THE EUROPEAN UNION AT THE START OF THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY

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JESSICA MATHEWS: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen and distinguished guests. I’m Jessica Mathews, president of the Carnegie Endowment. It’s a great pleasure to welcome you here this morning. We are here to hear from his Excellency, Pierre Vimont, the French ambassador to the United States at the beginning of the French presidency of the European Union. France is taking over at an extraordinarily interesting and challenging moment. The U.S., we know, is in the throws of rethinking its international role.

There have been important political changes — fundamental political changes — in key European countries: in France itself, and in Britain, and in others underway, and Turkey, and elsewhere. And, of course, we’ve recently had the spectacular “no” vote on the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland. The treaty — Lisbon Treaty — was designed — is designed to force more cohesion in policy-making in Europe by creating a presidency of the European Council for two-and-a-half years rather than the rotating six months and by creating a new post that combines the existing roles of the foreign policy supremo and the commissioner for international affairs, and many other changes, as I think probably most of you know, all of them, I think, designed to streamline decision making in the union.

Remembering our history over the recent Fourth of July weekend, I can only say that we look on in some sympathy at the task of bringing together 27 nations in today’s environment of almost complete transparency and immediate political accountability. It’s no small thing. Here at Carnegie, we are reinventing ourselves, as well, to fit the changed circumstances. We some years ago became convinced that the only route to wiser policymaking was through real and continuing partnerships that get outside of the Washington lens of policymaking. And so we set out to try to create something quite new, to pioneer the first global think tank and in the past few years, building on 15 years of work in Moscow, we have opened new offices in Beijing and Beirut and most recently, in Brussels.

Carnegie Brussels is – our European office is in Brussels but is active in capitals across Europe and to act as a two-way forum for the exchange of empirical research and practical independently formulated policy ideas among the best scholars in the all the regions: the Middle East, Russia, China, Europe, et cetera. This is not an effort to add one more voice in the so-called transatlantic agenda but to get quite beyond that.

But we’re here today to hear about something quite important and Mr. Ambassador, I know that the French presidency has many ambitious priorities for its six months in the lead. We’re eager to hear about them and to hear how, if at all, they have been affected by the recent vote and what we should think about the future of the treaty. So we look forward to hearing your views. I think the ambassador would like to speak sitting down and then we’ll – or which you’re more comfortable. Thank you for joining us this morning.

AMBASSADOR PIERRE VIMONT: I can speak from here if you wish. Thank you very much, Jessica, and good morning to all of you. I think the idea is that I do some introductory remarks and then answer your questions in a Q&A session. And I’m quite ready for that and I think questions are always the most lively part of this kind of a session, so I look forward. Just a few minutes ago, Jessica was mentioning or referring to the Philadelphia Convention and I’m precisely looking at all this the other day. I thought that you were very smart at that time because you set up this arrangement that to get ratified, your new constitution needed two-thirds of the 13 – (chuckles) – states at that time. That
was very clever I must say compared to what we’re going on through with the need for unanimity.

Let me give you maybe – I would like to answer two questions, mostly today. The first one is where is exactly Europe for the time being? Where is the European Union today? And secondly, maybe, enlarging to what are going to be the priorities of the French presidency. Maybe explain that in a more open way than just summarizing the four or five priorities that are usually mentioned and that you all know very well already and therefore, I will try to enlarge a little bit the vision of what should be the priorities and the task of the French presidency as we go ahead.

First of all, where are we today and what is the present situation – the present state of the European Union? I think, and I’ll go very quickly, on the first point is just to say that there is undoubtedly many successes. We all know that. I won’t go back on with that because I think we all know what has happened since 1957 and what we have managed to do, which is tremendous if you look at it from a historical point of view. Peace on that continent, prosperity, the setting up of a single European market that meant a lot of work, a single currency, the euro, and a process of enlargement since the fall of the Berlin Wall. That has been very quick and very successful if you look today at those new member states who are now inside the European Union, in terms of prosperity, peaceful transition, etcetera, etcetera. So I think we always have to remember that if we look at what we are today because there is this load of successes that are there and that are in the backyard of all the thinking and the reflection we’re going on today.

My second point, precisely, is the one that we certainly are, today, in a situation which is I wouldn’t say a difficult one, but which is, once again, a time for reflection and a time of transition, I think, for most of what we’re trying to do inside the European Union. The first point of observation, the obvious one, is that if you look at the present process of ratification of treaty and if you add what was the ratification of the draft constitution – Constitutional Treaty – to call it in its precise name – and now the draft Treaty of Lisbon, which is more or less the same thing but put in other words.

