

Press Gaggle by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz en route Joint Base Andrews, 10/14/2016

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

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Aboard Air Force One
En Route Joint Base Andrews

1:13 P.M. EDT

MR. SCHULTZ: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome aboard Air Force One en route to Andrews Air Force Base. Before we get started, I just wanted to commend to your attention the presidential policy directive approved by the President today to solidify our policy with respect to Cuba.

As you all know, back in December of 2014, following more than 50 years of bad policy, the President announced that the United States would begin to normalize relations in Cuba. Since then, we've worked with the people and government of Cuba to do exactly that, reestablishing diplomatic relations, expanding travel, opening embassies, and launching initiatives to help our people cooperate and innovate. We're determined to keep moving that progress forward.

The directive released today cements the changes we've made, promotes transparency, and encourages further engagement between our countries and our people. Additionally, as I hope you saw, the Departments of Treasury and Commerce issued further regulatory changes today, building on the progress over the last two years. These changes are representative of the progress the President witnessed firsthand when he visited Havana to personally extend a hand of friendship to the Cuban people.

His interactions with everyday Cubans told a promising story of neighbors bound by common values working to build broader ties of cooperation between the Americas.

With that, I will take your questions on that or any other topic.

Q Eric, the President is meeting with his National Security Council this afternoon. Can you flesh out a little bit more about that meeting? Particularly, will the President be getting any kind of formal recommendations from his advisors on what to do next in Syria?

MR. SCHULTZ: Sure. Josh, as we announced yesterday evening, the President will convene his National Security Council for a periodic review of his counter-ISIL campaign, as well as to discuss ongoing efforts to reduce violence, increase access for humanitarian aid, and advance a political transition in Syria.

As you know, the President does convene his National Security Council fairly regularly to, one, receive direct updates on how the counter-ISIL campaign is going, and two, to assess the progress we've made. So I expect the President to have that discussion with his team this afternoon. I think it's fair to say the President's top priority remains intensifying our military campaign against ISIL and al Qaeda, to protect the American people, our allies and partners.

The President will also receive an update on our efforts to work with local partners to pressure ISIL's two so-called capitals in Mosul and Raqqa.

Q But on Syria, we've kind of been in this holding pattern since the U.S. cut off diplomatic talks with Russia after the ceasefire failed. So is the President getting any closer to a decision about proceeding with some type of new action or strategy in Syria?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, Josh, I wouldn't anticipate any major announcements this afternoon. But what we will try and do is get you a written readout that summarizes the discussion.

I think it's also worth noting that, in this context, Secretary Kerry will be traveling to Switzerland this weekend to meet with a number of key countries to discuss the multilateral approach to resolving the crisis in Syria. As you know, this is all consistent with the President's belief that the situation in Syria can only be resolved diplomatically.

Both in the meeting later this afternoon at the White House and in Secretary Kerry's engagements abroad, I think the President's goals will be front of mind, which are, one, stopping the violence, reducing the violence in Syria; two, providing expanded access for humanitarian aid; and three, building an environment conducive to a political transition inside Syria.

Q On hacks in general, Pence today said that it's more and more clear that the Russians seem to be trying to interfere with the election. And with the WikiLeaks hack recently of Podesta's emails, today it came out that in March of 2015 apparently the campaign was questioning if it should hold back emails between Secretary Clinton and the President. Do you have any comment on that?

MR. SCHULTZ: As you know, it's longstanding tradition and practice in Washington that the President preserves the right to be able to communicate with his top advisors in real time as President. So what we've done is we have gone ahead and adopted a practice adopted by Presidents in both parties for decades now.

So I don't believe those emails will be released between the President and Secretary Clinton, but if you have questions about the tens of thousands of emails that have been released through the State Department process, you can talk to them about their process,

and then Secretary Clinton about the contents of those emails.

Q But was there a discussion between the campaign and the White House to release these emails between the President and the Secretary?

MR. SCHULTZ: Not that I'm aware of.

Q We just heard the President speak a little bit about Donald Trump making excuses for -- they seemed to pave the way for him not recognizing the result of the election. I was wondering how concerned is the White House by the prospect of him not recognizing the result of the election? And what consequences do you see if he does that, if he behaves like that?

