

Daily Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 10/1/15

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Please accept my apologies for the late start today. Let me do one thing at the top, and then we'll get to your questions and we can get going here.

The President received an update today from his Homeland Security Advisor Lisa Monaco about the forecast for Hurricane Joaquin. He received additional details about the preparations that are underway at FEMA in advance of the storm.

A couple of those points: FEMA has increased its staffing at our 24-hour watch center in Washington, D.C. to provide additional reporting and monitoring of the situation. FEMA incident management assistance teams and other lead elements have either deployed or are preparing to deploy to potentially affected areas to support response activities and ensure there are no unmet needs. FEMA staff have been activated to prepare for the establishment of potential incident support bases, which pre-position supplies like water, meals, blankets, and other resources closer to potentially affected areas. And of course, FEMA maintains significant stockpiles of commodities including millions of liters of water, meals, blankets, and other resources like that at distribution centers across the country.

The final thing I'll say here is that, particularly at this point, we encourage all Americans that live in areas that could potentially be affected by Hurricane Joaquin to monitor local radio, television, and official social media accounts for updated emergency information, and as always, to follow the instructions of state, local and tribal officials.

So this obviously is something that the President and his team are closely monitoring here, and I anticipate we'll be doing that through the weekend.

So, with that, Kevin, we can go to your questions.

Q Thank you, Josh. The President, in New York, had high praise for the Secret Service in recent days for the work they did last week. But what is the White House reaction to the reports that agents widely accessed a committee chairman's personnel file and that aspects of that file eventually became public? Are apologies enough in this case?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, as you point out, the Director of the Secret Service and the Secretary of Homeland Security both called Congressman Chaffetz personally to offer an apology on behalf of the agency. Both men, both Director Clancy and Secretary Johnson, indicated a commitment to holding accountable those who may have improperly handled information.

Obviously an agency like the Secret Service takes very seriously the responsibility that they have to properly handle sensitive information, and the report that was released does raise significant concerns about whether or not all those procedures were followed -- or at least whether those procedures were followed properly. So I do think we -- the President certainly has confidence that the appropriate steps will be taken to hold accountable those who didn't follow those procedures.

I would be remiss if I didn't restate something that I mentioned yesterday, which is that we did see a significant mobilization under the command of the Secret Service over the last week to professionally and effectively provide security for the visiting dignitaries to the United States. That included President Xi who made a high-profile visit to the United States, including his visit here to the White House; obviously, Pope Francis; as well as more than 100 dignitaries in New York for the United Nations General Assembly.

The Secret Service wasn't just responsible for providing for the security of each of those individuals; particularly when it comes to the Pope, there were hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Americans over the course of his visit who made an effort to try to see him, and the Secret Service was responsible not just for his security, but also for the security of those Americans who participated in those events.

And so I think the results of that visit and the security that was provided is a testament to the tremendous professionalism and competence of the men and women in the Secret Service. And when there are mistakes that are made, we've seen the Director do the right thing, which is step up and take responsibility for them, offer an apology where it's appropriate, but also assure not just Congressman Chaffetz but also the President and the American people that there will be accountability. And I think we can have confidence that that will happen.

Q Has the President lost confidence in leadership over there to address this appropriately?

MR. EARNEST: Not at all. And, in fact, I think their initial response to this report I think is a strong indication that there is effective leadership in place at the Secret Service, to say nothing of the effective completion of the very difficult but core mission that the Secret Service carried out over the last week or so in the midst of a series of high-profile visits.

Q One more. Russia's foreign minister says his country and the U.S. coalition see eye-to-eye on targets of their fight against terrorism in Syria. Is that accurate? And does that reflect the activity over the past 48 hours, as the U.S. sees it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as the Secretary of Defense acknowledged yesterday in his news conference, the early indications from the Russian military operations is that despite their claims that they're focused on ISIL, they're actually carrying out military operations where there are few, if any, ISIL forces operating. So it certainly calls into question that declaration. And it raises the concerns that you've heard us state previously about how -- if Russia is genuinely focused on fighting ISIL, then they will make the kind of constructive contribution to the 65-member anti-ISIL coalition that the United States is leading.

We have put forward a strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, and we are working with 65 other countries to implement that strategy. And we would welcome the constructive contribution of Russia to that effort.

Jeff.

Q Josh, following up on that, does President Obama feel that President Putin broke his word after their meeting this week with regard to their intentions in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the conversation that the two Presidents had focused on a range of things -- about the shared interest that we have in stopping the spread of ISIL extremists, and certainly to counter the safe haven that they're trying to establish for themselves inside of Syria. There was also a shared view when it came to the need for a political transition inside of Syria.

We have long made the case that the root of Syria's problems is the political turmoil inside of Syria, and the only way to address whether it's the spread of ISIL or the significant humanitarian crisis that started in Syria is to address the fundamental political problem there. And the case that we have made, and the case that generally Russia has acknowledged, is the need for a political transition.

Now, there are important differences of opinion about what that political transition ultimately looks like, but there was agreement about the need for some kind of political transition inside of Syria.

Q I'm referring more to the airstrikes, though.

MR. EARNEST: And so when it comes to the airstrikes, we've indicated that we would welcome a constructive contribution from Russia to the anti-ISIL coalition. And we haven't seen them be prepared to do that.

Q But you also agreed that there would be talks to de-conflict the operations. These Russian airstrikes today happened before those talks. Does that indicate that the talks are even worth having?

MR. EARNEST: They are worth having, Jeff, and they continue to be both a priority for President Obama and for President Putin. And, in fact, I can tell you that there was a call that was hosted today by U.S. defense officials and some of their Russian counterparts.

This is a telephone call that lasted about an hour today; it took place via video teleconference. It was led by Elissa Slotkin over at the Pentagon. She is the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. The discussion focused on ways the United States and Russia can communicate and effectively de-conflict our operations inside of Syria.

And in some cases, these were actually some basic aspects of our operations that we want to try to agree to, to avoid unintended consequences here. So there was a discussion about ensuring that military aircraft inside of Syria are operating consistent with international rules and safety regulations. There was a discussion about ensuring that military personnel operating inside of Syria are communicating on internationally recognized channels. And all of this is an effort to de-conflict our ongoing operations there.

