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Transcript

Chatham House Prize 2013: In Conversation with Hillary Rodham Clinton

Hillary Rodham Clinton

US Secretary of State (2009-13)

Chair: Dr Robin Niblett

Director, Chatham House

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Robin Niblett:

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Chatham House. Thank you very much for joining us today.

It's my great honour to welcome Hillary Rodham Clinton to Chatham House. Welcome here to our institute. It's a pleasure to welcome you here not just to have a conversation with us, but as the winner of the Chatham House Prize 2013. [applause]

Hillary Rodham Clinton:

Thank you. Thank you so very much.

Robin Niblett:

What I like about our prize, even though our board sometimes gets a little nervous, is that it is from a selection of candidates nominated by our research programmes. Then our presidents narrow it down to three people and our members vote. The members are here, they voted for you, so it makes it a very special, I think, prize. As you know, it was given to you for your great, significant contributions to international diplomacy but also – I know this is important to you as well – for your role promoting the rights of women and girls and equal opportunities for them in the world.

This evening we're going to celebrate the award of the prize at a formal event, which lets us have an informal conversation today. I'm very glad that you would be so kind, on an often on-the-record format at Chatham House, to be able to have this conversation with us today. We could go anywhere, so what I'm going to do is start off by just kicking off with a few questions that I will ask. Hopefully I will leave a whole bunch of things – people are already putting their hands up, this is a very bad sign. So hang on for 20 minutes or so because this is the way we're going to do it. We've got time. I probably won't take more than 20 minutes, hopefully I won't take up all of your questions. I'll do a fair amount of filibustering so the cameras will get a little quieter in a minute as well.

We could go in many directions, not least because I think, if I may say, Secretary Clinton, you kind of played two very fundamental roles as secretary of state. Strategically, I think the rebalance – let's use that phrase – of American foreign policy from the Middle East in particular to the Asia-Pacific was clearly one of the big strategic calling cards of your tenure as secretary. But you were also involved very much in the trenches, having to make last-

minute calls, tough calls, through the process, which is the job of a secretary of state. But to have blended those two things, and we can therefore talk in our conversation about grand strategy with you, and we can also end up talking about some of those really tough calls you had to make as you go along. I hope we can draw out the insights of your experience for the future and not just for how things went on at that time.

Let me kick off therefore with a kind of big question. When you took up your position as secretary of state, US leadership – and this was one of your calling cards, I think the phrase you used was that there were questions about the future of America's global leadership. You wanted to be able to renew the commitment to the tools of diplomacy, engage with allies, etc. Today, certainly if I look at the world, I'd say America – powerful country. Probably easily still the most powerful. Shale gas, military bases all over the world. Strong alliances and allies. But at the same time, we've got shutdown. We've got the nearly but not Syria vote. I'd say fears outside the US of a neo-isolationist instinct perhaps creeping into the body politic, and maybe a fear that America still plays by its own rules. The PRISM intelligence-gathering issue has really – I keep hearing it in conferences, it keeps coming up in conversations about America's role.

So with that big set-up, do you think America has the capacity for global leadership today? Can it play a leadership role of the sort that you hoped it would when you took office four years ago?

Hillary Rodham Clinton:

First, Robin, let me thank you and thank the members of Chatham House for this very moving award. I am a fan of your work and I appreciate greatly the vote of the membership on my behalf.

I think the question is one that has a very simple answer: yes, America's leadership remains not only preeminent but necessary. But the world in which we live poses new challenges to all of us on an ongoing basis that require a level of strategic thinking and execution that starts, first and foremost, back in the democracies that we represent. So I would never criticize my country out of my country, but let me say that it is distressing at any point to see a political system that has weathered so many crises over centuries now be caught up in what are very unfortunate partisan disputes. However, underlying them are questions about America's direction at home and abroad, and I am confident that we will work our way through this latest challenge as we did back during my husband's administration in 1995 and early 1996.

But I think that there's an underlying concern – and it's not only in our country, because we didn't take a vote but you did – that raises issues about, what are our responsibilities? How do we project power in the 21st century which is both traditional forms as well as new, so-called soft or (what I like to say) smart power? Those are debates that societies have to have, not just inside government offices.

So I'm looking forward to talking in specifics with you but I think it's fair to say that the concerns that we have to be aware of when we look at the international position of the United States have to really come from a wellspring of effective decision-making at home. That's economic and it's social: growing inequality; the sense that in the United States and in Europe there is an ongoing debate about how we continue to provide the best services at the most affordable cost to our citizens, because that after all is really the core of what we can do around the world. So I'm confident but I think that the debate we're having is one that requires some very serious analysis and thought.

