

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 5/29/2013

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:18 P.M. EDT

MR. CARNEY: Hello, everyone. Good afternoon. Before I take your questions I wanted to let you know that on Friday, the President will be joined by college students here at the White House for an event where he will call on Congress to prevent student loan interest rates from doubling on July 1st. The President's budget includes a proposal to guarantee students a low rate in July. Democrats in the House and Senate have also put forward solutions to achieve that goal.

While we welcome that House Republicans have paid some attention to this issue this year, their proposal, unfortunately, does not meet the test. It fails to lock in low rates for students while also eliminating a safeguard that provides middle-class families most in need with lower interest rates for student loans. And it raises rates of students for deficit reduction instead of taking on closing loopholes and tax breaks for the well-off and well-connected.

The President will call on Congress to pass a solution that truly helps keep college affordable for middle-class families and students, and he looks forward to working with them in the days ahead to get there.

With that, the Associated Press.

Q Thanks, Jay. Last week, the President spoke about greater transparency in its drone program. And in that spirit, I want to ask whether you can confirm reports of a drone attack that killed a Pakistani Taliban leader today in Pakistan?

MR. CARNEY: While we are not in the position to confirm the reports of Waliur Rehman's death, if those reports were true or prove to be true, it's worth noting that his demise would deprive the TTP -- Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan -- of its second in command and chief military strategist. Waliur Rehman has participated in cross-border attacks in Afghanistan against U.S. and NATO personnel and horrific attacks against Pakistani

civilians and soldiers. And he is wanted in connection to the murder of seven American citizens on December 30, 2009, at Forward Operating Base Chapman in Khost, Afghanistan.

So while I am not in a position to confirm the reports of his death, it's important to note who this individual is.

Q You're not in a position to confirm because that's --

MR. CARNEY: I just don't have -- I'm not in a position to confirm. I don't have an ability to confirm that for you. Separately, I'm not in a position, also, to discuss operational matters, but it is important on this -- with regards to this individual, to know a little bit about his background.

Q Would you in the future then, if you have knowledge, would you be releasing this kind of information as part of this strategy that the President --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think it's important to note that as part of this commitment to transparency, the President's speech at NDU laid out the legal and policy standards that guide our actions at great length, against whom and under what circumstances we take direct action. Those standards are now there for the American public and the world to see. That does not mean that we would be able to discuss the details of every counterterrorism operation, but it does mean that there are standards in place that are public and available for every American to review.

Now, let me also say that, to the extent that a question like this would be asking about our policy generally, I would refer you to the President's speech in which he said that in the Afghan war theater we must support our troops until the transition is complete at the end of 2014. And that means we will continue to take strikes against high-value al Qaeda targets, but also against forces that are massing to support attacks on coalition forces. By the end of 2014, we will no longer have the same need for force protection and the progress we have made against core al Qaeda will reduce the need for unmanned strikes.

So I think it's important to look at what the President said within the context of the Afghan war theater operations.

Q A question on Syria. Reports today of some continuing rifts within the opposition -- some dispute between opposition in Syria and ex-patriot opposition. Does that raise questions, one, about your support for those opposition movements; and two, about any prospects for a Geneva conference that would be successful?

MR. CARNEY: First, I would say that it is not surprising that there might be disagreements within the opposition. There is a unifying principle within the opposition, and that is that Syria's future cannot include the Assad regime. And we are working to bring together representatives of the opposition and the regime with the goal of implementing the Geneva Communiqué, as you know. And the United Nations would chair the conference. Secretary Kerry has been meeting with other nations and a range of key supporters of the opposition to lay the groundwork for the conference.

So we have been working with the opposition, together with our partners, to help them come together, to unify them around core principles. And we think it's very important that the process towards implementation of the Geneva Communiqué continue. We think that, ultimately, the political transition in Syria that we seek and that the Syrian people seek is the right path to bring about a cessation of the terrible violence there and the beginning of an implementation of a post-Assad future for the Syrian people.

Q Jay, you said yesterday that when the President meets with the Chinese President Xi Jinping next week, that cybersecurity would be a top item on the agenda. I'm just wondering, in the face of what we read about as bold hacking attacks on U.S. companies and other U.S. entities, does the President bring any firm sort of discussion to that issue, offering the possibility that sanctions might be imposed on companies that indulge in hacking and that sort of thing? What kind of an agenda will he bring to that discussion?

MR. CARNEY: Well, you're correct that the President expects this to be a topic of conversation, one of many topics in his conversations with his Chinese counterpart. This is a broad and complex relationship that we have, and there will be wide-ranging discussions on U.S.-China relations, on our economic and military cooperation, the efforts that we can undertake together to deal with global challenges as well as regional ones.

