

Background Briefing by Senior Administration Officials on the State Visit of President Hollande of France

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MS. LUCAS MAGNUSON: Hi, good afternoon, everybody. Happy Monday. The President is delighted to welcome President Hollande of France to the White House, starting today, for the state visit. We'll have a preview of the visit in this call. A reminder that this call is on background and our speakers should be identified as senior administration officials.

With that, I will turn it over to speaker number one.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks for joining the call. We just wanted to give you some sense of the sequence of events and agenda for the visit of President Hollande of France.

First of all, just the sequence of what to expect. This afternoon, President Obama will meet up with President Hollande at Andrews Air Force Base and they will fly together down to Monticello, where they will tour Thomas Jefferson's historic residence there and make brief comments at the conclusion of that tour.

This visit speaks to the historic ties between the U.S. and France that Thomas Jefferson did so much to cultivate as one of our principal Founding Fathers. And again, just as we are marking the relationship here in the 21st century, we wanted to note our longstanding ties with our oldest ally, France.

Tomorrow, following our normal run of show for a state visit, there will be an arrival ceremony here at the White House for President Hollande. Then there will be a bilateral meeting between the two Presidents, followed by a press conference. Then President Hollande will be hosted by Vice President Biden and Secretary Kerry for a lunch at the State Department. And then, of course, tomorrow night we will have the state dinner here at the White House.

In terms of the agenda, as you saw the Presidents note themselves in an op/ed this morning, we believe that the alliance and partnership between the U.S. and France has really grown by leaps and bounds over the course of the last several years. When you look at the agenda between the United States and France today as against 10 years ago, we have made significant progress both in terms of our bilateral cooperation but also how we work together to deal with issues around the world. Let's just say that we've come a long way from "freedom fries" and are now working together on multiple continents to promote peace and security and economic growth and development.

In terms of how the alliance has grown, I think what you've seen is consistent with President Obama's vision of partners working together to deal with global challenges. France has moved more fully into the NATO Alliance and has worked with us from Afghanistan to Libya to deal with key security challenges over the course of this administration.

I think in terms of what we will be focusing on throughout the visit, first of all, France is really a key partner in the principal security challenges that we're currently confronting. As we enter Iran negotiations, beginning in Vienna next week, towards a comprehensive agreement, the U.S. and France have been very aligned in working toward the common position with the P5-plus-1 to peacefully resolve the Iranian nuclear issue, so the two Presidents will discuss the preparations for those negotiations and the implementation of the current Joint Action Plan.

As many of you know, France has also played a critical role in dealing with security challenges in Africa with strong support from the United States. So in places like Mali and the Central African Republic, France has taken a key role in promoting peace and security, often with the support and facilitation of the United States as we provide support such as airlift and logistics and intelligence for their efforts.

I'm sure the two Presidents will address the situation in Mali and what we are doing together with countries in the region to promote lasting security in Mali and the broader Sahel region. That obviously speaks to our interest in countering terrorism and also stabilizing democratic governance in that region.

Then, of course, in the Central African Republic, France has a critical role in working with other countries in the region to try to combat the instability and violence we've seen there and put the Central African Republic back onto a path of peace and development.

As two countries that, again, have key interests across the African continent, I'm sure they will also discuss ways in which we are working to promote democratic governance and stability in Africa, generally.

In Syria, as you know, President Hollande was a key partner with President Obama in putting forward a credible threat of military force in the aftermath of the chemical weapons attack in August, and we are aligned with the French both in our desire to see that the agreement to remove and destroy Syria's chemical weapons is completed, but also in terms of pressing for greater humanitarian access to support the people of Syria who

have suffered so much in that conflict. France has also joined with us in trying to strengthen the moderate opposition within Syria in promoting a political resolution through the Geneva II process.

Beyond the security issues, there's a broad economic agenda, which my colleague can speak to. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership is one of the most ambitious transatlantic projects that we've had in many years and it has great potential to create jobs on both sides of the Atlantic, and we are working on an ambitious timeline to negotiate that agreement. And we've, of course, worked with France over the course of the last several years to encourage policies that promote growth in Europe and in the global economy, generally.

So with that, I will turn it over to my colleague to walk through some of the other aspects of the agenda, and then we'll take your questions.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Good afternoon, everybody. As you can tell we're very much looking forward to this visit of President Hollande. And to amplify some of the comments that my colleague made, the afternoon that they will spend today at Monticello is really intended to highlight the historic bonds, historic ties that we have with France. And then tomorrow we'll be showcasing how that historic relationship has been transformed to meet the challenges of today.

