

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, National Security Advisor Susan Rice, and Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes

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MR. CARNEY: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for being here today for your daily briefing. As you can see, I have a couple of guests with me today -- the President's National Security Advisor, Ambassador Susan Rice; and the President's Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications, Ben Rhodes. They're here to give you a preview of the President's upcoming foreign trip and then to take some questions on that trip.

Ben will start with a quick overview of the schedule. Ambassador Rice will then provide a thematic overview. And then they can take your questions on those topic areas. After an allotted period of time I'm going to let them go, and I'll stick around for questions on other subjects.

With that, I give you Ben Rhodes.

MR. RHODES: Thanks, Jay. So I'll just start with an overview of the President's key schedule engagements. There may be additional meetings that he does and we'll keep you updated over the course of the trip.

We leave here Sunday night and arrive at The Hague on Monday morning. Then the President will go to the Rijksmuseum, the iconic museum in Amsterdam, where he will meet with Prime Minister Rutte of the Netherlands. The two of them will do a brief tour of the museum and then they'll have their bilateral meeting there as well.

Following that, the President will go to the summit site at The Hague. He will have a bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping of China to initiate his meetings there at The Hague. This will be the first meeting he's had with President Xi since the G20 in

September. President Xi, of course, was able to greet Mrs. Obama today, and so we're pleased that they were able to meet, and they'll continue their consultations there at The Hague.

Then the President will go into the summit sessions. There will be an opening plenary session followed by a scenario-based policy discussion in the afternoon. Following those summit sessions, the President will attend a G7 meeting at the Prime Minister's Residence in The Hague. This G7 meeting has obviously been added on to the schedule as part of our continued response to the situation in Ukraine, and the President will consult with the leaders of the G7 about how to both support the Ukrainian government and of course, the meeting itself is part of our isolation of Russia for its actions in Ukraine.

Following that G7 meeting the President will have a chance to see the King of the Netherlands and then attend a working dinner.

Then on Tuesday, the 25th, throughout the course of the day the President will participate in the summit plenaries. Again, we anticipate him having the opportunity to have some meetings on the margins of the summit with additional leaders. We'll keep you updated on those interactions.

At the conclusion of the summit, President Obama will have a joint press conference with Prime Minister Rutte of the Netherlands. Then following that press conference, he'll have some additional meetings. He will have a bilateral meeting with Mohammed Bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates, one of our key relationships in the Gulf -- an opportunity to discuss our commitment to Gulf security, our efforts to support the opposition in Syria, and to update Mohammed Bin Zayed on our ongoing nuclear negotiations with Iran and the Middle East peace negotiations.

Following that meeting, we will have a very important trilateral meeting with President Park of the Republic of Korea, and Prime Minister Abe of Japan. We believe this is a very important message to show the United States aligned with our two most important allies in Northeast Asia. It's a signal of our commitment to the security of Northeast Asia and our belief that when the United States and our allies stand together we are all much stronger in the region and in the world.

Then the President will leave and travel to Brussels and spend the night in Brussels.

On Wednesday, March 26th, the President will begin by going to Flanders Field, one of the most important battlefields of World War I. This, of course, is the centennial anniversary of World War I, a very critical milestone in the history of Europe, the United States and the world. At Flanders Field, the President will meet with both King Philippe of Belgium and Prime Minister Di Rupo as well. So they'll have a private meeting, then there will be a wreath-laying and a tour of the battlefield, which will be a very resonant moment for the people of Belgium, people of the United States and Europe as well.

Following that, the President will attend the U.S.-EU Summit, where he'll meet with Presidents Von Rompuy and Barroso. Here, of course, we have a very broad agenda with the EU. I'm sure the situation in Ukraine will be front and center, as well as the ongoing

discussions around the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, the Iran negotiations, and the broad range of issue that we have with the EU. Following that summit and working lunch, he'll have a joint press conference with the leaders, Van Rompuy and Barroso.

After the EU meeting, the President will then meet with the Secretary General of NATO. And of course, this is one of our -- well, our single-most important joint security alliance and, frankly, is as important as ever given the situation in Europe and in Ukraine. So the President and the Secretary General will be able to discuss not just the situation in Ukraine, but the steps that we are taking to reinforce the security of our allies in Eastern Europe, as you've seen recently with Vice President Biden's trip and our additional deployments to the Baltic states and Poland as well. So these will be important discussions on NATO's collective defense and the preparations for the Wales summit.

