

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 2/18/2014

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: Good afternoon, everyone. I hope you had a relaxing holiday weekend. Before I take your questions, I just wanted to note that the “My Brother’s Keeper” event, which was postponed last week due to weather, has been rescheduled for Thursday, February 27th. And with that, I’ll take your questions.

Julie.

Q The Geneva talks between the Syrian government and the opposition seem to have officially broken down over the weekend with no plans at this point for them to resume. Does the Geneva process remain the administration’s main focus in terms of a resolution on Syria, or are you looking -- even if it’s diplomatic -- for another process at this point?

MR. CARNEY: Well, the talks are in recess, that’s correct. The international community needs to use this time to determine how to use -- or rather, needs to move forward in determining how to use this time most effectively in order to bring about a political solution.

So to answer your question, it is still our view, absolutely, that there is not a military solution to this conflict and that a negotiated political settlement is the only path forward for Syria, and the Geneva process is the process by which that is pursuable and achievable at this time. But there’s no question that there has not been a great amount of progress. It is important that the two sides sat down across from each other, but the international community needs to focus on how we can move this process forward.

Q Well, what do you mean by “using this time most effectively?”

MR. CARNEY: Again, to work together to push the process forward, to make the diplomatic channel and the negotiation channel more productive, so that progress can be made towards a solution that allows Syria to move forward, allows for an end to the military violent conflict, so that there’s a transition in Syria away from civil war.

Q And what would be some of the things that the U.S. might look to do in this period in order to try to make those talks more effective?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any announcements to make in terms of policy steps. We, as a rule, are always looking at all of our options and reviewing old options and new options when it comes to a situation like we find in Syria. It should not be forgotten that the obstacle to progress here has been the regime. The opposition attended the Geneva talks and conducted themselves appropriately. The regime, however, has made clear that it's throwing up obstacles to moving forward and making progress.

Q But would you disagree then with U.S. officials who say that the discussion around some of these options has taken on if not increased urgency but there's sort of a renewed focus on looking at options that maybe have been shelved previously?

MR. CARNEY: We got this question last week. I think that it is a standing proposition that the President is always looking for options available to him.

Q So there's nothing different about that process currently than there was a month ago?

MR. CARNEY: Correct. There's not a new review of policy underway, because the assessments of where we are and the options that we have available to us to get where we need to be is ongoing. The fact of the matter is the situation in Syria is horrendous, as the President has said. And we are going to continue to work with our international partners to try to push this process forward.

We should note that when it comes to the urgent need to allow for the provision of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people, we have been working with partners on the United Nations Security Council to move forward on a resolution that would advance that cause, and Russia has been a holdout. And it is notable that if you're going to proclaim your concern about the fate of the Syrian people, one way to act on that concern is to not block progress in the United Nations Security Council on a resolution that would provide humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people who so desperately need it.

Q And then, on another topic, is there any White House reaction to the U.N. report on crimes against humanity in North Korea?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any at this time. Perhaps State Department does.

Q No? Wait, wait, wait. There is no White House reaction to this report in North Korea? This U.N. report about all the atrocities going on? You guys don't have any statement?

MR. CARNEY: Well, as a matter of course, Chuck, we are extremely vocal and critical about the appalling conduct of the North Korean regime. I don't have a specific reaction to this report. I'm sure we can provide one to you, but it should come as no surprise to anyone that the United States and this administration is highly critical of the conduct of human rights in North Korea and the persecution of people in North Korea and we highlight our difference with North Korea on a range of issues constantly.

Yes, Steve.

Q On Friday night, the President said that there's some short-term steps to take and some intermediate steps to take on Syria. What was he talking about?

MR. CARNEY: Again, we are looking at the situation in Syria, understanding that the only resolution to this conflict is through negotiation. We absolutely recognize that the situation on the ground is terrible and that the Syrian people are still under constant assault from the Assad regime. We provide significant assistance to the opposition, including to the military -- military opposition. We provide far and away the most significant amount of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian civilian population. And we are at the forefront of the process that's trying to produce a negotiated political settlement in Syria.

What I think we've been discussing over the last several days and the President was referencing is that we are constantly looking at options available to make more progress on the humanitarian front and make more progress on the effort to push forward on the Geneva process, the negotiated-settlement process because, again, that's the only way out of this for the Syrian people and for the future of Syria. And there is no question that we are all pained by what we see in Syria and enormously frustrated by the obstructionism that the Syrian regime participates in, the unhelpful approach that Russia has taken on the Security Council when it comes to the resolution regarding humanitarian aid access. What remains the case is that we are looking for ways to advance a policy that is in the national interest -- national security interest of the United States and that helps Syria progress towards a negotiated political settlement.

