

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 9/24/2015

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. I do not have any statements to do at the top, so we can go straight to questions.

Q Thanks, Josh. I want to first start with the Putin meeting in New York next week. Can you give us a little context for what we should be expecting out of this meeting? Does the President see it as a meeting that could result in some agreements between he and Putin on Syria and Ukraine, or does he see it as an opportunity to kind of take Putin's temperature on both of these issues?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Julie, President Obama does look forward to meeting with President Putin -- at his request, at President Putin's request -- next week. Both presidents will be attending the U.N. The precise date of their meeting is still something we're hoping to resolve before the end of the day today.

Q The Russians said Monday.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. I'll let you know whether or not we can confirm that on our end. But when the President sits down with President Putin, the top item on his agenda will be Ukraine. And President Obama will once again use this occasion to reinforce to President Putin the importance of Russia keeping the commitments that they've made in the context of the Minsk agreements.

This is a message that President Putin has heard from some of our European allies who have raised concerns with the way that combined Russian separatist forces in eastern Ukraine continue to destabilize that country, and they continue to receive important military support from the Russian government. That is a clear violation of the territorial integrity of that sovereign nation.

And the impact of the coordinated action of the United States and our allies on Russia as a result of those activities are not insignificant. They have contributed to a significant weakening of the Russian economy just over the last couple of years since those sanctions were put in place. The IMF projects that Russia's economy will contract 3 to 4 percent this year, and will stay in a recession next year. The Russian economy in 2013 was measured at one-eighth the size of the United States [as] the ninth-largest economy in the world. In 2015, the Russian economy is just one-sixteenth of the size of the U.S. economy, and is now just the fifteenth in the world -- one rung below Spain on the ladder. The Russian Central Bank, since the start of the crisis in eastern Ukraine, has lost around \$150 billion in reserves. And both S&P and Moody's have downgraded Russia's credit rating to junk status.

So it is clear that Russia's international isolation and their continued refusal to abide by basic international norms, particularly when it comes to these combined Russian separatist forces, has taken a significant toll on their economy. And this will be at the top of the President's agenda when the two Presidents sit down in New York next week.

Q And yet despite everything that you just listed there, they're not actually changing their behavior in Ukraine, nor has Putin really been deterred, it seems, from moving military personnel and weaponry into Syria. So as it relates to Syria, you guys -- your public stance has basically been that you don't know what he's doing there. When the President meets with Putin privately, what is his message going to be? Where do we stand in terms of possible U.S.-Russian military cooperation on Syria?

MR. EARNEST: I think in this regard the President's public message will be quite similar -- or private message will be quite similar to the message that you've heard him deliver publicly, which is President Obama will make clear once again that Russia doubling down on their support for the Assad regime is a losing bet. The likely consequence of them doing so is only to deepen and expand the ongoing crisis in that country that doesn't serve the interests of either the Russian people or the American people.

President Obama will encourage President Putin to consider constructive contributions to the ongoing counter-ISIL effort. There are more than 60 nations that are involved in implementing a strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, and we'd like to see the Russians make a constructive contribution to that ongoing effort.

I would just note that these kinds of concerns about Russia's stepped-up military involvement in Syria are not at all inconsistent with some of the concerns that I know Prime Minister Netanyahu had the opportunity to raise when he traveled to Moscow -- I believe it was earlier this week.

Q And I guess, finally, on this -- do you worry or was it considered at all that by having this meeting -- which seems like it's going to be in a much more formal way than some of the sideline conversations they've had over the last year or two -- that this thickens your argument that you are isolating Putin on the world stage?

MR. EARNEST: No, I think -- well, you do raise an important point about sort of the length of time it's last been since the two leaders sat down in a formal way. There have been a couple of conversations around -- the President last spoke to President Putin in July to discuss the completion of the P5+1 agreement with Iran. And in the context of that call, the President rightfully acknowledged the constructive way that Russia had participated in those multilateral talks.

They had spoken a month earlier than that, back in June, to discuss the situation in Ukraine, which the President raised some of the concerns that I've just outlined. And they had face-to-face interactions last fall, I believe both at the G20 and at APEC.

But this is the first opportunity that the two leaders will have had to sit down in a formal way to discuss some of these issues. And, look, President Putin requested the meeting, and I think at this point, considering the significant concerns that I have just raised, I think it makes sense for President Obama to sit down with his counterpart and see if he can get some greater clarity about Russia's intentions inside of Ukraine and whether or not they are going to begin to take steps to abide by the commitments that they have made but failed to live up to in the context of Ukraine, and whether or not they're willing to at least consider President Obama's advice when it comes to reinforcing their military support for the Assad regime.

Q So you're not concerned that by giving him the meeting that he's requesting and giving him sort of the photo-op portion of it, I assume, that you're weakening this isolation aspect of what's supposed to be punishment for Ukraine?

MR. EARNEST: Not at all. And there will be -- the fact is -- I mean, I chronicled the toll that Russia's international isolation has taken on the domestic economy over there. And that's not going to change because of one in-person conversation. But a meeting like this does have the potential for giving the United States greater insight into exactly what Russia's intentions are. That insight is not likely to be gleaned based on one conversation, but it could lay the groundwork -- it could potentially lay the groundwork for better coordination. I think that remains to be seen, but at least it's a proposition worth testing.

Roberta.

Q You've emphasized in your remarks that President Putin requested the meeting. I'm wondering, if in the long period of time between the two leaders meeting, whether President Putin had requested other meetings that the White House or the President had turned down.

MR. EARNEST: I probably won't chronicle the meetings that didn't occur. But I would note that in the June call that the President placed to discuss Ukraine with President Putin, we noted in the readout that that was also a telephone call that President Putin had requested.