But also, certainly, a topic of conversation will be North Korea; stability in Asia; expanding our bilateral military ties; climate change; and cybersecurity. And I think we have been clear in our concern about cybersecurity, our concern about the fact that there have been cyber intrusions emanating from China.

As you know, the President's National Security Advisor, Tom Donilon, is just returning from a trip to China where he met and had discussion with Chinese officials from all levels and -- from the highest levels and representing a variety of responsibilities within the Chinese government. And he raised our growing concerns with many senior Chinese officials on this matter and made clear that the United States will do all it must to protect our national networks, our critical infrastructure, and our valuable public and private sector property.

And as Mr. Donilon noted earlier this year at the Asia Society, what we have been seeking from China is for it to investigate our concerns and to start a dialogue with us on cyber issues. And we are pleased that China agreed last month to start a new working group along those lines, and through such a dialogue, we seek longer-term changes in China's behavior, including by working together to establish norms against the theft of trade secrets and confidential business information.

But I want to reiterate -- and you've heard it from the President and from senior members of his national security team -- that this is a very high priority, the issue of cybersecurity. You've seen it in the way he's taken executive action. You've seen it in the way that we press for action by Congress for this. And the President considers this a very top priority.

Q To what extent do those intrusions, which include intrusions in U.S. military information, undermine cooperation in the other areas that you cited just now?

MR. CARNEY: I think that we have an important and broad and complex relationship with China. We are the two largest economies in the world, and we engage with the Chinese on an array of issues -- economic, political, cultural, military. And this will be an important topic of what promises to be a broad conversation about a number of issues between the President and President Xi.

Q Just one other topic. There's a report of the U.S. giving instruction to the Pentagon to explore a no-fly zone in Syria. Can you comment on that?

MR. CARNEY: I can comment, as I have repeatedly, that every option available to the President remains on the table when it comes to our policy towards Syria. That, of course, includes the possibility of a no-fly zone.

I think it is inaccurate to suggest that somehow that option would be something that would be in development only now, because the President has made clear, and I and others have made clear, that he has asked that all options be available to him as he reviews those options and makes decisions about them. So the suggestion that there's some new option when we have been discussing in this room, in response to suggestions from lawmakers on Capitol Hill and others, this particular option doesn't seem particularly newsworthy.

Q The Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee has sent a letter to Eric Holder about his testimony to that committee on May 15th, during which the Attorney General said in regard to potential prosecution of the press for the disclosure of material, this is "not something I've ever been involved in, heard of, or would think would be wise policy." Roughly a week after that, as you know, Jay, the Justice Department acknowledged that Attorney General Holder was involved in the decision to seek a search warrant for the private emails of James Rosen over at FOX News. Is it the administration's opinion that the Attorney General testified truthfully at that hearing?

MR. CARNEY: I think based on what you said, he testified truthfully. I think every published report -- I think the Attorney General talked about prosecution. Every published report that I've read about the case in question says that it's completed, no further charges or prosecution is contemplated. And again, I would point you to published reports on the extremely large distinction between what's at issue here and prosecution.

Q Because the FBI affidavit identified Rosen as a potential "aider, abettor and/or co-conspirator." That sounds very prosecutorial.

MR. CARNEY: Correct. And I would point you to published reports that say no prosecutorial action was taken and none is contemplated, again, based on my reading of reports. So it seems self-evident that that charge is inaccurate.

Q And on May 16th, the President was asked whether he has confidence in the Attorney General and he answered in the affirmative. Is that still the case? Does he still have confidence in this Attorney General?

MR. CARNEY: Absolutely. He absolutely does, yes.

Q And as for Syria and the no-fly zone, this talk that Russia might provide anti-aircraft weaponry to the Syrian government, should that be viewed as a potential move by the Russians to provide some kind of deterrent to a potential no-fly zone?

MR. CARNEY: Well, the Russians have responded to questions about this. I made clear yesterday in our gaggle on Air Force One our view of the continued supply of weaponry to the Syrians and we view it dimly. We believe it's unhelpful and does not in any way contribute to the goal here, which is the reduction and elimination of the violence that's taking place in Syria. And providing a tyrannical regime like the Assad regime with weapons is certainly not helpful to that cause.

Jon.

Q Just to quickly follow up on the Eric Holder testimony, what he said in that May 15th testimony was with regard to the potential prosecution of a journalist. Did he never sign off on --

MR. CARNEY: Jon, I'm looking for any evidence that there has been suggestion to the contrary. What I have seen in published reports is that that case in question, as I understand it, again, based on publicly available information is completed, no further action is contemplated. So hypotheticals to the contrary are one thing. Clearly, what the Attorney General said is accurate.

