

Press Briefing by the Press Secretary joined by Ambassador Rice and Ben Rhodes, 11/12/15

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. I brought a couple of guests to the briefing today. I know many of you have been packing your bags to accompany the President on what looks to be a long trip to Turkey, Malaysia and the Philippines. So both the President's National Security Advisor, Susan Rice, and one of her deputies, Ben Rhodes, will be here to talk to you about the trip and some of the themes that will be emphasized in the context of the trip. And then I'll stick around for a handful of questions that they'll take, and we'll go back to our regularly scheduled program from there.

Susan, I think you're going to kick us off.

AMBASSADOR RICE: Good afternoon, everybody. It's good to see you all. I wanted to spend a few minutes as we prepare to depart for Turkey, the Philippines and Malaysia to offer you a bit of a preview of what you can expect in the coming days. I'll spend a couple minutes discussing themes for each stop before asking Ben to run through the itinerary, and then we'll take a few questions.

As you know, on Saturday afternoon, the President will leave for Turkey and the G20 Summit. This will be the President's ninth G20. The G20 is the world's premier forum for economic policy cooperation, where leaders representing economies that account for about 85 percent of global GDP assemble to promote strong, sustainable and balanced growth, and to address urgent global economic challenges.

The President will discuss concrete actions to strengthen the global economy, to make growth more inclusive, to enhance the resilience of the international financial system, globalize investment to raise long-term growth, and implement previous commitments on economic reform and labor markets.

In addition to the G20's core economic and financial issues, the President will address additional challenges, including climate change, cybersecurity, refugees, global health security, and counterterrorism. The setting in Turkey, in addition, obviously, will make Syria a topic of conversation. The venue will provide a forum to reinforce the complementary nature of our military and diplomatic efforts to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL, as we work to bring about a political solution to the broader Syrian conflict.

We will depart Turkey and then head to Asia for six days. We will, in the Philippines and Malaysia, shift our focus to TPP and the administration's broader rebalance to Asia.

Let me say a few words about the rebalance strategy. At its heart, the President's rebalance to Asia is about building a rules-based order in Asia in which all countries pursue their national interests and their prosperity peacefully. We're working to strengthen respect for international norms, principles and values that offer everyone in the region an opportunity to compete and grow on an equal footing, and that certain shared responsibilities are assumed irrespective of relative size or strength.

Every facet of the rebalance is aimed at advancing this vision and we're working to promote it on multiple fronts that you will see as evident during the course of the trip. We're strengthening relations with our treaty allies. We're building ties to new partners and strengthening regional institutions such as APEC and the East Asia Summit in meetings that the President will participate in next week. And these, together, all help write the region's rules of the road.

We're also focused on building an open economic architecture, one with high standards and clear transparent rules that support American prosperity and American jobs. And that's, of course, where TPP fits in. TPP is central to our vision of the region's future and our place in it. And one of the President's top priorities is to secure passage of TPP through Congress and to implement the agreement, which is a critical step towards a high-standard free trade area in Asia and the Pacific, and our goal of revitalizing the open rules-based economic system that the U.S. has led since World War II.

This agreement is a confirmation -- is the encapsulation of years of negotiations, encompassing countries that today account for nearly 40 percent of the world's GDP. It puts in place historic labor and environmental standards that will ensure our trading partners play by our rules and our values. Equally important, the TPP helps to underscore what the President determined when he came into office, and that is that America's interests are integrally linked to the Asia Pacific region. This is where our security interests meet our economic interests in an undeniable way, and as such, you can rest assured that we will remain present, engaged and active across the region.

In keeping with this theme, the President will travel to Malaysia, where he'll participate in the APEC leaders meetings, and -- excuse me -- in Manila, where he'll participate in the APEC meetings, and then to Kuala Lumpur, where he'll take part in both the East Asia Summit and the U.S.-ASEAN Summit.

In Manila, the President will also engage in a series of bilateral meetings, and these visits together will show not only the strength of our rebalance strategy with the conclusion of the TPP, but also American leadership on the political and security issues that are critical to sustaining the rules-based order in Asia, including maritime, cyber, and human rights.

I just want to conclude by saying that this is a particularly significant year for the region's institutions. The East Asia Summit celebrates its tenth year as the region's premier leader-level forum for addressing political and security issues, while ASEAN will launch its ASEAN Community, including the ASEAN Economic Community. And with our ASEAN friends, we plan to outline new ways that will enhance the U.S.-ASEAN partnership.

During the course of our visit to Asia, the President will hold a number of bilateral meetings with key allies and partners, including the leaders of Australia, Canada, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia -- all of which underscore the importance of our alliances and the security partnerships across the Pacific. The President also looks forward to the opportunity to meet the Prime Minister of Laos, as Laos will prepare to take on the role of ASEAN chair in 2016.

So this will be a broad-based agenda. Ben will walk you through the various aspects of it. But I think also in the Philippines and Malaysia you'll see an opportunity to underscore our commitment to addressing climate change, broader security, counterterrorism, economic issues, as well as our people-to-people ties. And throughout, support for human rights and vibrant civil societies, as always, will remain at the forefront of our foreign policy agenda. The President will engage with leaders on this issue, both publicly and privately, and demonstrate our support for human rights throughout the course of the trip.

We'll also be highlighting our concerns about the global refugee crisis. And the President will have an opportunity to visit a refugee center in Malaysia to highlight our shared duty to provide refugee support, which is an area where the United States and Malaysia have made important contributions to vulnerable people over the years.

So let me stop here, and before we take your questions let me hand it over to Ben, who will highlight some of the specific events of the itinerary.

MR. RHODES: So let me just run through the particulars of the itinerary, make a few comments about what the President will be focused on, and then we'll move to questions.

So first of all, we'll be beginning this trip in Turkey for the G20 Summit, as Susan indicated. When we arrive in Turkey on Sunday, November 15th, the day after my birthday, for those keeping score -- (laughter) -- the President will participate in a bilateral meeting with President Erdogan of Turkey. Clearly in addition to discussing the G20 Summit and the agenda there, the two leaders will also be focused on our counter-ISIL efforts and the situation in Syria, where Turkey has been a critical ally and partner.

Following that bilateral meeting, the President will then attend the G20 welcome ceremony and the G20 working lunch, which is focused on development and climate change. After that, there is a G20 working session on the global economy, focused on growth strategies and employment. That evening, there is a working dinner among the leaders. This is focused on global challenges, particularly terrorism and the refugee situation will be topics on the agenda there.

Monday, the G20 Summit continues in Turkey. The G20 meeting Monday morning is focused on enhancing resilience through financial regulation, international tax, anti-corruption and IMF reform. And afterward, the President will attend a working lunch on trade, energy and the adoption of the communique.

