Transatlantic Diplomacy after 9/11: The U.S. and Norway
Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Espen Barth Eide
Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2000-2001
Deputy Minister of Defense, 2005-2010
Minister of Defense, 2011-2012
Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2012-2013

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[Begin Transcription]

LEONG: I'm LaiYee Leong with the Center for Presidential History. Today is the 12th of January, 2018. I'm in Oslo, Norway, and I'm with Espen Barth Eide. Mr. Eide, let's begin with your first experience in government in the First Stoltenberg

Cabinet. At that time, 2000, you came to government in 2000, and then the Bush Administration started in 2001. What were your expectations at that time of the Bush Administration in terms of its foreign policy?

EIDE: We were, of course, spending a lot of time to try to get to understand and to know this new administration. We had been working extremely closely with the Clinton Administration just before. Of course, as a Social Democrat, we have historic ties [00:01:00] to the Democratic Party, so that's always quite easy, but we also have, you know, experience in working with the solid Republican administrations, and we remembered his father's administration, for instance, as a very successful one where it was easy for Norway to connect. Now, what we realized early was that with George W. Bush came a group of people who had kind of a different, right-wing ideological starting point, which was typically known as the neocon team, you know, Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld himself, and Richard Perle in the margins of this and so on. So it was important to get to know these people and to understand what they were up to, and we realized that this was going to be a somewhat different America from what we had been used to both in the Clinton era but also in the George H. Bush era before that. So that was something we were conscious about. It's always in [00:02:00] -- the primary interest of any Norwegian government, I think, regardless of color will be to try to keep the Atlantic narrow, which means not only to maintain good bilateral relations but also to try to engage America in issues of global concern that we care about. So, you know, we had done that a lot with the Clinton Administration. We wanted to continue that and to find the new entry points.

I remember I visited quite early after the change. That was also, interestingly, when my -- I was deputy minister or undersecretary of state, as it would be called in the US, but the former foreign minister, Minister Vollebæk, had then become ambassador in the US, so I was there when he was sworn in, more or

less, or when he had his *tour d'horizon*[1] and had some early meetings with the administration [00:03:00] at that point. And I remember in particular a luncheon with Richard Perle, which was very interesting, where we had and *agrément*[2] on all of this. Richard Perle is somebody who knows Norway well because he's been into the strategic thinking, and a particular memory from that meeting was that I was arguing that we recognize and we understand that you are about to un-sign or to cancel the ABM treaty, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and we also assume that this decision has been made. But what about going to Moscow, telling them, and inviting them to do it with you so that you could say, you know, "Here we are, the former adversaries from the Cold War. We do not any longer need an ABM treaty," and Richard Perle responding, "Well, I understand the logic, but we don't want to give them the sense that they are that important." [00:04:00] And that kind of gave me an impression of where we were heading because some of these people, of course, had the sense that with the advent of the Bush Administration it was like year zero, that world history is behind us, but now we're starting again, and there are new ways of doing things. So that was an interesting -- just an example of an interesting experience.

And then, of course, came -- so we had then been for a while in government, but we were about to have an election, and we had that rather peculiar coincidence that we had our election on the 10th of September, 2010 [*sic*], which, of course, is the day before 9/11, as you call it in the US, or the 11th of September. And I was in the foreign ministry that afternoon, because what was your morning was our afternoon, and was probably among the first or the first one to hear about the attacks on the World Trade Center. [00:05:00] And the rest of the government and the key -- including the prime minister, the foreign minister for whom I was working at the time, were gathered to discuss the lousy election

[1] Definition: Overview, brief summary touching on main points

[2] Definition: The agreement by a receiving state to accept a named individual as head of a diplomatic mission. From the Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Diplomacy.

result that we had the day before. And I was, you know, contacting them to say that there's something more important going on here. And after that, the coming months where we were still -- so we had lost the election, but it took time for the Bondevik government to be formed. So we went through very intensely, and I, of course, remember vividly the early days after 9/11, how we would react in NATO, how we would deal with the Americans in this new setting. We understood that this was a major change and a major challenge in how we would deal with that, so I'll come back to that in a second. And then, we were still there when the intervention in Afghanistan started on, I think, the 7th of October [00:06:00] or something like that. And then, later in October we left the office for Bondevik, but we had a lot of contacts in that transition because, of course, we had fresh experiences that we wanted to share with the people who took over and had a sort of very unified approach to all of this.

And during September, so after 9/11, we basically -- hour by hour, we were in contact, of course, with the US but also with our other allies and in NATO, and we strongly supported the idea of announcing, you know, an Article 5 decision in NATO. And a very interesting experience was that we thought that was a good idea -- and I still think so, by the way -- but it was not particularly popular on the American side. And that was quite shocking, because, of course, this was supposed to be a strong sign of solidarity by using [00:07:00] Article 5, which has never had any real appliance. And then, I think, the next week, I believe it was -- and you can check the dates, but I think it was the next week -- Paul Wolfowitz came over and basically told NATO that, "You don't need to call us. We'll call you when we need you, and we will now form a coalition of those who are willing, able, and necessary." So that was a very different approach, and at that time, you know, the same -- the morning after 9/11, *Le Monde* said, "Nous sommes Américains," we're all Americans, something like that, which is not something *Le Monde* would write on a normal day, to put it mildly. But there was an outpour of support,

which was not particularly welcome in the US, and that was very strange, I think, for us at that time. And it had to do with the worldview that was quite different from what we had been used to earlier. So I can go on on this, but --

LEONG: No, no, that's great. Could you go back to [00:08:00] what you were saying earlier about the sort of shift in US policy that took you by surprise as a result of 9/11?

