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Barack Obama's European Tour: The President Must Protect the Transatlantic Alliance

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Barack Obama begins his first overseas trip as President when he arrives in London on March 31, where he will meet with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Conservative Party leader David Cameron, and Queen Elizabeth II before attending the G-20 summit on April 2. He will then travel to Strasbourg and Kehl for the 60th anniversary NATO summit, followed by meetings with European Union leaders in Prague. His European tour concludes with a visit to Turkey on April 6–7.

The President's trip to Europe has been heavily overshadowed by a major transatlantic rift over U.S. calls for Europe to pledge significantly more funds for a global stimulus package, a proposal that has been strongly resisted (with good reason) by most European leaders. There are already signs that the Obama Administration will back down in the face of intense European opposition when world leaders meet at the G-20, with many decisions likely to be postponed for a future meeting.

The G-20 aside, this trip will be an important opportunity for the new President to demonstrate clear U.S. leadership in Europe on an array of key issues, including:

- *The war in Afghanistan.* Alongside the British prime minister, President Obama must call on European allies to help bear the military burden of the fight against the Taliban by sending more combat troops to the battlefields of Helmand province and by removing the dozens of caveats aimed at keeping their personnel out of harm's way.

- *The Iranian nuclear crisis.* President Obama should declare that the West will not accept the ugly spectre of a nuclear-armed Tehran and will do all in its power—including the possible use of force as a last resort—to prevent it from becoming a reality.
- *The transatlantic alliance.* President Obama must reaffirm the United States' commitment to the two main pillars of the transatlantic alliance—the Anglo-American Special Relationship and the NATO alliance.

Finally, President Obama must also confront a resurgent Russia over NATO expansion and third site missile defense, as well as the continuing threat posed by Islamist terrorism.

Washington Must Preserve the Special Relationship. While wooing strategic competitors such as China and Russia, the new U.S. Administration has been largely indifferent to the Anglo-American alliance, with an appallingly handled reception for the British prime minister when he visited the White House in early March and the recalibration of the special relationship as a “special partnership.” Even a bust of Sir Winston Churchill was unceremoniously thrown out of the Oval Office. A dis-

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tinctly undiplomatic State Department official involved in the planning of the Obama-Brown meeting was quoted as saying that “there’s nothing special about Britain. You’re just the same as the other 190 countries in the world.”¹

It would be a huge mistake for the new U.S. Administration to look away from Britain for its most important strategic relationship. There has scarcely been a more important period since the Second World War for joint U.S.–British leadership with a major war in Afghanistan, a global battle against al-Qaeda, an increasingly aggressive Russia, and the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran.

The Special Relationship is vital to American and British interests on many levels, from military, diplomatic, and intelligence cooperation to transatlantic trading ties. If President Obama does not invest in the preservation of this relationship, the end result will be a weaker United States that is less able to stand up to terrorism and tyranny and to project power and influence across the globe.

Consequently, when he visits London, it is imperative that President Obama acknowledges and pays tribute to the tremendous sacrifice of Britain’s armed forces alongside American troops in both Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as two world wars, something he has never done in a major policy speech. Great Britain is America’s most reliable friend: As nearly every post-war President has found, there is simply no alternative to U.S.–British leadership in securing the free world. President Obama should maintain the Anglo–American Special Relationship as the centerpiece of the transatlantic alliance

The United States Should Be Wary of a Federal Europe. Barack Obama heads across the Atlantic as the leader of the first U.S. Administration to wholeheartedly back the creation of a federal Europe. In contrast to earlier U.S. Administrations,

including those of George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, the Obama Administration is avowedly Euro-federalist in its outlook and is keen to help build a European Union defense identity as well as support the foundations of a European superstate in Brussels.

The Bush Administration was sharply divided over Europe: Although then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice backed the European Constitution, her pro-Brussels instincts were strongly opposed by key figures in the White House and the Pentagon. President Bush himself worked hard to build up a counterweight to the Franco–German axis, one comprised of pro-American nations among the new EU members from Eastern and Central Europe.

In contrast, President Obama’s government is strongly backing the European Security and Defence Policy, the Lisbon Treaty, and the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Obama will seek to strengthen French and German leadership at the heart of a united European Union. President Obama has appointed several prominent supporters of European federalism to key positions in the Pentagon and State Department, including the new undersecretary of defense for policy and the next assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs.

The Obama Administration has already made major concessions to Paris over President Sarkozy’s decision for France to rejoin the NATO integrated command structure. The French have been given two major positions at the helm of the alliance, a move that will significantly enhance the drive towards a European defence component within NATO.

Vice President Joe Biden has clearly indicated that the United States will support “the further strengthening of European defense” and an “increased role for the European Union in preserving peace and security.”² Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has also expressed her support for key provisions in the Treaty of Lisbon—a rehash of the old

1. Tim Shipman, “Barack Obama ‘Too Tired’ to Give Proper Welcome to Gordon Brown,” *The Sunday Telegraph*, March 7, 2009, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/4953523/Barack-Obama-too-tired-to-give-proper-welcome-to-Gordon-Brown.html> (March 30, 2009).
2. Vice President Joseph R. Biden, speech at the 45th Munich Security Conference, February 7, 2009, at http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2009=&menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=238& (March 30, 2009).

European Constitution—including a European Union foreign minister.³

This dangerous shift in U.S. policy is a betrayal of both U.S. and British interests that will threaten the long-term future of the Anglo–American Special Relationship, weaken the NATO alliance, and undermine the defense of British sovereignty in Europe. It will also undercut opposition across the EU to the Treaty of Lisbon—including in countries such as Ireland, Poland, and the Czech Republic—and may set the scene for a major confrontation between the Obama White House and a future Conservative administration in London.

President Obama Must Project Leadership in Europe. When he visits Europe, President Obama has a major opportunity to show that he has the maturity, strength, and conviction to lead on the world stage. He must project a clear vision for U.S. global leadership, one that is anchored firmly in the transatlantic alliance with Britain. The Obama Administration currently lacks a clear foreign policy direction, and against the backdrop of an increasingly dangerous world, America seems rudderless and at times unwilling to lead.

Washington must stand up to the Iranian nuclear threat, the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the global menace of al-Qaeda, and Russian intimidation in Europe with strength, resolve and conviction. This must include a willingness to wield maximum force where necessary, deploy a compre-

hensive missile shield in Europe, and increase military spending in the defense of the United States and the free world.

The President must be careful not to fall into the trap of undermining America’s most important alliances, including the U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship and NATO, by supporting the rise of a federal Europe. There is no evidence to suggest that Europe is capable of shouldering the burden of global leadership with America. The European Union is a grandiose emperor with no clothes, and its track record in confronting dictatorial regimes such as Iran has been a dismal failure. The EU is obsessed with challenging American global pre-eminence rather than working with the United States, and the European Project is ultimately all about building a counterweight to American world leadership.

As they approach the transatlantic alliance, President Obama and his aides should heed the advice of a former prime minister and great friend of the United States who fought to defend the Special Relationship and maintain British sovereignty in Europe. As Margaret Thatcher put it, “that such an unnecessary and irrational project as building a European superstate was ever embarked upon will seem in future years to be perhaps the greatest folly of the modern era.”

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3. Denis Staunton, interview with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, *The Irish Times*, March 21, 2009, at <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2009/0321/1224243196950.html> (March 30, 2009).