Q Okay, no hypotheticals, and what that affidavit said was at the very least, Rosen was "an aider, abettor and/or co-conspirator." I don't know how you would feel to have your name entered in an affidavit from the Justice Department --

MR. CARNEY: I would --

Q -- at the very least if you were an aider, an abettor or co-conspirator.

MR. CARNEY: Let me say a couple of things. Be careful not to conflate facts with statements by members of Congress about what they want to be true.

Q But that's a legal document. That's not a statement.

MR. CARNEY: No, but you're talking about this in relation to what the Congressman has said. But let's just say a couple of things. One, I can only comment on this case based on the public reports and I can point you to what the published reports have said. And there's been some pretty comprehensive reporting on this.

Secondly, I think you heard from the President his general concerns about -- again, general concerns, not specific to any cases -- about actions that might have a chilling effect on the ability of journalists to do their jobs.

And for that reason, he has asked the Attorney General to meet with media organizations. He has asked the Attorney General to review policies and procedures that govern the way the Justice Department approaches these issues and to report back to him on that review. And I think it's important to allow that process to be carried out, and also to note what the President said and made clear last week in terms of his views of this matter, his views of the balance and the essential proposition that journalists need to be able to operate and do their jobs. That's certainly his view.

Q And on the national security speech, the President talked about the need for -- or his desire to have greater transparency of the drone program, and suggested that eventually this could be transferred over to be more of a military operation where there would be greater transparency. I'm wondering if you can give us an idea of what the timeline would be on this. And do you feel -- it's got to be very unusual for you, because now we're in this kind of middle period where you're acknowledging that this program exists. The previous administration didn't even do that. But here you are today giving us the justification for a drone strike that happened in Pakistan without actually confirming that it happened.

MR. CARNEY: I think I made clear that I think the extraordinary amount of information the President provided last week in a lengthy speech about our counterterrorism policies and other matters reflects his commitment to transparency on these issues. It does not mean that we are going to discuss specific counterterror operations.

Q Is that going to change over time?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I think that you have to look at what the President said last week about direct action and direct targeting, and also understand that, as he said, we have troops in harm's way in the Afghan war theater and that we need to take actions that are necessary to protect those troops, and that obviously as part of his policy with regards to the Afghan war, we are drawing down our troop presence there and we will be ending that war by the end of next year. And that will then obviously change our disposition towards these matters with regards to the troops that we have present now.

But I think it's important to note that the guidelines that he talked about and the programs that he talked about, I think that reflects his commitment to transparency, and the concerns he has about these issues and the need for a legal structure to be put in place that helps govern these counterterrorism operations. But it doesn't mean that it will be right or appropriate for us to talk about in detail specific counterterrorism operations.

Q Jay, just a follow up --

MR. CARNEY: Yes.

Q -- were you giving justification?

MR. CARNEY: I was noting -- first of all, I cannot confirm reports that this individual is dead. But I can say that what we know about him and what the world knows about him --

Q -- qualify --

MR. CARNEY: I would simply say that his demise would deprive the TTP of its second in command and chief military strategist, someone who has participated in cross-border attacks against U.S. and NATO personnel.

Q -- either in theater or for his activities, correct?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to be engaged in a --

Q You gave that background for a reason.

MR. CARNEY: So that people understand who this individual is. I'm not in a position to confirm reports of his death. I can tell you that he is -- this is the individual we're talking about.

Q But under what the President said last week, both in theater and in activities he would qualify?

MR. CARNEY: I can tell you that, as I just said, that in the Afghan war theater, we must support our troops until the transition is complete at the end of 2014.

Q What is the President's appraisal of Senator McCain's visit to meet with the Syrian rebels? And have they had a conversation? Just from the podium, would you give us a sense -- is this meddling? Is this welcome? Would you rather this not happen?

MR. CARNEY: I think we said yesterday that we were aware of his trip.

Q -- from the podium I want a sense --

MR. CARNEY: We were aware of his trip and we look forward to -- the President does -- discussing with Senator McCain his visit and his --

Q Is that on his schedule yet?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have a scheduling update for you. But as you know, the President speaks or meets with Senator McCain with some regularity. They met recently here in the White House. But I don't know that they have spoken yet since the Senator was in Syria.

Q We had a conversation last week where I asked you about the assessment that the Assad regime might be stronger. You said you didn't know what the U.S. assessment of that is. Let me ask you about the rebels. Does this administration believe the rebels are winning, gaining ground, losing ground, less organized, more problematic? What is its sense of the on-the-ground efforts to unseat the Assad regime?