So it is clear that he's interested in the attention of the leader of the United States of America. And given the lengthy list of concerns that we have about Russia's conduct in a couple of these international hotspots, a face-to-face sit-down seems appropriate at this

junction.

Q There's about a week to go before a potential government shutdown, and we saw the veto threat this morning. I'm wondering if you could outline for us or update us on what efforts the White House has been making just in the past day or so, if any, to avert the shutdown. Is there something that the White House is doing to sort of move things forward?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I certainly can't detail all of the conversations that may have taken place between the White House and Capitol Hill, but I can confirm for you that there were -- that there have been conversations between White House officials and members of Congress up on Capitol Hill to discuss the need to avoid a government shutdown and to ensure that the sequester is not locked in, and that there's eventual bipartisan agreement around an effort to adequately fund both our national security and economic priorities.

Q And lastly, I'm wondering whether the White House is worried at all or concerned at all about the optics of the Pope's visit overshadowing the President of China's visit tomorrow. Are you worried about that having any impact on sort of the diplomatic goals that you hope to achieve?

MR. EARNEST: I have not heard anybody raise that concern. I think the sense is, is that this is a week that we have long identified as being one filled with a lot of intensive diplomacy, and that includes not just welcoming the Pope to the White House or hosting President Xi for a state dinner, but also the important work that will be done in New York early next week in the context of the United Nations General Assembly.

And in each of those meetings, the President will be considering how the United States can continue to use our international influence to advance our interests around the globe. And I'm confident we'll have ample opportunity both over the course of this afternoon but also tomorrow in the context of the formal visit to discuss what interests the United States and China share in common, and how talks can be productive even on those issues where that might be characterized by what you could describe as competition.

Kristen.

Q Josh, thank you. Keeping on President Xi's visit, there is a sense that a deal is coming together over cybersecurity. Can you update us on that effort given that they will in fact be having dinner tonight?

MR. EARNEST: Tonight's dinner is essentially the same kind of engagement that was planned when President Obama visited China last fall. You'll recall that China hosted APEC, the APEC conference, where nations from around the Asia Pacific traveled to Beijing for a set of multilateral meetings. At the end of APEC, President Obama remained in China for another day or two to engage in a series of meetings with his counterpart, and he kicked off those series of bilateral meetings with a private dinner that President Xi hosted for him in Beijing.

And I know the President found that in-person interaction, where sort of outside of the glare of the klieg lights and away from sort of the formality and pomp and circumstance, to be pretty insightful. And I think the President, despite the language barrier and some obvious stylistic differences, the President found that to be a useful format for talking about issues that were important to both leaders and to both countries. And so the idea here is to try to reciprocate that kind of -- to reciprocate that invitation with one of his own.

So the President and -- President Obama and President Xi will be having a dinner tonight over in Blair House. There will be some other senior U.S. officials there and some other Chinese officials there, but not very many. And I wouldn't anticipate a readout at this point, although the two leaders will do a news conference tomorrow, and maybe one of you will choose to ask the Presidents about their private meal.

But our hope is, is that can be a good way to begin what will eventually be a day-long set of meetings to try to advance the interests of the United States.

Q Is the ultimate goal to get a deal on cybersecurity? And has that happened yet? Have they reached a deal?

MR. EARNEST: Certainly, there's no agreement that I'm prepared to talk about at this point. But we have made clear to the Chinese, both publicly and privately, that issues related to cybersecurity and our concerns with China's conduct in cyberspace will feature prominently on the agenda. And that will start tonight at the dinner.

And I think that it is clear -- I've cited this before -- President Xi a couple of weeks ago dispatched a senior Chinese official, Secretary Meng, to travel to the United States and meet with a variety of U.S. officials, including in law enforcement, the intelligence community, and even here at the White House specifically to address the concerns that we've raised related to cybersecurity.

Q And President Xi made some comments in Seattle, saying, "The Chinese government will not in whatever form engage in commercial theft, in hacking against government networks, crimes that must be punished in accordance with the law and relevant international treaties." And I wonder what the President makes of those comments?

Does he feel like President Xi is someone we could trust? And if there is, in fact, any type of agreement, does he trust that he will stick to it -- the Chinese will stick to it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think this will be a situation where we will pay particular attention to China's behavior and their conduct, that we put more stock in their actions than their words. But obviously those kinds of comments are at least consistent with what we have urged the Chinese to do when it comes to their policies.

But again, it certainly is not going to eliminate the concerns that we have. And it certainly is not going to reduce the priority that we place on trying to make progress on those issues in the context of the meetings that are coming up in the next 36 hours.

Q And just one on the refugee crisis. The EU summit seems to be devolving. Is there more that the United States can and should be doing to help Europe with this crisis? And is there any conversation about increasing the number of Syrian refugees that might be let in from the current 10,000 figure?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, there is no -- well, let's go back to what we said. A couple of weeks ago, we did make clear that the United States, based on a decision made by the President, is prepared to accept at least 10,000 refugees in the next fiscal year. And that reflects a significant scaling up of our response. And you've heard announcements over the course of this week from Secretary Kerry indicating that the overall level -- or overall number of refugees that we intend to try to move through the process and bring into the United States will increase both in the next fiscal year and the one after that.

Q But just in terms of the Syrians, Josh -- I mean, right now it seems like the urgency is there. Why not increase that number?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there is a sense of urgency, and that's why earlier this week I announced that the United States would be committing more than \$400 million in additional humanitarian assistance to this ongoing effort. And as long as we're talking about the most effective way to meet the urgent need of those Syrians who are in such a desperate situation, beefing up that humanitarian response is the most effective way to meet those needs in the near term.