Q Short of military action, what can be done to pressure Assad to make concessions?

MR. CARNEY: We are providing, as I said, assistance to the opposition. We have a lot of partners in that effort. We are also working with our international partners on pressing the Assad regime to engage constructively in a negotiated political settlement, and that includes our partners on the Security Council and our partners elsewhere.

The most important part of your question, I think, Steve, is the "short of military engagement," and I think that while everyone is enormously concerned about and frustrated by the situation in Syria, it should be on everyone's mind that when we look at the situation we're in, we have to examine what the alternatives some might be proposing are and whether they're in our national security interests, and whether a desire to do something about it could lead us, the United States, to take action that can produce the kind of unintended consequences we've seen in the past.

Q And just one other thing. Sorry to belabor it -- Vice President Biden sounded very pessimistic on fast track, according to participants at the Democratic caucus. Is there a recognition here now that this is not going to move forward in any significant way for some time?

MR. CARNEY: Steve, I think we talked about this a fair amount last week. The fact that there are differing views in both parties on trade matters has been the case as long as you and I have been covering this in Washington and it's the case today. The value in the kinds of trade agreements that, for example, we are trying to negotiate with the Pacific region is I think pretty self-evident when you look at the economic growth that that region represents, and the potential for American workers and American businesses through exports to capitalize on that growth through a trade agreement that would protect American workers and protect the environment. That's why we think it's in the best interests of the United States.

But we're going to continue to press for this authority, as we have in the past, mindful, of course, and recognizing that there are differing views on these issues in both parties, not just the Democratic Party.

Move around a little bit. Yes, Alexis.

Q Jay, can I just follow up on Syria?

MR. CARNEY: Yes.

Q Can you, today, remind us, is the U.S. goal to unseat Assad from control in Syria, or is the goal to end the civil war?

MR. CARNEY: The United States policy and position is that Syria's future cannot include Bashar al-Assad because the Syrian people have so clearly shown that he cannot be a part of future or transitional government in Syria. That's not a decision that we make here in the United States. That's a decision that the Syrian people have made and have suffered for in the past several years at the hands of Assad and at the hands of his brutal regime.

There's no possibility, in our view -- and this is simply a reflection of the view of the Syrian people and certainly of the opposition -- that a transitional government or governing authority in Syria could include Assad as part of it. The purpose of the talks that have started, albeit without significant progress, is to find a path forward and a transitional governing authority that can be agreed upon. And the only way that can be agreed upon is that it not include Assad, as far as the opposition is concerned, and we certainly support that view. Our goal is an end to the conflict through a negotiated political settlement, and that, again, settlement cannot be possible with Assad remaining in power.

Q Can I just follow up? If the U.S. is interested in supporting the opposition, is that, in the President's view, military intervention? Is that extending the conflict?

MR. CARNEY: We do support the opposition, and we have supported the opposition for some time now in a variety of ways. We have made clear our views on different kinds of support and our concern over the course of this conflict when it comes to some provision of weapons that some people have suggested and other countries have proposed or

engaged in, that there is a concern about that kind of weaponry falling into the wrong hands in a way that could pose a challenge or a threat to our national security interests or the national security interests of our allies in the region. And that remains the case.

Victoria.

Q If you look at Obamacare, including the difficulty with the rollout, and you look at midterms, would you regard it as overall an asset or an albatross for the Democrats?

MR. CARNEY: Is this a campaign press conference?

Q It's a political question for you.

MR. CARNEY: Look, I think that we have made enormous progress in the enrollment of millions of Americans across the country. And I think that fact is reflected in the diminished coverage of healthcare.gov and the process involved in getting people enrolled. The problems that we had with the website obviously set back the effort, but the significant improvements we've seen in enrollments since the website began functioning effectively have been very welcome, obviously, and I think demonstrate that the exchanges work and that the interest among millions of Americans in getting quality, affordable health insurance remains intense.

