

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

The President's News Conference in Strasbourg, France

April 4, 2009

The President. Good afternoon. We have just finished—well, not just finished—because I know there's been a little bit of a delay—we have finished what I consider to be a very productive meeting. I want to thank President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel for hosting us here in Strasbourg and Kehl. I should add that not only were they gracious hosts, but the commitments that they made with respect to Afghanistan indicate the seriousness of purpose with which they are approaching the NATO challenge and our mission in Afghanistan in particular.

I want to congratulate Prime Minister, and now Secretary General to be, Mr. Rasmussen. He is an outstanding public servant, somebody with an extraordinary reputation, and I have confidence that he's the right man to help lead NATO during a period in which we are moving from a vision first created in the 20th century to a vision that responds to 21st century challenges.

I should point out that the election of Prime Minister Rasmussen was unanimous, but there was important efforts to make sure that everybody felt included. And I want to thank, in particular, Turkey for raising some concerns having to do with their security issues and their confidence that the new Secretary General would address them. So I congratulate all the parties concerned in arriving at a outstanding outcome.

The NATO was founded on the basis of a simple but solemn commitment: An attack on one is an attack on all. And from that foundation we've forged the strongest alliance in history, an alliance that is stronger because it is made up of free nations.

Sixty years ago, much of Europe was in rubble, and this continent was divided. Today, the cold war is over, and Europe is free. Former adversaries have reconciled. We've protected peace and security in the Balkans. Our alliance has more than doubled in size. There was nothing predestined about the success. It took decades of consistent effort, careful cooperation, and collective action. But while we celebrate NATO's achievements, we can't rest upon them. The 21st century has ushered in a new era of global threats. To meet these dangers, the alliance must renew and reform itself once more.

The United States came here to listen, to learn, and to lead, because all of us have a responsibility to do our parts. America can't meet our global challenges alone, nor can Europe meet them without America. I'm confident that the leaders who joined me here today share that view, and that we're moving forward with a sense of common purpose.

We made great progress. Albania and Croatia are now formally NATO members. We welcomed France's renewed commitment to the alliance's military structures. And we agreed to develop a new strategic concept, which will be critical in modernizing NATO so that it can meet the challenges of our time.

We need to strengthen our planning to protect all of our allies. And we need the capacity to meet new and unconventional challenges. We need to partner with other countries and international institutions, and we need a constructive relationship with Russia on issues of common concern.

Today I focused in particular on Afghanistan. NATO's mission there represents both the promise of its past and its purpose for the future. After 9/11, our allies declared the attacks on New York and Washington an attack on all. And together, we embarked on the first mission beyond Europe against an enemy that recognizes no borders or laws of war.

Seven years later, Al Qaida is active in the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These terrorists threaten every member of NATO. They've struck in both Europe and North America. They are plotting new attacks, and that's why my administration undertook a comprehensive review of our strategy. We listened carefully, and we consulted closely with our allies. And today I briefed them on the results and discussed how we might move forward together.

We start from a simple premise: For years, our efforts in Afghanistan have lacked the resources needed to achieve our goals. And that's why the United States has recommitted itself to a clear and focused goal to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan and to prevent their return to either country in the future.

This effort cannot be America's alone. All of NATO understands that Al Qaida is a threat to all of us, and that this collective security effort must achieve its goals. And as a signal of that commitment, I am pleased that our NATO allies pledged their strong and unanimous support for our new strategy. Keep in mind, it was only just a week ago that we announced this new approach. But already, with Secretary Clinton's work at The Hague and with the success at today's summit, we've started to match real resources to achieve our goals.

We're leaving Strasbourg and Kehl with concrete commitments on NATO support. Our allies and partners have already agreed to provide approximately 5,000 troops and trainers to advance our new strategy as well as increased civilian assistance. To support critical elections for August 20th, NATO will fully resource our election support force to maximize security. And our allies have committed additional funds to an Afghan elections trust fund that will provide the necessary resources for free and fair elections.

To accelerate and enhance our training of Afghan security forces, a new NATO mission—a new NATO training mission will focus on high-level support for Afghan Army and training and mentoring for the Afghan police. And many of our allies and partners have also pledged support for a new trust fund to sustain Afghan National Army's going forward.

And to strengthen Afghan institutions and advance opportunity for the Afghan people, we are working with our NATO allies and partners to achieve substantial increases in nonmilitary assistance and to provide the kind of doctors, engineers, educators, and agricultural specialists that are needed to make a difference on the ground.