If you look at the number of referendums that took place, we had five since 2005. And in those five referendums, you have got three “no” and two “yes” and that tells a lot about the present state of mind of public opinions in Europe. And I think a lot of countries that have gone through parliamentary ratification would admit, in private, that if they had gone through a referendum, it was not sure that it would succeed. So we all know that we are facing a difficult situation with regard to the present state of mind of our public opinion. This is not to say that they want to stop. On the contrary and I think this has been true, also, with the Irish referendum that just took place. People are very much in favor. Opinion polls show that are very much in favor of their partnership inside the European Union.

It has more to do with the future that is in front of us and what kind of future are we offering to our population. And this is what we are, at the moment, facing once again, the traditional problem that we have been facing, I would say, since the ’70s, which is, as you go along enlarging the European community, you have also to ask yourself, what is the purpose of all this? What kind of institution do we have? Do we have to go on with the common policies that we have set up in the past? Are they still suited to European Union of
27 members and even more as we go ahead? These are fundamental questions and these are questions that we have never really solved because maybe we don’t agree altogether really, on the final objective – the final target of this European Union.

And the European Union has always been – I think it was Jean-Pierre Carter (sp), former French political leader and great lawyer and a great expert on European unions. Jean-Pierre Carter used to say, as soon as you have adopted and find a compromise on a treaty, you start immediately discussing about the next one because this is what we call constructive compromise on an ongoing process. And this is really where we are, in fact, in the European Union for many years because since the ’70s, we have been looking at and dealing with this contradiction between enlargement and deepening and of the integration process in Europe and we have never been really able to find the right balance. And this is going to be as we go on, always this question of finding the right balance between the two processes. And mind you, we are facing, nowadays, new perspectives of enlargement with the Balkan countries, also – and I’ll come back to that in a few minutes – with requests from other countries outside of the Balkan area: Ukraine, Moldavia, et cetera, et cetera, of course, Turkey, where we’re going through negotiations for accession with them at the time – for the time being – and you know this is a very controversial issue, of course.

So all these are the questions that we are facing and we are facing those questions with a system – a European system – that you – whose characteristics you must be aware of. It is a system whereby we have decided to transfer some of our competence to Brussels and to the European Union and where we have kept, at the same time, other competence on the national level. And I think this is very important to remind you of that because take, for instance, economic and monetary affairs. On one side, we have the single currency and, therefore, we have the Central European Bank, who is in charge of our monetary policy and even to some extent, even if this is controversial, precisely, of the policy of exchange rate.

And on the other side, it is the member states who still have to deal with their national economic policies or strategies and, therefore, it is a very complex system in which you have to manage to find the right balance between the two: national competence on one side, European competence on the other side. You could say the same thing about foreign policy and this has to do with competence, also. The way to – the governance of our foreign policy, whereby on point, we decide that when we can find agreement among ourselves, we leave it to the European level to set up the principles and we try all to abide by them. But at the same time, if we cannot agree, every one of the member states still retain its possibility and its capacity and its autonomy to go along.

And thirdly, a new phenomenon has appeared recently whereby a few countries got more or less the agreement of the other countries to go along and speak for the whole group. Take for instance, the nuclear issue with Iran, whereby three European countries: Germany, Great Britain, and France, with the United States, Russia, and China are trying to negotiate, if they can, with the Iranian authorities on that very sensitive issue, with the agreement of the others and, of course, with the presence of Javier Solana as the representative of the whole European Union, who is there in this group and who, in fact quite often, is the one who speaks for the whole group.
So you have to understand that we are facing at the moment, a very complex European system made out of – made up of different types of competence, different type of possible institutional frameworks, more and more flexibility into the system. And I tend to believe that you will get more and more flexibility as the enlargement goes on, which is not at all the kind of simplistic federal system that we may – or those who are the most pro-Europeans may wish for but where we are not there at the moment and I don’t think we will be there for, still, a very long time. That’s my assessment for the time being for what Europe is all about and how I think it will keep on evolving for the future.

With regard to the French presidency, how can we try to summarize in the best way the different issues we are facing? I think the best way to do it is to try to put three categories – let me just remind you first of all that officially, we have four priorities: climate change and energy, agriculture, immigration, and European defense. You will see that they are there in the three categories I’m going to talk about. But as quite often with France, when you talk about a few priorities, then immediately they add some more afterwards. And you have heard about the Union for the Mediterranean. You have heard about the social dimension of Europe. You have heard about the need to prioritize the whole question about how can we regulate financial markets, et cetera, et cetera.

So I think in order to get your ideas in order, the best thing is just to try to explain the three different categories that we are facing and that I think most of the presidency face because, you know, what task we’re having when we take up the presidency of the council of the European Union. It is a question of great modesty and of being asked by all of our partners just to take up the work that has been done by the previous presidency and to give it six months later to the successor in the best shape possible and with as much agreement as possible. It’s not much more than that and that is already a lot of work.

