues. And it feels really good to be able to work with a U.S. President who wants to change the world and who understands that the world does not boil down to simply American frontiers and borders. And that is a hell of a good piece of news for 2009.

President Obama. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 1:15 p.m. at Palais Rohan. President Sarkozy referred to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton; and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Bernard Kouchner of France. President Sarkozy and a reporter spoke in French, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Joint news conferences :: France, President Sarkozy.

Locations: Strasbourg, France.

Names: Medvedev, Dmitry A.; Sarkozy, Nicolas.

Subjects: Afghanistan : NATO, role; Cuba : Guantánamo Bay, U.S. Naval Base, closure of detention facilities; Europe : Relations with U.S.; France : Afghanistan, role in; France : President ; France : President; France : President Obama's visit; France : Relations with U.S.; Georgia, Republic of : Conflict with Russia; Iran : Nuclear weapons development; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; North Korea : Ballistic missiles, testing; North Korea : Nuclear weapons development; Russia : Conflict with Georgia; Russia : President; Russia : Relations with U.S.; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Terrorism : Global threat.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900217.