

# Briefing by Ben Rhodes on the Bilateral with Japan

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MR. RHODES: I'm just going to do a readout of the meeting between the President and Prime Minister Abe of Japan, and then can take a few questions on that.

The President and the Prime Minister began with a discussion of the situation in Syria, building on the conversation they had over the phone earlier in the week. I think the two leaders are in agreement that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable and demands a strong international response. They agreed to stay in close coordination on the issue as we move forward. And I imagine we'll be continuing to discuss Syria on the margins of the summit with Japan and beyond the summit as well.

They discussed a range of alliance issues. On the economic side, they discussed TPP and the importance of concluding an agreement by the end of the year, and they discussed some of the issues that need to be addressed as a part of the effort to reach that agreement by the end of the year and noted the importance of the APEC Summit next month as a milestone on the way to that process.

On North Korea, the two leaders underscored their commitment to work together towards the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The President noted the importance of close trilateral cooperation between the United States and Korea and Japan, as well as continued efforts with other members of the six parties, including China and Russia, and the broader international community.

They discussed the Senkakus and the President made clear that he was opposed to any effort to resolve the Senkakus issue through coercion and underscored the importance of diplomacy and dialogue, which Prime Minister Abe referenced as his preferred course of action.

They also agreed to consult on broader defense issues in the alliance. They agreed to stay in close contact as Japan reviews its own defense posture going forward, and noted the importance of the upcoming two-plus-two meetings with Secretary Kerry and Secretary

Hagel meeting their Japanese counterparts. And they discussed the need to continue to move forward to implement our shared plan on the Futenma realignment associated with U.S. forces in Japan.

And with that, I can take your questions.

Q Did the Japanese sign on to the need for a military response to what happened in Syria?

MR. RHODES: Well, again, I don't want to speak for the Japanese; I'll let them speak to their position. What I will say is that the U.S. and Japan were in agreement that there needs to be a response, that the international norm surrounding chemical weapons needs to be upheld. And in the spirit of our alliance, we have -- I think the two leaders have an expectation that we'll be able to reach a shared position on Syria.

So, again, it was a productive discussion in that regard, and we welcome Japan's continued insistence that there be a response to the use of chemical weapons.

Q Was there anything that the President was asking Abe for as it relates to Syria? You had talked in the gaggle earlier about looking for political and diplomatic assistance. Is that like the kind of thing he was looking for from him?

MR. RHODES: The question was, was the President asking for anything related to Syria. I think that there are two aspects to that, Julie. First, with respect to chemical weapons, I think what we'd like to see are countries coming forward to take the position that we have taken that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable; that while we have a preference for the U.N. Security Council resolving these issues, the Security Council has been paralyzed, and that, therefore, there needs to be an international response to the use of chemical weapons. And we'll continue to discuss with Japan and other countries the type of political support that they can express for that position going forward.

But the broader situation in Syria -- they did discuss Japan's continued support on the political and humanitarian side. And I think the commitments from other countries to help deal with the humanitarian crisis, including the refugee crisis, is important, and Japan has been a contributor in terms of helping neighboring countries absorb refugee flows and help provide humanitarian support to the Syrian people. And the Prime Minister expressed his desire to continue to work on those issues with the United States and other countries.

And similarly, on the Geneva process, which provides the ultimate pathway towards a political resolution to Syria's civil war, Prime Minister Abe expressed his strong support for working on behalf of that process going forward.

Q A couple on another subject. Is there anything further on Obama's interaction with Putin? And second, did the President get any additional Syria support so far today?

MR. RHODES: With respect to Mr. Putin, they obviously greeted one other at the beginning of the summit as they were coming in. Beyond that, I have no updates on any scheduled interactions between the two of them. I'm sure they'll be interacting within the context of the summit.

And on your second question, the President hasn't seen other leaders on the matter of Syria since he's been here other than Prime Minister Abe. So I think we had a good meeting with Prime Minister Abe. We're encouraged by Japan's position on Syria. We're going to continue to consult closely with them.

