

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes, 11/13/14

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MR. EARNEST: Good morning, everybody. It's nice to see you all. I understand you arrived rather late into Burma last night, so I appreciate you getting up this morning to be with us.

I'll turn it over to Ben here shortly, who can do some opening remarks to give you a greater sense of the President's plans while he's here in Burma today and tomorrow. And then, after that, we'll open it up to your questions on anything else related to the President's trip or other topics that may be in the news today.

Ben, you want to start?

MR. RHODES: So, first of all, just a little bit on the President's time while he's here. As you know, today he's in the East Asia Summit and the U.S.-ASEAN Summit before a bilateral meeting with Vietnam in the afternoon. In terms of the summits, we'll have more coming out of those meetings. We have invested a significant amount of U.S. time, attention and resources into deepening our relationship with Southeast Asia and trying to establish the East Asia Summit as a forum for cooperation regionally. It's a central institutional piece of our Asia Pacific rebalance effort. We cooperate in these forums on economic issues, environmental issues, education, also issues related to political and security matters, such as maritime security. So those will certainly come up in the meetings.

Importantly, this year I'd highlight, however, that we're also seeking to elevate global issues in these forums. So, for instance, climate change, ISIL and Ebola -- issues where we are seeking cooperation with Asian Pacific nations in order to make progress. So, for instance, just as in China, we were focused on the climate change issue with President Xi Jinping. We'll be talking to ASEAN countries today about how we can work together

heading into the Paris process next year to reach an international climate agreement. And so I think you'll see climate change continue to be an area of focus throughout the President's trip here, as well, of course, as ISIL and Ebola -- two global challenges we're very focused on.

In terms of the Burma portion of the visit, this afternoon the President will visit a parliamentary resource center that helps support Burmese parliamentarians as they have opened up their democratic process. He'll be able to meet there with a number of parliamentarians. Then, later this evening, he'll have a bilateral meeting with Thein Sein. I'll come back to the agenda for those meetings.

Tomorrow, as you know, we'll be going to Rangoon where he'll have the opportunity to do a number of things to reach out to a broader cross-section of the Burmese people. He'll have a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, of course, of the opposition -- an iconic figure in this country and around the world -- to consult about the situation in Burma.

He'll also be able to meet with representatives of civil society at our embassy. He'll be able to tour the old secretariat in downtown Rangoon, which was the seat of original Burmese democracy after independence. And he'll have a town hall with young people, where he'll be able to speak to the ongoing situation in Burma, but also our efforts to develop a young Southeast Asian leaders program in line with the type of program we had with young African leaders, and so we're looking to take that forward tomorrow.

In terms of the agenda for the bilateral meeting and visit, on the one hand we've seen extraordinary change inside of Burma, and an opening up that I think has brought much hope to the people of this country but also to the region and the world. We've seen political prisoners released. We've seen a greater openness to the international community. We've seen a process of ceasefires with ethnic groups who have had longstanding insurgencies and conflict with the government that has a prospect of a national reconciliation.

At the same time, however, we have significant concerns that there has to be further follow-through for the promise of reform to deliver results. And we talked about this a little bit the other day. I'll just note some of our key areas of concern.

Heading into the election next year, the parliamentary election in 2015, we want to make sure that steps are being taken to ensure that that election is credible, inclusive, that the Burmese people are able to choose their own leaders. And we'll be discussing ways that we and the international community that support that process.

We also believe as part of the political reform process there needs to be constitutional reform to get at some of the more systematic challenges related with the shift from military to civilian rule. That process has been on going here in Burma. There's been a committee that has drafted a variety of proposals for amendments. We would continue to encourage the government to move forward with constitutional reform in parallel to the ongoing preparations for the election.

We've also, I guess -- we also, as you know, have expressed our deep concern about the situation in Rakhine state as it related to the Rohingya population and the need for them to have greater humanitarian support and have a place inside of Burma where they can become citizens and can live free from fear.

So there's a number of areas where I think we'll be pressing the government and a number of areas where we want to indicate further partnership. We want to see the promise of the reforms that have opened up here in Burma fulfilled. That's going to be a long process as we discussed the other day. It's going to take many years to complete such a dramatic transition to democracy. But the important thing to us is that this stays on track and that very important milestones -- like the upcoming election, like the national reconciliation process -- are moving forward so that an extraordinary opportunity for this country and the world can be realized.

With that, I'm happy to take your questions on anything related to the visit or other foreign policy matters. And Josh, of course, can do any other questions you may have.

MR. EARNEST: Julie, do you want to start?

QI have a question for each of you. On the visit, I know this is similar to how you did it last time, but can you just talk about the optics of coming to a country and the President's main meeting, press conference are with the opposition leader as opposed to the President? What kind of message does that send about where U.S. support is here?

And, Josh, on Keystone, the House and the Senate are moving forward next week on a bill. If it passes, will the President sign it?

MR. RHODES: Well, the United States has had a longstanding interest in Burma, and one that we've really looked at through the prism of our support for human rights and democracy here. Since the reform process opened up, we sought to engage broadly within the country, given that there are many different political actors who have a voice. We clearly have engaged with the government and Thein Sein, and supported efforts that he's undertaken in the reform process. But we've also engaged the opposition -- whether that's Aung San Suu Kyi, other civil society actors.

With respect to Aung San Suu Kyi specifically, she has done extraordinary things to sacrifice on behalf of democracy and human rights here inside of Burma, being intermittently under arrest or house arrest for so many years, for exactly the type of opportunity that we see today, which is a democratic opening. So she is both a fundamentally important voice inside of Burma on behalf of reform, but she's also I think an icon for democracy around the world. So the President always looks forward to an opportunity to talk to her to get her assessment of what's taking place inside the country.

So he'll hear from President Thein Sein tonight; that will be a very critical engagement for us as we talk about a very broad agenda. We'll hear from Aung San Suu Kyi tomorrow, as well. And, yes, it's unique, but she's a unique figure, and she's certainly a figure who is

going to be very important to the future of this country. Her party, the NLD, did overwhelmingly well the last parliamentary election that was held. It was a limited election, but I think it spoke to the support she has inside this country as well.

