

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/07/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-and-deputy-national-security

September 7, 2016

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

September 07, 2016

Press Filing Center
Rashmi's Plaza Hotel
Vientiane, Laos

6:15 P.M. ICT

MR. EARNEST: Good evening, everybody. It's nice to see you all. Obviously this will be the -- one of the briefings that we'll do on the trip. I don't think we have anything at the top, so I think we'll just go to straight to your questions for the sake of efficiency. Who wants to get us started? Not everybody at once. Josh, do you want to go first?

Q Sure. I wanted to ask about the cancellation of the meeting with Duterte. The President said yesterday this wasn't going to affect our long-term relationship with the Philippines, but how is that the case if the President and the head of this other -- our ally are essentially in a war of words with each other? And the office of the Philippine leader said that the decision to cancel the meeting was mutual. Is that the case, or did the U.S. basically inform them that this was not happening?

MR. RHODES: Well, look, first of all, the nature of our alliance with the Philippines has been and remains rock solid. We have incredibly close working relationships with the government of the Philippines on issues related to disaster response, maritime security, diplomatic coordination on issues related to the South China Sea; economic, commercial and people-to-people ties. So I think people should certainly expect that our very close working relationship with the Philippines is going to be enduring. And in fact, we continue to consult closely at a variety of levels, and in fact, I think Chairman Dunford has even been in the Philippines recently, if not today, for a chiefs of defense meeting.

With respect to the bilateral meeting, I think it was our judgment that given the focus of attention on President Duterte's comments leading into the meetings here, we felt that that did not create a constructive environment for a bilateral meeting. All of the attention, frankly, was on those comments and, therefore, not on the very substantive agenda that we have with the Philippines. So, again, given that focus, we felt that it wasn't

the right time to have a bilateral meeting between the two Presidents. And that's something that we discussed with officials from the government of the Philippines last night.

Going forward, I would expect our close cooperation to continue, and where we also have differences, we'll continue to speak to those. And as President Obama said, for any country in the world, not just the Philippines, we'll certainly support very robust counter-narcotic efforts, but we also want to make sure that they're consistent with the rule of law and due process. And that too will be a message that we continue to carry forward.

Q What can you say about the likelihood of a Syrian ceasefire at this point? And you've heard the calls from Erdogan to establish a no-fly zone now that there's been more progress in Jarabulus. Do you still feel the same way about a no-fly zone as you did before?

MR. RHODES: So, again, as it relates to the potential for a ceasefire, that continues to be a subject of discussion with the Russian government. After the discussion between President Putin and President Obama yesterday, we feel like we have now identified the remaining gaps in what have been very extensive and technical discussions over a number of weeks now. And Foreign Minister Lavrov was returning to Moscow; Secretary Kerry is staying in touch with him, and they plan to meet in the coming days to see if they can conclude an agreement, having now identified the remaining issues.

Our objectives for that agreement would include ensuring that there is a Cessation of Hostilities that allows for humanitarian assistance to get into people who are in need. We want to make sure that there's space for the moderate opposition, and we also are open to working with Russia to focus on the threat from al Qaeda in Syria, al Nusra, as well as ISIL.

However, again, in order to achieve that cooperation, we do want to make sure that there is this period of calm and that there is this humanitarian access. So we'll be, again, following up in discussions between Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov, and I think we've made a lot of progress. But we're not going to take a deal that doesn't meet our basic objectives. And I think we'll know very quickly whether or not we can close those remaining gaps.

And your other question was -- President Erdogan. Well, first of all, I think we very much welcome the progress that has been made in terms of clearing ISIL out from along the Turkish border. That's something that we've been focused on for a long time now in our discussions with Turkey. Our own operations in support of SDF opposition forces on the ground helped to clear Manbij, which was a key transit point for ISIL fighters into Turkey. And Turkey's operations in Jarabulus and then further clearing operations on the border have made a significant amount of progress on what has been a key priority, which is making sure that you cut off that border area. Because, frankly, that's also where the flow of foreign fighters comes in and out of Syria, and so if we can seal that border using Turkish forces, opposition forces, with our logistical and air support, I think that would help us make a substantial gain against ISIL.

In terms of a no-fly zone, in terms of the dedication of U.S. military resources, we want to use those resources to go after ISIL, to go after al Nusra insofar as we see them affiliated with al Qaeda and engaged in external plotting. We do not think a no-fly zone would resolve the fundamental issues on the ground because there continues to be fighting on the ground. A no-fly zone would necessarily only be contained to one specific area, and we have problems and violence across the country.