I think that, as a general principle, without gaming out election strategies, it's a difficult case to make, despite the well-documented polling data on Obamacare, for Republicans to say they want to take away the benefits that the Affordable Care Act provides. It is a concrete reality now -- when you have millions of Americans who have quality affordable health insurance, you have millions more who have access to Medicaid in those states that have expanded it that they did not have before, and you have all of us across the country who enjoy other benefits from the Affordable Care Act, including the ability to keep our children on our health plans through the age of 26, including the fact that insurance companies can no longer deny you coverage if you have a preexisting condition, they can no longer charge you twice as much as they might charge your twin brother if you had one just because you're a woman -- these are benefits that the repeal effort would take away. They're concrete, they're real, they have accrued to the American people and to millions of Americans across the country.

So I think this has gone from an abstract debate to one that involves real people whose lives would be adversely affected by the success of an effort to take away dramatically the benefits that they enjoy. And I think that that's a difficult argument to make. I'm sure that it will be made, maybe not quite in the way that I just made it, but I think everybody who is running on a repeal platform needs to explain why their constituents -- either the ones they currently represent or the ones they want to represent -- should have those benefits taken away so that insurance companies can be put back in charge of their health care.

Q Jay.

MR. CARNEY: Welcome.

Q Thanks. What's the U.S. position on negotiating with terrorists? We're hearing that talks have now been reopened on the release of Bowe Bergdahl. Has the U.S. position changed? Is it being revised?

MR. CARNEY: We have long supported an Afghan-led peace process, and we'll continue to do so. When it comes to Sergeant Bergdahl our hearts go out to his family. We have great sympathy for them. Sergeant Bergdahl has been gone for far too long, and we continue to call for his immediate release. We can't discuss all the details of our efforts, but there should be no doubt that we work every day, using our military, our intelligence and our diplomatic tools, to see Sergeant Bergdahl returned home safely.

We are not -- to go directly to your question -- involved in active negotiations with the Taliban. Clearly, if negotiations do resume, at some point then we will want to talk with the Taliban about the safe return of Sergeant Bergdahl. He has been gone far too long, and we continue to call for and work towards his safe and immediate release.

Q Is there a concern about setting a precedent here? Is he a special, unusual case?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, he is a special case in the sense that he has been gone far too long. And we are very concerned about him and our hearts go out to his family and we have great sympathy for them. They've been going through quite an ordeal.

We have long said that we support an Afghan-led process, reconciliation process with the Taliban. And we are not involved in any negotiations with the Taliban, active negotiations, but if negotiations were to resume, we would certainly want to discuss the fate of Sergeant Bergdahl.

Q Is this seen as very time-sensitive?

MR. CARNEY: Well, he should, in our view, be returned as soon as possible.

Jon.

Q Just a quick follow-up on that first. Is the United States open to the idea of a prisoner exchange?

MR. CARNEY: I know the story you're referring to. I can tell you that, again, we won't discuss all the details of our efforts. With respect to Guantanamo, the President reiterated, when he signed the fiscal year 2014 Defense Authorization Act, that this administration will not transfer a detainee unless the threat the detainee may pose can be sufficiently mitigated and only when consistent with our humane treatment policy.

Q So just to try to do this generally, a prisoner exchange for a POW held by a terrorist group, would that be the kind of negotiations with terrorists that this administration would not be open to, or would be willing to engage in?

MR. CARNEY: First of all, we have long made clear that we support an Afghan-led process of negotiations and reconciliation with the Taliban. We are not involved in active negotiations with the Taliban. If negotiations were to resume, we would certainly press

the case of Sergeant Bergdahl. In the meantime, we are actively engaged in an effort to see his return. I can't document every effort, but that includes our military, our intelligence and our diplomatic tools.

Q Back to Syria. You've said many times there is no military solution to the problem in Syria. Is there or are there military options for stopping some of the killing that has been done by the Assad regime?

MR. CARNEY: The President has said that he does not take the use of American military force off the table in Syria or in any of these circumstances. So, in that sense, the military option always remains available and on the table. We've made very clear we do not see American boots on the ground in Syria. When we're looking at options, we are very interested in actions that move a process forward towards a conclusion that we think is the only one that can lead to a resolution of the conflict in a way that is best for our U.S. national security interests and the interests of our partners and allies in the region. But we look obviously at all options as we've been talking about for the last several days and weeks.

Q So all options, as you said, except for boots on the ground. So just to clarify, some have suggested a no-fly zone to ground the helicopters that are dropping the barrel bombs on civilians in Syria, targeted air strikes on those helicopters and on fixed-wing aircraft in Syria. Are either of those military options under renewed consideration?