So we want to make clear that we're engaging broadly government leaders, opposition leaders, parliamentarians, civil society actors -- because it's a very fluid situation right now inside of Burma, and it's going to take all of these different segments of society working together to make their foreign process work. And ultimately, that's also going to include the military, and we want to see the military continue to relinquish its political power and transition to real civilian rule.

So I think the President's time sends its own message, and that message is that we want to see inclusivity in the democratic process, and we want to see the reform agenda go forward.

MR. EARNEST: Julie, as it relates to the Keystone pipeline, as you know, this is a project that is continuing to be subjected to a review that's conducted by the State Department. That's consistent with past practice on projects like this.

The President, as you'll recall in a speech that he delivered last summer, indicated that one of the factors in that review should be the degree to which a project like this would substantially contribute to the causes of climate change. So this is a project that is still under review by the State Department to determine whether or not it's in the national interest.

One of the things that is impeding the progress of that review is some ongoing litigation in Nebraska about the route of the pipeline. So it's important in the view of this administration that this review be conducted consistent with past practice and in a way that reflects the national interests that are at stake.

Q So does that mean that if Congress passes this bill and it lands on the President's desk (inaudible) before this review and the Nebraska case is decided, that he would veto it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it is the view of the administration that that process should continue and that that's the proper venue for determining whether the project should move forward. There has been other legislative proposals that have been floated to try to influence the outcome of this decision about the construction of the pipeline. The administration, as you know, has taken a dim view of these kinds of legislative proposals in the past.

I haven't reviewed the specific details that have been discussed overnight, our time, in the Congress. But I think it's fair to say that our dim view of these kinds of proposals has not changed.

Q (Off-mic) veto?

MR. EARNEST: It is a -- well, it's not a yes or a no because I haven't reviewed the specific proposal. But there have been previous proposals that I expect would be consistent with proposals that have been discussed overnight. And in evaluating those earlier proposals, we have indicated that the President's senior advisors at the White House would recommend that he veto legislation like that. But we'll -- and that does continue to be our position. If that changes, I'll obviously let all of you know. I know there's a lot of interest in this.

Mark.

Q A question for Ben. On Aung San Sui Kyi -- I think as you know, she's had a somewhat less sterling record on the issue of the violence in Rakhine state. And she's at some point said things like, well, there's really violence on both sides involving the Muslims and the Buddhists. I'm wondering whether the President plans to encourage her when he sees her tomorrow to use her moral authority to take a stronger position on that, given that she's one of the people in the country who might be able to make that case most effectively.

MR. RHODES: Well, I think that in all of his engagements he will be speaking to the need -- he'll be speaking to the need for leaders to speak out on behalf of a process in Rakhine state that provides more humanitarian access for the Rohingya; that does not envision them held indefinitely -- or settled indefinitely in camps; and that allows them to become citizens of this country without having to self-identify as something that they do not believe they are -- without having to self-identify as Bengali. So I think that's a message he'll deliver across the board in his engagements with the Burmese leaders.

We recognize that this is a very complex issue here in Burma, that there are deeply held views; that there are contested views of history. But that doesn't change the fact that there are certain fundamental universal rights that need to apply for all people, and that when you have a situation where there's a population that is essentially marginalized, unable to have the type of basic humanitarian support that they need, and unable to resolve their status inside of the country through established protocols, that that presents a challenge to the reform effort.

So for instance, I think one message that he'll carry is the reform process is importantly -- hugely important to the future of this country. What happens with constitutional reform, what happens in the election next year is going to be hugely important to determine whether or not the democratic transition moves forward.

The national reconciliation process and the different ceasefires with ethnic groups will be historically significant for the future of Burma, resolving decades-old issues potentially, and allowing for there to be peace in a country that has had way too much conflict over the years.

That said, that reform process could be put at risk if we see a continued deterioration in the humanitarian situation in Rakhine state. The international community is concerned for the situation there and, frankly, the possibility for greater humanitarian suffering or violence. That could pose a threat to the broader project here inside of Burma because it

could be an instigator for violence, suffering and actions that will invite the grave concern of the international community. So we would like to see everybody speak out on behalf a fair resolution to this issue that addressed the fundamental rights of the Rohingya population.

And again, with respect to Aung San Suu Kyi specifically, yes, she is an opposition figure right now. The national government has a unique responsibility. The local actors on the ground have a unique responsibility. But we believe that all leaders across the political spectrum can play a role in speaking out. Her voice is obviously critically important. And so on all of these issues that are going to be important for the future of Burma, we will I think stake our principles, and we would encourage leaders here inside of Burma to recognize that the success of the reform effort is going to depend on a variety of different challenges in the years to come.

MR. EARNEST: Christi.

Q Thanks, Josh. If I could just follow up on that. Aung San Suu Kyi in recent days, according to local reports, has been telling people that the President should come and take a harder line with the government. I wonder if she's complained to you, if she's expressed this to you. Have you adjusted your message at all in response? And could you also just talk a little bit about the state of relations between the administration and her?

MR. RHODES: The state of relations between the administration and her is very good. The President, when he called President Thein Sein before coming out here, also called Aung San Suu Kyi. When our ambassador engages different Burmese leaders he's in very regular contact with Aung San Suu Kyi. So we've had a very open and transparent dialogue with her about our policies about her concerns.

Look, she has issues that she feels strongly about, and they're very much in line with the issues that we've continually raised with the government, specifically that the election next year has to be a credible and inclusive election that allows for participation for her party and other parties inside of Burma, but also the issue I think that she's been very focused on is constitutional reform. And we very much agree with the notion that there needs to be a constitutional reform process that reduces the role of the military; that completes the transition to civilian rule; that allows for ethnic participation; and that allows the people of Burma to genuinely choose their own leaders. And so that's what she's been engaged in as a parliamentarian, along with projects that improve the lives of her constituents.

