



The Ambassadors Series: French Ambassador Gerard Araud Discusses the Evolving U.S.-France Relationship

TRANSCRIPT

Participants:

Introduction.....2

- John P. Walters, *Chief Operating Officer of Hudson Institute*

Discussion.....2

- Ambassador Gerard Araud, *French Ambassador to the United States*
- Walter Russell Mead, *Ravenel B. Curry III Distinguished Fellow in Strategy and Statesmanship, Hudson Institute*

Audience Q&A.....7

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Please note: This transcript is based off a recording and mistranslations may appear in text. The names of participants in the Audience Q&A have been removed. A video of the event is available: <https://www.hudson.org/events/1619-the-ambassadors-series-french-ambassador-discusses-the-evolving-u-s-french-relationship102018>

John Walters: Welcome to the Betsy and Walter Stern Policy Center here at Hudson Institute. I'm delighted to greet you on behalf of my colleagues and on behalf of the participants in the program this morning. I am John Walters, chief operating officer at Hudson. I also want to convey warm regards from our president, Ken Weinstein, who would be here, but he is on his way back from a trilateral meeting in Tokyo on Indo-Pacific security. But otherwise, he would be here. And wanted me to send his regards to you, Mr. Ambassador, in particular. My job is to be brief and introduce our speakers this morning and let them use the time with you to convey some of the issues and many problems that we want to hear their views on as we go forward.

His Excellency Gerard Araud was appointed ambassador of France to the United States in September of 2014. He previously held numerous positions within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, notably, including director of Strategic Affairs, Security and Disarmament, ambassador of France to Israel, director general for Political Affairs and Security, and most recently, permanent representative of France to the United Nations in New York. He was the French negotiator on the Iran nuclear issue from 2006 to 2009 and is known for his knowledge of a wide variety of issues, particularly in the Middle East and on strategic and security matters.

As we announced just this morning, Walter Russell Mead is the Ravenel B. Curry chair and distinguished fellow here at Hudson Institute. We're delighted by the new chair that we announced in support of Walter's work. He's also, of course, a James Clark Chace professor of foreign affairs and humanities at Bard College. He is the global view columnist for The Wall Street Journal and he is author of the widely acclaimed books, "Special Providence: American Foreign Policy And How It Changed The World" and "Gold And" - excuse me. "God and Gold." Let's get those in the right order.

Walter Russell Mead: Yes.

John Walters: "Written America And The Making Of The Modern World." Please join me in welcoming Ambassador Araud and Walter Russell Mead.

(APPLAUSE)

Walter Russell Mead: Well, Ambassador, we are so pleased and honored to have you with us today. As you were reminding me earlier, America's first treaty with alliance was signed with France in 1778. It was such a stressful event that we didn't sign another one until 1949, I think. But France is America's oldest diplomatic relationship. At times, it's been one of the stormiest. But over the centuries, it has endured. And the French have a tradition of sending very interesting and informative observers to the United States. And we've probably learned more about ourselves from one Frenchman than from whole university departments of American studies. In any case, I was hoping you might want to start off today with just some thoughts about the state of the world, U.S.-French relations, whatever is on your mind.

Gerard Araud: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here, of course. What is striking for me, you know, I've been in this country for now nearly 10 years. I was already posted in the '80s in the U.S. And what is striking is, the first time, I think, in my life - I don't know. Does it work?

Walter Russell Mead: Yes. Can you hear him? Check. Is it on? Do you have...

Gerard Araud: Is it working?

Walter Russell Mead: Yes.

Gerard Araud: OK. So what I was saying is, I think it's the first time in my life that the political life in the U.S. is so comparable to the European political life. I'm not sure it's a compliment, but it's a reality. Which says a lot about the fact that the crises that we are all facing is really a crisis of our Western democracies. Whatever the national (unintelligible), you know, the reality is that in all democracies...

