

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks Following a Meeting With Prime Minister Justin P.J. Trudeau of Canada and an Exchange With Reporters in Manila, Philippines

November 19, 2015

President Obama. It is a great pleasure to have our first formal sit-down between myself and Prime Minister Trudeau. Obviously, there are no closer friends that we have than the Canadians. And we share values, we share culture. The ties between our people are extraordinary. We are NATO allies, and across the board, our interests align.

And I think we've seen the incredible excitement that Justin generated during his campaign in Canada. We're confident that he's going to be able to provide a great boost of energy and reform to the Canadian political landscape. And we're looking forward very much to working with him.

We had a chance to talk about security issues. Obviously, uppermost on our minds right now is the situation with ISIL and Syria, and we had excellent conversations about how our defense teams can coordinate and work not only on military operations there, but also how do we work on being able to stabilize the situation in Syria. I gave him an update on the diplomatic efforts.

And we discussed counterterrorism: Given the long, shared border that we have, how do we make sure that we are exchanging information about potential threats while, at the same time, preserving the civil liberties that both our peoples care so deeply about?

We also had a chance to talk about the economy and issues of the border, the amount of trade and commerce that takes place back and forth, and how we can continue to build on some of the good work that we've done. We are both soon-to-be signatories to the TPP agreement, and that's another area where we can continue to have important discussions. I know Justin has to review what's happened, but we think that after that process has taken place that Canada, the United States, and the other countries that are here can establish the kind of high-standards agreement that protects labor, protects the environment, protects the kind of high-value-added goods and services that we both excel at.

And finally, we talked about the Paris conference that's going to be coming up on climate change. And obviously, as—both of us are major energy producers, and we are glad that we are able to generate traditional fuels, but we also recognize that it's important for us to transition to cleaner fuels in order to secure the future of our children and our grandchildren. And I think Prime Minister Trudeau is very much committed to a successful Paris conference, and our teams have already coordinated on that. So I look forward to seeing a significant success, and I'm glad that we've got such a strong partner in Canada on that process.

Finally, we're going to have Justin down to the White House, hopefully, so we can have a more extensive, expanded bilateral. And I'm sure Michelle is going to want a visit with Canada's new First Lady. So we are going to be looking for a date for that to happen, but I'm confident that it will happen early in the year.

So overall, not unexpected that it was a wonderful meeting, but we very much look forward to our collaborations and wish the new Government of Canada the very best of luck.

[At this point, Prime Minister Trudeau spoke in French, and no translation was provided. He then spoke in English as follows.]

Prime Minister Trudeau. It's a tremendous pleasure to be here for the first official sit-down, hopefully of many, with President Obama. We covered a wide range of topics, as is befitting the strong friendship between our two countries.

We talked about terrorism and security issues off the top and how Canada is committed to continuing to engage as a strong member of the coalition against ISIL in ways that will continue to support international efforts, including through military engagement around training, to ensure that Canada continues to be a strong player, doing its part—and more than its part—to defend against ISIL.

We also talked a lot about economic issues, border issues, trade, the need for continued collaboration not just between the two of us, but at all levels of our governments to ensure that the relationship is as smooth and effective as possible. As you all know, I got elected on principles of cooperation, collaboration, respectful dialogue, and that's very much what we've established here today.

I look forward to going down to visit President Obama at the White House. I certainly know that my wife Sophie is going to be very excited to hear about Michelle's garden—[laughter]—because she has started a vegetable garden as well in our backyard. And it's going to be a wonderful time of strengthening ties between our two countries both on the economic, on the security, on the engagement with the world, and on the personal level.

President Obama. Excellent. We've still got time for a couple questions. Mike Memoli, L.A. Times.

President Obama's Advice to Prime Minister Trudeau/Syria/U.S. Policy on Syrian Refugees/Closure of Naval Station Guantanamo Bay Detention Facilities

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. You've long insisted that Assad go ahead of any political transition in Syria, but I'm wondering, given the urgency on the fight against ISIL, if you could be more specific about what specifically—what you'd be willing—what the U.S. would be willing to accept in terms of any role for Assad. And specifically, I'm wondering, could the U.S. accept any scenario in which Assad stays in power for the elections, as the Russians are insisting?

And I also wanted to ask if you could follow up on your question—your comments yesterday on the refugee crisis. There are Republicans in Congress who are now linking it to Guantanamo and your pledge to end the detention there, saying now is not the time to transfer any detainees either outside or to U.S. soil. I'm wondering if you care to respond to that. And if you could give us a timeline in terms of closing that.