Robin Niblett:

Does it cramp the style of a foreign secretary – of a secretary of state – the fact that this domestic dimension of international politics is so powerful today? We've got publics who have been battered by global financial crisis, by at least not-good handling of some key international crises (Iraq, Afghanistan – how they were managed, at the very least). Therefore the room or scope for leadership is minimal. Presidents or prime ministers find that they want to do a world of summitry, take the lead. The role of the secretary of state and foreign secretary must be quite a difficult one in terms of being able to follow through and lead. How did you find that kind of role as a secretary of state in particular?

Hillary Rodham Clinton:

I didn't find it difficult – I found it very challenging, because of course I took office when President Obama was sworn in, in the midst of the economic crisis. I think it's easy for many to forget how close the world came to a much more serious, long-lasting economic recession, even depression. I think it was something that required American leadership. I'm certainly aware that some of the reasons for it lay in American financial decision-making and perhaps lack of regulatory oversight. But the fact is that when I came into the position, the president and I talked very openly with each other about how

important it was for me to get out around the world at that moment, making it clear that we had confidence, we were going to recover, while the president had to deal with the Congress and the immediate effects of the economic crisis.

That's basically what I did for much of the first year, starting, as you say, by going to Asia, which was unusual if not unprecedented for an American secretary of state. But it was an important message to send, in part because China, which to this day has heavily invested in American debt, was raising questions and wondering about the decisions that would be made by the new administration. There was a feeling that because of the war in Iraq and the aftermath of 9/11 and then of course Afghanistan, the United States had shifted attention away from Asia, and that was of concern to a lot of our allies. In Europe there was also a worry: the contagion of the economic crisis plus what was felt to be a less-than-ongoing level of attention from the prior administration. So I went to Asia and then I immediately came to Europe. In part to consult and to hear out what people had to say but also to convey a message that we were looking at the entire world. Of course we will always be concerned about the Middle East – we had a war to wind down and a war to try to resolve, and so that was very much on the forefront of the National Security Council's agenda. But we wanted to get back into a more cooperative, consultative role with our allies and partners, and frankly to send messages to others.

Robin Niblett:

Just on this point about that trip to Asia and the role that you played in the pivoting or rebalancing of US foreign policy toward a more balanced look toward the Asia-Pacific. You mentioned China and the need to keep China sort of feeling onside. You pushed this Strategic and Economic Dialogue – you added the 'strategic' part to it, which was important – but at the same time you were a very forceful advocate for, let's say, your ASEAN allies, those allies in Southeast Asia (the Philippines, Singapore and other countries there). How do you balance that wanting to send the positive message, let's say, to your ASEAN allies with the fact that China may be seeing this part of the world more as its area? It looked at this pivot pretty suspiciously. Did you feel this in your meetings with Chinese leaders?

Hillary Rodham Clinton:

Oh yes, I did. There were concerns on the part of the Chinese leadership over what this meant. But when I planned that first trip and presented this strategy to the White House, I wanted to integrate what were different strands of our involvement. There's a very strong argument that a rising China has to be the central focus of American foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific and increasingly even globally, the hope being that through that kind of involvement we can move, as Bob Zoellick has said, toward China becoming a responsible stakeholder. There were our traditional allies: we have treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia. There was a feeling on their part that we needed to be much clearer about what American interests would be in the 21st century; that we were a resident Pacific power, that we had obligations and we needed to more forcefully present those. Then there were the ASEAN countries, some of whom we had alliances with, but which was a much larger group that was looking to try to figure out how to do their own balancing.

So what I said was I didn't think you could pick among those choices, that you had to have a more comprehensive approach. Partly because we had existing obligations but also because, it seemed to me, as we charted our course forward with China, we wanted China to realize that we were in the Pacific to stay. We were there not as an interloper but as a participant, and therefore we wanted to become more involved in the regional organizations. On that first trip I went to Jakarta and signed a memorandum saying that the United States would move toward the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, something we had never done but which was very important to the ASEAN nations, and indeed in China began what was a very candid conversation. I think there were certainly some areas of disagreement. We know about China's historical interests (Taiwan, Tibet) which they always raise with the United States, their sensitivity about human rights – all of which were on the agenda. But then we were looking, through this new vehicle of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, to take what Hank Paulson had done on the economic side and, with Tim Geithner and I working together, to expand the discussion. Because I think the Chinese would have been very happy to stay focused on the economic issues. In early 2009, part of that was: you guys are going to get your house in order, aren't you? You're going to make sure that our investments in your debt are good ones?