However, if we are able to preserve the space along that Turkish border, you do have an area for greater security and you do prevent this flow of foreign fighters into and out of Syria. So that's something -- an objective we shared with President Erdogan. We have not determined that a no-fly zone would be the best dedication of U.S. military resources.

Q Back on the meeting with Duterte. You said that it was your judgment that given the focus on his comments that you decided not to do the meeting. So are you saying that it wasn't the content of what he said that you found objectionable, or -- I'm trying to figure out what you're -- it seems like you're saying -- you're putting the focus on the fact that it was gathering all this attention as opposed to what he actually said, and I'm wondering if that had anything to -- if the President was offended by that.

MR. RHODES: Well, look, I think the two are fundamentally interrelated. So certainly the nature of those comments was not constructive, and therefore there was an enormous amount of tension on this series of statements by President Duterte. And again, given the important issues that we have, having a meeting where all we were going to discuss was a series of comments, frankly, did not strike us as the most constructive way to approach a bilateral meeting.

At the same time, we also knew that we could have a very important meeting with President Park of the Republic of Korea at a time when we just recently had an additional provocation from North Korea. So we had a lot of business to do with President Park, and we had a constructive meeting with her today.

But, again, we remain in contact with Filipino officials, and our close alliance relationship obviously continues and will going forward.

Q Can I ask on North Korea? Can you explain a little bit -- about closing loopholes? What loopholes? And is he talking about new sanctions? What did he mean by "making them more effective?" And do you expect that he'll do some of this around UNGA?

MR. RHODES: So we've passed now through the U.N. Security Council the strongest sanctions ever on North Korea. They are having an impact, we believe. It is putting a tighter squeeze on North Korea. At the same time, we have over many years seen North Korea try to find ways to evade sanctions, try to find ways to access foreign currency, try to find ways to access sensitive technology using front companies for their activities. So we have to be very vigilant in sanctions enforcement, and we have to maintain the sense of urgency among the international community.

This is something that President Obama talked to President Xi about, because China plays an enormously important role in the enforcement of those sanctions. It's something that we'll talk about with the leaders here at the East Asia Summit, because when you look at the interdiction of sensitive technologies into North Korea, or the interdiction of North Korean efforts to procure things on the international black market, we've worked very closely with a number of Southeast Asian countries as well.

So we want to make sure that we're just cutting off all the lifelines that North Korea tries to grab onto in terms of evading sanctions and accessing currency so that they pay the full cost for their actions. So that was a subject of the meeting with President Park. So was our shared commitment to deploy the THAAD defensive -- missile defense system, given these repeated provocations and the development of ballistic missiles. One of the things the two leaders focused on was our determination to move forward with the deployment of the THAAD system, which protects U.S. personnel in the Republic of Korea, protects our allies, and it ultimately is necessary to counter the threat from North Korean ballistic missiles

MR. EARNEST: Ron.

Q Are you saying that in order to -- a more meaningful agreement on Syria, the two Presidents won't be -- down the road, that something appropriate or (inaudible) be accomplished about that? And secondly, on the whole cyber issue thing, the President spoke about it generally -- about (inaudible) but how concerned is he about the Russians specifically trying to target -- to meddle in the U.S. election?

MR. RHODES: So, first of all, on Syria, we did not in any way have an expectation that the two presidents would conclude the agreement, because, frankly, the remaining issues are fairly technical, and they have to do with the manner in which an agreement would be implemented. And so we've had expert teams that have been negotiating this in Geneva in some detail, and Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov have been leading those discussions.

So the purpose of the meeting between the two presidents was to provide direction to those teams to indicate what were our respective priorities, and then to see whether they can get this done. And I do not think that the two presidents will need to meet on this again. Frankly, we would like to see this, if it can get done, happen quickly because of the enormous humanitarian needs in places like Aleppo. If it cannot get done, we won't sign on to a bad deal.

So I think we've been at this long enough to know what the outlines of an agreement could be, and we have to see in the coming days whether or not that can conclude, because there is an urgent humanitarian situation that needs to be dealt with. There is a terrorist threat that needs to be dealt with. And there also is the necessity of having space for a moderate opposition that can participate in the political process in Syria.

On cyber issues, the President spoke to this yesterday. I think, again, generally speaking, we have raised concerns with Russia, with China, about certain cyber activities that have targeted U.S. interests. The fact of the matter is, in this space we have our own significant offensive and defensive capabilities. And the reason he speaks about international rules and norms is precisely because we want to be able to hold nations to account when they are operating in an offensive manner against our infrastructure or, frankly, any other nation's infrastructure.