This was the first discussion of what I anticipate will be a series of additional discussions about de-conflicting our efforts. And in the context of that call, I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that, once again, the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense, Elissa Slotkin, underscored the importance of focusing our efforts on our shared objective, which is degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL. And she pointed out that the Russian military operations that we've seen so far raise some concerns because Russia is targeting areas where there are few, if any, ISIL forces operating.

Q Is there anything that the United States is doing or can do to protect the Syrian opposition from these Russian airstrikes?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jeff, I think the challenge here is one -- well, let me say it this way. I think the burden here is on Russia. And the fact is, carrying out indiscriminate military operations against the Syrian opposition is dangerous for Russia. And the reason I say that is that it is only going to prolong the sectarian conflict inside of Syria, if not make that conflict indefinite, and it also risks Russia being drawn even more deeply into that conflict.

We've already seen -- and I say this, knowing that Russia has already acknowledged that there's no military solution inside of Syria -- that ultimately a political transition will be required. And Russia, as I mentioned yesterday, will be no more successful in imposing a military solution on Syria than the United States was in imposing a military solution on Iraq, or than the Soviet Union was in imposing a military solution on Afghanistan.

The way that Russia has carried out these indiscriminate strikes against the Syrian opposition has also further isolated Russia. We've seen statements of concern from members of the U.S.-led anti-ISIL coalition, statements from Turkey and Jordan, and other leaders in the region, but also around the world, raising concerns about Russia's activities. And I think, most tellingly, we saw statements from both Iran and Saudi Arabia on this matter. And those who understand the nature of this sectarian conflict will not be

surprised to hear that Iran's response to Russia's military activities was one that was filled with words of praise, while the statement from Saudi Arabia was filled with words of criticism. And I think that highlights the risk that Russia is running here.

And I guess the two last things I'll point out here is that the effect of these kinds of indiscriminate airstrikes essentially drives what would otherwise be moderate elements of the Sunni opposition to Assad into the arms of extremists, creating an extremist problem - - or I guess I should say exacerbating an extremist problem -- for Russia inside of Syria, but also exacerbating the extremist problem that Russia has inside of Russia.

So that's why you heard me say when there were initial reports about Russia moving military equipment to Syria that it would be counterproductive for Russia to double down on the support of President Assad, this is exactly what I was talking about. And this is going to have consequences for the efforts of everybody, including Russia, to counter extremism in the region and around the world. And the fact is, these grave consequences for Russia are more dangerous than any diplomatic response that could be imposed on Russia by the international community.

Q Is the President happy with what Russia is doing?

MR. EARNEST: Obviously we would prefer Russia to make a constructive contribution to our ongoing anti-ISIL effort, and it certainly is not in the interest of the United States for Russia to exacerbate this sectarian conflict. But ultimately it's the Russians that will pay the highest price for that.

Gardiner.

Q Josh, the Russians seem to be particularly targeting groups funded and armed by the CIA. How will the President respond? And this is a renewal of the Cold War-like war of proxies?

MR. EARNEST: Not at all. And here's what's important to understand. I was making reference to indiscriminate --

Q It's not indiscriminate.

MR. EARNEST: -- airstrikes. Well, I think it is indiscriminate, because -- and let me explain why. Because Russia, in justifying these actions, suggests that they are carrying out operations against opponents to the Assad regime. The fact is there are extremist, ideologically-driven, essentially terrorists who are opponents of the Assad regime -- these are groups like ISIL and Nusra -- that have been the focus of our operations. There are also elements of the Syrian opposition that could more accurately be described as moderate elements of the Syrian opposition that are simply arming themselves to try to defend their communities, their homes, and themselves.

The Assad regime has been carrying out terrible acts of violence against these civilians. And so that's the kind of indiscriminate activity that we've seen Russia engaged in. And the danger associated with that kind of indiscriminate military action is that it distracts

from the organizations that should be the focal point of these kinds of activities -- namely ISIL -- and serves to drive away the kind of moderate opposition that ultimately the international community, including Russia, is going to be counting on to be a part of the political transition that's long overdue inside of Syria.

Q But, Josh, the reason I'm pushing back on the "indiscriminate" is your own military analysts are saying that these attacks are actually very well thought out. They're going after the people that now are the greatest threat to the Assad regime and also are closest to Russian military facilities. Those people also happen to be the people who are being funded by the CIA sort of on our side, so that it's not -- they're not doing this willy-nilly. They are going after the people who represent the worst threat to the Assad regime and their own position in Syria.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me just issue a clear disclaimer once again, which is that I'm not going to engage in a specific discussion of any activities that the CIA may be involved in or may not be involved in inside of Syria. What I will say as a general matter, though, is that there -- and this is something that I've said before, which is that there are opposition groups inside of Syria that have benefitted from U.S. support, and there is a variety of ways in which that support has been provided. It includes the training-and-equipping operation that we've talked about in here that hasn't yielded the kind of results that we'd like to see. But it also includes support in the form of things like medical equipment, rations and other supplies that are useful to fighting forces in a difficult environment.

There are also moderate Syrian opposition groups with whom we have no relationship. The fact is these kinds of groups that are operating against the Assad regime are pretty fluid. And the fact that these kinds of alliances are so fluid actually underscores the risk that Russia is taking; that by taking strikes against these moderate Syrian opposition groups, they only make it more likely that these -- what could currently be described as moderate Syrian opposition groups seek to align themselves with the extremist ideologues that Russia claims to be fighting.

So that's the concern that we have. And that is the risk that Russia is running when they wade knee-deep into this sectarian conflict.

Q What's your view -- I mean, you're talking about all these risks that Putin seems to be taking on. He's not an idiot. What is the White House view of what Putin is trying to achieve here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I certainly wouldn't use that word to describe President Putin, that's correct. But I think for weeks now we have indicated a lack of clarity about what Russia's true intentions are inside of Syria, and that is to say -- that is not to leave anybody with the impression that the United States was somehow surprised that Russia was actually using that military equipment that they moved into Syria in the last few weeks, but rather to describe the choice that President Putin faces about how to protect Russia's diminishing influence inside of Syria.