But certainly, over the longer term, we're going to need to see a couple of things. The first is a continued commitment on the part of European nations to confront the challenges that they face together, and not just rely on contributions and generosity from one or two countries on the continent. But ultimately the situation will only be resolved when we can effect the kind of political transition inside of Syria that's long overdue.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. I want to ask you about the President's morning. Did he get a chance to see the Pope's speech and his remarks on Capitol Hill? And what did he think about them?

MR. EARNEST: The President did have the opportunity to see at least part of Pope Francis's remarks to Congress today. I didn't get to talk to him about his specific reaction, but I know that he would have been struck by the kind of message that Pope Francis had to deliver not just to the leaders of this country, but to the citizens in this country. And Pope Francis made the appropriate observation, I believe, that it was important for the United States to live up to the high standard that we've set for ourselves, and that was met by those who came before us.

He cited the examples of people like Dr. King and President Lincoln for the role that they played in shaping our country and the values that guide the leaders of this country. So I thought it was a powerful speech.

Q I want to also ask you a bit about China. Is it the White House's sense that China is helping Russia economically, and in doing so blunting any potential punishment? For example, economically -- you sort of listed a number of ways that the U.S. economically has been able to sort of sanction the Russians for their misbehavior in places like Ukraine, and yet it seems like China might be sort of girding them up just a bit. Is that your sense? And if so, what does that say about China's respect for our wishes and the wishes of, frankly, many in the international community that the Russians be punished for what they've done in Ukraine?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm certainly no expert on relations between Russia and China. I did take note in the last month or so ago that there was an energy contract between Russia and China that would have yielded a significant economic benefit for Russia, and that was cancelled. So to the extent that there is any cooperation that's ongoing, it certainly doesn't seem to have been flawless. And again, to the extent that there may have been efforts by the Chinese to try to strengthen the Russian economy, based on the statistics that I read earlier it doesn't appear that their efforts were particularly successful.

The fact is, Russia is isolated and their economy has taken a hit as a result of it. And as Julie pointed out, rightly, and we've admitted this on previous occasions, it has not yet resulted in the kind of change of behavior that we would like to see from the Russians. They continue to offer support to these combined Russian separatist forces inside of eastern Ukraine, and that continues to be a source of concern not just to the United States but, in particular, to France and Germany.

Ultimately, what we'd like to see is Russia live up to the commitments that they've made in the context of the Minsk agreements. And the President has been quite clear since the very first day that these sanctions were imposed that the United States would be prepared to offer relief from those sanctions as soon as there was evidence that Russia was actually following through on what they said they were going to do. But we haven't seen that so far, and that's why those sanctions remain in place. And that's contributing to the kind of economic weakness that we're seeing in Russia right now.

Q Is there any way to further drive down the value of oil, at least domestically in terms of international supply, to further weaken the Russian economy?

MR. EARNEST: The global price of energy is one that we have, for a variety of reasons, usually in a much different context, have acknowledged that we here in the U.S. government don't have a whole lot of control over.

The fact is it's influenced by such a wide variety of things, but there's no denying that the low price of energy on the global markets has also had a negative impact on the Russian economy. And again, those who know more about the energy markets than I do have observed that the increased supply in the United States along with the reduced consumption in the United States have at least played -- been one factor in the declining price.

I don't think I can stand here and say that our efforts to promote energy efficiency and the production of oil and gas in the United States is directly related to our Russia policy. I don't think it really is; it's more directly influenced by the U.S. economy and our needs here. But there's no doubt that it has had an impact.

Q Lastly, I want to ask you about an interesting piece in the Times today about intelligence assessments. And I know you and I have talked about this previously. If you're getting bad information, if you can't rely on the information, then the veracity of that information, how do you make good decisions? How concerned is the President that some of the assessments of not just Iraq but Syria in particular has been faulty, and therefore the policies haven't been shaped by the right type of information?

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, I think as that story pointed out, there is an ongoing independent review of some of these intelligence processes. But what I have said is -- essentially echoes the point that you have just made, which is the President seeks accurate, up-to-date, timely, robust information about what is exactly happening on the ground in places like Iraq and in Syria.

The kinds of policy decisions that the Commander-in-Chief needs to make are more effective when they are informed by accurate, timely intelligence. And the President is deeply appreciative of the work of our intelligence agencies and the intelligence community for the work that they have done to try to bring that information to him and to provide him the kind of keen analysis that he relies on every day.

And there should be no doubt about the appreciation that he has for our intelligence officials, but also the kind of task that he sets before them to bring forward the most accurate, timely information -- even if that information yields bad conclusions. Even if it's bad news, the President wants to know about it so that we can confront it and figure out how to adjust our policy to make sure that we're maximizing the impact and benefitting from the desired effect.

Q What should be the punishment, if you will, and what should be the result if the investigations reveal that a particular person or persons did try to shade or cook the books? What does the President believe should happen to them?

MR. EARNEST: Again, I don't want to comment on the specific investigation or what could potentially arise from it, but I'll just say as a general matter that the President holds the intelligence community to a very high standard because of the importance of their work. But I can also say that the work that is done by the intelligence community is work that the President deeply appreciates and has a lot of confidence in.

Major.

Q Josh, good to see you.

MR. EARNEST: Nice to see you, too.

Q Could you describe for us what the administration would accept in terms of a CR?

MR. EARNEST: What the administration has -- what the President has made clear is that he believes it's important for Congress to take action before September 30th to avoid a government shutdown. And he has made clear that he does not want to see the Congress pass legislation that includes ideological riders like the one that is included in this Senate bill. And that's why we've made clear that we would veto this one.

Q I understand.

MR. EARNEST: The President has also said that the only way that we're going to resolve this budget disagreement that exists on Capitol Hill is for Republicans and Democrats to sit down together and to resolve it.