We're confident in our cybersecurity capabilities and our ability to secure our critical infrastructure, our election, as the President said yesterday. So I'm not going to get into the details of ongoing investigations that may be taking place about certain cyber intrusions.

Generally, we've also had concerns with some Russian actions in other parts of the world, where we've seen them seek to play a role in European politics, as well. So I think, in addition to the cyber issues, we do want to make sure that we and our democratic allies are standing up for the values that we believe in and pushing back against any efforts from Russia to seek to support -- again, I'm speaking in Europe now -- efforts to undermine European unity.

Q But about how many -- this investigation (inaudible). Is there a concern specifically about the U.S. election, based on (inaudible)?

MR. RHODES: Well, again, I think we're always obviously focused on assuring that we have the ability to defend against cyber threats to all of our critical infrastructure and all major events. But again, as the President has said, I think we have great confidence in our electoral process and the integrity of our elections.

MR. EARNEST: Roberta.

Q Is there any chance at all that President Obama would have kind of like an informal pull-aside or informal chat with President Duterte on the sidelines of these summits, particularly now that President Duterte has offered some kind of an apology for his statements? And secondly, how concerned is the White House that this spat, whatever you want to call it, could have an impact and push the Philippines into sort of China's arms?

MR. RHODES: So I would expect that the President will see President Duterte in the course of those summits. We have an ASEAN meeting, we have an East Asia Summit meeting. He tends to interact with all the leaders at those events. So I would not expect a formal bilateral meeting, but I think he'll have an opportunity to interact with him, as with all leaders.

With respect to the South China Sea, we've sustained very close cooperation with the Philippines over the course of the transition to the new government there on those issues. So, first of all, we've supported the outcome of the arbitral ruling because we believe that international legal processes are the way to resolve these issues. We have a very close partnership with the Philippines on maritime security issues and continue to provide

them with assistance in that space. We have a recently agreed-upon access agreement as it relates to bases in the Philippines. So the working relationship in this very important space continues to be strong.

Frankly, where we've had differences with President Duterte has related more to our concerns that there needs to be a clear commitment to due process and the rule of law as it relates to some of the internal security efforts that had been undertaken there. On the alliance issues, we'll continue to work closely with them.

We do think it's important, though, that given the serious nature of the issues in our relationship, that leaders seek to create a constructive tone for discussions. And again, that is why we made the decision that we did about the bilateral meeting.

As it relates to China, we welcome efforts by the Philippines to engage in a dialogue with China. Our position has always been that we're not picking a winner in terms of claims; that we want to see basic international principles upheld, including the peaceful resolution of disputes consistent with international law. What we don't want to see is these claims resolved through force or coercion. So we don't want to see a bigger nation forcing a smaller nation to accept their will. However, if the Philippines can reach a mutual understanding with China, or any of the claimants can reach a peaceful resolution to these disputes consistent with international law, then we believe that would be a constructive development. And, in fact, we've encouraged all ASEAN countries who are claimants to engage in dialogue, and we've encouraged ASEAN as a collective to support these basic sets of international principles.

MR. EARNEST: Margaret.

Q On North Korea, did you get any concrete pledges from Xi on cutting off financial lifelines? Because it was mentioned broadly, but specifically, anything that China is actually going after, bank accounts of -- leaders in a serious way? And on Duterte, this isn't the first time that he's insulted a U.S. leader, though it's certainly the first time the most powerful man in the world. I mean, he called John Kerry crazy. He used slurs to refer to the U.S. ambassador. Do you see this as a trend of anti-Americanism in the Philippines? And are you concerned about some of the things Duterte has said about perhaps getting a little closer to the Chinese, putting the court ruling aside?

MR. RHODES: So, each time we've seen comments like that, I think we've expressed concern. We were certainly concerned about the comments that related to our ambassador. I think that, again, what we are focused on here is whether or not comments like that on the eve of a meeting, and comments that related to a very substantive difference that we have raised consistently as it relates to due process, that those comments were going to prevent us from having the right environment to have a serious, productive discussion.

In terms of anti-Americanism, I think if you look at the views of the people of the Philippines, they're overwhelmingly in favor of the alliance. They're overwhelmingly positive about the United States. Frankly, we've come a long way from a number of years

ago when there was a greater degree of anti-American sentiment. I think we've built trust with the people of the Philippines. President Obama has invested a lot in that relationship. I think he's very well thought of in the Philippines. The fact that we're able to conclude a basing access agreement I think signaled that we're in a new chapter in our relationship.