MR. SCHULTZ: Andrew, we've heard the President discuss repeatedly why we have confidence in our election systems. We also know that Russia has a history of trying to influence elections outside its borders. They've done this in Europe quite a bit. We know that as the intelligence community determined that recent hacks into the United States, into some political entities was done at the request of senior officials in Russia. But there's a number of reasons why we can have confidence in our election systems here.

One, the way our election systems are structured around the country -- they're on different systems. So different states have different ways of tracking ballots. And sometimes that even varies down to the local level. Two, none of those systems are connected to the Internet. And three, there is a lot of oversight and a lot of sort of belt and suspenders built into the process to safeguard the integrity of our election system.

So the President has a lot of confidence in our election system, and he believes that's well grounded.

Q My question wasn't really so much about the validity of Trump's plans, rather the fact of them. What impact does that have on the political climate in the United States? And what happens on November 9th should he not recognize the result, whether these claims are legitimate or not?

MR. SCHULTZ: I see. Those claims don't seem to be coming from someone who would be on the cusp of winning.

Q On a somewhat related note, the President said democracy itself is on the ballot. That seems like it could be interpreted as kind of an apocalyptic type of claim. Does the President actually believe that if Donald Trump won, that democracy in the United States would be threatened?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I think as the President explained in his remarks, all of the progress we've made over the past eight years is at stake, because there's a Republican nominee for President who doesn't have much of an agenda other than reversing the progress of the past eight years. So whether that's ensuring 20 million new Americans with health care; whether that's reviving the economy, creating the longest stretch of private sector job growth in our nation's history; creating new and renewable sources of

energy; making housing more affordable, and making rising graduation rates higher than they've been in decades; educating young people in science and math and technology at rates that we haven't seen before; an international deal brokered thanks to the leadership of this President to reduce carbon pollution around the globe.

So, yes, the President does believe all of that is at stake.

Q But the democratic system itself, does he actually believe that's at stake? Does he actually believe that if Donald Trump won, that he doesn't believe in the democratic system and would try to undermine it in some way?

MR. SCHULTZ: There are certain views that this nominee espouses that are contrary to democratic values. Whether that's his belief that his opponent should be thrown in jail, or whether that's restricting the rights of journalists, there are definitely views that this nominee continues to maintain that run contrary to values that many of us hold dear.

Q Related to Andrew's question, a number of weeks ago the White House acknowledged that the President's advisors were considering adding elections infrastructure to the critical infrastructure. Nothing has happened on that. And we've been hearing nothing will happen before the election. So can we just button that up, and can you confirm that's not going to happen before the election?

MR. SCHULTZ: I want to quibble with that. It's not that nothing has happened. We've actually seen great engagements at the state and local level. We now have 33 states working with our Department of Homeland Security to make sure their election systems are of high caliber. So let me walk you through what that engagement means.

Q I really just want to know about the critical infrastructure designation.

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I know. But your question is about an important topic, so I want to make sure we explain where we are.

That support from DHS sort of boils down to three different buckets. One is, the assistance that these 33 states are getting includes very technical assistance and support like cyber scans, risk and vulnerability assessments, and sort of ongoing vigilance and monitoring to make sure that if there's any nefarious actors trying to interfere, that that's alerted very quickly.

The second way DHS has engaged on this is setting up an elections infrastructure cybersecurity working group. This brings together experts at all levels of the government, including local elected officials who are on the ground running these elections, running these ballots.

And then the third is a commitment to the sharing and adopting best practices. So if we know that there's certain technology or certain practices that have been adopted in one state that have proven effective, then we can make sure that that is deployed to other states.

Q Can you give a response to Senator Warren's request to the President to fire the SEC chairwoman?

MR. SCHULTZ: Todd, I saw that. I can tell you that the President continues to believe that Chair White is the right leader for the Securities and Exchange Commission. The SEC continues to have important regulatory and enforcement work to complete, and the Senate should confirm the President's nominees to the two open seats on the commission so they continue to work at full strength.