Look, she's, as an opposition figure as someone who's been an advocate for democracy for so many years here, is going to hold everybody's feet to the fire -- and that's a good thing. We welcome that. We welcome her skepticism -- I think because we all recognize that we can't deter our attention from the very hard things that have to be done in this country until we continue to see these milestones, like the election, like the nationwide ceasefire that's being negotiated. Until we see those followed through on, I think it's good for her to have a heavy dose of skepticism, and we welcome that.

MR. EARNEST:Major.

QBen, will you describe for us the degree to which the administration is torn over its policy in Syria?What is working?What isn't?And what is the state of the President's current thoughts about the strategy as articulated so far to the American public?

MR. RHODES:Well, with respect to our broader counter-ISIL campaign, we clearly have a strategy in Iraq that is focused on building up our partners on the ground, using airstrikes in conjunction with coalition partners to squeeze the space where ISIL is operating, and ultimately to evict them.

In Syria, the challenge is much greater because we don't have a similar partner on the ground.In terms of the specifics of your questions, Major, I think our military effort has been successful in degrading ISIL inside of Syria.So we've been able to take out key financial nodes.We've been able to take out masses of ISIL fighters around Kobani, blunt their momentum there.We've been able to disrupt some of their activities through the fundamental denial of a safe haven because of our air campaign.

On the other hand, it's going to take more time to address the longstanding issues that are going to ultimately allow us to destroy ISIL but also bring a measure of stability to Syria.Specifically, we continue to invest in an opposition that can be a more strengthened force as it relates to the effort against ISL, but also as a counterweight to the Assad regime.And there's a political process that we believe needs to be reignited to allow for a transition inside of Syria to a new government.Ultimately, only a political transition is going to stabilize the situation.

So as the President looks at this, we are going to do what is necessary to take action against ISIL, to degrade their capabilities, to build up our efforts on the Iraqi side of the border, to get them out of these safe havens.In Syria, candidly it's going to be a longer-term effort to build up a partner on the ground and also to support a political process that can lead to a transition.And so these are the types of issues that we're working on a regular basis with our coalition partners and within our own government.

QOn those last two points -- political transition and putting together not necessarily a formidable opposition, but just an organized, recognizable one -- does the President feel he has -- what he's done so far has, in fact, failed?

MR. RHODES:I think the President believes that this has been an incredibly difficult challenge and there are no easy options here.So it's not so much the measure of whether or not what we've done has succeeded or failed, it's how do we deal with an incredibly complex and difficult challenge where, frankly, there's not been a lot of good or easy options to draw on.

We do believe we have more leverage right now given that we are taking action inside of Syria, given that we do have the authorization for the train-and-equip mission with the opposition, and that we do have this coalition.

So what's changed in the last several months is we have a lot more skin in the game in terms of our ability to press the issue in Syria against ISIL, but also to use this moment where we're pressing the issue against ISIL to try to reignite the political process. And we've talked to the U.N. representative, de Mistura, about his ongoing efforts. The President talks on the margins of these meetings with different leaders about that effort.

But clearly no one is satisfied with the situation in Syria as it currently stands. We haven't been satisfied for years, given the loss of life there, the destabilization, the flow of refugees out of the country. And that means we're always going to be taking a hard look at what more we can do to effectively degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, but also support a return to a stable Syria where there's been a transition to a new government that can have the confidence of more of the Syrian people.

MR. EARNEST: Kristen.

Q Ben, thanks. And, Josh, thanks. Following up on something Christi was asking -- Aung San Suu Kyi was also quoted as saying that the transition to democracy is stalled here. Would you go that far? Would you use that language? And are there any discussions underway about scaling back some of what's given to Burma, for example, the sanctions? Are there any discussions about continued sanctions?

And then, on Ukraine, can you comment on the reports that Russian troops are moving in? And was it a missed opportunity on the part of President Obama not to raise that issue during this last summit publicly?

MR. RHODES: So I think parts of the reform effort have stalled, parts have moved forward, and parts we've even seen things move backward. So I think it's a mixed picture. I think we do see continued progress in that there is open political debate here. There are political prisoners who have been released. There is a political culture and environment here that just did not exist a few years ago. The President will be seeing parliamentarians; there was not a functioning, active parliament several years ago.

On the other hand, we've seen certain aspect of the reform process stalled, like the progress on negotiating a nationwide ceasefire. There's been good progress there, but they haven't closed the deal in terms of taking all these different individual ceasefires with ethnic groups and turning it into a nationwide process. The constitutional reform has moved forward, but it's moved forward slowly. And they have an opportunity, though -- there's a clear marker out there with this election next year.

And so what we've said is let's use the opportunity of the constitutional process and the election to make sure that the reform effort is moving forward. I think we do need -- and as I said, I think the area where we've seen some backsliding is in Rakhine state in particular, where there needs to be concerted action.

But I do think we need some perspective here that a country that was completely closed to the international community, completely closed in terms of its politics, completely dominated by the military, with Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest just several years ago, has now opened up in a very dramatic way and is going to be undergoing a transition

for a number of years. And no country goes through the process quickly or easily. And, frankly, working through this deliberately, working collaboratively within the country so that there are efforts made to engage with different political actors about the way forward I think is a healthy way of doing things.

We've seen in other parts of the world sometimes more overwhelmingly revolutions can bring about more rapid challenges. So it's going to take time, but the fact that it's going to take time cannot serve as an excuse to not use the very clear opportunities that exist around an election, a constitutional reform process. And so that's where we want to see the government moving forward and the different political leaders working together.

Was there another aspect to your Burma question? Sanctions.

So we maintain -- our sanctions authorities are in place, so we have relaxed sanctions, but the sanctions authorities are there. And when we see the need to take action, we can do that. So as recently as a couple of weeks ago, an individual was added to our sanctions list because we saw him as taking steps that were blocking the reform effort.