MR. CARNEY: Well, obviously, a lot of ideas that have been discussed in the past have been put forward of late in the press, and I recognize that. Having said that the President would never take the use of military force off the table, we also firmly believe that there's not a military solution to this conflict. And as a general principle, I think that the use of military force in any circumstance like this needs to be engaged in with a very clear-eyed sense of what the consequences of that use of force would be and what the policy objectives would be that are being sought and that can be achieved.

Q But just trying to understand the process here, you said that they've talked about it in the press. No doubt. But these were clearly options that the President decided not to pursue in that past. Is there any renewed consideration given how bad the situation has gotten on the ground -- "worst humanitarian crisis in a generation," in the words of our U.N. Ambassador -- is there any renewed consideration of those military options?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have specific options to itemize that I can say are being considered beyond saying that we are always considering all plausible options when it comes to advancing our goals in this terrible conflict. And our goals include the negotiated political resolution of the conflict in a way that allows for transitioning governing authority -- a transitional governing authority that does not include Bashar al-Assad, who has significant Syrian blood on his hands. And that is in keeping with the interests and desires of the Syrian people.

Q But given how bad it's gotten, and given the apocalyptic language coming from some of the President's own top advisors on this, why wouldn't there be a renewed review? Why wouldn't the President be asking for new options? Why wouldn't the President be saying, come to me, we may have to do a review of this policy, obviously what's happening right now is not working, the crisis is getting worse -- why wouldn't there be a new comprehensive review?

MR. CARNEY: Well, Jon, I think you're putting words in my mouth that I didn't speak. I simply said that the review has been ongoing, that the suggestion that there is some --

Q But you said there is not a new review of policy underway. Why wouldn't there be a new review of policy?

MR. CARNEY: You can't do something new that you've been doing all along. We could call it new for the public relations value in it. But the fact is the President has been asking for all of the options available to him constantly in the course of this conflict. And so, in the interest of providing factual information, I can tell you that the review of options that is ongoing is not new, but it is broad and it reflects a recognition that the conflict continues to exact a terrible toll on the Syrian people. It has significant regional implications and is a challenge to the national security interests of the United States and our partners and allies. And for those reasons, this review is ongoing. And the President takes no option off the table, but nor does he rush to or embrace an option that might sound good because of the frustration we all feel over the terrible situation there, without thinking through the implications of the use of that option.

Bill.

Q You said earlier that the only resolution in Syria is through a negotiation. But how do you pursue negotiation with someone who the Secretary of State says is being put in an advantageous position because of Russian military help and who shows no sign of being willing to negotiate? So it's one thing to say, let's negotiate, but it's very hard to see how you can get there.

MR. CARNEY: Well, Bill, the fact is that was the case before we actually succeeded in establishing the Geneva process and before the parties actually sat down across from one another. And while we're not --

Q -- haven't resolved the problem.

MR. CARNEY: Well, you're right, we haven't resolved and they haven't brought an end to the conflict immediately. There has not been significant progress from those negotiations, but it is only from those negotiations or negotiations as a general matter that this can be resolved. There's not a military outcome here that ends the civil war and allows for the Syrian people to open a new chapter in this history.

We need to work -- because the work is hard and because it is frustrating doesn't mean that it's not the right course. And we understand and share the enormous frustration that those who care about the Syrian people and what they're suffering are experiencing. Our

goal is to pursue policies that provide the aid necessary to the Syrian people that push pressure on our partners who have the capacity to either block or allow aid to reach the Syrian people, and to pursue policies that support and provide assistance to the opposition -- the moderate opposition as we continue to press all parties to negotiate an end to this conflict.

Q That presumes that the war will simply drag on while you continue to pursue these goals, which have so far proved, to put it mildly, elusive.

MR. CARNEY: So what's the question? I mean, are you --

Q Why would you not want to advance somehow the possibility that you could affect regime change there?

MR. CARNEY: Are you suggesting that we should invade or attack?

Q I'm asking you --

MR. CARNEY: I think obviously questions that reflect the enormous suffering that's happening in Syria and the frustration that everyone feels about that are completely understandable. Concrete policy alternatives are even more welcome. And if you have one, let me know. Because I don't think that, for example, a U.S. invasion of a country in the region is something that would be in the national security interests of the United States, or would be viewed by the American people or the representatives in Congress as the right policy.

Q But, Jay, wasn't it the President himself who, at that podium, set the red line almost two years ago and said, if they were to use these chemical weapons, it's a red line, enormous consequences. Where are those consequences? You pushed back for a time because they were -- you said, they were turning over chemical weapons. Turns out Assad is not turning over --

MR. CARNEY: Well, Ed, I think you're conflating the two things. The red line --

Q No, the red line on the chemical weapons. Then you said he was turning them over, but he's not.