In the afternoon, following the conclusion of the G20 Summit, the President will host a Quint meeting with our key European allies -- the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Chancellor Merkel of Germany, President Hollande of France, and Prime Minister Renzi of Italy. This is an important opportunity for the President to meet with our close European allies to discuss the ongoing counter-ISIL campaign as well as the situation in Ukraine, where we've coordinated very closely with Europe in our support for the Ukrainian government, support for the Minsk process, and, of course, standing up to efforts by Russia that violate Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Following the conclusion of that meeting, the President will host a press conference before he departs Turkey for Manila.

On Tuesday, November 18th, after arriving in Manila, the President will host a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Turnbull of Australia. This is the first meeting that the President will have with the Prime Minister of Australia. We clearly coordinate very closely with the Australians on many issues, including the counter-ISIL campaign, our commitment to maritime security, and TPP, of which Australia is a critical member.

Following the bilateral meeting with the Prime Minister of Australia, the President will take part in an event that showcases U.S. maritime security assistance to the Philippines and the region. And clearly, in our alliance with the Philippines and our focus in the region, we have been committed to maritime security, to principles like freedom of navigation, and to the peaceful resolution of disputes. And, again, this event will be an opportunity for the President to showcase some of that maritime security assistance.

On Wednesday, November 18th, the President will begin his day with a bilateral meeting with President Aquino of the Philippines, where he will address a number of issues related to our alliance, including our support for economic growth and development in the Philippines, our support for maritime security, and, of course, coordinating with President Aquino as he prepares to host the APEC Leaders' Summit.

Later that morning, the President will take part in a CEO summit at APEC where he will be focused on the issue of climate change as we prepare for the Paris meeting later this year. And I should add, throughout the course of this summit in Asia, I think you'll see the President focus on a number of the affirmative issues that are very critical to his

foreign policy agenda. That includes maritime security, as I suggested; it includes a successful Paris outcome in confronting the threat of climate change; and it of course includes our support for ratification of TPP, which is an anchor of both our economic approach, but also our commitment to a rules-based order in the region.

Following this participation in the CEO summit, the President will participate in a meeting with his TPP leader counterparts. This will be the first time that the leaders of the various TPP countries will be able to come together since the completion and publication of the text. So the leaders will have an opportunity to mark this enormous progress, and to demonstrate their shared commitment to moving forward with TPP.

Later in the afternoon, the President will participate in a meeting of the Pacific Alliance with the leaders of the 21 APEC countries, as well as Colombia, which is a member of the Pacific Alliance here in the Americas. I would note that it's very important and welcome that Colombia is able to participate in this global forum, particularly at a moment when Colombia is making great strides in its own economy, and, of course, in the peace process that it is pursuing with the FARC.

That evening, the President will attend an APEC welcome dinner and cultural performance, and that initiates the formal APEC Summit.

On Thursday, the 19th, is the APEC Summit events. So throughout the course of the day, he'll be participating in several APEC meetings. In addition, he will have two bilateral meetings. He will have a bilateral meeting with the Prime Minister of Canada. As with Australia, this is the first opportunity for the President to meet face to face with the Prime Minister of Canada. He was able to speak to him twice on the phone already, congratulate him on his resounding electoral win. Clearly, Canada is also a country where we have enormous overlapping interests, including the TPP; including our shared commitment to counterterrorism; and also our cooperation here in the hemisphere.

In addition to the meeting with Canada, the President will have a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Abe of Japan. This is the first meeting that the two leaders have had since Prime Minister Abe's visit and state dinner here in April. And they'll have an opportunity to review the key issues in our alliance. And of course, Japan too is a TPP country.

On Friday, November 20th, the President will leave Manila and fly to Kuala Lumpur.

Upon arrival in Kuala Lumpur, the President will participate in a town hall meeting with members of our Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative. This is our key showcase people-to-people initiative in Southeast Asia. It's generated enormous enthusiasm and participation, as with the Young African Leaders Initiative. So in this town hall meeting, the President will have an opportunity to speak to and take questions from young people who are participating in YSEALI.

Saturday, November 21st, the President will begin his day with a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Nagib of Malaysia, as the host of the ASEAN and East Asia summits.

They'll discuss a number of issues of mutual interest from maritime security cooperation

to the successful conclusion of TPP, which, of course, Malaysia is a member of. And they'll have an opportunity to review the agenda for the ASEAN and East Asia summits.

Later that day, as Susan referenced, the President will visit a refugee center in Malaysia. This will be a manifestation of our commitment to work with countries like Malaysia that are doing their part in the context of the global refugee challenge. A lot of attention has been put on Europe as it relates to the refugee issue, but there has also been significant refugee flows in Asia and the Pacific, as well. Malaysia has consistently throughout the years stepped up to host its share of refugees. And we'll be able to highlight U.S. support for refugees and displaced persons worldwide at this refugee center.

That evening, as Susan mentioned, the President will meet with the Prime Minister of Laos. I was recently able to travel to Laos, which is hosting next year's ASEAN and East Asia summit. The U.S. and Laos are working together as Laos prepares to take the chair of these important multilateral bodies. And we'll have the opportunity to express our full support for working with Laos throughout its chairmanship.

Then that evening the President will participate in the U.S.-ASEAN meeting with the various ASEAN leaders before attending the East Asia Summit dinner and cultural performance.

Then finally, on Sunday, the 22nd, the President will attend the East Asia Summit leaders meetings, which again will address the broad economic, political, and security picture in the region. In addition he'll have a bilateral meeting with the Prime Minister of Singapore, one of our closest partners in the region, also a TPP country, as well. And then the President will have a press conference before he departs for Washington.

Before we move to questions, I'd also just add that at the ASEAN Summit the President will have the opportunity to meet with and see, along with the other ASEAN leaders, the President of Burma. I just want to make a few comments about the election that recently took place there. This is in many ways a momentous opportunity for the people of Burma. What we've seen take place on Sunday was a nationwide vote. We had been very focused on this election as a critical milestone in evaluating Burma's democratic transition.

The United States participated along with many international monitors in working to ensure that the election was credible, inclusive, that there was transparency, and that it reflected the will of the people of Burma. Thus far, I think the results demonstrate that there was broad participation in the election, and a clear commitment from the authorities to, again, allow the people's voices to be heard.

You saw last night the President made calls to both President Thein Sein and to Aung San Suu Kyi. And what we've seen so far is clearly Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD political party have performed very, very well. We've also seen very positive statements from President Thein Sein and from the leadership of the military in Burma, pledging to respect the result of the election, issuing congratulations to the NLD for their performance.

Again, we believe this sends a very positive signal that an election took place, the people's voices were heard, the authorities are committing and pledging to respect the results of that election. I think the President's message was very much that this is an opportunity now for the key leaders of the country to come together as they prepare for a new parliament to be seated in January and for vice presidents and presidents to be chosen early next year.