Following the meeting with the Secretary General, the President will give a speech at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels. This will be the single speech of the trip. The President will have a chance to discuss his vision of transatlantic relations, of European security. Obviously, the situation in the Ukraine will factor heavily into his presentation. It only reinforces the need for the United States to remain committed to a strong transatlantic alliance, to the security of Europe, the integration of Europe, and to the values that the United States and Europe stand for together, including both individual liberty, but also the rights of sovereign nations to make their own decisions and to have their sovereignty and territorial integrity respected. Following that speech, the President will depart for Rome, where he will spend the night.

On Thursday, March 27th, the President will begin his day with an audience with Pope Francis. He has long looked forward to meeting Pope Francis. He has very much admired the leadership he has provided in his first year as Pope, his commitment to address issues like income inequality, and his leadership of the church more broadly. So that will be an important time for the President to have some personal interaction with the Pope and to hear about the very ambitious agenda that he has launched in his first year.

Following that audience with Pope Francis, the President will meet with the Secretary of State Parolin to discuss what the Vatican is doing on a range of issues around the world as well.

After the visit to the Vatican, he will then have a meeting and lunch with President Napolitano of Italy, who has been a very good friend and partner of President Obama and the United States for several years now. Then, he will have his first bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Renzi of Italy. He has had a good series of discussions with him on the phone. He'll have an opportunity to address with Prime Minister Renzi the situation, of course, in Ukraine, but also broader cooperation between the United States and Italy. Following that press conference, the President will have the opportunity to tour the Coliseum in Rome, one of the iconic sights in the world, and he is very much looking forward to that opportunity.

Then, on Friday, we go to Saudi Arabia, to Riyadh. After arriving in Riyadh, the President will have a bilateral meeting with King Abdullah, again, an important opportunity to invest in one of our most important relationships in the Middle East, certainly in the Gulf region, to address I think a very broad agenda in terms of our ongoing support for Gulf security, our support for the Syrian opposition where we've been very coordinated with the Saudis, the ongoing Middle East peace discussions, as well as both the nuclear negotiations with Iran but also our joint concern for destabilizing actions that Iran is taking across the region. And then the President will spend the night in Saudi Arabia on Friday. He will be returning back to the United States on Saturday.

And with that, I'll turn it over to Susan.

AMBASSADOR RICE: Thank you, Ben. Good afternoon, everyone. Over the course of this trip, the President will be mobilizing the international community and some of our most important partners in the world at a time when we're dealing with a number of important challenges. If there's a common theme to this trip, it's the fundamental strength and importance of our alliances and partnerships. The strategic importance of this effort really can't be overstated. From Europe to Asia to the Middle East, our ability to lead strong coalitions is essential to making progress. In Europe, as you heard Ben say, we'll meet with some of our most important institutional partners in the world -- the G7, the European Union, and NATO. We'll also have important bilateral engagements with the leaders of the Netherlands, Italy, and Belgium, all traditionally strong allies.

These meetings obviously take place against the backdrop of Russia's intervention in Ukraine. What will be clear for the entire world to see is that Russia is increasingly isolated and that the United States is leading the international community in supporting the government of Ukraine and the people of Ukraine, and in imposing costs on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine.

At the same time, we're also building our strategic cooperation in Europe by moving forward with T-TIP, which is a vital engine for growth and job creation on both sides of the Atlantic; by strengthening NATO as the world's leading instrument of collective security; and by advancing our efforts to secure nuclear materials around the globe through the President's signature initiative of the Nuclear Security Summit, in its third iteration.

Meanwhile, we continue to focus on our rebalance to Asia. After a period of tension, we will bring together two of our closest allies, the Republic of Korea and Japan, in a trilateral meeting that will send a powerful message about America's commitment to the security of Northeast Asia. In addition, the President will meet with President Xi Jinping of China and that will advance our efforts to try to cooperate where we can with China on a range of issues from climate change to denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula.

Finally, we'll be reinforcing some of our most important relationships in the Middle East. As you heard Ben say, on the margins of the Nuclear Security Summit, the President will have the opportunity again to spend time with the Crowned Prince of the United Arab

Emirates, Mohammed Bin Zayed, and then later to travel to Riyadh for a very important meeting with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, which we've been very much looking forward to.

These meetings come at a time when we're engaged in the nuclear negotiations with Iran, where we're working to try to bring fruition to the Middle East peace negotiations, and we're engaged in collective efforts with many of our partners in the region as well as in Europe to strengthen the Syrian opposition. By investing and deepening our core Gulf partnerships, the United States will be in a stronger position to make progress on these very core projects that are central to the President's second term agenda.