So let me just explain that over a year ago now, in October of 2015, the President nominated Lisa Fairfax and Hester Peirce to the SEC. The Senate has approved both of those nominations out of the committee, but they're still waiting for floor votes. So we believe that the Senate should hold a vote on those nominees as soon as they get back to Washington so that the SEC can proceed with full strength.

Q And can I ask you about the heckling the President has been subjected to the last two days? Does he take this in stride as part of the job? Does it irritate him? Does he think when somebody is shouting about the Dakota Access pipeline, does it give him second thoughts about the Dakota Access pipeline?

MR. SCHULTZ: I think the President definitely takes it in stride as was evidenced by how he handled these events. And I think anyone who has followed this President knows that this isn't the first time and this isn't the last time that protestors want to make their voices heard at these events.

Q Eric, the President has made reference to the speech that his wife made yesterday, and it obviously made a lot of news. Can you give us any color on any interaction between them in relation to that speech?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, those are state secrets. But I can tell you that the President is very proud of his wife's remarks yesterday. I think it's important to sort of underscore the context by which she gave that extraordinary speech. As the President himself said, if you want to know the best case for electing Secretary Clinton president, that speech is what you should go check out.

But you'll note that earlier this week, the First Lady led a White House celebration on marking International Day of the Girl. And that also was a moment to revisit all of the work done in her Let Girls Learn initiative. That's been work that's been unfolding over the last eight years, and that includes visits around the world with amazing young women who have inspired the First Lady.

Q But did they talk about it last night? I mean, can you give us any sort of color about that?

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't have any private conversations to read out to you. I will just say, though, that I think it was important that -- or I think it's important to note that when the First Lady meets these amazing young women around the world, she has the same message no matter where she is, which is they're valuable people. They should be treated

with respect and dignity, and that the measure of a society is how it treats women and girls. And I think you heard yesterday why the First Lady believes those values are at stake in this election.

Q Eric, at what point do the accusations that you guys have made about the hack with Russia become an issue for the relationship with Russia? You guys have Secretary Kerry going to meet with Sergei Lavrov, who just the other day had that line about, there are pussies on both sides of the election, right? Like making clear where things are in his mind. Has it become an issue for how the administration and the President deal with Russia, Syria and other things?

MR. SCHULTZ: The answer to the question is yes, Isaac. As you all know, our relationship with Russia is complicated. There are areas where we are able to work together, and then there's areas where we vehemently disagree.

A few of the areas we work together include the deal to eliminate Iran's path to a nuclear weapon. That was a deal where, thanks to this President's leadership but with the cooperation of the Russian government, we were able to work to get the implemented. Another place where we work together is space exploration. Our two countries have a long history of working together to explore the new frontier.

There's also areas where we disagree. I would point you to Russia's nefarious activity in the Ukraine. I would point you to Russia's propping up of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and I would point you to cyber activity. They have a long history of nefarious, and misguided, and unwise activity in cyberspace. And this is something that we raise at all levels with the Russian government. I don't have any responses to preview for you at this time. As we've said when we respond to these types of activities, we don't always announce -- we definitely don't announce them in advance, but we might not even be able to talk about them in real time because of the nature of the action.

Q Can the President trust Russia to be dealing with him fairly on anything, given that you guys are accusing Vladimir Putin and accusing the Russian government, essentially, of undermining American democracy, or attempting to, and doing it in a way that involves a lot of subterfuge?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, look, we haven't been shy about Russia's record in this space. Our own intelligence community issued a determination earlier this week -- I guess it was the end of last week now; it seems like much more longer ago -- determination that Russia was responsible for this. So we haven't been shy about that.

We've also been very clear about our concerns with their conduct in Syria, and that also speaks to their credibility, right? The reason the cessation of hostilities fell apart is because they weren't able to live up to commitments that they made. So this wasn't anything we imposed on them. These were commitments that they had agreed to that they couldn't even live up to.