And we'll let you know -- clearly, the President will have interactions on the margins of the summit that touch on Syria, so we'll keep you updated on those going forward. But we're in the early stages here.

Peter.

Q Has the President been making personal phone calls to members of Congress on the Hill while he's here?

MR. RHODES: It's my understanding that -- I was asked this morning and I owe you guys a list. So he is going to be doing outreach on the Hill, and we'll email you guys those calls as we get them compiled.

Q A question about Japan. Did the President specifically talk about the military action? And, secondly, do you have a sense that you got support for military action from Japan?

MR. RHODES: The President did update Prime Minister Abe on the type of action that we're contemplating in Syria and the strength of our views that the Syrian regime must be held accountable. Again, we had I think a broad expression of support from the Prime Minister on what we're trying to do in terms of enforcing an international norm around chemical weapons.

Again, I want to let the Japanese government speak to its formal position on these matters, but our general sense was it was a positive meeting and the two leaders will be able to continue to consult closely on these matters going forward. So again, we felt like we had very positive signal from Japan on its commitment to upholding this international norm and to the notion that there's need to be international response. And I'll let them to speak to any more details associated with their position.

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. RHODES: Well, I think, as a general matter, we would like to see public expressions of support from countries that are invested in the international norm prohibiting the use of chemical weapons. So we would like to see on a political and diplomatic level countries insisting that the international norm against chemical weapons be upheld. We'd like to see an acknowledgement that, while the U.N. Security Council is the preferred course of action, that we cannot be paralyzed by the inaction of the Security Council either.

And so I think we'll be working over the course of the next two days on the margins of a summit that is dedicated to economic issues to enlist continued support politically, diplomatically from other countries.

Again, as I said earlier today, we would never expect to achieve full consensus among the countries here because Russia just takes a different position on the issue of Syria generally. But in terms, in particular, of our friends, our allies, our partners around the world, we believe it's important for people to raise their voices on behalf of international norms that countries around the world have signed onto for many years.

Q Just a question about the dinner tonight. Can you give any preview of what the President hopes to say about Syria? Putin said in his opening remarks that there would be some discussion over the dinner about Syria, and I'm wondering what the President plans to say and what kind of case he's going to make to the other world leaders.

MR. RHODES: So on Syria, what the President will be saying is the same case he's been making to the American people he'll be making here on the world stage when Syria comes up, which is, first of all, that the international norm against the use of chemical weapons is fundamental to global peace and security; that it's manifested in agreements like the Geneva Protocol and the Chemical Weapons Convention that express a prohibition on the use of chemical weapons; that in order for the prohibition of chemical weapons to mean something, there needs to be enforcement associated with that norm.

Secondly, I think he'll reiterate his very strong confidence that the responsible party for the use of chemical weapons was the Assad regime. We have as high confidence as we can have in terms of the U.S. intelligence community in the evidence that we have seen that points directly to the Assad regime as the responsible party. We also have sarin samples that confirm through physiological evidence that a chemical attack occurred, in addition to the overwhelming abundance of publicly available information that points to a chemical weapons attack.

And third, I think the President will speak to the notion that the United Nations has a critical role to play but that the United Nations Security Council has been paralyzed on this issue, so that we're not interested in simply drawing out a process at the U.N. that is not going to lead to a result. And given the inability to pass any resolution at the Security Council associated with Syria in recent years, including three vetoes and including the inability to even move forward on a resolution that just expressed condemnation generally about the use of chemical weapons, we believe that we can't use our preferences for the United Nations Security Council as a reason to not take action to enforce this international norm.

And then, lastly, I think the President will make the point that we are dealing with the issue of chemical weapons here. The military response that we are currently calling for with Congress is focused on degrading Assad's capabilities and deterring future use of chemical weapons. But at the same time, we've made clear that it's not intended to resolve all the issues in Syria because, frankly, we don't think there is a military solution.