MR. CARNEY: I would say that Assad remains in a vulnerable position, that his control over his country is extremely reduced because of the strength of the opposition. There are obviously ebbs and flows in something like this. And we have noted the role played by

Iran in supporting Assad. We have noted the role played by Hezbollah in supporting Assad, and have noted that that says a lot about the Assad regime in terms of the friends it has in the neighborhood and the world.

We are committed with our partners and allies to a process that brings an end to this conflict and allows the Syrian people to determine their own future and they have determined that their future cannot include the Assad regime in power. So I think that it's evident that there remains a great amount of violence in Syria, a great loss of life.

And I'm not able to give daily or weekly battlefield assessments. What I can say is that we are committed to our support for the Syrian people through humanitarian aid. We are committed to our support for the Syria opposition through the direct assistance we've been providing and will continue to provide. And we are committed to reevaluating the options that are available to the President when it comes to further action in Syria, and we evaluate those options based on assessments of whether or not implementing those options would bring us closer to the policy objective, which is the peaceful transition within Syria that the Syrian people seek and that our partners and allies seek.

Q On the Attorney General's testimony that you've been asked about today, is it your position he was technically accurate but not fully responsive? Or accurate and fully responsive?

MR. CARNEY: I would refer you to the Justice Department for further details about what specifically the Attorney General was saying. I think, based on published reports, it is my understanding that this case is complete and that no further prosecutorial action will be taken -- again, based on my reading of published reports.

Q But the fair reading of questions from the member of Congress was is there anything in this world that you're personally responsible with, or overseeing, or have an active role in. Do you believe the Attorney General was responsive on that?

MR. CARNEY: I was saying what the Attorney General said about his view on whether or not prosecution was an issue or is an issue. And I would simply point you to what the Attorney General said, and I'm saying based on the published reports that I've seen, I see no conflict between what he said and the published reports.

Q -- because obviously that came up in the testimony provided by officials representing the IRS, part of this administration. Are you satisfied, is this White House satisfied with the responsiveness of people it sends up to testify about matters of congressional interest?

MR. CARNEY: Well, it's a broad question, but the answer is yes. And if it's specific to this matter, the answer is yes.

Q Jay, specifically even if the Attorney General ruled out that he was going to prosecute Rosen, on the question of a potential prosecution, he said, "this is not something I've ever been involved in, heard of." We know he was involved in it at the very least. That's the question. Was he not telling the truth on that point? He was involved in it.

MR. CARNEY: Involved in what?

Q He signed off on the search warrant. Are you not involved after signing off on a search warrant?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I would refer you to the Justice Department.

Q Those were his words. He said it.

MR. CARNEY: You guys are conflating the subpoena with prosecution. And I think that it is -- again, I would just point you to what the Attorney General said.

Q But it is a technical accuracy you're holding on to.

MR. CARNEY: I'm not. I'm saying that based on what I've seen in published reports and what the Attorney General said, I don't see the conflict. But I would refer you to the Justice Department.

Q On the economy, the news seems pretty good. We've got -- housing is doing great.

MR. CARNEY: Ed. (Laughter.)

Q Jay, I just wanted to point that out. I don't have a question. I just wanted to say that. Consumer confidence, very good. The stock market, Jay, is doing great. What's your assessment of the economy right now, in all seriousness, in terms of -- there are some people actually saying there's a bubble and it's getting too good. And obviously, the other people would say, I'm not feeling it yet, it's actually not that good. What's the President's assessment of where we are? Because there are hopeful signs, but yet there's people who are still not feeling it.

MR. CARNEY: We believe that the economy is continuing to recover and continuing to strengthen in the aftermath of the worst recession since the Great Depression. The indicators that you mention demonstrate that the recovery is continuing. The news on housing is particularly welcome given the blow to the housing market that was caused by the financial crisis and the implosion of the housing bubble.

But we have much more work to do precisely for the reasons that you mention. There are still too many people who are looking for work who have not found work. There are still too many huge, unfilled, unmet needs when it comes to rebuilding our infrastructure. And it is essential that Democrats and Republicans come together to take action on these economic items that have generally enjoyed bipartisan support and that would provide the kind of direct infusion into our economy and job creation into our economy, the long-term benefits of infrastructure development that will help our economy thrive in the future.

We see too many instances that demonstrate anecdotally the fact that our infrastructure is in crying need of further investment. We need to take steps to further invest in education in this country, again, for the long-term economic future. We need to take steps to ensure that we are investing in areas of the economy that will produce the jobs of the future so

that we are, even as we become more energy independent, we are not trading one form of importation of energy for another. We need to make sure that we're creating the kinds of energy, 21st century energy, here in the United States, with jobs in the United States that will help us become more energy independent in the future.

