

A Conversation with Catherine Ashton

Jane Harman:

Good afternoon to the audience in this room, audience in overflow rooms, and those, I think, who will be checking this by webcast after the event. I don't think we're doing this live. I'm Jane Harman, the director and CEO of the Wilson Center, and I'm very relieved to be here, not in Congress --

[laughter]

-- in a place where we can consider and debate serious issues. Our focus at the Wilson Center is to be a trusted platform, a space where people and ideas from across the world and across the political divide can come together to talk and listen to each other, to frame issues, helping expand understanding and sharpen focus with context and insight, and to produce actionable ideas that bridge the gap between scholarship and policy. I'm pleased to welcome in the audience right in front of me the ambassadors of the EU, Jordan, and Macedonia. Also attending are my former colleague, member of Congress from Tennessee, Bart Gordon, whom I don't see, but -- yes, I see him.

[laughter]

Former Mexico Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan, former U.S. Ambassador to Croatia Peter Galbraith, members of the Wilson Council, and Grace Kennan-Warnecke, who serves as advisor and board member of our Kennan Institute.

So, what an honor to host high representative Catherine Ashton at the Wilson Center for her only public appearance in Washington following an extraordinary week at the U.N. General Assembly. This is also the formal launch of our revamped Global Europe Program headed by Dr. Christian Osterman [spelled phonetically], right here, which looks at the new roles Europe is taking on regionally and globally. I have suggested that we rename our Global Europe Program the Following Cathy Ashton Program.

[laughter]

Here is a snapshot of what this extraordinary woman, high representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has been up to in recent weeks and

months. One, last week she literally sat between John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif and chaired the meeting with the P5+1 on Iran. It was there at that meeting that Kerry and Zarif agreed to meet privately, the highest level meeting between the U.S. and Iran in 34 years. Two, she welcomed the security -- she played a key role in helping pass the -- unanimously -- the security council resolution on Syria's chemical weapons, and signaled that the EU would provide forceful support in case of noncompliance. Three, she played a major role in persuading Serbia and Kosovo, something many of you know a lot about, to reduce tensions, paving the way for the possibility that each of them might be admitted to the EU. Four, she hosted a conference -- I'm not even close to done yet --

[laughter]

-- on Somali piracy, an important step in resolving that vexing problem. As some of you know, Somali President Mohamud visited the Wilson Center about 10 days ago on his way to the U.N. General Assembly, and he reported significant improvements in governance and security in his country. Five, she visited former President Morsi -- former Egyptian President Morsi at an undisclosed location following his removal by the military in July. And six, in general, and on a subject dear to my heart and to the Global Women's Leadership Program at the Center, she is a powerful voice and example for women's leadership.

So, today the format is Q and A. I will ask questions for about 20 minutes and then we'll have the audience and the extended audience pose questions for about 20 minutes. Our time is very tight. We have to respect her huge schedule in Washington today, and I do want us to cover a lot of ground. All right. So, first question.

Catherine Ashton:  
Okay.

Jane Harman:  
Do you ever sleep?

[laughter]

Catherine Ashton:

I do. I don't need a lot of it. I brought up lots of kids and you learn not to sleep, and I don't get jet lag. So, that's probably my greatest assets.

[laughter]

Jane Harman:

Impressive, huh? I've often said I don't get jet lag. I give it.

[laughter]

More seriously, how do you assess the chances of a deal between Iran and the West on dismantling Iran's effort to build nuclear weapons? And do you think that coercive sanctions -- worldwide coercive sanctions, not just U.S. sanctions -- should be kept in place while the negotiations are taking place?

Catherine Ashton:

I think, first of all, that it's been quite a week. I met with Zarif in a bilateral meeting, and I met with President Rouhani with President Van Rumpuy from the EU. So I got my first insights into this new leadership. And I've always said that if we can find a diplomatic solution to this, we really have to do everything we can, but we do it with our own principles and determination intact. So we've pursued what we've called a twin-track approach, wanting to solve it diplomatically but being prepared to put the pressure on to try and get the diplomacy to work. And that's how I think we should continue. We should be ready to move if they're ready to move, but not ready to move until they are ready, they've done it, they've proved it, and we are confident in them, just as I've said to them they need to be confident in us. But if it can be done, we'll do it.

