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Transcript

Foreign Policy Challenges for the Obama Administration

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Xenia Dormandy:

Good afternoon, everybody.

We are extraordinarily lucky today to have Ambassador John Bolton with us to talk about foreign policy challenges for the Obama administration. I actually had the fortune many, many years ago of working for Ambassador Bolton, but it has been a long while, so thank you for coming to us. The ambassador is senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC and a former US permanent representative of the United States to the United Nations from August 2005 to fall 2006. Previously, he was undersecretary of state for arms control and international security from 2001–5, assistant secretary for international organization affairs at the State Department and assistant attorney general at DOJ (Department of Justice). He regularly commentates in the media and today, as I mentioned, will be talking to us a little bit about the foreign policy of the next administration, of the next four years. For those of you who haven't seen it, you can take a look on our website: we also had a report out on Friday – this past Friday – on the foreign policy of the next four years as well, but let's see whether we are right. Ambassador?

John Bolton:

Well, thank you very much, thanks to all of you for coming today, especially given the weather. It is a particularly auspicious day to be here in London, and I am very glad that I am here and not in Washington. We are almost, therefore – or precisely – at the midpoint of the Obama administration and what I would like to do is to talk a little bit about how he has approached national security issues during his first four years, and how I expect he will approach them in the next four.

I will try and explain initially a little bit about what I think motivates his thinking and then how it has played out in policy to date, particularly looking at the implications over the next four years. And I think the most important characteristic to understand about Barack Obama that distinguishes him from every other American president since Franklin Roosevelt is that he doesn't particularly care about national security affairs. He doesn't see it as the same kind of priority that all of those other presidents have seen it. He is focused on his domestic agenda, and he told us this in the 2008 campaign. He said – and I'm not making these words up, these are his words – he wanted to, quote, 'fundamentally transform America'. And that is what he has set about trying to do in the first four years, and I expect that we will see that emphasis continue

in the second four years. It is not that he doesn't confront international affairs when he has no other choice, but that is not what he gets up thinking about in the morning, which, as I say, distinguishes him from a long line of recent presidents.

Second, I don't think he sees the rest of the world as particularly threatening or challenging to the United States and its allies. He doesn't like to talk, at least until recently, about a global war on terrorism. He said back in 2008 that he didn't see Iran as threatening, he called it a 'tiny country', I guess as if it were seeking 'tiny' nuclear weapons. I think he feels that American decline is natural and not to be concerned about it.

Now, in days of yore, a president with these kinds of views would have been an isolationist, but that is not Barack Obama either; he is a multilateralist and I think it has been interesting to see in his first term that he didn't pursue that inclination as much as, certainly, I would have predicted. I do think we will see more of it in a second term now that he is safely re-elected, but that will be an interesting hypothesis to test.

So, when you put all of this together, what I conclude is that for those of you who are of a social democratic view, who have decried American assertiveness, who think that the George W Bush administration was something you longed to see in the rear-view mirror, who want a truly multipolar world, get ready for it because it is on the way courtesy of Barack Obama. I think this mindset that I have described for you makes Obama the first 'post-American' president. As people in Europe love to talk about 'beyond nationalism' in the European Union, I think Obama sees himself that way as well.

I think it starts from his disinclination to believe in American exceptionalism. Now, I know some people will see this as a real plus for Obama because they think that American exceptionalism is a form of arrogance, that it reflects a condescending view of America towards the rest of the world. I honestly don't think that is what it means; that is not what I see as American exceptionalism. I think it is a reflection of the difference in American history compared at least to history in Europe. And it obviously goes back in the American concept a long way to the pilgrims who, after all, came from here via detour in the Netherlands, who saw themselves as living upon a city on a hill, obviously from scriptures about Jerusalem. But it is a difference that is reflected in a lot of aspects of American history and it has been commented on for a long time. I think the first person to remark about American exceptionalism actually was a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville who said in *Democracy in America*: 'The

position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.'

So, this notion of American exceptionalism really does form, I think, an important element in conceptualizing American foreign policy. And Obama is not unaware of this; he is a consummate politician if nothing else. His first trip to Europe in 2009, he was asked by a reporter if he believed in American exceptionalism, and he said the following: 'Yes, I believe in American exceptionalism, just as the Brits believe in British exceptionalism, and just as the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.' That is a classic Obama sentence. In the first third he gives the lie to those, like me, who say he doesn't believe in American exceptionalism because he says 'of course I do, I just said it'. But in the second two-thirds of the sentence he takes it away. Now, you know, there are 193 countries in the United Nations today; he could have gone on: just as the Burkina Fasians [*sic*] believe in Burkina Fasian exceptionalism, just as the Papua New Guineans believe in Papua New Guinean exceptionalism. If everybody is exceptional obviously nobody is exceptional, and I think that is the real point.

