

EUROPE AND AMERICA, ALIGNED FOR THE FUTURE



With this week's NATO and United States-European Union summit meetings in Lisbon, I am proud to have visited Europe a half-dozen times as president. This reflects an enduring truth of American foreign policy - our relationship with our European allies and partners is the cornerstone of our engagement with the world, and a catalyst for global cooperation.

By Barack Obama

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(Distributed by The New York Times Syndicate)

Published: November 18, 2010

With no other region does the United States have such a close alignment of values, interests, capabilities and goals. With the largest economic relationship in the world, trans-Atlantic trade supports millions of jobs in the United States and Europe and forms a foundation of our efforts to sustain the global economic recovery.

As an alliance of democratic nations, NATO ensures our collective defense and helps strengthen young democracies. Europe and the United States are working together to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, promote peace in the Middle East and confront climate change. And as we have seen in the recent security alert in Europe and the thwarted plot to detonate explosives on trans-Atlantic cargo flights, we cooperate closely every day to prevent terrorist attacks and keep our citizens safe.

Put simply, we are each other's closest partners. Neither Europe nor the United States can confront the challenges of our time without the other. These summits are thus an opportunity to deepen our cooperation even further and to ensure that NATO - the most successful alliance in human history - remains as relevant in this century as it was in the last. That is why we have a comprehensive agenda at Lisbon.

First, on Afghanistan, we can align our efforts to transition to an Afghan lead, even as we sustain an enduring commitment to the Afghan people.

Our NATO-led coalition in Afghanistan is comprised of 48 nations - including contributions from all 28 NATO allies and 40,000 troops from allied and partner countries, whose service and sacrifice we honor. Our shared effort is essential to denying terrorists a safe haven, just as it is necessary to improve the lives of the Afghan people. With the arrival of additional coalition forces over the last two years, we finally have the strategy and resources to break the Taliban's momentum, deprive insurgents of their strongholds, train more Afghan security forces, and assist the Afghan people.

In Lisbon, we will align our approach so that we can begin a transition to Afghan responsibility early next year, and adopt President Hamid Karzai's goal of Afghan forces taking the lead for security across Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

And even as America's transition and troop reductions will begin this July, NATO - like the United States - can forge a lasting partnership with Afghanistan to make it clear that as Afghans stand up and take the lead, they will not stand alone.

As we move forward in Afghanistan, NATO will also transform itself in Lisbon with a new Strategic Concept that recognizes the capabilities and partners we need to meet the new threats of the 21st Century. This must begin by reaffirming the lifeblood of this alliance - our Article 5 commitment that an attack on one is an attack on all.

To ensure that this commitment has meaning, we must strengthen the full range of capabilities that are needed to protect our people today and prepare for the missions of tomorrow. Even as we modernize our conventional forces, we need to reform alliance command structures to make them more effective and efficient, invest in the technologies that allow allied forces to deploy and operate together effectively, and develop new defenses against threats such as cyber attacks.

Another necessary alliance capability is missile defense of NATO territory, which is needed to address the real and growing threat from ballistic missiles. The Phased Adaptive Approach to European missile defense that I announced last year will provide a strong and effective defense of the territory and people of Europe and our deployed American forces. Moreover, it forms the foundation of greater collaboration - with a role for all allies, protection for all allies, and an opportunity for cooperation with Russia, which is also threatened by ballistic missiles.

In addition, we can work to create the conditions for reductions in nuclear arsenals and move toward the vision I outlined in Prague last year - a world without nuclear weapons. Yet so long as these weapons exist, NATO should remain a nuclear alliance, and I've made it clear that the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective nuclear arsenal to deter any adversary and guarantee the defense of our allies.

Finally, at Lisbon we can continue to forge the partnerships beyond NATO that help make our alliance a pillar of global security. We must keep the door open to European democracies that meet the standards of NATO membership. We must deepen cooperation with organizations that complement NATO strengths, such as the European Union, the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. And with the attendance of President Dmitri Medvedev at the NATO-Russia Council summit, we can resume practical cooperation between NATO and Russia that benefits both.

For just as the United States and Russia have reset our relationship, so too can NATO and Russia. In Lisbon we can make it clear that NATO sees Russia as a partner, not an adversary. We can deepen our cooperation on Afghanistan, counter-narcotics and 21st Century security challenges - from the spread of nuclear weapons to the spread of violent extremism. And by moving ahead with cooperation on missile defense, we can turn a source of past tension into a source of cooperation against a shared threat.

For more than six decades, Europeans and Americans have stood shoulder to shoulder because our work together advances our interests and protects the freedoms we cherish as democratic societies. As the world has changed, so too has our alliance, and we are stronger, safer and more prosperous as a result. That is our task in Lisbon - to revitalize our alliance once more and ensure our security and prosperity for decades to come.

(Barack Obama is the President of the United States.)