So, again, we look at the whole, which is what is our relationship with the government and people of the Philippines, and we think it is very strong. However, when we see actions that we would object to anywhere, we're going to voice concerns. And when we see comments that are along the lines of what President Duterte said the other day, again, we'll raise our concerns about that as well.

What we want is an effective working relationship, though, so our hope is that there's an effort that is continued to be made by the government of the Philippines to have the right tone for our discussions to be productive going forward.

Q Do you want an apology?

MR. RHODES: I think it's their determination as to how they address his comments. We've noted the statements that they've made over the course of the day. I think we'd welcome efforts to set a positive tone for the discussions between our leaders. At the same time, the working relationships continue to be very strong in the relevant ministries and throughout our diplomatic and military channels. So none of these comments have affected the basic cooperation that takes place on a day to day basis with the Philippines.

MR. EARNEST: William.

Q Thank you.

MR. RHODES: Oh and again on China, look, we don't -- we have no concerns about there being positive relations between our allies and China. In fact, when our allies have constructive relations with China, it contributes to stability broadly in the Asia Pacific. We do have concerns about circumstances where China or any other nation may seek to coerce another country. So if the government of the Philippines is engaged in a dialogue with China about South China Sea claims or other issues, that's consistent with the type of diplomatic resolutions we seek here.

Frankly, what nobody has an interest in is there to be an escalation or a conflict over these issues. We do take the position on the arbitral ruling that this is legally binding and that claims should be resolved under international law. And China is party to the U.N. convention on the law of the sea, and so therefore we believe that they and other countries should respect that ruling as final and binding.

Q Can you talk a little bit about human rights -- with the Lao government? In what context did you raise it? Was it just, like, the standard response? And do you get any sense that there's going to be any movement -- any chance of movement on that? And then I was also wondering, is the difference you see between race and human rights with a

country like China on one -- a country like Laos, is there ever a greater chance of getting something back for that? And how do you see that coming out? And I have a follow-up question about a specific case.

MR. RHODES: So as it relates to human rights here in Laos, in every country in the world we support a set of basic universal values like freedom of expression, freedom of association, the freedom of people to exercise the rights that are enshrined in the U.N. charter.

I think in terms of the President's conversations and some of our work here, we have focused on support for civil society. We believe, frankly, that civil society can be an important partner in supporting development. We've seen a trend in different countries of restrictions placed on civil society. So that is both an issue that relates to political matters, but also we see civil society organizations that could do important work here in Laos on issues related to health or education and development. So that's certainly an issue that the President raised here, as he has in other places.

I think tomorrow he'll be meeting with the Young Southeast Asian Leaders in Luang Prabang, many of whom are in the civil society space. When we work to develop these YSEALI networks, civil society along with entrepreneurship is one of the areas of focus. So there will be representatives in the audience tomorrow who have worked on civil society issues.

I would say that we also then generally raise concerns around specific human rights concerns that emerge, whether they be individual cases or, broadly speaking, our desire to see a greater freedom of speech and association, whether that's in Laos or anywhere else in the world.

Look, I would say candidly -- and I said this in Vietnam -- that if you're in Vietnam or you're in Laos, there's obviously a history that is quite complicated. And we do feel the need to make clear that when we raise these issues, we're not in any way suggesting that the policy of the United States is to change the regime here or to impose a new political system. It's to support a set of universal values that we would anywhere else. And we understand, obviously, and have to be mindful of the fact that we're building a new relationship here. And we don't have as extensive a history of dialogue with the government on these issues as we might have in other places. So we're just beginning to have these types of conversations at high levels and we will continue to do so.

I think with respect to China, we raise all of the same issues there. They manifest themselves in different ways, whether it be the individual cases, which President Obama did raise when he was in China, or whether it be issues related to Tibet, or whether it be issues related to freedom of religion, which is something the President also raised when he was in China. I think the U.S.-China relationship is so big and so multifaceted that it just takes place as a part of a much broader discussion. But a human rights dialogue has been a consistent part of our China policy and it will be going forward.

Q And can you talk about the case of Sombath Somphone? Was that raised? And how was that raised, and what was your response? His wife mentioned especially that the standard response -- the police are looking into it, but is that what you got?

MR. RHODES: The standard response has been what?

Q It's simply that police are looking into his disappearance. It's been four years, though.

MR. RHODES: So I met with Mr. Somphone's wife when I visited Laos earlier this summer. I'll be meeting with her over the course of this visit as well. We stay in regular contact with her and we care very deeply about her case and her husband. We believe that she deserves to know what happened to her husband and what the status of his case is.