Q Would a clean CR be a bridge to that and acceptable to the President?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it certainly could be. And we have in the last couple of -- maybe it was the last week or so -- made clear that the President would be willing to sign a CR that did not include ideological riders for a relatively short period of time --

Q Essentially maintain the status quo.

MR. EARNEST: -- for a short period of time to allow members of Congress to come together and try to reach a bipartisan agreement.

The reason that we would not like to see a CR for a long period of time is it would have the effect of locking in the sequester, which would badly underfund some of our national security priorities and some of our economic priorities. But the President has indicated a willingness to tolerate that for a short period of time.

Q Can you define that?

MR. EARNEST: Not specifically, no.

Q Well, considering that negotiations have not really gelled in any way that I can tell, it's going to take a couple of weeks at least.

MR. EARNEST: They haven't gelled any way that we can tell either. (Laughter.)

Q So all I'm saying, it would take a couple of weeks it would seem.

MR. EARNEST: Yes.

Q So a month? You could do it with a month?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't want to set a deadline here at this point. But what we have made clear is that we're not looking at locking in the sequester. And in fact, we would be willing to agree to a short-term extension at current funding levels in order for Congress to reach an agreement that would not lock in the sequester. And --

Q That's a precondition.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not setting preconditions here. You asked what we are interested in, and we're interested in the kind of agreement that would ensure that the national security and economic priorities of this country are adequately funded.

Q Just to put a fine point on it, would the President therefore not sign a CR to keep the government open if it wasn't -- included with that was a pledge from Republicans to engage in negotiations that would lift the sequester, or in some ways give more room for defense and domestic spending than the current sequester limits allow?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not prepared to offer up any ultimatums from the podium today other than sort of the outlines of what we've already established about preventing a government shutdown, adequately funding our economic and national security priorities, making sure that this is not clouded by ideological riders. The good news with all of that is I think that those are broad outlines; I would readily concede that. But I do think that there is bipartisan agreement about all of that. I think that there is a sufficient bipartisan majority that generally supports all that stuff.

I would also concede that the devil is in the details in these kinds of things. So that's why the President would be willing to sign a short-term CR to give Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill the opportunity to work through those details and arrive at the kind of bipartisan budget agreement that would certainly not be perfect in the eyes of anybody, but would fulfill that criteria that I think most members of Congress agree is important.

Q On Syria you said that notion of Russia doubling down on behalf of Assad is a losing bet. But then you also said the President wants to obtain clarity on what Russia is doing there. It sounds like you already decided what Russia is doing there -- doubling down on behalf of Assad. I'm trying to reconcile those two things.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, and I think what we have acknowledged is I think a lot of people have said, well, the fact that Russia is committing these additional military resources into Syria is an indication that they're just going to do more of what they've already been doing. And what we have said is that there actually does continue to be the potential for Russia to not do that and actually find a way to use their military resources inside of Syria or other places to constructively contribute to the ongoing efforts of our counter-ISIL coalition.

Q Is it also possible that Russia is there, that in case there's a transition of a government they can be there militarily to influence the new government and play a role on the ground that the United States can't play?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what is also clear and the other observation that we've made about this --

Q You think that's possible?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what's possible is that Russia is growing increasingly concerned about the fact that their sole remaining client state in the Middle East is descending further and further into chaos, and the autocratic leader that they have

propped up in that country for a number of years now is on a downward trajectory, you might say. And so they might be concerned that the investment that they have made over the years is something that they're not prepared to lose, and so they are scrambling to try to shore up that investment.

And they could be doing that with an eye toward the future -- there's no denying that. But I would quibble with the suggestion that they may be doing that from a position of strength. I think the fact is they are -- that these kinds of decisions are decisions that are being made because their hand is being forced and because they're concerned about ultimately losing a significant bet that they've already placed.

Q Lastly, on cyber. In the conference call earlier this week -- it was a prelude to the Xi visit -- it was suggested -- and maybe I misinterpreted -- that the administration draws a very sharp distinction between espionage in the cyber world and private companies being infiltrated by state or non-state actors. Is that true?

MR. EARNEST: Yes. And that's --

Q As regards to China.

MR. EARNEST: Yes. And this is a distinction that we've drawn previously. You've heard this distinction before. But --

Q So in the context of conversations, there is a sense from the administration that if you're conducting espionage it's not nearly as bad as if you're going after private intellectual property or other cyber-crimes, correct?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't think I would characterize one as not bad or worse than the other. I think what we would merely --

Q Your higher priority is the private sector, yes?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what we would want the Chinese to do is to acknowledge the difference between the two.

Q And work out an agreement on the private side?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we certainly recognize the difference between the two, and we have raised significant public concerns that have been echoed in private conversations about the continued government-enabled cyber theft that is used for financial gain or at least financial advantage by a bunch of Chinese companies. Again, this is a concern that we've raised many times with them. It even resulted in some Chinese military officials being indicted by the Justice Department because of it.

Q I'm just trying to get the sense of priorities in these conversations and what you're trying to get at in terms of an arms control agreement on cyber. Is the priority on the private side and less on the espionage side because you can't get agreements on that

because that's going to be something that states are going to do no matter what? And the biggest priority for the President is to try to lock something down on the private side of this equation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what you could -- I would say that we are concerned by all of China's behavior in cyberspace. So stipulating that -- I wouldn't want anybody to misunderstand that -- the concerns that we have raised most loudly are those concerns centered around government-enabled cyber theft for financial gain. This is something that China has been engaged in for quite some time, and it has drawn significant rebukes from the administration. These are concerns that President Obama has raised directly with his counterpart on previous engagements.

And, yes, the possibility of using sanctions against any country or any actor that engages in this kind of behavior or benefits from it is a tool that continues to be at the President's disposal.

