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Transcript

What Next for Britain?

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Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP:

Thank you very much. I find the prospect of speaking about foreign policy to an audience of such distinguished guests altogether more intimidating than trying to make a point as 500 grown men and women yell at me. I feel like I have to compress myself now after decompression in Westminster.

Firstly thank you very much for inviting me to come to speak this afternoon. I'm looking forward to taking your questions and comments after I've made a few observations of my own.

I'm here of course at a time when the drum roll ahead of the general election campaign is getting louder by the day. And I'm very struck by the way in which the two other parties, David Cameron and Gordon Brown, are seeking to portray this election as one where, as far as foreign policy is concerned, there are no real choices to be made. As if this isn't a foreign policy election, because it is an election principally focussed on our economic fortunes, dealing with the crisis in government finances and of course a number of other issues. Public services, renewal of politics and so on.

But I've heard next to nothing that suggests that they understand that this is a general election in which we must seek to debate the choices before us in terms of the UK's foreign policy. It's my view that whilst it's not often commented on and it's underemphasised by politicians, the choice we face as a country on our foreign policy is as important as on economic management, the justice system, education policy, the renewal of politics after the expenses scandal.

I think, in a sense, we are at a crucial moment in deciding what is the long-term role of the United Kingdom on the international stage? What are the long-term interests of the United Kingdom in the world and how are they best served? Which is why I think the initiative of Chatham House is so timely.

This is exactly the right time to ask the very fundamental questions about what we're capable of, what our interests are, what the strategic threats are that we face, and the strategic opportunities. I think we are very poorly equipped as a political community to ask those questions, let alone provide cogent answers, because we are still using outdated tools by which we explain the world around us and our place in it.

We are still, in essence, using the tools that were given to us that we forged and created in the wake of the Suez crisis. The Suez crisis, in my view, remains still the greatest page-turning moment in post-war British history in terms of significantly altering the attitude of a succession of governments,

both Labour and Conservative, about what our long-term interests are. It crystallised and solidified the default Atlanticism that has governed British foreign policy ever since.

It enshrined this view that our primary interests in the affairs of the world are served by us maintaining an allegiance to the United States, regardless of the incumbent in the White House. And acting, in effect, as an echo to the music set in the White House and Pentagon.

It was a perfectly logical conclusion to be made at that time. Loss of empire, loss of sense of identity, height of the Cold War. The mind-boggling power that America mustered in that environment as the only hyper-power, the only true superpower, in global affairs.

But I do not believe that we can carry on in 2010, and beyond, thinking that the events of the 1950s and the place of America in it should continue to be the pivot around which we organise all of our foreign policy issues. Why?

The first and most trite observation is that the world is changing, it's changing very dramatically. From a world in which there was one hyper-power, which, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Communism, seemed totally triumphant. Remember the days of Frances Fukuyama's declaration of the end of history.

That has now evolved into something wholly different. The rise of China, the rise of India, the rise of regional powers, Brazil, Egypt. The rise or prospect of a multipolar world. Perhaps not the reality now, but certainly a very real prospect for the future. A feeling that the United States, perhaps because of some of its decisions, notably the decision to invade Iraq, has bumped up against the limits of what it is capable of delivering.

So I think in that complex new environment it is right for us to ask ourselves searching questions about where our strategic interests lie and whether the cast in stone Suez crisis of the 1950s still should act as our lode star in the way in which we organise ourselves in international affairs today. But to do that, to move that forward, it seems that we first need to acknowledge the fact that we still too readily put ourselves in a position of unthinking subservience to American interests, even when they're not necessarily in our strategic interests.

Let me be clear. I'm an Atlanticist much like everyone else. I spent a happy time working in the United States. I think it is vital to our interests that we maintain a positive, strong and even uniquely warm relationship with the United States. But it is not our only relationship and it mustn't become a

relationship that at every junction, every time a decision is made we have no choice but to follow the decisions made in the White House. And yet that seems to have been happening with greater velocity and frequency in recent years rather than less.

Look at the headlines just today. The former head of MI5 saying 'startlingly' that she now feels that the American Secret Services were conducting interrogations of terror suspects in ways which are wholly unacceptable, contradictory to our principles and legal values - but weren't telling people here. What does that say about the British relationship? What a lopsided asymmetrical relationship.

What does it say that we seem to be apologising repeatedly? The Labour government, Blair in particular, apologising for the evidence of extraordinary rendition, what was going on in Guantanamo. Why is it that I find myself as the only leader of a political party asking the obvious question of whether we, as a country, should be spending 120 billion pounds over the next 20 years on the like for like replacement of the Cold War Trident Missile System?