EIDE: So what was surprising was -- what was not surprising was that this was a very -- I mean, it was the biggest attack on America since Pearl Harbor or since anything in the Second World War. It was unique. I mean, Europeans, of course, had been accustomed to terrorist attacks, not at that scale, but, you know, relatively serious things had been happening and not only from Al-Qaeda and fellows but also from domestic, from ETA or IRA and so on. So the recognition in Europe that life is not perfectly secure, that there's always a certain risk, has been, you know, very much internalized into European culture. And if you try to be absolutely, 100-percent secure against anything, in a sense, there's no life. But this reaction that -- so we also understood the initial reaction from the US, [00:09:00] and I think it was not -- I don't think; I know -- I remember very well that a lot of allies said that we need to connect because we don't know what these people will do on their own. So it's better that we try to take them into the fold and be supportive but, by being supportive, also have some kind of a hand on the steering wheel. And why? Because if this had happened -- I mean, if this had happened during the father Bush, George H. Bush, or Clinton, I would be absolutely certain that the reaction will be multilateral, that you would say America, of course, strong America leadership, but building on taking all of the institutions you and NATO, whatever has been built over many years, and say, "We want to support true, multilateral responses." But that was not so clear given these early days of the Bush Administration. Everything I'm saying now -- and if we go chronologically, we can come back to it, but this attitude [00:10:00] changed. And I think that in

my experience, the relatively dramatic change to -- what I would say to the better in the second term, where some of the sort of -- the most self-conscious neocon, "We can do it alone. Why do we need the world?" had been maybe washed out by experience that the world is actually not so bad, and actually having allies can be helpful at times.

LEONG: Now, you mentioned that early meeting with Richard Perle.

EIDE: Yeah.

LEONG: Did you have any meetings with other senior US officials?

EIDE: Yes. Yes. No, absolutely. I had a whole package of meetings, so I mentioned him because it was a very strong -- I remember I met -- who did I -- many, but, well, Steve Hadley, I remember, I met, who was then --

LEONG: Deputy.

EIDE: -- the deputy at the time and then later, of course, became -- a very good impression of him, and I maintained a good impression of him throughout, by the way, and met him again also when he was later -- much later, when he became the security advisor himself. [00:11:00]

LEONG: The advisor. But did you meet any of these advisors after 9/11, and what impressions might they have given you at that time after 9/11?

EIDE: Well, let me think. Well, I must have, because we were in, I mean, at least the crowd in NATO. The ambassador and so on I would have met after that, but because we just had a few months in office after -- but at least the US ambassador to NATO, who was a political appointee. But I will have -- this is a long time. No, of course, I met some of these people later, again. So I met all of them later, but I'm trying to remember when I met them.

LEONG: Sure. How much do you think the neocon --

EIDE: But, of course, when you say did I meet them, and we -- I mean, that's relevant, but, of course, we, Norway -- I mean, the institution of the foreign

ministry was in contact with everybody all the time, you know, whether I was there myself or not. [00:12:00]

LEONG: Right. Of course. Do you think that the neocon approach, you know, that sort of "go it alone" that you were describing -- how much of that was structural because the US saw itself as a hyper-power, perhaps, or how much of it was a matter of personality?

EIDE: I think it was ideology. I think, and you'd know better, but, I mean, I think that a certain group of people who were already involved in the Bush Senior Administration who had been left frustrated particularly after the, by the way, the highly successful invasion of Iraq, that stopped short of actually regime change in Iraq because George H. Bush, who had been, who was a sort of solid believer in international systems said, "The mandate we got is to restore the sovereignty of Kuwait. We did not get a mandate for regime change in Baghdad, and, by the way, maybe we don't need it," because on the other hand you also had the [00:13:00] complicated Iran, and, you know, it wasn't that obvious that that was the only choice. So some of these people had been sitting there thinking that we should have done more and, I think, developed an ideology. And, of course, this also came at the point where you could get the impression that -- I mean, there were people actually saying, like the Fukuyama book and so on, that the US had won not only the Cold War, which it had, but actually won history once and for all, and now the US should break free. Which is interesting because, seen from a highly Atlanticist European country as Norway -- I mean, many of us in Europe are pro-Atlantic, but we are particularly pro-Atlantic, also, because we are not in the EU. So we have an even stronger need for good ties with the US. We had been used to Americans, through shifting governments and administrations between left and [00:14:00] -- Democrat and Republicans, rather, that built a system of institutions and then used the system of institutions -- that you invented the UN, invented NATO, invented the World Trade Organization or GATT, as it were -- and then

used it because, you know, it was good seen from an American administration, good for me and good for you, right? But then, suddenly, now, the new ideology was to break free of all of this, that all of this is keeping us tied up. And I think in the most extreme version the argument was, "It's good for America to break free and for the rest of the world, because by breaking free we can do good in the world without asking any foreigners for permission. And since we are always good, that's good for the people we save." Dangerous, of course, and it didn't last, which is why -- so this was not adjusted by Obama. It was adjusted by the Bush Administration where the new -- let's say, in my subjective reading -- more normal crowd came in and took over and took over some of this. [00:15:00]

LEONG: Right. Sure, sure.

EIDE: Yeah. But what I should say is that what was not very difficult was to reestablish good bilateral -- or maintain, rather, maintain bilateral ties. There was no particular issue that -- so our concern, not completely different from what we experience today with the Trump Administration, is that Norway-US is perfectly okay. We just -- the prime minister had a successful visit. The problem is that we are worried about what American doesn't care about any longer, which is the Paris deal and the UN and world peace and free trade and so on. You know, so the concern is not -- it's very seldom a bilateral issue. It's more different views on global or international issues.

LEONG: So the Bondevik government then came in --

EIDE: Came in, yes.

LEONG: -- and strongly supported the war in Iraq -- sorry, the war in Afghanistan.

EIDE: Yes, as we had. Yes. Remember, it had started in our -- that's very important for history. [00:16:00] We left -- I remember it exactly. We left on the 17th of October. Afghanistan intervention started on the 7th, so the decision to support it was under us. And, of course, then continued by all means, and that was consolidated. So, of course, we knew what they would think because we were

perfectly aware that they were about to take over. So, of course, we spoke to them, but it happened under us. Yes. Continue.

LEONG: Okay. So what sort of advice did your cabinet give to the incoming cabinet, the Bondevik Cabinet, in terms of handling all these issues that you had just mentioned?

EIDE: I think that this reaction of reaching out to keep them, in a sense, you know, engaged with America in a helpful way but also with the purpose of preventing excesses was widely shared. So I think there was not much of a policy discontinuity on that when it came to Afghanistan. What became difficult was [00:17:00] Iraq later, but that autumn what was in focus was, of course, the Afghanistan operation where we engaged, Norway engaged early, long before it became a NATO operation. We engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom with special forces and planes and so on, so we went into that at an early stage. That was supported by us. Afghanistan was never very controversial. What became controversial was Iraq.

