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Die Bundesbehörden der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft

«American Swiss Foundation - Young Leaders Conference» - Rede von Bundesrat Didier Burkhalter (EN)

Bern, 13.11.2012 - Bern, 13.11.12 - Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Dear Young Leaders,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

One week ago, the people of the United States of America re-elected their president. This also means that Ambassador Beyer, whom I would like to thank for his deep commitment to our bilateral relations, will be staying on in Switzerland...

U.S. presidential elections are closely followed and watched all over the world. I myself followed the elections from the other side of the globe that is to say from South-East Asia. In its foreign-policy strategy, Switzerland attaches increasing importance to this up-and-coming region of the world. Switzerland's membership in the ASEM, along with the opening of an Embassy in Myanmar bears ample witness to this fact. Apparently, US President Obama is of the same opinion as he will in fact be visiting Myanmar this week.

And so we discover one of the first things that the United States and Switzerland have in common – and for once, Switzerland was just a little bit faster...

The American Swiss Foundation's Young Leaders Conference is also about the promotion of common grounds. It is one of the most outstanding initiatives to foster understanding and mutual exchange between Switzerland and the United States.

Such understanding and exchange is important for both nations, as it is a catalyst for new opportunities.

In addition to diplomatic relations, to economic and business exchange, the person-to-person contacts that the American Swiss Foundation is facilitating with its Young Leaders Program, is of utmost importance.

In the upcoming years, more than ever mutual understanding and respect will be key to generating new opportunities and finding solutions as we face global challenges. And more than ever, it will be important that the leaders understand the consequences of their decisions.

By bringing the young and upcoming generation from our two countries together, the American Swiss Foundation is contributing to the mutual understanding between Switzerland and the United States, and I would like to sincerely congratulate everybody involved in making the Young Leaders Conference possible. I want to mention especially the founder of this visionary idea, Faith Whittlesey, the present Chairman of the American Swiss Foundation Steven Hoch as well as Josef Ackermann of the Zurich Insurance Group.

Proof for the success of the Program is the impressive list of alumni which includes a range of Governors and Congress People in the U.S and Parliamentarians and business leaders in Switzerland. Let me just highlight the example of National Councilor Christa Markwalder who is the driving force behind this year's Conference and who is a long time Young Leaders alumna. Thank you very much, Christa, for your commitment and your efforts in favors of the relations between Switzerland and the United States.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The bilateral relations between our two countries are extremely manifold and intense. And there are profound historic bonds between Switzerland and the United States: the first American national constitution was indeed inspired by Swiss federalism; in turn, Switzerland, in the middle of the 19th century, modeled its first national constitution after the U.S. Constitution of 1787.

Even more important than these historical ties are the values we share: Swiss and Americans are freedom-minded people. Democracy is of vital importance to both of us. Another feature which is dear to both, the Americans and the Swiss, is the rule of law. Similar to the U.S., we have a long tradition of strictly respecting the rights of individuals. And both the Swiss and the Americans strongly believe in human rights.

These common values – democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights – are the basis of our friendship and constitute a meaningful link between the people of our countries. These links often make people talk about the two "Sister Republics".

You might be aware that more than 1 million Americans claim to be of Swiss origin and that today, more than 75,000 Swiss citizens are living in the U.S., while about 17,000 U.S. citizens live in Switzerland.

You certainly know as well of the close economic relations between our countries. Let me just remind you that the U.S. is – after Germany – the second largest export market for Switzerland and by far the main destination for Swiss direct investments abroad. Some 600 Swiss companies are present in the U.S. market, creating nearly half a million jobs.

What you perhaps may not know – but what is no less crucial when it comes to democracy and the rule of law – is that the fight against corruption and for the restitution of illicit assets has been one of Switzerland's priorities for over 25 years.

Over the last 15 years, it has restored assets of more than USD 1.7 billion to their countries of origin. And at present, Switzerland has frozen some USD 700 million held by the former Egyptian regime.

At present, we are closely working with Egypt to return this money to the Egyptian people as rapidly as possible, while mindful of observing the due processes of law in all procedures.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The strong historic and economic ties and especially the shared values are the fundament for the close political relations and strong cooperation between our countries. These factors enable Switzerland and the United States to achieve impressive results by joining forces and working together. Outside Europe, the U.S. is and has always been a partner of highest priority for Swiss foreign policy.

Let me give you a few examples of Swiss–U.S. international cooperation: together with the U.S., Switzerland is contributing to stabilization efforts in various regions of the world. I would like to mention the Swiss- mediation between Turkey and Armenia. backed by the U.S, which led in 2009 to the signing of reconciliation protocols between the two countries.

The most obvious field of cooperation is, of course, our traditional Interest Protection Mandates, which we fulfill for the United States in Cuba and in Iran. This is proof of the trust and confidence that the American Administration places in Switzerland's capacity to act as an honest broker within the international community.

These examples are, on the one hand, proof of the confidence existing between the USA and Switzerland. On the other hand, this representation of interests and the role of honest broker is only possible due to the fact that Switzerland pursues an independent and autonomous political line – for instance on the issue of sanctions. Mutual respect and trust also means being able to accept this leeway – to our mutual benefit.

This special role of Switzerland can be useful for the international community. Sharing values and ideas does not mean that we have to abandon all of our own peculiarities.

Switzerland and the U.S. are also often teaming up in the multilateral field, for example in the fight against terrorism or in the field of water and security. For instance, just a short time ago Switzerland participated together with the United States and the EU in a Ministerial Roundtable on the theme of water, peace and security in New York. Upon this occasion, we primarily emphasized that it is critical to treat water as an essential element on the human security agenda and not merely in terms of its economic and health value.

We are also regularly exchanging on all levels with our colleagues at the State Department in order to identify areas of international cooperation in which we can work together by using our comparative advantages. It is my strong intention to additionally strengthen the political cooperation between our countries.

I was repeatedly able to exchange on this with Secretary Clinton throughout the year, and I am convinced that we will have an equally warm and hearty relationship in the future.

Of course, wherever there is a close relationship, there is also potential for disagreement. The current negotiations on bank and tax issues are the most prominent example. It is now in the interest of both our countries to quickly find an overall solution on the basis of existing law and mutual respect. We are confident that there will be progress now that the United States is no longer caught up in election fever.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by saying that we see additional potential in the complementary cooperation between the U.S. as a superpower and Switzerland as a neutral, non-aligned state. We have repeatedly proven that we can reach impressive results by joining forces – thanks to our shared values.

I have mentioned a few examples before. But we must strengthen the values we share, in order to strengthen our relations.

Switzerland is prepared to support efforts by the U.S. to bring stability to the world. We are ready to engage in order to find solutions to the challenges which need to be faced.

Dear Young Leaders,

You will be your countries' future decision-makers in politics and business. Good decision-makers need a broad horizon and a good understanding and respect for their counterparts' positions. In current Swiss-American relations, you can find these conditions. But it will be your task to maintain them.

By participating in the Young Leader's Program, by exchanging ideas with your Swiss and U.S. colleagues, you are building on the good relationship between our two countries. I wish you luck and success for your careers, for your plans and your endeavors.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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