Jim.

Q How do you think Pope Francis has changed the debate on immigration?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it remains to be seen. I think the outlines of the debate are quite clear based on the degree to which we have engaged in this debate over the last couple of years.

I think it is quite clear right now that there is strong bipartisan support across the country for common-sense, comprehensive immigration reform because of the kind of economic and fiscal benefits that are associated with it, to say nothing of the moral component of this policy initiative.

That's why you've seen leaders in the Catholic Church, other religious leaders across the country, business interests, law enforcement leaders all come forward in support of that -- of a comprehensive, common-sense approach to immigration reform. That kind of support was effectively mobilized to advance legislation in bipartisan fashion through the United States Senate in 2013. And that bipartisan support across the country actually mobilized what we believe would have been a majority of votes in the United States House of Representatives, had that legislation not been blocked by Republicans in the House.

And we've lamented this outcome for quite some time now. But the President wasn't satisfied with just lamenting the outcome; he was determined to act. And he set out to initiate a whole series of executive actions to do as much as he possibly could to try to address some of the flaws in our broken immigration system.

But we have never viewed that as a substitute for legislative action. In fact, the President has promised that he would actually repeal all those executive actions if Congress were to take action. But I think ultimately --

Q Has the Speaker expressed any -- is there a remote possibility that this could resurface before the President's time is up?

MR. EARNEST: The President's commitment to this issue has not waned. If anything, his commitment to this issue has only strengthened. But ultimately I think the person who needs to answer this question is the Speaker of the House.

Q And during the Pope's speech, he called for the abolition of the death penalty. And I know the President has called for a review of executions in the federal prison system in the past. And he's obviously called for criminal justice reform. Would the President like to see the death penalty abolished in this country?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, you've heard the President speak about this a couple of times. And in the context of answering this question in the past, the President has noted his concerns with the way that the death penalty has been applied. There is all kinds of data to indicate that there may be some racial disparities associated with the death penalty.

There are a variety of concerns that have been raised by some charitable organizations that have taken up the cause of those who have been on death row who have mobilized enough evidence to actually have those individuals exonerated, and serious questions raised about those who have already been put to death. So certainly those kinds of results are troubling.

And I think it's fair to say the President's views are influenced by statements that are made by the Pope most recently, but by the Catholic bishops previously. But I don't have a new policy position to announce at this point.

Q He hasn't changed his position on that at this point?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any policy position to announce.

Q And on China, getting back to China, is the administration aware -- just getting back to the OPM data theft -- of any of that data being improperly used at this point? Has that surfaced?

MR. EARNEST: I think for that question I'd refer you to the Department of Homeland Security. Let me check on that. I have not heard that.

Q I know we asked that question maybe a few weeks ago, and I don't know if we've gotten an update on that.

MR. EARNEST: I haven't gotten an update on that, but let me see if I can follow up with you in terms of which government agency may be able to give you a steer on that.

Q And lastly, the Pope visited Little Sisters yesterday evening. Did the White House take that as a message from the Pope about I guess the difference that the Catholic Church has with the administration over this contraception mandate in the Affordable Care Act. It seemed to be intended as a message. Is that how it was received?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not -- I guess you'd have to talk to the Vatican for what was intended by the visit. As it relates to the specific case that has been brought to the courts by this particular organization, I believe now that seven appellate courts have considered the

steps that the administration has taken to both protect access to health care for women while also protecting the religious liberty of the members of this particular organization.

Seven of those appeals courts have found that our efforts to strike that balance between access to health care and religious liberty was effectively reached. There was one appellate court that concluded that it had not, and it may mean that there will end up being additional legal action in this area.

But I think, if anything, this particular case does illustrate the lengths to which this administration has gone to protect religious liberty while at the same time protecting access to health care that millions of women rely upon.

Jon.

Q Just to pinpoint -- when you were talking to Major about the CR, you said the White House is willing to accept a short-term CR, not a long-term CR. So is it safe to say this idea of a continuing resolution that would fund the government until the end of the year or until December, the White House would oppose that, right? Is that what you mean by long term? I mean, that takes us all the way to the end of the year.

MR. EARNEST: I think that the -- I wouldn't at this point prejudge what that length would be. I mean, I think, as Major pointed out -- and you've got more experience covering these issues than I do -- that sometimes it could take a little while for these differences when it comes to the budget to be resolved.

Q So you might be willing to accept a continuing resolution that would fund the government all the way until December?

MR. EARNEST: I think what we'd be willing to do is to join Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill in support of a piece of legislation that would prevent a government shutdown while also providing Congress enough time to work in bipartisan fashion to reach the kind of an agreement that ensures adequate funding for both our economic and our national security priorities.

Q When was the last time the President spoke to Speaker of the House Boehner?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, as you know, the President does have on occasion the opportunity to speak with Republican leaders in Congress. We don't read out every single conversation that occurs between those two leaders. Occasionally, we've found that it's more productive for those conversations to be kept confidential.

But certainly the expectation that we have is that Speaker Boehner and Leader McConnell will engage in conversations with Democratic leaders in Congress; that ultimately it is the responsibility of Congress to pass a budget. Both Speaker Boehner and Leader McConnell have attempted to pass legislation strictly along party lines to fund the government, but those efforts have not yielded legislation that's arrived on the President's desk. And that

means that, ultimately, Leader McConnell and Speaker Boehner are going to have to confront the differences that they have with Democrats in Congress before any legislation will arrive at the President's desk.

We've encouraged them to do that, and we've also made clear our willingness to facilitate those conversations, to contribute to them so that whatever bipartisan agreement is able to be reached would be one that the President is willing to sign.

Q Okay. And then quickly on Putin -- you said Putin requested the meeting. Did he say why?