The fact is, Syria has been the client state of Russia in the Middle East for years. And Russia has made a significant investment in that client state, and over the last five years, Russia has seen that client state essentially unravel. And it has risked the significant investment that they have in that country, and this significant military deployment is aimed at shoring it up. And the question that President Putin faces is how exactly to shore that up. And continuing down a path of carrying out military operations in an indiscriminate fashion against the Syrian opposition is actually going to run counter to the stated goals of Russia because it only will prolong the sectarian conflict that has torn that country apart.

Q One more. I want to put this gently, but there seems to be this view that Putin keeps stealing your lunch money. There's a kind of -- that he seems to be --

MR. EARNEST: I've heard that before.

Q Yes, exactly. Is there -- you just have to sort of wait out that view? I mean, there's this sense of this sort of playground battle that he seems to be getting the best of the President on. How do you fight that, or can you not? Or do you just leave that aside?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me take that on in a couple of different ways. I think the first is that if you examine the interests of other countries in the region, that is not at all what's happening. The fact is, Russia is responding to a situation inside the Middle East from a position of weakness. Their influence in that region of the world is waning.

I've seen some of the media reports that pointed out that the military base that Russia operates inside of Syria is actually the last military base that Russia operates outside of the former Soviet Union. And that base is located in the country that over the last five years has been torn apart, and where the security situation there is highly unstable at best. And Russia is responding to that urgent situation trying to shore up their investment. So this has not been a long-term benefit from Russia. This is Russia trying to salvage what's left of a deteriorating situation inside of Syria.

Now, the second thing is a careful consideration of U.S. interests. The President has been very clear from the beginning that the prolonged commitment of U.S. military personnel on the ground inside of Syria is not something the President was willing to consider. And instead, we have implemented a strategy that has put the safety and security of the American people at the top of the list.

And I walked through yesterday some of the military actions that the United States has taken inside of Syria to take extremists off the battlefield there, and this includes operations against individuals like Abu Sayyaf, who was killed in a U.S. military raid inside of Syria over the summer; and ISIL operative named Junaid Hussain, who was actually a British national, who was recruiting Western targets for lone-wolf attacks. And this includes also an ISIL leader and foreign fighter recruiter named Tariq al-Harzi; to say nothing of the strike that was taken against David Drugeon, who was a French national but an extremist operating inside of Syria -- not affiliated with ISIL, but yet very focused on planning significant attacks against Western targets including the United States.

So the President has worked aggressively to safeguard our interests in that without making the kind of commitment that draws the United States into another land war in the Middle East. That is something that the President does not believe serves our interests well. And again, I made reference to the fact that that's exactly what Russia is getting drawn into and will have to pay the significant price for it.

Mara.

Q You said earlier that you and Russia have a shared objective, which is to degrade and destroy ISIL. Are you confident that that is actually Russia's objective?

MR. EARNEST: I do believe that Russia is being forthright when they say that they are quite concerned about the threat that is posed by ISIL and are prepared to take military action to try to destroy ISIL.

Q But that's not exactly what they're doing right now.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that's how we started this briefing, which is that they are taking strikes in the country where there are few, if any, ISIL operatives in place.

Q But that doesn't make you question that that is actually their objective, to destroy ISIL? I guess I'm --

MR. EARNEST: I think what I was walking through in response to Jeff's question are some of our shared priorities. That is clearly a priority of the United States. It's a stated priority of the Russians, and I wouldn't have any reason to dispute that that is one of their priorities. I certainly have ample reason to dispute that they're taking the actions that are going to accomplish that goal. In fact, I think they're actually taking actions that are counterproductive to that goal.

Justin.

Q First off, I was just wondering if you could give us a tick-tock of what the President has been up to for the last couple days on this -- whether he's had conversations with Secretary Kerry, the CIA Director, meetings in the Situation Room -- just how he's been briefed and updated on this.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have a lot of detail to share with you. The President has been briefed by his national security team about events on the ground inside of Syria and the President has had conversations with members of his national security team about it. But I don't have any specific meetings to tell you about.

But, look, Russia has been a fluid -- Syria has been a fluid situation for quite some time, so it's not unusual for the President to get updates on the conditions on the ground when things are changing rapidly. And that certainly has been the case over the last 24 to 36 hours.

Q I'm wondering if President Putin's latest actions have led the President to reconsider either what the U.S. is going to put into Syria, or what the U.S. might do in other regions where we're in some sort of conflict with Russia, including Ukraine. Obviously, arming Ukraine has been kind of an issue that's dangling out there. And so I'm just wondering if any of those things is under new reconsideration after what's been going on.

MR. EARNEST: No. And I made this point yesterday. I would not -- at this point, we haven't seen the kind of change that would prompt a significant, broad reevaluation of our policy either with regard to Syria or with Ukraine.

Let me just stipulate that I frequently convey to all of you that the President and his team are always reviewing our strategy in Syria and looking for areas where we might be enjoying a little bit more success and sort of refining and reforming our strategy as necessary. That's part of an ongoing policy process. But this has not caused a broad-scale -- or a broad reevaluation of our strategy inside of Syria.

When it comes to Ukraine, the situation there I think is pretty cut and dried, which is we continue to see Russia interfering in eastern Ukraine; we continue to see them destabilizing and violating the territorial integrity of a sovereign nation; and as a result, Russia has sustained serious and worsening economic consequences. And so we've talked before about the decline in the value of their currency, the downgraded economic growth projections for Russia, the expectations that their economy will shrink by 3 percent to 4 percent this year and will remain in recession new year. They're now the world's 15th largest economy, one step behind Spain, and declining.

So the situation in Ukraine, unfortunately, hasn't changed. The kind of change we'd like to see is for Russia to begin implementing their side of the bargain when it comes to the Minsk agreements. And once they start doing that that is how Russia can start to reintegrate into the international community.