Now, this view that Obama has has been recognized by others in the United States as well. If you back, for example, to the speech, to Obama's speech at the anniversary of the D-Day invasion in 2009, people commented on how he approached it compared to the way [Ronald] Reagan approached it in his classic speech in 1984. And listen to what Evan Thomas, an editor of the publication called *Newsweek* in the United States – it is a publication whose name, I like to say, is half-true – but what Evan Thomas said about Obama contrasting him with Reagan in 1984, Thomas said: 'Well, we were the good guys in 1984, it felt that way. It hasn't felt that way in recent years, so Obama has had really a different task. Reagan was all about America. Obama is "we are above that now, we are not just parochial, we are not just chauvinistic, we're not just provincial; we stand for something". I mean, in a way, Obama is standing above the country, above the world...he is sort of God, he is going to bring all different sides together.' Now, apart from the reference to God – which is a little over the top even for the American media – I think that is the way Obama *does* see himself. And not surprisingly, although *Newsweek* isn't published anymore, in its cover on its website for the second inauguration, there is a picture of Obama and the title on the cover page is 'The second coming'.

Now, Obama is not the first person to have had this kind of view of America, but he is the first to be elected president. George HW Bush said back in 1988 about Governor [Michael] Dukakis of Massachusetts right before he rolled

over him, he said about Dukakis: 'He sees America as another pleasant country on the UN role call somewhere between Albania and Zimbabwe.' And I think you could say exactly the same about Obama.

Now, this is obviously a very different perspective on foreign policy, very different particularly from the Reagan view of foreign policy. Reagan's approach was often characterized as 'peace through strength', along the lines of the ancient Roman aphorism: 'If you want peace, prepare for war.' Not because you want war, obviously, but because having the strength to dissuade and deter potential adversaries meant it was a lot less likely that you would ever have to resort to it. This is something, I think, that is completely divorced from Obama's view of the world. I think he believes that American strength is provocative and that we are the cause of much of the turmoil and controversy in the world. So, a less strong, less assertive America is less provocative and therefore the world is a safer, more secure place.

Now, I think it is the exact opposite; I think American weakness is provocative and we are well on the way to being an even more provocative nation than we have been before. I don't think it is well understood how deeply defence budget cuts that we have already experienced and maybe are about to experience more of have the potential to create a hollowed out American military. In the first four years of the Obama administration, cuts in defence spending projected out over a 10-year period already amount to close to \$1 trillion. And if the sequestration mechanism provided for by Congress in one of its worst moments ever, if that kicks in as it is expected to, at least as the current law provides, we will lose another \$500 billion. So, roughly speaking, \$1.5 trillion reduced defence expenditures, excluding the cost of the Iraq and Afghan wars. In other words, \$1.5 trillion out of the projected baseline not separate cost of waging the wars. And this is a huge number even over a relatively long period of time, especially contrasted to the extent of budget expenditures that Obama has made in every other area of the federal government's responsibility. The Defense Department is the only agency of government to see budgets cut, while everything else has been expanding, indeed accelerating.

The effect of the budget cut has nothing comparable in our recent history. And obviously the way these budget cuts go on top of reductions we've had already, don't take effect immediately, you see it as decline occurs over a protracted period, much as I think we faced when Reagan came into office trying to dig out of the cuts imposed after the end of the Vietnam War and through the [Jimmy] Carter administration; it didn't happen overnight. And, you know, the base that we start from has already eroded. Right now the

United States Navy, for example, has 285 ships at sea, and that is a level that we haven't seen since 1916 or 1917. I didn't say 1960, I said 1916. Now, actually, this number – and it is going to go much, much lower with these budget cuts.

This precise figure came up during the third debate between Obama and [Mitt] Romney because it was a figure that Romney had used in the campaign to show how harmful budget cuts from an already low level would be. And Obama responded with snark; he said, 'Well, we used to have things called bayonets too, and you know, our ships are a lot more powerful today than they were in 1916.' Now that is true about the ships. Of course our ships of today aren't fighting ships of 1916, are they? They are fighting ships of comparable age, or they would if we had to engage in naval warfare. And I think when you look at the attitude that Obama's response embodied, it was a clear example of the disdain for underlying military power that gives our diplomacy added clout.