MR. EARNEST: Well --

Q Because obviously a lot of things to talk to Vladimir Putin about. Did he say why he wanted to speak with the President?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'd refer you to the Kremlin for their explanation about why President Putin would like to meet with President Obama. I think I've tried to make clear to you why President Obama believes that a conversation with President Putin could be useful.

Q Okay, well the Kremlin has been quite forthright in saying that, first of all, that Putin wanted a meeting, being the first to be out there to say the meeting would happen, and then now the only one to tell us exactly when that meeting is supposedly taking place. Was the President kind of reluctant to take this meeting? It seems like the Kremlin has been certainly more forthcoming in talking about it.

MR. EARNEST: I think some might conclude that that means the Russians are --

Q More transparent? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, or --

Q I'm just kidding.

MR. EARNEST: I know, I know, it's okay. Or more desperate, right?

Q But is he more eager to have this meeting?

MR. EARNEST: They certainly -- I think it is fair for you to say that based on the repeated requests we've seen from the Russians, that they are quite interested in having a conversation with President Obama. And after, I think what I would acknowledge, is some careful consideration on our end, the President did make a decision that it was worth it at this point to engage with President Putin in a face-to-face meeting to see if the interests of the United States could be advanced in the context of those conversations.

This has been a hallmark of the President's approach to a range of foreign policy issues that, despite our significant disagreements, the President has been willing to engage in conversations with the hope that they may be able to -- that those conversations could

advance our interests.

In this case, it appears that President Putin is convinced that his position would be -- would benefit from a conversation with President Obama. And if that's the case, hopefully we'll be able to find some common ground and have the kinds of conversations that would result in advancing our mutual interests.

But look, we've also -- we're also quite aware, and I think one of the reasons that an offer like this is something that receives a lot of deliberation is that we haven't seen the Russians be particularly willing to live up to the commitments they have made in the context of diplomatic talks.

There are a number of times that President Putin has sat down with Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande to discuss Russia's actions in Ukraine. And in the context of those conversations, Russia has made any number of commitments about their ongoing support for combined Russian separatist forces in eastern Ukraine. But Russia hasn't really been willing to follow up -- or follow through on those commitments. So I think that would explain why an offer from President Putin to meet face to face with President Obama is one that is carefully considered and deliberated upon before it's accepted.

Scott.

Q I wanted to get a little more window into that consideration in what has changed so that you feel like this is a productive time to meet with Putin after more than a year of giving him the diplomatic cold shoulder.

MR. EARNEST: Well, there have been -- we talked before that there have been some engagements between President Obama and President Putin -- a couple on the phone this summer, and a couple in person last fall. And I don't know if I can point to a specific thing that has changed. But I do think that the President and his team have concluded that there is the potential for something constructive to come out of a meeting between the Russian President and President Obama.

It doesn't mean that there will be a major announcement out of the meeting. In fact, I would be surprised if there is. But could it lay the groundwork for some more constructive conversations and more effective cooperation between our two countries? That possibility does exist.

After all, President Putin himself says that he -- or at least he claims to share the goals of our counter-ISIL coalition. If that's true, then it seems like it shouldn't be too hard to convince him to contribute to our ongoing effort. But we'll have to see what President Putin is willing to commit to, and if he does make any commitments, if he's actually willing to follow through on them. When it comes to matters like Ukraine, he hasn't been willing to do that.

Q So while Ukraine is at the top of the President's agenda, how much was Syria a factor into deciding to take this meeting now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we're certainly aware -- and as we've discussed here -- of the concerns with Russia's behavior inside of Syria. And the President has spoken publicly about how Russia doubling down on their support for Assad would be a losing bet, so we're certainly mindful that that's on the agenda, but it's not what the President believes is the most pressing issue between our two countries.

JC.

Q To follow up on Scott, you just mentioned two individuals vis-à-vis the Ukraine issue, Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande. Is David Cameron in the mix? And might the President have a conversation -- does he look forward to a conversation with the leaders who are involved in the sanctions for Mr. Putin's activities in Ukraine before he meets with Mr. Putin kind of as a rallying call or conversation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I certainly wouldn't rule out any consultations with Prime Minister Cameron. In fact, if you stick around today, we may have a little news in that regard. And I think this sort of reflects the kind of international consensus there is about Russia's destabilizing behavior inside of Ukraine and concerns about Russia's intent when it comes to the use of their military inside of Syria.

Again, Russia is operating from a position of weakness in confronting challenges in both those countries. But they have taken steps that we believe in both situations are counterproductive when it comes to both their own interests but also the broader international community's interests.

We believe there's a collective interest in respecting the basic territorial integrity of sovereign nations. We believe it's in Russia's interest to observe those international norms. Instead, they've flouted them for more than a year now. And that has been a source of some concern not just on the part of the United States, but on the part of the United States and our European allies. And we've taken the kinds of steps that have isolated Russia and taken a toll on the economy.

Q You mentioned earlier, if I may, that Mr. Putin has a reason for staying involved with Syria. It seems to be his -- I don't know -- I don't want to put words in your mouth -- is it's kind of a surrogate nation.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, well, we've described them as a client state. And it's been that way for some time now.

Q But the former Soviet Union, under Mr. Khrushchev, also had influence and a desire to find a client state with Mr. Nasser during that era in Egypt. Do you think that Mr. Putin may have his eyes on some other countries, as well, in the Middle East to get that stronghold?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that -- well, let me confront this in a couple of ways. The first is, when you're the -- when you've been reduced to the fifteenth-largest economy in the world, it means that you're going to have to be very judicious about how you choose to invest your resources. And it means that President Putin will have to choose wisely as he

considers how to account for some of the weakness in Russia's interest in some of these other locations. So I certainly wouldn't rule out that he may choose other venues to try to exercise some influence. But his ability to do that is going to be constrained by Russia's international isolation and their declining economy.