The reason that we chose Monticello, as my colleague mentioned, has to do certainly with the fact that Thomas Jefferson was one of the Founding Fathers, but I should also mention that he succeeded Benjamin Franklin as the U.S. Envoy to France from 1785 to 1789, so Jefferson was in France at the time that the Bastille was stormed and when you saw the French Revolution beginning. And I think we would all agree that the French Revolution in many ways was in part inspired by the American Revolution. So those themes of freedom and democracy and liberty are something that are very important to both the United States and France, and we'll be reminded of that today when President Obama and President Hollande are at Monticello.

Then tomorrow in Washington, my colleague ran through the substantive agenda that they will be talking about, and we've been thinking about that substantive agenda really as divided across four large themes. The first theme is advancing cooperation on shared security challenges. And my colleague shared with you the many issues on which we work closely together from Iran to Syria, to North Africa and Middle East peace.

The other three themes -- the second theme is promoting economic and commercial partnerships, and my colleague mentioned the Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership. A third major theme is highlighting joint efforts on development. And the final theme we'll be hitting tomorrow will be expanding cooperation on protecting the environment and addressing climate change. And what I'll do for those last three themes is turn to my colleague who can give you a bit more detail on that.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you very much. I'll just briefly cover those three economic themes we expect the two Presidents to cover in their conversations this evening and tomorrow. And the first is, of course, continuing the conversation on the global economic recovery. And I think in particular, they will be talking about encouraging signs in Europe that the recession is coming to an end, and yet, the challenges ahead to whittle away at a very high unemployment rate in Europe.

I know President Hollande has made restoring domestic demand in France and across the euro area a priority of his. And I know the President will be eager to engage in that conversation and also hear some more about Europe's plans for building stronger institutions to reinforce the eurozone.

Secondly, of course, TTIP will be high on the agenda. This is a longer-term effort to build and support growth on both sides of the Atlantic, and certainly create jobs in both Europe and the United States. Both our country and the countries of Europe face some very difficult decisions as we come closer to agreement on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. But we will be very -- we will be looking to France for leadership on this issue because its role is crucial in securing an agreement that sets really a new standard for 21st century trade agreement.

And the last thing I'd say is on climate issues, France, of course, will be hosting the climate summit next year in Paris, and we'll be working closely with our French counterparts on some ambitious targets and outcomes from that summit. We'll also be talking to President Hollande about our new initiative to end public financing of coal-fired power plants overseas except in the poorest of countries, and discussing ways in which France can help support that initiative.

Q You're not mentioning -- you're not giving any mention of surveillance in your presentation, nor was there any in the op-ed published today. We know that France is pursuing a bilateral agreement on surveillance from the NSA activities, so does that mean that no agreement has been reached yet? And if I may add, do you have any agreements yet with the Germans? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You point to an important subject that we have had a very good dialogue with the French on. Let me just say at the outset that the French have been an intelligence partner to the United States, particularly on counterterrorism efforts, and we share significant amounts of intelligence already as it relates to counterterrorism.

We have had an ongoing dialogue at various levels, so Director Clapper, Director Brennan, Susan Rice have been in very regular contact with their French counterparts about how to develop more robust intelligence cooperation.

And frankly, this discussion is not limited to addressing concerns around surveillance, although that is part of it. It's also focused on figuring out how we can cooperate even more closely in this area going forward to both better protect the security of our citizens but also provide the type of assurance that privacy safeguards are being set going forward.

I would note a few items from the President's speech that I think are particularly relevant in this context. First of all, as the President said, we are going to take steps going forward to ensure that there are similar privacy protections afforded to non-U.S. persons overseas that we provide for Americans here in the United States as it relates to the collection of metadata in particular. And this gets at how long that data can be held. It gets at questions as to how broadly disseminated that information can be and what purposes it can be used for. So we are developing these safeguards that will extend privacy assurances to citizens overseas as it relates to the collection of bulk metadata.

The President also took an unprecedented step in detailing what we do and don't collect intelligence for. And he enumerated those categories where the United States does pursue bulk collection as it relates to only a specific set of challenges like counterterrorism or countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, for instance -- and then detailing what we do not collect intelligence for in terms of bulk metadata.