MR. CARNEY: The President -- well, first of all, there is no question that the Assad regime has blown some deadlines on the transport and delivery of its chemical weapons supplies. The regime is still committed to ridding itself of those supplies, and Russia is on the hook for making sure that, as the regime's significant ally, that those chemical weapons and the supplies are delivered and the regime is fully rid of chemical weapons as part of that agreement.

Now, the fact is the President said that was a red line. He threatened the use of force in response to that. And because the threat was real, we saw the Assad regime go from refusing to acknowledge it even had chemical weapons stockpiles to acknowledging that it

had them and to reaching an agreement that they would give up those weapons. And we are going to -- and the international community is going to hold both Syria and Russia responsible for the fulfillment of that agreement.

Q Why would anyone believe you're going to hold them responsible when this has been going on for years? And in answer to Jon's question when you said "the review is ongoing," if the review is always ongoing, doesn't that suggest that you're more likely to spin your wheels because you're just reviewing and reviewing, but there's not an endpoint to this?

MR. CARNEY: Again, you're conflating a bunch of things, Ed. When we're talking about policy as a general matter -- not just with regards to chemical weapons, but as a general matter in Syria -- we are constantly reviewing options that would allow us to provide more and more effective humanitarian aid to the Syrian people, that would allow us to provide more and more effective support for the opposition, and that would allow us to advance the essential cause of diplomatic negotiations that could lead to a peaceful political settlement to the conflict and a transitional government. And those are the range of options that the President is constantly asking for and evaluating, because we all recognize that progress has not been coming quickly on Syria and we need -- together with our partners -- to press for a solution here on behalf of the Syrian people.

Q Two other quick things, one on national security. James Clapper, you probably saw comments he made to the Daily Beast where he -- he at one point said, "I probably shouldn't say this, but I will. Had we been transparent about this from the outset, right after 9/11, which is the genesis of the 215 program" -- he's talking about the metadata -- "and said both to the American people and to our elected representatives, we need to cover this gap" -- he said, if we had been more transparent, we wouldn't have had these problems, that Edward Snowden's leaks wouldn't have had as much of an impact on the American people if the intelligence community had been more transparent. Does the President agree with that assessment?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I certainly don't think that Director Clapper is saying anything that should come as a surprise. He's going all the way back to the event that led to the creation of some of these programs.

Q He said "since 9/11," so he was talking about both administrations I should point out.

MR. CARNEY: Correct. Well, I think that you've seen in what the President has done in the steps that he's taken, that he absolutely shares the view that we need to enact reforms and take steps that provide more transparency to the American people in a way that gives them more confidence that the intelligence gathering we engage in is done with full oversight and in accordance with the Constitution and the law, and that it's done solely with the aim of protecting the American people, protecting the interests of the United States.

Q Last question: On 2014, when you were asked about it before, you obviously said you don't want to get too much into politics, but you believe that health care will be an asset for Democrats, for the President in 2014. David Axelrod undoubtedly agrees with you on that part of the story, but in The New York Times today says he's concerned the Koch brothers are spending \$20 million on Senate races. And he said he's concerned there are some Democratic activists who are too focused right now on 2016, too excited about that, and losing sight of the election ahead of you. Does the White House share a concern that your fellow Democrats are not focused enough on the fact that if the President loses control of the Senate that will be a big problem for him?

MR. CARNEY: Look, again, this is not a campaign briefing. I can tell you that the President is obviously going to engage and do everything he can to assist Democrats running in 2014, but he is principally focused on an agenda that's designed to expand opportunity for the American people, strengthen and expand the middle class, reward hard work and responsibility.

Q But if you lose control of the Senate, that legislative agenda -- if you put aside politics for a second, if you lose control of the Senate, it's going to be pretty hard to get that agenda through, wouldn't it?

MR. CARNEY: Well, he is not going to, and the Democratic Party is not going to lose control of the Senate, in our view. And that's precisely because of the policies that he and Democrats support that are focused on expanding opportunity, as opposed to repealing benefits; that are focused on providing broad support for the middle class so that it can become more secure going forward; and that more jobs are created, as opposed to support for special interest tax loopholes that benefit the few. I mean, that's sort of a general principle. And the President feels very strongly that that approach is one that broadly speaking the American people support.