So the three categories we are facing is the one where there has been official proposals by the European Commission that are there on the table and where, therefore, it is the responsibility of the European presidency, whatever country’s in charge and decided to help, to go on and to try to push as far as possible those proposals. And in that field, in that category, there are three main issues that we are facing. The first one has to do with climate change and energy. I’ll go back into more details, if you wish so, when you ask your questions. Just let me tell you that the whole purpose behind that issue is, first of all, to prepare the – well, first of all, to implement the commitments that the Europeans have taken, not only at the European level but, also, at the G8 summit last year in Heiligendamm under the Germany presidency, which are the three main objectives – the three 20 percent: a reduction by 2020 of 20 percent of our gas house – greenhouse gas emission; secondly, to try to increase the part of renewable energy by 20 percent, also by 2020; and thirdly, to try to increase savings of energy and resources, also by 20 percent in 2020.

Those are the commitments we have taken. These are the issues on which the European Commission has put down proposals on the table and we have to try to get that through the European Council and the European parliament as we go ahead. But the second point, of course, is to go on discussing among ourselves and putting forward in the international fora, the proposals of the European Union with regard to the next international agreement, the post-Kyoto agreement that will have to be decided at the latest in
Copenhagen in 2009 and, of course, the European Union wants to present itself in those discussion as one single entity and, therefore, to have one single position on that.

With regard to energy, to put it as simply as possible, the idea is really to try to improve the energy policy that we have at the moment and to try to increase the cooperation and the coordination of our energy, of our actions in the energy sector. In other words, try to coordinate the imports of gas and that brings about the whole question of our relations with Russia in that sector. Also, to improve the transport of energy all over the European Union and we still have some progress to do there. Even a lot has been done already and a few other issues on which I can go back, if you wish so.

The second issue that is, in other words, imposed on us is agriculture. In fact, when we adopted our financial perspective by the end, if I remember well, of 2005, it was decided that by this year, 2008, we would get a report by the European Commission on the common agriculture policy. Why do we relate financial perspectives and CAP? For the simple reasons that CAP still represents something like 42 or 43 percent of the total European budget and that a lot of our partners, not France I must say, but a lot of our partners think it is too much and that we should try to reduce that with the prospect of very difficult negotiation on the next round of financial perspectives that we have to adopt at the latest by 2013. So, therefore, next year or in two years time, we will have to start the discussion about financial perspectives and this is why we've got this report by the commission about where is the common agricultural policy at the time today and where should it go.

Of course, this has been complicated recently by what has happened in the food markets, of course, and the increase in food prices. And this is why the debate about the present state of the CAP and these reforms that we should for the – with regard to the common agricultural policy, has become, now, linked to a large extent, with what should we do and what should the Europeans do with regard to the turmoil, at the moment, in the food market, on food prices, and, of course, the whole question of relations with our partners in the developing countries and how should we help them and support their efforts to build up their own national agriculture? So this is also a very important issue.

And the third issue that is imposed on us, it's all the present negotiations going on in the external relations of the European Union, mostly two large chapters there. Everything that has to deal with enlargement – as you know, we're going on with negotiations with Croatia and with Turkey and, also, the question of whether we should open new accession negotiations with some of the countries in the Balkans that are knocking at the door in order to start their accession negotiations. You have the whole problem of Macedonia and FYROM, which is at the moment, boggled down by the opposition between Greece and FYROM about the name of that country and so we have to find a solution there before we can start negotiations. But there are also requests for the start of negotiations from countries like Montenegro, Bosnia, and the whole question, of course, the most important question there of Serbia. If we manage to find a solution and to calm down the situation in Kosovo, the whole question of moving towards the opening of negotiation with Serbia on accession will be there on the table.

And then the second question in relation with external relations, of course, has to do with the partnership agreements – the new partnerships agreements. We have to negotiation
and discuss with some countries like – just name a few, but you will understand how important this point is – Russia or Ukraine. So this is very much high and a heavy load that we’ve got on the table. The second set of category, I would say, of questions that we are facing – I’ll try to speed up a little bit to allow for your questions – are those, I would say that are imposed by circumstances and there you will easily understand it what I want to do. It’s what I mean.

It’s the Irish referendum, of course, because we were not expecting a “no” vote in Ireland. What we had to do and what we were expecting to do under our presidency was to prepare for the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty. In other words, as Jessica mentioned a few minutes ago, how to be ready on the first of January for the new president of the European Council to be in place, therefore, pick up the names, choose the right candidate, and that was something, as you can imagine. We’re not there anymore. Now, what the French presidency will have to do is to try to sort out the situation in Ireland in close cooperation with the Irish leaders, and also with our other partners and the commission. And this is going to be a lot of work because if we look at past experience, its use – of that kind of the problem, how do we get out of a solution creating by your negative vote is something that takes time and that can take more than a few months. I can go back in details to that, if you wish so. I just leave it here for the moment.