LEONG: So there was no concern from the Labour Party's perspective in terms of how -- in terms of the form of support that Norway gave in Afghanistan?

EIDE: Not at that time. Later, we were always convinced throughout the operation that we should be in Afghanistan. However, many years later, before we came back in 2005, the operation begins in -- first, there's a short intervention. There's actually [00:18:00] an attack on Afghanistan, on the Taliban-led Kabul government. They were then thrown out quickly and with the American planes, and the Northern Alliance troops marched into Kabul, and, in a formalistic sense, the Taliban was out. Of course, they were not out, but, I mean, they didn't run -- they didn't have the institutions of power, and then started Operation Enduring Freedom, which we joined and which we supported. We, Labour, supported that. In 2003, ISAF became a NATO mission. ISAF existed, but it was made into a NATO mission, I think, in August-ish or the summer, and after that we started to

argue that maybe we should be in Afghanistan but as an ally. And I think I was quite instrumental in developing that argument myself. It's not only whether [00:19:00] we support an American-led operation. It's also how and through which institutions. And since we are institutionalists, we think that, now that there is a NATO mission, we should move to the NATO mission. Right? When there wasn't one, I mean, there was no alternative, so you might as well be in Enduring Freedom. As we approached the election campaign, this was a big issue. And actually, normally, foreign policy issues are not big in Norwegian election campaigns simply because the difference is so big, right? So there's not much to talk about in an election campaign. But here, it was, because the Bondevik government were focused on maintaining the OEF, Enduring Freedom, approach. We said, "Let's move more to ISAF," but that's a very fine nuance, as you can hear. It's not -- this is not a major divide, but it was a nuance within the sort of general support on Afghanistan. But we might go back to 2002 and the beginning of Iraq.

LEONG: Yeah, I'm just curious to know, despite the fact that there are very small [00:20:00] divisions among the political parties, nonetheless I think there were still critics from the far-left, further left, yeah, and also Norwegian public opinion towards the United States changed quite quickly as well, didn't it.

EIDE: With the Iraq War. That's why I want to draw the attitude and, let's say, the sympathy for the US after 9/11 was close to 100 percent. The support for engaging in Afghanistan was probably not 100 percent, but it was very strong. What became problematic, I think it was when -- I think maybe around the time of the State of the Union address --

LEONG: The "Axis of Evil."

EIDE: -- and the rather unhelpful "Axis of Evil," which everybody with a brain knows that it's perfectly fine not to like North Korea, not to like Iran, and not to like Saddam Hussein's Iraq. But to try to convince anybody that they are in some kind of alliance, you know, [00:21:00] defies reason, because Iran and Iraq normally

kill each other as much as they can, and North Korea is something completely different. So that whole idea came out as very strange and as, you know, superimposed by some kind of ideological idea and maybe a speechwriter who thought, you know, when they called -- in the Second World War, there was an axis of three, Japan, Italy, and Germany, so let's invent one again. And that whole rhetoric, the whole, "Are you with us, or are you against us?" And, you know, we who normally are with you also strongly reacted to that kind of attitude because, basically, it attacked a fundamental principle that you can actually be neutral. Never tell Switzerland that we're in such a world, you know, that either you're with us or with the terrorists. So that whole rhetoric -- by the way, I remember, of course, we met with Colin Powell and so on at the time, and our sense was that Colin Powell [00:22:00] represented the sound tradition of strong for America but who cares about having others on board, you know, cares about UN mandate, cares about allies. But then, there's the neocon crowd who are very dominant in the Pentagon trying to break out of that, so we experienced a shift, which you could say geographically was a shift from Afghanistan to Iraq, because actually, I think Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld seemed to be almost bored about Afghanistan. First, they had probably ticked it off as already done, and it wasn't big enough. I mean, that was sort of a loose network of crazy terrorists. I mean, what we really wanted to do was to attack Saddam Hussein's state. So that was a change in geographical focus, but it was much more than that because it was a change from a more [00:23:00] inclusive approach to a more gung-ho, "Let's go for it. Are you with us or against us?" And that started to change. So as you approached the Iraq War, the sympathy for the US went from extremely high to much, much lower, and that was not only among, shall we say, the usual suspects like the far-left and so on, but it was bishops, right? There were a lot of people who started to engage with, "There's something very wrong with the course that George W. Bush is on now."

LEONG: Well, since we're on the topic of the Iraq War, what was your view from the outside looking in in terms of how the Bondevik government handled that, handled Norway's --

EIDE: Right. So now we're there. So the Iraq War, of course, happened from 2003, but the whole discussion was the mainstay of 2002. And you say the Bondevik [00:24:00] government. I think the Bondevik government was very complex. I strongly approve of how Prime Minister Bondevik managed it because he had to manage not only a difficult relationship to Bush and the Americans but also a difficult internal issue because, remember, he was from the Christian People's Party, which is relatively small compared to the Conservative, which is much bigger. And the Conservatives had the foreign minister, whereas he was the prime minister. So he is the boss in the government formalistically speaking, but, of course, sitting there on the premise that the Conservative Party still wants him there. So his formal power -- which, of course, the prime minister decides over his cabinet members -- is more complex in reality. Right? So he had to manage that internal relationship. The way we saw it -- and, again, what I'm saying now, of course, is politically subjective -- but that was Krohn Devold, the defense minister, [00:25:00] totally, you know, followed Rumsfeld 100 percent and really found a very close connection with Rumsfeld and was all for going in, and not only going in but going in right away, you know, with the full force. Jan Petersen was leaning that way but was being held back, I think, by serious advice from his diplomatic service and Bondevik's instinct going in a different direction. I actually spoke quite a bit to the prime minister's office during those days, not as a Labour politician but as an academic because this was exactly my field. I was at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, and I led all that research and debate and so on that was going on on that front. And because the foreign ministry, who has most of the expertise, were under the Conservatives, the [00:26:00] prime minister's office reached out to us to get some informal advice. So we followed

quite closely what they were thinking, and this, of course -- all of this led to Bondevik saying, "I don't think I can support a war." And he had, apparently, a successful meeting with President Bush -- or a phone call, I think, this was. A phone call. Yeah. But, anyway, they had -- the chemistry was already established. He spoke about him being a Christian and the president being a Christian, and, "You know, we take different readings in my book. This is not possible," and that was kind of respected by the -- as he tells the story, at least. I wasn't there. And Bondevik had tremendous support from that. So Jens Stoltenberg, who was then the opposition leader here in Parliament, he, from the pulpit of the parliament, said that the Labour Party supports -- you can check the quote, but what it meant [00:27:00] was that we support those in the Bondevik government that we agree with. So he made very clear that it was very visible that there was an internal division on this.

