ANDREW MARR SHOW
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CRISPIN BLUNT

AM: Now, we assume that Mister Juppé or Mr Sarkozy will in the end beat Marine Le Pen, but we can’t be sure. If they don’t, if she does become French President, what kind of world are we heading towards?

CB: We’re heading then towards a world of great power politics. And what’s at stake here is the liberal international order that we’ve all grown up with. And that’s the big question now for the Trump administration, are they going to recommit to NATO and to the defence of states such as the Baltics and an implicit defence of some kind for the Ukrainians? The message coming out from the Trump election, which would be the same if there was a Le Pen presidency – which I agree with you, I think it’s highly unlikely because the centre right will be her opponents in the run-off. But the question then –

AM: ..of course, you know, we – (talking together)

CB: You know, a year ago I was confidently telling my European counterparts that Remain would win because of the scale of the establishment dump on the electorate. Now I supported Leave because Britain doesn’t quite get the European ideal. It’s why the whole relationship has been transactional, not based on belief in proper advance towards European integration.

AM: It seems it might not just be us of course.

CB: Well, she speaks for part of the French population, and it’s a profound question for France. Which takes us on to European defence integration. The Trump election is a big wakeup call now for the European powers as to whether they are prepared to get serious about defence. First of all moving towards the NATO goal of two per cent on defence expenditure, where they’re only spending about half. And also around defence integration. If both of those things work, there’s a substantial amount of more of hard power in the defence of the liberal international order.
AM: Do you think Trump has a point when he says that lots of other members of NATO are not paying their fair share and therefore as a result of that other NATO members, not us necessarily but other European NATO members, have to spend more on defence to save NATO?

CB: Yes, absolutely. He’s entirely right about that. And it’s the same point being made by Jean Paul Junker, it’s the same point made by Nick Clegg today. I disagree with Nick Clegg’s diagnosis that Britain should be involved in that European defence integration, because the fact that we’re leaving the European Union is the reason why we can’t be – we don’t get Europea. But for our partners who got it here originally, who are part of the single currency, which means their interests are going to be much more intertwined than ours, it makes complete sense of them to defend them together. And if they defend them together, they will drive much more efficiency out of their defence management and get much more hard power to defend states like the Baltics directly and the Ukrainians implicitly.

AM: Can I ask you about one other thing that I was talking to Richard Tice about, which is the possibility of Nigel Farage being, as it were, the diplomatic bridge between the Conservatives and the Trump administration. Is that at all plausible in your view?

CB: No, completely implausible. Our embassy’s done exactly the right thing. It’s had people with both teams. I’ve seen the leaked telegram from our ambassador in Washington, that they’ve been alongside the Trump administration. Probably better placed than any other nation. And the circumstances are that the Prime Minister has been extremely wise in having been very reserved and guarded about her comments about Donald Trump right from the beginning.

AM: Unlike many?

CB: Unlike many. But our Foreign Secretary has – AM: Rowed backwards at speed..
CB: Is, I’d say, wonderfully charming and entertaining if he can get away with the row back. And the Prime Minister has been extremely wise in what she’s said. And so I think there’s a fantastic opportunity actually for a decent relationship with for the United Kingdom with the new administration.

AM: No need for Nigel.

CB: And no need for Nigel.

(ends)