If they can continue in this spirit of national unity, this is an enormous opportunity for the people of Burma. There are huge challenges that remain in the country -- to complete the national reconciliation process with various ethnic groups and to address the humanitarian challenge in Rakhine State. But, again, I think if we were to predict five or six years ago that we would be standing here today having just witnessed a nationwide election in Burma in which Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD were able to freely participate and campaign vigorously in that election, perform very well, and have that result welcomed by the relevant Burmese authorities and the military, I think very few of us would have predicted that that would be the case. I think that's a testament to both Aung San Suu Kyi's decades-long commitment to democracy in Burma, and it's a testament to the government remaining committed to a democratic transition that is not yet complete but has the potential to advance significantly because of this election.

So with that, we'll move to your questions.

MR. EARNEST: So we've probably got time for four or five questions here so let's move around a little bit. Andrew, do you want to start?

Q Sure. With regard to what you -- just a couple of questions about this idea of a rules-based order in Asia. I was wondering if you'd expect that you'll be able to achieve some kind of code of conduct at one of the meetings in order that some of the maritime disputes and air identification disputes are resolved in an easier manner. And secondly, on the Burmese elections, do you think the Burmese need to change the rules to allow Aung San Suu Kyi to become President?

AMBASSADOR RICE: Well, let me address the question about the code of conduct and maritime issues in the South China Sea. Obviously, this will be a central issue of discussion, both at the East Asia Summit as well as the ASEAN-U.S. Summit and the other engagements that we have throughout our visit to Asia. Our view has always been that these disputes need to be resolved through peaceful, legal means and that the establishment of an implementation of a code of conduct agreed among the leaders of the region, the states of the region, and in particular the claimants, would be a positive step forward. This, though, is not a U.S. agreement or U.S. code. It's one that would need to be implemented by the parties involved. And I'm confident that this will continue to be something that we and others encourage, but I don't expect it to be a concrete outcome of this particular visit.

MR. RHODES: So with respect to the constitutional reform in Burma, we have consistently said over the course of the last several years that a full transition to democratic civilian rule in Burma would require a process of constitutional reform. For

instance, even with this election, 25 percent of the seats in the parliament are reserved for the military. So this election was selecting the remaining 75 percent. And then of course there are the amendment procedures that prohibit Aung San Suu Kyi from assuming the presidency. You heard President Obama, when he was in Burma with Aung San Suu Kyi, indicate that he did not think that those restrictions made sense and appeared to single her out.

That said, she's a member of parliament. She is the clear leader of the NLD. I was in Burma a few weeks ago; I met with her as well as Burmese officials. She campaigned across the country and her party did remarkably well. The Union Election Commission is still putting out the results, but I think every indication is they're already very close to having an outright majority, even with that 25 percent blocked for the military and, indeed, as additional results come out, it's possible that they will have that outright majority in which case clearly she will be in a very strong position as the leader of the NLD.

Going forward, this is a question for the leaders and people of Burma to determine. In the first case, we very much encouraged her in her efforts as she's reached out to the leadership of the USDP, the governing party and the military, in pursuit of having a dialogue between them. And the President has indicated -- the President of Burma, that is -- his openness to that type of dialogue. So in the first case I think in the coming weeks what we want to see are the key players, key political actors and institutions in Burma sitting down together to process these election results and to look ahead to the future.

A new parliament will then be seated in January and there will be a period of time before they select a president and several vice presidents. At some point, it will be up to that new parliament and to those leaders to make determinations about the reform of the constitution. And, again, I think Aung San Suu Kyi is in a very strong position as the leader of the NLD to be a leading voice about the future direction of the country. So what we've seen here is an election that didn't resolve every issue, did not resolve the constitutional issue, and that's one of the reasons why we said this election wasn't going to complete the democratic transition.

But clearly it is an important milestone and an historic milestone in enabling the people of Burma to vote for their parliamentary leaders, enabling Aung San Suu Kyi and her party to participate in the process and to do very well.

And again, I think many were somewhat haunted by the experience of 1990, when you had a decisive NLD victory followed by the subsequent imprisonment of Aung San Suu Kyi. What we're seeing thus far that is different, again, is congratulations from the military and the leadership of the USDP to the NLD on their performance in the election and a commitment to respect that result. That alone I think speaks to enormous progress that's been made in Burma, even as there are many more issues to be dealt with.

MR. EARNEST: Kathleen.

Q If I could turn to the talks you're going to have over Syria in Turkey. It doesn't sound like the President has a formal meeting with Vladimir Putin on his schedule, if this is right. Do you expect that they'll meet and talk? And it looks like Putin will be arriving with a peace proposal in hand. If you could talk a little bit about what you think about that proposal, and whether or not this might demonstrate that Putin is not as isolated as the U.S. once imagined two years ago. Attempts to isolate him have failed, it seems.

AMBASSADOR RICE: Well, let me begin with your first question, which is there is not a formal meeting between the President and Mr. Putin on the schedule, but as has often been the case at the G20 and other multilateral leaders' meetings, we fully expect they'll have ample opportunity for discussion directly. So that's the first point.

Secondly, recall that the G20 meeting will come just after Secretary Kerry again convened the key countries in Vienna along with the United Nations to press forward on the political process. We have been working with all of the key players in that configuration, including the Russians, on our thoughts and our various respective partners' thoughts about the substance of a potential transition.

The Russians certainly have their ideas; we have ours; other players have theirs. And this discussion in Vienna will be an opportunity to try to see the extent to which we can forge a common way forward, such that we have a concrete -- ultimately, a concrete transition plan that enables Syrians to decide their future for themselves peacefully, securely, and in accordance with their popular will.

So I don't see any indication that President Putin's isolation is diminished. That is a function of the actions he took to violate Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The sanctions remain intact. And I think we're all very realistic that for the conflict in Syria to be resolved, which it must, it's going to require all the relevant players to come to a common understanding.

MR. EARNEST: Mike.

Q Just to follow on that real quickly. Do you expect or do you anticipate any concrete action on Syria then coming out of the Kerry meeting and then out of the meetings that you guys will have on the sidelines on Syria? And then secondly, do you think the President is disappointed that this is such a summit-heavy trip that he -- is back-to-back-to-back four summits and not -- doesn't have more of a chance to do what he likes to do on these trips and sort of take in the countries and the cultural stuff? (Laughter.) Maybe I'll take that as a yes from the grins. (Laughter.)

AMBASSADOR RICE: The first part about concrete outcomes -- first of all, we view the dialogue about the political process in Syria as being a process. It is not about a single meeting or a single event. These issues are hugely complex and fraught. If they weren't, they would have been resolved a long time ago.

So we fully anticipate that there will be more meetings like the one last -- couple weeks ago in Vienna, like the one coming up on Saturday. We view the discussions of the G20 as a useful opportunity for the key leaders to touch base and try to further concert our

efforts. But I don't think anybody expects a single outcome that all of a sudden readily resolves all these difficult issues. We're looking to try to use these venues to make incremental progress toward the objective that we all seek.