Jane Harman:

Well, I must say, I -- if I weren't an optimist, I wouldn't have served in our Congress for 17 years.

[laughter]

But I am an optimist about this. We have to be clear-eyed, and many in our press have written about all the things that could go wrong, and it is heartening to hear a tough-minded woman talk about the ways in which we have to keep

the pressure on, but wouldn't it be magnificent if this could work?

Catherine Ashton:

I think it would be extremely important for all sorts of reasons, but that's why we have to be clear-eyed about it. We're going to meet with them in Geneva. I will lead the negotiations. That will be a chance for us to, in a much quieter way than you can at the General Assembly, sit down and work through what they're thinking, what we've been talking about, the packages we've put on the table before, but with him instead of the previous negotiators, and see whether we think this can move forward. If there's a chance of doing it, we will do it.

Jane Harman:

And is there a timetable or an approximate timetable now for this?

Catherine Ashton:

Well, you've probably heard that both President Rouhani and Minister Zarif said at various times last week, and indeed before, that they wanted to move relatively quickly. They've talked about trying to get a sort of framework in place quickly, and I think -- the last time they spoke to me, they talked about a sort of 12-month timetable. The issue, which we will of course deal with them in detail, is what does that mean? Because to dismantle things or to change things or to be sure about what's being done requires the technical work to happen, and that technical work takes time. So I think, again, part of being level-headed, clear-eyed is to say, "Okay, if this is real, let's make it real and let's make sure that everybody can be confident in what we're actually doing." And that means the people in Iran, it means the people in American, it means the people across the world, including those who were most worried and most skeptical about what's happening now.

Jane Harman:

Well, on that point, Prime Minister Netanyahu and the president -- President Obama have been meeting this morning, so there are those who are very skeptical, and I think skepticism is warranted given the painful 34-year history.

Catherine Ashton:

Yes. I mean, by no means is the prime minister of Israel alone. There are plenty of those who have good reason to be concerned, either because of proximity or because of things that have been said historically. So, they need to also feel part of this and feel part of being certain about what we are able to do. But if can be done, it will be done.

Jane Harman:

Well, while this is happening there are encouraging developments in Syria, too. And I was reading in our press that there is some optimism about the way Syria is beginning to comply with this mandate, U.N. mandate, to disclose all of the chemical weapons and so forth. The second phase of this is Geneva II. Everyone is talking about Geneva II, and what interests me particularly is the possibility that a new transition government could be structured in Syria, and I wonder if you think -- how optimistic you are about that, and if you think Iran should play a role in the Geneva II negotiations about Syria.

Catherine Ashton:

We've been saying for two years, since Geneva I -- which I participated in -- you have to have a political process, and you don't make peace with your friends. So this was always going to be about finding a way that you could move from this dreadful situation on the ground. I mean, the chemical weapons incident brought home to many just how horrific the situation was. Fifteen-hundred people were killed, many of them children, but that was on top of 100,000 people that have been killed.

Jane Harman:

Right.

Catherine Ashton:

And millions of refugees. I visited the camps in Jordan. I visited refugees in Lebanon. The situation for them is just awful. Despite the best efforts and the wonderful willingness of the people in Jordan and Lebanon and in other countries, Turkey and so on, to be willing to host them, it's very difficult. It's difficult for those countries, too. So the situation is terrible, and in order to really come up with a solution, we need the people to sit around and work out how this is going to work. There's a consistency of view, with some exceptions, that says you can't have a sad stay [spelled phonetically] because you

cannot be in charge of a country and see so many of your citizens killed and be participating in some way in that, and continue. But there are people around, and people from all the different communities, who need to feel that this country belongs to them again and to rebuild it from the shattered ruins -- 70 percent, at least, destroyed. Some wonderful places, and, more importantly, everybody's life affected. So many children without parents, so many people without relatives and friends. We have to help them rebuild it. So the sooner we get to Geneva II, the sooner we get the process going, and the sooner we commit to rebuilding the country, the better.

Jane Harman:

Well, just another comment on the refugees. The presence of so many millions outside the country, in Jordan in particular, is enormously destabilizing on the government of Jordan. Those refugees are welcome, but it's an extraordinary economic burden on Jordan.