LEONG: Right. Can you explain it from the viewpoint of an academic, that split? I mean, why --

EIDE: Yes. It's perfectly logical and very easy to explain, actually. We have sort of two main lines in -- many, of course, but I'm highlighting two main lines in Norwegian foreign policy, which has been quite consensual. One is that we believe in a just world order with a rules-based world order, the United Nations and rule of law, meaning national law. And at the same time, we understand that, given our location and the state of the world, it's smart to be in an alliance with NATO and the Americans. And most of the time throughout our, you know, post-Second World War era there was no [00:28:00] conflict because it was perfectly logical to say, "Our long-term ambition is a world which is actually run by rule of law and the UN and so on. While waiting for that we had better be allies." And there was no point in which these two crashed, right, because there was no -- remember, NATO hadn't really done anything before Bosnia and Kosovo, so most of the time NATO was just there preparing to do something, which is perfectly legitimate in

international law, which is to defend yourself against an attack. What came clear now is that you had to make a choice because it became very clear that Bush was acting outside of the remits of international law. There was no UN mandate. The attempt by him and Mr. Blair, Prime Minister Blair, to stretch old resolution didn't hold. There were basically no international lawyers outside of the US or UK, and very few inside who were able to explain that, [00:29:00] because the 1991 resolutions had a very different purpose. So to use them for regime change in Baghdad was quite the stretch. So any government in Europe was forced to choose between, let's say, instinct A, which is a rule-based order, or instinct B, "Let's hang in with the Americans." And in our case, like most of the Europeans, by the way -- remember this discussion didn't happen in a Norwegian vacuum. It was very connected to a lot of other European countries. But Prime Minister Bondevik and we said, "In this case, the choice we make in this particular case is to go for the UN route," right? And I think, then, particularly Jan Petersen -- there's a nuance between Krohn Devold and Petersen because Krohn Devold, [00:30:00] I think, couldn't care much about that rule thing. But I think Jan Petersen did, so for him it was difficult because he understood both arguments. But he then leaned towards the "We still need to be with our American allies" side, and was then drawn back from the brink in a sense by Bondevik. I don't know what he's told you, but I think later he has come to the conclusion that it was probably a good place to be. So I don't think he's -- I would be surprised if he was very unhappy with that. What happened at the time was that Bondevik [put it clear?], knowing that he had all the people with him -- I guess 80 percent. I don't remember all these numbers, but a lot of people. He had the bishops' collegium, which is important because of the Christian People's Party, and you had the Labour Party, which meant a majority in parliament. Not that they would revolt, but, I mean, he would have the political support and, of course, all to the left of us. And he drew that conclusion, I think, quite smartly. And, of course, you could make it more

complicated, [00:31:00] but the narrow thing is what do you do when two of your core principles are contrasted, so you need to actually choose one of them.

LEONG: Since you mentioned it --

EIDE: This is still -- I'm sorry to interrupt, but this is difficult, I think, to explain to an American audience because it's hard to understand how small Western countries could be so tied to international law. But, of course, this actually reflects a fundamental difference, because, I mean, we live in a part of the world where wars sometimes happen. When they happen, they happen here. We die, not only our soldiers who are in faraway fields, and some kind of order is a good thing, whereas if you're in the US wars happen far away. Your soldiers die, but they are on a mission, after all, and you tend to be on the winning side of that war, you know, with the exception of Vietnam. You normally win them, and most people afterwards say it was good, right? [00:32:00] So the experience of what it means is somewhat different, even if we fundamentally agree on many political principles, the deep experience. So the idea first to create the League of Nations and then the UN is very solidly rooted, and our internal balance here and in other similar countries in Europe -- Germany would be a case in point -- is that, yes, Atlanticist allies, yes, UN, but we cannot sort of throw out the rules-based order. So it's important to understand, and this matters to people. It's not sort of an elite issue. People care about it.

LEONG: Right. No, I think that has come up in various quarters.

EIDE: Yeah.

LEONG: And since you mentioned it, I just wonder, at that time, even though you weren't in office, I'm sure you were talking to your colleagues --

EIDE: Every day. Yeah, yeah.

LEONG: -- elsewhere as well, in Europe.

EIDE: Yes. Yes. Sure.

LEONG: So, as you will recall, there was a big talk at that time about this trans-Atlantic drift, right, between France and Germany and Belgium, in particular, on one side, and, of course, the US on the other side.

EIDE: Yeah. [00:33:00]

LEONG: What was driving that drift? This, obviously, was a major thing. Were there other factors as well, or was it mostly this?

EIDE: I think, I mean, it was mostly this. I think there were variants of this, I think. Like I just said about Norway, I think Germany had the same -- Germany has a very strong sense that the reason that they are a free, prosperous Northern country is very much thanks to American assistance not only in getting rid of Hitler but also rebuilding and the much better approach that was taken after the Second World War compared to the First World War, when Germany was held down. So there's a lot of loyalty and gratitude. But on the other hand, they are also maybe the primary country saying, for our own experience, "You can't have this go-it-alone attitude in international -- look when we did it." So [00:34:00] I think quite predictably the German government had to fall down on this line. I don't think there was any alternative. In the case of France, it's actually less surprising because France had had, you know, much more distance to US foreign policy anyway, so it needs less of an explanation. But I think the German case, which, of course, then was the same as the Belgian and so on, it would be very much like the -- I think the key point was the principle attitude. And if there is a time where you need to think in principle terms, it's the times of war. I mean, this is really when it really matters, when you test your principles.

LEONG: Sure. I want to make sure that we spend enough time on the second part of the Bush term when you were back in office.

EIDE: Yes.

LEONG: So let's jump ahead, then, to 2005.

EIDE: Yes.