The President, obviously, will be in a unique opportunity to, first of all, spend time with President Erdogan, who's a very important player and partner in the counter-ISIL effort. The meeting that Ben described among our key European partners -- what we call the Quint, with the leaders of Britain, France, Germany and Italy -- key coalition partners of the United States and our 65-member global coalition will be an opportunity to discuss in depth the counter-ISIL campaign and the steps we're all taking to intensify our efforts in that regard.

And then, of course, the discussions in the room at dinner and on the margins we expect will serve to try to push forward our shared interests in a political process that results ultimately in a genuine transition.

MR. RHODES: I can do the second one, yes. So, Mike, it's a good question. I'd say first of all that, as a New Yorker, and mindful of a Woody Allen maxim of how much of life is showing up -- and in Asia in particular, it really matters to attend these summits at the level of the leader. That was not the case before President Obama took office, and so we made it actually a common occurrence -- an annual occurrence that the President would attend the ASEAN Summit at the leaders level, and the East-Asia Summit at the leaders level, precisely because we want the United States to be at the table at the Asia Pacific in shaping the future of the region, and signaling that we're going to be present.

When we're not at the table, we're on the menu. (Laughter.) And when we're there, we can actually shape this agenda and elevate issues that are of interest and concern to us.

That said, your point is well taken, which is that it's very important I think -- the way the President looks at foreign policy is that, in addition to the meetings that take place in convention centers, that he's engaging people, that he's reaching out to different sectors of society that we're visiting. So, for instance, that's why we very deliberately made sure that he has a town hall meeting with young people in Malaysia, for instance; that he's getting out and getting to a refugee center and seeing people in Malaysia who've had to flee conflict or a humanitarian catastrophe; or going to a coastal facility in the Philippines to showcase our maritime cooperation with the Philippines.

So we very deliberately look at these visits as a way of broadening our outreach to publics beyond that leader-to-leader engagement that happens in the summit. And we, of course, also regularly look for ways to engage with members of civil society along the way. And I'm sure that will be the case as we go through this visit.

MR. EARNEST: Margaret.

Q Can you sort of explain for us how you're thinking about what the President is going to say about where the ISIL campaign is, particularly in light of the Sinjar offensive, in light of these diplomatic talks, and considering what's happened on the ground with Russia?

What is the message? Is this a new phase in the campaign against ISIS? And on the refugee center, can you explain why the President is visiting in Malaysia and not in Turkey, given the hemorrhage out of Syria into Turkey and the destabilizing factor?

AMBASSADOR RICE: The message is very straightforward, and we will be at the G20 and in the subsequent summits with many of the key players who have participated with us in the counter-ISIL coalition. And we're now over a year into it, and I think we can point to areas of significant progress. But we've also been very straightforward in saying, look, we're taking stock of what is working; we will do more of what works, and that which has not worked, as well, we will move away from.

And so we are very much keying with our partners, particularly at the G20, to focus on the political process, which is integral ultimately to the successful resolution of the conflict in Syria, which is necessary for the counter-ISIL campaign to have maximum effect. At the same time, we'll be in a position to highlight a number of the steps that the United States and our partners are taking to intensify the counter-ISIL campaign. And you've heard a number of those announced over the last several days and weeks, including our deepened and intensified air presence based out of Turkey, at Incirlik, along with others of our allies in defense of Turkey but also in support of the counter-ISIL campaign in Iraq and Syria.

We are intensifying our support for the Syrian Arab Coalition as they move to increase the pressure on Raqqa, including through the support of the deployment of a small number of American Special Forces to engage in a liaison and assistance mission with them. We are working, as we have been, with the Iraqi Kurds, as we see most recently in Sinjar, as well as with the Iraqi security forces on multiple axes inside of Iraq to increase the pressure on ISIL. We continue to intensify and increase our support to key neighboring states and partners in the region such as Jordan and Lebanon.

So this is a multifaceted effort where the coalition efforts are increasing not only on the military front but along various lines of efforts, countering the foreign fighter flow, countering financial flows to ISIL, countering ISIL messaging, providing support and stabilization inside the conflict zones, and increased humanitarian assistance.

So all of this is part of a whole. It has been from the outset a collective effort that involves the meaningful contributions of a wide range of allies around the world, and it will continue to be that. And we will concert, as always, our efforts to not only intensify the counter-ISIL campaign but intensify, in parallel, the political process.

MR. RHODES: And quickly on your second question, Margaret, it harkens a little bit back to Mike's. The fact of the matter is our schedule in Turkey over the course of two days is very much dominated by the G20 and associated meetings. However, refugees will be front and center at that summit. In fact, President Erdogan has indicated one of the principal topics at the dinner at the leader level on the first night -- Sunday night -- will be the refugee crisis in Europe broadly and certainly emanating from Syria.

I would say that doing the event in Malaysia does highlight the fact that this is a global challenge. There are enormous refugee flows out of Syria and into Europe; there are enormous refugee flows in Africa; there are enormous refugee flows in Asia. Malaysia hosts a very significant population of refugees, including a significant number of Rohingya, who have had to leave because of the humanitarian catastrophe in parts of Rakhine State, as well as victims of human trafficking in the region.

So I think we very deliberately will indicate in Malaysia that the President going to a refugee center, lifting up that piece of work by Malaysia is not focused just on Malaysia or Asia, but rather speaks to the global responsibility that countries have to provide support for refugees, either in hosting them or providing assistance or taking in a portion of refugees, as the United States and many of our allies and partners do.

MR. EARNEST: Jon, I'll give you the last one before we let these two go.

Q Is it possible to have a resolution to the crisis in Syria that leaves Assad in power, as apparently Putin is proposing? And why not have a formal meeting scheduled with him? I mean, you certainly have no shortage of things to talk to Vladimir Putin about. I understand you may have a meeting on the sidelines, but why not have a formal meeting with him?

And if I could just get a factual question to you. Ben Carson, in the debates, regarding Syria, said that there's evidence that the Chinese are involved in Syria. I was wondering if that's true.

AMBASSADOR RICE: What does he mean by involved?

Q Well, it was a little unclear, but it was in the context of the Russians, the Russians and the Chinese --

AMBASSADOR RICE: I really can't speak to what he was referring to. But unless you're talking about having a diplomatic presence, I'm not sure what he was referring to.

Q Any military-to-military involvement -- which was the implication?

AMBASSADOR RICE: I have not seen any evidence of Chinese military involvement in Syria.

In terms of a formal meeting with Putin, as you know, the President not long ago -- really about six weeks ago -- had the opportunity to speak at length with President Putin at the General Assembly. That was a useful discussion. I'm sure that they will have ample opportunity as I said to speak again in Antalya and we fully expect that and look forward to it. But as Ben described, this schedule is very packed and there are, frankly, a number of bilateral meetings that would be nice to have had in Antalya that won't be possible in the compressed time that we have.

But we expect that the President will have the opportunity to see Putin and others not only at the G20 in Turkey but we also know, for example, that President Putin will be in Paris at the Climate Summit. A number of the other leaders will be at either APEC or EAS. So this is going to be something of a moveable feast over the course of the next two weeks and I think all of the key leaders will have more than one opportunity to exchange over the course of that period.