The common thread is that we are investing in our traditional alliances and building strong and flexible coalitions. In each of these regions, which will serve in many ways as force multipliers, the United States cannot and we should not bear all the burdens of addressing global challenges alone. And we don't, because with this core group of alliances and partnerships from Europe to Asia to the Middle East, we have, I am confident, the wherewithal to manage this very complex mix of international issues, including challenges like Ukraine, like Iran, like North Korea and Syria, while also continuing our ability to make progress on key elements of our affirmative agenda -- things like the trade agreement we're working on with Europe, T-TIP, our Asia rebalance, and working to resolve the Iranian issue -- nuclear issue through peaceful means.

With that, I'm happy to take a few questions, joined by Ben and Jay.

MR. CARNEY: We'll start with Josh of the AP.

Q Thanks, Ambassador. Is it your goal at this G7 meeting next week to get the Europeans to agree to the same type of sanctions that the U.S. says that it's willing to impose? Or are you anticipating tough rhetoric from the Europeans, but an unwillingness to embrace the kind of sanctions against sectors of the Russian economy that could affect them? And also, will you be laying out clear lines for what steps Russia would have to take to trigger those kinds of sanctions?

AMBASSADOR RICE: We've been in very close and constant communication and consultation with our G7 partners over the last several weeks. I'm talking to my colleagues and counterparts almost every day. The President has been on the phone for the last several weeks. So the communication has been robust, so the coordination is already very much in train.

And you saw that yesterday when the European Council, on the same day we made our announcement of additional sanctions yesterday, came out with a very strong decision of its own, which included not only additional support for Ukraine, but additional designations of individuals for asset freezes and visa bans, as well as a very strong statement of a readiness to impose broad economic sanctions in the event that the situation escalates.

That very much matches the theory behind the executive order that President Obama signed yesterday, which gave us and gives us the ability as needed to target particular sectors to be designated within the Russian economy, should the circumstances necessitate.

So we are already quite closely coordinated with our European partners. Obviously, the G7 meeting will be an opportunity to deepen and continue that coordination even as we have the chance to talk about how we step up our collective support for the people and the government of Ukraine and consider the optimum disposition of the G8-G7 mechanism going forward in light of recent developments.

Q There was a report this morning in the Wall Street Journal that says that the White House canceled a planned meeting between Obama and the GCC leaders in Saudi Arabia next week because of rifts among some of those Persian Gulf leaders. Do you have any response to that?

AMBASSADOR RICE: That's not accurate. There was never a formal meeting scheduled. It is something that we had contemplated some weeks back and began some preliminary consultations on that. But then, of course, the situation between and among the members of the GCC has grown more complex of late. And while we maintain very strong and cooperative relationships with each of the GCC countries, we didn't think that from their point of view that the time was optimal for a collective meeting.

Q Is the Ukraine crisis prompting a fundamental reassessment of U.S.-Russian relations?

AMBASSADOR RICE: Yes. (Laughter.) Well, look, the fact of the matter is that in the years since the ending of the Cold War, the United States and Europe, and indeed the international community have proceeded along a path where we've made clear that our interest was in more fully integrating Russia, politically and economically, into Europe and into, indeed, the fabric of the international system and the global economy. But that was predicated on an expectation that Russia would play by the rules of the road, the economic and security rules of the road, international law and the norms and principles that govern responsible international action.

What we have seen in Ukraine is obviously a very egregious departure from that. And it is causing the countries and people of Europe and the international community and, of course, the United States to reassess what does this mean and what are the implications.

You saw a stark example of that or demonstration of that in the U.N. Security Council last weekend, where Russia was alone, even without China, in insisting that its actions in Ukraine had any international legitimacy. The rest of the world has said absolutely clearly that they reject and will never accept the annexation of Crimea, that this is an act that is in blatant violation of international laws and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and it will have consequences. And it already has.

Q Russia, obviously, is a country that's supposed to be a big participant in the Nuclear Security Summit. Do you guys have an idea of who's going to be representing them there? I know there's some speculation that Secretary Kerry could meet with his counterpart while there. And is there anything you want to use with the nuclear summit to sort of send a message to Russia about its international isolation or things like that?

AMBASSADOR RICE: Nuclear security is an area where the United States has and continues to have an enduring interest in cooperation with Russia and other important countries where the security of nuclear materials remains of concern. So the Nuclear Security Summit is an opportunity for I think it's about 53 countries to come together to advance a very important agenda that has been a pillar of this administration's national security policy to make it harder and harder for those who may wish to use nuclear materials for terrorist purposes to get their hands on them. And there's been a series of steps, starting in 2010, which have led to a very serious improvement in the security of materials around the world.