Gerard Araud: So going back to what I was just saying, saying that our two societies, our two - our democracies are facing the same crisis, and - which leads, of course, to political tensions in both countries. We have two presidents who, however different they may be by their age or by their profile and by their political leanings - actually, I mean,

both of them have been elected as, in a sense, populist leaders, which means as leaders who have been elected to make politics in a different manner. In the case of the French - in the French case, it was a populist campaign on the centrist platform, a pro-European platform. But fundamentally, President Macron really ascend - was not a politician.

And, you know, in France, to be president, usually, you have to be around for 30 years. In this case, he has never been elected. He was not a politician. And nevertheless, he was elected. And it may explain, also, why our two presidents, however different they are, have a good relationship. It's because they are two mavericks who have been elected through the same anger of the voters. So once you - that's the first reality. The second one is that the president - the French president has a strong majority in the Parliament. He's there for three years. He's very well determined to reform the country. And - which creates a particular situation in Europe a bit by chance, which means that France is a bit, by default, right now, the natural interlocutor - European interlocutor of the United States because the U.K. is facing the very trying challenge of Brexit, which is, of course, really is calling all its political energy to solving this problem in an appropriate way for the British interest.

And on the other side, you have seen, this morning, the declaration of the German chancellor. So it means that, again, by a sort of default, we are, for the moment, a very important interlocutor of the United States. And as you know, in politics, you have to be pragmatic. It's not a question of feelings. And, in a sense, we are delivering. What does it mean that we are delivering? It means that our French soldiers are, right now, on the main battlefields against terror. We are with the Americans. We are deploying 4,000 soldiers in Africa right now, facing the terrorists in the Sahel region, and the Americans are supporting us. And we are the main contributor to the military operation in the Levant. We'll be side-by-side with the Americans, I should say, simply because the security in the Levant is critical for our own national security.

So you have seen President Macron was the first one to be invited to a state visit by President Trump. And the relationship between the two countries is quite strong, so which means that, so far, we have been sort of good at avoiding, really, confrontations and reaching what I call gentlemen's disagreements, and which is apparently - which is a diplomatic quality. So that was my short introduction.

Walter Russell Mead: Short and, I think, very, very informative. I would like to follow up with your observations about the United States because you, as an ambassador, you have a unique kind of position where you talk to people on all sides of the political divide. You hear the candid views of Republicans, Democrats, Liberals, Conservatives, Never-Trumpers and administration officials. How do you read the American political situation today? How much trouble are we in?

Gerard Araud: Well, in a sense, I am privileged because I'm not an American in observing what is happening in the U.S. in a time of intense polarization. I should say, for me, the first element I want to emphasize is how emotional are the Americans today on both sides, and - which means that, really, basically, people are launching epithets at each other, you know, or, you know, really, are more in a sort of moralistic tone than a political one.

And I think it's, especially, I should say, for the Democratic side. For the Democrats, you know, really, I think that what has happened in this country, what is happening in all the democracies is calling for a political response. So I guess it's not enough to say that I don't like the person. I think it's much more important to say, actually, I don't like - it's your politics. And, actually, if I was elected, that would be the politics, which means taking it seriously into account, seriously - what the voters have said, the anxiety they have expressed, the demands they are presented and to try to - basically, to articulate a policy. So my advice would be, be less moralistic - which is a very French - but be more political.

Walter Russell Mead: So that's very good. French ambassador advises Americans: be more French.

(LAUGHTER)

Walter Russell Mead: It's probably good advice right now. You mentioned Brexit. And this is clearly an issue that has been rumbling along for a long time. The EU seems to have been moving a bit in the direction of a softer approach. The British, on their part, don't seem to have much of a consensus at all. Where do you think this is going? And is there any kind of a positive role the U.S. can play, or should we just sort of wait it out?

Gerard Araud: Of course, we do regret, you know, the decision of the British. Frankly, according to us, it's a lose-lose situation on both sides of the discussion, the British or the EU people. And it's a waste of energy, especially at a time when the EU is facing so many different challenges. Well, it's a self-inflicted crisis. First, the British have decided to leave. It's their decision. Secondly, they have also set the red lines. They said, we don't want any competence of the European Court of Justice, we don't want free movement of people, and we want to be able to negotiate our own trade deals. So now, for more than one year, we have said - considering your red lines, what we can offer to you is a free trade agreement the way we have signed a free trade agreement with Canada. Of course, for the British, it's a loss.