What was your first?

Q And Assad -- if it's possible to have a solution in Syria that leaves Assad in power.

AMBASSADOR RICE: We do not believe so. Our strong view is that Assad has lost all legitimacy; that the fact that he has been directly responsible for the deaths of so many of his own people means that a transition ultimately will have to result in a legitimate government coming to power in the context of a transition. And it's very hard to envision how that could be accomplished with Assad still in power.

MR. RHODES: Yes, and I was going to say, Jon -- not to engage the -- I think Susan answered the specific question on China's military involvement in Syria, but I think it's worth stepping back and noting that China makes it a practice to not get extended into military conflicts in the Middle East.

In many respects, their policy over many years, if not decades, has been to not be overextended in military exercises. I think it speaks to our commitment to deal very clearly with our interests in Syria and in the Middle East in ways that deny terrorists a safe haven, that support the sovereignty and security of our allies, but we also recognize that we can't continually be overextended in the Middle East because we have significant global interests.

This trip speaks to that I think through the literal manifestation of what the President is doing, beginning in Turkey but then moving on to the Asia Pacific where he'll be focused on climate change, on TPP, on supporting this democratic transition in Burma. We have to balance very broad global interests that include the situation in Syria and counterterrorism, but, by definition as a global leader, must include the Asia Pacific.

So I do make the point that I think as people are evaluating what it takes for America to sustain its global leadership, the test of that global leadership is not how much are we investing militarily in the Middle East. It's how are we addressing our interests in the Middle East, including with our military, but making sure that we have the resources, the bandwidth, the diplomatic prioritization to look at a whole range of global challenges. That, in many respects, is what the President's foreign policy has been about, and I think that will be on display where you will see him very much in a leadership role and the counter-ISIL effort but also at the table in the Asia Pacific, preparing for the Paris climate talks, pushing through for ratification of TPP, supporting, again, this democratic transition in Burma, and ensuring that the United States is at the table in the Asia Pacific as well as in the Middle East.

Thank you, guys.

AMBASSADOR RICE: Look forward to traveling with you. Get some rest. It's going to be a long tour. (Laughter.)

Q What are you getting Ben for his birthday?

AMBASSADOR RICE: It's not just Ben's birthday -- it's mine as well.

Q Happy birthday! (Laughter.)

AMBASSADOR RICE: So we're going to be getting each other something. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I guess we can look forward to a lot of birthday cake on this trip. (Laughter.)

Beyond what they had to say, we can go to your questions on that topic or any others that may be on your mind today.

Q When is your birthday? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Not until January, but you can start shopping now, if you'd like. (Laughter.)

Go ahead, Kathleen.

Q Well, I guess I'll switch to the Guantanamo Bay closure plan -- your favorite topic. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: You guys had the National Security Advisor out here. (Laughter.)

Q Well, and again, yes, when? So it looks like it may not be released until the President has left the building. Is there a reason why the President maybe isn't going to announce this formally and be involved in its rollout? Is he distancing himself from it in some way or putting this sort of off on to the Pentagon? Can you describe any update on it?

MR. EARNEST: Sure. I don't have an update for you in terms of timing. I think the relatively soon construction that I've used in the past is still operative. And in terms of the President's involvement on this, the President is deeply involved. This was the highest-profile announcement that the President made on his second full day in office, his commitment to closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

So there is no denying that this is not just a top priority for the country and for the administration, it's a top priority for the President personally. And I think you've seen him expend significant time and energy to finding a way to overcome congressional obstruction to achieving this goal.

As it relates to the plan itself, there's no big mystery here, so I certainly would not anticipate a lot of surprise once the plan is presented. We've been quite clear about what the strategy is. There was a process that was undertaken in the first week of the administration to review the case files of all of those who were detained at the prison at Guantanamo Bay. A number of those individuals were cleared for transfer, and the

administration has worked diligently with our partners around the world to secure their agreements to take on some of these detainees and impose some limitations on those detainees consistent with our desire to mitigate the threat that they may pose to the United States and our interest.

There's another group of detainees that have been cleared for prosecution, and there is a case that can be brought against them either in a military commission or in a criminal court of law. And there's a small group of detainees that are not likely to be able to be safely transferred or effectively prosecuted.

The good news is we do know that there are effective ways to safely detain them that don't run so contrary to our interests and that don't essentially overcharge American taxpayers. And this is the plan that we are seeking to implement. And at every turn it seems that Congress has attempted to put obstacles in our path of achieving this goal. And despite that obstruction, we have succeeded in transferring more than 100 individuals from the prison at Guantanamo Bay to other countries around the world. We've done that since the President first took office.

And there's more work that needs to be done here, so your interest in reviewing the plan is certainly understandable. It's something that we've talked about extensively from here, but I wouldn't expect any major plot twists associated with the presentation of the plan.

Q So what's the holdup?

MR. EARNEST: I think what you can expect, though, is a carefully considered, thoughtful plan that will include some specifics that heretofore have not been previously discussed. And this is something that the Pentagon has been principally responsible for putting together, and so that would explain their significant involvement in this effort. But this is something that the President has spoken with the Secretary of Defense on a number of occasions, and I would anticipate that when the plan is presented, that it will not just represent the important work that's been done at the Department of Defense, but it will also represent the priorities that have been outlined by the President of the United States.

Julia.

Q Hi. This really was a question that I was going to ask Ben and Susan, but I wanted to hear a little bit more about the South China Sea and how the President might address that in his trip, particularly at APEC in Manila, where he's going to see Chinese President Xi. To what extent, if any, will he actually bring that up? And how will his message -- what will his message be to China and their neighbors, especially since we've seen these freedom of operations, of navigation?

MR. EARNEST: The fact is, it is going to come up in the context of the meetings. There's a possibility that the President may bring it up. I think there's an even greater possibility that the participants in some of these multilateral meetings will bring it up.

This is an issue of significant concern to a number of countries that will be participating in these meetings. And I'm not just referring to China. I'm referring to other countries like Vietnam and the Philippines, that have significant concerns about Chinese claims in the South China Sea that seem to impinge on the kind of generally accepted claims that they've made.

Now, the thing that will also be repeated in the context of these meetings is that the United States takes no position on competing sovereignty claims to land features in the South China Sea. But what we do take a strong position on is protecting the rights, freedoms and lawful uses of the sea and airspace that's guaranteed to all countries. And that was on -- that commitment was demonstrated in the context of the freedom of navigation operation that was carried out by the Department of Defense in the last couple of weeks.

Q Okay. I also wanted to ask, following the arrest and extradition yesterday of relatives of Venezuela President Maduro in Haiti -- we're watching the legal side of that -- I know you don't want to comment on an ongoing case, but just diplomatically, what does this mean for U.S. relations with Venezuela, especially as we've seen some warming, if you could call it that, of ties earlier this year? Is this a step back? And is Venezuela -- does the U.S. view the Venezuelan government as unable to handle the vast problem of drug cartels and conspiracy within its country?