The response that we get from the Lao government is what she referenced, which is that they're continuing to investigate this. And oftentimes, they indicate that they do not know and that there is an ongoing investigation. Given his prominence, this is something that we'll continue to raise. I think the President addresses these issues around civil society and human rights in his meetings, and then we tend to raise individual cases with the government around those meetings.

Q Just talking about the complicated history of -- the decision to develop the funding for getting rid of these bombs over the country. Is that -- it was not the case in, say, Hiroshima, but is this an apology from the U.S. for what happened all those years ago? And second, in terms of MIA, I know it's been about 30 years since we started searching for the Americans that went missing. And the foreign minister said last week -- taken about 30 years. Why has it taken so long? Is it that they're somewhere out on the mountain somewhere? Are they buried where they can't be found? Why does it take so long to find them if -- it's going to take around 30 years?

MR. RHODES: So I've worked on both of these issues. On the POW/MIA issues, we've actually taken some steps around this visit that we believe will help us accelerate the process of recovery. We've been focused on increasing the number of personnel that are in the teams that go out and conduct the recovery efforts and their ability to operate for longer durations of time at the sites.

The reality is, as you said, I think part of the reason it's so difficult here is that many of the search areas are densely forested, many years have passed, and it's just hard work. But it is a principle of the U.S. government that we do not leave people behind and that we exhaust every effort to find personnel who are missing in action and we'll continue to do that. I could not put a precise timeline on it, but we'd obviously like to get it done as quickly as possible. And we've made progress in recent years and around this visit in taking steps to improve our capacity in this space.

Obviously, as in Vietnam, this was a process of building trust. The notion of having teams go out in this country was controversial when it started, but now we have a good working relationship.

On the UXO, I think that the -- what's unique about the situation here is that this poses an ongoing threat to the people of Laos. Since the conclusion of our bombing, some 20,000 Lao have been either killed or wounded by the UXO. So it poses a danger to civilians in many different parts of the country. It's also an enormous obstacle to development here, because in a country that has got a largely agricultural economy, you cannot develop land that is littered with cluster munitions.

So we believe that we have a profound responsibility, a moral responsibility to do our part. When we took office, I think we were spending roughly \$3 million a year, which, frankly, was nowhere near the scale of support that the Lao government needed to try to get as much done as possible in this space. We've steadily increased that. The three-year \$90 million commitment is going to enable us to do a comprehensive nationwide survey here in Laos so that we're better able to identify precisely where we think these munitions are, and then we can prioritize clearance, working with the Lao and our other partners in this space.

We want to make it more efficient and quick, just as our recovery efforts, to clear this UXO. And in the past, it's been very difficult work -- people out with metal detectors trying to identify individual munitions, and then explode them when you have millions of cluster munitions across the country -- that is difficult work. But this is going to jumpstart that process and hopefully save lives, support victims, and open the space for greater economic development here in Laos. So we're very proud of the ability to make additional contributions.

I don't think it's a matter of apologizing. I do think that, as President Obama said -- referenced in his remarks today, this was largely a secret war to the American people, and therefore there wasn't the same degree of public knowledge about what was taking place here, and about the scale of the bombing that took place here. And that may have contributed to the fact that we were slower in beginning to engage in some of these efforts than in a place like Vietnam, where we've been doing Agent Orange and Dioxin cleanup for a long time now.

So we feel an urgency, given the fact that people are still dying and being wounded by these weapons, to do our part to try to accelerate the clearance process.

Q I had a quick -- with Ben, and then couple of domestic -- I don't know if you want to -- Ben, the President said Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov were going to meet in the coming days on the Syria deal. Has that -- been planned? Has that been scheduled, or is it kind of --

MR. RHODES: No, I think that's -- I mean, you'll have to check with the State Department on precise timing, but I think that's still the plan. And again, the urgency for the meeting is both we feel like we have a clear understanding of what the remaining issues, but also there's a humanitarian situation that we'd like to address as soon as possible.

Q Josh, Oklahoma ordered the shutdown of a couple dozen wells after the earthquake over the weekend. I'm wondering if the President worries those kinds of events are going to become the norm, and secondly, if -- he's very happy to take credit -- energy crisis, so -- if he at all regrets the advocacy for fracking he's -- attempting to (inaudible.)

MR. EARNEST: I did see the news about the announcement in Oklahoma. What our policy has been as it relates to fracking has been to ensure that environmental experts and the federal government, including at the EPA, are working closely with state officials to design a regime to ensure the safety and security of the people who live in the area. In some cases, that has meant a concern about the water supply. I know that there have been other concerns about the impact of these kinds of procedures on possibly leading to earthquakes.