We have every interest in continuing to cooperate with Russia and other countries, even where we have differences with them on other issues, on the issue of nuclear security. And I believe it's Foreign Minister Lavrov who is representing Russia. And I think that was their plan for --

Q Do you feel like that's an appropriate level -- I mean, the United States is sending the Commander-in-Chief. Russia is sending their --

AMBASSADOR RICE: Chuck, I mean, that's their choice to make. But it's been their choice for quite some while. This is not --

Q It was Medvedev at the last one.

MR. RHODES: It was -- yes, it was Medvedev at the last one.

AMBASSADOR RICE: Yes, but I don't think there was ever an expectation that President Putin or Medvedev were coming to this one.

Q Do feel like they're still fully cooperative, that the Russians are still fully cooperative on nuclear security?

AMBASSADOR RICE: We haven't seen any evidence to the contrary.

MR. CARNEY: Jim.

Q Ambassador Rice, I guess since you're being so direct, what do you think Vladimir Putin is up to? This morning or overnight he said that they should hold off on countermeasures in response to the sanctions. Do you think he is trying to rewrite the end of the Cold War? Do you think he's, through confrontation with President Obama, trying to elevate his status, elevate Russia's status?

AMBASSADOR RICE: I'm not going to get into speculating about President Putin's motives. His actions are clear. And we have expressed equally clearly our opposition to his invasion and annexation of Crimea, and the further provocative steps that he has taken with regard to Ukraine.

Our view is that this situation can and should be de-escalated. It should be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy. We still believe it can be if that choice is the choice that the Russian Federation makes, and we'll continue our efforts, even as we impose costs and signal that those costs could increase if the situation escalates, to work to support any credible efforts to resolve the situation diplomatically.

Q Will the President deliver a message to Russian leadership while he's --

AMBASSADOR RICE: I think he has been.

Q Ambassador, Secretary Hagel has had two important calls in the last couple of days -- one with Ukraine's minister of defense, where he encouraged them to continue to show restraint. So it's kind of a two-parter: How concerned are you about the Ukrainians being pushed by the Russians into responding and giving Putin an excuse to take more territory? And secondly, Secretary Hagel had a phone call with the Russian defense minister to talk about the some 20,000 Russian troops on the border, and it was explained that there's a military training exercise going on. Do you believe the Russians that they're just doing a training exercise? How do you believe them at this point when they previously suggested they had no intention to take Crimea either?

AMBASSADOR RICE: Well, I don't know that anybody is talking about beliefs. I think we're characterizing what Secretary Hagel's counterpart, Mr. Shoigu, said to him yesterday. I won't ascribe a value to it.

I will say that what Secretary Hagel has been doing, staying in close consultation with his Ukrainian counterpart, very similarly to what Secretary Kerry has been doing with Prime Minister Yatsenyuk and the foreign minister of Ukraine, is part of our ongoing effort to show support and partnership to the people and the government of Ukraine. That support takes the form of political and diplomatic support, of course much increased economic support. And that is the reason for our efforts to work with Congress and urge them to act quickly to implement through legislation the billion-dollar loan guarantee and the IMF quota reform, which are critical to our ability to support Ukraine. And this dialogue even remains ongoing with Russian counterparts, which we think is still important to maintain.

Q Are you concerned about Ukrainian restraint? Secretary Hagel said -- he encouraged the fact that they've been restrained, but at some point are you concerned that the Ukrainians are going to want to push back and that will give Putin an excuse to do more?

AMBASSADOR RICE: Well, this is obviously a very worrying and fragile situation, but we have been very much admiring of the posture that the Ukrainian people and government have taken. They have exercised enormous restraint in the face of obvious provocation.

And they've made clear that their interest is in a unified, democratic future that is -- an existence at peace with both Russia and with the Western Europe and the United States.

And as the President said yesterday, we don't see those as in any way necessarily in tension. Ukraine has a history that ought to enable it to be simultaneously working constructively with Russia and with the remainder of the world.

MR. CARNEY: Bill, then April.

Q There were reports today that more Russian troops -- substantially more than the 20,000 number that were discussed, have gathered along many segments of the Ukrainian border. Has the U.S. taken note of this? And what have you said to Russia?

AMBASSADOR RICE: We have, indeed, been taking note of developments along Ukraine's border, including the Russian border. And indeed, I think that was part of the substance of Secretary Hagel's telephone conversation yesterday with his Russian counterpart.

Q Does it signal to you that things are getting worse rather than better?

AMBASSADOR RICE: It's not clear what that signals. The Russians have stated that they are intending military exercises. Obviously, given their past practice and the gap between what they have said and what they have done, we are watching it with skepticism.

MR. CARNEY: April.