Catherine Ashton:

It's a huge burden, I mean, for Jordan and for Lebanon. I talk with the ministers in both countries regularly. They've really done a fantastic job of being willing to take people and to try and do their very best for them with a lot of international support. I'm very proud that the EU is the biggest donor to the refugees and to supporting in every possible way efforts to provide aid and support. But it is those nations who have been willing to open the gates, as it were, and take them in, even though the circumstances are very difficult, and for the populations. It's incredibly difficult to suddenly find so many people -- at one point I think in Jordan five or six thousand a day coming through. Very, very tough, and I really pay tribute to them, as I do to the agencies who've been on the ground, because they've been amazing.

Jane Harman:

And Senator John McCain, who visited the Jordan -- the largest camp in Jordan, reported some months ago that walking through it the head of the camp said to him, "Look at these kids. They're the next generation of Jihadists." So there clearly is a requirement to end this, and there is an example, which may not be a perfect example, but Yemen had a peaceful change of government and is not -- I wouldn't think we would call it a Wilsonian or even a Jeffersonian democracy, but I think we'd call it somewhat

of a stable country, and that goal should be our minimum goal for Syria.

Catherine Ashton:

I think minimum goal. That's right.

Jane Harman:

Right.

Catherine Ashton:

I don't -- I mean, I don't necessarily agree that when you meet the children in the camps you think of them as potential Jihadists. I think their lives will just be very sad, and I think their lives will be unfulfilled if we don't do something. You know, they're getting some education. UNICEF is there. The schools are running. The kids look and behave just like any other kids, but their lives will be built upon this terrible, terrible story, and terrible history, which if it's at its least bad they'll go home and rebuild. But for most of them they will have lost so much, including so many parts of their family. So for them it's going to be about giving them back the childhood they never had and helping them rebuild it. And I think we should look at it that way around and not think of them as potential enemies, because they're not. They're just children and they need to grow up and become part of the new Syria, which needs to really grow from these dreadful events, but really come from the ashes. And I think, for Yemen, it's really amazing to see the potential of that country. It's still pretty fragile, but it's got real signs of being able to move forward, and that's great. And that was a really good example of what -- the Gulf countries, for example, played a big role in helping to get that transition to be peaceful. And an important example that it's not always just -- or even us who can best do it. Sometimes the neighborhood can be the best and most appropriate way of helping it move into transition.

Jane Harman:

No question, but we shouldn't leave the impression that Yemen is even close to perfect. There are some very bad guys out there, including this notorious bomb maker, al-Asiri, who has been the inventor of most of these most pernicious weapons that are capable, unfortunately, of evading many of the detection systems that we have around the world.

Turning to another calm country, how about Egypt? I know you recently visited Egypt. We were recently visited at the Wilson Center by a delegation from Egypt headed by Anwar Sadat, a parliamentarian who brought with him another Muslim, a copt, a Bedouin, and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Two of the members of his delegation were female, and one of the exciting things about this was that we had several meetings here where the members of the delegation respectfully disagreed with each other on what exactly happened with this military takeover and what the future of the country was, and then they went out with some arrangement from us and met with the Pentagon, the State Department, the Senate and the House, and came back to report. And at least, I thought, we had a tiny experiment in the pluralist democracy that many of us hope will be found in some near lifetime in Egypt. So my question to you is are you hopeful and what is a way forward for Egypt?

Catherine Ashton:

Well, I make my fourteenth visit to Egypt tomorrow, so I'll report back. The good news is that I think when you talk to all of the people in leadership positions across Egypt, they know that the future of Egypt needs to be an inclusive democracy. It's what people first went in January two years ago to fight for, to stand in Tahrir Square for, in some sad cases, to die for. And that still remains the fundamental objective that people have in mind when you talk to them on the streets or in the interim government or wherever. And, you know, you could write -- and there will be many books written, but you could write a long story about what happened and what went wrong. We've been active in Egypt from the very beginning trying to support what is a very fledgling democracy and trying to now work with all the different groups to show them that we're not coming to tell them what to do, but in Europe we've done a lot of this. You know, we've had thousands of years of trouble and war, and we've had many countries come out of oppression into democracy, and they know it's not easy and they know it takes time. But there are things we know to do and there are things we know not to do. And so the offer we make is to just help give them some ideas and maybe some building blocks that can make a difference. So I'll be going back tomorrow. I'll be seeing all the political groups again, and I hope that we'll be able to continue this important conversation, which is about how do you move now with a good constitution, towards the elections, with the guarantee that you can have a democracy

that will continue and roll forward and not stumble along the way, linked to -- because this is just as important for Egypt -- a strong economic plan. Because without that it's very difficult to see how they're going to support this young population and give them the opportunities that they're going to need.