MR. EARNEST: Julia, it's difficult for me to give you a specific answer to that question, primarily because I can confirm that there are two individuals in Haiti who have been arrested on charges that they were conspiring to bring a significant quantity of cocaine into the United States. However, I cannot confirm the identity of those individuals.

So what I can say as a general matter is the Department of Defense takes quite seriously the responsibility that they have to enforce the laws of the United States. And we're able to work with countries throughout the hemisphere to enforce these laws. But as it relates to what impact it may have on our broader relations with Venezuela, I think that's difficult for me to comment on without either confirming or not the identity of the individuals that have been arrested.

Q Okay. And I'm sorry, is DOD involved, or do you mean the Justice Department?

MR. EARNEST: I'm sorry, I meant the Justice Department. If I misspoke and said DOD I apologize.

Q Thanks.

MR. EARNEST: Laura.

Q Thank you. There's a big story in France today about the climate controls with a statement made by John Kerry, the U.S. Secretary of State, who said that "it definitely will not be a treaty." Francois Hollande, the French President, reacted to that. What's the White House reaction?

MR. EARNEST: I didn't see what President Hollande had to say. Do you want to read that to me and I can try to give you a reaction?

Q "The Paris agreement must be an international, legally binding agreement."

MR. EARNEST: What we are seeking, Laura, are significant commitments from countries around the world to combatting climate change. And it's going to require countries making good on promises to cut carbon pollution, and to doing so in a transparent, verifiable manner. That is our goal. And there are significant global consequences for our ability to do that. There are also significant consequences for the U.S. economy for doing that. And what those agreements look like and how the countries who are participating will mutually pledge their commitment is something that will be discussed at the talks. And so I wouldn't want to prejudge that from here.

Q -- between the United States and France regarding what could be accomplished there in a legal way?

MR. EARNEST: There may be some -- that's hard for me to assess. What I will say is that the United States remains committed to following through on our commitments, and having a serious conversation about how other countries can both make ambitious commitments, but also demonstrate their commitment to following through on them in a transparent and verifiable way.

Q Another question on Guantanamo. Can you expect the plan before the departure of the President?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an update for you on the timing other than relatively soon.

Q What does it mean, "relatively soon?" Tomorrow?

MR. EARNEST: I guess that would fit into that definition, but not necessarily tomorrow.

Ron.

Q On Mount Sinjar, I'm not sure there was an answer to the question of what exactly the status of things is there now. And is the area secure? Is the fighting continuing? And aside from -- or in addition to the U.S. airstrikes, was there other U.S. involvement in the planning and execution of that operation?

MR. EARNEST: Ron, I didn't get a detailed operational update on the situation there. I do think that there continues to be some updated -- or there does continue to be some ongoing fighting in that region. I'd refer you to the Department of Defense who may be able to give you some more specific updates. I know that one thing I can speak to is that one important role that the United States and our coalition partners played was in carrying out some military airstrikes in advance of the ground defensive that was launched by the Peshmerga who were leading the effort to retake Sinjar.

Q So there was no other U.S. role, other than the airstrikes? Or you don't know the answer to that.

MR. EARNEST: I know of that role, but for any additional operational activities, I'd refer you to the Department of Defense.

Q Specifically on the refugee issue, in describing the overall situation there, I think it was Ambassador Rice who used words like "being realistic," and an "incremental process" in terms of Syria generally. But how -- or does the administration look at the refugee, that acute problem, in the same manner that there's only incremental progress that can be made and that you have to be realistic about this exploding problem that's happening right now and getting worse by the day?

MR. EARNEST: My understanding was that, based on her answer that she was talking specifically about the ongoing political effort that Secretary Kerry is leading. And I think that was an indication that we do not expect any sort of political diplomatic breakthrough at the Vienna talks that Secretary Kerry will be leading tomorrow, but we are looking to make some additional progress, and even incremental progress that she described would be important to ultimately reaching a solution.

As it relates to the refugees, I think the situation there continues to be quite troubling. And I think the United States' status as the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to that effort is an indication of how troubled we are about that humanitarian situation. And I'm confident that there will be a discussion at the G20 about what additional contributions countries around the world can make to alleviate some of the suffering that we see.

Q Given the big contribution of the United States, the problem is still there. Is there anything else specifically that President Obama is trying to do or trying to initiate to, again, stop this problem today?

MR. EARNEST: We do know that the crux of this problem is the political failure of the Assad regime to effectively lead that country. And that is precisely why the United States has invested so much time and energy and sweat equity in trying to bring all of the relevant parties to the table to engage in a conversation about the kind of political transition that's needed inside of Syria that would at least reduce the violence in that country, and create an opening so that more Syrians can come home. But we're realistic, as Susan said, about the fact that that's not something that's going to be announced tomorrow, for instance.

Q And just lastly, on the Burmese elections, I remember the readout you gave about the phone calls the President had and this issue of the constitutional provision that bars Suu Kyi from becoming President. Now that the elections are done and the result are pretty much known, did the President speak specifically to that issue with the President or with Suu Kyi? And does he intend to specifically speak to the issue with leaders at the -- during his travels coming up?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a more detailed readout than what we put out first thing this morning. I will note that all of the parties who were involved in the Burma elections have, to their credit, been quite respectful of the ongoing process to tally the votes and

ultimately report the results. And both the incumbent party and the NLD party have been quite forward-leaning about urging their party members to not unilaterally declare victory, but rather to be respectful of that independent process. So I certainly want to heed those admonitions as well, and I think Ben was precise in talking about the results.

But I do think you can expect that the President will be talking with other leaders in Asia in the context of these meetings about how significant the results of this election are, principally, in the first instance, because the elections out-performed expectations in terms of what voter turnout would look like, how much confidence there would be in the integrity of the election, and that the earlier results are encouraging in terms of the number of people who showed up to vote and the confidence that we have in an accurate tally. That's a good thing. And I do think that bodes well for the future of Burma.

Q But it sounds like the President does not consider this constitutional provision about the presidency a settled issue -- or doesn't he?