Q Turning to Venezuela, the government there has thrown out three diplomats -- or is trying to throw out three diplomats from the country. What is the U.S. response? Are they going to go ahead and agree to the order? And is there -- in the past there's been retaliation where the United States has asked -- has ordered Venezuelan diplomats out of the country. Is there going to be retaliation?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I can tell you that the Venezuelan government has notified the United States that it has declared three of our consular officials PNG -- persona non grata. We've seen many times that the Venezuelan government tries to distract from its own actions by blaming the U.S. or other members of the international community for events inside Venezuela. And these efforts reflect a lack of seriousness on the part of the Venezuelan government to deal with the grave situation it faces.

The allegations against our diplomats by the Venezuelan government are baseless and false. And as we've long said, Venezuela's political future is for the Venezuelan people to decide. We urge the Venezuelan government to work to address its people's grievances

forthrightly, through real, meaningful dialogue. The U.S. values its strong, historic and cultural ties with the Venezuelan people and remains committed to our relationship with them.

I don't have any reaction to announce or preview.

Q Or anything that says any -- kicking anybody out of the country?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't have any reaction to that information.

Q Anything about -- Leopoldo Lopez, who has been the leader of the opposition, turned himself in to Venezuelan authorities. Any U.S. -- any reaction to that?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we're deeply concerned about the violence in Venezuela. We are alarmed by the Venezuelan government's use of security forces and armed gangs affiliated with the government to disrupt peaceful protests, which is disproportionate and threatens further escalation of the violence. Venezuelan authorities have arrested and detained scores of anti-government protestors. We call on the government to release them immediately and to provide the political space necessary for meaningful dialogue with the Venezuelan people.

Q And if they don't do this, is there an action you'll take? Is there --

MR. CARNEY: Those responsible for acts of violence must be held to account through impartial investigation and independent judicial processes. I have no other action to preview.

Q Two other foreign policy questions. Going back to North Korea, I know that you guys time and again publicly condemned the actions of North Korea as human rights violations. What about with China? Is there anything beyond asking China to do more about North Korea that the U.S. plans to do?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I mean, that's no minor thing. China has a unique and significant leverage with North Korea, and because of that fact, we engage with the Chinese directly on these matters and encourage the Chinese to --

Q Have you guys ever punished China for not doing anything?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would simply say that we make clear to the Chinese that we believe very strongly that it is in not just the U.S. interest but in the interests of regional security, including in the interest of China, that North Korea take steps to deescalate some of the provocative behavior that they engage in periodically, and ultimately to get right with the international community, to comply with the series of United Nations Security resolutions that it is in violation of, and we will continue to work with the Chinese and others to help bring that about.

Q I mean, I guess the point is, is that does China realize that they can do nothing because it's not as if the United States is ever going to react other than a strongly worded statement?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not sure I agree with that assessment and I think that we are working with the Chinese on these issues, as well as our partners in the region, on a regular basis.

Q And on Syria, you guys are obviously -- I know that we're all beating a dead horse maybe on this, but is there a -- obviously, there's a sense of urgency. Is there a timeline that the President is operating on -- that, okay, you know what, he's not abiding by the chemical weapons, this is still going on, they've got three weeks or else -- I mean, is there some sort of timeline he's operating on here in deciding whether to shift the policy or not?

MR. CARNEY: I think the way to answer that question, Chuck, is that we are actively engaged in a process of looking at the options available to the President to advance the goals that we believe are necessary, which include making sure that humanitarian assistance is being provided the Syrian people -- we continue to be the lead nation when it comes to providing that assistance -- making sure that our assistance to the moderate opposition is being delivered and our assistance to the moderate armed opposition is being delivered. We continue to work on an international basis to press for the only path forward when it comes to resolving this conflict, which is through the diplomatic channels and negotiated political settlement.

So I don't -- and on the matter of CW, I've made clear that we believe the Assad regime as well as the Russians must comply with their obligations to the international community when it comes to ridding the regime of its chemical weapons supplies so that they can be destroyed.

Q And if they don't, what?

MR. CARNEY: Well, there's no consequence to something that hasn't happened to announce today except to say that this is a very serious matter -- as we demonstrated last fall, which lead to this agreement -- and that we and our international partners take it very seriously.

Jared.

Q Thanks, Jay. On the resumption of talks over Iran's nuclear program, does the administration still think there's a good chance of a comprehensive agreement?

MR. CARNEY: Our view hasn't changed in that we think that it is absolutely the right thing to do to test whether or not Tehran is serious about resolving this conflict diplomatically.

