

Remarks on United States Foreign Policy
July 16, 2014

Good afternoon, everybody. I want to briefly discuss the important actions we're taking today in support of Ukraine. Before I do, I want to take a few minutes to update the American people on some pressing foreign policy challenges that I reviewed with Secretary Kerry this afternoon.

First of all, I thanked Secretary Kerry and our outstanding civilian and military leaders in Afghanistan for their success in helping to break the impasse over the Presidential election there. Thanks to their efforts and, of course, thanks to the Afghans and the courage of the two candidates, both of whom I spoke to last week, the candidates have agreed to abide by the results of a comprehensive and internationally supervised audit that will review all the ballots, and to form a unity Government. If they keep their commitments, Afghanistan will witness the first democratic transfer of power in the history of that nation.

This progress will honor both candidates, who have put the interests of a united Afghanistan first, the millions of Afghans who defied threats in order to vote, and the service of our troops and civilians who have sacrificed so much. This progress reminds us that even as our combat mission in Afghanistan ends this year, America's commitment to a sovereign, united, and democratic Afghanistan will endure, along with our determination that Americans are never again threatened by terrorists inside of Afghanistan.

Second, John updated me on the negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program. Over the last 6 months, Iran has met its commitments under the interim deal we reached last year: halting the progress of its nuclear program, allowing more inspections, and rolling back its most dangerous stockpile of nuclear material. Meanwhile, we are working with our P-5-plus-1 partners and Iran to reach a comprehensive agreement that assures us that Iran's program will in fact be peaceful and that they won't obtain a nuclear weapon.

Based on consultations with Secretary Kerry and my national security team, it's clear to me that we have made real progress in several areas and that we have a credible way forward. But as we approach a deadline of July 20 under the interim deal, there are still some significant gaps between the international community and Iran, and we have more work to do. So over the next few days, we'll continue consulting with Congress, and our team will continue discussions with Iran and our partners as we determine whether additional time is necessary to extend our negotiations.

Third, we continue to support diplomatic efforts to end the violence between Israel and Hamas. As I've said repeatedly, Israel has a right to defend itself from rocket attacks that terrorize the Israeli people. There is no country on Earth that can be expected to live under a daily barrage of rockets. And I'm proud that the Iron Dome system that Americans helped Israel develop and fund has saved many Israeli lives.

But over the past 2 weeks, we've all been heartbroken by the violence, especially the death and injury of so many innocent civilians in Gaza: men, women, and children who were caught in the crossfire. That's why we have been working with our partners in the region to pursue a cease-fire: to protect civilians on both sides. Now, yesterday Israel did agree to a cease-fire. Unfortunately, Hamas continued to fire rockets at civilians, thereby prolonging the conflict.

But the Israeli people and the Palestinian people don't want to live like this. They deserve to live in peace and security, free from fear. And that's why we are going to continue to encourage diplomatic efforts to restore the cease-fire, and we support Egypt's continued efforts to bring this about. Over the next 24 hours, we'll continue to stay in close contact with our friends and parties in the region, and we will use all of our diplomatic resources and relationships to support efforts of closing a deal on a cease-fire. In the meantime, we're going to continue to stress the need to protect civilians—in Gaza and in Israel—and to avoid further escalation.

Finally, given its continued provocations in Ukraine, today I have approved a new set of sanctions on some of Russia's largest companies and financial institutions. Along with our allies, with whom I've been coordinating closely the last several days and weeks, I've repeatedly made it clear that Russia must halt the flow of weapons and fighters across the border into Ukraine; that Russia must urge separatists to release their hostages and support a cease-fire; that Russia needs to pursue internationally mediated talks and agree to meaningful monitors on the border. I've made this clear directly to Mr. Putin. Many of our European partners have made this clear directly to Mr. Putin. We have emphasized our preference to resolve this issue diplomatically, but that we have to see concrete actions and not just words that Russia, in fact, is committed to trying to end this conflict along the Russia-Ukraine border. So far, Russia has failed to take any of the steps that I mentioned. In fact, Russia's support for the separatists and violations of Ukraine's sovereignty has continued.

On top of the sanctions we have already imposed, we are therefore designating selected sectors of the Russian economy as eligible for sanctions. We are freezing the assets of several Russian defense companies. And we are blocking new financing of some of Russia's most important banks and energy companies. These sanctions are significant, but they are also targeted, designed to have the maximum impact on Russia while limiting any spillover effects on American companies or those of our allies.

Now, we are taking these actions in close consultation with our European allies, who are meeting in Brussels to agree on their next steps. And what we are expecting is that the Russian leadership will see, once again, that its actions in Ukraine have consequences, including a weakening Russian economy and increasing diplomatic isolation.

Now, meanwhile, we're going to continue to stand with the Ukrainian people as they seek to determine their own future. Even in the midst of this crisis, they have made remarkable progress these past few months. They held democratic elections, they elected a new President, they're pursuing important reforms, and they signed a new association agreement with the European Union. And the United States will continue to offer our strong support to Ukraine to help stabilize its economy and defend its territorial integrity, because like any people, Ukrainians deserve the right to forge their own destiny.

So in closing, I'll point out the obvious. We live in a complex world and at a challenging time. And none of these challenges lend themselves to quick or easy solutions, but all of them require American leadership. And as Commander in Chief, I'm confident that if we stay patient and determined, that we will in fact meet these challenges.

Thanks very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:44 p.m. in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Afghan Presidential candidates Abdullah Abdullah

and Ashraf Ahmadzai Ghani; President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia; and President Petro Poroshenko of Ukraine.

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