Pam.

Q When the President spoke to the Business Roundtable recently, and he talked about China and how the administration was preparing steps or initiatives to show China that they were more than mildly upset, was he referring to the economic sanctions? And was he also referring to just sort of the business -- U.S. business intrusions, or also U.S. government intrusions?

MR. EARNEST: You're talking about on China here?

Q Yes.

MR. EARNEST: What the President talked about in the context of the Business Roundtable is raising the kinds of concerns that we have in the past about government-enabled cyber theft that we have suggested that China has previously been involved with for the financial gain of corporations inside of China. There are other instances where it certainly has given them a competitive advantage over U.S. businesses. That's been the source of significant concern. This is something that President Obama has raised with President Xi in previous meetings between the two leaders.

It's also -- these are also concerns that President Obama raised with President Xi's predecessor in meetings that he had with President Hu. So these are long-running concerns, and these are concerns that have long been priorities of the business community. They recognize that some of this behavior has had an impact on their ability to do business around the world and do business inside of China.

And the President made the observation that many times he would attend either a meeting like the Business Roundtable, or a private meeting with business leaders here at the White House -- which the President does occasionally -- where business officials would get exercised about the conditions inside of China and the impact that it's having on their company.

But yet they've also been reluctant to have the United States aggressively press their case on their behalf because they're worried about either some sort of retribution or retaliation on the part of the Chinese. So the President made clear that that had previously hamstrung efforts that were undertaken by the U.S. government to try to protect those business interests.

So overall, though, this is an issue that will be -- will rate highly on the agenda when President Xi is here to meet with President Obama. And what is clear -- I guess the one piece of good news that is here is that what is clear is that it is clear that China now understands just how seriously we take this issue, and how serious we are about getting them to try to address it.

Q I know you haven't blamed China for the OPM hack, but is that specifically -- will the President raise that specifically with President Xi?

MR. EARNEST: I don't want to prejudge any of their conversations. And you're right that we haven't publicly made any pronouncements about --

Q Have you privately?

MR. EARNEST: -- who may have been responsible for that particular incident. The work of our investigators continues, and there are some conclusions that they have drawn that have been aired publicly, but nothing that we have made a pronouncement about at this point.

So I wouldn't want to prejudge whether or not an incident like that would come up in the context of the private conversation between the two Presidents, but certainly the broader issue will.

Colleen.

Q Thanks. There are reports today that the U.S. and Russia have reached some sort of agreement on how to end the crisis in Syria. There's an Assad advisor saying there's a -- this person calls it "tacit agreement," and that there's been some change in the West's position. Any truth to that? Is there any sort of agreement?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen that report, but based on the way that you've described it I wouldn't put a lot of stock in it.

Q Is there any change in the United States' position?

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

Q Okay.

MR. EARNEST: Angela, you had your hand up earlier.

Q Thanks, Josh. Following up on Pam's question and your emphasis on the word "publicly" in terms of assigning blame for the OPM hack, is publicly naming China as the perpetrator of that a potential bargaining chip when the President meets with his counterpart today and tomorrow?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I wouldn't -- at this point I wouldn't speculate on what the eventual conclusion of our investigators who are continuing to look at this matter will be. So at this point, it would be too early to speculate on whether or not we would make -- we would publicly implicate China in that particular matter.

I will just say that we have made clear our concerns about Russia's activity -- I'm sorry, China's activity in cyberspace. We're jumping back and forth here so I'm trying to keep up -- and there are a range of tools that are at the President's disposal for responding to

those concerns. And we do continue to believe that just having some of those tools on the table, including possible financial sanctions, have been effective in serving as a deterrent, and in advancing our interests in this regard.

But as for anything that could come up in the context of their meetings, I don't have anything to preview beyond what I've already said.

Q And then to go back to Russia -- you've made clear that the U.S.'s top agenda item is Ukraine for that meeting, but your counterpart at the Kremlin spoke to reporters a couple hours ago and said that they plan to talk about Syria, and if there's time they'll also get to Ukraine.

MR. EARNEST: There will be time. (Laughter.) There will be time.

Q Does that portend a tense meeting, given these very different agendas?

MR. EARNEST: It might. Look, I wouldn't -- the President has described his previous discussions with President Putin as "blunt" and "businesslike." I wouldn't anticipate significant, overt hostility, but I do think that there are some serious issues that the United States and Russia have to discuss. And the President is not going to shy away from raising our significant concerns with Russia's behavior in Ukraine and other places around the world.

John.

Q Thanks, Josh. Over the course of the past few months, even today, U.S.-Russian relations have been described as "tense," as "strained," as "chilly," as "cool." Does President Putin bear sole responsibility for where U.S.-Russian relations are right now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess I would say it this way. My guess is that President Putin is not particularly concerned about the use of those adjectives to describe the relationships between our two countries. In fact, I think that he may feel that that may enhance his status one way or another.

But the fact is, because of Russia's behavior in Ukraine and their ongoing support for the combined Russian separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, the United States has engaged in a policy of working with our allies in Europe to isolate Russia. And that could result in a relationship -- or it could result in at least some of those words being an apt description of the relationship.

At the same time, the President has made clear that he's prepared to waive those sanctions as soon as Russia is prepared to demonstrate a commitment to complying with the agreements that were reached in Minsk. Thus far, they've been either unwilling or unable to do so.