I believe there is no case for the like for like replacement for that system. And I believe one of the reasons there is a deafening silence on that issue is because that missile system is cemented by a sense of indebtedness to our American friends.

Why is it that, I am the only party leader speaking out, at the time of the wholly disproportionate military incursion into Gaza, just over a year ago? I want to say something about this later. That seemed to me to be something morally incumbent upon us to say that kind of incursion was something that was not in the interests of Israel. I think part of that silence is because of a feeling that we can't step out of line with our US reflexes.

When George W Bush proposed locating the stations for his ill-judged missile defence shield in Yorkshire the government immediately said 'we'll make British facilities available, no questions asked'. On Iraq, the impression I get is that the decision was taken pre-emptively to join in the invasion because basically the Government felt it had no choice.

I'd like to see us repatriate our foreign policy interests so that we conduct a foreign policy which doesn't just conclude that we have no choice in vital matters such as whether you go to war or not just because a vital strategic partner tells us we must. That is a loss of real sovereignty about which I never hear the swivel-eyed Eurosceptics worry about at all.

Surely any foreign policy must be conducted in line with your values, principles and strategic interests. Our strategic interests will not be served unless we release ourselves from that spell of default Atlanticism which has prevailed so strongly since Suez.

But what do we replace it with? Well, yes, of course a rebalanced and mature relationship with our American friends. I, personally, think... I certainly think this is the case when I speak to some of my American friends who work in policy... that many Anglophile American policy-makers are slightly mystified that the sort of limpet like responses that Britain seems to adopt on these issues.

I don't think it's in America's own interests to have the UK act as a transatlantic echo, as a succession of American presidents have made clear. In a sense, the Dick Cheney George W Bush era was a departure. It is in America's own interests to have Britain standing tall in its European backyard. Acting not just as a bilateral bridge between Washington and London, but also as a leader of opinion and events in Europe as a whole.

That's why the most important thing that we need to learn to do in the future is to make the promise of British leadership in Europe a reality. To deliver on all the cliché, rhetorical pledges that we've heard from a succession of foreign secretaries and prime ministers that our ambition is to stand tall in Europe.

You do that by saying that its our first and absolute priority; nothing else is possible unless we act as leaders within the EU. I believe that, as someone who is not naïve or starry-eyed about the fairly cumbersome way that the EU works in practice, it's a club that took 15 years to define chocolate. I was an MEP for 5 years; I suffered from traipses down to Strasbourg, costing you the tax-payer money for no reason other than satisfying the French. I know the grubby deals that take place.

I'm not ignorant about it, but I do know this. That pretty well all the vital interests which affect the security, prosperity and sustainability of our lives in Britain now have a very pronounced European dimension to them. In many ways, while you could argue that the inception of the European Community was driven by post-war reconciliation, the creation of the Coal and Steel Community in the Alsace-Lorraine region, the desire to create agricultural policy to be self-sustaining after the war.

It's not mutated into something... it's had its original purpose and vocation forged by history, it's actually become extremely sophisticated to very contemporary challenges.

Climate change. Probably the greatest challenge facing this generation. The weather doesn't stop at the cliffs of Dover. It is by definition something that we cannot sort out on our own.

The banks. Unregulated, over-leveraged, risk-taking in the financial services sector. We are not ever going to get the right balance between regulation and risk; between scrutiny and dynamism in financial services unless we create a regulatory environment which can be implemented at the supranational level at which they operate.

Remember, we are an economy which is now shouldering liabilities in a British banking system which are four and a half times the size of the British economy. We're like an enlarged version of Iceland. We're almost unique in having a very open economy, open in the financial services system, through the city, the urban flow of capital markets, and yet we're not part of the security of any reserve currency, unlike the United States, unlike Ireland.

We are much more akin to the exposure suffered by the Icelandic economy, and it seems that we buy the luxury. We must seek greater sustainability and security in that parallel economic model by playing an active role in supranational forms of regulation.

Crime. Some of the recent statistics on the relationship between everyday crime and international criminality is spine-chilling reading. Everyday crime now one way or another has some connection to how international criminal gangs operate. We can't deal with international criminality on our own. We can't deal with cross-border migration on our own, by definition.

All of these big, contemporary challenges. The environment. The nature of footloose, fancy-free modern capitalism. The globalisation of crime. The mass movement of people. All of these things are big new challenges that we can't cope with alone. Any politician- and I hear this constantly from the other two parties- who claims to the British people that you can provide security and safety from criminals, sustainability and rescue from the prospect of increasing environmental instability... anyone who says we can do that on our own are lying.