Jane Harman:

The -- just to continue on Egypt for a moment. Former Ambassador Anne Patterson has visited the Center many times. She is now back in Washington, has been nominated for a State Department job, the Assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs. Our country had a tough summer, not just Anne Patterson. Our position seemed to be unpopular with absolutely everybody, and yet I witnessed on my four visits major efforts to get the then Morsi government to open up to the participation of others. Do you think that characterization is fair, that we made a major effort that was unfortunately misunderstood by many in Egypt?

Catherine Ashton:

I think when we've talked to Egyptian groups -- you're right to identify the misunderstanding about the U.S. on both sides. Quite interesting that they don't really see the role properly wherever you sit in the Egyptian system. And that's partly because I guess for some people that's been a suitable way of approaching it. I don't think that will last. I think that Anne Patterson did a great job in incredibly difficult circumstances, and I wish her every possible success in her future role. But I think what we learned, too, is how quickly your situation, whoever you are, can change when people on the streets or when the rumor mill starts or when things are done in ways by others that make it, if you like, almost easy to put someone else in the frame. And I think, as time goes on, it will be better understood.

Jane Harman:

Well, this paradigm of blaming other people is going on full tilt in the United States Congress just a mile from here, so I think that's a lesson we should internalize. Final substantive area: Serbia and Kosovo. Places I've certainly visited and places that have had a very uneasy relationship for a long time. You get the major credit, you yourself, for reducing tension there, and I would be, you know, very interested to know if you think for a future period there will need to be a NATO or EU force there to

keep the peace or what way forward is there for those two countries?

Catherine Ashton:

Well, the first thing is I should not get the major credit. They did it. We helped them, but it was the two prime ministers who were willing to take the risk and come and sit with me in my office, and I can still remember the first time they did that. We've had 16 meetings since then. Three of them have lasted 14 hours, including on my birthday.

Jane Harman:

She clearly doesn't sleep.

[laughter]

Catherine Ashton:

For they were not popular when I took -- I finally cracked the champagne at 11:00. I said, "Enough. I'm going to have one hour of birthday."

[laughter]

Jane Harman:

Happy Birthday. Should we sing to you?

Catherine Ashton:

No, not today. Not today.

Jane Harman:

But I thought delayed. We can do that.

Catherine Ashton:

But they were really willing to sit and actually talk with each other and to get beyond, because they both know that the future for them, for their people, does not lie in looking back, you know? There's nothing -- there's nowhere to go with the history of it. All they can do is go forward. And we've an attraction to them, because both want to be part of the European Union. They should be in the European Union without question. So that gave them not just an incentive to do it, because, frankly, I think they would probably have done it anyway, but it gave them a way of binding their populations to it when so many of them were very reluctant because of the history in the past that they didn't really feel secure in having a strong

relationship with each other. And that enabled them to, I think, offer something to everybody. They've worked very hard. There are still real needs on the ground. We lost one of our officers only last week, a Lithuanian customs officer who was shot dead right near a customs point, and it was a strong reminder of just how dangerous it still is in parts of the north of Kosovo. The first person to ring me with great sadness in his voice was the prime minister of Serbia, and they're working closely with us to try and bring the perpetrators to justice. So we still need to be vigilant, because there are people who don't yet see the reason to find peace, and there are some people perhaps whose interests do not lie in that direction, but the majority do. And the elections on November 3 will be the big chance, and for the very first time you have Serbia really, really saying to its population in the north of Kosovo, to its people as it would see it, "Go to the elections," and that's not happened since 1999, both prime ministers are urging people to go to the same elections and working together to make the elections successful. And, by the way, they want to do a second agreement after the elections are over. So I think we're well on our way.