Now, we'll need more resources and a sustained effort to achieve our ultimate goals. But these commitments of troops, trainers, and civilians represent a strong downpayment on the future of our mission in Afghanistan and on the future of NATO. These are the new missions that NATO must take on in the 21st century, and these are the new capabilities that we need to succeed.

NATO was founded upon mutual responsibility to our common security. And today I'm confident that we took a substantial step forward in renewing our alliance to meet the challenges of our time.

And before I start taking questions, let me just note that while we were busy dealing with common securities issues here at the summit, we received news yesterday of an extraordinary

tragedy back in the United States, where a lone gunman killed and injured multiple people. My administration is in communications with law enforcement officials, Federal, State, and local. We are monitoring the investigation. I am heartbroken for the families who survived this tragedy, and it just underscores the degree to which, in each of our countries, we have to guard against the kind of senseless violence that the tragedy represents.

So, with that, let me start with Richard Wolf, USA Today.

Outcomes of the G-20 and NATO Summits

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I'm wondering if you can say that you got what you asked for here and also in London, because you didn't ask for everything you wanted. And what I mean by that is you didn't get a lot more combat troops here, and you didn't get direct government stimulus there.

The President. Well, first of all, I don't want to circle back and have a whole new press conference about the G-20 summit, since I answered some pretty extensive questions there. A week before the summit, 2 weeks before the summit, on multiple occasions, I indicated that the notion somehow that we were seeking to dictate to other countries their budgets and their approach to government spending was simply not accurate. What we said was that all of us have to take important steps to deal with economic growth.

We in the United States have taken appropriate actions to fill the huge hole in demand that had occurred as a consequence of the financial crisis. We saw that other countries at the G-20, like China and Japan and Great Britain and France and Germany, had all similarly taken stimulus steps. And the most important thing in terms of stimulus that we wanted to see at the G-20 was a commitment that as we monitor what takes place, we assure that if what's been done is not adequate, then we reconvene to make sure that we're taking steps that are adequate to create jobs and regrow the economy.

With respect to what we wanted here in NATO, the first thing we wanted was consensus and unity around a refocused approach to Afghanistan. And because of careful consultation with our allies prior to releasing the results of our strategic review, we came here expecting consensus and were gratified to receive that consensus. You had NATO putting its stamp of approval on what I believe is a well-thought-out, hard-headed strategy and approach to Afghanistan, but also the need to deal with the interaction between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This was not a pledging conference, and yet we already received the kinds of commitments that, historically, you don't see at a conference like this. And I think if you will talk to prior participants, they would tell you that what was pledged here today was significant.

Let me just review: We fully resourced the elections, 3,000 from allies and partners; 300 new paramilitary trainers and mentors for NATO training missions in Afghanistan; 70 NATO-embedded training teams to support expansion of the Afghan National Army; \$100 million downpayment on the Afghan National Army trust fund; and civilian assistance of half a billion dollars.

That was at a summit that was designed to discuss strategy as opposed to attract pledges. And I think it's an indication of the fact that this alliance is committed to achieving the focused goals that we've set out in Afghanistan. I think that you're not going to see a division between allies in terms of how we approach the situation. I think our allies are encouraged by not only the consultation that we conducted prior to releasing our strategy, but also our commitment to continually reviewing the strategy to ensure that it works.

And what we anticipate is not only that we will see additional resources brought to bear on the strategy, but that also we will have established a baseline of honesty and clarity about our purpose so that it will be much more difficult for each of us in NATO to try to avoid or shirk the serious responsibilities that are involved in accomplishing our mission. Okay?

Peter Maer, CBS.

Afghanistan/Pakistan/Terrorism

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I've got a two-parter on this policy. I'm wondering if at any time in the course of the meeting or before, you asked for a commitment from NATO for combat troops in a war stance like the ones already there and the thousands of others that you're ordering.

And since you keep referring to this—and you have referred to it as an Afghanistan and Pakistan policy—and you said recently that you don't envision sending—you don't envision NATO troops being sent to Pakistan, what is the message to Pakistan and the terrorists who are hiding out there?

The President. Well, as I said, this was not a pledging conference. All the NATO allies have troops on the ground who are in harm's way. Our ISAF partners have troops on the ground in harm's way. They are making significant commitments despite having participated in what has turned out to be a very lengthy operation.

And so the whole point of the strategy was to get beyond this notion that somehow there is one kind of troop and one kind of way of accomplishing our mission in Afghanistan. The trainers that we're sending in are not—are no less important than those who are in the south in direct combat with the Taliban because if we can't achieve these other goals, then we will put more and more of a burden, an unsustainable burden, on those troops that are conducting direct combat operations. So the answer is, number one, all these allies have combat troops on the ground. Number two, part of our strategy is to make sure that we've got a much more comprehensive approach.