You know, they had full access to the wider free trade area in the world. And now they are going to have - you know, to be treated like the Canadians towards the European Union. And as they are good diplomats, they want to have their cake and eat it. So basically, they have been knocking at our door now for one year, trying really to say - oh, we want a bit more of that, more of that. So that's the first problem. The European Union is a set of norms. You know, if you take off the norms, there is nothing really left of the European Union. It's not a territory. It's not a nation. It's a set of norms that the member states have accepted. So we can't change the norms, which are the basis of the European Union, for the sake of the U.K.

So we have always repeated to the U.K., free trade agreement, free trade agreement but nothing else considering your red lines. The second problem is, of course, the British aren't negotiating with themselves because there is a lot of disagreements between them. You know, really, it reminds me when, as a poor French diplomat, I was negotiating with the Americans. Well, the Americans - first, you have what you call the intra-agency process. So you have this process, intra-agency. Usually, you're awaiting the results of the process during three months. And at the end, the Americans are arriving with the result. And they say, oh, please don't touch it. Don't say negotiate it. You know? It was too tough to negotiate.

(LAUGHTER)

Gerard Araud: The British are going to be the same. You know, really, they are spending weeks and months, you know, fighting and fighting, negotiating. And after that - you know, coughing, out of blood - they came to us with a (unintelligible) and say, please don't. Of course we are not obliged to accept it. So it's a complicated negotiation because of the British political situation because the complexity of the issue. You know, in 40 years, hundreds of agreements actually have been negotiated between the U.K. and the EU. And you have to cut all these links. So it's really very messy. And when you have a negotiation, also, it's very important to know that closer you get to the deadline, more melodrama you have. So there is melodrama. There will be melodrama. Doors will be slammed. Chests will be banged. You know, really, that's part of a negotiation.

But I'm quite - really, I do believe that, at the end of the day, we will have an agreement. It's certainly in interest of both sides, as such, that we will have an agreement. As you know, now the point is the Irish border because if the U.K. is leaving the European Union, there will be a hard border on the Irish border, which would be contrary to the Good Friday Agreement. The Good Friday Agreement was negotiated when the U.K. was in the EU, so it was quite possible simply not to have a border anymore between Northern Ireland and Ireland or not an apparent border. Now it will be more complicated. So that's the point of the negotiation. Again, there will be still a period of tension, periods of tension. But I'm quite optimistic about an agreement.

Walter Russell Mead: And we've talk about the difficult negotiating partner to one side of France. And then on the other, you have another, I think, where President Macron, really at the beginning of his term in office, made a very impassioned call for a renewal of Franco-German cooperation and almost a relaunch of the European Union sense. And at the time, the Germans were saying, this is very nice, but we're having an election. Talk to us after the election. Then after the election, well, we have to have a coalition. Talk to us when the coalition is formed. Then the coalition was formed - the coalition is still very new, and, no, we need some time. And now it looks like, well, our coalition is breaking up, and we still can't talk very much about Europe. How do you get a process going when - because in some ways this is an even better strategy for not negotiating than the British or the American one.

Gerard Araud: You know, what is striking for somebody of my generation is the question of the future of the European Union. For my generation, the European Union was a moral imperative - something that nobody could

really even discuss. We had been invaded three times in 70 years by the Germans. Our territory had been devastated. And so we reach, I guess, two conclusions. The first one was nuclear deterrence. We needed nuclear deterrence because in time of danger you are alone. And we were alone in 1940. And the second one was never again.