So our approach in Oklahoma will continue to be the approach we've taken all across the country, which is we're going to continue to work with local officials who do have the primary responsibility of ensuring the safety and security of the communities where this kind of activity is taking place.

Obviously, some of the advances that we've seen in the technology that have opened up access to larger deposits of natural gas have contributed to driving down the cost of natural gas, and also making the use of this fossil fuel that's much more -- much less of a contributor to climate change more common. And that's had a positive impact on the level of emissions that we've seen in this country over the last several years. That's not something that the President regrets, but the President will insist that the work to exploit those deposits is done as safely as possible. And we're certainly -- we've been mindful of that from the beginning, and our policy with regard to fracking has not changed.

Q And then Congress went back today with a list of -- a laundry list of the priorities that we've heard for -- I'm wondering specifically about the possibility of a government shutdown this fall -- your thinking of the chances of that happening, and have you received any assurances from Speaker Ryan or other congressional leaders that they'll probably get through the election, or -- and into the next presidency before (inaudible)?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, Justin, I'm not sure that people would -- that anybody at this point would put a lot of stock in the assurances, whether we receive them or not. The fact is we have seen the Republican-led Congress operate at historic lows when it comes to doing the people's business. Republicans, for some time, prided themselves on their ability to pass budgets. And despite having significant majorities in both the House and the Senate, they have not succeeded in passing any appropriations bills this year. And that does not bode well for the ability of members of Congress to do their job and ensure that they can pass a budget before the end of the fiscal year.

This administration is certainly going to continue to be in touch with members of Congress now that they're back to work after a seven-week break. Hopefully they're ready to get some business done. Hopefully that will include funding for Zika that is badly needed. Hopefully that will include funding for opioid addiction and treatment -- something that both parties have identified as a priority. Obviously we'd like to see some

progress on the President's Supreme Court nominee and on TPP as well. So there's a long to-do list for members of Congress who have been gone for a while now. And hopefully they'll get after it, as they say.

But I think the other point that I would make here is simply that the American people are going to be watching. And as people across the country prepare to go to the ballot box this fall, they're not just going to be casting votes for the presidential candidates that understandably get the most attention, but they're also going to be making decisions about whether or not they're being well-represented in Congress. And based on the track record that we've seen from the Republican majority in Congress, I think serious doubts have been raised. And I think that does explain the low standing of Congress in public opinion surveys. I think it does account for a lot of the dissatisfaction that people have with the political system in Washington, D.C.

And I've made the observation many times that there are no Republicans in Congress who are currently serving there who are forced to serve in Congress. They ran for these jobs. And the American people elected them to these jobs with the expectation that they were actually going to do something. And we have seen that Republicans in Congress have not done much, and all too often they have refused to do their job. And when it comes to the budget and a looming deadline at the end of this month, hopefully they'll step up to the plate and get it done.

Andrew.

Q A quick question on the meeting next weekend with Aung San Suu Kyi. Ben, do you think there's anything you can do to help her government establish itself in terms of --

MR. RHODES: I'm sorry, who did you say? Suu Kyi, okay.

Q Is there anything you can do to help her government improve their fiscal situation or - in terms of sanctions or with the (inaudible)?

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, she'll be visiting Washington and meeting with the President on September 14th in her capacity as State Counselor. Since the NLD-led government took office, we have looked precisely at this question of what we can do to help. Some of that is related to providing direct assistance, and we've significantly increased the assistance through USAID, much of which is in the space related to capacity-building, so that they're better able to attract investment and create the type of legal frameworks that can grow their economy, in addition to dealing with specific issues like conflict resolution and trafficking.

I think the biggest thing, though, we can do is help their economy grow by opening up greater trade between Myanmar and the United States and other countries around the world. Again, some of that involves us working with them so that they're strengthening the environment for investment and trade. Some of that involves sanctions relief, and we've taken steps to relax the sanctions and to authorize greater activity. It's something

that we continue to look at, because the purpose of the sanctions regime was to support a democratic transition, and some of the sanctions even were tied to the treatment of Suu Kyi specifically.

We, of course, continue to have concerns about a range of issues inside of Myanmar, but we do want to make sure that there's a democratic dividend. I got a question before about human rights. One of the best things that we can do to support human rights is to make sure that when there are transitions to democracy, that they succeed. And so given that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are now elected leaders in Myanmar, we need to make sure that they are showing a dividend for their people. And so we'll be exploring ways that we can help them deal with their economy, whether that's through sanctions relief, whether that's through working with her to promote greater commercial ties with the United States. That's going to be, I think, a focal point of her visit to Washington.