LEONG: So the Stoltenberg Cabinet, second government, comes back into office. What was the recalibration in Norway's approach at that time? [00:35:00]

EIDE: Well, we came in, and we came in very clear. So we came in October 2005. We had then been discussing for two preceding years with our coming partners, which was the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party, how we would deal with these issues. And Mr. Erik Solheim, he was the leader of -- he wasn't any longer, but he had been the leader of the Socialist Left Party and was very close to the new leader, Ms. Kristen Halvorsen, and the husband of the leader of the Centre Party, Bård Hopland, then-husband -- they later divorced, but then-husband -- and myself, the three of us formed a group and brought a number of other people in to have a long, two-year-long discussion about how to ally ourselves on foreign policy. And there were similar groups, more or less, [00:36:00] focusing on other types of issues, and the party leaders also had their connection. So the coalition was a prepared coalition. It was not like first we had the election, and then some parties scrambled to come together. For the first time in the history of the Labour Party, we went to the booth saying, "We will form a government. The prime minister will be Jens Stoltenberg, and the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party will be on board." So, of course, we needed some kind of program -- and this is very relevant to say this because all of this happened -- this Norwegian domestic political process I'm describing happened exactly as the Iraq War was unfolding. So, obviously, it had a lot of influence on this, and here we, Labour, who are pro-NATO, pro-Atlantic, pro-American meet with the Socialist Left Party, who had a very different history. It was actually originally built on anti-NATO [00:37:00] and an American-skeptic platform back in '61. They had then modernized. They had now taken more the environmental route, and they were somewhat less focused on this, but it was still part of their raison d'être, in a sense, as a party. We had to build some solid, lasting compromises, and we had some on the European issue, EU, EEA, which is not what you're discussing, but those are just for context. And

then, it was these issues. And the compromise we came out with is that continued solid support to NATO, continued presence in Afghanistan. Why? Because Afghanistan had a UN mandate. It was fully in line with international law as we understood it. However, the adjustment I already described between the Operation Enduring Freedom, which was directly American-led, to NATO, which was a formal organization, and a gradual withdrawal from Iraq, [00:38:00] and the last point was to increase our presence in UN missions abroad. So that was the package that came out of that. That was a package I personally was very comfortable with because it so happened that it very much aligned with what some of us in the Labour Party would have thought anyway, but in a sense it was crystallized because we had to form this platform with the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party.

LEONG: Right. Right. That was called the Soria Moria Declaration. Is that right?

EIDE: This led to the Soria Moria Declaration. So this group was actually called Majorstua-kanalen.[3] There was never a declaration. But then, when we came to Soria Moria, these thoughts were written into the Soria Moria Declaration, actually, by Jonas Gahr Støre and myself, who wrote the international chapter. I mean, we wrote them, and, of course, we discussed it with everybody.

LEONG: Yeah, I know you were the key person in that.

EIDE: Yeah. So, thankfully, it was extremely helpful because the fact that we had time to think about this [00:39:00] gave us the opportunity of having this platform. Now, before we came, there was a phone call I'm sure you heard about already between President Bush and Jens Stoltenberg. That phone call actually went well. What did not go so well was the communication about what had been said because, I think, the story is simply that -- of course, when you had a phone call

[3] Majorstua-kanalen refers to a series of back-channel meetings in 2004 between representatives of the Labor and Socialist Left parties. They aimed to resolve foreign policy differences and develop a consensus that would allow the broad Norwegian left to work together. They held these meetings in an apartment in Majorstua, an affluent neighborhood in Oslo, Norway.

well prepared, you have a list of several points, and then, of course, as the call goes you tick them off, or, no, you know. Right? So the spokesperson for Mr. Stoltenberg claimed -- in good faith, of course, because he had that list -- that Mr. Bush was now been informed about the withdrawal from Iraq, whereas the American side does not remember that that actually had happened, at least not as clearly as it was then later stated. So I think the sense in Washington was that you're hanging up on a successful phone call, which was basically kind [00:40:00] of a congratulations call, you know, as the president always would do when there is somebody who had won an election in an ally country. And then, there was a statement about what was said, so that meant that we started on a little bit of a sour note. I then met with Rumsfeld six days later because -- not bilaterally but in the context of a NATO meeting, and he --

LEONG: Was that the one in Sicily or no?

EIDE: No, this was not in Sicily.

LEONG: Oh, that happened later.

EIDE: This, I think, was in some -- I wonder if it was in Bratislava. It was somewhere in Eastern Europe. I wonder if it was Bratislava. I'm not sure. It was not a summit. It was ministerial. And I met with him, and he made -- yeah, we had a good dinner, in no way a bad meeting. It was constructive enough, but he made clear that he hadn't been so happy with these statements, right? Which I have to say I can understand because, I mean, you know, it's better to hear it directly than indirectly. But [00:41:00] then, we did a lot of things in this front and other fronts where we actually -- I feel that we quite rapidly more or less bottom-up through the system built an actually quite good relationship with the second -- this had become the second Bush term. There were some new people there. We established -- so when did Powell leave and Condoleezza Rice come in? Do you remember?

LEONG: Yeah, that was early in the second term, so early -- it was early in 2005.

EIDE: So it probably already had happened. Yeah, I think so. Yeah, which meant he built relations to Condi Rice, who then discovered that, no, it was active on many fronts that were interesting for America. And then, so I was then [00:42:00] the deputy foreign -- the undersecretary of defense, but I basically did all the international work because the defense minister has a somewhat more national focus, so I did not too much of this. And then, I felt -- and we worked not only with the top level but also with some of the level-three, level-four political people and established very good relations. For instance, one, at the time a young man, Damon Wilson, who is now at the Atlantic Council, was quite active in that dialogue, and he has told me, at least, that they were initially skeptical of this left-wing government, but it ended up being extremely positive to our activists and more engagement or seriousness and so on, in his words. And apparently, that was sort of a strong view at the time in his circles in the US administration. I wonder if it was the director for Europe or whatever.

LEONG: But I'm thinking of this meeting in Sicily in 2006 when, I think, your defense minister was essentially taken to task [00:43:00] by Rumsfeld, wasn't she, when she said that, "Well, under the Stoltenberg government, Norway is going to withdraw the logistical support that it has been providing in Iraq," and Rumsfeld essentially gave her a lecture about it. Were you there?