And to the Prime Minister, congratulations. I'm wondering, you campaigned on a pledge to end the Canadian air campaign against ISIL and insisted that you were going to follow through on that pledge even as you ramp up your ground training efforts. Has the President asked you to reconsider that pledge? And I also was interested in asking, given what the President noted about the excitement surrounding your campaign—we've noted in the press who cover these summits—it's reminiscent, many have pointed out, of what the President encountered during his early time in office. And have you sought his advice about how to manage expectations and to reconcile the promises you made and the realities of governance?

President Obama. You know, I'm actually going to horn in on that last question.
[*Laughter*]

Prime Minister Trudeau. He's been very vocal and helpful.

President Obama. The first call I made to him, I said: Justin, congratulations. You and your family look great. I know Canadians are incredibly inspired by your message of hope and change. I just want to point out that I had no gray hair when I was in your shoes 7 years ago. And so if you don't want to gray like me, you need to start dying it soon—[*laughter*]—because it gets too late——

Prime Minister Trudeau. So young and yet so cynical. [*Laughter*]

President Obama. Yes, yes. So that was my main advice.

But with respect to the situation in Syria, let me just make a couple of remarks. Number one, we have always had a sense of urgency about the need to defeat ISIL. And the 65-country coalition, including Canada, that we organized has put consistent, steady pressure on the organization. But what I've also said is that it's going to be a multiyear task and that we're not going to be able to fully succeed in eliminating their safe havens until we have a political settlement of some sort in Syria.

It is also my view that it is not going to be sufficient for us to have formal political processes that lead to Asad still being in power. And the reason is not simply because of my opinion of him, it's because it is unimaginable that you can stop the civil war there when the overwhelming majority of people in Syria consider him to be a brutal murderous dictator. He cannot regain legitimacy. And if in fact he is still in power, then regardless of what outside powers do, there are still going to be large portions of the population that are fighting.

So the goal of Vienna is to find a process that initially identifies what are opposition groups that could be part of an inclusive future government that finds a structure for how a political transition, including potential constitutional changes within Syria, could be made: planning for elections, figuring out who's voting, how is that managed. That's where we are now. And then, being able to initiate a cease-fire that may not be observed by everyone, but at least would create some pockets of calm that could, hopefully, grow over time.

But I also believe that in order for this to be successful, at some point, the Russians and the Iranians are going to have to make a fundamental decision: Do they actually believe that they can prop up Asad and win on the ground militarily inside of Syria against all the opposition, or do they actually think that it is better to save the Syrian state and work with the international community and the U.N. to find a government that truly can be legitimate?

That is what is going to allow us to refocus our energies on ISIL as a unified world whereby—because it's not as if Iran or Russia see ISIL as a—as not being a serious threat. They recognize that it's a threat. The problem is, is that the strategy that they're pursuing right now doesn't allow them to focus attention there. That's why most of the Russian strikes at this point have not been directed at ISIL, they've been directed at propping up the Asad regime. So there's—they will have to make a fundamental shift, I believe, in policy.

What we are doing with our coalition members is recognizing that it is—may take some months for the Russians and the Iranians and, frankly, some of the members of the Syrian Government and ruling elites within the regime to recognize the truth that I just articulated. And if we can create habits of all the parties talking—talk about process, talk about structure, talk about how elections would be run, what would be the constitutional provisions—then that

may create the space in which that pivot in the minds of the Russians and the Iranians and the Syrian people can be made. That's our effort; that's our goal.

But the bottom line is, I do not foresee a situation in which we can end the civil war in Syria while Assad remains in power. And by the way, that's not a matter of my decisionmaking. Even if I said that was okay, I still don't think it would actually work. You could not get the Syrian people, the majority of them, to agree to that kind of outcome. And you couldn't get a number of their neighbors to agree to that outcome as well.

Last thing to say was on the issue of refugees, the issues of Guantanamo. I think I've been very clear about my position on refugees. The fact is that America has always been open to allowing people from war-torn countries, who are subject to incredible hardship and repression and violence, to find refuge in our country. And ultimately, they have become part of the fabric of American life. The refugees from Syria are no different in that regard. The overwhelming numbers who have been applying are children, women, families, themselves victims of terrorism.

We already have in place the most vigorous vetting process that we have for anybody who is admitted. And in fact, if you look at how our process currently works, with the involvement of the National Counterterrorism Center, the FBI, the Defense Department, our intelligence organizations, we subject them to a process that takes anywhere from 18 to 24 months before they are admitted. And the idea that somehow they pose a more significant threat than all the tourists who pour into the United States every single day just doesn't jibe with reality. That's not what our law enforcement thinks. That's not what anybody who's looked at this problem thinks. They are already under much more scrutiny.