At the same time, she has a range of other challenges that she's dealing with, whether it relates to the peace process with the ethnic groups or the situation in Rakhine State. On both those issues, she's put forward ambitious plans recently -- in the peace process, convening a conference with all of the different ethnic groups; in Rakhine State, taking some initial steps to have a citizenship verification process and have a commission that can oversee that in Rakhine; but also, I think importantly, inviting international participation through Kofi Annan's auspices. So she's doing a lot of things to try to address the toughest issues inside the country, and we want to make sure she can succeed.

And so that's one of the things that we'll be most focused on when she comes to Washington. I'm sure, again, given Congress's role in supporting her and our Burma policy over the years, we'll be consulting with them, as well -- and we have been -- leading up to her visit. And that will continue when we get back to Washington.

Q (Inaudible) as in Burma, you would welcome a transition to the (inaudible)?

MR. RHODES: Well, the key point I'd make here is that that transition was led by the people of Myanmar. That was not imposed by the United States. We spoke out for what we believed in. We imposed sanctions when we saw things that were contrary to our values or international law. But ultimately it took the courage of people like Aung San Suu Kyi and countless political prisoners who are now serving in parliament, over many years, to bring about a democratic transition.

It also took a decision by the previous government to allow for an opening and to allow for elections. Now, we were very much engaged in that process, pressuring them for many years, and then, beginning in 2011 really, accelerating our engagement on behalf of things like release of political prisoners, democratic elections. So we played a role in supporting that transition. But, ultimately, it was the people of Myanmar themselves who claimed democratic gains -- that are not yet complete. There is still 25 percent of the parliament reserved for the military.

But I think a key point in our foreign policy has been that we gain more in promoting our interests and our values by engaging countries; that just sitting back and criticizing countries has a limit in terms of what it can achieve. So when you look at a Myanmar, when you look at a Cuba, when you look at a Vietnam, and when you look at a Laos, these are all countries with whom we have very different relationships. The common thread is we have very difficult histories. But we believe that we're going to be more effective in building partnerships and advancing our interests and improving the livelihoods of people in these countries, and ultimately in supporting things we believe through engagement.

We are going to make clear in that process that we are not going to impose, again, a political system, or impose -- insist upon regime change. Those are decisions that should be left to the people of these countries.

Q A couple questions. Just to be clear, the Philippine government I believe suggested that there would be some sort of rescheduling of this meeting. I know you mentioned that they'll probably have a chance, Obama and Duterte, to chat along the sidelines. But is there any date set for them to actually meet before President Obama leaves office, perhaps during UNGA? That's one.

And then on Syria, broadly speaking, what can the U.S. realistically do, not just on a Cessation of Hostilities, but more broadly to pressure Russia to stop propping up the Assad regime? What are the carrots and the sticks, if you look at it that way?

And then lastly, on Turkey, how concerned are you that any failure, if the U.S. doesn't ultimately extradite Fethullah Gulen -- how concerned are you that that could irreparably harm the relationship with Turkey?

MR. RHODES: I think, look, it's an irritant on our relationship, there's no question about that. The fact of the matter is, though, we have a system in which the President could not simply choose to return Gulen. I do think it's important that we show that we take Turkey's concerns seriously, and that's why the Department of Justice has devoted a lot of resources to reviewing Turkish evidence and sitting down with their Turkish counterparts. And I think that the government of Turkey sees that we're taking this seriously. We're not ignoring their concerns, we're just saying you have to meet a legal threshold. And so we'll continue to have those discussions.

I do think that President Obama and President Erdogan had a positive meeting, and the tone of the comments after the meeting reflected that, as well as the progress that we're seeing in Syria.

With respect to Russia, I think the principal point that we've always made to the Russians is, when you talk about incentives: They are not going to be able to achieve their own objectives unless they engage in the type of process that we're negotiating. There is not a military solution to pacify that entire country. There is not a circumstance in which they

continue to support a regime that has been bombarding its own people that doesn't lead to greater international isolation of not just the Assad regime, but ultimately Russia -- because those actions are opposed by many of the other countries in the region.

Russia would benefit from there being a political resolution inside of Syria that can end the violence. And the only way in which you are going to achieve that is if there is a moderate opposition that is able to come to the table. At the same time, Russia wants -- it says -- to go after al Qaeda and ISIL. Well, the best way to do that is to go after al Qaeda and ISIL, and not after opposition that is more moderate in orientation and that would be interested in coming into a political resolution. Ultimately, they'll have to make the determination. And I think we'll learn over the course of the coming discussions whether or not they indeed are serious about narrowing a focus to al Qaeda and ISIL. That's a proposition that's being tested in those discussions.