Q Ambassador Rice, from the podium you just said that Russia has not followed the rules of the road. And this White House contends that they want to deescalate the situation. But from all looks, the last couple of days at least things have escalated. How far is this White House willing to go beyond sanctions when it comes to Russia and the isolation of Russia?

AMBASSADOR RICE: Well, I'm not sure what you're implying beyond sanctions. But let me say this, that the United States has been leading the international community to the point where we are now, which is that Russia finds itself highly isolated from the norms and the expectations of the international community. I mentioned what occurred in the United Nations Security Council, which is emblematic of that. We have Europe, the United States, and many other countries outside of Europe coming together to impose economic costs on Russia and to indicate that those costs will escalate if the situation on the ground escalates.

We're supporting Ukraine in a very active and affirmative way to get on its economic feet and to be able to conduct the upcoming elections. So this action, which is coordinated and collective among the entire world, I think is both emblematic of our commitment to Ukraine, but also increasingly of the isolation that Russia is facing.

Q What I'm speaking of are options that are on the table that you're reviewing to include Senator McCain's request for hardware. So what are those options that are on the table beyond the economic sanctions?

AMBASSADOR RICE: Well, April, obviously as a national security team, we have to review a wide range of options. But our focus has been and remains on the economic and diplomatic instruments at this point. Our interest is not in seeing the situation escalate and devolve into hot conflict. Our interest is in a diplomatic resolution, de-escalation, and obviously economic support for Ukraine, and to the extent that it continues to be necessary, further costs imposed on Russia for its actions.

Q Do you have a timeline for that, for those economic sanctions to end -- I mean, when you want to move to the next level beyond the economic sanctions?

AMBASSADOR RICE: We'll keep you guessing.

MR. CARNEY: Ann, and then Nadia after that.

Q Thank you for doing this briefing today. Can you point us to the impact that you've seen of the sanctions so far, the second wave of sanctions? And would the next step be sanctions directly on the Russian government? What did the President mean when he said that would have a global impact?

AMBASSADOR RICE: Well, Ann, I think, first of all, you can see that these measures have had at least an initial impact when you look at the markets, when you look at the currency, when you look at the ratings by the major ratings agencies, which have downgraded Russia from stable to negative just in the last 24 hours, that these steps are consequential.

The executive order that the President signed yesterday is a tool that allows even broader action should that be determined to be necessary, including the opportunity for the Secretary of Treasury in consultation with the Secretary of State to impose sanctions in various sectors, key sectors of the Russian economy. We have not taken that decision. As the President said yesterday, that is not our preference. But if the situation escalates, that remains a tool at our disposal.

Q Ambassador, both Syria and the peace process are important. Would you say that the primary aim of the President's visit is to assuage the Saudis' fear towards Iran? And do you think that's achievable, considering they're being very critical of the President's policy? And after his meeting, do we expect any change of his policy towards Syria?

AMBASSADOR RICE: I think the meeting that President Obama looks forward to having with the King of Saudi Arabia will cover a broad range of issues. In the first instance, our very important bilateral relationship and the strength of our cooperation and security, economic issues, counterterrorism regional issues as well. This partnership is longstanding, is very important to both of our countries, and this will be an opportunity to affirm that and to find opportunities to strengthen it and deepen it.

On the regional agenda, of course, Syria will be a topic of conversation. So will Iran and the nuclear negotiations, and the United States' determination above and beyond the nuclear issue that we have security interests and security commitments to our partners in the region that we will stand by and maintain. They will talk about, I imagine, the situation in Egypt and the Middle East peace process. There will be a range of issues on the agenda. And you mentioned Iran in particular. That obviously is a topic of importance to both.

Q I just want to know what do you expect the Saudis to do that's different so far in terms of their cooperation in Syria?

AMBASSADOR RICE: Well, we've been working very closely with Saudi Arabia on the issue of Syria. Our cooperation at the present is excellent, in fact, and we expect to be discussing ways to deepen it further.

MR. CARNEY: Last one for Ambassador Rice. Jess.

Q You talked about the GCC and the divisions there, Ambassador. Is there a role for the U.S. to play to bridge those differences during those meetings with the UAE and Saudi Arabia? And will it be pursued?

AMBASSADOR RICE: I think, first of all, as I said, we have very good relationships with each of the GCC countries, and we look forward to maintaining those and we look forward to continuing what has been really a pattern of collaboration between the United States and the GCC as a whole.

I don't think that "mediation" is perhaps the noun I would use, but certainly we will be interested in the perspectives that we will hear from our important partners in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and that will inform our efforts to encourage the continued cooperation among those partners in the GCC, which we think is mutually beneficial and in the United States' interest. Thank you.