Q Our friends at Reuters have reported that there's hundreds of Iranian troops that are now entering into Syria to bolster the Assad regime. I'm wondering if you can confirm that, say if it's going to need any steps from the U.S., and also if you've heard from our regional allies? I know that you mentioned statements from the Saudis earlier -- but the Saudis, the Turks -- if the Iranian intervention there is going to lead them to either bring more troops, more military equipment, whatever, into the situation.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Justin, I think you've actually highlighted what may be the most important piece of evidence to indicate how Russia's military activity is worsening the sectarian conflict inside of Syria. I have seen those reports; we're aware of those reports and we're taking a look at them. I cannot independently confirm them, but if true -- and the reports are coming from a variety of sources -- it would be a rather apt and even powerful illustration of how Russia's military intervention inside of Syria, focused on an indiscriminate bombing of Syrian opposition targets, has worsened the sectarian conflict there; that you see, at least according to these reports, Iranians racing to Syria to take up arms and join the fight.

That is not good news for the Russians. And that is consistent with a worsening sectarian conflict that only puts off a political solution -- a political solution that the Russians themselves have made a priority and said would be necessary to solving the problems inside of Syria.

Q And the last one -- just on the conversation you had with Gardiner -- I know that you can't confirm whether the CIA has backed any of rebel groups that were targets of this bombing, but do you know if any of the targets received U.S. backing of some sort, any sort of assistance? And if so, or even if not, what your message to rebel groups that might want to work with the U.S. would be who are worried about that not providing them any protection against the Russians?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll just restate again that I will not be in a position to discuss any activities that the CIA may or may not be responsible for inside of Syria. But for a more specific analysis of the targets that were hit by Russia yesterday I'd refer you to the Department of Defense. I certainly wouldn't rule out the possibility that there may be some opposition groups in that part of Syria that have received support in one form or another from the United States. And again, it reflects the risk that Russia is taking by carrying out these kinds of indiscriminate operations.

By failing to discriminate between ideologically driven extremists like ISIL and Nusra and moderate Syrian opposition elements that have a political concern with President Bashar al-Assad's leadership and have taken up arms solely to defend their families and their communities is going to lead to bad outcomes for Russia. It's only going to deepen the sectarian conflict. It's only going to further inflame sectarian tensions inside of Syria that results in more Sunnis directing their ire at Russia, both inside of Syria and back home in Russia. That is the risk that Russia is running right now. And it has significant consequences for the national security of Russia.

Q Real last one. (Laughter.) I know that you said that you weren't surprised that Russia used its military equipment that they were bringing in. Were you surprised by the targets that they had chosen in this mission?

MR. EARNEST: There had not been a discussion between the Presidents in their meeting in New York on Monday that included operational details. So there was not advance notice that was provided other than the notification that was provided to the United States by a Russian military official in Iraq.

Jon.

Q The President spoke some time ago about what he wants to accomplish before he turns the keys over to the next President. I mean, it's clear Syria is going to be a mess at the end of the second term. I mean, what realistically at this point does he hope to accomplish?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point -- it's hard to sort of, on a day-to-day basis, draw conclusions about an environment that's so fluid. But I think it's clear that what the President's top priority has been all along is to prevent extremist organizations using the

chaos inside of Syria to establish a safe haven that could then be used to attack U.S. interests or even the U.S. homeland. And that will continue to be the focus of our efforts there.

And so I guess what I would say in terms of over the next year, what kind of progress do we want to make, making progress in terms of applying pressure and even taking out leading ISIL figures operating inside of Syria and Iraq would be a priority; further strengthening and, where possible, expanding the international coalition that we have built to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

We added three new members to the ISIL coalition just this week. That's an indication of sort of the further expansion of that coalition. We've also seen recent announcements from the British and the French about the possibility that they would take additional action inside of Syria. So that's an indication that the members of that coalition are becoming even more active in it.

And then the third thing -- and in some ways, this is the most difficult one -- is there's no -- for all this discussion of our military actions there, which are critical to the national security of the American people -- for all of that military action, we are going to ultimately need a political transition. There's no military solution that can be imposed on Syria. A political solution will be required.

And hopefully, over the next year or so, we can make more progress than we have so far in trying to at least build a mechanism for talks about a political transition to take place.

Q Didn't Putin have a point when he said at the U.N. that right now, the only force -- this is back to the military component -- the only forces on the ground that are battling extremist groups like ISIS are the forces of President Assad and Kurdish militias?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not sure -- you can check with the Department of Defense on this, but I'm not sure that President Putin has a very strong case when he talks about Assad's forces fighting ISIL. The fact is, Assad's forces have predominantly been engaged in the areas where we saw Russia take strikes yesterday, and again, those are areas where there are few, if any, ISIL forces. So I'm not sure that his case is very strong there.

His case is stronger when he talks about the effectiveness of some Syrian Kurds and Syrian Arabs who have been taking the fight to ISIL on the ground. But those are precisely the opposition that the United States and our coalition partners have been actively supporting, both through airstrikes and supporting their efforts on the ground, but also in providing the kinds of equipment and material that are valuable in a fighting environment like that.

Q But then just this last question. So the President's resolve -- he has said consistently for some time now, that Assad must go -- remains. There's no -- you're adding the word "now," and you have for some time said "ultimately" -- "ultimately" a political transition. Is there any solution that would involve the Russians, as you've said, as necessary, that would continue Assad's role as the President of that country for some period of time?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me explain the use of the word “ultimately.” The reason I keep using that has less to do with Assad and more about explaining why -- if a political solution is required, why the United States continues to take robust military action to protect the country. And by saying this situation only ends with a political solution, I don’t want anybody to be left with the impression that we’re not going to do anything until we start to a political solution. So that’s why I typically use the word “ultimately” there, that we’re going to do these other things to protect our interests and to protect the country while we pursue a political solution.

But when it comes to Assad -- a legitimate question -- the things that Assad has done inside of Syria, perpetrating terrible acts of violence against innocent civilians, have caused him to lose the legitimacy to lead that country. And I’m referring to legitimacy in two different ways. The first is, he’s lost the moral legitimacy to lead that country. No leader who’s willing to use the military of that country to carry out heinous acts of violence against that country’s citizens is fit to lead the country. So there is a simple moral case about what Bashar al-Assad has perpetrated on other human beings -- Syrian citizens.

But there’s also a more practical argument to be made about how Assad has lost legitimacy to lead that country, which is that there are -- that depending on sort of how you draw the lines, probably 80 percent of the Syrian population no longer views him as a legitimate leader of Syria. He no longer exercises authority in the areas where they live. They no longer view him as a legitimate leader of Syria.