And so it was reconciliation with Germany. I was educated, like all the French, you know, fearsomely anti- German family. And that was, of course, the feeling of all - the feelings of all the French. And nevertheless there was a sort of will to say, again, never again. We have to build Europe - to build Europe. And the problem maybe is that we have been too successful, which means now to young Europeans, the idea that Germany could be afraid of course doesn't make any sense. And it doesn't make any sense. So the question mark is why European Union. What is the use of European Union? So you can say it's very good for prosperity because it's that largest free trade area in the world. But frankly it's not with that that you excite the enthusiasms of the crowds - and especially at a time when there is - what? - the populist wave. And here the populist wave has Washington, D.C., and Wall Street as targets. In France - in Europe, it's Brussels because Brussels appears as, you know, really the beacon of globalism - you know, really opening the borders, really signing free trade agreements with everybody. So the populist anger is mainly directed at - not only but mainly directed against Brussels.

So the question that we have all of - we all have to answer is how to convince our citizens that the European Union remains of a critical importance for our security and also for our prosperity. And, again, the jury is out. At the same time, you should - you may see that countries which are actually experiencing populist or neo-populist really governments, like Hungary or Poland, actually are not talking about leaving the European Union. And Prime Minister Orban has been very keen on saying that really they don't want to leave the European Union. And also beyond all this name-calling - of the name-calls of our times, the fact is the European Union is muddling through in a very EU way, which is not very glorious. But it's muddling through - creating, for instance, you know, border guards - European border guards and training them also to respond to the anxieties of the cities, including on immigration. So again, it's tough, and - but we have to move forward.

And going to your question, it's true that Macron has really - basically has made - Europe has - in a sense, he's waving the flag of Europe. And it's not very easy, you said, because usually we are working with Germany. And - and it's true that Germany is going through - right now through a particular moment. But you have also had the Italian elections. So in a sense, what will be a test will be the European elections. There will be elections to the European Parliament, I think in May - May 2019. And Macron is trying to set the stage in terms of Nationalists against Europeans. And he's trying to create - he has been creating a party with all the European leaders, especially leaders - the prime minister of Netherlands, for instance, Mr. Rutte, or Scandinavian leaders - you know, really to have - to present a sort of a center or center of the left platform really against the nationalist. And the result of the elections will be important in themselves because the European Parliament has some powers. But also the message that is - that these elections are going to send.

But, you know, there is a book that's been written about Macron called "At The Same Time" - (speaking French) - because, you know, usually when you ask a question to the president, he's saying, oh, yes, the answer is A. And you say, oh, that's a right-wing answer. But then immediately after that, he'll say, (speaking French) at the same, it could be B, which is a left-wing answer, which means that he's trying to really to make a sort of (Speaking French) of the different possible responses. He's not prisoner of a political - really a political line. As I've said, he's different. You know, he's been elected in a different way. And he wants to be different. So there are some measures, you say, oh, that's right wing. Some measures it's left wing. In a sense, he has understood that a debate is not so much right against left - that the debate, as you know, about what this fight is saying globalist against nationalist. And he wants to be part of this debate. He's accepting - he's accepting this debate. But at the same time, if for instance on immigration, there was - he has a deal voted by the French parliament which was quite restrictive. And also he's using also, you know, the signals - the symbolic signals, also for instance, of commitment to nation - you know, the flag, national ceremonies, the celebration of the centennial of the First World War. So he is also aware of the anxieties of all of the citizens and trying to respond to these anxieties.

Walter Russell Mead: Talking about Italy then, the third problematic neighbor of France in a sense, how do you see - how will France respond to the Italian position on its budget?

Gerard Araud: You know, I'm willing to have a very courageous answer. That's the competence of the commission.

(LAUGHTER)

Gerard Araud: That's the commission to handle on this issue. You know, it's really - first, as you can guess, our relationship - our bilateral relationship with Italy, for obvious reasons, is totally critical for us. You know, really in France, well, I think is the first - and the second investor in Italy. Our major companies are really linked. And there is also that we have to manage together the question of immigration through the Mediterranean Sea. So there are some, again, name-calling between Paris and Rome. But at the end of the day, we'll have to cooperate. I noticed, as I've said for the prime minister of Hungary, that the Italians have never said that they want to leave the European Union, you know, really.