And so, again, I think that was designed to provide greater assurance to citizens overseas that this is focused on security requirements, that both of our nations have their limits on what we do and what we don't do and there's going to be greater transparency going forward. So this will be another opportunity to continue that discussion with the French. It has been constructive, I think. We are quite pleased with the status of our discussions with France, and we'll continue that dialogue going forward.

As with Germany, we are also having an ongoing discussion with them about ways to deepen our intelligence cooperation. So all of this I think is intended to ensure that we are both addressing some of the concerns that have been raised over the course of the last several months to foreign leaders and foreign publics, but also that we are using the opportunity of that dialogue to strengthen our cooperation in the intelligence field.

Q Thanks, guys, for doing this. My question: You alluded earlier to France and the U.S. being on the same page in the negotiations with Iran on the nuclear program, but, of course, in the last few weeks there was a very big delegation of French businesspeople that went to Tehran to begin to look for business opportunities there. And clearly that's been addressed publicly by Wendy Sherman and I think privately by the Secretary of State. I'm wondering whether you'd expect President Obama to raise this directly with President Hollande. And then also, what is your assessment of France's role in trying to maintain the solidity of the sanctions regime? Do you worry that this kind of thing weakens that regime?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, Mark. Good question. First of all, I think it's important to note that France has been an important partner in developing the sanctions regime. As you know, after we passed our unilateral sanctions with respect to the Iranian banking and oil sectors, the critical challenge was going around the world and getting other countries to move with us in reducing or eliminating their purchases of Iranian oil. And France was a critical partner in Europe in securing the oil embargo from the European Union that had such a deep impact on the Iranian economy. So I think the

French understand the utility of sanctions in getting us to where we are in the negotiations, and they have been a good partner in enforcing that sanctions regime, including the EU oil embargo in particular.

With respect to that delegation, I'd just say a couple of things. And you're right, Wendy addressed this. Secretary Kerry actually also addressed this publicly. The point we've made clear to France and to every other country is that there can be no relaxation of sanctions beyond what was agreed to in the Joint Plan of Action unless we reach an agreement, and that, frankly, any activity to conduct business in Iran that contravenes our sanctions will be viewed by the United States as sanctionable activity. Again, that's not unique to France; that runs across the board.

We understand obviously that some businesses may explore those opportunities, but they will have to know that they will be sanctioned if they get ahead of this process. So the fact of the matter is if we reach an agreement, then, clearly, some aspect of that agreement would likely include additional sanctions relief. But if we do not reach an agreement, the current sanctions regime holds and holds in place.

I think the French government understands that position, and frankly, they have been a strong partner in the negotiations in taking a very firm line that Iran must meet the requirements of the international community and demonstrate that its program is peaceful. So while I think the subject of making sure that the sanctions regime is vigorously enforced will come up, I think we're confident that the French government understands that, is on the same page with us, and making clear that any additional sanctions relief that goes above or beyond what's in the Joint Plan of Action would only come on the other end of an agreement. And it's clearly going to be a very tough negotiation over the course of the next six months to get there.

So we are tracking this issue closely, but we've communicated privately the same thing we have communicated publicly. And I think President Obama is confident that France will be a partner with us in enforcing the current sanctions regime and certainly delaying any additional relief until after an agreement is reached. And, as we said, if an agreement is not reached, we support increasing sanctions to increase the cost on the Iranian government.

Q Thanks. Last week, a top U.S. diplomat was recorded saying some disparaging things about the EU. Have the French expressed any concerns about those comments ahead of the visit? Do you expect them to come up? And do you think it mars this visit in any way?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks for the question. I'm not aware of the French raising those concerns, so that has not been a subject in our conversations. We have, of course, talked to them about Ukraine, and I think both the United States and our European allies are committed to a process that respects the right of peaceful protest, that rolls back some of the onerous laws that restricted political freedoms in Ukraine, that seeks to foster a more -- a government of more national unity in this time of tension in Ukraine, and that, frankly, reaffirms the European path for the Ukrainian people so that there is confidence in Ukraine that they are a part of the West, they are a part of the

Atlantic community -- that that doesn't need to come at the expense of their relationship with Russia, but that they can both maintain a relationship with their neighbor to the East, but also continue the very important orientation towards Europe and the Atlantic community as well. So we have been in a common position with France as it relates to Ukraine, generally.

Again, I think the State Department has spoken to that specific recording. I would note, having been asked on this very call about issues related to surveillance, that it does beg the question of how a private conversation between two diplomats gets recorded and then released online. That certainly raises its own set of questions. But on the matter of Ukraine specifically, we feel very allied with the French in our position.

