

Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor For Strategic Communications, on the President's Trip to the United Nations General Assembly

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September 21, 2013

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

September 21, 2013

Via Conference Call

3:11 P.M. EDT

MR. RHODES: Hey, everybody. Just wanted to give you the overview of the President's trip up to New York next week, his fifth time up at the United Nations as President to the General Assembly. I'll just go through the schedule here and then make a couple more comments.

We'll leave on late Monday morning and get up to New York early Monday afternoon. The President's first meeting will be a bilateral meeting with President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria.

Nigeria is a very important partner of the United States in Africa on issues related to economic growth, security and democratic governance. We expect that the two leaders will discuss the upcoming preparations for Nigeria's elections; our new signature development initiative, Power Africa, and our potential cooperation with Nigeria on the initiative; Nigerian participation also in the President's Young African Leaders initiative; as well as our security cooperation as Nigeria contends with a northern insurgency and a terrorist threat from Boko Haram.

Following that bilateral meeting, the President will host an event for International Civil Society, and this is a unique event that will bring together a number of different heads of state, civil society organizations from around the world, multilateral organizations including the United Nations and the Community of Democracies, as well as private foundations. And the purpose of this event is to discuss how we can counter growing restrictions on civil society around the world, and how we can provide additional support for the work that civil society organizations do around the world.

This is part of a broader process that the President will be initiating that is focused on civil society and how we can promote favorable laws, build multilateral support for the work of civil society, find new ways to provide technical and financial and additional support to

civil society organizations -- again, not just on the U.S. effort, but in terms of the multilateral effort -- and how can we use organizations like, for instance, our Open Government Partnership and the Community of Democracies, as well as working with the United Nations to accomplish those goals.

So the President will give opening remarks, and then there will be a discussion. And this event will be open to the press.

Then the President will meet with our mission up at the USUN, joined by Secretary Kerry and Ambassador Power. And then that night, he and the First Lady will host their annual reception for visiting heads of state and delegations.

The next morning, on Tuesday, the President will address the U.N. General Assembly. His remarks will focus on the events in the Middle East and North Africa in particular. Given the complexity and breadth of challenges that we face in the region, the President will lay out an update of America's approach, how we see our interests, how we're going to be pursuing and prioritizing our policies going forward.

This will allow him to touch on the situation in Syria. He will reinforce the need for the international community to stand strongly against the use of chemical weapons, and continue to argue for a clear diplomatic process to put Assad's chemical weapons under international control and ultimately destroy them, including our support for a U.N. Security Council resolution that enforces consequences on the Assad regime should they fail to cooperate with the international community in that effort.

He'll also note that the chemical weapons issue is one part of a broader challenge in Syria, and that there needs to be a political resolution to the civil war that removes Assad from power and puts in place a new, inclusive government for all the Syrian people.

He will also discuss other challenges and opportunities in the region, including our ongoing pursuit of Middle East peace and the opportunity that is presented by the fact that the Israelis and Palestinians have made hard choices to come into direct negotiations on final status issues.

He will discuss the situation regarding Iran's nuclear program and the longstanding effort that we've had since he took office to ensure that Iran lives up to its international obligations; the sanctions that we have put in place over the last several years with broad multilateral cooperation to impose consequences on Iran for failing to meet those obligations; but also, our openness to diplomacy and the prospect for a peaceful resolution of this issue that allows Iran to rejoin the community of nations should they come in line with their international obligations and demonstrate that their nuclear program is peaceful.

He will also be able to speak more generally to the transition taking place in the region from North Africa, Libya and Egypt to Yemen, and the commitment of the United States to support democratic principles in the region.

Following his speech -- well, I'll first note -- off the President's schedule -- the First Lady midday will host a luncheon and deliver remarks at the Studio Museum in Harlem for spouses of the heads of state and delegations who are in New York. The Studio Museum is a leading institution devoted to artists of African descent. And in addition to the First Lady's remarks, there will also be performances by a variety of local student groups.

