

Remarks Following a Meeting With Prime Minister Enrico Letta of Italy
October 17, 2013

The President. Well, it's wonderful to welcome Prime Minister Letta to the Oval Office. We have had a chance to get to know each other over the last several international summits that we've attended, and I couldn't be more impressed with the Prime Minister's integrity and thoughtfulness and leadership.

I want to congratulate him on having won a vote of confidence and passing a budget. I think it's clear that Italy is moving in the right direction in stabilizing its finances and embarking on reforms that will make it more competitive. And we spent a lot of our time discussing the importance of European growth, that with high unemployment—particularly youth unemployment—and the challenges that have been created since 2008, as well as the challenges within the euro zone, I think it's important for all of us to coordinate. And the United States obviously is not part of Europe, but we have a great interest in Europe because if Europe is doing well, that means that we're doing well also.

So we discussed how we could partner on a strong growth agenda. Part of that growth agenda is the Transatlantic Partnership agreement [Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership],^{*} the trade agreement that we're trying to shape between the European Union and the United States. We've had several meetings already on that, and I know Prime Minister Letta is a strong proponent of expanding what is already a very important trade relationship between the United States and Europe. So given the fact that he will be ascending to the Presidency of the European Commission, it's a great opportunity for his leadership to assert itself during those negotiations.

We also talked about our security cooperation, and Italy has been an outstanding partner. A NATO ally on issues ranging from Libya to Syria, to counterterrorism efforts, consistently, Italy has been a strong partner, and obviously, it's been an outstanding host to our men and women who serve in the region. And so we very much thank the Italian people as well as the Prime Minister for their strong support there.

On Libya, we agreed that we want to continue to work with other international partners to strengthen the security capacity of the Libyan Government. There's enormous potential and hope for the Libyan people, but what they need now is a Government that is representative and inclusive and can provide the basic security, as well as the basic services, that will help the Libyan people achieve that potential. And I think that we both share an interest in finding ways in which we can help the Libyans move forward.

With respect to Syria, we have been pleased to see not only the U.N. resolution, but also now the concrete efforts to get chemical weapons out of Syria. And Italy has been very supportive of that effort. And we both believe that it's important to build off that success—or at least that good start—to also talk about the humanitarian suffering that the Syrian people are experiencing. Italy has been a contributor to the humanitarian efforts there, and we want to partner with them to find ways to not only relieve the suffering, but also to implement a political transition that can allow people to return to their homes and end the killing that's been taking place there.

^{*} White House correction.

And we had a chance to talk about Afghanistan. Italian troops have been extraordinary in their sacrifice and their efforts in helping to create an Afghanistan that is secure and safe for the Afghan people. We very much appreciate it. We talked about how well our militaries coordinate with each other and the genuine partnership that has been created. And we both reaffirmed our commitment to make sure that when we end combat activities in Afghanistan at the end of 2014, that we are in a position to leave behind an Afghanistan that has a strong professional security service and a government that is meeting its obligations to all its people, including all ethnic groups and women and others who have started to see greater opportunities and greater freedoms over the past several years.

And again, I want to say to the Italian people, and to Prime Minister Letta, in particular, we're grateful for your friendship. I think everybody understands the closeness between Italy and the United States is not just because of a friendship between leaders, but also because of the incredible history and the people-to-people relations between our two countries. Italian Americans in this country have helped to make America what it is and in every aspect of life, and that bond is one that will never go away and, hopefully, will continue to be strengthened during the time that you and I have the chance to work together. I'm sure it will be.

The last point I want to make is that the Prime Minister is from Tuscany, from Pisa, and he has extended an invitation to me to come and visit and eat some very good food. [*Laughter*] I don't know whether I'm going to be able to take as much time as I want while I'm still President, but Michelle and I, having been to Tuscany before I was President and seeing how spectacular and wonderful it is, I told the Prime Minister that he will not have to twist my arm to try to get me to come to Tuscany again sometime in the near future.

So thank you very much for the wonderful visit. Thank you.

Prime Minister Letta. Thank you very much. Of course, the invitation to Tuscany is for now, for the future, for whenever you want: Florence, Pisa, Sienna, or Lucca.

First of all, I congratulated President Obama, for yesterday's success is his success, but it is also our success, because yesterday's decision was very important for the stability in the markets in the world, in Europe and in Italy, first of all. We need stability because we have such a big debt, so we need to have low interest rates.

Yesterday we had the lowest interest rates in Italy since 2 years and half. That was for us a very important achievement, demonstration of the fact that we are in the right path. And we have to continue that, and to continue on this path, we need to have an alliance, alliance of growth, first of all.

Next year, Italy will be President of the European Council. For—in the second semester, we will start the new European legislature. The present European legislature is linked to the word austerity. Austerity without growth, it's a big problem for us. This is why we passed, in Italy, a budget with the budget under control, with the debt decreasing, the deficit decreasing, public spending decreasing, and the level of taxes on families and entrepreneurs decreasing for the first time since many years.

So it's very important to continue on having budget under control, but we need to push growth. This is why the European legislature that will start with the Italian Presidency of the European Council will be a legislature based, first of all, on growth. And of course, T-TIP is one of the most important achievement. My dream will be to sign this agreement, both, together, before the end of next year, before the end of the Italian Presidency next year.

It is important we have to fight against protectionism. In—both in the G–8 and the G–20 meeting, we have very important common positions in fighting against the fiscal evasion, fiscal avoidance, fiscal havens, against protectionism, and T–TIP is so important.

For the Mediterranean concern, I tried to present to President Obama all our concerns about the situation, the migration problems, of course the mission—the humanitarian military mission—that Italy raised in these very days, "Mare Nostrum," because we don't want to have Mediterranean as a dead sea. Mediterranean has to be a sea of life.

And of course, we have a problem of failed states in Africa. We have to help them, and first of all, Libya, of course. We have to work together on Syria to apply the resolution as soon as possible. And we want to have Geneva II as soon as possible too. And of course, there, our work will be all together. And also I will thank President Obama's words on Afghanistan, of course. Our joint commitment is very important for the stabilization of the area.

So I am very glad for the words I listened, but I'm very glad for the yesterday's result. It's very important for our future. Our future will be a future of friendship, of cooperation, and next legislature, next European legislature will be—has to be—a legislature of growth. And we, the Italians, we will work very hard in reaching this goal because growth and, first of all, jobs for youth is my mission, our mission, and we will work together on that.

President Obama. All right. Thank you again. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:32 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

Categories: Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Italy, Prime Minister Letta

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Letta, Enrico; Obama, Michelle.

Subjects: Afghanistan : NATO, role; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Arms and munitions : Chemical and biological weapons; Europe : Financial markets :: Unrest; Europe : Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership; Italy : Afghanistan, role; Italy : Defense relationship with U.S.; Italy : Financial markets, stabilization efforts; Italy : Prime Minister; Italy : Relations with U.S.; Libya : Democracy efforts; Libya : International assistance; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Syria : Civil war and sectarian conflict; Syria : International assistance.

DCPD Number: DCPD201300707.