So even as there may be differences with a country like Russia on the issue of how we respond to chemical weapons, ultimately we're going to have to reinvest in a political process through Geneva, which is the existing framework, to bring about an end to the Syrian civil war. And in our belief there's no way that a leader who has killed thousands of his people, including gassing many of them to death, will have legitimacy to lead on the other end of that process, which is why we think Assad needs to go.

So I think those are the core points the President has been making and I expect he'll make the same case here on the international stage.

Q Ben, just one question. Most of the allies -- there was a press conference this morning with the European Union and some other leaders in Europe -- are aligned with the U.S. in attacking and criticizing the use of chemical warfare. The difference is how to respond. And the general position that we gather from Europe, except from France, was why don't we try to get sanctions? Why don't we try to punish Syria in a different way and so without a military attack? So should that prevail as a line? And should Russia support a resolution with very strong sanctions would the U.S. consider not proceeding with a military attack?

MR. RHODES: We believe that the nature of this chemical weapons attack is such a flagrant violation of the international norm prohibiting the use of chemical weapons that it demands a strong response, and in this instance a military response -- albeit a limited military response.

This is the case we'll be making to our European allies. We have had political support from them for the notion that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable and demands a response. We've had expressions of support from a country like France, which has indicated an interest in potentially being a part of an operation.

But at the same time, when you talk about sanctions, I think the U.S. and the EU have basically thrown the book at the Assad regime in terms of sanctions. Early in the conflict we moved in a coordinated fashion to cut off Assad from the European and American economies. And I will say that the European efforts in that regard have had a significant impact on the revenues that the Assad regime is able to access.

In the past, the United Nations Security Council has failed on several occasions to pass a Chapter 7 resolution imposing any sanctions. So we simply do not foresee the U.N. Security Council acting any differently in this instance, given Russia's support for the Assad regime. And we do believe that the level of violation committed by Syria merits a response that imposes a deterrent military cost on the regime, because if there's a sense from Assad that he can use these weapons with impunity, that emboldens him to use chemical weapons, that emboldens future dictators and terrorist groups to use chemical weapons. It risks unraveling the prohibition against the use of chemical weapons, which could put citizens and parties in conflict in the future in far greater harm. And it's further destabilizing to a region in which the United States has a number of close allies and partners, such as Turkey, Jordan and Israel.

Q There is a report that Prime Minister Abe invited officially President Obama to visit Japan. So what is President Obama's response?

MR. RHODES: He did extend that invite, and what the President said -- he always likes to go to Japan. He's been there twice as President, obviously traveled before, so he would very much like to go to Japan and accept that invitation. It's just a matter of determining at what point in the future it makes sense to go forward with that visit. So it's just something that we'll have to work out.

Clearly this year, the President has a full schedule in Asia, so we'll look for opportunities in the future to be able to have the President return to Japan and accept that invitation.

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. RHODES: Until our schedule is done it's still an open question. I think the President's intention is to find a time to accept that invitation, though, and that's what he expressed to the Prime Minister.

I'll take one more on Japan and then -- yes.

Q About economic issue, there is a growing concern among the emerging market economies about the impact by a possible slowdown of U.S. monetary policy, and I think this issue is going to be discussed in the G20 meeting. So how will the USA respond to such a concern?

MR. RHODES: Well, I think that what we've seen is the U.S. took several steps including our central bank associated with monetary policy as we were seeking to rebound from a grave economic crisis. As we moved on to a firmer footing in terms of economic growth and job creation, you've seen adjustments made in those policies.

I'd just say a number of things. First of all, obviously the United States government -- the President doesn't set the policy of the Federal Reserve, so these are not decisions made by the President. Secondly, he believes that there are different things that each country can do here within the G20 framework to invest in economic growth. And what we've consistently said is even as we deal with long-term fiscal imbalances, countries can take different types of steps to promote investment or to provide their own investment in growth and job creation.