MR. CARNEY: Thank you, Ambassador Rice, Ben Rhodes. I'm here to take questions that you may have for about 15 more minutes if you need me.

Roger.

Q The Ambassador said that the U.S. is reassessing the relationship with Russia. What's the effect of that on the Iran talks?

MR. CARNEY: We view that it is in Russia's clear interest that Iran not be allowed to or pursue possession of a nuclear weapon. Thus far, Russia has been an important part of the P5-plus-1 process and we hope and expect that that collaboration and cooperation will continue because of the shared interest that all members of that process have and that Russia has in particular, for the reasons I just noted.

This is true, I think as Ambassador Rice said to Chuck earlier, when we look at other areas where there are joint interests that the United States and Russia share. And we obviously expect Russia to continue to participate in a constructive way in these processes, whether it's the Nuclear Security Summit in the pursuit of greater nonproliferation efforts and nuclear security, or the P5-plus-1 process, which is related.

So we're going to monitor that situation very closely and continue the, thus far, useful process that's been underway through the P5-plus-1 in order to try to resolve diplomatically and peacefully the challenge posed by Iran's nuclear program.

Q You haven't seen any damaging effect yet?

MR. CARNEY: We have not seen any indication that Russia has changed its posture with regards to the P5-plus-1.

Kristen.

Q Jay, given everything Ambassador Rice just said about the changing state of relations with Russia, the fact that people are talking in terms of a new Cold War, is the President thinking now about talking to the American people on this subject, putting this in some larger context?

MR. CARNEY: You heard the President speak yesterday on this subject, and he noted very clearly that what Russia has done in Ukraine, and specifically in Crimea, violates a sovereign nation's territorial integrity; it violates Russia's commitments under the United Nations Charter and its commitments through agreements with Ukraine itself. It also is at odds with what has been a 20-year effort, mostly -- mostly, not entirely -- mostly in one direction towards integrating Russia further into the international community and into international institutions, into the fabric of Europe, into the global economy. So what we have seen obviously represents a serious step away from that integration. And it's very concerning and problematic. It is not good for Europe; it's not good for the United States; it's not good for the world; but it is least good for Russia and the Russian people.

We've seen the impact already on the Russian economy that Ambassador Rice noted, and further escalation will result in further isolation and higher costs that Russia will incur because of these actions.

I don't have a schedule for the next time the President will address this issue, but it is clearly one of concern. It's one that he's been speaking about regularly for the past several weeks, and I expect he will in the future.

We pursue this matter with a clear-eyed focus on our national security interests, on our commitments to our allies through the NATO alliance, and our commitment to the Ukrainian people and their right, as a sovereign nation, to choose their own future.

Q And just one question about that expression of support for the new Ukrainian government. How much do you feel it undercuts your message that the loan guarantees are stalled?

MR. CARNEY: We believe that there is broad support on Capitol Hill for providing direct assistance to the new Ukrainian government in order to help Ukraine get back on its feet economically, which in turn will help it move forward, especially towards holding elections, which have been scheduled. We believe that that process can and should move forward quickly through Congress as soon as Congress is back.

We also believe that part of that commitment to Ukraine and the new Ukrainian government is the need to ensure that the quota reforms for the IMF are passed as well. If the lawmakers of both parties believe, as the President does, that we need to maximize the assistance we can provide to Ukraine, the way to do that is to pass legislation that includes these reforms, these quota reforms at the IMF, because that will increase the flexibility and leverage that the IMF has to provide assistance to Ukraine.

The bilateral assistance that we envision providing and that Congress supports generally in providing, the loan guarantee program, is a piece of and a complement to the more substantial assistance that the IMF can provide and should provide.

Alexis.

Q Jay, yesterday the Russian Federation imposed travel restrictions on some members of Congress, some White House officials. Some members on the Hill took that lightly, and I have two questions. One is did the White House greet that response by taking it lightly as some members on the Hill did? Or is the White House concerned that the reaction from the Russian Federation signaled that this is going to be a ping-ponging of sanctions back and forth for some prolonged period?

MR. CARNEY: The way we look at it here, Alexis, is that it's certainly unfortunate that an action like that would be taken in response to the firm commitment the United States has made to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of an independent nation, and to the effort that the United States has participated in and led to provide support to the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian government, and to oppose the clear violation of international law that the Russian military intervention in Crimea represents.

But we're focused on everything on the back half of that paragraph, which is what can we continue to do to support the Ukrainian people? What actions can we take, as necessary, to ensure that Russia understands that there are serious costs associated with the decisions that the Russian leadership is making?