EIDE: No, I wasn't there with those people. No, I wasn't there when she was there. I know about it, of course.

LEONG: How did that affect relations?

EIDE: Not much, because we already knew, and it was also Rumsfeld's style at times. I don't think it had much of an effect. It's an interesting thing to -- this is the right moment to say that traditionally -- let's say 10, 20 years before this -- being reprimanded by an American secretary of state would have been a big deal in Norway. It was less of a big deal [00:44:00] now because our government and the preceding government had already demonstrated that the marginal maneuver had

become much bigger. So, remember, on the big issue, do you support the Iraq War, do you want to be involved in it, the answer was no already during Bondevik, which was Centre-Right, okay? So we come in, and we continue that. Now, they had found a little marginal -- it was a sort of engineering support thing, so, of course, withdrawing that, unlikely to have much material effect on the US Army because I'm sure they're able to compensate for that. But, of course, it was one less flag in this logical coalition. When you didn't want to use organizations, you had coalitions. Then, you put, "Oh, here's Tuvalu or Trinidad and Tobago supports us," and, yes, another flag on the line. It's the flag, not the material effect. So that was unpopular, but I would say, [00:45:00] apart from probably an unpleasant meeting, I don't think it had much of an effect at all, actually. And Ambassador Ong, which was his name at the time had been raising his voice, probably on instruction from Washington, several times about all the problems that would occur by Norway not supporting the US. And basically, people said, "Well, that's what ambassadors do. I mean, he's doing his job, but we don't -- who cares?"

LEONG: Right.

EIDE: Yeah.

LEONG: And he was, of course, replaced by Ambassador Whitney.

EIDE: Yes.

LEONG: Yeah.

EIDE: With whom I had a lot of contact. He really invested -- I mean, he was a political appointee, not a diplomat. But he really had strong views on many issues, but he, I think -- I will give him credit for having tried to build relations on many fronts and really saw his mandate to strengthen ties.

LEONG: Now, you had mentioned earlier, very much earlier in the interview that in the second Bush term things really shifted.

EIDE: Yeah.

LEONG: From the Bush's [00:46:00] point -- from the Bush Administration more than anything else, can you speak a little bit more to that? In what way did it shift?

EIDE: So I think there's sort of the long tradition of since -- when America abandoned the isolationism during the Second World War and throughout the Second World War and throughout the decades that followed, where America took a global lead on building a UN that was stronger than the League of Nations, joining it itself rather than Wilson's unsuccessful attempt building, you know, free trade, building NATO, in a sense was exactly the America we wanted because we wanted to be friends and allies and close, but we also wanted America to take global leadership. And, of course, [00:47:00] the Cold War made that necessary because there wasn't really any other, but, anyway, the US did it, and we who are -- as I've said many times now -- fundamentally Atlanticist and easy -- Norwegians connect easily with Americans. I don't know why, but it's easy to become, you know, both personal and political friends with Americans, so that was an America we liked. And then, the first administration we had hardly any bilateral problem, but we discovered a big change in worldview. And what happened in the second was that some of this old thinking started to sneak in again, in a sense. Maybe the most sort of hardcore neocons had either left or become marginalized, and, you know, there were sort of more diplomats, again, more people in the military, more people with allied experiences where you actually value the importance of togetherness [00:48:00] in NATO. You know, so there was a kind of reconnection with that, so we didn't change. They changed, but they changed to something that we could -- it was easier to work with. Some of it was maybe an ideological turnaround or at least adaptation. Some of it might simply be that this administration got more experience, and they discovered that, actually, it's a hard world out there, and we can't do everything on our own.

LEONG: I have to ask you this --

EIDE: And then, of course, when Obama comes, this becomes the name of the game. This is a complete change.

LEONG: Absolutely.

EIDE: Yeah.

LEONG: I have to ask you this, too, though. So there's the Godal committee report about Afghanistan and Norway's involvement in Afghanistan, and it's quite critical. So it says that on the level of maintaining a strong alliance with the United States, Norway did very well by participating in Afghanistan, but didn't do so well in two other regards. One was state-building, I believe, and the other one was development. [00:49:00] I'm sorry, state-building and development in one case, and in the other one it was ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a haven or continue to be a haven for terrorists. In those regards, it didn't do so well.

EIDE: No.

LEONG: What are your reactions to that, because you were quite active in something called the Afghanistan Forum?

EIDE: Yeah. No, absolutely. Yeah.

LEONG: Right?

EIDE: Yeah.

LEONG: Yeah.

EIDE: You did good homework. [laughs] I think that's largely correct, but, of course, the only problem with it is that it suggests that Norway alone could have succeeded in preventing Afghanistan becoming a haven for terrorists. Well, we couldn't. That was supposed to be NATO and the UN and the whole coalition, so the critique -- I mean, the acknowledgement is right. It helped maintaining NATO and trans-Atlantic ties. Yes, I agree, successful. The failure is also correct, but it's a collective failure. It's not individual. I mean, Norway couldn't -- I've also [00:50:00] been interviewed there, but my mild critique -- and it's a mild critique of the report because, as I said, I agree with the main findings, but it exaggerates

the degree to which we could have done something completely on our own, right? I mean, there was a UN mandate. There was a UN representative. There was a NATO mission. There was a NATO representative there. There was, you know, at that time a hundred and several thousand soldiers under NATO command. We had maybe 500, 600 of them, which is a relatively small share. And I have also grown quite critical of how the whole thing was set up because we had some -- we collectively, I mean not only Norway -- we had some quite good ideas about how things should work together, the whole-of-government approach and so on. But we never had the institutions to actually do that, so one institution just assumed that they could more or less send an [00:51:00] order to another institution that you will do -- you know, "I will take this village, and next week you start development," but that's not the way it works. There was a lot of naïveté around it. And Afghanistan is not very successful. It wasn't successful, and we were part of it. But we were just part of it, so we were part of a bigger failure, in a sense.

LEONG: In what sense is it a NATO --

EIDE: But the first point --

LEONG: Go ahead.