And the question they are asking, in a sense, you know, has been a question which has been altering, you know, for some years, which is to say that the austerity policy, which is - really that has been imposed on Europe now since 2010 - 2011. You have a lot of people who are considering that this austerity policy has in a sense had a very destructive consequence on the economy growth and the economy of the member states of the Eurozone, which means on the fabric of our society. It's a debate which is going through all the European countries, especially in the south - saying, you know, it's a modern imposed austerity, and we have to put an end to it.

Walter Russell Mead: I'd like to ask you one more question on my own behalf and then give the audience a chance. And this would be - we've noticed a dramatic turn in U.S.-Chinese relations. Standing pretty much where you are sitting, Vice President Pence a couple of weeks ago gave a striking speech about U.S.-China relations and talked about a whole-of-government approach in the U.S. to counter China's Chinese policies. And there have been a number of other steps before and after that suggest a turn of the U.S. - of U.S. policy toward a much tougher approach to China. From a European perspective, from a French perspective, how does all this look? And how do you see this line of administration policy shifting world politics if at all?

Gerard Araud: You know, there are a lot of people who are saying basically that power politics are back. I think that never left the stage, you know, really. But, you know, we believe it's power politics are back simply because so far for the last decades our politics was overwhelmingly in favor of the West and especially of the U.S. And the fact is that we are simply seeing a rebalancing of the world between world powers. Obviously China is on the rise. And that's less obviously because we can discuss it. In comparative terms of the U.S. is in decline - in comparative terms even if the U.S. will remain the main power for the decades to come.

So it's always - you know, it's not to you - it's always a difficult moment, you know, how to find - to define a new balance between this emerging China and, on the other side, the U.S. and the other powers - Japan, Russia. So it's really - so it's not abnormal that we feel - we hear tensions for the Europeans. But it has always been the case for Europeans they know what is power politics. You know, really it's - we nearly invented power politics. And - but we consider that multilateral institutions, international law are a way of civilizing power politics - you know, really maybe hiding, you know, under a cloak of decency - the balance - the reality of the balance of power but also creating frames for negotiating. And that's the reason why we are so much committed to multilateral approach, to international organization but without any injury - you know, without any naiveté. We are not naive. So sooner or later, we will have to define - you know, we were expecting a definition of this relationship, which is now the major relationship which is between China and the U.S.

You know, it has - it had to come. There was a filament, you know, crystal - it was a crystallization moment. You know, the speech of Vice President Pence was a crystallization moment. But the trends were there, you know, really. And what we have - again, on our side, we - of course, we do hope that after all this crystallization there will be between China and the U.S. - there will be a dialogue, you know, really leading to partial deals or agreements and so. And I think it's in the interest of everybody to reach agreements or compromise between China and U.S. What we have told the U.S. - we have told the U.S. that on the trade issues, we were ready to work with the U.S. because it's true that there are some real questions which are raised by the Chinese behavior - a real question about intellectual property, market access, public procurement. And that we - there was also all the questions about cybersecurity. We consider that we should set the standards together - that if we don't do it with the U.S., again, the risk is that China

will set its own standards, which are not - which wouldn't be very friendly towards the democratic values and towards our national interest.

So we've also got ideas about reforming the WTO because we consider - again, you know, really this administration and this president are raising a lot of legitimate questions - the behavior of China in the trade field, for instance. You know, we have been whispering about it for the last 20 years. And so it's really - it's a real question. The WTO - also the WTO - you know, the previous administration was already unhappy about the WTO. It was not appointing judges to go to the court of the WTO. So - but why not reform - reforming the WTO? We are ready to work with the U.S. to reforming the WTO. So again, there are - really again, there is this very special unique relationship between the two powers. But on the European side, we are ready, as I said, on some issues to work with the U.S.

Walter Russell Mead: Well, thank you, enlightening as always. I try to call on as many people as I can. Let me remind you though that you need to ask questions. Questions are short statements that would be punctuated by a question mark at the end - so please no statements or long comments. Identify yourself briefly. And we have microphones? Yes. So wait for the microphone. This young man here in the front. I'm sorry. Probably you all look young to me.