They are betraying the hopes of the British people by pretending that we can do something we can't do on our own. I'll give you one very concrete example. Recently under a police operation conducted by the EU, called Operation Koala, successfully exposed a paedophile ring. Police from 28 countries rescued over 20 young girls from unimaginable abuse and arrested almost 100 sex offenders, many of them based in the UK.

Guess what? UKIP and Conservative members of the European Parliament voted against the measures, the laws that made Operation Koala possible,

because they thought it was an infringement of our sovereignty. Am I alone in getting... in the anger I feel that that kind of blind anti-European dogma should be put before the safety of vulnerable young children in this country?

Let me give you another example. Hussain Osman, the bomber in the 21st July bombing. He fled to Rome, was detained, arrested in three weeks, under the European Arrest Warrant, which made it possible for him to be caught and brought back to face British justice, in a fraction of the time. UKIP and Conservatives voted against this. They put their anti-European dogma above the basic safety of the British people.

But, if we're going to turn what I'm talking about into a reality, if we're going to stand tall in Europe, globalise British political, social, leadership in Europe, to serve our wider needs, and to serve the needs of a more mature and balanced transatlantic relationship, then the EU is going to have to work better than it currently does.

I think there is a draining lack of self-confidence in the EU at the moment. I think it's a club that has been left bewildered and exhausted by years and years of impenetrable naval-gazing debate about one treaty after the next. It's been constant institutional reform. I used to know and study all this stuff and even I've given up.

Very destructive. You cannot ask people to develop trust, let alone any affection for a political club and economic arrangement, which keeps changing. If you keep changing the rules and the goalposts, you'll never develop that delicate fabric of familiarity which create legitimacy. This constant fiddling with how decisions are taken in the EU has gone well beyond its sell-by date. I don't see a new treaty for a very long time.

We've seen obviously a change in the generation of leaders. The old leaders, these were people who had a visceral commitment to the necessity of European co-operation because of the experiences they witnessed first hand.

I think that sense of mission and purpose and vocation... that it's a necessity that we work together, it's in our own interests. I think that's gone from the present generation of leaders. It's been replaced with a parochial pragmatism, introversion, slightly erratic attitude in the case of Sarkozy. I think Germany, the great EU powerhouse... nothing will be possible without their leadership, is, to some degree, still dealing with the huge internal consequences of reunification. Britain has been no leadership at all for years.

I think this institutional cogitation has hollowed out a sense of purpose in the EU. It's drained it of confidence at the same time as we don't have leadership. You can see that on so many fronts.

Look at the miserable failure of the EU to talk to Russia, with one clear voice on energy policy. It is in all our strategic interests to speak with strength in numbers with a partner as important but as difficult on energy policy. It hasn't really happened.

Look at the Middle East. We're by far the largest trading partner with Israel so potentially have huge economic leverage over the Israeli government. We're the largest aid donor of Palestinian communities, in Gaza and the West Bank. But we don't use that leverage. We're an economic giant and a political pygmy.

Imagine what we could do if we spoke with one voice and said unambiguously to the Israeli and Palestinian communities that you will not get the support you're receiving from the EU unless you start working together and abandoning terrorism. Imagine what we could do if we used leverage over the Israeli government to end a blockade that's having disastrous humanitarian consequences in Gaza, and will have political consequences too. If you lock up 1.5 million people, the majority of whom are under 18... unimaginable consequences.

Why then, whilst this blockade is carrying on, why has the EU entered into two new agreements with Israel, on aviation and fisheries? Why don't we apply any conditionality in the Middle East?

Afghanistan. The EU stepped up to the plate and said 'we're going to be the lead force in training Afghan police officers'. The target has been to provide 400 trainers, to provide 350 of those by this month. The latest statistic I've seen is that only 273, after all these years of effort, have been provided by the EU.

The kind of spectacle we saw at Copenhagen, the sight of Sarkozy and Merkel looking bewildered whilst a deal with being cut by Obama and the President of China. That will be the reality for us. Marginalised, made increasingly irrelevant, impotent, if we don't act with the strength of numbers that we need in Europe. I don't want that for Britain. I think a self-confident vision of foreign policy understands that we have strength in numbers. We are weaker apart.

I think I've ranted at sufficient length now. But in summary, don't let anyone tell you that this general election does not matter as far as foreign policy is

concerned. Don't let anyone tell you that we can carry on with the same assumptions. Don't let anyone tell you that we're not serving our own interests by seeking real leadership in the EU. Certainly don't let anyone say the answer is another treaty for the EU. The answer is self-confidence, a rebalanced partnership with the US, a repatriated foreign policy which is in British interests alone, articulated through a strong, united and forceful EU.