With respect to Pakistan, we want to bring all of our diplomatic and development skills to bear on strengthening Pakistan in part because they have to have the capacity to take on Al Qaida within their borders, but also because to the extent that we strengthen Pakistan's ability to deliver goods and services and a better life for its people, then the less the contagion of extremism in that country or in the region is likely to spread.

And I informed our allies here today that we are going to, despite difficult budget circumstances, put more money into aid to Pakistan, conditioned on some concrete results in dealing with the terrorist threat. And we are going to be pushing our allies to participate, for example, in the donors forum for Pakistan that's going to be taking place.

Q. And the message to the terrorists, sir?

The President. We are going to keep on going until we get this job done. And they should be clear that we are unified. We are strong. They will not wear us down. We are going to complete our mission so that our people are safe.

Okay. Major [Major Garrett, FOX News].

Human Rights and Military Operations in Afghanistan

Q. Thank you, Mr. President, and good afternoon. I'd like to ask you about a law that's recently been passed in Afghanistan that affects the 10 percent of the Shi'a population there. A summary of it says it negates the need for sexual consent between married couples, tacitly approves child marriage, and restricts a woman's right to leave the home. The United Nations Development Fund for Women says this legalizes the rape of a wife by her husband. I'd like your assessment of this law, number one. Number two, will you condition future troop movements of the U.S. to Afghanistan on the basis of this law being redrafted or rewritten? And if not, sir, what about the character of this law ought to motivate U.S. forces to fight and possibly die in Afghanistan?

The President. Well, first of all, this was actually a topic of conversation among all the allies. And in our communication—communique, you will see that we specifically state that part of this comprehensive approach is encouraging the respect of human rights. I think this law is abhorrent. Certainly the views of the administration have been, and will be, communicated to the Karzai Government. And we think that it is very important for us to be sensitive to local culture, but we also think that there are certain basic principles that all nations should uphold, and respect for women and respect for their freedom and integrity is an important principle.

Now, I just want to remind people, though, why our troops are fighting, because I think the notion that you laid out, Major, was that our troops might be less motivated. Our troops are highly motivated to protect the United States, just as troops from NATO are highly motivated to protect their own individual countries and NATO allies collectively. So we want to do everything we can to encourage and promote rule of law, human rights, the education of women and girls in Afghanistan, economic development, infrastructure development, but I also want people to understand that the first reason we are there is to root out Al Qaida so that they cannot attack members of the alliance.

Now, I don't—those two things aren't contradictory; I think they're complementary. And that's what's reflected in the communique.

Q. [Inaudible]

The President. We have stated very clearly that we object to this law. But I want everybody to understand that our focus is to defeat Al Qaida and ensure that they do not have safe havens from which they can launch attacks against the alliance.

Ed Luce from the Financial Times. Where's Ed? There he is.

America's Place in World Affairs

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. In the context of all the multilateral activity that's been going on this week—the G-20, here at NATO—and your evident enthusiasm for multilateral frameworks, to work through multilateral frameworks, could I ask you whether you subscribe, as many of your predecessors have, to the school of American exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world, or do you have a slightly different philosophy? And if so, would you be able to elaborate on it?

The President. I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism. I am enormously proud of my country and its role and history in the world. If you think about the site of this summit and what it means, I don't think America should be embarrassed to see evidence of the sacrifices of our troops, the enormous amount of resources that were put into Europe postwar,

and our leadership in crafting an alliance that ultimately led to the unification of Europe. We should take great pride in that.

And if you think of our current situation, the United States remains the largest economy in the world. We have unmatched military capability. And I think that we have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality that, though imperfect, are exceptional.

Now, the fact that I am very proud of my country and I think that we've got a whole lot to offer the world does not lessen my interest in recognizing the value and wonderful qualities of other countries, or recognizing that we're not always going to be right, or that other people may have good ideas, or that in order for us to work collectively, all parties have to compromise, and that includes us.

And so I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity, and recognizing that that leadership is incumbent depends on our ability to create partnerships, because we create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone.

Steve Thomma, McClatchy.

Troop Levels in Afghanistan

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Of the 3,000 troops that NATO committed to send to Afghanistan, I wanted to ask you, is that a net increase, or will some of them be replacements? And more importantly, how open-ended is that commitment? Will they stay past the election in August and into 2010 alongside U.S. troops?