MR. EARNEST: Well, when the President visited Burma last year, he talked about the need for the Burmese government and the Burmese people to consider some constitutional reforms, particularly given the unfair provision that essentially singles out Aung San Suu Kyi in making her ineligible to serve as President. Even this provision about reserving 25 percent of the seats in the legislature for the military is something that doesn't reflect the kinds of broad democratic principles that we'd like to see Burma adopt.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. I want to draw your attention to something that Donald Trump said on "The O'Reilly Factor" last night. You may or may not have had a chance to hear it, but it was very similar to something he said during the most recent GOP debate. He said, speaking about illegal immigration and trying to figure out a way to send back potentially millions of people, he said, "You're going to have to have a deportation force, and you're going to have to do it humanely." He pointed to the actions of former U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower, for example, many, many years ago. And I know, as a general matter, you don't like to sort of intervene on a -- wade into the GOP primary talk, but I thought it would be instructive, at a minimum, if not just interesting conversation, to get your perspective from the executive branch. Would something like that be feasible, for example? A deportation force? And what do you make of the comparisons with what happened under President Eisenhower and Truman?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not familiar with the historical reference that I've heard Mr. Trump make to the Eisenhower administration. I think that our law enforcement professionals have indicated that the kind of effort to deport 12 million immigrants from this country is unrealistic, both as a practical matter but also as a fiscal matter. That would cause -- it would cost a lot of money. And it would also put us in a situation where our law enforcement resources are not being effectively targeted at those individuals that do pose the greatest risk to our communities and to our national security.

What the President has said is that given our limited law enforcement resources, we should be focused on those who have been convicted of gang offenses, or convicted of serious violent crimes -- not on tearing apart families. And I think this is just one of many places where Mr. Trump is fundamentally in a place that does not reflect the broad view of a vast majority of Americans in terms of how inhumane what he's emphasizing is, but also how he refuses to discuss how much it would cost and how he refuses to recognize what impact that would actually have on the safety of our communities and the safety of our country.

Q Quick follow-up then, just to play devil's advocate for a second. You're not putting a price tag on the rule of law when you say it's expensive, therefore we shouldn't do it, are you?

MR. EARNEST: What I'm suggesting is, is that if this is what his proposal is, that he should explain how he's going to pay for it. I don't think that's a controversial notion. And I think it warrants mentioning that Republicans in the House of Representatives last year had an opportunity to allow a bipartisan, comprehensive immigration reform bill to come to the floor of the House of Representatives. That bill included an historic investment in border security, but it was blocked by Republicans.

So again, it sounds like -- when it comes to enforcement, it sounds like Mr. Trump's concerns are probably more effectively directed to the House Republican leadership who actually blocked the kind of investment that would be necessary to fulfill the kind of policy that Mr. Trump is talking about.

Michelle.

Q On the Gitmo plan, we're already hearing from some Republicans bracing for any potential executive action that comes even with maybe a lawsuit, and that includes John McCain, who actually is in favor of closing it. So I know that --

MR. EARNEST: Gives you a pretty good sense of what we're up against, doesn't it?

Q Well, that's what I want to ask you about.

MR. EARNEST: Even our friends on this issue are threatening lawsuits.

Q Yes, well, I wanted to -- I know you said that you are focused on the plan and not necessarily executive action, of course. But what do you think of those kinds of thoughts that this could end up in court if executive action is taken? And I'm guess that that isn't going to be any kind of obstacle to the President taking that kind of action.

MR. EARNEST: There are a number of times where Republicans have threatened legal action, I think most prominently when it comes to the Affordable Care Act, where their legal efforts have not at all been successful. And we've had two Supreme Court rulings now that have overturned significant Republican threats to the Affordable Care Act law. So I guess I would say from one standpoint that the track record of House Republicans in this regard is not particularly good.

There are some other places where we are continuing to have an argument through the courts, particularly when it comes to immigration reform. But specifically on this issue, I think if this is an issue that ends up in court, it will be as a result of the abject failure of the United States Congress to put the national security interests of the United States first.

And there is a common-sense way for us to proceed in closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay. This is a policy and a strategy that is backed not just by this President, but by his Republican predecessor who opened the prison in the first place. It's also backed by Secretaries of State that have served Democratic and Republican administrations. This is a policy that is supported by the last three chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This is a policy that is supported by General David Petraeus, who I know is someone that Senator McCain looks up to.

So what we would like to see is Congress engage constructively in a strategy that is supported by people who have dedicated their lives to protecting the country. We're just asking members of Congress to fulfill their responsibility to put the interests of the country ahead of their narrower political interest.

Q Because there is such opposition to the way the President would take that action if he were to do so, and similar actions in the past -- even among some people who support the end result, they just don't want him to act in that way. So does the President see taking that action as an absolute last resort that he doesn't really want to do? Or is it a very viable option considering that it's likely that Congress doesn't go along with his plan?

MR. EARNEST: What I have indicated is that the President is -- that we're not going to take anything off the table when it comes to what the President can do to accomplish this goal. And our strong preference would be to engage Congress in a constructive discussion about how they can cooperate in the achievement of a national security priority that has strong bipartisan support among people who have spent the vast majority of their careers protecting the country. And that's what we're seeking to achieve. And it remains to be seen exactly what Congress's reaction will be.

Q Okay. And on the Russian plane crash, how would you characterize the sharing of information that's going on between the U.S. -- or among the U.S., Russia and Egypt? Is the U.S. getting adequate information from them? And how would you sort of describe the way the U.S. is sharing information in turn with them?

MR. EARNEST: Well, since the day of the crash, or at least the day after, U.S. officials were in touch with Egyptian and Russian officials who have been involved in trying to get to the bottom of what exactly occurred. We have offered assistance as they conduct this investigation, and those lines of communication remain open. The extent of that information sharing is not something I can discuss in much detail publicly. But there certainly is a willingness and there has been some follow-through on those commitments.

Q Would you say that the -- I know you won't go into great detail, but do you feel like you're getting adequate information from Egypt and from the Russian investigation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we certainly are interested in understanding what they have learned thus far. But given that they are the principal investigators and they're investigating a terrible incident that occurred on Egyptian soil and affected the lives of hundreds of innocent Russians, the information flow is primarily to them, not from them.

But we're going to continue to stay in touch, and we certainly are interested in understanding as much as we can about what exactly happened so that we can adjust our security posture as necessary to ensure the safety of the traveling public.

Mark.

Q Can you -- what's the process after this reports comes out? I mean, you transmit it to the Hill; you release it publicly, whatever. Do you want Congress to act on it in some fashion? Are you expecting, like, hearings? Do you want them to -- is there any hope in heck of them doing anything about it other than pitching it aside?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we'll have to see. I think our hope would be that Congress would review the report, agree that it is a reasonable approach to accomplishing this goal of closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay that advances our national security interests and actually advanced the interests of taxpayers, too. And what we would like Congress to do is to take steps to remove the obstacles that they've put in place that prevent the implementation of this plan.

Q But to do that, they would have to specifically repeal language that the Senate just passed 91 to 3, I think it was.

MR. EARNEST: Again, that may be what's required. Ultimately, Congress will have to consider the plan and determine what steps they need to take to allow the plan to be implemented.

But this has been our objection for quite some time. Congress has frequently included language in the National Defense Authorization Act that prevents the implementation of this plan. And so we're hoping that by being more specific about what the plan includes that Congress will -- members of Congress will come to their senses and remove the obstacles that prevent the implementation of a plan that's in the best interests of our national security and the best interests of ensuring that we're being good stewards of taxpayer dollars.