So if we’re going to try to unify that country again -- something that Secretary Kerry has said that Foreign Minister Lavrov told him is a priority of the Russians -- that just as a practical matter, just doing the math, if 80 percent of the country is not controlled by or is viewed by [views] Assad as a legitimate leader, it’s not possible for him to continue to lead that country -- which is why we need the kind of political transition that includes a moderate Syrian opposition.

This is the inherent tension in the case that the Russians continue to make. They say, well, we need a political solution inside of Syria and that’s why we’re supporting Assad. It is not possible to have a political transition inside of Syria that results in Assad continuing to lead the country because he’s not supported by the vast majority of those country’s citizens.

Major.

Q Josh, you used the word “indiscriminate” many times today, and I want to try to see if you and the administration are arguing that it is indiscriminate because it’s an accident, or it’s indiscriminate because it’s intentional. Because there’s a big difference between the two, and it goes to the likely U.S. response should this behavior continue.

MR. EARNEST: Let me try to say it more clearly, which is that we believe it is important - - and this is clear in the operations that the United States and our coalition partners have carried out -- it’s important to discriminate between the targets that you’re considering.

The United States and our coalition partners have discriminated in those targets. We have focused on hitting ISIL targets, predominantly. There are other extremist organizations that we've obviously carried out strikes against. And we've avoided taking strikes against members of the moderate Syrian opposition. And it's Russia -- and the Assad regime, frankly -- that have essentially described the Syrian opposition as essentially one unit. And failing to discriminate between ideologically driven terrorists and Syrian citizens who are just trying to defend their homes and their communities and their families is a grave mistake that will lead Russia even deeper into a sectarian conflict.

Q Thank you for that. Is it an intentional mistake by Russia? Because there are some who look at it and say Russia doesn't really know the terrain that well, they're bombing lots of different things and are not really sure what they're doing. What I'm trying to get at is, do you believe and does this administration believe Russia, in fact, knows what it's doing -- it's a miscalculation, from your point of view, but it is, nevertheless, intentional?

MR. EARNEST: It is a grave miscalculation, and it is one that carries significant risks for Russia and for the broader region. But at this point, I don't have any reason to call into question their ability to hit the targets that they intend.

Q So it's intentional?

Q So it's intentional.

MR. EARNEST: I think they are hitting the targets that they intended to hit.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. EARNEST: Although I do believe that that is -- and it is the position of the United States and, I think, many observers that that is counterproductive.

Q Okay. So help me understand what you are saying today and what Ash Carter said yesterday. Ash Carter said many things, -- among them, the most colorful metaphor of the day, the prize goes to him for "pouring gasoline on a fire." What I hear you saying is, this is a gross miscalculation; we're more or less content with the Russians screwing this up in their own way, and are willing to sort of stand by and watch them inherit all the negative things we think are going to come from this. So which is it? A gross miscalculation they're going to come to rue, or pouring gasoline on a fire?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Major, I think Secretary Carter -- you can ask his spokesman, but based on what I saw on -- well, I read the transcript last night.

Q We both did.

MR. EARNEST: We did. So the point that I think that he's trying to make is actually the same one that I am -- that by wading more deeply into the sectarian conflict, by carrying out military operations indiscriminately against the Syrian opposition, they're only fanning the flames of the sectarian conflict. And the point that I'm making is that Russia will have to pay the costs for that.

Now, let me also be clear that we don't view that in the U.S. interest either, because -- and the reason I make that point is -- I just sort of described to Jon that one of the sort of three things we hoped we could make progress on would include a political transition inside of Syria because that ultimately will be necessary to solve all of the problems plaguing Syria, including the ability of extremist organizations to create a safe haven inside of Syria, or to address this terrible humanitarian crisis that we've seen in terms of the refugee problem.

So the problem, though, is that by exacerbating the sectarian conflict, the Russians are essentially prolonging the sectarian conflict, and making a political resolution much more difficult to achieve. And the consequences will principally be borne by the Russians who will be inspiring the anger and violence of many Sunnis inside of Syria, including potentially some Sunnis that could previously be described as moderate.

So there's no satisfaction I take in conveying to you that Russia is making a grave error and miscalculation here, but it is a fact. And it, frankly, is why Secretary Kerry continues to engage in conversations with his counterpart, Foreign Minister Lavrov. It's why we're going to continue to engage in conversations through this operational military channel to ensure that our operations are properly de-conflicted. And it's why the United States is going to continue to lead an international coalition to pursue our strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q Last question. So since you consider this an intentional act from Russia, do you believe that the targeting of the forces we are supplying and backing, by whatever means, is an act of aggression against the United States and its interests in Syria, and therefore ought to be subject to a formal diplomatic and strategic protest?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I can't say with a lot of specificity precisely which targets Russia hit. So I can't confirm --

Q But you know they've been hit, you know that we're supportive of them, and you believe it to be generally intentional. I'm asking you, is that act of aggression against the United States and its interests worthy of a protest to the Soviet -- to the Russian government? Forgive me.

MR. EARNEST: What I've made clear -- and Mark and I had this conversation yesterday -- that certainly Russian military activities against opposition groups that are genuinely fighting ISIL do come into conflict with our counter-ISIL strategy. And we have made that point clear to the Russians. So I don't know if it has taken the form of a formal diplomatic rebuke of some kind, but there's no mistaking our perspective on this, and it's been conveyed to the Russians in a variety of channels.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. I want to get a big-picture view of the administration's policy in this region in particular. Can you give me a grade at this stage, given all that's happening? It has been fluid, and I know that you said that there's always a constant and ongoing

evaluation. But if you were grading right now, what grade would you give the administration?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would hesitate to do the letter grade thing because the situation on the ground is fluid. But I think that we have been pretty forthright about our concern about the situation inside of Syria, and it's multifaceted. Certainly one principal area of concern is the unthinkably terrible humanitarian situation inside of Syria and in the region that has been caused by Syrians fleeing violence inside their country.

And it's heartbreaking to read some of the accounts of these otherwise innocent Syrian families who have been terrorized in their own homes, subjected to violence either by extremists like ISIL, or the Assad regime, and been forced to leave their homes and, in some cases, even leave their country. And that is something that, I think, as the President has described, is something that stirs our conscience.