Q You said in answer to my question that it may actually "enhance" Mr. Putin's status. I would imagine when you say that back home, perhaps --

MR. EARNEST: Well, what I was alluding to is I think he thinks it may enhance his status. We've seen Russia, certainly over the last year, and President Putin directly over the last year, seek to position Russia sort of as the chief competitor to the United States around the world. And the President has previously described Russia as a regional power to illustrate that they do have influence in the region and are seeking to hold on to the influence that they may be losing in places like the Middle East. And that certainly is different than the kind of influence that the United States wields all around the globe.

Q You have sometimes personalized things as it relates to President Putin, and so has the President. The President once said that "Putin's schtick is to look like the tough guy." He once also said, "He does have a public style where he likes to sit back and look a little bored during the course of joint interviews." Does that help matters in terms of that U.S.-Russian relationship when you and the President himself personalizes things in that matter about President Putin?

MR. EARNEST: I suspect that that was a question that was in response to a question the President was asked about his personal relationship with President Putin. I think the irony of your question is -- and I don't mean this as a criticism but I think it is a fact -- that there's a tendency on the part of all of you as you observe these interactions to personalize them. And I think that's why the President has tried to --

Q The President could answer -- doesn't even have to answer in that matter, right?

MR. EARNEST: Sure, that's true.

Q He's asked a question, he doesn't have to answer it that way, right?

MR. EARNEST: That's true. But he goes to great lengths to try to answer your questions, and so that's what I think he was trying to do there.

Let me make one other observation about this, which is that anybody who subscribes to the Wall Street Journal may have seen a picture of President Putin -- just a little plug there, Colleen --

Q Thanks for that. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: You're welcome -- may have seen the picture of the bilateral meeting between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Putin, where the two leaders were sitting side by side in their chairs, and President Putin was striking a now familiar pose of less-than-perfect posture and unbuttoned jacket, and knees spread far apart, to convey a particular image.

And so I guess the point is, President Putin doesn't seek to project this image only when President Obama is around. I think this is an image that he seeks to project in a variety of international settings, and he did it as recently as his meeting earlier this week with Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Yes, sir.

Q I would like to ask a question of Volkswagen, if it's possible. Considering the magnitude of its scandal and shaking up the very bedrock of German manufacturing and actually German economy, and giving this proud slogan, "Made in Germany" a completely new and surprising spin, has there been any communications between the Chancellor and the White House, or other parts of the two administrations?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any conversations between President Obama and Chancellor Merkel on this particular issue in the last week or so.

As I mentioned earlier, the Environmental Protection Agency takes quite seriously the responsibility that they have to enforce the standards under the Clean Air Act. And the expectation is that, at least in the auto industry, that all companies that are seeking to sell automobiles in the United States will comply accordingly.

And based on the admission from Volkswagen executives, they didn't just fail to comply, they actually sought to actively circumvent those rules. And there will be -- we've already seen some executive-level changes in the company, and we'll see what additional steps that company decides they need to take to repair what I think could be accurately described as evident damage to that company's credibility.

Q Another question about Syria. Chancellor Merkel said just recently basically there will be no solution without Assad. She said in solving the Syria crisis one has to talk to a couple of leaders, including Assad. Is that kind of an about-face to the West and the U.S. who so far basically said there cannot be a solution with Assad?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I did not see the entirety of her remarks, but the position of the United States is quite clear. And I think that Chancellor Merkel is largely on the same page. She understands that so much of the chaos that we have seen in Syria is a direct result of the failed leadership of the Assad regime. And in order to address that problem, and in order to eventually deal with the chaos that ISIL, for example, has capitalized on, to deal with the significant humanitarian crisis in the form of Syrian refugees, that we need to address the root cause of this problem.

And that's why the United States has insisted that a political transition inside of Syria needs to take place that results in Bashar al-Assad leaving power. That ultimately will be the way to solve these problems. And there will be challenges that remain as long as he does.

Q Would he have to leave before the transition or at the end of the transition?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I wouldn't get into sort of how we see these talks progressing, and unfortunately we haven't seen the talks progress very much of late. And that's been the source of some disappointment here. But we are going to continue -- the United States will continue to play a role in trying to facilitate those United Nations-led talks to effect that political transition that we believe is long overdue.

Alexis, I'll give you the last one.

Q I know the agenda between the President and President Xi is long, but does the President have any intention of bringing up Russia and the U.S. and global, international concerns about Russia's disposition in Ukraine or Syria with the Chinese President while he's here?

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't rule out that that may come up. I don't think those issues feature most prominently on the agenda. I think the things that are most likely to be discussed are things certainly related to cybersecurity, which we've discussed at length in here. I would expect that there will be continued efforts to cooperate on the issue of climate change, and there may be an opportunity for greater cooperation between our two countries. We've certainly been pleased with the commitment that President Xi and the Chinese people have shown to this issue. And if there is more progress that we can make, we certainly would welcome the opportunity to do that.

There have obviously been some greater economic challenges inside of China, some volatility in their financial markets, and the United States obviously has some long-running concerns about China's reluctance to more effectively tie their currency to market rates. This is something that Secretary Lew has talked about quite a bit.

There are also some broader strategic issues that I would expect that would come up -- the South China Sea is probably the most prominent among them.

And as we always say, President Obama raises concerns about the Chinese government's respect for basic human rights. That is a central value of this country, and therefore, a national security priority of the United States and of this President. And I think that he would use the occasion of this series of meetings to underscore once again what a priority that is for the United States.

Thanks, everybody. So we'll have a news conference tomorrow between President Obama and President Xi. It's early afternoon -- it's around noon. It will be a two-and-two. The plan right now is to do it in the Rose Garden, weather permitting. The East Room will be set up for the state dinner.

So we'll do that. And then we'll get a week-ahead out on paper tomorrow afternoon.

Q 21-gun?

MR. EARNEST: 21-gun salute. So there you go. Pop your popcorn. (Laughter.)

END

2:29 P.M. EDT