Jane Harman:

So that will be your birthday present.

Catherine Ashton:

That's my next year's birthday.

Jane Harman:

Delayed. So my final question is what do you say to young women and girls, who will tune in to this or who may be sitting out there somewhere, who want to be just like you?

[laughter]

Catherine Ashton:

Wow. I'd say there are bits of me I wouldn't want to be just like, if you can --

[laughter]

But -- well, I'd say simply this. I come from a family where I was the first woman to go to university and to really move away from the village I grew up in. And I come from generations of people who had nothing really, very much, certainly not the chance of education. So that's why

the first thing I'd say is get education, because it's the most important thing. And then I would say be yourself, because don't deny the parts of you that have made you a mother or a sister or a wife or a daughter or a friend or whatever you are. Be that, too, because it's much better to be all of the things that you can be. And then I would say find people who you can talk to and who will listen to you about being a woman in public life or in a profession, because it is different. People treat you differently, and any woman that tells you they don't is not telling the truth, and any man who tells you they don't is even more not telling the truth.

[laughter]

Jane Harman:

Well, that was a softball question, because we do have the Women in Public Service Project here at the Wilson Center, whose goal is 50 by 50: 50 percent women in public service jobs by 2050. And a big part of that is mentoring, two-way mentoring. I mean, I always find I have a lot to learn from younger women who have figured it out better than I have so far.

We'll now turn to your questions. There are exactly 20 minutes left, and please identify yourself and ask a question. Do not make a statement. The mic will come to you.

Catherine Ashton:

Ask a question I can answer.

Jane Harman:

And I don't know -- yeah. Well, you can restate the question.

[laughter]

Are there questions coming from other rooms? I don't know about that. If there are, would someone hand them to me? And we'll now recognize people. Haleh Esfandiari, who heads our Middle East project. Ah, microphone.

Haleh Esfandiari:

Thank you. I'm from the Wilson Center. To follow-up on Jane Harman's question regarding Iran, in your group negotiation and private negotiation with Mr. Zarif, did you

get the sense that -- or any indication that the Iranians are willing to accept some of the hard things that are expected from them by the P5+1? For example, limiting the level of enrichment, having more than one inspection of the Fordo site, and also closing down the Iraq station for high water or at least change it to a low water development?

Catherine Ashton:

Well, you won't be surprised that in those meetings we didn't get into the detail, but I think Minister Zarif knows very well from his previous role in negotiations that a negotiation is about the things we need them to do and the things that they want in return. So I'm sure that he's looked very carefully at all the ideas, proposals, and issues that are on the table.

All I can tell you at this stage is that he certainly approaches with great energy and determination, which is the phrase I use. He's not sure about me calling him energetic at all, but it's a compliment -- just in case he's listening.

[laughter]

The -- you know, I get a real sense from him that he seriously wants to sit down and work this out. So, hopefully, when we get to Geneva in a couple of weeks' time we'll have the chance to do that, and that will, in a sense, be the time when we really will go through all of these issues, like Fordo and Iraq and all of the other technical questions.

Jane Harman:

Okay, way in the end. In the middle. Right here. Pink tie.

Male Speaker:

Mattow Klosky [spelled phonetically] with UMD. My question is, given your success with Serbian Kosovo, what role can you play in facilitating an agreement between Macedonia and Greece, given their differences -- Greece being a EU member, Macedonia being an aspiring member? Thank you.

Catherine Ashton:

Well, the issue, as you know, is about how ultimately we're going to refer to what is known by us as the former Yugoslavia -- Republic of Macedonia. And the UN have

played the biggest role in trying to find a solution to that, and we supported them in it.

Again, I think part of this is about the desire to be part of the European Union, and one of my hopes is not my role in this, but the role of the two prime ministers who have shown that what everybody said was impossible has been possible. So, I joke with them, but they know I'm only half joking. The Prime Minister Dačić of Serbia, Prime Minister Thaçi of Kosovo, they have a next mission in life, and their mission in life is to sort out their own region.

So, one of the things I do hope is that as we show leadership in the region, by the region, that they can play a role in helping find solutions, too. So, for me, I'm willing -- always willing to help if there's anything I can do. But, actually, those solutions -- just as they did with Serbia and Kosovo -- rely on people being prepared to make the right compromises, get to the table, and work it out, and to have a bigger goal. And the bigger goal should be "what can you do for your people?"