And so we'll discuss in the G20 session what types of steps can be taken not just in Europe and the United States, but in the emerging economies to promote growth. We've also said repeatedly that when you look at emerging economies, increasingly they will have to look within their own borders for demand. That's part of the rebalancing of global growth that we've discussed for four and a half years now, so that there's steps that can be taken so that emerging economies can find growth not just from consumers in the United States, but from within their borders.

The only last comment I'd make is as a veteran of these G20s, in the past, there was criticism of the U.S. position on issues like quantitative easing. I think that what has been demonstrated is we've pursued a pro-growth policy, and we believe that that ultimately is good for the global economy, because when the U.S. economy is growing it helps provide momentum more broadly. But, at the same time, we cannot be a substitute for demand that is generated in other countries.

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. RHODES: Well, look, I haven't done any vote counts. I think any assessment done at the beginning of this was that there was just a lot of undecided members who wanted to receive more information. We're very pleased with the trend lines. I think each day what you've seen is different members coming out on a bipartisan basis to support an authorization to use military force. You've seen a resolution reported out of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with strong bipartisan support, running the spectrum from a Senator McCain to a Senator Boxer. You've seen other important leaders in the House come out in support of an authorization.

So what we're seeing each day is an increasing number of members who are convinced that a military response is necessary. But we're going to continue to make the case to members. We understand the obligation that we have to provide them with information to explain our thinking, to explain the nature of the military action we're contemplating. We'll keep doing that, and we're confident that we'll get a resolution passed.

Just one more from Peter.

Q Has the President in his meetings in Sweden or today gotten feedback from counterparts about the step that he took to hold off on military action until taking this issue to Congress for authorization?

MR. RHODES: Not really. I mean, I think leaders of course are aware. As a general matter, they've expressed support for the President's efforts in terms of getting a resolution through Congress. But he hasn't had detailed discussions with them on our congressional process.

I think that the world looks to the United States to lead on these issues. And I think the President made an important point in his press conference yesterday, which is that oftentimes it's the United States that's looked to to do things when you have terrible circumstances like we've seen within Syria and by necessity, we have to be out front in terms of enforcement on international norms. And were the United States to not play that role, there would be a significant vacuum in the international community.

So one thing for Congress to consider is the message that this debate sends about U.S. leadership around the world -- that the U.S. for decades has played the role of undergirding the global security architecture and enforcing international norms. And we do not want to send a message that the United States is getting out of that business in any way.

So I think one of the reasons we're starting to see bipartisan support is that there's an understanding that this is about the situation in Syria and it's also about the leadership role that the United States plays in enforcing international norms. And I think you saw that yesterday with the Prime Minister of Sweden saying that he understood President Obama's need to react precisely because the obligations of the United States in these matters has always gone beyond the type of actions that other nations have taken. We want other nations to meet their responsibilities, too, though, and that responsibility is to stay invested in an international norm that has been constructed over many decades.

Thanks, everybody.

Q The Pope wrote a letter for peace and against an intervention in Syria. What is the response of the White House on this position?

MR. RHODES: I haven't seen that. I'd have to take a look. Clearly, we always welcome the views of the Catholic Church, which has a longstanding commitment to the promotion of peace. But I'd have to look at the letter itself.

Thanks.

Q Ben, can you take one more from the file? Can you tell us, has the Brazilian President notified the President or the White House that she is cancelling preparations for a visit to the U.S. over her outrage over the NSA surveillance?

MR. RHODES: I'm not aware of that. I know that they're seeing each other -- I think they're sitting next to each other, actually, at the G20 session, so I'm sure they'll have an opportunity to talk. I addressed this earlier today in terms of our commitment to work with them to understand their concerns around the NSA issue. That's what we'll continue to do. And we'll keep you updated on any interaction he has with President Rousseff.

END

6:15 P.M. MSK