(LAUGHTER)

Audience Member: That's fine. George Washington University. I was wondering. What's your take on the Iran deal? Should the European Union stay in it? Singular sanctions are coming. How can the European Union better handle the issue? Thank you.

Gerard Araud: You know, on the Iran deal, we have a fundamental political disagreement with the United States. It's fundamental. It's not a question of business. It's a question - political question. We disagree. We have to admit it. We consider that the decision of the U.S. to get out of the Iran deal was a major mistake - period - which means that we do believe that the Iran deal was - of course, it was not perfect. But it was - it gave us a lot of means of monitoring and limiting the Iran nuclear program. And we have told Americans, and we have told the previous administration already that, beyond the Iran nuclear issue, there were a lot of other issues that we had to face as for the Iranian foreign policy. And with this administration actually, we, the Europeans - we are negotiating with the administration about an agreement on how to handle the terrorist, missile activity and regional activities of Iran. There was a negotiation going on. And we were - we considered we were at 90 percent of an agreement.

So our position was clear. We keep. And we actually implemented very robustly the Iran deal. And, at the same time, we worked together, the Europeans - the free Europeans and the European Union - with America to address the other issues, which, of course, are real issues and in a sense, more real - real issues for Europeans, considering our geography. So we were there. This administration has decided overnight, you know, really to denounce the Iran deal and basically to sweep away the negotiation that had been conducted. OK. So here we are. What we are trying to do and what we have been repeating to this administration is that if the Iranians leave the Iran deal, what are we going to do? (Laughter) You know, really - basically, when we signed the Iran deal, it was basically to say - you know, really, to avoid facing the alternative between bombing Iran or Iranian bomb. That was what we were trying to avoid. And we believe disagreement was a way of avoiding this very - really, an appealing alternative. So what the Europeans are trying to do right now is trying to convince the Iranians to stay in the deal, the Iran deal. So far, they have accepted it.

When the new American sanctions are going to hit - and apparently, they are going to hit very heavily the Iranians - on November the 4, I don't know what the Iranians will do. But again, if the Iranians decide, suddenly, to go back to massive uranium enrichment, what are you going to do? You know, it's really - that's the real issue. So for the moment, we have convinced Iranians. We have a very intense dialogue with the Iranians. Of course, it's really politics. It's also domestic politics. And the fact that the Americans are sanctioning European corporations, which were engaging to totally legitimate a trade in Iran - you know, selling cars or, really, the normal trade - as, of course, political consequences in our public opinion. Our public opinion is totally outraged that the U.S. would punish foreign companies doing legitimate business in a foreign country. Extraterritoriality of the American sanctions, it's more and more difficult to accept by the European public opinion. And we have also to take into account the European public opinion.

So what we have been telling the Americans was, OK; on one side, the nuclear deal disagreement - we disagreed. So let's see whether we can work together on the other issues. But it's also difficult on our side because of the public opinion, and it means also that we are expecting our American friends to make some gestures. For instance, the humanitarian goods - of course, humanitarian goods are not sanctioned, are not under American sanctions. But the fact is that the banks are so terrified by the sanctions that they don't want to do anything with Iran. So it means that there is a strong risk that in a few months, you know, really, there will be shortage of medicine in Iran if we don't do something positive to solve this problem. So again, it's a difficult dialogue. We want - again, we are - it's a bit weird because we have the same diagnostic of the Iranian behavior. And as you know, we have expelled Iranians because they were trying to organize a terrorist act, actually, on a French territory. The French, we have been always very tough with Iran. But we do consider that this way of what has been decided by the United States makes our action against Iran - against or balancing Iran more complicated.

Walter Russell Mead: More questions. Let's see. In the back there. Yes? We'll get a microphone to you. Introduce yourself?

Audience Member: Mr. Ambassador, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. I was wondering if you have any insight on the French-Russian relationship and, more specifically, if France has any hopes for the upcoming Trump-Putin summit and the INF Treaty in general. Thank you.