I would say that while we've seen the U.S. come in with assistance and you've seen some U.S. investment here, that there's much more that could be done. We have, for instance, had very limited military-to-military engagement here in Burma. Our businesses still now that there are sanctions in place, and they know that there's an election coming up next year. USAID could do more in support of a nationwide ceasefire and reconciliation process. So if we see continued steps in the right direction, there's a lot more that we could be doing and would be doing to incentivize that in terms of U.S. government action, investment. But our fundamental view is it's better for us to be engaged, it's better for us to be here on the ground. A lot of what USAID does in development is in service of the ceasefire process, in service of reform. Our businesses I think bring good practices into Burma when they come here. They are more transparent. They can help create development that is more broadly shared.

So we're going to be engaged, because when our voice is in the room we believe it helps the outcomes that we all seek here, which is a successful democratic transition.

With respect to Ukraine, the President did raise this issue with the relevant leaders he's seen. When he saw President Putin, he made clear the importance of abiding by and respecting the Minsk agreement. And we've been very clear in expressing our concern about the recent reports of Russian military support flowing across the border to the separatists.

So this will continue to be a topic of discussion, less so here where we're meeting with Asian countries, but certainly at the G20 I imagine the President will have a chance to see his European counterparts -- Chancellor Merkel and others -- and be able to have discussions on the margins there about the situation in Ukraine.

MR. EARNEST: Jim.

QA couple questions for you, Ben, and then one for Josh. First of all, on the war crimes issue, do you expect the President to bring this up with the President here, to ask whether or not he's going to proceed with trial with any of these folks who have been accused of war crimes by the Harvard researchers? And is the war crime issue an impediment to the military government releasing some of their power? Are they concerned that if they release power, that it will mean, in fact, trials for them?

And just if you could in a general way for viewers who are not up to speed on this, when will the government -- when will the United States recognize Myanmar as the name of the country? What would have to happen for them to do that?

And just one for Josh, on the immigration, has the President already decided what he's going to do and is now just waiting to get back and decide when he's going to do it at this point?

MR. RHODES: So on the name issue, we essentially use it interchangeably. So in our diplomatic engagements with government officials we refer to Myanmar. The President when he's here, you'll hear him refer to Myanmar and Burma. So we have an official policy that has been longstanding that recognizes the country as Burma. But in practice, we use both names interchangeably.

In terms of making a formal shift to Myanmar, I think that's something that we wouldn't necessarily peg to an event. It's something that we'll evaluate going forward. But in practice, I think we're very comfortable using both names.

In terms of the accountability issues, I think in our current engagements with the government, what we've been most focused on is accountability for violence that's taking place now. So for instance, if we see violence against Muslim minority populations, for instance, we have encouraged there to be accountability for the perpetrators of that violence so that there's not a culture of impunity that can take hold in parts of the country. That's particularly been a challenge in Rakhine state.

In terms of international justice related to past events, I'm aware of the report. I'm not aware of any ongoing process that has demanded us to take a position with respect to past events here. So we believe that best thing that can be done is to look forward, to make sure that there's accountability if there's violence against minority populations, ethnic minority populations going forward. That in these ceasefire processes -- so this is what gets at the underlying issues that have I think been the subject of some of those reports -- that these are not cosmetic, right? That the military is not just declaring a ceasefire with an ethnic group so that the shooting stops, but that the underlying problems -- internally displaced peoples, the political participation for these ethnic minorities -- that those are addressed in a genuine way so that they can come into full investment in the reform process here.

So we look at allegations in the past. And, by the way, the people who have been engaged in those efforts tend to be the people who are on our sanctions list. So we've enforced our own accountability over the years when we've seen individual members of the military who we believe were engaged in crimes, in human rights violations. That's the basis of our

sanctions. So we've enforced our accountability. We want the government to make sure that they're holding people accountable -- whether it's individuals or government actors if there's violence that's ongoing. I'll have to see what the status of the process is as it relates to any international justice related to past events.

MR. EARNEST: I'll come right back to you, Carol.

Jim, just to answer your question on immigration -- the President has not made a final decision at this point about exactly what will be included in the administrative steps that he will take to try to address some of the problems associated with our broken immigration system.

As you know, the President is still planning to make some decisions and announce them prior to the end of this calendar year. That should be an indication to you that the President is nearing a final decision. In that process, the President has met with Secretary Johnson and Attorney General Holder, who are -- who have chiefly been responsible for evaluating what sort of options are at the President's disposal to deal with this.

The President met very recently, just within the last week, with Secretary Johnson to discuss the status of that. And I would anticipate that the President will receive some final recommendations from the Secretary relatively soon, but certainly not before the conclusion of his trip to Asia.

The other thing I'll note is that there have been some concerns -- to put it mildly -- expressed by Republicans with the President moving forward with some executive actions to address immigration reform. Julie began this briefing by asking about a piece of legislation that's moving quickly through the House dealing with the Keystone pipeline. The fact that we're in the lame duck session certainly hasn't affected House Republicans' decision to act quickly on the Keystone pipeline. There's no reason the fact that the House is in lame duck session, that that should affect their ability or even interest in bringing to the floor bipartisan legislation that's already passed the United States Senate to deal with immigration reform.

So that would be --

Q Does that mean the President will wait until Congress is finished (inaudible) announces -- so that he can see whether or not they do act before going home in early December?

MR. EARNEST: No, it does not mean that the President will wait. The House has certainly had ample responsibility. And again, what we're asking for here is not necessarily for the House of Representatives to begin a long process associated with committee meetings and other things. That long process has already taken place in bipartisan fashion through the United States Senate.

So what we're seeking is something that should not consume a lot of time on the legislative calendar. I'm not certainly an expert in House legislative procedure, but bringing to the floor a bipartisan Senate bill is something that we believe should

happen. And if it does happen before the end of the year, the President would be happy to sign that bill in lieu of signing any of these executive actions that the President is considering.