There is no question that the prospects for success are a matter of serious debate or that -- they're far from a sure thing, either way. But because there is at least some prospect that Tehran might be willing to in a verifiable, transparent way convince the international community that it has forsaken pursuit of a nuclear weapon, we ought to do through diplomatic means.

Resolving this issue through the use of military force has to be something that we obviously never take off the table but can't be a first option. And because, in the wake of their elections and the enormous pressure that the unprecedented sanctions regime has placed on their economy, the Iranian government was willing to move forward with talks and to reach the interim agreement, the JPOA, and now to engage in the comprehensive settlement discussions is worth exploring. But we're obviously mindful of the fact that they may not result in an agreement, but because they present the opportunity, we have to take it.

Q How much of a sticking point is their recent ballistic missile testing? And how important is that to these talks?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I want to be very clear, per the Joint Plan of Action agreed to by Iran, Iran must address the U.N. Security Council resolutions related to its nuclear program before a comprehensive resolution can be reached. In other words, they have to deal with matters related to their ballistic missile program that are included in the United Nations Security Council resolution that is part of explicitly, according to the Joint Plan of Action, the comprehensive resolution negotiation.

So U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929, passed in 2010, prohibits Iran from undertaking any activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using ballistic missile technology. So that is explicitly agreed by Iran in the Joint Plan of Action. And I think that applies -- it's important to note that that applies to all of the United Nations Security Council resolutions in this area. That is explicitly referenced in the Joint Plan of Action.

Scott, then Mara.

Q Thanks, Jay. Thinking back on the Libya intervention for a minute, the President spoke after that and told the American people that the principles he acted on were, by all American interests, imminent humanitarian catastrophe and a military strike with partners. And it was easy for a time in Syria to see that the parallels were not there, but now the Syrian army is moving on the ground, on Aleppo, which looks a lot like Benghazi -- a second city, seat of the rebellion. Why aren't those same parallels coming into clearer focus for the President?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think that you've left out some of the parallels that continue not to line up with the Libyan example, including the international agreement to take action.

Q You had the Arab League.

MR. CARNEY: So this is as we've discussed in the past, including, you're right, the Arab League. So it is our view that there is not a military resolution to this conflict and that we need to continue to press forward with an effort that is aimed at reaching a negotiated settlement between the two parties because that's the only way to ensure that Syria has a fighting chance in the future as opposed to an extended, ongoing conflict.

Q Will you try to reengage the Arab League to get their endorsement, which was crucial to the Libyan intervention?

MR. CARNEY: We are engaged with all our partners in the region on this very serious issue. I wouldn't say that that's around a certain prospective action that could be taken, but as a general matter, this is something that we need everyone who is concerned about the fate of the Syrian people and about the instability this conflict causes in the region to be engaged in so that we can help move the process forward.

Q But it sounds like without the Security Council's support, you're not interested in any sort of -- considering a military option and Russia is not going to give you that. So are you being hung up by the U.N. at this point? Is that what is --

MR. CARNEY: Let me just be clear that we don't take any option off the table; the President has made that clear. What we are focused on is a path forward that recognizes that there's not a military solution to this conflict and that the only way forward for the Syrian people is through a negotiated political settlement. Now, how we use our leverage and the leverage of others to help push that process forward is very much what we're engaged in now, and the progress has been frustratingly slow, there's no question about it. But it does not change the essential fact in our view that there's not a military resolution to the conflict.

Q Last thing. When you say that, that there's no military resolution to this conflict, there was in Libya. Why isn't there -- was there a moment in this conflict when there was a military solution to it, and has that moment passed? And if you had acted then, would the situation be different now? In other words, by waiting as long you have to begin to consider these things, obviously the battlefield is a lot more complicated.

MR. CARNEY: I think for reasons that you better than most probably here understand there are a host of differences between Libya and Syria, and that play into even hypothetical counterfactuals about what might have been in that conflict. And what has been the case all along is that the President has pursued a policy that he believes puts as a priority United States national security interests and that is supportive of an opposition that wants to rid itself and Syria of a tyrannical regime, and that envisions working with partners in the region to help bring about a negotiated political settlement. So engaging in hypotheticals about actions that could have taken by sort of stating all other things being equal when of course they weren't and aren't doesn't really get you very far.

Cheryl.

Q Thanks, Jay. On minimum wage, CBO has been looking at the effects of raising the minimum wage on employment. What do you say to critics who say raising the minimum wage will cost jobs and cut hours?