Gerard Araud: You know, it's really - first, I start by your remark, a small remark, which is - I don't know - it's indicative a bit of the United States. You - during - on Friday, I guess - on Friday, you had, a summit in Istanbul between the French president, the German chancellor, the Turkish president and the Russian president to talk about Syria. France, Germany, Turkey, Russia - don't you think that somebody is missing there?

(LAUGHTER)

Gerard Araud: And it's very true. It's very strange because, for us, it was a major event. It was hardly covered by the American press - hardly covered. You know, it's really - I want only, really, to emphasize this point because we - our embassy, we had to send a report about the reaction of the American press. And frankly, really, it was not that - the relationship with Russia is, in a sense, for the Europeans, as you may know, it's platitude. But Russia is an important country. At the same time, we don't want to - we don't see Russia as the USSR revisited. The only reason that the Russian power is not a global threat for - to Europe - you know, basically, if you add the military budget of Germany, France and the U.K., it's more than twice the Russian military budget. So Russia is a partner. Russia is also - is raising, I should say, political problems in Crimea, in Ukraine, you know, what was Georgia in 2008.

So we have problems with Russia, but Russia is not a major - really, unifying France the way USSR was. Second point - our trade with Russia is 10 times the American trade with Russia, really. So it means also that for us, we have also legitimate business interests in Russia - business interests which were - which are quite important. And by the way, the sanctions that we have - which have been imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea and the interference into Ukraine has been much more costly for the Europeans than for the Americans because of that. You know, actually, our agricultural sector, which was a major provider to the Russians, has suffered. So we have done the job, you know, really. So once - you know, what is foreign policy?

Foreign policy is talking with your adversaries. So we have to talk with the Russians. We have to find with President Putin whether there could be a compromise between the way they see their interest and the way we see our interest. To be frank, when we - President Trump was elected, actually, we thought that it was a very good idea to have a personal relationship between your president and the Russian president because it's really through Vladimir Putin that you can have an influence and access to the real decision-making process of Russia. And it is what the president, President Macron, has been trained to do. And it's exactly what happened also in Istanbul. And because - here we are going into the conflict in Syria. As for Syria - and for some legitimate reasons, the Obama administration and the Trump administration have limited - they have really limited intervention to fighting ISIS, basically.

You know, really - and has not very - the two administrations have not been very active going further than fighting ISIS. For us, what is happening in Syria has critical consequences on our national security, either for migrations but also because of terrorism, which means citizens of our countries going to Syria and coming back. So we have a - for

these reasons, we could feel much more urgency, maybe, than the Americans into solving this conflict. And the fact is whether we like it or we don't like it, that Russia is in Syria. The fact is that in military terms, some people would say that Russia and the regime have the upper hand and that we are really close to the last stage of the crisis, which is the fall of Idlib. Idlib is 14,000 jihadists. It's 2 millions of civilians. If the Russians and Syrians attack Idlib, it will be more than one million of refugees, many going to Turkey, and on top of that, thousands of jihadists scattered in the nature, as we say in French.

So you can understand that for Europeans, it's a totally unacceptable prospect. So since the Turks and the Russians have been working on this issue, with our German friends, we have seen what we can do on Idlib and also on a political transition, which could be, in a sense, consolidate a ceasefire and maybe a peace process in Syria. So we don't have any illusion about Russia. You know, really, we see the military activity in the Baltic airspace, the military activity in the North Sea. Actually, we have reinforced our military presence at Warsaw. We are contributing to the NATO battalions in the Baltic states. We have forces, really, also trained in Poland. So we - but at the same time, we have to talk, really - we have to speak with the Russians. And it's what we are trained to do. And so the idea of having, you know, a summit in Paris or in Buenos Aires between the two presidents, it's a very good idea.

Walter Russell Mead: All right. Yes - microphone.

Audience Member: Thank you - what's been the response of the administration to your European requests on making a bigger effort to exempt humanitarian goods from the sanctions? And how big an impact is November 4 going to have on transatlantic relations if the U.S. pursues extraterritorial actions against European companies?