I guess if we did find ourselves in the unlikely scenario where the President did announce some administrative actions to deal with immigration reform, and then a week or two later Congress were to pass -- or the House were to pass the bipartisan legislation that passed through the Senate, the President would happily sign that bill into law in a way that would supersede any executive action that he took just weeks prior.

So in some ways, the timing of the President's decision is not nearly as significant as the decision that is facing House Republican leaders about whether they want to continue to block bipartisan legislation that has already passed the Senate and that would do so much more even to address the challenges of our broken immigration system in a way that would be good for the economy, that would strengthen our border security, and that would reduce the deficit.

Q The President's decision is not related to Congress acting in either way before the end of the year?

MR. EARNEST: No, other than if Congress does act before the end of the year to pass -- let me try to be more specific. If the House does pass the bipartisan Senate bill that's already passed, the President would happily sign that into law. And if he has already made a decision and moved forward on his own executive actions, he would happily retract those executive actions so that we could implement the bipartisan Senate bill.

Q Forgive me, Josh, if I could just jump in. What if the House were to bring the Senate bill to the floor and vote it down?

MR. EARNEST: We think that that's not likely to happen.

Q But what if it did? What if a Republican decided to stop the President from doing this, they would shift and just vote no? Would even bringing it to the floor slow this process down?

MR. EARNEST: Let's have them bring it to the floor and let's find out. I think that's what I would say, right? We've got an opportunity to evaluate the situation. It's a hypothetical, a legitimate one to raise. So let's test the proposition.

Jim.

Q Congressional Republicans, I'm sure you've noticed Mitch McConnell -- in response to the President's climate deal that he announced in Beijing yesterday -- said that it requires the Chinese to do nothing at all for 16 years. And I'm just curious what your response is to that. And what do you make of -- I mean, in a background call with reporters, there was an administration official saying that you think that you could potentially meet some these requirements unilaterally, without going through the Congress. I guess on two fronts

there, can you meet these requirements without going through Congress? And what do you make of Republican opposition that was almost immediately voiced after the President announced that deal?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, I have a couple thoughts here. Ben, you may have some ideas on this too.

Let me start by saying the President has already taken some important steps without Congress to significantly reduce carbon pollution inside the United States in a way that has yielded significant benefits for our broader economy, significant benefits for the manufacturing sector, particularly the auto industry, and significant benefits for middle-class families that are already saving costs on fuel.

The most prominent of these examples is the steps that the President took to raise fuel-efficiency standards for cars, trucks, and even some heavy vehicles inside the United States. That has already had an impact on reducing carbon pollution. And as those -- as the fleet turns over, so as older cars go off the roads and as newer cars take their place on the roads, the benefit of those regulatory decisions will only increase -- again, both in a way that reduces carbon pollution, but also in a way that lowers fuel costs for middle-class families and businesses all across the country. So that's the first thing.

There are a number of other steps that the President has announced through his executive authority that will also have an impact on reducing carbon pollution. The most prominent of these is, of course, the power plant rule that the President has discussed quite a bit over the last year. There have been some regulations that were rolled out on this over the summer.

Again, these are rules that will yield significant economic and public health benefits for the American people, and will have a broader impact on some of the impacts of climate change. It also puts the United States in a position where we can continue to lead the international community to confront this problem.

Q Do you think you can meet these goals, these requirements -- without (inaudible) Congress at all?

MR. EARNEST: We do. It will require some additional work. And again, some of that is because the benefits of the rules that have already been announced will only continue to increase as time goes by. That's related both to the fuel-efficiency standards for cars and trucks that I mentioned. That's also true as it relates to a bunch of energy-efficiency standards for buildings.

Again, we're seeing more buildings come into compliance with those high standards that the administration has set, and that will have benefits that will accelerate over time -- again, in a way that's both good for the economy and good for climate change.

As it relates to China, there are some significant things that we've asked them to do. We have asked them -- and they have committed to reaching a peak, as it relates to carbon pollution around 2030. And that is a significant commitment on their part and does

require some advance planning.

The second thing, and this is -- Ben can expand on this, but this has important domestic benefits, as well. The Chinese have also committed to significantly phase down the amount of energy that -- or power that is produced from coal-fired plants and replace them with plants that are fueled by renewable energy.

That kind of commitment to renewable energy, whether it's nuclear power or wind and solar, is a significant boon to the industry. And there are innovators and entrepreneurs back in the United States that stand to benefit from this commitment by the Chinese government.

So again, this is a way in which smart policy can be good for the planet, but also really good for domestic economy back home. It plays to the strengths of American entrepreneurs and innovators back in the United States.

This is also why a significant portion of this trip already has been devoted to the President trying to open up additional opportunities for American businesses here in Asia. And I think this goes hand-in-hand with that.

Ben, do you want to add to this?

MR. RHODES: Yes, so, I mean, just quite simply, Jim, there's no way that China could possibly peak its carbon emissions around 2030 if they are not acting between now and 2030. Their trajectory has been one of enormous upward emissions -- very dramatic upward trajectory in terms of China becoming the world's largest emitter.

So in terms of the breadth of what they're going to have to do, as we said the other day, their commitment in non-fossil fuel-burning energy to meet their target is going to be commensurate to the electricity production in the United States. It's going to be equal or comparable to their current reliance on coal-fired energy. So in other words, just to have a peak, they're going to have to do an enormous amount.

They're at a different stage of development than we are. They're much more reliant on dirty forms of energy. And so the type of investments that they're going to have to do on clean energy, the types of steps that they're going to have to take at home just to reach that peak in 2030 are quite significant. And that will then allow them to go on a downward trajectory in terms of their emissions. And all that is in service of the two degrees Celsius goal that has been set in terms of the international climate framework that's been negotiated over the course of the last several years.

So these are not things that await 2030 for Chinese action. These are things that the Chinese are going to have to be doing in order to peak around 2030, and then see them joining us in reducing emissions.