Jane Harman:

Let's go to the very back. Keep your hand up. Yes, you, in the -- all the way back.

Male Speaker:

The people of the back, thank you.

[laughter]

Jane Harman:

The people of the back. [laughs]

Male Speaker:

Ber Neshasin [spelled phonetically]. Do you think -- as you well know, the House of Representatives has passed legislation that, if it were to be approved by the Senate, would significantly increase U.S. sanctions on Iran. As you enter into this period where you will be negotiating with the Iranians, do you think it would be advisable not to roll back sanctions while you're still negotiating or until the Iranians have done certain things, but to put on a hold -- to suspend, as it were -- movement toward additional sanctions by the United States or anyone else?

Catherine Ashton:

I'm not in the business of telling Congress what to do, as you can appreciate.

[laughter]

We could talk about Obamacare if you'd like, but I think this: I think I would like to get to Geneva with the best possible atmosphere to really have these negotiations, and that means in all sorts of ways we need to show willingness and good faith to sit down and talk and expect the same in return. It may be, at the end of those two days, that we don't make progress, but it may be at the end of those two days that we do. And every round of negotiations I've done I've approached in the same way. We keep the pressure on, but the pressure is there for a reason. It's to bring people to the talks in order to try and make progress.

So where we are at the right -- at the moment right now, I want to go into Geneva with that best possible atmosphere. And I think in any thinking about that, those who are making the law here or those in control of the negotiations from the U.S. end, which of course is Secretary Kerry and his team, will have to think about how to make sure that it's the best possible atmosphere.

Jane Harman:

Okay, in the middle. Right here.

Female Speaker:

Good afternoon. My name is Mindy Reiser [spelled phonetically]. I work in international development in the former Soviet Union, but let me turn to the Middle East. Netanyahu, Obama, the Palestinians -- I know the EU has been active, if they've been looking at issues in terms of boycott, divestment, sanctions. Where do you see things going? There's a great deal of pushback from certain sectors in the Jewish community to some of the things that are going on, and Palestinians have tensions, as well. Where are we headed?

Catherine Ashton:

Well, in terms of the negotiations, I think what Secretary Kerry has done is absolutely incredible and you should all be extraordinarily proud of him, as am I. I think his efforts and the sheer determination not to let them get away was fantastic and it had the effect of building confidence sufficient that Saeb Erekat for the Palestinians

and Tzipi Livni for the Israelis are sitting down together. And at the quartet meeting on Friday in New York, we watched them sit together and talk to us, not on substance, because the detail is for them to work out, but just on the fact they were doing it. And it was the most hopeful thing I've seen in a long time.

We've been, again, biggest donor, very active -- I've been working very closely, particularly with people in Gaza, to try and help the people there in what is a terrible situation. I've been to Gaza I think four times in the last 18 months or two years. Working on the West Bank, we do a huge number of development programs and projects, but we also work closely with the politicians from both Israel and from the Palestinian authority, and we cohost with the Norwegians the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, which is a body that helps to build the institutions that will be necessary for Palestinian states so it can actually function.

So we're very, very engaged and very engaged and very supportive in doing that. And that's what we'll continue to do for both, because we want to see a successful, stable, secure Israel. We want to see a successful, stable, secure state of Palestine side by side with Israel. And that's everybody's ultimate goal. And I think John Kerry has done more to get us moving towards that than anyone for a long time.

Jane Harman:

Let me raise a couple questions from the overflow room and then we'll take some more from here. And we have 11 minutes left, so you're all doing very well, and especially Baroness Ashton.

Catherine Ashton:

Thank you.

[laughter]

Jane Harman:

These are questions about two other parts of the world that we haven't addressed: one is the country of Georgia and the other is Belarus. The question is, "The EU allocates significant resources to find solutions for crisis situations in Africa, but what about a part of Europe -- Belarus -- that is not getting as much attention?"

And the second is, "There are a great deal -- there is a great deal of alarming information coming from the country Georgia: human rights abuses by the state-controlled media, and, the most alarming, country shifting its policy toward Russia." That wasn't -- I didn't quite convey that, but both issues.