So the news you mention is welcome. It is an indication of the strength and resiliency of our economy and of the American people. It is also an indication of the fact that some very tough but correct policy decisions were made in 2009 and 2010, 2011 and 2012 that have helped put us on the path towards economic recovery and job creation. But we are not there yet. We're not where we need to be yet, and we need to keep at it.

And that's why you've heard the President say and others say that the American people are principally focused on these issues, and they expect their leaders in Washington to be principally focused on these issues -- the economy and job creation, and making the middle class more secure, making it more possible for middle-class kids and kids of families striving to get into the middle class to go to college, to get the education they need. And that's what the President is committed to doing, is focusing on those issues. And he hopes to continue to work with Congress to get things done that build on the progress we've made.

Q Very last quick follow-up on the economy, which is how does the sequester fit into this? Because you said many times from this podium that it was going to really hurt the economy, and yet, you have to acknowledge -- because you want to acknowledge, obviously -- the economy is doing pretty well, even though the sequester has now had time to kick in. So how do you square those two?

MR. CARNEY: There is no question -- and don't take our word for it, take the assessments of outside economists, take the assessments of the CBO that the sequester will cost jobs -- three-quarters of a million jobs according to the CBO. It will cost us economic growth, up to half a percentage of economic growth according to the CBO.

And while the economy is recovering and doing better, it could be recovering more and doing better still if we were not engaged in the process of inflicting wounds unnecessarily on the economy. And that is what Washington all too often tends to do. And the embrace of the sequester is a perfect example of inflicting unnecessarily a wound to the economy when we should be reducing our deficit in a responsible and balanced way, and we should be investing in our economy that helps it grow even faster and create jobs at an even greater pace than we've experienced thus far.

Peter.

Q Jay, given the fact that the President is traveling this afternoon to Chicago in support of the DCCC, so he's engaging in the political process and campaigning this evening, I'm curious to get his thoughts, if he's seen them through news reports, on Representative Michele Bachmann announcing that she's not going to seek a fifth term.

MR. CARNEY: I came to the Briefing Room from the Oval Office, from a meeting, and I can tell you that that subject did not come up. So I don't have a response from the President. I think we all wish her well in her future endeavors.

I'm sorry, Peter. Did you have another one?

Q Well, yes, if I can briefly.

MR. CARNEY: Sure.

Q Sorry. I just had to get that off your plate. We just heard just a short time ago from the commanding general in Southwestern Afghanistan saying today that the Taliban in Afghanistan will not be completely destroyed, and that the fighting season in Afghanistan is still up for grabs. Given the comments you made earlier with some of the questions about the fact when we refer specifically to the Afghan theater, that by the end of 2014, there will be sufficient gains there for the policy to change as the President desires, do these new statements -- not entirely new -- but these specific ones today saying that the Taliban will not be fully defeated affect in any way the President's position on that issue?

Q Well, it's a useful question because it helps -- it allows me to remind everyone what the President's policy in Afghanistan is.

The objective for going into Afghanistan, which had been essentially lost by the time the President took office, was to go after those who attacked the United States on September 11th, 2001. The President made clear through his policy review that we needed to refocus attention on that conflict and refocus on the goals that we had set for ourselves and needed to be clear: to disrupt, dismantle and ultimately defeat al Qaeda; to provide assistance to and create the breathing room for the Afghan government to allow for a process whereby we could transition security responsibility gradually to Afghan forces; and to ensure that through doing that, we made it impossible for Afghanistan to again become a haven for al Qaeda and like-minded extremists who have the destruction of the United States and Americans as an objective.

It is not -- and that was made clear in the President's policy review and the statement of his policy -- the objective to defeat the Taliban. Reconciliation is part of the process in Afghanistan, the long-term process of bringing about a peaceful resolution to the conflict there. Defeat of al Qaeda is a very clear objective. But the long-term prospects for Afghanistan and for peaceful resolution of this conflict clearly has to include reconciliation.

For those members of the Taliban who fight U.S. troops and who fight Afghan forces, they are clearly part of this conflict and we are engaged with them. But in the long term, the objective is to defeat al Qaeda and to provide the training and assistance necessary to Afghan forces so that they can take control of the security of their country.

Q One final thought, digressing briefly, regarding the Attorney General and his efforts to reach out to news organizations for a meeting that's I believe supposed to happen at some point this week. Was that done with any involvement from the White House? Or was it

done -- or any pressure or any encouragement even from the President, or done unilaterally by the Attorney General?