And look, that's been the key to this whole climate deal all along. Everybody knows that their country is at different stages of development from Europe, the United States, countries like Japan on the one hand, but then emerging economies like China, India,

South Africa, Brazil -- investing them in an international climate accord. That's the difference between what we're doing now and Kyoto, which put so much of the burden on the United States and Europe.

Again, the reason why this announcement was so fundamentally important is, as the world's two largest emitters, if China is not bought into this process and if they're not being ambitious in their targets, if they're not changing their energy dynamic, there's no way we can achieve an international climate accord. Because we now have this announcement, it provides a framework for us to go to other countries and to enlist them in their commitments. And we have a huge opportunity because of what we're able to get done with the Chinese.

MR. EARNEST: There's one other thing I want to add to that, and this is -- I mean, this is a view that is consistent with a view that's been expressed by some conservatives -- not this week, of course -- but last week, I noticed that Charles Krauthammer was on Fox News, and he said something I thought was pretty interesting. He said, "I think the one item he" -- meaning the President -- "could negotiate, and I'm serious about this, is climate change. That's the one where if we" -- meaning the United States -- "and China could agree -- if we could agree it would make a difference. You could shut down every coal mine in Kentucky. It won't make a dime's worth of difference. If he" -- meaning the President -- "gets an agreement with China, which he won't, but that's the one area, it would be historic."

So even by the standards set by some Republicans who don't always share the President's view when it comes to reducing carbon pollution, even they at this point would have to agree about the significance of the announcement that was made yesterday.

Q Because there's been some pretty nasty tone with incoming Republican Congress on immigration; you're going to take executive action before the end of the year. And on climate, you're saying you can meet these requirements without even consulting and dealing with Congress. So on these very two big issues, you don't need Congress is what you're saying.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, we would welcome congressional involvement in these two priorities. The fact of the matter is you have Republican leadership in Congress that is failing to take action on two issues that are critical to the United States, to our future, and to our economy. So it is regrettable that we're not seeing cooperation from Republicans in Congress on two core priorities.

The President has indicated that he's going to use all of the authority that's vested in the executive branch of the United States to take action that would benefit the American people, the American economy, particularly the American economy for middle-class families. And that's consistent with something that the President talked about in the aftermath of last week's election, that during his remaining time in office he's going to squeeze every ounce of opportunity that he has out of the presidency. I think these are a couple of good examples of that.

That said, neither of these steps -- or neither of these policy priorities, where we are going to make some progress because of the President's commitment to them, necessarily means that there isn't a role for Congress to play.

In fact, there is an important role for Congress to play, and we'd welcome their interest in participating constructively in this process. So far Republican leaders have not indicated that willingness.

Ed.

Q On Syria, maybe just to put a finer point on what Major was asking about specifically -- because I didn't hear the whole thing. I want to make sure I heard it right. CNN is reporting that the President ordered a review of his Syria strategy, and it suggests he's not happy with it currently now, and also went on to suggest that maybe there would be a more aggressive effort to oust Assad, that there be some dramatic shift. Has the President ordered such a review?

MR. RHODES: No. There's no formal strategy review of our Syria policy. What there is, is a strategy for degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL that requires us to take a hard look at what we're doing on a regular basis.

And as you know, we've had regular meetings that the President has joined with his national security team on this issue. And Syria has been an important subject at those meetings. And I think the President wants to make sure that we're asking hard questions about what we're targeting in Syria, how we're able to degrade ISIL. But also about how we're supporting the opposition and building them up as a counterweight to ISIL, but also ultimately, of course, as a counterweight to the Assad regime and how we're supporting that political process that I talked about earlier that can lead to a transition inside of Syria.

So, yes, we've been focused in the context of the ISIL strategy very much on our efforts inside of Syria. Our coalition partners, as we've grown this coalition to over 60 countries, have very strong and in some cases divergent views on Syria. And we've had to work to get the best alignment that we can about what we're doing. So this is an issue that is worked actively. And it certainly is the case that Syria has been a focus of recent discussions, along with other elements of our strategy like the deployment of additional U.S. military personnel to Iraq.

So this is in the context of what we've been doing. It has been a focus -- because as we've acknowledged, the Syria challenge -- as difficult as Iraq is, the Syria challenge is going to be that much harder given the absence of a partner on the ground and given the very significant challenges related to the Assad regime.

Q While you've been here, the President has been here, there's videotape from Jonathan Gruber, who was one of the architects when the law came out. Among the things he said was that the bill was originally written in a "very tortured way," in his words, to kind of

mislead people about the taxes in the law and other parts of the law. He went on to say, "A lack of transparency was a huge political advantage for the President..." in terms of selling it to the American people.

I thought it was just the opposite. Didn't the President promise unprecedented transparency? Why would one of the architects of the law suggest that you were misleading people?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not sure, frankly, Ed. The fact of the matter is the process associated with writing and passing and implementing the Affordable Care Act has been extraordinarily transparent. We all sat through many town hall meetings and discussions where this piece of legislation was vigorously debated by people on both sides. There was even a meeting that the President convened at Blair House with Republicans to discuss this policy proposal. It was, as you know, broadcast by C-SPAN.

There was a steadfast commitment by this administration to make sure that people had good insight into the benefits of the law. The fact is we spent a lot of time talking about one of those benefits. And that is the fact that individuals could receive tax credits from the federal government to make their health care costs more affordable. The fact is, I think it's actually Republicans who haven't been particularly transparent or even honest about the true impact of those.

Q He talked about some of the downsides, saying that we had told people that sick people were going to get more benefits; healthy people wouldn't pay more -- and not tax credits, but people paying higher taxes. And CBO, he said, scoring it as a tax, that that was going to hurt. He wasn't talking about the benefits. He was saying that some of the negative sides, you misled people.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, it sounds like you may have watched the video a few more times than I have.

Q (Off-mic.)

MR. EARNEST: Right, right, right. Again, I think you've probably watched it more than I have, so I'm not going to quibble with what he actually said.