Catherine Ashton:

Yeah. We have in the European Union what we call the Eastern Partnership, which is six nations on our eastern side: Armenia, Azerbaijan are two; and Georgia and Belarus two others, as well as Moldova and Ukraine, just to prove I know all six.

[laughter]

Jane Harman:

We knew that you would know them.

[laughter]

Catherine Ashton:

I know. There's always that moment when you get to five and think, "What have I -- who have I forgotten?"

[laughter]

With Belarus, with Lukashenko, the president, we have been arguing for a long time about the need to release the political prisoners, which, as you know, were arrested and detained after the last elections. And we don't, therefore, work closely with the government of Belarus, but we reach out to the people. We do a number of programs to support civil society, and we do talk to the ministers. The foreign minister of Belarus I've been in touch with. I'm not going to reveal what I say to him or him to me, but we do try and reach out to try and get them to change their policies and to do the right thing by their people but also to have a good relationship with us. Invest a lot of energy in that. In Georgia, Ivanishvili is the new prime minister, and, as you know -- or some of you will know the presidential elections are shortly about to arrive. In fact, you'll be there for the --

Jane Harman:

The 27th of October.

Catherine Ashton:

And we'll see what happens, but there are different expectation on what will happen with Ivanishvili and so on. And there are different views about the new government of Georgia. What I can say is that we work closely with them, that they're part of the Eastern Partnership, there will be a big summit with all of the heads of state and government of the European Union, with their heads of state and government of the partnership that will take place in Lithuania in a few weeks' time. Georgia is very determined on its European perspective. Whatever noises may come out of the media or otherwise, we believe that that is where Georgia's future should lie, with a very strong relationship with Europe, and I've not heard in any meetings I've had of any change of policy. Certainly a different change in terms of different political parties and different tones. Not everything is perfect, I agree with that, but our job is to work with Georgia and to help support it in its future.

Jane Harman:

Let's see. Over here. Michael.

Michael Adler:

Michael Adler, of the Wilson Center. Lady Ashton, thank you for coming, and what is the chance that Secretary Kerry and other foreign ministers might come to the meeting at Geneva and is there a time limit? Is there -- how urgent is it that this new hopeful round of diplomacy be exploited right now?

Catherine Ashton:

You mean for the Iran talks?

Michael Adler:

Yes.

Catherine Ashton:

The expectation for this round is we will be meeting with myself leading the negotiations with the political directors. So it will be Wendy Sherman who is there for the United States. And that's as it should be at this point for two reasons: one is because the way we want to do these negotiations. The political directors are fully given the mandate from their countries, and my role is, if you like, to negotiate directly with the chief negotiator opposite and to be supported in doing that by the strength

of the six who are, of course, experts in how this negotiation is being done. And they, as I say, have their mandate but also are connected throughout the talks with their capitals. It's actually, in my view, a better way of doing it than trying to get seven ministers all trying to negotiate at the same time because you do quickly get into some other technical details. We have experts there, too. I don't pretend to be an expert on all of the detail. But what we've said to Minister Zarif, and we stand by, is that if there is a point when it's very obvious you need to bring the politicians in, because it's a particular point in the debate and discussion or a decision needs to be made or they need to be confident in what we're doing, we wouldn't hesitate to do that. So the difference between what we're trying to achieve -- and in the round that's coming up, the biggest set of objectives is to really understand and look at what is possible.

Jane Harman:

Okay, in the second row. Right here.

Male Speaker:

Thank you. [unintelligible] -- the Republic of Srpska is here in Washington, D.C., and I'm wondering what are your expectations on the eve of the next round of talks with the Bosnian political leaders from both entities, the talks that are upcoming with the leaders, the political leaders who are due to go to Brussels, and also --

Catherine Ashton:

Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Male Speaker:

Yes, yes. And, also, can you assess in that context the negotiations that you began on judicial reform and what is your thinking on that, the structured dialogue?