Back on the President's schedule, following his address to the U.N. General Assembly, he will have a bilat with the Lebanese President Suleiman. And this will give him an opportunity to discuss the extraordinary refugee challenge confronted by Lebanon as they've had to take onboard many hundreds of thousands of Syrians who've crossed the border. The U.S. has provided support for Lebanon in dealing with that challenge. And the two leaders will be able to discuss the refugee situation as well as the broader situation in Syria, and the other challenges in the region on which we cooperate closely with Lebanon. We'll also reinforce our support for a democratic process in Lebanon that is responsive to the aspirations of the Lebanese people.

Following that bilateral, the President will have his annual meeting with Ban Ki-moon, and then attend the luncheon hosted by Ban Ki-moon at the United Nations.

Following the luncheon, the President will have a bilateral meeting with President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority. This is the President's first opportunity to meet personally and at length with President Abbas since the launch of direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. So the President will have an opportunity to hear firsthand from President Abbas about the progress of those negotiations.

Of course, in several days, he'll also be able to host Prime Minister Netanyahu at the White House. So this is an important opportunity for him to reinforce the support of the United States for the progress that is underway towards Middle East peace, to welcome the courageous steps that have been taken by both leaders, while also reinforcing the need to continue to make progress given the opportunity that is presented through these negotiations.

Then, finally, the President will attend the Clinton Global Initiative. This will be an event that is focused on the implementation of health care reform and the Affordable Care Act. I will, of course, leave that to my colleagues, who are much more -- in a much better position to speak to that than I am. But President Obama will be joined by President Clinton at that event and have the opportunity to talk about the importance of implementing the Affordable Care Act going forward.

With that, I will be happy to take your questions. Operator, we can move to questions then.

Q Thank you very much. Thank you. (Inaudible) said today that Iran is on course to develop a nuclear bomb within six months, and that time is running out for further negotiations. I'm just wondering what's the administration's response to the Israeli government's assertion that Rouhani's overtures are meant to buy time, that it's pure deception when he says he'll never develop nuclear weapons. And further beyond that,

what if any message will the President have at this U.N. speech to reassure Israel that all options are on the table, including the military one, as he said before? Will he state that outright?

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, as relates to President Rouhani and the Iranian government, we've always made clear that we're going to make judgments based on the actions of the Iranian government, not simply their words. We have, over the course of the last four years, built up an unprecedented sanctions regime precisely because the Iranian government has not been able to come in line with its international obligations through the actions that they take.

We've also made clear, though, that we have a preference for resolving this issue diplomatically and that we're open to engagement with the Iranian government. So as it relates to the specific question of time, we've always made clear that there's not an open-ended window for diplomacy, that we need to be moving forward with a sense of urgency. We do believe, though, that there is time and space, that Iran has not taken steps, for instance, to break out and weaponize its nuclear program. So even as we move with a sense of urgency here, we do believe that there's time and space to pursue diplomacy.

I think the bottom line is the President has also made clear that a nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable to the United States. He has repeatedly made clear that all options are on the table to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. But again, we want to make sure that we are testing every opportunity to resolve this issue diplomatically. We've put in place the pressure that is necessary to incentivize Iran to pursue a diplomatic course. We believe that part of their current focus on pursuing diplomacy is clearly related to a desire to address the sanctions regime that they're under. Again, in order to do that, they'll need to take action.

So we're going to have an opportunity to discuss this at the U.N. General Assembly, in the President's speech, in his meetings, and again, our position will be the same as it's been the last several years, which is we've built a regime of pressure that is designed to incentivize the Iranian government to make a different decision and to pursue actions that build the confidence of the international community that their program is peaceful. If they do that, they can have a different relationship with the United States and the international community. If they don't, they'll continue to face increasing pressure.

We'll take the next question.