I do think that the question that you raised is about the commitment to transparency that was embodied in the process of writing and passing the Affordable Care Act. And again, I think the President is proud of the transparent process that was undertaken to pass that bill into law.

And again, I do think that the benefits are transparent to people who have gone to the website and evaluated the health care options that are available to them. In many cases, these are higher quality, more affordable options than had ever been available to them.

This does lead me to one other segue, which is that there is an opportunity for people now -- in advance of the enrollment period -- to go onto the website and to begin shopping. And that, again, is a commitment that this administration has made to try and

get people as much information as possible, as soon as possible, so that they can make the kinds of decisions that are in the best interest of their families or their small business.

Q-- on the video, he also says that -- he says, "Call it what you will, the stupidity of the American voter -- if we have been more transparent, this wouldn't have passed." To suggest that voters are stupid and that's how you passed it, you don't feel bad about that at all?

MR. EARNEST: I disagree vigorously with that assessment, I think is what I would say. I think the fact of the matter is this is a -- this was a very difficult undertaking, but ultimately this is a law that has had significant benefits for millions of people that have been able to sign up through the marketplaces established by the Affordable Care Act. We're nearing the open enrollment period once again where millions more people will have the opportunity to at least go online and shop to see if they can get a better deal for their family through the Obamacare marketplaces. We certainly would hope the people would take advantage of that opportunity to see if they find something that's in their best interest.

Again, that is one of the benefits of this proposal, of this law, is that it does empower consumers to make these kinds of decisions with more transparency, with a greater understanding about the market, with a greater understanding of what the costs are associated with each of the plans, and what the benefits are.

And again, that I think is one of the hallmarks of this proposal. It's one of the reasons that it's been so successful so far. And it's one of the reasons that we're bullish about its prospects moving forward.

I will say -- and I think this warrants mentioning, as well -- it is Republicans who have been less than forthright and transparent about what their proposed changes to the Affordable Care Act would do in terms of the choices that are available to middle-class families. I know there is at least one very prominent Republican who campaigned for reelection saying that he would repeal the Affordable Care Act, but yet keep in place the Affordable Care Act marketplace that has operated very successfully in his state.

So I think if we're going to examine which party, and whether its advocates or opponents who have been honest about the true impact of the law, I think the administration grades out very well on that factor.

Carol, you've been very patient. We'll go to you next.

Q I have a couple for Ben. Coming from China to these summits, how much of the part of the President's time here is going to be spent trying to reassure allies in the region that his new strengthened ties with China aren't a threat to them? Or does it mean that he doesn't have their back the way he said he has? And if that is part of his time, what's his message on that?

And secondly, the AP has a report out of Tehran saying -- quoting top Iranian officials saying that the Supreme Leader has responded to the President's letter. Is that right? And what do you make of this -- the letter apparently says that he told the President that you can't have a decorative nuclear program, that that was not acceptable to Iran -- what do you make of that?

And if I could just one more time on Syria -- the CNN report says that the President has expressed concern that Islamic State may not be defeated if there isn't a political transition. It quotes a senior official saying that the President has asked us to look again at how this fits together. Is that wrong? Or can you -- did he say -- I mean, is that what he has directed you guys to do?

MR. RHODES: Again, what I thought was not accurate is the notion that we're undertaking some formal strategy review that is any different than how we look hard at issues on a regular basis, and as part of the counter-ISIL campaign.

So that's what we're not doing. We have a strategy in place to defeat ISIL. It has an Iraq and Syria component, and we look on a regular basis at the different elements of that strategy. And I would absolutely acknowledge that Syria -- he continually presses how we can pursue effective tactics inside of Syria that are in service of the broader goal of defeating ISIL.

On that specific issue, we certainly looked at what the relationship is between the actions we're taking against ISIL and the political transition. And we've long believed that you're not going to have stability inside of Syria if there's an ongoing civil war. So I wouldn't rule out the prospect that you could defeat ISIL absent that political transition. But what I would certainly say is it will be much easier to get that job done if you're able to end the civil war.

This is a message that the President has also used in his engagements with other leaders, including President Putin, which is that as long as the underlying conflict persists in Syria, it's going to be a magnet for extremists. That's how ISIL was able to establish a foothold in the first place. So we do very much look at that connection between the political process and the environment for ISIL inside of Syria. So that is certainly a question that the President has pressed us on.

Q That was what this report, that these officials are referring to, is you guys have described this as a phasing, meaning you would have this initial phase, where it's very targeted, focusing on Islamic State, and then sort of look at the broader picture. Is that -- are these officials -- are you guys moving more into that next phase? Is that what these officials are talking about?

MR. RHODES: Look, I can't speak to the officials. What I can say is that inside of Syria we've said there's going to be a phase in the sense that the strikes that we're taking now are very much geared towards degrading the organization generally, hitting targets of

opportunity, as we have in Kobani, and also helping the situation in Iraq because supply lines and command and control in Iraq runs back into Syria. That is the current focus of our efforts inside of Syria.

We are shifting to a new phase inside of Iraq where we're working with the Iraqis to go on offense. I think in Syria the question is going to be how do we align our ongoing military efforts with our training of the opposition and with the political dynamic in the country to achieve our objectives. So it is true that we're looking at this mix of factors inside of Syria. I just -- I'd say that that's been happening in the rhythm of the President's meetings.

So, for instance, you've seen him have almost weekly meetings with his national security team on ISIL. That's where we've been having these discussions. So that's been something that's been ongoing.

On allies, I think that the countries in the region don't want there to be conflict between the United States and China. The two things that we've overwhelmingly heard are, one, we want to see the U.S. engaged; but two, we also want to see the U.S. have a constructive relationship with China because, again, conflict between the two of us would be bad for the region.