Gerard Araud: As for humanitarian issues, we have not - you know, we have not actually yet received a precise answer. You know, for instance, the question is, really, the designation maybe of an Iranian bank with which it will be allowed - we could be allowed to make, you know, really to have a relationship, you know, because for the moment, the administration says, we said publicly that humanitarian - really, it's possible to send medicine and food to the Iranians. And what we - our question was, no, you need to be more positive to say how to do it because if you don't say how to do it, the European banks will not do it. So we are waiting for the technical answer.

You know, we know that the Americans are thinking about it, really. As for the sanctions on November 4, first, I don't know what would be their extent. But I should say now that in a sense, we have swallowed 95 percent of the bitter potion. So I'm - but if there is something totally really unexpected, I don't think that November 4 would be more - really will bring more bitterness on the transatlantic relationship in this field. But Americans may surprise us. You know, really, that's the quality of this country.

Walter Russell Mead: Let's see - one more question. Yes, sir.

Audience Member: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. I'm a French national but a recent American citizen - appreciate you being here. The European Court of Human Rights recently ruled that the Austrian case about blasphemy - that the woman - ES's comments about the Prophet Muhammad weren't protected speech and sentenced her either to a fine or time in prison. I wonder what your government's response has been. And I wonder, also, with respect to recognizing the legitimacy of the court and of that ruling, were a French citizen to be found responsible for the same crime elsewhere in the European Union, would the French government respect the decision and potential incarceration?

Gerard Araud: Well, I think it's typically a very polemical, in a sense, issue. And to be frank, I read it in the press, but I didn't read the decision of the court. And as you know, it may make a real difference. So I - again, I don't know what is the exact text of the decision. So I really - so I can't answer to your question. You know, as prominent representative to the United Nations, I spent five years, you know, defending the rights of the Frenchmen to insult Virgin Mary and, really, Jesus Christ. So - and, really, which is a bit strange, you know, because Charlie Hebdo - you know, Charlie Hebdo was this newspaper, was victim of the terrorist attack, basically, because he had insulted and he drew in a very crude manner Muhammad, prophet. But he had insulted much more, you know, really, the poor Pope that he submitted to a lot of indignities, I couldn't describe here - or Virgin Mary and so on.

So there is a big tradition in the French as you - on the French - in France, as you know, to be anti-religious, to be frank, because people don't understand it. It's very - it's wonderful when major difference is your secularism is to

protect the Virgin from the state. You know, it was really your - the - your founding fathers didn't want to have an established religion. So really, your secularism was to prevent the state to impose an established church while our secularism was to protect the state from the church, you know, in one century of fighting between - from the French Revolution between the Roman Catholic Church and the French state. So there is a sort of a twist - an anti-religious twist in our secularism that we have to recognize. You know, really, it's - you will never see a French president swearing on the Bible. That will be the end of his political career.

Walter Russell Mead: (Laughter).

Gerard Araud: So it's really - so it's very different. So again, I have to look at it because I was also struck by this decision. But when you are struck by such a decision, saying, basically, it's - you can punish somebody because he has insulted a religious figure, you certainly have said, no, it's not that simple. It's not possible that the European Court of Justice has taken this position, really. So I want you to have a look at it and to answer to your question after that. You know, really, it's - you're French. Yeah. Really, I saw you arriving. I was sure you were French.

Walter Russell Mead: (Laughter).

Gerard Araud: Really, it's - so even with American nationality, you can't escape.

Walter Russell Mead: (Laughter) Great.

Audience Member: Our moderator had an even more torn comment about that on Twitter.

Walter Russell Mead: Well, Twitter is an interesting medium. And I think the ambassador and I...

Gerard Araud: I don't have Twitter (laughter).

Walter Russell Mead: ...Have both found that Twitter is, sometimes, best avoided.

Gerard Araud: Yes, exactly.

Walter Russell Mead: All right. Well, listen. I think we're all grateful to the ambassador for really generous and open conversation - diplomacy at its best - and hope to see you here again soon for another conversation with another one of our Washington-based diplomats. Thank you so much.