MR. CARNEY: I think the President made clear last week that he wanted this to happen and he wanted a review of these policies and procedures from the Attorney General. And we think it's a constructive and useful engagement because the President is very focused on and concerned about finding the necessary balance between the need to protect our key national security secrets on the one hand, and making sure that journalists are allowed to freely pursue investigative journalism and do their jobs.

And I think you've seen that in what the President said last week. You've seen that in his continued support for a media shield law for which there is renewed support in the Senate -- and we commend Senator Schumer and Senator Graham and the others who are pushing on reintroducing a media shield law that is essentially the law that the President - - or the bill that the President and the administration negotiated with the Senate back in 2009, which enjoyed the support of media organizations as well as federal prosecutors. We would very much like to see action on that in the U.S. Senate.

Q Does the President believe the Attorney General's relationship with Congress is fixable and repairable? Or does he think things have reached a point where the trust and confidence between the two have broken down? And does he think that that is largely the fault of the Republicans, or has the Attorney General contributed to this ill will that now exists between them?

MR. CARNEY: Look, I think that the President believes that the Attorney General is doing a good job and the President has confidence in the Attorney General. There are a variety of matters that fall under the umbrella of your question. The President is committed and he has made clear to every member of his Cabinet and every member of his team that we cooperate with legitimate congressional oversight. And that has been the case in inquiry after inquiry from Congress, and that will continue to be the case.

It is also true that, depending on the issue, that there are, sometimes, attempts to politicize matters that, in the President's view, should not be politicized, but should be focused on by both parties where there's a problem that needs to be fixed, and that's the President's focus.

Q Quick follow-up. The President is going to Chicago to do some fundraising today. You've often talked about how -- one of the White House's biggest assets is the President's time. Is it a good use of the President's time to be in Chicago, campaigning, raising money for Democratic candidates? Or should he be making the case for his agenda, trying to build a congressional coalition for what he's hoping to accomplish?

MR. CARNEY: I think the President's time, I think, is devoted overwhelmingly to the former, as I think any who look at his schedule demonstrates. The fact that the President has taken some time to support the DSCC or the DNC, or the DCCC is completely consistent with the activities of his predecessors of both parties.

But I think, again, if you look at what this President is focused on and the great majority of his time is dedicated to is the business of ensuring that we have the national security policies in place that keep this country safe and keep Americans safe, and that we are pursuing an agenda that helps the economy grow, helps the middle class feel more secure, and helps those who would aspire to the middle class obtain that status. And those are the President's primary objectives. And he has, as you know, in recent weeks, focused intensely on a number of legislative objectives, including comprehensive immigration reform and there has been marked progress on that particular issue. There has been some progress on other issues. And we will continue to engage in Congress on the President's agenda.

Margaret.

Q Thanks. So several top administration officials are meeting with Latino and Hispanic business folks today. The President did not drop in, is that right?

MR. CARNEY: I don't believe he has or that that's on his schedule. But you're correct that the White House will convene, or is convening the nation's top Hispanic business leaders from across the country today for the first-ever Hispanic business leaders forum. And the event, which is held in conjunction with the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, will focus on jobs and the economy. About 80 top Hispanic business leaders are expected to attend the forum, and they come from a range of industries. Many are from Fortune 500 firms or top professional firms, or from the next generation of high-growth entrepreneurial firms. So there's a variety of senior administration officials who are participating in that forum.

Q Can you help me to understand the link between those meetings or today's event and the President's push for comprehensive immigration reform on the Hill? Does it leverage some of these guys to go to the Hill and make bipartisan --

MR. CARNEY: The focus of the meeting today is on economic growth and job creation. These are -- I'm sure that other topics might be raised, but that is the focus and purpose of the meeting today. And the participants include the Treasury Secretary; the head of the Domestic Policy Council; the U.S. Chief Technology Officer; and Valerie Jarrett, the Senior Advisor to the President, who's also the Assistant to the President for Public Engagement.

But the focus, the purpose of the meeting -- and it was convened for this -- is to discuss job creation and economic growth.

Q Can I ask you also about the -- with Mr. Xi of China this week? I know it's going to be wide-ranging, that a bunch of different stuff is going to be discussed. But I'm trying to understand kind of the balance between the desire by the two men to bond with one another, get to know each other -- and it seemed like the Chinese leader sort of did this thing for the U.S. last week by coming out strongly on North Korea -- and at the same time, like this elephant in the room is the cyber thing. So is this more of -- do you see this

as more of a dealing with tensions head on kind of meeting, or more of a let's set that aside and figure out what we can work on together? How do you -- if they're going to talk tough and they're going to talk nice, how do they do that?