We do look for opportunities, though, of course to reaffirm our alliances. At APEC, the President went out of his way to speak with President Park of South Korea, and Prime Minister Abe of Japan, to discuss with them the recent trip from Director Clapper to North Korea, for instance. We'll be meeting on a trilateral basis with Prime Minister Abbott and Prime Minister Abe when we're in Australia. That is geared at not just strengthening our alliances, but we've been working to make sure our allies are working well together, as well. You saw the trilateral meeting, of course, with Japan and South Korea that we had.

So, yes, we will be looking to obviously reaffirm our alliances. But I think a good relationship on a set of issues with China does not come at the expense of the interests of American allies in the region. It can be in service of those interests because it can help be a stabilizing factor here in the region.

We'll also meet with Vietnam today, which is not, of course, an ally of the United States, but we do partner together on a range of issues. And we have been in discussions with Vietnam on the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement that they're a part of, on maritime security issues in the South China Sea. We have supported efforts within ASEAN that Vietnam has been a part of to reduce tensions and negotiate a code of conduct with China, and then also to have a rules-based way of resolving disputes. So our engagement is going to be broad. It's going to include China, or allies, but also emerging partners like Vietnam as well.

On the correspondence, we're not going to get into the details of the President's correspondence with other leaders in the instance that you cite. I think with respect to our engagement with Iran, the Supreme Leader has said that there's a fatwa against the development of nuclear weapons inside of Iran, that their program is peaceful.

The purpose of the nuclear negotiation is to arrive at a resolution which Iran can demonstrate to the confidence of the international community that that is the case. If that is their stated policy, there should be an opening to get this done. That's been our message in negotiations with the Iranians; that will continue to be our message going forward.

MR. EARNEST: Why don't we just do a couple more here? Yes, sir, in the front. What's your name?

Q Jared Ferrie with Reuters.

MR. EARNEST: Hey, Jared.

Q So just going back to Myanmar, I wanted to ask a specific question about the Rakhine state action plan. In this plan, there's a citizenship section. It says if the Rohingya refuse to identify themselves as Bengalis, then they can't take part in the citizenship verification process; they'll have no access to citizenship. They will then be taken from their homes and villages and put in camps. Human rights groups have called this ethnic cleansing. I'm just wondering if you would characterize it the same way.

And my second question was going back to the SDN list with Aung Thaung being blacklisted. People in Myanmar have accused him of financing Buddhist nationalist groups. Was that the reason? Or were there other reasons he was blacklisted?

MR. RHODES: So on your first question, we believe that the action plan needs to be revised, that it's wrong for people to have to self-identify as Bengali. So again, the notion that in order to access citizenship you have to identify as something that you do not believe you are, that is a policy we believe that is going to only serve in marginalizing the Rohingya and is not going to bring stability to Rakhine state. So we've made our views clear. We'll continue to do so. We'd like to see a revised action plan that can allow for the Rohingya to become citizens through a normal process without having to do that type of self-identification.

With the respect to the SDN list, we have a variety of factors that we draw on. I think it's fair to say that we have seen him as a spoiler in some of the reform efforts. And that includes a potential association with the incitement of tensions in different parts of the country.

Again, Treasury has restrictions over how much detail we put out on these matters. But as a general point, the SDN list exists so that if we see people who we believe are working against the interests of reform and stability, we have a tool that we can use to impose a consequence.

I will say -- I will take the opportunity, since we are back on Burma, and we were talking about Senator McConnell earlier, to note that this is an issue where we've had important bipartisan interest in the Burma policy for many years. And the sanctions regime that has been put in place was the work of bipartisanship. And as we've relaxed sanctions, we've consulted closely with Congress. But in particular, Senator McConnell has been a champion of democracy here in Burma. This is an area where I think we certainly believe

he's shown leadership. And he has, of course, a close relationship to Aung San Suu Kyi, as well, and follows events here in the country. So I did want to note that this is an area where we very much welcome the bipartisan interest, including from the next Senate Majority Leader.

MR. EARNEST: We're all about making sure that we're giving credit where credit is due here. That's good.

Peter, I'll give you the last one here.

Q Thank you. Ben, back on the discussions on Ukraine the President had with Putin, in those brief talks, did the President get any better sense at all of what Putin's plans are there, what his mindset is on it, where Russia is going with this going forward?

MR. RHODES: No, I don't want to overstate. I don't want to overstate that. I think President Putin knows where we're coming from. We certainly have a sense of where he's coming from.

Often you hear the right things from the Russian government, in terms of upholding the Minsk agreement, but then the actions don't follow suit. So I guess I'd just say that we didn't hear anything substantively different than I think what the normal exchange is with the Russians on this issue.

They have expressed commitment to support the Minsk agreement, but we really need to see that followed by action. And so we'll continue to consult with our partners on this, with the Ukrainian government. And our message to the Russian government will continue to be: You're a part of the framework that brought about the Minsk agreement with the separatists, with the government. That is the opportunity towards de-escalation here and resolving the issues. We cannot see the type of build-up -- military build-up in the separatist-held areas going forward if the Minsk agreement is going to succeed.

Q -- substantive conversations, at least that we know of, how would you characterize the tone of their chats?

MR. RHODES: I think they -- from what I understand, I wasn't there, but from what I understand, they were relatively brief, businesslike, straightforward, on the margins of the APEC meeting; that in addition to Ukraine, they were able to touch on the Iran negotiations, where we had been working cooperatively with the Russians, as well as the situation in Syria. So I believe they spoke briefly a number of times, I think 10, 15-minute range maybe -- not a formal meeting, but just discussions on the margins of the APEC sessions.

Q Do you expect them to meet in person?

MR. RHODES: I don't anticipate that. Again, we'll keep you apprised if they do. I do expect that the President will want to, again, on the margins of that meeting be able to check in with his key European counterparts -- Chancellor Merkel, President Hollande, Prime Minister Cameron -- again, not necessarily formal meetings, but certainly they'll have

opportunities to speak. And they've been key towards sending a shared message to the Russians and the Ukrainian government. So it will be an opportunity for him to check in with them.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks a lot, everybody. Have a good afternoon.

END

11:46 A.M. MMT