EIDE: -- but, of course, the first point about maintaining the -- it should not be underestimated because very important to remember is that the decision to make ISAF into NATO, this is very often forgot. People extrapolate and think that NATO was there since 2001. No, there was an ISAF mission under the UN, although not as the UN, not the blue helmet, but with the direct mandate, and then there was the Enduring Freedom mission, which was hunting terrorists, basically. And then, the idea was that now we will expand ISAF [00:52:00] gradually to the whole country in a clockwise spread north, west, south, and then finally east, beginning at Kabul in the center. And Norway was actually one of the first countries to go out in the country. We were very early in ISAF in the center, in Kabul, and we were among the first ones to go out in the periphery as well

because we wanted to take this very seriously. A lot of others were stuck in Kabul when we already up in Maymana and Mazar-i-Sharif in North Afghanistan. But why did this decision happen that suddenly this is now becoming NATO? I'm quite certain it was in August. If it wasn't in August, it was September 2004 -- '03, importantly. The reason was Iraq, because NATO was -- the West was so divided over Iraq that there was a desire to find something to agree about. So, in a sense, Afghanistan suddenly became the theatre in which we are allied, right, because the [00:53:00] Iraq theatre had been nothing but divisive. So NATO took it on, and, frankly speaking, part of the purpose was to show that we can do something together. And, okay, so bad news, it didn't work. Good news, we were hanging together, so it was actually one of the purposes, if we shall be frank with each other.

LEONG: Sure. Sure. Now, you do acknowledge, however, that it was something of a collective failure in the other respects.

EIDE: Oh, by all means. Yeah.

LEONG: To what extent --

EIDE: You would be hard-pressed to find somebody who -- no, I saw the current president tweets that we're doing great, but I'm not sure if that's evidence-based.

LEONG: We shall leave that aside for today.

EIDE: Yeah. [laughter]

LEONG: But in terms of -- to what extent was it also a failure of US leadership, would you say, in Afghanistan?

EIDE: Yes, I think so, but, I mean, it's collective, so we can all be blamed. So it's not uniquely -- I always --

LEONG: Yeah, but the US was in the lead.

EIDE: I'm always skeptical when [00:54:00] people throw all the blame on somebody else to get away from it, but what was problematic was the very quick drop in attention to Afghanistan, which came because of Iraq, because Afghanistan

actually had begun well. The coalition was able to get the Taliban and their Al-Qaeda friends out of Kabul. They had found sort of some good partners to work with. The Bonn Conference, I think, started on a good note. The problem with the Bonn Conference in 2002 -- and that was America's fault -- was not to allow any role for those elements of Taliban that could actually have been taken into the political -- and Lakhdar Brahimi, who was the UN boss in the first round, has said constantly and, I think, convincingly that the Taliban was so weak that this is exactly the moment you should have made them into a political party, not the extremists, of course, but the [00:55:00] people who might have some kind of actual concern about Afghanistan. But because of the black-and-white attitude of the US administration that you're either good or bad, which led to some rather dark-gray people becoming white and some rather light-gray people becoming black, you know, that wasn't possible. And then, there was a lot of attention, and the attention shifted. And we should not be fooled by the -- so there were a lot of soldiers, a lot of activity, but the political focus wasn't any longer Afghanistan. So I think we lost those early years, and we're paying the price for that now. Now, it's not that everything is bad. I mean, Afghanistan institutionally is better than the neighborhood, right?

LEONG: Sure. It's a low bar.

EIDE: I mean, they're not between Finland, Norway, and Sweden. I mean, they're in a very complicated neighborhood, so I'm not saying it's all [00:56:00] bad, but, of course, we had greater expectations than what I said.

LEONG: Absolutely. In terms of sort of a larger strategic setting, did the US wars and trans-Atlantic drift, did all of that in some ways change Norway's strategic approach in pushing it, perhaps, a little closer to the EU?

EIDE: Yeah. Well, I think that's clearly the long-term effect that we realized when we continued to realize that -- I said early in the interview any Norwegian government would like a narrow Atlantic. But if it is widening for other reasons

that are beyond our control, we have to have, also, a solid European footing. So it has strengthened our relationships to the EU as such but also to EU countries, which are two [00:57:00] different things. We have moved closer to Germany. We have developed more of a Nordic cooperation, so we're trying to compensate, not to replace. But, let's say, if once upon a time we were extremely, you know, America first -- not from America but from our side, you know, "Let's call the Americans first," we've now developed a broader framework of friends. And then, we work on -- and if you look at trade, I mean, the trade with the EU is more than 10 times higher than the trade with the US. There's actually not much trade now. Again, I know you're not discussing the current president, but he was very happy with the prime minister because the trade surplus was positive for the US. That's great. We're perfectly happy with that. We don't care. The reality is that that's true, but the volume is very low. It's a surplus on a very small volume where we have a massive trade surplus in our favor with Europe, and they so far haven't complained about that because [00:58:00] it's called the market.

LEONG: In terms of the policy coherence in the second Bush term versus the first Bush term, did you notice -- is there a difference, as well? Because of course the first Bush term was marked by a lot of infighting.

EIDE: Yes.

LEONG: I mean, everybody knew that, Powell, Rumsfeld, State Department versus Defense Department. What was your sense of that in the second Bush term?

EIDE: Yeah, I agree. We also saw that. I mean, everybody saw that. We also noticed that it wasn't right. You know, actually, remember what I said about the early days after 9/11? The instinct -- and I think it was a good instinct -- was, "Let's help those Americans that we agree with," which in this case meant, "Let's help Powell to keep some order, so let's do the Powell things," so that we reduced the influence of the -- and I actively -- you know, when I was out of government, which would have been [00:59:00] in mid-October, there were a lot of seminars. I

was speaking about, writing, speaking about this, and I remember saying that, I think, until the State of the Union address, which is, I guess, in late January or something like that, that we were positively surprised, you know, that Powell did call allies, did engage, did go to the UN, did things right. So the initial sense was that we didn't expect this to be as good, but it was quite good. But then, the regrouping internally -- and I think the neocons, probably to Colin's, you know, dismay, managed to take over, and then they started this Iraq route and "with us or against us."

So when we are not fast-forwarding to the second term, I think the sense was that this was at least more coherent, and I think that [01:00:00] maybe one of the reasons is that Condi Rice was quite close to the president and at the same time picked up some -- I mean, she was not Powell, okay, but she has a different background, an academic from Stanford, and probably more conservative. But at the same time, she strengthened -- our sense was that -- how should I explain that -- a foreign minister that was maybe slightly further away from us also strengthened the clout of the foreign ministry, which brought them closer to us again. Do you see the logic?