We are also focused very much on strengthening already what is the strongest alliance in the world -- NATO; to taking the steps we've taken, increasing our deployments in the Baltic nations and Poland because of the importance of that alliance; and then having the kinds of collaborative consultations with our European partners that you're going to see the President participate in, in person this coming week.

Josh.

Q Jay, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon says that he's apologized to Chuck Hagel for questioning the U.S. commitment to Israel's security, to taking action in Iran, and for trashing John Kerry. Can you confirm that he did apologize? And is the U.S. confident -- or has the U.S. received any assurances from Netanyahu that Minister Ya'alon will no longer be an obstacle to our efforts to secure peace and deal with the Iranian threat?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't obviously speak for him. I was quite clear about our view of his previous comments, which are simply inconsistent with the truth when it comes to this country's and this administration's and Secretary Kerry's commitment to Israel's security. And I would point you to the affirmation of that that Prime Minister Netanyahu has made when it comes to the singular nature of the specific and concrete commitment to Israel's security that President Obama has made, and this administration has made. And I would point you to comments of other leading officials in Israel to that effect as well.

Q And can you flesh out any details about the who, what, where of the meeting this afternoon with the Internet CEOs?

MR. CARNEY: I can tell you that the President looks forward to having that meeting in which he will sit down with a number of executives from tech firms to continue his dialogue with them on the issues of privacy, technology, and intelligence, following the President's January 17 speech.

We'll have more information after the meeting, if we can provide it. I can tell you that the following CEOs are attending: Reed Hastings of Netflix; Drew Houston of Dropbox; Dr. Karp of Palantir; Aaron Levie of Box; Eric Schmidt of Google and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook. Q Jay, how did the meeting with the Chinese President get set up for this trip next week? And is it about anything special they want to discuss? Or is it a wide range, the East China Sea tensions? What exactly?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have more on the agenda for that meeting than Ben and Susan outlined. And in terms of how it came about, we look forward to opportunities for President Obama and President Xi to meet whenever practicable. As you know, they've met several times now, including out in California. And this is a very important relationship that includes a panoply of important issues -- economic, security and environmental issues, for example. So I'm sure you can expect the full range of topics to be discussed.

Ed.

Q Jay, the health care deadline will be coming up as the President I guess is just returning from the trip. Can you talk about what kind of preparations are going on while he's away? He's obviously been making a big, last-minute push. And can you address some of the critics who have been saying that you haven't released the numbers on how many people were previously uninsured who are now being insured as part of the 5 million-plus that have been signed up? Is there any way to break that down?

MR. CARNEY: Sure. On that one in terms of that breakdown, if it is being calculated. I would have to refer you to CMS. What I think is still confusing to some viewers out there, depending on the outlet, is the fact that this system that the Affordable Care Act created is a system of private insurance specifically aimed at the individual market. Most Americans who have health insurance receive it through their employer. Others, of course, if they're senior citizens are on Medicare. And other Americans receive health care through Medicaid. The private insurance market set up by the Affordable Care Act and by the state marketplaces are obviously aimed at the individual market and, in that case, the uninsured within those marketplaces.

So I know that the sort of criticism is a moveable feast, because as each straw man in this debate is knocked down, there is a new one that's set up. And maybe this is it, that somehow the fact that in some places, somebody in a state is finding out that through the marketplaces the insurance that's available is more affordable and higher-quality than what they had before -- and that's certainly often the case, because the standards are higher that are set by the ACA. That would be a good thing for the individual who was able to get that insurance and an improvement for them.

So we're going to focus instead on making sure that the system is working so that Americans can get their options and avail themselves of the insurance plans that they can find on healthcare.gov, and to further implement the Affordable Care Act, because millions of Americans are demonstrating through the federal and state marketplaces that they want this product. And I'm sure that no matter what the number is come April 1st, no matter what the demographic is, no matter what, we'll still hear from the critics.

Jim.

Q On the March 31st deadline, is there going to be any kind of grace period at all if people are having trouble with the website on that last day because there could be a lot of traffic? Could they have until April 1st?

MR. CARNEY: Well, March 31st is the deadline for enrollment. You've heard us make that clear. And I would refer you to HHS and CMS for procedures that might be in place for dealing with what will probably be an increase in interest towards the end of the enrollment period, which you see in all kinds of enrollment periods like this and how that volume will be handled. But the March 31st deadline is the deadline.

Q So if you sign up on April 1st, you won't be able to -- you'll just have to wait until November?

MR. CARNEY: March 31st is the deadline. As was the case for the December deadline, we're going to want to make sure that people who are already in line can finish their enrollment. But for how that process works, I would point you to what happened in December and how that played out.

Q The December grace period, you could kind of --

MR. CARNEY: I would refer you to CMS and HHS for how to explain the -- how that works.