Q Yes, hi. Thanks for doing this. My question is related to Syria. We know the French have been pushing the U.S. to do more on this issue. I wonder if you will have anything to offer President Hollande? And also the French, they are preparing for a meeting in Lebanon on the 5th. Will any of the U.S. officials be present at this meeting?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, on Syria, I think what we have sought to do is work on a number of lines of effort with countries like France that share a common view of the situation with us. One is how can we increase humanitarian assistance that can reach the Syrian people? And the U.S. is the single largest donor of humanitarian aid, but we also work with other countries to make sure that we are meeting humanitarian requirements articulated by the U.N., and that different countries are providing different types of assistance that meet the greatest needs inside of Syria.

We've also been talking with the French and others about steps that the U.N. Security Council can continue to take to promote humanitarian access inside of Syria. I'm sure that that will be an area of discussion.

We've also worked with the French to coordinate our support for the moderate opposition within Syria. And we obviously provide a range of support, as well as a number of other countries that have worked together over the course of the last year or so. And so, I think discussing how we can work together to strengthen a more moderate opposition, both to be a counterpoint, obviously, to the Assad regime, but also to isolate extremist elements inside of Syria that could ultimately pose a threat to France and the United States as well. So I'm sure we'll discuss how do we continue to support that moderate opposition.

That's directly relevant to the Geneva II process, because that opposition has come to the table quite constructively in Geneva II. And as we work through that process towards a transitional governing authority, the more we are speaking with one voice in support of an outcome that meets the aspirations of the Syrian people I think the stronger that opposition will be at the table. So we'll want to discuss that issue as well.

On Lebanon, we do regularly talk to the French about the situation in Lebanon. The United States has taken some steps in recent months to increase our assistance to the Lebanese armed forces and to continue to speak up for the unity of Lebanon and for a peaceful resolution of political differences within Lebanon.

Given France's history, I'm sure it is quite likely that Lebanon may come up as a topic. And, frankly, it comes up in the context of Syria, because many of the challenges we see in Lebanon are spillover from Syria, both because of the significant refugee population inside of Lebanon because of the role of Lebanese Hezbollah in supporting the Assad regime, which has been obviously quite destabilizing and concerning to us, and also because some of the violence that has found its way into Lebanon. So we will I think be addressing the situation in Lebanon as related to the ongoing crisis in Syria.

Q I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the overall success of the joint efforts in counterterrorism in Africa -- Mali, CAR, other areas across the Sahel -- and whether we think at this point that that has really yielded results that we'd hoped for by this point in that whole effort.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd focus in particular on Mali. I think we see the Central African Republic as less of a counterterrorism challenge than, frankly, a risk of mass atrocity and chaos, although we are attuned to the fact that unstable places can potentially become terrorism threats.

But I think what we saw in Mali was a significantly growing terrorist threat when you had al Qaeda-affiliated organizations and other extremist groups that were taking more and more territory in Mali, in 2012 in particular. And what we were able to do is support the French effort to push back the extremist elements and to reclaim really the state of Mali for the people of Mali. In that effort, the U.S. provided intelligence support to help identify the activities of extremist elements. We also provided a degree of logistical support to facilitate some of those French operations.

And I think where we are now is other countries in the region have committed servicemembers to be a part of a peacekeeping effort to stabilize Mali. The French have maintained a force there as well, and we've maintained our support for that effort. I think what that has done is given us a good foothold to give space for the people of Mali to have an election and a transition in government, because ultimately a political settlement in Mali is going to have to involve a buy-in from the people of Mali.

So there's been good progress both in stabilizing the immediate situation in Mali, pushing back the extremists so they have less of a safe haven, and then trying to bring a longer-term solution. That longer-term solution is going to address not just the situation in Mali but how do we combat the flow of different extremist elements and weaponry across borders in a part of the world that faces many challenges.

So given our relationships with and support for governments from Libya to Mali, to Chad, to Niger, I think we are looking regionally at how do we shrink the space where extremists operate and support more durable political processes. And again, there has been good progress on that in the last year or year and a half or so in that you now have a government in Mali that is in place, you have extremists that have been pushed out of some of these major population centers. But there's a lot of work that has to be done, and that's going to involve intelligence-sharing, security cooperation, and support for governance that can be a stabilizing force in the region.