The President. You know, the—keep in mind that this is not a ceiling for what we're achieving. Again, I just want to emphasize this was not a pledge conference. So what I prefer to do is to have Bob Gates or Mike Mullen or General McKiernan or others talk to you in detail about troop rotations, how various NATO contributions will be integrated into the various operations that are going to be taking place. But if you asked people who have been around these NATO summits, they will tell you that it is highly unusual to see the kinds of commitments that we saw today this early and this much unanimity in terms of what our strategy should be.

Everybody understands it's going to be hard. And part of why I think our strategy was received favorably was because we did not try to paper over the difficulties. And I think every leader who participated in the summit understands that these commitments place a strain on our populations at a time when we're already going through very difficult times.

We got jobs reports yesterday back home that 663,000 people have lost their jobs just last month. States are struggling. Families are struggling. Military families are going through all the strains and stresses of deployments, and although we're dealing with that issue successfully, thanks to some good planning by Secretary Gates and our drawdown in Iraq, this is still a strain both on our budgets and on our troops, who are performing brilliantly. And that's not unique to the United States; that's true for all the NATO allies.

But what I am deeply encouraged by is, I don't see any lessening of will to ensure that terrorist organizations cannot operate with impunity and continue to threaten devastating attacks on the United States, NATO members, and that I think is—that promises success over the long term.

Let me—I'm going to take just two more questions, and I'll—from non-Americans. You guys weren't even on my list, but I'm adding you on so that—and I want you—I want to make sure that the other world leaders treat my American colleagues well too, though. [Laughter] Did Sarkozy give you guys any questions? [Laughter] You see there? There's got to be mutuality in the transatlantic relationship. [Laughter]

What's your name?

President's Meetings With Foreign Leaders

Q. Sonja Sagmeister from a little country, Austria, from the Austrian television. Mr. President, you said you came here to learn and listen, so a quite personal question. What did you learn from your personal talk with the European leaders? And did this change in a certain way your views on Europe and its politics?

The President. It's an interesting question. I had already formed relationships with many of them. Some of them I had met when I traveled through Europe before my election. Some of them I had met because they came to Washington after the election. This is the first time I've been in a forum with so many of them at the same time.

I'm extraordinarily impressed by the quality of leadership. I am constantly reminded that although there are cultural differences that are important and that we have to be sensitive to, what we have in common between Europe and the United States so vastly exceeds any differences that we have, that we should not forget why we are allies, and we should be careful about some of the easy stereotypes that take place on both sides of the borders.

It was also interesting to see that political interaction in Europe is not that different from the United States Senate. There's a lot of—I don't know what the term is in Austrian—wheeling and dealing—and, you know, people are pursuing their interests, and everybody has their own particular issues and their own particular politics.

But I think it's a testimony to the success of the European Union, as well as NATO, that on very important issues, each leader seems to be able to rise above parochial interests in order to achieve common objectives. And I think that has accounted for some of the extraordinary success and prosperity of Europe over the last several years.

Yes, right back there.

The Balkans

Q. Dear Mr. President, I am Vladimir Lame from Albania, from Tirana Observer. Thanks for the approval of Albanian candidate to be member of NATO. But do you think this will bring peace and stability in Balkans, first of all? And the new American President will support Kosovo for membership in U.N. and for other countries to recognize this new state?

The President. Well, first of all, we are very proud of Albania and Croatia. And they made extraordinary efforts at reform in order to see this day come about, and so we're grateful for them.

With respect to the Balkans, I think that because of NATO actions, because of European assistance, because of a lot of hard work by the peoples themselves, we have seen a stabilizing of the situation. But some of those gains are fragile. And I am very concerned about the impact that the economic downturn may have on the ability of these various countries to stay focused on achieving peace and resolving differences through negotiations.

That's not unique to the Balkans. That's, I think, true around the world. One of the points that was made during the G-20 summit is that what starts as a financial crisis can move to a broader economic crisis, a social crisis, and eventually, a political crisis. And so we have to monitor that very carefully. We want to play a constructive role in that process. The first constructive role we can play is to help fix this economy. Obviously, we have a big role to play in doing that, and I was very pleased to see what happened with the G-20.

But we have a specific role in emerging markets in developing countries. And many of these Balkan States, we need to make sure that their economies are stabilized during this crisis period. I think that will help in the broader issues of political reconciliation.

Okay. Thank you, everybody. Appreciate it. Thank you.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 4:32 p.m. at the Palais de la Musique et des Congres. In his remarks, the President referred to President Nicolas Sarkozy of France; Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany; Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen of Denmark, Secretary General-designate of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton; President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan; and Gen. David D. McKiernan, USA, commander, NATO International Security Force, Afghanistan.

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