Q Thank you very much. Just to follow up, on the timeline, the Israelis have also said today that there's a plutonium program that can be geared up much more quickly. And would the President welcome the opportunity to actually meet Rouhani in some context, either formally or along the margins of the meetings in New York? Would that be one way -- face to face -- to test his seriousness? Thank you.

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, on the timeline, again, we coordinate very closely with the Israeli government in terms of our monitoring of the Iranian nuclear program. So we have, through our security dialogue, through contacts from the head-of-state level on

down, I think very regular exchanges with them. We share, again, a set of concerns about the Iranian program. At the same time, it's our assessment that there is time to pursue a diplomatic outcome, particularly given the pressure that we've put in place.

So again, we certainly recognize and appreciate Israel's significant concerns about Iran given, again, the threats that have been made against Israel and the outrageous comments that have come out of Iran for many years about Israel. We have our own concerns as well. Part of it is Israel's security, but part of it is the threat to the nuclear nonproliferation regime, the risk of an arms race in the region. So there are manifold reasons for the United States to have made this a priority that it is.

But again, I think given Israel's relationship with the United States and given our shared interests in preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, we'll continue to closely cooperate on our assessment. Again, ours is that there remains time to pursue a diplomatic path.

With respect to President Rouhani, the President has already indicated that he exchanged letters with President Rouhani. He indicated in his letter, again, an openness to pursue a diplomatic path, but the need for Iran to take concrete actions that demonstrate that they're going to meet their international obligations. We don't have any meetings scheduled with the President and President Rouhani at the U.N. General Assembly. As a general matter, we've consistently made clear that we're open to bilateral discussions with the Iranians at a range of levels. Frankly, that's a position that the President has taken since he ran for this office in 2007. But there's not anything currently planned.

I think one point I'd make, though, is that the issues between the United States and Iran are not ones that would be settled in any one discussion, and there's longstanding differences, particularly related to the nuclear program. We're willing to address those diplomatically, including through a bilateral discussion, but we also very strongly believe that the forum for resolving this issue includes the P5-plus-1, given the international unity we've built with Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France and Germany on this issue. So even as we've communicated an openness to dialogue with the Iranians, we have made the P5-plus-1 a forum for these discussions with the Iranians, and we expect we'll continue to have those discussions going forward.

Q And if I could just follow up, as you've pointed out, since the President's first inaugural, he's open to meeting without preconditions. So since you've said you wanted to test the seriousness -- for instance, the release of prisoners, would that not be enough of a signal to warrant even an informal meeting at that level?

MR. RHODES: Well, look, we are certainly open to bilateral discussions. The President has indicated, as you readily note, back to 2007, that he'll meet with his counterparts without preconditions if he feels like there's an opportunity to make progress.

The fact of the matter is we don't have a meeting scheduled with President Rouhani. But again, we're always open to diplomacy if we believe it can advance our objectives. And in this instance, our objective is an Iran that meets its international obligations.

So we'll continue to test what the best means of engaging the Iranian government is. Again, the one thing we would insist is that the nuclear issue continue to be addressed through the P5-plus-1. I'd note that there have been some positive developments in terms of the release of prisoners -- some of the comments made by President Rouhani. But those are clearly not sufficient to meet the concerns of the international community with regard to their nuclear program. So we're going to have to continue to insist upon actions that follow through on I think some of the more constructive statements that have been made out of Iran.

Q Thanks, Ben. One issue, the op-ed from President Rouhani -- many things were said in it and I wonder if you have a general characterization of it. My curiosity was sort of lifted by the phrase in it, "The world has changed. International politics is no longer a zero-sum game, but a multi-dimensional arena where cooperation and competition often occur simultaneously. Gone is the age of blood feuds. World leaders are expected to lead in turning threats into opportunities." That caught my eye. I wonder if anything caught the administration's eye, and if there's any reaction to that.