Q So unless they specifically vote to reverse the language that the President is going to be signing presumably any day now, only executive action will allow him to make good on his order of his second day in office.

MR. EARNEST: Well, what I have indicated is we're not going to take anything off the table in terms of options that may be available to the President, but our first choice would be to garner cooperation from the United States Congress.

Richard.

Q I just want to check something with you, Josh. When Ben talks about this meeting between Prime Minister Trudeau and the President in Manila, you refer to counterterrorism. The operation against ISIL, is it under this big umbrella of counterterrorism?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what Ben is referring to is that the United States does have an important counterterrorism relationship with authorities in the Philippines. Isn't that what you asked about?

Q No.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. Maybe I misunderstood your question.

Q The bilat between Prime Minister Trudeau and the President in Manila --

MR. EARNEST: Okay, in the Philippines.

Q Sorry, that's my fault. So he talked about the three main topics -- there are going to be other ones -- and counterterrorism is one of them.

MR. EARNEST: Understood.

Q Is it about the hemisphere or also the operations against ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: I think he's talking about both in terms of our efforts to coordinate on our strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, but there are broader areas where the United States and Canada coordinate our efforts to ensure the safety and security of both the Canadian people and the American people, and that counterterrorism relationship has been important to our national security and it's one that we will ensure continues under the leadership of Prime Minister Trudeau.

Q Do you think he's going to try to convince the Prime Minister to keep on fighting ISIL with the coalition?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we certainly are -- as you've heard me say in the past, we value the contribution that Canada has made thus far to our counter-ISIL coalition, and their contribution has been important. And we certainly are interested in having a conversation with Prime Minister Trudeau to talk about their ongoing commitment to this effort.

Q Hoping it's going to continue?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we'll have a conversation. Obviously, he made some promises in the context of his campaign and he'll have to -- as he now has assumed the office of Prime Minister, is going to have to make a range of decisions about what's in the best interests of Canada's national security. That's what his responsibility is. But this certainly is an opportunity for he and the President to have a conversation about how our mutual interests are and can be advanced through the effective implementation of our strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q Would you say that it's in the best interests of Canada to remain in the coalition?

MR. EARNEST: What I would say is that it is -- first of all, that's a decision for Prime Minister Trudeau to make. He can -- he was elected based on his ability to make that kind of assessment. And my understanding from what I've read about some of the coverage of the campaign is that he wasn't suggesting withdrawing from all of Canada's important commitments to our counter-ISIL efforts, but I know that he did raise some concerns about some of those contributions. And I'm confident that will be part of the conversation.

Q Okay. Very last question. This operation, this support to the Kurdish forces in Sinjar, is it just the U.S.-backed air support, or the coalition is involved?

MR. EARNEST: I'd refer you to the Department of Defense who can give you an operational update about who exactly carried out those airstrikes. I'm confident that the vast majority of them were carried out by the United States. I don't know to what extent other countries may have been involved.

Jon.

Q When is the President going to sign the NDAA? And I assume there will be full coverage, or what's the coverage?

MR. EARNEST: Last I heard, Jon, is we haven't received that legislation, the bill from Congress yet. But we'll keep you updated on when he's going to sign it. I can't promise in advance that there will be coverage, but we'll let you know.

Q But you're leaning that way?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not leaning one way or the other at this point.

Tuluse, we'll give you the last one.

Q It sounds like from what Ambassador Rice said that you all are sort of pushing back on the idea that Putin has a more influential stance at this G20 at this time of year compared to last time. And I'm wondering if that's the U.S. position. It sounds like in the response to the question about whether or not the President would meet with him that he met -- they met about six weeks ago. So I'm kind of wondering what your position is on whether or not Putin has a more influential position on the global stage today versus last year.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Toluse, I think the best way to consider that question is actually just to take a look at the President's schedule. When the President meets with our closest allies in Europe -- the UK, France, Germany and Italy -- they'll be having a conversation about what all of our countries are doing to implement the President's counter-ISIL strategy. When the President does his bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Trudeau that

will be a topic of conversation. When the President meets with President Erdogan that will be a topic of conversation in terms of Turkey's ongoing contribution to the counter-ISIL effort.

So it will be fairly evident to those who are tracking the President's schedule, as all of you will be, that he's playing a leading role in mobilizing the world's response to the threat that is posed by ISIL. There just aren't that many countries that are working with Russia in that regard, and those that are aren't invited to the G20 meeting.

So I think that is an indication of the way that the world is responding and how Russia stands alone as they're trying to get some attention for their efforts. And frankly, the concern that's been raised about Russian activity is that there is an internal, fundamental contradiction to their strategy, that President Putin likes to say that he's quite concerned about ISIL and that his military actions are focused on ISIL, but the fact is, the result of his military efforts and the result of his political efforts have only been to build up the Assad regime, which only sets back the likelihood of the kind of political transition that even Mr. Putin himself says is necessary.

So his failure to resolve that basic, fundamental, internal contradiction -- I'm sorry -- contradiction -- in his thinking has isolated him. And again, I think that will be on display at the G20 meeting and in the context of other elements of the President's trip.

Q Susan Rice said that it's likely that they may talk on the sidelines. I'm wondering how that conversation may differ from the meeting they had back in September, given what's happening in the time since. You've seen Russia bombing U.S.-backed rebels on the ground in Syria. You've seen the plane that went down, potentially shot down by ISIS. And we've also seen these talks start in Vienna with Russia at the table. So I'm wondering what the President's message is going to be and how it may be different from about six weeks ago when they met and all of those things hadn't happened yet.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm confident that the conversation will be shorter, if there is one over the course of this week, than it was back in September. But the message and strategy that President Obama has laid out has been quite consistent. And I wouldn't be surprised if this issue of the fundamental contradiction in the Russian strategy is at least a topic of some discussion.

I don't want to prejudge the conversation before it happens, if it happens, but if it does, we'll try to give you a sense of what's discussed.

Q Just one more on the South China Sea -- a quick follow-up. There seems to be some debate over whether or not that's going to be part of the official agenda. Will the U.S. sort of push to put down the official agenda at the East Asia Summit?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of what's going to be listed on the official agenda at those meetings, but I'm confident that it will be a subject of prominent discussion among the world leaders who are gathered there. And while the United States, of course, makes no claim in the South China Sea, we are quite concerned about protecting freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce in the South China Sea.

And we're going to continue to encourage all parties, big and small, to resolve their differences diplomatically and to not try to use their comparative size and strength to intimidate their neighbors in that region of the world; that resolving these differences of opinion through diplomacy and fairly around the negotiating table serves the interest of all parties involved, including China. China has a significant stake in protecting the free flow of commerce in the South China Sea, as they, I understand, have even previously acknowledged.

So that's the result that we're after. And again, I don't know if it will be on the formal agenda, but it certainly will be on the minds and lips of the world leaders who are attending the meeting.

Thanks, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

1:37 P.M. EST