MR. CARNEY: I think the signature of our approach to our bilateral relations with China and other countries is that we deal with both areas of cooperation and competition head on. We're very clear with the Chinese about issues of disagreement and very clear with the Chinese about issues where we see room for greater cooperation and coordination. And that's going to be the case here.

It is true that the Chinese just completed a leadership transition, and, of course, the President was not that long ago reelected -- President Obama -- and so this is a good time for the two leaders to get together. But the issues that you talk about have been present in the discussions between the leaders of both countries for some time now, and they'll continue to be.

I mean, this is an issue -- a relationship that has elements of significant and important cooperation as well as competition, and we engage directly on both with the Chinese and we think that that is the best approach. It is the way to further develop cooperation in our relation, whether it's military-to-military cooperation, or regional or global economic issues, or climate issues. And it's the way to deal with disagreements or areas of competition in our relationship. And that's the approach we've taken.

And we, on the matter of cybersecurity, as I mentioned, we welcome some of the statements coming out of Beijing on this, and the interest in pursuing a dialogue on these matters. But we're very clear about our concerns. And the President is very clear about the priority he places on cybersecurity for all the reasons I mentioned earlier.

Mara.

Q Where is the administration in the search for credible and corroborated facts about Syria's use of chemical weapons?

MR. CARNEY: We continue to work with our partners and allies, as well as the opposition, very importantly, in putting together and gathering evidence and facts that corroborate the information that we have and build on it. We continue to press for the Assad regime to allow U.N. investigators into the country to look into this matter --

Q Can you get the evidence without them going in?

MR. CARNEY: I think as we've talked about, without getting into sort of specifics about the process, the answer is we do have some ability, and we work with our partners and allies and, most importantly, the opposition on this matter. But I can point you to what we said about the intelligence that we had gathered and the intelligence assessments that were available at the time --

Q -- if you found any credible and corroborated --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I have no new announcements on this issue.

Q It's been about a month, I guess.

MR. CARNEY: I have no announcements to make on it. But we are continuing to pursue this matter. It's one that we consider to be very serious and important.

Q One other question. You seemed to be suggesting earlier that as the President talked about this balance between national security and the need for the press to do its job -- is the standard that a journalist isn't prosecuted -- in other words, being an unindicted coconspirator is still within the balance? Where is the standard?

MR. CARNEY: I think that two things should be said about this. First, on a specific case, beyond the published reports, I can't really offer my comments and opinions about it. I would point you to what the President said last week. I would point you to some of the published reports that I was citing earlier about the disposition of that case, about the subpoena that you're raising.

But I would also note that the President has asked for the Attorney General to review the procedures and policies in place that govern the approach to these matters when journalists are involved, as they tend to be, in investigations of the illegal leaking of classified information. And again, I think you heard from the President and his views on this and his concerns about it. You've heard from me about my views both as a spokesman and as somebody with a background in journalism.

Throughout this, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that we are talking about classified information, the leaking of which is a crime. And unless, as I said one day last week or the week before, there were the suggestions that we should simply make all information available to everybody, including al Qaeda and AQAP and everyone around the world, and eliminate that and just make it freely available and deal with the national security consequences, there has to be some process in place that allows for the protection of that classified information, that allows for there to be consequences if individuals who have sworn to keep those secrets break the law by not keeping them.

Christi.

Q Jay, I was just curious about the venue -- the choice of venue for the meeting with the Chinese President. Why is it in California rather than the White House?

MR. CARNEY: It's a good question. The President -- President Obama was looking forward to meeting with, early after the Chinese transition, the leadership transition there in China, with President Xi in his new capacity to discuss the full range of diplomatic, economic and defense issues on the U.S.-China agenda. And the President had domestic travel planned for the West Coast and California emerged as a good location for --

Q Is it a fundraiser?

MR. CARNEY: He had domestic travel in California. California is closer to Asia obviously, and California became a useful place and a good place to have this meeting. They are meeting at Sunnylands, the Annenberg Estate, which is a private location that has hosted Presidents in the past, and will allow the Presidents and -- both Presidents and a small group of advisors to have the kind of in-depth discussions that I know President Obama is looking forward.

Q So do you think they'll do a two-and-two after their meeting?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have -- we haven't worked out all of the details of the schedule yet.

Let me move around in the back. Yes, sir.

Q Thank you, sir. The British and the French are talking now about new evidence and new cases of use of chemical weapons in Syria. They even notified the United Nations. While there is no reason to believe that the Assad regime will allow the inspectors -- investigators to go inside Syria and investigate, is the President entertaining the possibility that we would never know that the red line was crossed, or not?