And following along Andrea, I know there's nothing between the Presidents, but that General Assembly is an opportune moment to have other lower-level conversations that might lead to something more substantive, or perhaps this week has been an opportunity for those lower-level conversations. I just want to get on the record whether or not those have occurred or they're anticipated in New York?

MR. RHODES: Well, Major, on the op-ed, I guess I'd say that it certainly reflects a new tone from Iran in terms of some of President Rouhani's statements. That's not surprising in some respects because he was elected expressly on a platform of moderating Iranian foreign policy with respect to the West and the United States and pursuing diplomacy with respect to the nuclear program with the goal in part for Iran of achieving sanctions relief.

Now, I think an important context for that is that Iran has been incentivized over the course of the last four years to pursue exactly that course because their course of intransigence only brought greater sanctions and pressure on them.

So we extended a hand in 2009. We pursued a diplomatic course. They were unwilling to follow through on their commitments. And what's followed is a steady increase in pressure on their petroleum sector, on their banking sector, cutting them off increasingly from the global economy, that has led to every leading economic indicator in Iran I think going downward and the economy grinding to a halt.

That's the context of President Rouhani's election. And again, he was elected on the platform of moderation, and I think his words reflect that.

President Obama has said since before he was elected that he is willing to address these differences with Iran diplomatically, that we have a long history of mistrust between our nations, but that should not stop us from being able to pursue a peaceful resolution of our differences that (inaudible) outcome.

And we've always framed the nuclear issue on the basis that the ability of the Iranian people to have some access to peaceful nuclear energy is something that should be available to them provided that they can meet the obligations that they have to the international community to cooperate with nonproliferation requirements and to come into compliance with the U.N. Security Council resolution.

So there should be a basis for discussion there, but we've also made clear that until Iran takes a different path through its actions we're going to keep these sanctions in place.

In terms of context, look, we've had ongoing discussions with the Iranians through the P5-plus-1. We've had an ability to exchange messages with Iran also on a bilateral basis at relevant moments in time. The President has communicated -- he indicated with President Rouhani directly through an exchange of letters. And we're open to continuing to build on those contacts.

And I can't predict every interaction that might take place at different levels at the U.N. It's possible that there could be some interaction at different levels, but there's just simply none planned at this moment that falls in line with the type of formal meetings that the State Department and the White House are pursuing heading up to the U.N. General Assembly. But I think that the tone we're setting is one of openness to engagement with Iran, but insistence that their words have to be followed by actions.

And I'd just also underscore that even as we understand the importance of the differences that we have bilaterally with Iran, the reason the P5-plus-1 is so important is it sends a signal that the international community is united in insisting that Iran meet its obligations. And that's why the center of gravity as it relates to a lot of our efforts to address a nuclear issue are going to continue to be through the P5-plus-1.

We'll take the next question.

Q You mentioned that the President, in his speech, was going to talk about Syria and the need for strong action through the Security Council to make sure that it's a binding commitment from Syria. Do you think that the framework arrangement that was reached between Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov can continue through an OPCW inspection process and monitoring of the weapons without a Security Council resolution that fits those parameters of a binding commitment?

MR. RHODES: Our belief is that there should be a U.N. Security Council resolution and that that is necessary to ensure that there's a verifiable process and that there are consequences that are enforced upon the Assad regime should they fail to comply.

Now, the Geneva agreement does provide we think a very strong framework for that type of process. In fact, already, reportedly, Syria has come forward with the first indication of its chemical weapons stockpiles to the OPCW. That is a process that will play out at the OPCW, but it's consistent with the timelines that were set in Geneva.

But if you look at that framework agreement, the United States and Russia both determined that it was in the interest of achieving our objectives to pursue a U.N. Security Council resolution and to do so through Chapter 7. And so it's going to continue to be the position of the United States that in order to have a credible process where the actions of the Assad regime can be monitored, can be verified, and that there can be consequences for their non-compliance, we want to have a U.N. Security Council resolution.

