

Remarks Following a Meeting With President Sergio Mattarella of Italy
February 8, 2016

President Obama. It is my pleasure to welcome President Mattarella and his delegation to the Oval Office. The President has an extraordinarily distinguished career as an academic, as a jurist, as a public servant. He has the honor of being the first Sicilian to become President of Italy. As I mentioned, he's also a constitutional law professor, so I felt great affinity for him right away.

The bonds between Italy and the United States could not be closer. And this gave us an opportunity not only to reaffirm the friendship between the United States and Italy, but also the extraordinary strategic cooperation on a wide range of very challenging issues that face the transatlantic community.

As a close NATO ally and a member of the counter-ISIL campaign, we discussed the situation in Iraq, in Syria. And I thanked the President for Italy's strong contribution to the efforts to train and advise police to participate in the progress that's being made there and to update him on the progress of the campaign going forward. And that includes the critical role that Italy will play in fortifying the Mosul Dam, an issue that is of great importance to the Iraqi people.

We discussed the joint efforts of Italy, the United States and other of our partners in helping Libya form a Government that will allow us then to help them build out their security capacity and to push back against efforts by ISIL to gain a foothold in that country.

We spent a lot of time discussing the refugee crisis that's facing Europe and Italy in particular. And I indicated to the President that we view this not just as a European problem, but as a global problem, as a problem for the United States, as a strain on the transatlantic relationship, and indicated the ways in which I want to see the United States working in concert with our NATO partners and European Union partners to address the humanitarian crisis and also to make sure that we're going after some of the human trafficking networks that have been developing and are profiteering off the misery of others.

And from the work we're doing together in Afghanistan to the importance of maintaining our unified effort to bring about a peaceful resolution of the situation in Ukraine, to the opportunities that present themselves in finalizing a trade agreement through the T-TIP process, we agreed that joint and common action between the United States and Italy not only serves the interests of both our countries, but the broader transatlantic relationship that has underwritten so much peace and prosperity over the last several decades.

So, Mr. President, welcome. I understand you'll be traveling to New York and Houston. I'm sure that, wherever you go, you'll get the same warm reception because of not only the incredible ties between Italy and America, but also because of the extraordinary sacrifices that our peoples together have made to shape a better world.

President Mattarella. I wish to thank President Obama wholeheartedly for the invitation to come to Washington and for the wonderful reception and hospitality that we have received. This is a sign of friendship between Italy and the United States. It is a friendship that dates back 70 years, and we have known all these years that we can count on one another.

And it is also through the cooperation within the Atlantic alliance that we have been able to overcome, over time, the many demanding challenges and difficulties successfully. And it is through this closeness and friendship and cooperation that exist at present and will continue to exist in the future that we will be helped to overcome the many new challenges that will appear before us, and we will be able to defeat in this manner the enemies of peace, freedom, and human rights.

As President Obama has told you, we have agreed on the number—on the numerous issues and challenges that we are facing, not only in terms of actually identifying them, but also in determining how we wish to deal with them. So, on the subject of terrorism, which of course is engendering great violence and death all over the world, and then migration, we agree that we need a very balanced approach, a human—a humane approach in dealing with this matter, because we have to consider issues of security and the rights of the people that are affected.

And the President also mentioned the different theaters where there are crises: Syria, Iraq, Libya, for example. And it is through the cooperation, based on the Atlantic alliance, through the alliance itself, that we can hope to bring stability and security to these many different areas. This is, I think, very important to focus on the cooperation within the Atlantic alliance.

We also talked about our transatlantic economic and trade partnership, and this, of course, is a very important approach because it can help us to avoid in the future additional, new economic and financial crises, because they would, of course, jeopardize the prosperity that has been achieved in the developing world and perhaps ward off or prevent any prosperity from being achieved in developing nations.

So these are very demanding challenges indeed. We need to know exactly how to govern them, how to resolve them. And I think that it is within the transatlantic framework that we can hope to be successful. And of course, Italy and the United States are on board together, all the time.

Thank you very much, Mr. President.

President Obama. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:19 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization. President Mattarella spoke in Italian, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter.

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