MR. CARNEY: I would point them to the ample documentation from respected economists who say the opposite -- that there is not evidence that it has a significant impact on jobs, and that, to the contrary, it's beneficial to the economy and to efficiency and productivity. And the theory behind the opposition to raising the minimum wage --

that it costs jobs -- if you tease it out all the way, then there shouldn't be a minimum wage at all. And there are probably fewer than 5 percent of the American people who believe that. That would be let's just pay people a dollar an hour, and nobody believes that that's the right thing to do any more than paying them a full-time wage that keeps them below poverty is the right thing to do, which is the situation we have now.

So, again, there are far greater economic minds than this one who can attest to the fact that raising the minimum wage, certainly in the way that has been proposed and the President supports, is the right thing to do for the economy and that does not have a significant impact on jobs.

Olivier.

Q Jay, a couple for you. First, did the White House invite any of the original "Monuments Men" to tonight's screening?

MR. CARNEY: I do not have a list of participants, but we'll try to get those to you later in the day. The White House is hosting a screening, as you know, of "The Monuments Men" today, or tonight. The cast and crew have been invited, along with officials from the State Department's Cultural Heritage Center who are our country's modern-day "Monuments Men" and women. In addition, the White House curators, members of the Jewish community and officials from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum will attend. We'll try to get you a fuller list.

Q And can I just -- one more. On Syria, in late January, Director Clapper told Congress that the area is under control by the al Qaeda-linked militants now. It looked like they're becoming the new FATA, the new lawless Pakistan areas. Did that change the President's outlook on the usefulness or the desirability of entering the conflict militarily in any capacity?

MR. CARNEY: His testimony?

Q Yes. Well, that was news to at least me that that's what was going on there. Did that change -- did finding out that this is becoming a new petri dish for this stuff, did that change the way he's thinking about this?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would say that among the many concerns that we have about the situation in Syria is the presence of extremists and al Qaeda-linked organizations and individuals. And that is obviously a concern anywhere that it presents itself. And it speaks to sort of both sides of the issue when you talk about actions that you might take. I mean, one of the issues that has always been discussed was making sure that the provision of assistance gets into the right hands and isn't passed on to those who have designs on U.S. national security interests or on the interests of our allies. So that's always something that we're concerned about. And certainly, Director Clapper identified that in that testimony.

Mark.

Q Back to trade if I can, and also specifically about the North American Summit -- trade is if not at the top of the agenda here, it's close to it. What is the President going to tell to the other two leaders about the possibility of completing an accord of this Trans-Pacific Partnership that all three countries have been trying real hard to get finished when the leaders of his own party have thrown up roadblocks to it?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I think that it's a useful exercise when reporting on this discussion and debate to make sure that your readers are aware of the fact that 'twas ever thus. And the differing opinions on these matters are not new, and the fact that there are differing opinions within both parties is not new. So I don't have -- obviously, the President will be speaking to this during his visit, broadly, in terms of what the agenda is and what the discussions will be at the summit. But we shouldn't pretend that the wheel has been recreated here when we talk about the differing views that people have on matters of trade expansion.

Q Well, what does he hope to accomplish tomorrow?

MR. CARNEY: Look, we'll have more information on the visit. And the President himself will obviously be speaking at the summit. But these are obviously two close allies and partners, and he looks very much forward to the discussion and the meetings.

Q Jay, before you go -- Ukraine. The government has moved in to clear out protestors.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have anything that's happened since I've been here obviously at the podium -- I don't have new info on. But I can tell you we are appalled by the violence that was already taking place in downtown Kiev, and reports of armed riot police amassing on the edge of Maidan.

We continue to condemn the street violence and excessive use of force by either side. The force will not resolve the crisis. To restore peace and stability we urge President Yanukovich to deescalate immediately the situation and end the confrontation at Maidan. We also urge him to restart a dialogue with opposition leaders today to develop a consensus way forward for Ukraine.

Last one.

Q -- says that he's going to meet with opposition leaders tomorrow. Is that --

MR. CARNEY: I can't respond, absent my BlackBerry, to breaking news. Sorry.

Last one.

Q Has the Vice President or the President reached out to Mr. Yanukovich in the last few days?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have an update on the fairly regular conversations that the Vice President in particular has been having with President Yanukovich and others in Ukraine. If we do have an update on that we'll get it to you.

Thanks very much, guys.

END

2:05 P.M. EST