The second issue that is imposed on us, of course, is everything has to do with the economic and financial circumstances; the increase in oil prices, the increase in food prices. The next meeting in Geneva of the Doha cycle and try to get an agreement in the trade sector with regard to that. I’ll be – I won’t go further on that but you can imagine if you just look at the most recent European Council that took place under the Slovenian presidency, these were the issues – the most important issues – that the heads of state and government looked at and discussed among themselves and in fact, they had decided – they have decided at that time that we’ll come back to that on the 15th of October with a report by the commission. So this is also something that is very important.

And, of course, we have also a third example of those issues imposed on us. It’s everything that is related, at the moment, the diplomatic issues that are very familiar to all of you. I’ll name just a few and you understand immediately: Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, the peace process, where you hear more and more from the different parties involved in those difficult issues. You hear more and more from those parties, their eagerness and their wish and their willingness that the European Union get more involved in the different processes that are there on the ground.

And then the third category, which is, I think, the ones where you have a clear initiative by the presidency itself, which is, I think, one of the good things about the system of rotating presidency, is that each presidency has, usually, a few priorities that she puts on the table that are not coming from the European Commission and that a way of giving impulse and a new momentum to some chapters of our European construction that are sometimes a little bit left behind.

This issue, I’ll just give you a few glimpses about the three that are the most important, I think. The three issues are, first of all, immigration. We thought that it was ripe and the time was ripe for trying to get some sort of agreement on principles and guidelines
for what could be common immigration policy in the European Union. What do I mean by that? What do we mean by that? Try to get some guidelines at what should be legal immigration. Try to agree among ourselves on how to manage illegal immigration and the whole question of whether we regularize the illegal immigrants when they are there inside the European Union. Do we do it? Do we not do it? The questions of political asylum. The question of control of our borders. And last but not least, the whole question of increasing development aids towards the countries of origin of those immigrants and, of course, of those illegal immigrants.

The objective of the French presidency is to have what would be called a pact for immigration. In other word, a statement of principles and guidelines that would be agreed among the 27 of us and that would pave the way for further work inside the European Union in the years ahead as we will try to put all those principles into practical, concrete European resolutions and European regulations.

A second point, European defense. We have talked a lot about this. You know a lot about it. I won’t go into details. The main ideas there is to give a new momentum to this chapter by updating the European strategy concept that was adopted in 2002, to update it so that to take into account the new threats that we are facing, mostly terrorism but also some others: cyber attacks, et cetera. And also, to take into account the whole question of internal security and to see how we can work together.

And secondly, of course, to look at the kind of coordination and increased capacities that we could have in terms armament industries and in terms, also, of external operations. These are the first two ideas about initiatives by the presidency. The third and last one is, of course, Union for Mediterranean. As you know, we’re going to have a summit in Paris next Sunday, where we are gathering the whole 27 countries of the European Union, the 12 member states of the Mediterranean southern part, and, of course, some observers who will be there, also, the Arab League and some others who will join us. That will be a gathering of more than 40 institutions, countries, et cetera, and it will be a very important one.

What it is all about? It’s mostly, to put it in the most simple term, to how we can bring new life and new momentum to the Barcelona process, which was launched by the Spanish presidency in 1995, had some good success but from the point of view, I think, of all the member states and of the commission and also, I would say, the Mediterranean countries need to find some new determination and some new mobilization on behalf of both parties on both sides of the Mediterranean.

That means, in fact, two or three things. How to setup a governing system – a system of governance, which will be more in terms of parity, which will allow both parties on both sides of the Mediterranean to be on common ground, on common footing and to look at very concrete and practical programs on which we could work: the pollution of the Mediterranean, transports, energy, et cetera, et cetera. And not more than two or three projects of that kind each year and really trying to work very closely all together to try to push those projects ahead and to find solution there, and regular meetings of the heads of state and government, who will meet along the lines of what we’re going to do next Sunday and who are able to give more political momentum, if necessary, when they have the impression that the process is slowly moving down. This is what it’s all about. This is, once
again, one of the initiatives that we have taken and that we hope will be successful as we go ahead.

Here I am, last note. If you look at all that, I haven’t talked a lot about transatlantic relation and I did it on purpose. First of all, because I will allow you to ask questions on it if you wish so but what strikes me, in fact, and what I find very interesting at the present moment, is that contrary to what was the situation about five or 10 years ago, in fact, there is not really a major bone of contention between your country and the European Union at the moment. What we are observing, I think, more than real controversies, we may have here and there some problems inside the framework of the other issues that we’re facing inside the transatlantic economic relation imports of poultry, intellectual property, or things of that sort. But I think you will agree with me that this is not really a major issue or not major issues.