So the Permanent Five members of the Security Council met on this today. I think there will continue to be meetings going through the week. And our desire is to see a Security Council resolution that provides a framework over that work that the OPCW will be doing.

If that can be accomplished and if we start to see Syrian chemical weapons moved under international control, ultimately destroyed, we believe that would be a significant positive outcome. Given the fact that a month ago we were determining how to deter the future use of chemical weapons potentially through a military strike, now we're talking about not just deterring their use through this process, but destroying them, I think this demonstrates how diplomacy backed by a credible threat of force can achieve an important objective of not just deterring chemical weapons use, but destroying chemical weapon stockpiles, and reinforcing the international prohibition against chemical weapons, which is precisely the type of action that the U.N. Security Council was created to support.

Q Hi, Ben. Thanks for doing this. And mine is a follow-up related to Karen. And that is, if we turn it around on Syria, how soon do you think there has to be a U.N. Security Council resolution for this whole framework that was set up at Geneva to remain credible and have sort of the weight of the international community behind it? And how can you explain that when they left Geneva there was this either vagueness or really difference of view on this whole question of enforcement and what this resolution should say, and what it meant to refer to Chapter 7?

MR. RHODES: Thanks, Margaret. Well, I think we believe there needs to a sense of urgency for a number of reasons -- most importantly, because the challenge is significant in terms of chemical weapons within Syria and we want to be moving as quickly as we can to get those weapons under international control and to destroy them.

The OPCW and the Geneva framework agreement have pretty aggressive timelines that are ambitious in terms of achieving the technical objectives of inventorying these stockpiles, taking custody of them and destroying them. So in order to ensure that these ambitious timelines are met and that the objective is completed, we think a U.N. Security Council resolution is necessary to provide that credible investment of the legitimacy of the international community in the process, but also to have a mechanism for enforcement and a verifiable process that the United States and the international community can have confidence in.

Beyond the question of the differences, I think what was clear coming out of Geneva is that the Assad regime had to undertake a process that was verifiable and transparent to the international community and, frankly, that there had to be consequences.

Now, we made clear in the document in Geneva that we'd be pursuing a U.N. Security Council resolution and that it would be under Chapter 7. I think the Russian Foreign Minister indicated their long-held position that they don't support the use of force as a part of that. That's not surprising; that's always been the Russian position. Our position is that Chapter 7 is necessary so that there are consequences, and so that there's enforcement for noncompliance by the Assad regime.

Chapter 7 allows for a broad range of consequences for the Security Council to debate and determine. We would argue for the strongest possible enforcement, and that's our position. And so right now, we're going to be in a process of negotiation and discussion with the Russians in New York around this text. But we believe that a Chapter 7 resolution is appropriate and our position is going to be one of seeking the strongest possible enforcement within the context of Chapter 7, given that Chapter 7 allows for a range of responses to be debated by the Council.

We're also joined in that position, by the way, by the United Kingdom and France, who have worked with us on the text of the resolution. So the unity of the United States and our allies I think is an important point here, as is the very strong finding by the U.N. inspection team that chemical weapons were used, and frankly, the fact that everything they reported completely corroborates with our assessment of rockets being fired by the regime into these opposition neighborhoods.

So in terms of timelines, given the urgency, what we've said is this is the type of thing that needs to be completed in weeks, not months. We don't want to set a hard deadline on this, but they will be working it through the week in New York and we'd like to see a resolution as soon as possible.

Q Hi, thanks very much. Just relating to this initial declaration that Syria has submitted, is this the complete accounting that Secretary Kerry was asking for when they signed a deal last week? Has the White House or anyone else had a chance to assess what they've submitted? And in your view, does it meet -- well, I know you're not calling it a deadline, it's a timeline -- but meet Syria's obligations under the timeline?

And if I can, just a follow to The Washington Post and others' questions about that resolution -- what specific penalties are you talking about short of military action that we know Russia opposes in any Chapter 7 resolution to enforce the agreement?