On the Philippines, again, I think they'll see each other at the summit, as the President will see leaders over the course of tomorrow's dinner and the meetings the following day. We do not have a formal bilateral meeting scheduled. We don't anticipate a formal bilateral meeting. I do think it's the case that -- we're not indicating that we'll never speak to the President of the Philippines, we just don't think that this is the right environment after the series of comments. So I don't have any scheduling updates.

I think in terms of the coming days we'll see him as a part of the summit meetings.

Q Is there a situation in which THAAD doesn't get deployed? For example, if you're more effective enforcing -- if China is more effective enforcing sanctions?

MR. RHODES: Sanctions enforcement, no, would not lead to a reconsideration of THAAD. I think the two leaders were very clear today that they're both committed to the deployment of the THAD system; that it's entirely necessary, given the threats emanating from North Korea. That's something that President Obama said to President Xi as well.

The fact of the matter is we've also made the case to the Chinese that this is not a system directed at them; that this is directed at a threat from North Korea so that they should not have concerns about the deployment of the system. In terms of what could lead us to change our minds, North Korea could abandon its ballistic missile program and nuclear programs.

The reason we're deploying THAAD is because of the provocations from North Korea and the constant testing of ballistic missiles and the nuclear tests as well. So, again, this is a defensive system that is in response to North Korean threats. A change of behavior from North Korea is the thing that could change that calculus, but we have not yet seen any indication, given that they just recently launched another ballistic missile.

This is a threat to us, it's a threat to the Republic of Korea, it's a threat to Japan. I would add that the one other thing that President Obama and President Park spoke about is the importance of continued trilateral cooperation between our three countries. And in that regard, we've welcomed the progress and the leadership shown by President Park and Prime Minister Abe as well.

MR. EARNEST: Anybody else? Yes, ma'am, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thank you very much. So the President is -- wanted to have the bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Abe? And also my question is about the state of new -- the review of the nuclear -- of the administration. So what do you want to accomplish at the next UNGA about -- in terms of the state -- and also, how much does the President weigh in -- of a nuclear weapon?

MR. RHODES: So I would expect that the President will have an opportunity to have a meeting with Prime Minister Abe. So we're -- I think we're trying to find the time for that discussion. I think given the recent missile launch and our continued efforts to coordinate with Japan on a host of issues, that they'll want to find a time for a discussion. They spoke I think a number of times at the G20 meeting, so it may not have to be a lengthy meeting, but I do think that they'll sit down and want to have a bilateral conversation.

With respect to our nuclear policies, I think President Obama has consistently said that we want to look for ways to strengthen international norms against the use of nuclear weapons, and that we want to find ways to lead by example as well. As it relates to testing, we are committed to CTBT, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. We are not able to achieve ratification through the Senate, even though that's something we'll continue to do because we think Senate ratification would be critically important.

At the same time, we do want to see whether we can find ways for there to be international expressions of support for the norm against testing. I think that's all the more important given what we're talking about, which is North Korea having conducted repeated nuclear tests in violation of international law. In that environment, why would you not want to work at the U.N., with other countries to have a strong statement that reinforces and strengthens a fundamental international norm against testing nuclear weapons? So those are conversations that we're having diplomatically.

Beyond that, I think we regularly look at a range of different options as it relates to our own nuclear arsenal. Some of those involve how we are addressing our own stockpile -- we've had arms control negotiations with Russia that have stalled. So we continue to look at ways in which we can lead by example, and the President said he was going to do that in Hiroshima.

However, what should be very clear is that the security guarantees that we have to our allies are ironclad. And, in fact, today, in the meeting with President Park, you heard President Obama indicate once again that we embrace the concept of extended deterrence as it relates to the Republic of Korea. So we've always made clear -- and Japan, Republic of Korea will always have the commitment of our full arsenal as it relates to their defense.

I think it's certainly -- well, I wouldn't go beyond that. There are no decisions that are pending for the President. I think there's been more speculation, frankly, publicly about this than should be the case, given that it's not as if the President is engaged in reviewing

any imminent decisions. And were we to look at issues related to declaratory policy, we would obviously consult with our allies. But the fact of the matter is our security guarantees are rock solid and they will continue to be.

MR. EARNEST: Have a good evening, everybody.

END

7:14 P.M. ICT