What we’re facing today and I find that rather interesting and that, in fact, we have no real difference and controversy between ourselves. What we have is facing the same common challenges: climate change, energy, financial markets, immigration, to some extent, even if the problems are not exactly the same. And, really, what it’s all about, I think today in our transatlantic relation, is how can we measure it and find the proper way, the proper process, to try to work together on those challenges that we’re facing either on the bilateral basis or inside the international community when necessary. And I think this is, really, the challenge that we’re facing at the moment in the transatlantic relations. It is a very exciting challenge, a challenge of a very different nature from what was in the past and I think this is the kind of work we all face in the years ahead. I stop there. Jessica, thank you very much.

(Applause.)

MS. MATHEWS: Let me begin questions and then there will be microphones here and I ask everybody to please identify themselves. Let me start where you started with the reference to requiring unanimity. I can’t think of anything the United States – any policy decision – that the U.S. could take that we could, in fact, reach if we required unanimity. Can the EU, looking ahead down the road, function with this requirement? And if not, how will it be changed?

AMB. VIMONT: The problem, to answer your question, is that we look at this quite often. In fact, as far as I can remember, it may have started in the ’80s with the – when we negotiated the European Single Act at that time. We already start here and there to think about, if we want to ratify that treaty in due course, should we go away from unanimity? And time again, in the Maastricht Treaty, Amsterdam Treaty, the Nice Treaty and now in the constitutional – the draft Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon treaty, we have been looking at that. And the truth, to come back to what I was saying previously, we don’t agree among ourselves on that because going from unanimity to two-thirds is starting to move in the direction of a real federal Europe.

And once again, to come back to what I was saying, what is the objective and the purpose of the whole thing is that when we talk about European integration up to the point of starting to have a real federal institutions, we have partly federal institutions here and there. But with a two-third majority, for instance, or even a four-fifths majority, it would be
totally different. It would mean, in other ways, that you force the hand of one country to accept – to go along with a treaty that she has not – it has not ratified – sorry – or maybe to stay on the side and not go along and get out of the European Union. And this is a move that, in fact, very few countries are prepared to accept.

Look, for instance, at a country like France, my country. We were very much in favor of getting rid of the unanimity system because so far, we had managed until 2005, to get positive referenda every time we’ve come. We got one on the accession of Great Britain and we had one on the Maastricht Treaty and we managed to get through those two. The Maastricht Treaty was very short and very difficult but we did it. Now that we’ve had this experience of 2005, where we voted against, I’m not so sure that we would be as enthusiastic as before with a new clause for a two-third majority. And this is the same with many other countries, so it is one of the issues on the table. And as we can’t find and agree on a different solution, I think we will go on with unanimity with that on the question of ratification for many years ahead.


Q: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. I’m the consulate at the Turkish Embassy. Well, thank you very much for your presentation. It seems that in spite of the current difficulties in the European Union, the presidency has a every ambition agenda, so we wish good luck and every success.

AMB. VIMONT: We need it.

Q: (Chuckles.) Yes. Mr. Ambassador, it is good to see that enlargement is still among your priorities. It is really relieving because that were really – there has been really serious concerns about the fact that the enlargement perspective is lagging behind, especially comparing to the previous periods, especially after President Sarkozy’s remarks right after the refusal of the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland regarding – I mean, President Sarkozy’s remarks on enlargement. But I still argue that keeping the enlargement perspective alive is, today, as important as it used to be. It is not only important for this or that country or this or that region, but it is important in general if the EU is to seek to become a global player in world affairs.

So my question is that President Sarkozy’s views about my country’s EU bid is well known, so there’s no need to repeat it here. So my question is that how do you think that the presidency would strike a balance between the national position of France represented by President Sarkozy and the position of the EU, which is apparently quite different from that of France?

AMB. VIMONT: And in fact there are – maybe I’ll make two remarks about your question because I would just like to come back of what the president of the – the French president of the republic said just after the Irish vote because there must be no mistake and you have to understand the point, which to some extent, is a technical point that you have to be aware of. Those who have, unfortunately like myself, been through the negotiation of the Nice Treaty and through the negotiation of the Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty know that perfectly well.
What he was saying is that if we don’t have, by a way or another, the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, then we are in a very difficult situation with new enlargements that are going ahead because we are – we remain under the arrangement of the Nice Treaty and the arrangement of the Nice Treaty were only made for 27 countries. It was a totally different system. It was a system by which we were giving a certain – we were casting a certain number of votes for member states. We have a ceiling for members of the European parliament.

We have an arrangement for the European Commission that still has to be looked at because it was only saying that when we will be 27, we won’t be able to have 27 members of the European Commission; we should have less but we should have to find an agreement among ourselves. And it was precisely because we thought those arrangements in the Nice Treaty were not good that we have gone through the whole process of the Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty, where by now, we have a general rule that applies to every member state, 55 percent and 65 percent, you know, the whole thing of one member state and the population and taking into account the population.