What's also true is that there are extremists that are operating inside of Syria, and we see ISIL extremists trying to establish a safe haven inside of Syria that they could use to not just destabilize Iraq but also to inspire acts of violence in other places as well. So that's certainly a subject of some concern, too.

Q So barring a grade, would you say you're dissatisfied with the way things are going, broadly speaking?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't think that there's anybody who says that they're satisfied about the situation in Syria right now. What is true is that the United States has been effective in building and leading an international coalition of 65 countries to implement an integrated strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And there have been important military actions that have been taken against leading ISIL targets. Those are strikes that have made the United States safer. We have made some progress in shutting off different lines of financing that ISIL has used to fund their reign of terror. We have also been ramping up and made some progress -- modest progress -- in countering ISIL's efforts to use social media to radicalize individuals around the world.

So that's not to say that there haven't -- and what's also true in Syria is that by backing some moderate Syrian opposition elements, they had been successful in driving ISIL out of about 17,000 square kilometers of territory inside of Syria. That is principally in northern and northeastern Syria where that progress has been made, but it has limited ISIL's access to the border with Turkey. And there is some active effort underway that includes our allies in Turkey to seal off entirely that 600-mile-long border.

So there are areas where we can point to some important progress, but I don't think there's anybody that would say they're satisfied with how things are going in Syria right now.

Q I want to switch gears for a second and ask you about Bibi Netanyahu's comments today at the U.N. He made a very powerful statement about the fact that he felt that not enough people in that body were coming to the defense of the people of Israel, and he criticized them for standing by -- deafening silence. Is he right about that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I didn't have an opportunity to see his speech. Frankly, I was spending a lot of time preparing for the other questions we've been discussing today. What I will say is that when it comes to a nation that is ready and willing to come to Israel's defense, no one has been more loyal than the United States of America, including under the leadership of Barack Obama. And the President is proud of the strong relationship between our countries and the unshakeable bond when it comes to our commitment to Israel's security.

Q Thank you, Josh. Can you tell me, isn't Russia facing now the same legitimate question you faced when you were putting together the coalition to fight ISIL in Syria, which is, could you fight the extremists inside Syria without propping up Assad? Because the Russians would say, well, it took the United States a long time in the train-and-equip program to vet who is an extremist and who is a moderate opposition, and still you failed to really distinguish and ascertain the moderate opposition in Syria that's worth equipping and training.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would acknowledge that it has taken some time to build the capacity of opposition forces on the ground inside of Syria who can take the fight to ISIL. They've made some important progress, but there's obviously a whole lot more to be done.

The problem is that progress that they have made is progress that they have made not because of the Assad regime, but actually in spite of it. The fact is, we've often seen the Assad regime carrying out military operations against moderate elements of the Syrian opposition, and we have not seen the Assad regime demonstrate either the willingness or the capacity to carry out military operations against ISIL.

So, again, I think that's the other tension in the argument that is being made by the Russians, is it's hard to make the case that you're supporting Assad because you want to fight ISIL when Assad doesn't appear to have either the desire or the capacity to fight ISIL. So it exposes a significant flaw in the logic of Russia's strategy here.

Cheryl.

Q Thanks, Josh. Different subject. Last night, you put out a statement, you're very excited that the government did not shut down, and --

MR. EARNEST: "Very excited" might be generous. (Laughter.)

Q Pleased, whatever.

MR. EARNEST: Relieved maybe.

Q And you called on Congress to pass a budget that would reverse sequestration.

MR. EARNEST: That's right.

Q There are several other big fiscal issues, including highway funding that expires at the end of this month, and debt ceiling increase as well, along with tax extenders, potential tax cuts. Do you see that all as one package? Or do you think Congress should deal with these individually?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Cheryl, you've identified some of the -- some priorities that we have identified. Some of them -- I think all of them are important; some are even more important than others. I'm referring mostly to the debt limit.

But there are other economic priorities that you didn't mention that are also important to us. This would include reauthorization of the Export-Import Bank and long-delayed action on cybersecurity legislation. This is legislation that's been sitting in the Senate for I don't know how long now, but too long. And yet, we actually see the Republican leadership holding votes on appropriations bills that they know won't pass -- these are appropriations bills that don't have any sort of bipartisan support -- while they neglect the kind of cybersecurity legislation that is critical to our economy, that is critical to our national security, and has bipartisan support in the United States Senate.

So I think it makes it difficult to explain exactly what Senator McConnell has in mind when it comes to following up on the promise that was included in his op-ed in the Wall Street Journal the day after the election -- "now we can get Congress moving again." If he were actually interested in doing that, he wouldn't be bringing to the floor pieces of legislation that he knows stand no chance of passing, and ignoring legislation that's critical to our economy and critical to our national security that probably would pass if they did the work that was necessary to get it done.

Q Senator McConnell has talked about a two-year budget plan, though, now, going forward. Do you have suggestions on the shape of that, what that should include?

MR. EARNEST: Well, obviously, we have an informed view on all of these things. And our priority has been on preventing a government shutdown, essentially reversing the sequester to ensure that our national security and economic priorities are adequately funded. That's been where our priorities have been.

Our view is that we can only accomplish those goals if Democrats and Republicans -- if Republicans are actually willing to work with Democrats to get that done. And the last time that Democrats and Republicans were able to work together on budget legislation, they actually did come to a two-year budget agreement. Whether that's appropriate this time or not remains to be seen. We'll see how things play out. But that certainly was something that Democrats and Republicans were able to accomplish together last time they were confronted with this challenge.

Chris.

Q Thanks, Josh. Going back to the Secret Service for a second, I was thinking back to some of the other problems the Secret Service has had, and the understandable -- maybe outrageous is overstating it, but certainly a great deal of unhappiness given that the safety and security of the President and his family at times seem to be at risk. And I realize that comparing what happened to Congressman Chaffetz isn't the same, but it doesn't seem like there's a lot of concern on your part. Is there concern on the part of the White House or the President that this was -- that this happened to somebody who was so vigorously investigating what was going on in the Secret Service?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Chris, it certainly is not routine for the Director of the Secret Service to personally call someone to offer an apology for the conduct of his agency. It certainly is extraordinary for the Secretary of Homeland Security to place the same telephone call. I think that should be a pretty clear indication to you just how seriously the administration takes this matter, and how seriously the Secret Service takes their responsibility to live up to the high standards that they've set for themselves at that agency. That includes the effective and proper handling of sensitive information.