MR. CARNEY: I'd say two things. One is we are working with our allies and partners, obviously including the English -- the British and the French, on this issue and, importantly, the opposition on this issue, on the effort to gather evidence about the potential use of chemical weapons, or to build on the evidence that we have already gathered. And I think as you heard the President say and others say, it is very important that we be very sure and clear about the facts that we have and that those facts are corroborated and they are reviewable, and that if the case is to be made for a policy response that we ought to be able to make a very strong case.

And at the time that we were discussing this, it was noted that there is some history of -- that I think demonstrates the need to be absolutely sure of your facts and absolutely sure that you have the ability to put together a series of facts that can be corroborated and reviewed and assessed if you're going to contemplate a policy response to crossing the red line.

So we are in that process. We are working with our allies. I think there's a concerted effort from a number of areas to try to gather information about this possible chemical weapons use -- to document it, to prove it, and then to move forward once that process is continued -- completed, rather.

Q Jay, you've said from the podium repeatedly that Bashar al-Assad has to go. In a television interview, the Syrian Foreign Minister now says that Assad will remain the President of Syria until the 2014 elections and may run again. Does any of that comport with what the White House thinks the timeline should be?

MR. CARNEY: I mean, if you're telling me that Assad has made clear that he intends to cling on to power, I don't think that's news. I think the Syrian people disagree. And I think that we clearly disagree and, again, more importantly, the Syrian people, but allies

of the Syrian opposition and people around the region and the world disagree with the proposition that Assad has a future as the leader of Syria. And the process that we talk about with the Geneva Communique has to result in a post-Assad Syria.

Now, we've talked about the composition of the group of participants in those discussions and that would obviously be something that everyone has to agree to, including the opposition. But the end result here has to be a political transition that does not include at the end Bashar al-Assad in power.

Q And could that be through an election that happens in Syria?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think we are interested in bringing about that transition as soon as possible. That's why we've worked very assiduously on establishing, reinvigorating the Geneva Communiqué process and setting up a conference in June. And we're going to press to bring this about as quickly as possible, mindful of the many challenges that are out there to the conclusion of this process.

Q Does the President have a reaction to Governor Chafee of Rhode Island, Lincoln Chafee, saying that he is going to switch parties to become a Democrat?

MR. CARNEY: I would simply say that the President welcomes Governor Chafee to the party. Governor Chafee has been a longtime supporter of President Obama, and not as a party matter, but as a supporter of the President and his policy proposals. But I don't have any other response beyond that.

Yes, Andrei.

Q I have a question on Russia. As we know, recently, the Russians delivered their own message to the President. I understand you cannot talk about the contents of the document. But has the President been able to review it? What is the general reaction? Is it moving forward? What's happening?

MR. CARNEY: I'll have to take your question. I'm not aware of a document. But I can say that obviously we communicate with the Russian leadership all the time and the President has had several conversations fairly recently with President Putin.

Q But the Russian President's National Security Advisor recently visited and brought a message --

MR. CARNEY: I just don't have any information about those communications for you.

Q Could you take the message -- could you take the question, please?

MR. CARNEY: I can take the question. But my guess is we're not going to discuss those kind of communications.

Q On Syria, Jay, I'm listening to all this and basically a general-type question is do you still regard Syria as a country that's governed by international laws, that's covered by laws, to which international laws apply -- notions such as sovereignty and integrity or

whatever?

MR. CARNEY: The fact is international laws do apply, including laws of human rights. And it is an abomination for a regime to participate in the massacre of tens of thousands of its citizens. That is an abomination. And the world sees that. The Syrian people live it. And we are committed, with our allies and partners and the Syrian opposition, to bringing about a future -- or helping bring about a future for Syria that is a marked improvement on its present.

Q The reason I was bringing this up was because I simply don't understand how a lawmaker from a different country can come into a place, into a different country's territory and basically call for a regime change or something like that. What legal basis is there for that?

MR. CARNEY: We have been making clear as a matter of United States policy that we believe that Assad must not continue to rule Syria, that he has massacred his own people, that he has the blood of his own people on his hands. And that that process continues. Bashar al-Assad long ago gave up the opportunity to participate in a transition process that would improve the future of the Syrian people and the Syrian nation. He chose instead to wage war on his people. And we are unapologetic about a policy position that calls for a future in Syria that does not include a tyrant who has demonstrated his willingness to murder his own people.

Q But is he an outlaw? And does it make Syria a no-man's land legally?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not even sure what your question is. I get the sort of basic motivation behind it. I think we just disagree on our basic view of the situation in Syria.

END

2:12 P.M. EDT