MR. RHODES: Well, first of all, the declaration from the Syrian government goes to the OPCW. It does not come directly to us. So we have not reviewed it, certainly not that I'm aware of. That's a process that will have to be done by the OPCW.

In terms of our expectations, first of all, it is a positive step that this has come to the OPCW in the timeframe that was set in Geneva. Our assessment we've made very clear in terms of where we believe the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile is. So at the appropriate point, we should have an ability to determine how much the Syrian declaration from the Assad regime matches with the assessment that the United States and Russia agreed to in Geneva. So that process will take place I presume in discussion with the OPCW.

In terms of enforcement, first of all, I'd just note that we believe that, with the threat of U.S. military force that got us to where we are today in terms of the Assad regime not just acknowledging its chemical weapons but being willing to give them up, that threat remains. The President made very clear that in terms of the potential for U.S. action, that remains on the table, particularly as we seek to deter the use of chemical weapons.

With respect to the resolution, this will be a process of negotiation with the Russians. Now, they have made clear their opposition to the use of force. I think what Chapter 7 provides for is a baseline that there needs to be consequences for noncompliance, and then an opportunity for the Council to debate a range of potential sanctions that run the spectrum, with military action obviously being the most significant. And that's what we'll be debating in the drafting of the resolution and through the implementation of the Chapter 7.

So again, we would want to see the strongest enforcement possible. There's a range of consequences that are available to the Security Council in enforcing a Chapter 7 resolution. And again even as we are pursuing that course of action through the U.N., we've made clear that given our concerns about chemical weapons, we are not forsaking the option of the United States and our allies taking military action in support of the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons.

Q Hi, thank you for doing this. Do you think there will be any meeting between the President and the new Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif -- for this is the first opportunity for them to meet after the elections? And how do you see the new Pakistani government moving forward on the peace process with Afghanistan?

MR. RHODES: Well, I think there's not a formal bilateral meeting scheduled at the United Nations, but it's certainly possible that they'll be able to see each other. We do expect that we'd like to have a formal meeting with the Prime Minister of Pakistan in the near future, so it's a matter of making sure that we can find an appropriate time for both leaders to come together.

I think the President and the Prime Minister have had a good set of discussions on the phone. And I think our impression is that the Sharif government wants to find a basis to rebuild a stronger U.S.-Pakistan relationship that -- they're going to be very clear about what their interests are and when they have differences on some issues, but that we both still believe that our nations benefit when we can find ways to work together on issues related to counterterrorism, on issues related to economic growth and development inside of Pakistan, but also on regional stability.

And so on your question with respect to Afghanistan, as we look towards the end of our war in Afghanistan in 2014, we've made clear that one of the pillars of our strategy is regional stability. So even as we are strengthening the Afghan government and security forces and even as we are supporting an Afghan-led peace process between the government and those elements of the Taliban that will pursue their goals peacefully, we

also want to make sure that Pakistan is part of the picture and part of the solution in terms of regional peace and security and stability, particularly given how many groups have operated across that border.

So we want to ensure that we're enlisting Pakistan as a partner. But we also want to help ensure that Pakistan and Afghanistan are finding ways to bridge their mistrust and to build deeper cooperation. Because we believe that strong and positive relationships between Pakistan and Afghanistan serve the interests of both countries and the United States as well.

So I think that will be the tone of the discussions, as to how can we find ways for the (inaudible) of our countries to cooperate, and how can we find ways, even as we have differences on some issues between the U.S. and Pakistan, to make sure that the trajectory of the relationship is a positive one.

And the Sharif government I think provides that opportunity, and I think that will be represented in meetings that Secretary Kerry has up there in New York and also the future discussions and meetings that the President will be able to have with his Pakistani counterpart.