Q But this is not a small claim here. And given what's being talked about just in Syria, you have the Secretary of State going to meet with a foreign minister who seems to have weighed in on this election in a government that you guys have accused of attempting to undermine American democracy. Do you really think that we can trust anything or deal fairly in any way with the Russians, given what the U.S. government has said?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well again, Russia, we know, has a long history of deploying these tactics in cyberspace that has not deterred us on working separately on issues where we think there's a mutual interest. So in other words --

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. SCHULTZ: But in other words, if there's areas where both countries can work together that advance our interests, we're not going to be shy about pursuing those.

Q Eric, you said that the issue of cyber is being raised with the Russians at every level. That's obviously you're talking about the broader issue. But this specific issue of targeting the elections, how have you raised this with the Russians? Did you send a demarche? Is the DNI going to Moscow? How are you delivering that message this time around?

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't have any internal conversations to read out to you or how the United States government has been interacting with our Russian counterparts on this. But suffice it to say, they understand our views.

Q Eric, another one of the Podesta emails that came out has a private speech transcript of Clinton saying that if North Korea doesn't do what we want them -- sorry, if China doesn't do what we want them to do on North Korea, we'll encircle China with missile defense, which seems to pull the rug out under the administration's argument that our missile defense in that part of Asia is not directed at China.

This was shortly after she left the State Department. So is the U.S. concerned that China is not really going to buy our argument when Obama's former Secretary of State said these are directed at China?

MR. SCHULTZ: Josh, I appreciate the question. I'm just not going to be able to be in a position to comment on stolen emails from someone's personal account that was hacked.

Q How about I'll rephrase it this way then: Is it still the U.S. position that missile defense systems in Asia are not intended toward China but are for other countries like North Korea?

MR. SCHULTZ: We've been very clear about our positioning in that region. I don't have any new views to read out to you, but the President's views have been clear. We have assets there, A, to support our allies and to support our partners in the region. You all frequently ask us about North Korea and what we're doing, and it's important to us to make sure that our allies and our partners in the region know that we have their back. But I don't have anything new to read out to you on that.

Q There are some reports from Iraq suggesting that the Mosul offensive is being pushed back in part because of tensions between the Turks and the Iraqis, and you've seen some pretty strong statements from Shia militia leaders talking about liberating Mosul and taking revenge whenever they get there.

I was wondering if you could confirm whether there's still more groundwork to be done before the Mosul offensive takes place there -- it seemed like it was imminent.

MR. SCHULTZ: I'll say two things about this. One is, I suspect this to be a topic in today's NSC meeting, so I don't want to get ahead of anything that's discussed there. But to the extent that it is, we'll try and make sure that that's included in the readout.

The other thing I'll say is, I'll just restate our position generally, which is we strongly support Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity. And that is the entire premise of our global ISIL coalition. So if you want to fight ISIL in Iraq, you're going to do so at the invitation and with the permission of the Iraqi central government.

Q Have you heard anything from the President on Bob Dylan's Nobel?

MR. SCHULTZ: I have not spoken to the President about it, but I believe he sent a tweet about it yesterday. And I think he believes that it's very well deserved.

Q Week ahead?

MR. SCHULTZ: On Monday, the President will visit Benjamin Banneker Academic High School to highlight the progress his administration has made over the last eight years to improve education across the country, including in Washington, D.C., where a greater share of students in recent years are being prepared for success in college and throughout their careers.

On Tuesday, the President and First Lady will welcome Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and his wife to the White House for an official visit with a state dinner. The visit will be an opportunity for the United States and Italy to celebrate the depth and breadth of our relationship. The visit will also advance cooperation across a range of shared interests, from addressing climate change and the global refugee crisis, to promoting global security and inclusive economic growth.

On Wednesday, the President will attend meetings at the White House.

And on Thursday, the President will travel to Miami-Dade College in Miami to deliver remarks about the Affordable Care Act and the progress made in ensuring that all Americans have access to quality, affordable health care. The President will also attend an event for Hillary For America, and later that evening return to Washington. Additional details about the President's travel to Florida will be made available in the coming days. As you know, this trip was rescheduled from last week.

And on Friday, the President will have meetings at the White House in Washington.

Thank you.

END

1:36 P.M. EDT