Q Thank you for doing this. My question is about the history of organizing a state visit for President Hollande. I wanted to know what was the triggering moment for giving the status of a state visit to the French President, because it's a rare privilege in the U.S. Was it sort of compensation for what happened during the -- over Syria, letting President Hollande somehow (inaudible) -- and also if I could ask, what is your comment on the fact that he will be the only French President not to speak in front of the joint House of Congress. Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Great, thanks for your questions. Well, I think on your first question, President Obama has invested a lot in our key European relationships. And as I said, when we took stock at the beginning of the second term here we were quite impressed by the advances that had been made in the U.S.-French relationship, that not only do we have a strong bilateral tie but we increasingly find ourselves partnering with France.

And frankly, this partnership spanned both administrations. We worked effectively with President Sarkozy in dealing with the challenge in Libya, and we've worked very well with President Hollande in supporting his initiatives in places like Mali and the Central African Republic or on the Syria and Iran issues.

So again, I think that it spoke to the fact that President Obama wanted to signal to the French people that this is one of our foundational relationships in the world; that we have welcomed the trend of increased cooperation that has spanned now two French governments; that we welcome the assertive leadership that President Hollande has shown in dealing with a range of the challenges that I've discussed.

Syria was one of them where he, of course, was quite outspoken about the need for there to be consequences for the use of chemical weapons and that helped I think bring about the agreement to remove Syria's chemical weapons.

So I think all those factors converged as we were planning around our next state visit in the summer and fall and I think made President Hollande an obvious choice for this invitation.

And again, I think it speaks to the foundational European relationships. We've been able to welcome Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Cameron, and that context is very important for us to also welcome President Hollande as a key partner, a good friend, and President of France.

But again, I think the U.S.-French relationship is in a very strong place, and President Obama has a deep affinity for France and its people, and this visit should be seen in that light.

With respect to his schedule, I know that he's making a trip out to California to speak to some of our companies out there, which I think, frankly, speaks to some of the economic potential for the U.S. and France to deepen our engagement in ways that will create jobs and prosperity on both sides of the Atlantic. So we very much welcome the initiative he's taking to go out to Silicon Valley in California and to meet with some of our businesses.

So really I think it's driven by, as with any visit from a foreign leader, questions of scheduling. And we are very pleased that we'll have a full program with him here in Washington and that he'll be able to get out and see a different part of the United States and speak to some of our most innovative businesses. So I think we believe it's a successful itinerary for him.

And I think our Congress remains supportive of the French relationship so I wouldn't read anything more into it than simply a matter of scheduling and decisions about time spent. But again, I think we think it's a constructive thing that he is traveling to California.

Q As far as climate change and next year's summit, can you just touch on what some of those targets you mentioned might be, and in particular, what the U.S. focus might be in these next couple days when Obama and Hollande meet?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you for the question. I think the specific targets are things that we're going to be working out both with our French counterparts and others who will be participating in the U.N. summit next year in France. But as you know, ever since the President outlined his Climate Action Plan, he's been trying to put substantive policies in place behind that, and in particular, one of our -- what we think is an important effort is to limit our support of public financing of conventional coal-fired power plants around the world except in the poorest of countries. So that's an initiative I think we feel very good about and are hoping to get other countries to sign on for. And we'll be talking to our French counterparts as well.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'd just add to that that we feel confident that the steps that we've taken domestically are in a good position to converge with our efforts internationally. And if you look back to Copenhagen and the subsequent discussions between Cancun and Durbin and beyond, we continue to look at what are the emissions reductions targets that the world's major economies can agree to; what type of support can we provide for poorer developing countries as they aim to bypass some of the dirtier phases of development; and what are the mechanisms for transparency verification so that we can be assured that the world is meeting its commitments.

Our own efforts at home on coal-fired power plants but also on things like fuel efficiency standards and some of the steps we've taken to promote cleaner energy have allowed us to make progress in reducing our emissions. That puts us in a good position, again, to continue this effort internationally. We've also worked through the G20 in our efforts to phase out subsidies for certain fossil fuels.

So there are many different international lines of effort that will be converging in the process that will lead into the Paris summit. But I think we have an ambitious goal here of reaching an agreement in 2015 that has been set, and the only way we're going to do that is if countries like the United States and France can over time come to a common position, and bring in countries like China and India as well so that this is a truly global coalition that goes beyond simply the Kyoto coalition.

But thanks, everyone, very much for joining the call.

MS. LUCAS MAGNUSON: Just a reminder that all information is attributable to senior administration officials. And have a good day, everyone. Thank you.

END

1:14 P.M. EST