Q -- if you were having trouble on the 31st you'll have the door shut on you? You now have the door shut?

MR. CARNEY: Again, we want to make sure, as we did in December, on that deadline, that folks who have begun the process are able to complete it. We certainly expect naysayers, notwithstanding, that there's going to be continued interest right up to the deadline. And that interest will probably increase as we approach the deadline.

Q -- Turkish Prime Minister shut it down, Twitter officially was banned in Turkey. What your reaction about this government's decision?

MR. CARNEY: The United States is deeply concerned that the Turkish government has blocked its citizens' access to basic communication tools. We oppose this restriction on the Turkish people's access to information, which undermines their ability to exercise freedoms of expression and association, and runs contrary to the principles of open governance that are critical to democratic governance and the universal rights that the U.S. stands for around the world.

We have conveyed our serious concern to the Turkish government. We urge Turkish authorities to respect the freedom of the press by permitting the independent and unfettered operation of media of all kinds. And we support the people of Turkey in their calls to restore full access to the blocked technologies.

Mark.

Q Jay, is the White House considering a change in its smartphones, leaving Blackberry and going to some other brand?

MR. CARNEY: I can tell you, Mark, that the reports on this are somewhat -- I don't want to say misleading, but they create the misimpression. The White House Communications Agency is part of the Department of Defense, as veterans like you know. And for questions about their devices, I would refer you to them. I can tell you that the Executive Office of the President is not participating in a pilot program with regards to our handheld electronic devices.

Q Jay, can you comment today on the statement from U.S. Ambassador to Poland Stephen Mull that the U.S. is preparing a military exercise in Poland, which will include Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, et cetera?

MR. CARNEY: I would refer you to the Defense Department.

Laura.

Q Did you have some briefing at the White House this week about the terrorist action involving the missing plane? And my second question is what for the White House the definition of breaking news? (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: Laura did not submit that question in advance. (Laughter.) And the answer I'm about to give I'm going to make up right here.

Q People from all over the world are watching what some 24-hour news channels are doing.

MR. CARNEY: Well, Laura, what I'd say on the first question is, as you know, the United States is providing assistance to the Malaysian government in its investigation and in its search for the missing plane. And we have not here in the United States reached any conclusions about what happened to the plane or where it is. We are, as part of that investigation that's being led by the Malaysian government, engaged in an effort to try to look at different scenarios and make decisions about and conclusions about what happened. But we are not there, by any means. This is obviously a challenging situation for Malaysia and for everyone participating in the investigation and the search.

On the other one, one man's breaking news is another man's news of the day, I would say. I'm not sure that means anything. I've got to go in a few minutes. I'm not going to wade into that debate.

Q I was just handed the score of the Duke-Mercer game.

MR. CARNEY: I lost three games yesterday.

I have a meeting with my boss pretty soon. I'll take one more. Zeke.

Q I was wondering if you could clarify a little bit -- you said that the sanctions authorized by the executive order yesterday could be deployed in the event if there's escalation in Ukraine. Now that Russia has sort of formally annexed Crimea, what would constitute escalation? Is that moving into eastern and southern -- the rest of eastern and southern Ukraine? Or could those --

MR. CARNEY: That would certainly constitute escalation.

Q But couldn't there be escalation without Russia moving into southern Ukraine or eastern Ukraine? Could those economic sanctions be imposed? Or is that the only disincentive?

MR. CARNEY: I think that you could follow that road a long way and try to create specific parameters. What I can tell you is there are a variety of ways that escalation could take place. We certainly hope it doesn't. The scenario you outlined represents escalation -- would if it were to happen. But the fact is it's not our preferred path to have to resort to imposing those sanctions on sectors of the Russian economy that the President described, but we have the authorities to do so, should Russia choose to further escalate, to make the situation worse.

Instead, what we hope is that Russia will choose a path of de-escalation, one that recognizes Ukraine's sovereignty, recognizes that it has an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the Ukrainian government about any additional concerns they have, and

one that understands from the beginning that the world will not recognize the illegal seizure of territory that was part of and remains part of a sovereign nation.

Q Is time a factor here if nothing changes on the ground for a certain period of time? Would that count as an escalation?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to speculate about that. We obviously, as you will see in the President's trip this coming week, have worked very hard with our partners to make it clear to Russia that sustaining this disposition, continuing this kind of action will result in further isolation and further harm to the Russian economy and the Russian people, and will erode the authority and prestige that Russia could have if it were to choose to abide by the rules of the road that Ambassador Rice discussed at the top of the briefing.

Thank you all very much.

END 2:27 P.M. EDT