Q I just wanted to ask, in the President's remarks either on Tuesday or in bilats and pull-asides, how is he going to address some of the lingering concerns from Brazil but also other nations about the NSA revelations and U.S. spying? And how will he seek to convince allies that they can count on the U.S., in spite of some of the concerns that have been voiced, like, okay, it's working out okay now, but he said he was going to do this and then he was going to do that and he was going to do this -- like, will he try to assure folks that he's on a steady course when it comes to Middle East policy or Asia policy, that he can't be too easily swayed by Putin or the actions of some leader of a hostile nation? Thanks.

MR. RHODES: Thanks, Margaret. So on the -- well, I'll take those in order. On the NSA, I think this is an ongoing issue that we'll have to address going forward with a host of countries. I think our basic point is the United States government collects intelligence just like just about every other country in the world. So the notion that we are unique in terms of intelligence collection in other countries is just not true. And intelligence has an important role to play not just in our own security, but, frankly, in the security of our allies and partners. We share a lot of intelligence to help disrupt terrorist plots, to help deal with issues like weapons of mass destruction.

What is also true, though, is that the United States has extraordinary capabilities, and those capabilities have grown exponentially as technology has gotten more sophisticated. And that allows us to collect a lot more data. And what the President has said is that we're going to be reviewing our intelligence capabilities to ensure that we're focused on threats, that we are, again, bringing those capabilities to bear to deal with things like terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, security challenges in different parts of the world, and that these are not tools that are intended to target, single out friends of the United States.

That's something that he was able to discuss with President Rousseff of Brazil and President Peña Nieto. And again, I think now that both inside the government and in terms of some outside experts, we're in that process of review. We'll be making determinations about how we can ensure that we are putting appropriate safeguards on our actions and we are appropriately focusing our efforts, even as I think we will always defend the notion that the United States should have a very robust intelligence community.

And so those are discussions he's had with leaders in his recent travels. I'm sure that if the issue comes up in New York, that he'll have comments along those lines.

With respect to your second question, first of all, I think what's very clear is it was the President's threat of force that has changed the equation inside of Syria. And so there's been a lot of attention on the fact that we ended up pursuing this diplomatic path, but the position of the United States has not changed. The position of the Russian Federation and the Assad regime changed. A month ago, the Assad regime didn't acknowledge that they had any chemical weapons, and a month ago, the Russian government had not put a proposal on the table that's anywhere near as ambitious as the one that we're seeking to implement now.

I think it was that threat of force from President Obama that changed the calculus around the chemical weapons issue and that allowed for this diplomatic progress. I think that when it comes to the commitment of the United States around the world, people know that this President does what he says in matters of war and peacemaking.

So we've taken military action when necessary against terrorist targets, to take out Osama bin Laden, to degrade terrorist networks in different parts of the world. We've also brought troops home in terms of keeping our commitments to remove our troops from Iraq and to wind down the war in Afghanistan. So President Obama has a strong track record, built up over four and a half years, of doing exactly what he says.

Iran is actually another example of that, in that he said we'd be open to diplomacy, we'd pursue engagement, but that there would be pressure if Iran failed to take that opportunity. And what we've done is steadily, I think, exceed expectations in terms of the sanctions that we did put in place, that weren't just unilateral but that got other countries onboard to stop purchasing Iranian oil. And that's ultimately what had the impact on Iran.

So I think when it comes to our commitments in the Middle East, or you mentioned Asia, where we have launched treaty alliances and are rebalancing and refocusing our foreign policy in some respects, I think people understand that not only does the United States follow through on its commitments, but President Obama has a track record of doing so. And I would actually argue that the recent situation in Syria only underscores that it's that credibility that made a military threat real and that opened the door for this diplomacy.

So with that, I think it covers most of the issues we're preparing for. We'll have opportunities to be in touch with you through the next several days. If there are any scheduling changes, we'll let you know about that. We'll make sure that we have the ability to read out the President's discussions in New York and look forward to seeing some of you up there.

So thanks very much, everybody.