So this is something that the administration, but, more importantly, that the agency takes quite seriously. And Director Clancy gave his word to Congressman Chaffetz that those who are responsible for mishandling of this information would be appropriately held accountable, and I have confidence that Director Clancy will do that.

Q Is it something the President takes quite seriously? Is he upset about this?

MR. EARNEST: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q Let me ask you about -- a couple more questions, if I can, on Russia, particularly the teleconference that took place today. Is this strictly limited to the de-confliction area? Or will some of the conversations continue about targets, some of the kinds of conversations that were had between Secretary Kerry and Mr. Lavrov?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me answer that in a couple of different ways. The first is, this is the first in what I anticipate will be a series of operational, tactical conversations to effectively de-conflict Russian and U.S. military operations in Syria. This is something that President Putin and President Obama discussed starting in their meeting on Monday. And on Thursday morning here in Washington, those conversations began.

Now, based on the readout of the call that I got, it is not clear to me that there was a discussion of some of the things that you described, including targets. The discussion focused -- at least when it came to the U.S. agenda -- on ensuring that aircraft are operating consistent with international rules and safety regulations, and ensuring that communications were being conducted on internationally recognized channels. So when you have military pilots that are flying aircraft at a high rate of speed, you want to make sure that these kinds of standards are observed by everyone who is operating there and that there is an ability to communicate, if necessary.

So those are the kinds of basics that were covered in the context of this call from the U.S. side. I'll let the Russians read out what they raised. But this is just the first in a series of calls, and I wouldn't at this point rule out that there might be a discussion of targets and some other things.

What I will say, however -- and this is something that was reiterated on the call by the United States directly to the Russians -- is that this call and these consultations do not at all represent a change in our policy of limiting military-to-military cooperation with the Russians as a result of their actions inside of Ukraine. That policy has not changed. And these conversations will not rise to that kind of broader strategic level. These kinds of consultations are important, but they will continue to focus on basic operational, tactical efforts to de-conflict our operations.

Q There have been multiple conversations over the last several days between Secretary Kerry and Sergei Lavrov, and at one point yesterday -- before I think that final meeting that went about an hour that was off his schedule -- he came up and said to the media, "Don't listen to the Pentagon." How do you read that statement?

MR. EARNEST: I didn't see that -- this is from Foreign Minister Lavrov?

Q Yes.

MR. EARNEST: I'm not sure exactly what he was referring to.

Q You don't want to even venture a -- all right. (Laughter.) And this just happened and so it may not even be on your radar that apparently there's been a shooting at a community college in Oregon in which there may be some fatalities. And again, we don't know any of the details so I'm not going to -- I don't want to project. But I just wonder, as the President looks ahead -- and I know that, whether it's written or whether it's in his head, there's sort of this list of his priorities -- when you look at things like limiting access to guns and mental illness and the kinds of things that he spoke about so movingly in places like Newtown, is there a sense that a realistic analysis says that's not something that can be high on the priority list because it's not likely to get done? Or where does that sort of fall as he looks ahead to how he spends his next 15 months or so?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Chris, the issue of sensible steps that can be taken to protect our communities from gun violence continues to be a top priority of this administration. There are some common-sense steps -- things like closing the gun show loophole and others -- that have strong bipartisan support across the country. According to some polling data, there's even a majority of Republicans that support closing the gun show loophole.

We have not yet seen that kind of strong bipartisan support across the country translate into legislative support in the United States Congress that's sufficient to pass legislation that would, again, implement these kinds of common-sense solutions. That said, we've been pretty candid about the fact that there's no piece of legislation that can be passed into law by the Congress that would prevent every single incident of gun violence, but

there are some common-sense things that we can do. And I think the vast majority of the American people share the President's view in wondering why Congress wouldn't take those kinds of common-sense steps.

And the President has been quite candid about how this is and has been a source of frustration for him. It has not at all been lowered on the priority scale, but at the same time, the President is quite realistic that we'll need to see a fundamental change in terms of the way the American people communicate this priority to Congress before we'll see a different outcome in the legislative process.

Michelle.

Q If Russia is hitting these targets -- and many now are saying that there's evidence that they are hitting U.S.-backed fighters -- how much of a setback do you see that to the coalition's work going forward? And if the goal is de-confliction with Russia and they're hitting people backed by the U.S. and destroying work that has been done, how is that not a conflict? And how could that not have been discussed in this initial contact today?

MR. EARNEST: I think I acknowledged yesterday that any sort of Russian effort to take strikes against moderate opposition fighters who are fighting ISIL does come into conflict with our counter-ISIL campaign and does run into conflict with our counter-ISIL strategy. And we've made that quite clear to the Russians.

And again, I can't speak to what additional conversations might take place in the series of consultations aimed at de-conflicting our military activities inside of Syria, but I certainly wouldn't rule out that there might be a discussion of targets in the future. But when it came to what the United States raised, we are focused on some more fundamental issues.

Q So do you see a warning coming out of this? And if they are hitting those targets, which many believe they are, what are the consequences for that? Are you thinking possibly some other form of sanctions?

MR. EARNEST: I think the consequence is that Russia is wading more deeply into what is potentially an indefinite sectarian conflict. This will serve to isolate Russia internationally. And we've seen significant statements of concern from countries like Turkey and Jordan and others who are part of our anti-ISIL coalition.

Russia certainly risks deepening and enflaming sectarian tensions in a way that forestalls any sort of political solution inside of Syria -- a political solution that the Russians themselves say will be necessary to accomplishing their goals, to say nothing of the fact that Russia risks driving elements of the moderate Syrian opposition into the arms of extremists that are operating inside of Syria, and enflaming members of the Sunni opposition such that they're prepared to carry out acts of violence against Russia inside of Syria or against Russia inside of Russia.

This is the risk that is freighted with Russia's strategic decisions here. And as I mentioned earlier, those consequences that I just outlined are far more grave than any sort of diplomatic consequences that could be imposed by the international community.