I think we have got to restore these cuts. It doesn't much matter to me what budgets of some other countries are – although many of our potential adversaries' are rising and rising significantly – because my point is I don't want America ever to be in a fair fight again. I still believe in full-spectrum dominance and I think that is what we ought to be aspiring to. Instead, we are going in exactly the opposite direction.

And let's look at how this has played out in the first four years and how it might play out in the second. Let's just take Russia. This is practically a laboratory experiment in how to go wrong. The Obama administration came in saying 'our relations with Russia are terrible', implying that it was our fault. And remember, they were going to press the 'reset' button, the famous reset button Hillary Clinton handed to Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister. And he – I've known Lavrov for 20 years – as only he could do, he looked at it and said that the Russian word on the button box was the wrong word, which he said to Hillary Clinton in public. So much for the 'reset' button, and it got worse after that. We abandoned capabilities for national missile defence in Poland and the Czech Republic, we gave the Russians a very ill-advised arms control agreement, the New START agreement, we gave them a space in a variety of other areas in their former territories, and what did we get in response? We got three vetoes by Russia of sanctions against the [Bashar] Assad regime in Syria, we got Russia flying political cover for the Iranian nuclear weapons programme, we got essentially no cooperation from Russia at all. And just to add to the cheekiness of it, the Russians declared a few weeks ago that the reset button had been a complete failure. Well, from my

point of view it certainly has been, but it really takes gall for the Russians to say it has been a failure from their point of view.

So, I think the direction in the next four years *vis-à-vis* Russia is going to be to make even more concessions. I mean, if you make a raft of concessions as part of a reset policy and you don't get good relations, what do you think the inclination of the Obama administration is going to be? To get tougher? Don't hold your breath.

Let's take China. This is a critically important issue for the United States, for Europe. President Obama himself has said that he wants to pivot away from the Middle East towards Asia. I don't take that, by the way, as a serious statement. You know, number one, we are a great power; we don't have to pivot from one region of the world to another, except under his administration. And we're not going to pivot away from the Middle East anyway, as I will explain in a few minutes. But Obama at least says he is interested in Asia – he grew up in Hawaii, why not? And what have we done with respect to China? We have no strategy at all. As China has used its extraordinary economic growth to enhance and modernize its conventional weapons capabilities, to expand its arsenal of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons many times over, to create area-denial and anti-access capabilities intended to push the ever-shrinking American navy back from the western coast of the Pacific, to creating what I think most would agree the world's most intensive and most sophisticated cyberwarfare capability, and to make assertive, even aggressive, territorial claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea to the detriment of the countries of southeast Asia and Japan.

And what has our response been? Almost nothing. This is a circumstance where I think there is a lot of exaggeration about what China's impact on world affairs is going to be over the next couple of decades. I, for one, don't buy their economic statistics. But even if I thought their economy was growing at the rate they say it is, their ability to project power is still considerably less than it could be. And it is in precisely that period of time where China's neighbours feel most vulnerable and most in need of assistance, and yet we are essentially absent from that larger question of the increase of Chinese authority.

Let's turn to the Middle East that the president wants to pivot away from – good luck with that. You know, the president said two years ago that the Arab Spring would be the answer to terrorism, to the threat of Al-Qaeda. Maybe he believed it at the time, maybe he has wised up a little bit, but fundamentally the whole attitude about the threat of international terrorism has been

something that the administration has tried to ignore. Even to exclude the word 'terrorism' from some of our public statements, to talk about 'man-caused disasters' – think about that one for a while.

Now, the president's answer to all of this is: 'We killed Osama Bin Laden.' And indeed, that is true and thank goodness for it. But it is really extraordinary for the president to claim credit for more than the decision to authorize the raid against the compound outside of Islamabad that killed Osama Bin Laden – a decision which 99.99 per cent of the American population would have agreed with. You know, we had been after Osama for 10 years, and it really reminds me of what people would have said after [Neil] Armstrong and [Buzz] Aldrin landed on the moon in the summer of 1969 during the [Richard] Nixon administration. It is like Nixon taking credit for them landing on the moon when the space programme, the manned space programme was really started by [John F] Kennedy with his pledge to get to the moon within a decade.