But also, we wanted to bring the strategic in, because there's a long list: claims in the South China Sea, claims in the East China Sea, the conflicts that have occurred over assets and potential resources with Vietnam and the

Philippines, the back-and-forth arguing with Japan. The continuing threat posed by North Korea, which is very much of a Chinese problem and potentially a solution. So we wanted to broaden the aperture so that we weren't just talking about currency revaluation. We wanted to have a broader discussion and we wanted it made clear that the United States was there to stay.

Robin Niblett:

There was a moment there when you must have wondered if this was all going to be able to hang together. It struck me as one of the most remarkable moments of your time as secretary of state with China, those few months at the beginning of 2012 when Wang Lijun – the vice-mayor of Chongqing, Bo Xilai's right-hand guy – sort of gave himself up to the US embassy in Beijing, which you had to handle in a particular way. Then three or four months later, Chen Guangcheng had to be kind of rescued into the embassy, if I can put it that way. That was just before you were going to land for your next Strategic and Economic Dialogue. Can you give us a feel for how you managed that particular process?

Hillary Rodham Clinton:

It's always a challenge when things that are totally unexpected happen. I like to have these virtual inboxes in my head: the immediate screaming crisis, the brewing crisis and the long-term crisis. Then I also try to keep a big box of opportunities. But it is a great example of the way I think the expanded Strategic and Economic Dialogue helped us resolve two very difficult issues, because what I tried to do in the Dialogue is to really embed in the governments of both of our countries issues, so that there was a lot more interchange. I came to believe that the Chinese, for their own reasons and because of their own way of governing, believed that somewhere in Washington there is a master plan about what we intend to do to try to control their rise. I see my friend Kevin Rudd sitting in the front row; he and I have talked about that endlessly. They really do, because they have plans and they have all kinds of processes. They have never understood the jazz-like quality of American government and democracy.

So what I tried to do is to begin to sort of strip away some of the misconceptions. We do have views, we have interests, we have values – but we're not opaque, we want to share with you and we want you to begin to share a little more with us. So when, as you say, Bo Xilai's right hand, the

police chief, showed up in a consulate (not the embassy, showed up in a consulate) asking for asylum because his story, which you know was quite dramatic, about him knowing that Bo Xilai's wife had killed one of your countrymen – he did not fit any of the categories for the United States giving him asylum. He had a record of corruption, of thuggishness, brutality. He was an enforcer for Bo Xilai. They may have had a falling-out and now he was trying to somehow get his way to a place of safety. But on the other hand, the consulate was quickly encircled by other police who were either subordinate to Bo Xilai or looking to curry favour. So it was becoming a very dangerous situation.

So what we did was to tell him that he could not move into the consulate, that there were no grounds on which we could offer that to him. But he kept saying that he wanted to get the truth to Beijing, he wanted the government in Beijing to know what was happening. So we said: we can arrange that. So indeed that's what we did. We were very discreet about it and did not try to embarrass anybody involved in it, but tried to handle it in a very professional manner, which I think we accomplished.

Fast forward: I get called late, late one night about Chen, who has escaped from house arrest – quite remarkably, since he's blind – had broken his foot in the escape, had been picked up and was seeking asylum in our embassy in Beijing, and was on his way there. Of course, we knew of his courageous history of dissident activity. We knew he was a self-taught lawyer who had very bravely taken on the one-child policy of China, suing local officials and others for their behaviour. It was, as you say, about a week before our annual Strategic and Economic Dialogue meeting, this time in Beijing. I was very well aware that this would be an issue in the relationship, but I also believed that this was an example of American values in practice. This was a man who, yes, deserved American support and attention and protection.

So lots of back and forth, as you can imagine, and then I finally just made the call. I said: we're going to send our people out to go pick him up. So there was a rendezvous, we got him into the embassy, got him medical treatment for some of his injuries. Then had to tell the Chinese government that we were offering hospitality to one of their citizens and would love to talk to them about it. Kurt Campbell, who some of you know, who was my assistant secretary for Asian and Pacific affairs, immediately got on a plane. We were fortunate that Harold Koh, the head of my legal department and an incredible international lawyer with his own history of dissidence – his father was unable to return home from his position at the UN because of a coup in Korea – he had a feel for this. We tracked him down, he was at one of our Strategic and

Economic Dialogue working groups. So we got our people to the embassy and they began talking with Mr Chen, and then they began negotiating with their Chinese counterparts.

This is a long story, I don't want to take all of our time, but it was a very touching and touch-and-go situation. We were able to negotiate with the Chinese safe passage for his family – he hadn't seen one of his children for quite some time – to Beijing. We were able to negotiate an agreement that he could attend college, something he really wanted to do, and he did not want to leave China. He loves China. He actually also very much believes that if he could just get his story to the upper echelon of the Chinese government, they would agree with him, because so much of the mistreatment he experienced was at the hands of local and regional officials. So our team did a great job negotiating all of this. He did have medical problems that needed further treatment so he left our embassy, totally voluntarily. He called me from the van on the way to the hospital and said: if I were there, I would kiss you. I said: I'm very happy you're so happy.

Robin Niblett:

A tactful answer.

Hillary Rodham Clinton:

Yes. We got him to the hospital and his family showed up. Rightfully, they were saying: are you sure you can trust the Chinese government? Are you sure that they will keep their end of the bargain? Are you sure they're going to let you go to college, are you sure they're not going to throw you in prison? He began – and this is a man who had been under a lot of stress now for several days – he began saying: I'm not sure, I'm not sure. So he tells us: I don't think that's a good deal you negotiated. Yes, I know. I said: excuse me? I mean, really. So we said: okay, what would you like? He said: I'd like to go to America. Okay. After saying no, no, no. So we worked out an arrangement that he could go to New York University to study, assuming we could get a second agreement with the Chinese. And this is where I think all the work we put into this, all of the incredible planning and one-on-one meetings and very candid conversations that I engaged in with my counterparts and others did with theirs – because I had to go to State Councillor Dai Bingguo and I had to say: this is in your interests and it's in our interests, and there's got to be a way we can work this out. His first response was: we never want to talk about this man again with anybody. We can't go back into negotiations. I said: we

have to, and we need to start now and we need to get this resolved by the end of our meetings.

We did it in a way that really I think validated the kind of arrangement and the almost daily work that went into it. The final thing I would say about it, which was very touching to me – this was really touch-and-go. One of the things that I was asked to do, because I still had meetings on my agenda with President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, and they said: please don't mention this to them, we will try to work this out. So I didn't, and we had very formal, very predictable kinds of meetings. Then we were having an event of our People-to-People Exchanges. Again, I know a lot of foreign policy experts say that's like frosting on the cake, what difference does it make? Put on your formal clothes, go into the meetings. I can only tell you that at the People-to-People event there was a young American man who was studying in China and a young Chinese woman who was studying in the United States, and we had picked them out to speak to the group (she in English, he in Mandarin) about their experiences in each other's country. I am convinced that helped to convince the Chinese government that we would do this deal, because I said in my prepared remarks: this is what the future should be about, about young people like this working together, understanding each other better, visiting and finding common ground. That's what we should be looking for.

So later that afternoon we were able to make the deal and then Mr Chen and his family were able to leave. But I think it was part of a broader story, not just a one-off.

Robin Niblett:

But I think the story, which is fascinating, is, as you said, an absolute example of that thickening of relationships – what diplomacy, I suppose, is about.

Hillary Rodham Clinton:

Right.

Robin Niblett:

Diplomacy is meant to be about actual results – to get to them, you have to go through such a process of confidence-building.

Hillary Rodham Clinton:

Right. We are such an impatient people these days. This seems like it's just like the Weber comment about politics: the dull, slow boring of hard boards. It seems like it just goes on and on and really, the tenth meeting and the eighteenth dinner. In a way, I think it's more important to show up today than it used to be, because everybody knows you can communicate via technology without showing up. People would say to me all the time: what are you travelling all over the place for? Part of it was we had some repair work to do, to be very blunt, but part of it also was we had some relationships to build. They are worth investing in because you never know what might come from them or what you might stop coming from them. Yet I think in part because of the feeling (I'll speak for my own country) that this is like just frosting on the cake, fine if you can do it but not necessary – and I actually think it's baked into the cake, so to speak. If you don't do it, you will not really understand what is possible in such a complex, fast-changing world like the one we have.

Robin Niblett:

I think even in the UK at the moment, there has been a rediscovery of the importance of that human component of diplomacy, alongside something I know you pushed a lot as well: the social media, the connectivity, the town hall meetings, etc. If you don't do some of that hard graft, it becomes incredibly difficult to deal with the crises which are a core part, as you said, of your job.

Of course I've got a bunch of questions about the Middle East and so on which I'm not going to tackle right now, because I've got a lot of people here, especially among our members, who have a chance to ask questions.