LEONG: Sure.

EIDE: You know, because we would then think that, after all, it's Foggy Bottom that would even think of calling the UN and having a meeting and so on. That wouldn't necessarily initiate in the Bush Pentagon, so a strong State Department is a good thing. So by having a closer person to President Bush [01:01:00] was helpful, and working with the Pentagon also became quite good. I think we had eventually developed into a rather good position. And one thing I remember, an argument I tended to use in my meetings with political people in the Pentagon, is that there is a similarity between the Bush Administration and Norway, which is that we actually care -- I think the phrase I used is that our instinct is to change the world, not to accept it as it is. Now, we don't necessarily want to change it in

exactly the same way, but we understand that you actually have some kind of sense of *mission civilisatrice*[4] and so do we. You know, and then sometimes we agree. That's great. Sometimes we don't, but Norway is different from some of the other Europeans who basically just want to maintain and not change. That worked. [01:02:00] We established a connection on that. And then, another factor, which you should not forget here is that this is also these years are also the years where we are developing our work on the purchase of a new fighter aircraft, combat aircraft, which ended with the F-35. And the fact that there was a strong American candidate in that run, I think, was also quite helpful, because there's a limit to how annoying you want to be to a potential large customer. See? I led that work, and I can assure you that it was perfectly done on objective grounds. I mean, we chose the right aircraft based on our criteria, but it had that [01:03:00] side effect that we had the close contact on something where the US was a demandeur, in a sense, and we were about to take this decision. That might have been helpful in improving relations as well.

LEONG: Sure. So maybe if you put on your academic hat for a change, in terms of the long development over the eight years of the Bush Administration, how has America's place in the world changed in that time because of the wars and so on, and how have trans-Atlantic relations changed as well over that time?

EIDE: Of course, some of the change would have happened anyway, right? So there are some underlying trends that sort of, you know, objective things like the size of the economy and developments elsewhere and so on. I think the challenge with the Bush Administration is that the [01:04:00] US's real influence over the world was gradually going down, whereas the image of running the world was going up. So there was a discrepancy between the perception and reality. Now, I would in no way say that everything that happened with Obama was -- you know,

[4] In English, literally, "civilizing mission." Refers to the colonialist projects of western European nations up through and including the 20th century.

that he made all the right choices, but what we noticed was maybe a stronger recognition of the reality of a somewhat dwindling US role in the world, to which he said, "We have to compensate by -- we can't do everything on our own, so let's rebuild that leadership that we could do it with people." Now, that became very clear in the change to Obama, but it began, I think, in the second part of the Bush Administration. So, you know, the worst thing you can do is to have -- I mean, whether you're a small country or a midsized or a big country, it's very helpful to have a reasonably realistic recognition of who you are and how you look. And then, you can have an ambition to improve, right? [01:05:00] Because everybody wants to punch above their weight, but then you had better know your weight. And if you have an ideologically driven erroneous reading of your weight, you don't really get it right. So for that reason, I think, trans-Atlantic relations became rather difficult in parts of this period for the reasons we've been discussing, and the Iraq War crystallized it. But the Iraq War also showed that while, I think, the message from Europe -- now I'm saying more France, Germany, and so on -- is that, "No, President Bush, we cannot join you in the Iraq War. We will say no, and we'll stay there. You will not convince us, but we deplore that -- the fact that our relations have strained." It's not like, "Hooray. Finally, we got rid of them." No, it's a problem. Right? We think it's a problem. "We would like you -- please come back. Become that old America who talked to us first, and then we [01:06:00] acted together." And since that happened, the damage is not permanent. Yeah. There's another thing happening, which we haven't even mentioned, but in the same years Mr. Putin started to run Russia.

LEONG: Yes.

EIDE: And, remember, throughout the 1990s, most of the 1990s after the demise of the Soviet -- or the self-inflicted collapse of the Soviet Union, we had Mr. Yeltsin, and President Yeltsin was -- and Russia is our neighbor, so we follow closely. Mr. Yeltsin was like a chaotic friend, in a sense. He was Western-leaning, not very

effective, and Russia's early attempt to become a normal, capitalist Western country was not very successful. A lot of people -- you know, the ruble collapsed. A lot of people, you know, lost that -- "savings" is the wrong word in a Communist country, but they lost the basis [01:07:00] of life that they used to have, elected Putin, said, "We'll make Russia great again." And he hadn't invented the term, but he would have loved it. That's what he meant, [laughter] and he actually got some order back but at the price of a more self-imposing, strong, more great power type of Russia. So, of course, we Europeans could see this more complicated Russia emerging in which you would have liked to have had your good old American friend on board. So I think that also. And something else I was very much involved in, which illustrates this, is that in 2010 -- this is, of course, in a new administration -- we adopted a new strategic concept for NATO, but that started before. So the discussions in NATO started then, and we actually played quite a strong role and started to say, "Hey, guys. Let's not forget about Article 5. [01:08:00] Let's not forget about area," because with Rumsfeld, he couldn't care less about Article 5, actually, or area because it all was operations other than war out there, you know. So there was a gradual recalibration back to that one thing, which really connects the US and America, which is your collective defense in the narrow sense, not in the extended war against terror sense but in that narrow sense. So that was maybe also an outcome of all of this that we got that back on track. And you know, now NATO is much more, again, an Article 5 organization than a mission. Yes, we have a few troops in Afghanistan, but it's really not the core any longer. But for many of those years, you know, we spent 95 percent of every NATO meeting discussing details in the campaign in Afghanistan. And, you know, if there was some time left, we remembered that we were also here to do deterrence against large enemies.

LEONG: Right. Right. Right. [01:09:00] All right. Well, thank you. I think you've spent a lot of time with me, and I really appreciate that.

EIDE: Good. That was fascinating.

LEONG: You've given us great insight, so I really appreciate that. Thank you very much.

EIDE: While being interviewed, I start remembering things.

LEONG: It always comes back as you speak.

EIDE: It's true. Yes.

LEONG: All right. Well, thank you.

EIDE: Thank you very much. All right.

LEONG: May I ask your permission –

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO]