The Economic Club of Washington, D.C.

Welcome and moderator:
David Rubenstein,
President,
Economic Club of Washington

Speaker:
Thomas Donilon,
National Security Adviser

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DAVID RUBENSTEIN: We're very honored today to have, as our special guest, the President's national security adviser, Tom Donilon. Tom has had a distinguished career in national security affairs and in government work generally over some 30 years.

I first met Tom when I was working in the White House under President Carter. Tom, who had just graduated from Catholic University, came to work in the White House in the congressional affairs operation. And very quickly, his talents became so apparent that he was put in charge of the president's delegate hunt at the age of 23. He did a spectacular job, helping President Carter get renominated. That election didn't go the way we thought it would go. (Laughter.)

Tom then went on to help President Carter set up his post-government career, and then went to law school at the University of Virginia where he became a member of Law Review. He ,subsequently joined O'Melveney & Myers and has been back and forth in government service and O'Melveney & Myers for many years.

He served in the Clinton administration as chief of staff to Warren Christopher, and also as assistant secretary of state, and was integrally involved in that foreign policy operation as well. And then, in the Obama Administration, he served initially as deputy national security adviser, and about a year ago or so, became the national security adviser as well. He is one of the few people who have been presidentially appointed to serve in the Carter, Clinton and Obama administrations.

As the national security adviser, he leads a daily morning briefing for the President of the United States. He's now led over 500 briefings for the President. He also is the chair of the Principals' Committee, which consists of the senior people and senior Cabinet officers involved in the formulation of foreign policy. He led the Principals' Committee meetings that led to the successful raid on Osama bin Laden, and spent one day – 11 and one-half hours of that operation – chairing that committee.

He's been integrally involved as well in the efforts in China and the Middle East. And in the spare time, he has time for two children. His wife is also a member of the Administration. She is the chief of staff for Joe Biden. And his brother is the counselor to Vice President Biden. So they know a lot about this Administration.

THOMAS DONILON: We at least get to see each other once in a while around campus.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: No doubt.

So, you've worked for three very high-IQ presidents. Who was the smartest of them? (Laughter.)

MR. DONILON: That wasn't in the staff preparation for the – (laughter) – for the national security interview.

I guess the answer to that question would be this: that one of the keys to being able to work closely in a senior advisory role with three presidents over 30 years is not answering questions like that. (Laughter.) I think that's the answer to that question.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, that's a fair answer.

MR. DONILON: But I have been privileged to work for three administrations, and fairly closely with them – with Presidents Carter, Clinton and Obama – and I am struck, David, increasingly, by the burden we place on our presidents.

You mentioned the bin Laden operation, and that's a good example. At the end of the day – that day – you mentioned we had a long Principals' Committee meeting. When the decision was made the Thursday before, the President had divided counsel.

Our team of national security advisers is a team of prominent Americans, from Vice President Biden to Secretary Clinton to then-Secretary Gates, now Secretary Panetta, and others. And as I said, he *[the President]* received divided counsel when he sat at the head of the table in the Situation Room. When he walked out of that room to make a decision, it was on his shoulders.

I am increasingly struck by that the longer I serve. I also am struck by the fact that we have been exceedingly lucky in the men who have been in that job.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, I just mentioned the bin Laden matter, so let me get to that if I could now.

The night before that night, the President spoke at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, yet he knew the raid was going to occur. He did a very god job of hiding the fact that he had all those pressures on his mind. Did you have any doubt that the raid would succeed?

MR. DONILON: We had high confidence that the operation could be executed by the Special Forces that undertook it. Stepping back in terms of analysis, a couple of things:

Number one, the evidence with respect to Osama bin Laden being in Abbottabad, Pakistan, was circumstantial. It was an intensive intelligence analysis. It was the result of work that took place during the course of two administrations, over two presidents. Many of the same people who had been working on it with President Bush were working with us in the Obama Administration, analyzing this evidence.

It became focused during August of 2010, and we worked it very hard. But at the end of the day it was a circumstantial case. It still was the best evidence we had with respect to the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden since his getting out of Tora Bora many years earlier.

So, the best case we had was circumstantial, *[indicating that]* there was a slightly better than even chance, perhaps, that he was there. But when people try to put percentage points on intelligence estimates – this is something bankers do more than intelligence analysts – it really is a judgment call.

But, the President had tremendous confidence in the ability of the Special Forces to execute the mission. That's one of the reasons he chose the option of a helicopter raid as opposed to other options that were proposed. Our Special Forces had developed expertise through thousands of these kinds of operations.

Through the President's experience over the first two-and-a-half years of his presidency, through the experience that he knew our Special Forces had gained in Iraq and Afghanistan, through the quality of the briefings and the rehearsals that the Special Forces had presented to him – he had 100 percent confidence in the ability of the Special Forces to go in, secure the place in Abbottabad, and get back.

[The President was balancing] an unclear judgment call on intelligence, but a very high degree of confidence with respect to the ability of the Special Forces to do the operation.

That tipped the decision, I think.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: When you heard that a helicopter had failed, did you relive the Carter Administration days? Were you worried that this was going to be another failed mission, or did you have complete confidence it could still succeed?

MR. DONILON: In my job, I spend quite a bit of time worrying about things – as you would hope, right?

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Right. (Laughter.) So you were worried.

MR. DONILON: With respect to that specific incident, David, it had been a contingency that the Special Forces folks had thought about and planned for.

The fact is, that even when the helicopter came down in the courtyard and the back of it hit a wall, I don't think that these folks missed a minute, frankly. I don't think it delayed the mission more than a minute.

Again, they have tremendous adaptive ability through what is really an extraordinary set of skills. They are an asset that the United States has right now that has been put together.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: From the iconic photo now where you're all looking at the screen – what were you actually looking at?

MR. DONILON: I actually don't – (chuckles) – I don't have the answer to that question.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You don't remember?

MR. DONILON: As you said, I was there for the entire day. There were hundreds of pictures taken. We were monitoring the operation.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Was the plan to not bring back Osama bin Laden alive? Was that always the plan, or would you have brought him back alive if he just said I surrender?

MR. DONILON: First of all, it was a military option against an enemy combatant – indeed the leader – the only leader up to that point that al-Qaida had ever had. We are at war with al-Qaida, authorized by the Congress in 2001 for the use of military force.

Bin Laden did not surrender. He didn't give any indication he was going to surrender. One of the hallmarks of al-Qaida operations is suicide vests and other kinds of booby-trapping of homes and facilities where they work. So I think that our forces were absolutely within their rights to take the action that they did.

Indeed, because the President chose the option that he chose – the helicopter raid – we were able to limit – through the extraordinary efforts of the Special Forces – collateral damage. Women, children and noncombatants at the facility were protected. Anyone who wasn't associated was protected. The action took place against those combatants who didn't indicate any signal that they had any intention of surrender.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Shifting to another person who we're not friendly with, Gadhafi. If Gadhafi is found is the U.S. position that he should be tried in Libya or be tried by the International Court? What would the United States prefer?

MR. DONILON: The Libyan people will have to make a decision. I guess I'd say a couple of things about that.

I do think it is important that he is captured and brought to justice. I think that he has shown, over the course of his life, that he is capable of undertaking actions with very negative consequences, including killing Americans. And, I think that he would continue to be a threat in terms of undertaking kinds of harassment and by trying to undermine the successor democratic government that's going to come in Libya. So, it's important to catch him, although this is not slowing down the development of a Libyan government.

Again, it will be up to the Libyan people. I think what the leadership of the Transitional National Council has said is that they would capture him and turn him over to the International Criminal Court to be tried there.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, yesterday I think President Sarkozy and Prime Minister Cameron were in Libya saying they want to help the new government. Is the United States prepared to help the new government, and what kind of resources are we prepared to give to the new government?

MR. DONILON: The United States is prepared to help the new government, and we have helped the Transitional National Council in its efforts to get where we are today, which is a fairly successful outcome to date.

We have been leading the effort – and led the effort prior to the fall of the Gadhafi government – to recognize them. We have frozen, under our laws here, some $30 billion-plus in Libyan assets. We did that immediately after the President said that Gadhafi should step down.

The United States undertook an extraordinary set of actions over the course of the beginning of the weekend to freeze north of $30 billion in Libyan assets. We've gone to the U.N. and unfrozen at the United Nations about a billion-and-a-half dollars to date. That's an extraordinary resource for the Libyan people and we'll be working on unfreezing those assets and getting them to the Libyan government.

We also will support the re-opening and re-establishment of the oil industry there. And obviously, we'll be working with them through the United Nations, principally, in terms of getting their governance together. *[Libya is confronting]* a lot of challenges, but it's a very big success for NATO.

The President saw the potential of a real humanitarian catastrophe when Gadhafi was threatening a town on the coast in Libya called Benghazi with 700,000 people. The President saw an opportunity there to act in concert with others to protect those people.

We did that, and it was, I think, a well-designed op; a well-designed approach where we decided that military action could be taken, could be successful. We set out a set of criteria that included that we wouldn't go unilaterally, wouldn't have United States' boots on the ground. It would have to be a legitimate basis for a United Nations Security Council resolution.

We wanted the participation of Arab countries, not just rhetorically but in real ways. And we wanted to see a burden sharing here commensurate with interest. The President worked through, with the leaders of NATO and other countries, a division of labor which worked. We kept up the front end on this, doing unique things that only we could do.

No other country in the world could take down a country's defenses in a couple of days – we were able to do that – and then turn the ongoing operations over to NATO. It has been a very successful operation with NATO.

We have talked about burden sharing for a long time. We were actually able to implement it here and act in ways that were commensurate with our interests towards a successful outcome.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: By that logic, why not do the same in Syria? There seem to be people being killed there. Why don't we do something there?

MR. DONILON: As I laid out the front end to the question here, there are a set of criteria that you need to work through with respect to military action, including a set of allies and

partners that you would work with. But also, it needs to be effective. Syria is a different case than Libya.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So you don't expect anything soon by us in terms of Syria similar to what we did in Libya?

MR. DONILON: I don't expect that, no. What I expect us to do in the case of Syria is this: we have organized an effort around the world to isolate and really squeeze the Assad regime. He took a choice to repression. He had other choices in front of him. And what he has done, of course, now is lost even his neighbors, who had close relations with him.

An example of that, of course, is Turkey, which had invested 10 years in really trying to develop a positive, constructive relationship with Syria.

During the course of the last – whatever it's been – 45 or 60 days, Assad has demonstrated his commitment to repression. He slaughtered people during the holy month of Ramadan. He rejected Turkey and its efforts to push him towards reform. He now has the European Union last week putting in place oil and energy sanctions. That's where 90 percent of their oil exports go to. And he succeeded in making himself a pariah.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Do you think he survives?

MR. DONILON: I think at the end of the day that the Assad regime – and you can't put any timeframe on it – will not be the governing regime in Syria.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, speaking of trials a former ally of the United States, the president of Egypt, is now being put on trial in Egypt. Does the United States government support those trials?

MR. DONILON: Again, that is a decision for the people of Egypt, to undertake in accord with their laws.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Do you have any regrets about the way Egypt was handled by the Administration? Sometimes people thought we were pushing him to leave, sometimes people said we can tolerate him for a while. Are you happy with the message that came out from the Administration during that period?

MR. DONILON: I think that it was consistent with a set of principles that we have laid down on the events in the Arab world since the beginning of the year. *[Those principles]* are these: that we oppose repression and violence; that we are for – the President laid this out in his speech in May – we are for a set of universal rights and principles: freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and, third, we stand for reform – economic and political reform.

I don't at all regret the way that we – that the United States – handled this. I do regret this: I regret that President Mubarak did not take action sooner to be responsive to what was

going on in Tahrir Square and around Egypt. I think there were a series of mistakes there that turned out to be tragic – tragic for him.

One last thing on that, this question on the "Arab Spring." Obviously, it's ongoing and it's very country-to-country, as we've been discussing. It is indigenously driven, *[although]* obviously some broader trends are at work – bad governance, letting people down, communications now possible both in countries and in and out of countries – that allowed these movements to move forward.

A couple of big strategic impacts, though. The contrast with the al-Qaida – we're talking about Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida – with the al-Qaida narrative is really stark here. And this is a very big blow to the al-Qaida narrative. The people in Tahrir Square and in Tunisia and in Syria and throughout the Arab world were not, in any way, advocating a violent, really kind of no-positive agenda of al-Qaida. It's a real blow to the al-Qaida narrative.

It's also been a blow to Iran. Iran thought they were going to go take advantage of this. I think if you do an analysis right now of the "Arab Spring" and Iran, Iran turns out to have been a very negative –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But has that been a blow to Israel, because Egypt now has forced the Israelis to close their embassy in Cairo, in effect. Are you worried that the impact on Israel from the uprising in Egypt will be damaging to our ability to defend Israel when necessary?

MR. DONILON: I think two or three things on that. There are a lot of elements to that question.

Number one is that the United States is absolutely committed to the security of Israel. I spend a lot of time personally on that issue. We have been devoted to ensuring Israel's continued qualitative military edge.

We have worked with them on important projects there that are very important in the current circumstance, like Iron Dome, which is a protection against rocket attacks. We have very deep intelligence of security cooperation with Israel. So, as a first principle of our Middle East policy, Israel's security is front and center, number one.

Number two, there is tremendous uncertainty on each of Israel's borders right now. Obviously, the focus of the government and people of Israel is on working through these issues and dealing with this uncertainty, and we have to acknowledge that uncertainty as we work with Israel on its security.

Third, the Egypt-Israel relationship has been a pillar of Israel's security since you and I were in the White House over 30 years ago. We have been working with both sides to try to do everything we can to preserve that.

We had an incident last Friday in Cairo. The Israeli embassy is on an upper floor of a high-rise building in Cairo. There was general breakdown of order in Cairo last Friday. The

ministry of the interior and others responsible for order were not enforcing it generally and it migrated to the building where the Israeli embassy is. *[The crowd]* started to push over a fence – a wall – threatening the Israeli embassy. We worked very hard during that day and that night with the Egyptians to have the Egyptians meet their obligation, which is an obligation of a sovereign country to protect the embassy of another country in your country.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And is it protected now?

MR. DONILON: That night we were able to evacuate the Israelis who were under siege by the crowd. We were able to do that working with the Egyptian military leadership, who run the country right now, pending their moving to elections.

We have been very clear with the Egyptians on their obligations there, and they met those obligations. It was a tough scene, but ultimately, *[the Egyptians]* met those obligations on Friday. We've also been very direct with the Egyptians with respect to the importance of maintaining its international agreements, including its agreements with Israel, which are really pillars, again, of security there.

There are other issues at work right now, given this level of uncertainty, and there are simultaneous multiple revolutions going on. There's a very serious security situation in the Sinai, for example, that has really become difficult to handle in the wake of the events in Egypt over the last six or seven months. We've been focused on this, and we've asked the Egyptians to focus on really dealing with it. This *[situation]* resulted in the death of several Israelis several weeks ago at Eilat.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You have a relationship with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. I was told, or I read in the newspapers, that he was very upset about the way we handled Egypt. Is that true? And is our relationship with Abdullah different than it was before the uprising in Egypt?

MR. DONILON: Let me address that directly.

Number one, obviously at the outset of this year there was tremendous uncertainty and tumult in the region. It began in Tunisia, which, by the way, is moving towards elections in the third week in October. It's a very important and good story in Tunisia. It began in Tunisia and moved to Egypt.

Mubarak – President Mubarak – was a leader of long standing in the region and had very close relationships in the region. It was not the United States or indeed any external force that led to President Mubarak's having to step down as president of Egypt. It was an indigenous set of events.

During that period, I would be less than honest if I didn't indicate that there were disagreements about how the United States should go about handling that. We set our course –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Disagreements within the administration?

MR. DONILON: No, disagreements with other countries in the region.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Oh.

MR. DONILON: I think it's fair to say, and I've said this publicly before, that our conversations with the Saudis about this were scratchy. There were some disagreements.

Third, since then, it really has become clear to everybody in the region that these were indigenous forces, that these forces were building for a long time, that mistakes had been made by these leaders. I've talked directly with the leadership of Saudi Arabia, as you know, and I think the relationship is in very good shape.

Why? Just to take a minute on it. I think because it is based in shared strategic interest. You get past things like what happened at the beginning of this year. There's a recognition that these were inexorable forces, that mistakes have been made in the governance in other areas, that they were not brought on by the United States or any external force.

These are the conversations like I have with my Saudi counterparts – that we've had a relationship for 70 years. It is based on a set of shared strategic interests that include the following.

Not having a nation or some other group get a dominant role in the region.

We have a shared interest in counterterrorism efforts.

We have a shared interest in global growth and economic growth.

We have a shared interest in secure and stable energy supplies, among others.

So, David, I guess that to be perfectly square with you, the answer is yes, there were some issues at the beginning of the year. They have been worked through. King Abdullah and President Obama have a very good relationship. We really have, I think, through this kind of focused on and reminded ourselves anew of the strategic foundations and shared interests.

In international relations, it's those shared interests and those historical ties that, at the end of the day, are critical. Countries don't engage with each other if it's not in their interest.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Between now and our presidential election, do you see any prospect of a peace agreement in the Middle East between Israel and the Palestinians?

MR. DONILON: That's an exceedingly difficult problem for us. We have pushed through, during the course of this Administration, quite a bit of change. We have focused on, as a principal strategic priority, renewing and restoring United States' prestige, power and authority in the world, which went through a period of diminution.

This is not a partisan comment, because there were a lot of reasons for it. We were tremendously invested in Iraq, and there was a tremendous amount of capital spent, as well as blood and treasure, but political capital around the world. We had the global financial crisis in 2008. And, there's a dynamic in international relations, obviously, that moves against a dominant power. We were dealing with all of those issues simultaneously.

When President Obama came into office, he sought to – and we have made this our principal effort – to restore that authority, power and influence in the world so that we can move towards addressing our national interests. That includes a number of lines of work.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: I assume we're not going to have a peace agreement between now and the end of the year.

MR. DONILON: The end of the year?

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Or the end of the next presidential election, I should say.

MR. DONILON: I would say I think that's probably right in terms of the end of the year.

Obviously, we have had a strong focus on restoring our economy as well as a strong focus on revitalizing alliances. It's a unique asset the United States has.

We're focused on enhancing our great-power relations, deepening partnerships with emerging powers, and rebalancing our foreign policy, which is where I wanted to get to: the drawdown in Iraq, our renewed focus on Asia, a tightening of our focus, an intensifying of our counterterrorism effort, and focusing on really kind of the key challenges like nonproliferation.

We've got a lot of that done, I think, and are on the right path. We have not been able to move the Middle East peace process as far as we would like to have moved it. It's a difficult set of issues and choices.

The President laid out in May – and has done consistently – his approach, which is a two-state solution. We will continue to be persistent, but I can't make any predictions on it.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You mentioned Iraq. How many American soldiers do you think we will have in Iraq by the time of our next presidential election? Will we be gone or would we keep 15,000 there? And will we depend on what the Iraqis ask us to do, or are we going to decide what we want to do?

MR. DONILON: Well, at the end of the day, Iraq is a sovereign country. Under the understandings that have been put in place, again, by two administrations – the Bush Administration and the Obama Administration – by December 31st, 2011, the United States will complete its drawdown of the troops that we have there now. We are on track to do that.

We had 145(,000) to 150,000 troops in Iraq when President Obama came into office. We now have about 45,000. Those troops are on track to withdraw from Iraq, and that withdrawal will be complete by the end of this year.

On the issue that you raise, like we do with countries all over the world, we will have a conversation with Iraq about the nature of the security relationship that we're going to have with them going forward in terms of weapons systems, in terms of training and assisting and things like that. Those discussions are ongoing.

The bottom line here, though, is twofold. One is that the United States is on track and will complete its withdrawal by December 31st, 2011. With respect to the relationship going forward, that's a separate conversation that will take place over the next few months.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Thanks. How many troops will we have in Afghanistan by the time of the presidential election?

MR. DONILON: When we came into office, the –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Fewer than we have now. Is that –

MR. DONILON: Yes, that's true, but the Afghan effort was really drifting strategically and under-resourced. I don't think there was a lot of disagreement on that. Indeed, that was, I think, the first presentation that I got during the transition.

We looked at it very hard. We narrowed our goals down to two: that is, ultimately strategically defeating al-Qaida and putting in place a security force in Afghanistan and a support mechanism that wouldn't have it fall completely to the Taliban, providing operational space again for a group like al-Qaida to plan operations against the United States.

We surged to aim towards those goals. The President announced in June that, as he had promised, we now would begin our drawdown. The drawdown would go this way: by the end of this year – well, by the end of next summer which would be September of the year 2012, we will have fully recovered the surge troops. The surge troops number 33,000 troops. Ten thousand of those will come out this year. An additional 23,000 will come out next year, with them out by the third week of September of 2012.

At that point, there will be between 65(,000) and 68,000 American troops in Afghanistan. We then will set a pace – and the President's speech on this was very clear – that we'll continue a pace of withdrawal in Afghanistan aiming towards 2014, when we will completely turn over the security lead to the Afghans, and the United States' remaining force there will be basically an enduring presence force focused on counterterrorism.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You sit in meetings all the time with three people who ran against each other for president: Barack Obama, Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton. What are those meetings like? (Laughter.) What's the relationship like among those people?

MR. DONILON: As you said, I have to chair these meetings so I have to be careful of my characterization – (chuckles) – of these things. But the bottom line is there's one president. And, as you know, there is a sense around the president – particularly among the people who are committed to public service – of the fact that he represents over 300 million Americans every day and he makes the decisions. So the President obviously is the leader of the group.

Now, these are not shy people, like the rest of our group, but it is a group of very experienced people, of people who express their opinions very forcefully. I want to say a couple of things about them.

You mentioned the bin Laden raid earlier. And as we had mentioned, we had had our first real focus on the path toward Abbottabad, Pakistan, in August of 2010. We had some 24 interagency meetings on this topic, leading up to the raid at the beginning of May of 2011.

We had half a dozen Principals' Committee meetings in the four or five weeks before the raid, and there wasn't a leak. I think that really speaks well, obviously, of the commitment and seriousness of purpose of the group that the President has put together.

So, robust debate, David. These are deeply experienced public figures who bring a lot of experience to the table, but a real sense of trust. And at the end of the day, the President makes the decisions. As I said, there was divided counsel at that table. The President makes a decision and it gets executed.

The last thing I'll say about this: We put in place a system and a process which I think has been really essential to our success in the foreign policy, national security side. And it had these elements to it:

One process, the National Security Council process – not competing processes. There were not back doors in to the President. There were not other national security processes over here that compete. One process. And everybody signed up at the beginning to that being the exclusive process by which national security decisions will be made, number one.

Number two, that the decisions made would be executed by this group faithfully.

Number three, that when you came to the table, you came to the table with a view and the view of your building *[Cabinet department]*.

Number four, that I would commit on our side that decisions of each meeting would be published in writing in 24 hours so that people could see what their assignments were and they could object if they disagreed with it so there's absolute clarity at the end of the day.

We also fully integrated the Vice President's national security team and our national security team. The same people who briefed the President on Iraq briefed the Vice President on Iraq, and it's a fully integrated deal. So the system is robust.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Is that in contrast to another administration you're referring to?

MR. DONILON: I can just describe the administration that we built – all right? (Laughter.) But I think it's important. And, indeed, I will tell you this about this: The system that we built is based expressly on our study of the Scowcroft-Gates model in the Bush 41 Administration.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: If you were to pick any one person to be the role model for the ideal national security adviser, who would you say is your role model?

MR. DONILON: That's a difficult question for the following reason: because each national security adviser serves in the functions and the manner that the president wants him or her to serve in. So they're different approaches, number one.

Number two, I will say – I wanted to say something about national security advisers and about national security policy generally.

There really is kind of a community of people in national security who have been in these jobs who understand them and work with each other across party lines. I get tremendous support from my Republican predecessors, from Steve Hadley and Condi Rice and Colin Powell and Brent Scowcroft. I'm in touch with them quite regularly and get very good advice.

I wish – frankly – I wish we had the same sense of community and bipartisanship on the political side. There really is a sense of "I've been there, I know what you're dealing with; I disagree with you on some policy issues, no doubt, but at the end of the day we're all about protecting the country and advancing the national interest."

I see these folks quite regularly, and so there really is a community of interest on the national security side, which is, I think, a really important asset for the country.

Now, you asked about models. There are different models. I think in terms of process management, I do think that there's one person who's had the job twice and did put in place kind of this committee system – this decision-making system – in the late '80s that we follow today. That's Brent Scowcroft, who I think did a tremendous job.

On the policy development side, obviously Dr. Kissinger is a master of policy development. I deal with him pretty consistently and I've learned a lot from talking to him. It's an unusual community of interest where the politics really do get pushed aside. Again, lots of disagreements about policy but lots of mutual support, frankly, and I am very, very grateful to my predecessors on both sides of the aisle for the support I've gotten from them.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Do you brief the former presidents of the United States on national security matters? Do you call them up, and do they ever have good ideas to give you about what you should be doing?

MR. DONILON: I haven't. I am in regular touch, as I said, with my predecessors. There may be specific issues that a former president asks to be briefed on, and I've done that.

And there are sometimes projects that we ask former presidents to undertake and I'll spend time with them on. There's a couple of examples.

We worked very closely with President Clinton on his trip to North Korea, you'll recall, to get back two young journalists who had been kidnapped, basically, taken into custody in northern North Korea at the river. We worked very closely with him on designing that trip, working through various aspects of it, ensuring that it wasn't a ruse, and it was for real.

So we've done that. We've worked, obviously, with President Bush 43 on the Haiti relief efforts. The short answer to your question – the direct answer is it's kind of project-oriented.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You have had two careers, really. In government service, you've been involved in national security for quite some time. You've also been involved in presidential campaigns. You've briefed presidents for debates. I think you've briefed every Democratic candidate for president. You've helped them with their debate preparations since '84, and you helped President Obama with his debate preparations.

When you're in the Oval Office of the President and nobody else is around, does he say, Tom, what is your political advice about what I should be doing; forget the national security advice? Does he ever ask you any political questions?

MR. DONILON: Before I got deeply involved with foreign policy, if you looked at my political record, you probably wouldn't spend a lot of time asking about my political advice, frankly. (Laughter.)

But, in all seriousness, no, I started spending quite a bit of time with President Obama during the debate preparation. We probably spent 50 or 60 hours during the course of the campaign getting ready for, preparing for the debates.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Was he easy to prepare for debate compared to the other candidates that you've prepared?

MR. DONILON: The last two that I prepared became president, so they were pretty good at this and tremendous communicators, obviously; with President Clinton and President Obama, absolutely.

But on the question you ask directly, I don't have political conversations with the President. To be totally honest with you, I think that the work we have to do together fills up more than the time we have together.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Can you explain to people what it is to be at the briefing of the President every morning? You go in every morning and you tell them things that presumably are not in the newspapers and nobody else knows.

Who else is in those meetings? Is it just you and the President or does the Vice President sit in?

MR. DONILON: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: What time does it occur and how long does it last?

MR. DONILON: It occurs at 9:00 or 9:30 in the morning. And it's a combination of an intelligence briefing and a policy briefing. The people that take part in this are the President and the Vice President, the two principal people that we're briefing.

We, at the beginning of that briefing, will have intelligence services come in, led by General Clapper, or a briefer on a particular issue. General Jim Clapper is the Director of National Intelligence. He may opt to bring another head of an intelligence service like Dave Petraeus for CIA or another one of the services that work in the constellation of 16 or 17 intelligence organizations. That takes place.

And then we will have kind of a policy briefing that I lead, with an analysis of the intelligence and its implications, and then the three or four or five or six most important things going on in the world that day. There may be three or four decisions that we want to reach during the course of that briefing about issues that have come up during the course of the 24 hours since the last briefing.

The principal people who do this, again, are the head of the intelligence services and then myself; Denis McDonough, who is the principal Deputy National Security Adviser; Tony Blinken, who is the Vice President's National Security Adviser; and John Brennan, who is the counterterrorism adviser. That's the core group that meets every morning.

It lasts between 30 and 40 minutes every morning. It's an efficient way, I think, to have kind of a continuing conversation and focus on the key issues in front of the President, in front of the country.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Does the president prefer to read things or does he prefer to be orally briefed? How would you compare him with the other presidents you've worked for?

MR. DONILON: With respect to that, the President has read all the materials before we meet with him.

There's different ways to do it. Different presidents do it different ways. Some presidents prefer actually to have it presented orally and to have the book handed to them of key items and go through it with a briefer.

President Obama has read everything that was prepared from that morning before we go in and we work from there. If you start briefing on things that are in the newspaper, it's not going to be a long career as a briefer to President Obama. (Laughter.)

MR. RUBENSTEIN: On trade agreements – we've had some trade agreements with Korea and Colombia and there's the Law of the Sea Treaty. Do you think you can get those through this year?

MR. DONILON: A couple of things on that score.

Number one, with respect to the free trade agreements – and Ambassador Han is here from the Republic of Korea, with whom we've been working closely on the really important U.S.-South Korea Free Trade Agreement.

With respect to the free trade agreements, there are three that are ready to go, that have been negotiated and are ready for submission and I expect to pass this fall, that we would like to see passed this fall: Korea, Colombia and Panama.

They are very important. Just to spend a minute on Korea, this will be the largest free trade agreement entered into by the United States since NAFTA. It's absolutely critical in terms of creating American jobs and opportunity. It's critical in terms of us integrating ourselves into the fastest-growing economic region in the world.

There are, as you know, developing in the region a number of preferential trade agreements. If we're not integrated, if we don't pursue these kinds of agreements, we're going to be excluded from opportunity. So it's very important. It's important for our export industry and it's important for the creation of jobs.

But it's critically important for the kind of efforts that I described earlier in terms of rebalancing. That is, when we came into office – when you come in you get the opportunity to ask yourself the following question, as you would if you bought a new business: Where are we over-invested; where are we under-invested? Where are we under-weighted and over-weighted?

It was our judgment at the start of the Administration that we were under-weighted in Asia, given the importance to the future of the United States. Indeed, Secretary Clinton took her first trip as Secretary of State to Asia at the beginning of the Administration, which was the first time this took place since Dean Rusk became Secretary of State in the Kennedy Administration.

So we have really been focusing on a bigger presence there. focusing on building that architecture. I think we have done a very good job at revitalizing the alliances – Ambassador Fujisaki is here as well from Japan – which are the core of our efforts out there.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Do we have any burning issues with China right now? Speaking of Asia, are we in pretty good shape with China?

MR. DONILON: That's an enormously complicated relationship.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, in 30 seconds, what would you – (laughter) –

MR. DONILON: Are there any – Ambassador, any issues with China right now? (Laughter.)

The ambassadors are deep experts in this area. At the start of the Administration, as I said, we wanted to increase our focus on Asia. Part of that obviously has to be China, but it was part of an overall strategic focus on maintaining great-power relationships and getting them right. If you have your great-power relationships in a good place, it's a platform from which you can work to attack problems. If they're not in a decent place, it becomes exceedingly problematic in terms of attacking problems.

So we have focused very tightly on improving our great-power relations in Europe, in Asia. Ambassador Kislyak is here from Russia, and we have worked very hard with the Russian Federation in improving our relationship. Part of that is obviously China.

We have spent an enormous amount of time focused on China. We have engaged in an intensive way – President Obama and President Hu Jintao have had nine face-to-face meetings. We are deeply involved in a series of other dialogues.

We have been working to integrate China into the rules-based system in the world. We have been pressing China on business practices and other things that are important to our companies and other companies around the world. And we have been working to shape the environment in Asia so that China's rise occurs in a stable and peaceful way.

I think the relationship with China has been fairly productive and constructive. I think it's in a fairly good place, but there are always a lot of challenges in a relationship this complicated.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Time for one more question, and my question is, what is it that keeps you up at night? What is the single greatest worry you have as national security adviser about the problems you have to face? Is there one thing that you're most worried about and that keeps you up at night or at least worries you?

MR. DONILON: We have a lot of challenges. Economic recovery is critical. The President said in a speech last year that history doesn't really allow for a country to maintain its international primacy without maintaining its economic vitality. Put simply, there's a direct relationship between our strength at home and our strength abroad. Revitalizing our economy is absolutely critical.

I do, David, every day focus on the safety and security of the men and women we have abroad in war zones. I do focus and worry every day about our homeland security and terror threats.

We've made tremendous progress with respect to al-Qaida. We judged at the end of 2010 that al-Qaida was in the worst shape they'd been in since 2001. We took a big blow against them in May with the Osama bin Laden operation. We've taken a number of steps against them since, but it's still a threat.

In general, you worry every day about the dispersion of the means of violence and technology. That's where our nonproliferation agenda is so important.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: If there's a second term for President Obama will you stay as national security adviser?

MR. DONILON: I'd say two things about that. I'd argue with the "if" argument and, secondly, that's up to the president, David, obviously.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right.

MR. DONILON: It's a privilege to serve there. I enjoy every day. We have a great team. If you were in my position and you look down the table every day and you see Vice President Biden, Secretary Clinton, Secretary Panetta, Secretary Gates, Dave Petraeus – it's a privilege to go to work every day.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Tom, you're obviously very articulate and obviously know these issues well. I very much appreciate your doing this. And whenever you have the national security adviser for an hour or so, you realize that nothing terrible is happening in the world during that hour. At least I hope. (Laughter.)

But let me give you a gift here. (Applause.) Tom, this is a map of the District of Columbia, the original map of the District of Columbia.

MR. DONILON: Oh, OK.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Thank you very much.

MR. DONILON: Thank you.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right, thanks very much, Tom. I appreciate it. It was great.

(END)