So that’s what he was saying and he said – stated since then, that he was very much in favor of going on with the enlargement process and there I come back to – I come back to my second remark. France will be a loyal president of the European Commission because we – it is our duty and we intend to do that and we have said, very clearly, that if the commission comes up with asking us to open new chapters in the accession negotiation with regard to Croatia or to your own country, Turkey, France will put the question to the other member states. And if they wish to go along, we will certainly go along and, in fact, we really hope that we will be able to open new chapters for the negotiations with Turkey. There is no doubt about that, in spite of what we may as a national position that you know of, we have said from the beginning that we intend to play our part, either as president or as member state, in the accession negotiation and with the negotiation with Turkey in order to allow that negotiation to go on, as it should. So there’s no change there and we will be a presidency that will really abide by the rules and be very responsible and do whatever is asked us, either by the member states or the commission.

MS. MATHEWS: Gentleman right in the middle there. Yes, thank you.

Q: Thank you. Jim Berger from Washington Trade Daily. Candidate John McCain has – actually a few months ago – said he’d support a U.S.-EU free trade agreement. Now, France will not be president when he’s inaugurated but – (chuckles) – it will be president when he’s – if he’s elected. What is France’s view on a U.S.-EU free trade agreement?

AMB. VIMONT: Free trade agreement, for instance, with Colombia? I mean the bilateral free trade agreements that the United States have with some countries. Well, we have nothing against that, of course.

Q: I mean, with the European Union.

AMB. VIMONT: Oh, with the European Union. This is – how could I put it? This is an old story that we’ve been through for many, many years between the European
Union and the United States. I was saying previously that we have no major bone of contention at the moment between ourselves. I'm not sure that if one member state comes out or the commission comes out, once again, with the idea of a free trade zone between the two sides of the Atlantic, there we would find, once again, many problems arising. This is precisely because as we have been going on and trying to see how to find a way through, the German presidency came out very smartly, in my opinion, with this idea about the Transatlantic Economic Council.

In other words, let’s not try to have some general objectives on which immediately we have difficulties and we don’t agree because it’s very difficult, quite often, to agree on principles. Let’s go for practical problems and to try to solve them as they arise and this is what we’re trying to do with the Transatlantic Economic Council. And I think this is the proper way to proceed for the time being. If, as we go along, in due course, we have the impression all together, all the partners of this transatlantic relationship, that we could do more and look, once again, at the question of a free trade zone, we will see. But let’s be pragmatic on that side, in my opinion.

MS. MATHEWS: The gentleman right here.

Q: Michael Sellinger, Brookings Institution. In the aftermath of the Irish “no,” there’s been, of course, a lot of discussion in the EU about the citizens and why there isn’t greater support for the EU; why they don’t feel it’s doing more for them. In connection with that, President Sarkozy has made a number of statements, including using the word “protection” – important to protect the citizens, related to that, I guess, because my guess is he’s talking internally as well as, perhaps, externally, sharp criticism of the EU negotiated and the Doha round. I happen to think that’s a lost cause, anyway, but I just mention that. Can you shed any light on what the president has in mind and should Americans be nervous and if not, why not?

AMB. VIMONT: I'm not sure you should be nervous because this is also a very old story. If you go back, for instance, to the French campaign in 1992 on the Maastricht Treaty and if you look at the major intervention that President Mitterrand, who was the French president at the time, made on French television and who played, I think, a big part in the “yes” vote, he precisely said, more or less, exactly the same thing: What we have to do to make Europe more popular towards our public opinion is to show that Europe can protect them.

So the question of protection has always been there for one simple reason is that, what were the objectives at the beginning of the whole process in 1957 with the Rome Treaty? It was mostly about peace and prosperity. Peace, the new generations in Europe just think that it's there and it's there forever. Maybe they're wrong but that's their impression. Prosperity, we have seen a lot of it, even in a country like mine in the ’60s, the Golden ’60s, as we say. And even if we have here and there some difficulty, the increase in the prosperity of all the European member states – old member states, new member states – has been tremendous and everybody agrees this has been a great success.

What we are facing today is a new challenge and a new – the new purpose maybe of the European Union is facing the global economy and trying to put – to give some input
into that global economy from the European perspective from what our ideas, our values, our way of dealing with economic problems and, therefore, to manage to get those European ideas floating around in the international circles, et cetera, et cetera, in order to precisely to protect those values, those principles, and those systems, social security – the possibility for the states to implement public services, as we say, et cetera, et cetera. We need to be able to put those ideas forward to be more offensive on that field and this is what it’s all about for, I would say, about the last 10 years.

I think a lot of the European population has the impression that the European Union doesn’t know where it wants to go, which way it is going, and this is the kind of a new sense of purpose that we think should be put into a European reflection and this is, I think really what it is all about. I don’t think it is about protectionism, as such, even if there may be, as in your country, great pressure for protectionism among many of the reasons, the present exchange rate between the dollar and the euro. When you manufacture in the euro zone and try to sell in the dollar zone, it’s becoming more and more difficult. So you have more and more European industries thinking about outsourcing their industries outside of Europe and this doesn’t go down very well with European trade unions, of course, and we are facing that kind of pressure at the moment.

But I don’t think that the president, Nicolas Sarkozy, was thinking in such precise terms about trade, protectionism, et cetera. I think he was thinking in a more general term about how can European leaders and European institutions defend, protect, promote some of our values, some of our way of managing our economies when we face the outside world and the global economy.

MS. MATHEWS: The gentleman right here, then it’s you.

Q: Good morning, Mr. Ambassador. Melvin Udai (sp) from the Aspen Institute. You mentioned earlier that defense was one of the four major focal points of the French EU presidency and given President Sarkozy’s determination to sort of reassert French, and in a larger sense, EU military presence globally, going into the future, what will be the EU military posture vis-à-vis the Middle East and certainly within a larger global context? Thank you.

AMB. VIMONT: I think the main idea behind this French priority in the field of defense is very simple. If the European Union wants to play a role and wants to have a part in international affairs and wants to have its own contribution to international issues, international problems, et cetera, we need, by a way or another, to have defense capacities. And what we’re seeing at the moment is that when we try to do that you immediately have countries like Great Britain, mostly, France, afterwards, a little bit Germany, Spain, and Italy, and not much more. Here and there you can have some small contribution but the truth is that every time you speak about an external operation that could represent and constitute a European contribution when we’re facing difficult challenges in Africa and Balkans, in Lebanon; it’s more or less always the same countries who are there. We’re ready to do that but we think that in terms of solidarity and even in terms of showing that the European Union is integrated and is moving to more integration with regards to defense, we need to have all of the 27 member states to do some effort in that direction in terms of operational
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capacities, in terms of setting up European armaments and their capabilities, et cetera, et cetera.

I’ll give you an example. When we decided, since last year and for nearly half of this year, to set up a military operation at the border between China and Sudan, with regard to the Darfur crisis, and we decided to have a European force there, we – it took us along time to get the agreement of several countries to come along with France. We’ve got them and we’ve got troops or military commanders from Ireland, from Poland, and from a few other countries – Austria, also, and this is good and this is progress and we have to go on like that. But, for instance, we discovered that we’re having great difficulty in transporting those troops. We had no helicopters. We don’t have the proper airplanes for that. So looking at the shortcomings of our experience in recent external operation, we think that it’s time to discuss between ourselves how to get over those shortcomings and in – so that in the future, when we set up those kinds of operation, we are much more efficient and much more quick in responding to, for what is quite often, international requests by the U.N. or by some of our partners.

MS. MATHEWS: In the back, right.

Q: I’m Peter Shutley (ph) from Brookings. Thank you very much for coming. I’d like to take you to U.S.-French bilateral relations and you’ve spent a lot of time in your diplomatic career on cultural and so my question is, how would you compare the volume level of cultural exchanges, student exchanges, academic exchanges between France and the U.S. today as opposed to 30, 40 years ago? And are our visa policies creating problems in that regard?

AMB. VIMONT: I think – and I think it is a good thing. I think those relations have improved a lot. Maybe where the imbalance lies is with the fact your students usually come to France for short visits, three to six months, in very strong connection between the universities where there’s – the American universities and some of their French counterparts – very concrete, practical programs, very well framed, et cetera. Whereas what we are doing on our side, sending French students to your country, it’s more the fact that we’re sending people who are already have their Ph.D. and are more in the scientific field and researchers that take a great interest, in fact, in coming to your country and working here, which is, I think, a trend that you see with many other foreign students, also, because the amount of foreign students in your university increase a lot when you look at the post-Ph.D. stage.

So this is really what is going on at the moment, young French scientists coming to your country, spending a few years, and mind you, we have to be careful because we would like them to come back to France at one point or another. (Chuckles.) But they do. But they enjoy very much being here and they stay, quite often, after their studies and they start – and they keep on with their projects quite often for a few more years but they come back after all and this is a very useful contribution to the innovation sector and to the research sector in France. And I think that kind of a relation is very good but we’re quite prepared to have more students and scientists from your country, also, coming to ours.

And with regard to the visa program – and this I’m going to do a promotion here. Beware, this is an advertisement. In fact, what we’re doing at the moment in France, what the French authorities have setup is a very, very open visa programs for all those of you who
would like to come in France, whether they be scientists or young businessmen who’d like to start a business in France or to do research in France. In fact, we give them, quite immediately, a program visa for two years that can be renewed afterwards and their family can join them without any sort of impeachment. So it’s contrary to what is quite often said. For a country like yours, France is getting more and more open in terms of visa and immigration.

MS. MATHEWS: Can you also address what I think was the question, which is, are U.S. visa policies inhibiting exchange in a significant way?

AMB. VIMONT: It – well, you have this own category of student visa and so far, we haven’t had too much problems. We have individual cases here and there of people who would like to stay longer and who may have some problems here and there but I would say with regard to this kind of exchange, for the time being, we haven’t had too much difficulties yet.

MS. MATHEWS: I should just add that we’ve had a French colleague here at Carnegie, expert on Afghanistan and Pakistan, for the last several years and it has been, I think, a significant source of innovation and thinking in Washington, as well. I think we have time, maybe for one more right here. Well, maybe we’ll have –

Q: Good morning, Mr. Ambassador. Jonathan Norman (ph) from the Hudson Institute. Regarding the EU security integration defense, I was wondering, recently President Sarkozy has, you know, called for this and said that it will compliment NATO. So I was just wondering how, exactly, he envisions that happening and how he believes we can keep NATO relevant, if indeed he wants to do that?

AMB. VIMONT: Yes, we think one of the difficulties we were facing in the past, when I was talking earlier on about the change of mood in the transatlantic relation, I think defense is a very good example, also, because you remember that when France in the past years was talking about increasing European defense and being able to have some autonomous capacity, et cetera, it was usually very badly received, I would say, and welcomed with great reservation in this country.

I think that there has been a tremendous improvement, recently, and if you go back to the statements made during the NATO-Bucharest Summit, you will see that President Bush, Condi Rice, and others have said that they welcome this new initiative enhancing European defense as long as that it will be complimentary to NATO and this is exactly the way we’re seeing it. And, in fact, if you look at the past experience, this is exactly the way it has been going for the last few years, even to an extent where you could say that somewhere we have the sort of a division of labor in the international community, with the Europeans taking in charge some of the external operations that have been going on in Africa.

In fact, that we have been doing a lot of it in the Democratic Republic of Congo, twice already in Chad, and the border between Chad and Sudan. And even if it was not really what I could say a European external operation in the south – in South Lebanon, at least it was mostly three European countries: Italy, Spain, and France, that were – that agreed after consultation, in consultation with the United States and many other countries
inside the European Union. These three countries sent their troops to South Lebanon in order apply Resolution 1701 of the Security Council. So I think we can really, now there’s talk in terms of complimentary action, and this is what it’s all about. Dispel the misunderstanding and try to work in the proper way so that we have good complimentary system between the two institutions.

Mind you, I think that also, and this is something that France has being saying time and again, that this also calls, maybe, for reflection among NATO members on what should be the future of NATO and what should be the missions of NATO in the future, it’s geographical competence, whether it should remain mostly a military institution or whether it should go for larger involvement in the civilian sector, development aid, et cetera, et cetera. In other words, many of the issues we’re facing at the moment in Afghanistan, as we’re going through one of a very difficult, irregular conflict and we know that we’re going to see more and more of those kind of this nature of conflict and that, therefore, we have to maybe, think about the future in NATO in precisely the way NATO will be able to face those – this new kind of conflict as we go along and, therefore, how to adapt NATO on one side, how to adapt the European defense on the other side, and how to make them work together. This is what it’s all about. And once again, I must put a note of caution there. I think this is going to take a long time to get implemented as we go along and it will be done, I’m sure, in a very progressive way.

Q: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. I just wanted to go back quickly to climate change, if possible, and talk about how the French presidency plans to coordinate implementation of the 2020 goals among such diverse countries?

AMB. VIMONT: Well, it’s – how to put it? This is the – I would say the traditional discussions that we have in the European Union. What is important is that objectives have been agreed by all the 27 member states. So what we have to do now is to implement those objectives with clear proposals that are being put on the table by the European Commission. So what it’s all about, it’s the way we have been working now for – since more than 50 years now, it’s how to find the right compromise between all together and to go along.

Quite often in the past, one of the ways to find the right compromise was to get an agreement between France and Germany. Yes, that was the way we used to proceed and, in fact, with regard to this issue of climate change and among others, car pollution, we have managed, very recently precisely, to get an agreement between Germany and France but I think nowadays this is not enough. With a European Union of 27 members, you need more member states to gather around such a compromise and in the other fields that we have to look at with regard to those commission proposals.

So the idea is to try to go as far as possible and to get an agreement by the end of the year. It’s not sure that we will succeed because we have also to take into account all the discussion inside the European parliament, you know? It’s a back-and-forth process where we have a second reading; that it goes to the parliament, then it comes back and you try to agree altogether on the common text and this can take some time. But this is, precisely, the responsibility of a presidency to go as far as possible and if we haven’t reached a definitive
agreement, it will be for the Czech Republic who will come after us to go along and to try to reach an agreement. That’s the way we’re going to proceed.

MS. MATHEWS: I’ve taken us over time. I apologize to those I can’t call on but I know I’ve gone beyond our stated time. I hope you’ll join me in thanking Ambassador Vimont – (applause) – for a very enlightening discussion – (applause).

(END)