That is basically what Obama is doing, but it has been very effective for him politically, I grant you, and he knew it. And on 6 September last year, he accepted the Democratic Party nomination for president and said – in Charlotte, North Carolina – and said the following: 'Al-Qaeda is on the road to defeat and Osama Bin Laden is dead.' Joe Biden had a similar line, he said: 'General Motors is alive and Osama Bin Laden is dead.' Of course, the crowd at the convention loved it, but apparently the terrorists in Libya didn't get the message because five days later terrorists affiliated with Al-Qaeda attacked a consulate compound in Benghazi, killed American ambassador Chris Stevens and three others. Four months after that attack, despite a lot of rhetoric from the administration, nobody has been captured and brought to justice, there have been no retaliatory raids and as far as we can see there is no likelihood that much is going to be done about it.

Now, there is a lot to be said about Benghazi and the failures leading up to it, but unquestionably one of the failures in repeated rejections of requests for enhanced security from our embassy in Libya was the feeling that we wanted to see an atmosphere of normalcy in our relations with Libya and continuing through the Arab world, and obviously enhanced security would have implied that normalcy was not in prospect and that absence of security had a fatal effect on the second 11 September.

But that threat has been present throughout the Middle East. We have seen that the Arab Spring is not only not an alternative to terrorists like Al-Qaeda, it may well be a precursor. The Muslim Brotherhood has had lots of spinoffs of

people who have themselves become terrorists, and its approach in the countries where it has taken power, I think, is clearly going to be adverse to American interests.

Egypt is the principle example. I think the Camp David peace accord with Israel is in great jeopardy, I think that Egypt's closeness, growing closeness with Iran is bad news for everybody, and I think that the prospect of Muslim Brotherhood rule in other Arab countries can only be of enormous concern to the United States. But it is not in Washington. Now, how stringent that regime is going to be is a matter of debate, but we do know one thing for sure: already in Egypt, 100,000 Coptic Christians or more have fled the country. Now, they are not listening to abstract discussions about Sharia law and 'is the Muslim Brotherhood moderate?'. The Coptics – 10 per cent of the Egyptian population, so roughly seven million people – 100,000 or more, in my view, have voted with their feet already. They are not going to wait around to find out. And other Islamists of greater or lesser radicalism hold power in plenty of other places and the prospects for how their rule plays out should be extremely worrying, not only for their foreign policy implications, but for the domestic populations. Don't forget Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan of Turkey, who is held out as the paradigm of the moderate Islamist, said before he became prime minister: 'Democracy is like a streetcar: you ride it to the stop you want and then you get off.' Think about that one for a while.

So, if we didn't have the threat of terrorism in front of us, maybe just with an American focus because of the attack in Benghazi, look at what has happened in the past couple of weeks. The terrorists have carved out a doughnut hole the size of Texas in northern Mali, which if they can hold their own against... the French, they can use as a sanctuary much as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda used Afghanistan as a sanctuary to plan and carry out terrorist operations – globally, but particularly in Europe. Now we see in Algeria a terrorist operation of enormous sophistication, obviously planned before the French went into Mali, although using that as an excuse, and with implications that go far beyond what look to be the already tragic consequence of 48 dead hostages. This was an attack on a critical economic facility for Algeria, and if the terrorists are now willing to do that – which prior Islamists in Algeria had not been willing to do – we are in a very, very different kind of world. So, the threat of international terrorism, which the president spent the first four years denying the existence of, is back in a very, very threatening way.

And I haven't even gotten to the Iranian nuclear weapons programme, which is within a very short period of time of achieving its 20-year-long objective of a deliverable nuclear weapons capability for Iran. I think this year will bring a

critical decision in Israel. You know, you hear President Obama talk all the time about how 'all options are on the table', meaning the use of military force. Of course they are not on the table. The president is not going to use military force preemptively against Iran's nuclear weapons programme. That will make some of you happy, but in Israel I think they believe it as well, and if later this week Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu is re-elected, Israel is going to have to face a critical decision I think within the next six months. I don't know what it will be, but if they decide not to use military force, I think it is almost inevitable, I think it is far and away the most likely result, that Iran will get nuclear weapons. And once that happens the balance of power in the region will change forever. Other states will get nuclear weapons, and the threat of nuclear proliferation will become graver than it has ever been before.

So, I look forward to the next four years as a period where America's adversaries, having sized up the Obama administration, will accelerate the pace and enlarge their challenges to our authority. I'm extremely worried about what our response will be, and I look forward to the 2016 presidential election.

Thank you very much.