Q So are you saying that there's no way there would be international diplomatic consequences?

MR. EARNEST: I certainly wouldn't rule it out. But it certainly will not be as significant as the prospect of Russia being sucked into a years-long sectarian conflict that only makes them more vulnerable to extremist violence.

And again, just to clarify, there is no delight taken here in the United States in Russia's miscalculations. The fact is Russia's efforts forestall a political solution that we believe is necessary to stabilizing the situation inside of Syria, to prevent the worsening of the humanitarian disaster caused by the refugee crisis, and to prevent the efforts of extremist groups like ISIL from establishing a safe haven inside the chaos of Syria.

Q Does the U.S. not believe that Russia working -- okay, aside from what happens politically down the road, is it not possible that Russia working with the regime now could defeat ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, Michelle, I think that's going to be pretty hard for them to do since neither the regime nor the Russians are actually taking strikes against ISIL.

Q Well, for now. But --

MR. EARNEST: But again, this --

Q But you say that that is one of their priorities --

MR. EARNEST: This highlights the fundamental contradiction in Russia's strategy. They're supporting a regime that is either unwilling or unable to carry out strikes against ISIL. And they're supporting that regime by taking strikes in areas where ISIL forces are not likely operating.

Q Do you still believe that fighting ISIS is one of their priorities?

MR. EARNEST: I do take them at their word that they are concerned about the true impact of extremist groups like ISIL continuing to succeed in recruiting foreign terrorist fighters, in radicalizing individuals through social media, and in destabilizing the broader Middle East. I think they are genuinely concerned about that. As President Putin would tell you, just looking at a globe, Russia is a whole lot closer to the Middle East than the United States is, so they are well aware of the risks that Russia faces from extremism continuing to propagate throughout the Middle East. So I do take them at their word that degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL is a goal of theirs. But there is a fundamental contradiction in their strategy for which they cannot account.

Q Do you see it as an impossibility that they could degrade ISIS to the point of not being able to function, and then whatever happens politically happens after that?

MR. EARNEST: I think it is extremely unlikely that Russia will be able to defeat ISIL if they continue to support a regime that doesn't take strikes against ISIL and further enflames the sectarian divide inside of Syria, and if they continue to pursue a military

strategy that's predicated on taking on strikes not against ISIL but against elements of the Syrian opposition, including some elements of the Syrian opposition that are actually fighting ISIL -- or at least opposed to them.

And again, that is the fundamental contradiction on the Russian position that I think makes clear that they're operating from a position of weakness, and that they're pursuing the kind of strategy that is clearly not in the interests of the Russian people and will ultimately be counterproductive to Russia's efforts to make progress in the direction of their stated goals.

Q Thank you, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: Juliet.

Q Hi, two domestic questions for you.

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q First in terms of EPA's new ozone standard to deal with smog -- this has been decried on both sides today. Both the environmentalists and public health advocates are upset.

MR. EARNEST: I saw the headline in your story before I came out here. (Laughter.)

Q There you go. (Laughter.) Could you talk about what balance you were trying to strike and why you decided to revise it? It didn't go nearly as far as many of your traditional allies had been calling for.

MR. EARNEST: Juliet, for the actual decision behind the formulation of this rule, I'd refer you to the EPA. They can give you a much more detailed and technical explanation for how they arrived at their decision. Let me just say as a general matter, particularly when it comes to our critics who suggest that these kinds of rules will be bad for the economy, let me just point out that the EPA for more than four decades has been working with state and local agencies to cut air pollution, and in that same period of time, they have succeeded in cutting air pollution by 70 percent, while our economy has tripled.

So I think it certainly calls into question the claims -- the dire claims of some of our critics that this kind of rulemaking is inconsistent with an economic strategy. In fact, the President would make a pretty strong case to you that there is a sound economic incentive for the United States and industries in the United States to be more focused on investments in renewable and clean energy.

Q And then, on John Boehner and the possibility of him being a working partner in the last few weeks he has here on Capitol Hill. Can you give us a sense of to what extent you've seen indications that there may be a possibility to work with him more closely on key priorities before he leaves office?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Juliet, there's an open line of communication between the White House and Capitol Hill. Speaker Boehner rather colorfully described his desire to "clean out the barn" before he leaves. I think that was viewed by many here in the White House,

including myself, that that was a rather apt description of what needs to happen in Congress in the next few weeks. And if there is an opportunity for the Obama administration to support those efforts, then we'll certainly be a willing partner.

It will, however, require bipartisan cooperation; for any of this business to get taken care of, Republicans will not succeed in passing that legislation along party lines. They can't -- there simply is not support that they're able to muster in Congress sufficient to overcome the filibuster, to say nothing of the President's veto pen.

So if Republicans, including Speaker Boehner, in his last few weeks in office, does want to work in bipartisan fashion to "clean out the barn," then he'll find partners here at the White House ready to roll up our sleeves and pick up some mops and get to work.

John, I'll give you the last one.

Q Okay, I just wanted to ask you about what we're seeing over the past two days in Syria. Did the actions by Russia over the past two days make it difficult -- more difficult to recruit fighters to the opposition to the Assad government?

MR. EARNEST: Well, John, I think the way that I would answer your question is actually to remind you of how fluid the situation is on the ground. And I do think there is a significant risk that individuals who last week would be described by an informed but impartial analyst as a moderate opposition figure and a potential moderate opposition fighter and a potential moderate opposition political activist -- somebody who could participate in the political transition that's needed inside of Syria -- that as a result of Russia's actions inside of Syria that that individual essentially seeks the comfort and protection of extremists, and that they make common cause with extremists to fight Russia and to fight the Assad regime.

That seems like an entirely likely outcome to me, and it highlights why we take no special delight in Russia's miscalculation. But it also highlights, I think even more importantly, the grave consequences for Russia's inherently flawed strategy.

Q And as far as the de-confliction talks which took place today, what's next? Are there more talks? Were all the issues resolved today during that one-hour teleconference?

MR. EARNEST: No. There will be additional consultations as they work to de-conflict their efforts. So I would anticipate additional communications between Assistant Secretary Slotkin and some other members of the U.S. uniformed military and their Russian counterparts.

Thanks a lot, everybody.

END

2:45 P.M. EDT