Catherine Ashton:

Well, of course, you remember that I went to see [unintelligible] in -- when I was in Bosnia-Herzegovina last year, I think. Time disappears, doesn't it? Two years ago. We want Bosnia-Herzegovina to succeed, and we believe that it can only succeed when the political will and leadership is there to take them forward. And I think, having talked with the presidents and with the different political leaders, including from what you represent, the Republic of Srpska, that there is still a need to really

show the drive to go forward. So the political leaders are coming to Brussels. It will be a session led by my colleague, Commissioner Stefan Fule, and the purpose of that is to see whether we can make progress in the court in the -- the court case issues [unintelligible] that you know well, and to see whether there's a chance of it moving forward. Again, back to my point about political leadership in the region, I do believe that the more we have strong leadership across the region, the more that countries can be encouraged to try and solve their problems themselves. I don't want it to get left behind, and that's what I'm worried about, fearful of.

Jane Harman:

Straight back, in the striped tie. Blue shirt, right there.

Catherine Ashton:

So they all have to look at their ties and see what --

Jane Harman:

I know.

[laughter]

Male Speaker:

Thank you. You asked for -- Garth Trinkl, Department of Commerce. You asked for a comprehensive discussion, so in the last few minutes I wanted to follow-up and ask about Ukraine and I wanted to ask about the fragility of democracy. You mentioned Belarus and Georgia, but also Moldova is a sandwich between Romania and a hot zone, and Transnistria and Ukraine, and Ukraine had been led by a strong woman politician who emerged and has been treated the international community believes not in a civil way. You have meetings coming up in Vilnius, there's election in Ukraine in 2015. Could you do a few comments on Ukraine and perhaps the neighborhood?

Catherine Ashton:

Of course. I mean, on Ukraine itself, you know, what we do in the European Union is we reach out to our neighbors and we try and design the right kind of relationship that they can have with the European Union. For some, they have their own long-term perspectives of what they would like to see that would be very close to Europe. For others, they want a good trading relationship, they want a good economic

link, and sometimes, and increasingly often, they want the power of what we've done to help them reform their own systems. So Ukraine is a very good case in point. It's a sovereign state, Yanukovich is its president, it has the potential to have a really good relationship with Europe that will benefit it economically for sure, and will benefit us -- it's a two-way street. But there are things they have to do to have that, and we're just at the point with them where we're trying to get the agreement in the best possible shape, ready for the summit in Vilnius that I talked about earlier. In that, one of the issues that they've got to address is what we call selective justice, and that led to the imprisonment of Yulia Tymoshenko, who is the woman you were talking about, the former president. The issue we have is about the process of law, that if you have a process of law that doesn't work very well, you don't necessarily end up with the right verdicts. Let's put it that simplistically. And we are very concerned about her. We're very concerned about others who have also had the problem of selective justice. So this is something, along with other things, that we've said Ukraine has to sort out in order to get closer to us, and I really hope they will.

Jane Harman:

And the last question, in the front row.

Female Speaker:

Thank you. Joan Agerhone [spelled phonetically]. I've just completed a tenure as deputy director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, so not surprisingly my question is about Russia, with regard to the Syrian issue. My question to you, Baroness Ashton, is has the European Union been in touch with the Russians on this issue, and, if so, what have you been working on this issue with them?

Catherine Ashton:

We talk with the Russians all the time. I mean, they're a huge neighbor and strategic partner of the European Union. So of course we've been talking to them, and we've been talking to them about the need to both get Geneva II to work, which they are committed to, but also to use their influence and their support to try and persuade the regime that this has got to be the future for the country, that they've got to get Geneva II, they've got to get the transitional government moving, and they've got to find a way that people get what they originally went out on the

streets for in peaceful demonstrations, which was to see a transitional process that brought them the kind of society and democracy that they want. And the Russian know that's where we stand, and, as I say, they are people -- including the foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, with whom we talk a lot.

Jane Harman:

So, some people ask if the EU has a foreign policy. My answer to that is the EU has Cathy Ashton, and that is more than enough foreign policy.

[laughter]

It's just so impressive to hear you flawlessly address all these different subjects, have visited everywhere multiple times. It is true, she doesn't sleep, and no way she could have jet lag. And it is such an honor to have one hour of Cathy Ashton at the Wilson Center. I can't thank you enough, and know that any young woman or girl out there listening is saying, "I want to be like her." Again, our thanks and our gratitude.

[applause]

[end of transcript]