And so my expectation is, after the initial spasm of rhetoric, that people will settle down, take a look at the facts, and we'll be able to proceed.

With respect to Guantanamo, in the same way that the rhetoric around refugees, suggesting that we should only allow Christians in or suggesting that we should bar every Syrian applicant even if they are underage, in the same way that that alienates Muslim Americans who are our fellow citizens, our friends and our neighbors and our coworkers, as well as the entire world of 1.6 billion Muslims, Guantanamo has been an enormous recruitment tool for organizations like ISIL. It's part of how they rationalize and justify their demented, sick perpetration of violence on innocent people.

And we can keep the American people safe while shutting down that operation. We've already reduced drastically the populations. Keep in mind that the bulk of people who are released from Guantanamo were done so under the previous administration, before I even came in. We have reduced that population further, and I expect that early by next year we may even have fewer than a hundred people at Guantanamo. We are spending millions of dollars per detainee, and it's not necessary for us to keep our people safe.

So we are going to go through meticulously, with Congress, what our options are and why we think this should be closed. I guarantee you there will be strong resistance, because in the aftermath of Paris, I think that there is just a very strong tendency for us to get worked up around issues that don't actually make us safer, but make for good political sound bites. And whether it's refugees or Guantanamo, those are handy answers, particularly for folks who aren't interested in engaging in a more serious debate about how do we invest in the long, hard slog of dealing with terrorism, doing the tough law enforcement work, gathering intelligence

meticulously, and building the kind of diplomatic and military solutions that we need in the Middle East.

It's easier to talk about Guantanamo, I guess, than it is to, for example, pass an authorization for the use of military force in Syria, which hasn't gotten done yet. It's easier to talk about refugees than to talk about the hard work that's going to be required in putting organizations like ISIL out of business, but they don't actually have the kind of impact that we need on the problem. Okay?

Prime Minister Trudeau. In our conversation, in the election campaign, and in the time since the election campaign, I have always been very, very clear: Canada will and must remain a stronger member of the coalition against ISIL. And that means humanitarian aid, that means support on refugees, and it also means engaging militarily. There is much that Canada can do, and Canada will continue to work with our coalition partners to ensure that we're doing what we can, including militarily, to degrade and defeat ISIL over the long haul. That's what I reassured the President about, and that's what we're going to continue to be engaged in, and we're going to be discussing further the best ways Canada can move forward. But I made a clear commitment to Canadians to withdraw the six fighter jets, and we will be doing that in collaboration and coordination with all of our allies to ensure that the coalition still has tremendous impact against ISIL.

[*Prime Minister Trudeau spoke in French, and no translation was provided. He then spoke in English as follows.*]

On a personal level, the first phone call that we had, I don't dwell on the gray hair, because there's nothing I can do about that. But what Barack pointed out to me about how fast his daughters grew in the 7 years since that first night of his electoral victory really struck home for me. And I'm making sure to try and remain as attentive and present for my kids, not just because it makes me a better parent and a better person, but also because it's what keeps us focused as leaders on what actually matters, how we build a better world for our kids.

[*Prime Minister Trudeau continued in French, and no translation was provided. He then spoke in English as follows.*]

Bill Curry from the Globe and Mail, I believe you have a question.

Alternative Energy Sources and Technologies/Canadian Oil Production

Q. Good afternoon. Prime Minister, you pledged this week to pursue a North American energy deal. How do you go about convincing the Americans to accept more of what the President described recently as "dirty oil" from Alberta?

And to the President, do you think that Alberta's oil sands bitumen needs to stay in the ground?

Prime Minister Trudeau. Well, first of all, one of the things that we've seen over the past years is, Canadians, right across the country, as well as our friends and our neighbors internationally from many countries, have felt that Canada hasn't been doing enough on the environmental front, hasn't done enough on regulations, on oversight, on pricing carbon, on demonstrating that we understand as a Government that there is no longer a choice to be made between what's good for the environment or what's good for the economy. They go together in the 21st century.

And one of the first tasks that I have on energy and climate issues is to reassure Canadians and others that we are serious about meeting reduction targets, about being positive actors on the world stage in the fight against climate change, and demonstrating a future in renewable and smart investments around energy. That's something that we are going to continue to do as we demonstrate that Canada is serious about taking on its responsibilities.

[Prime Minister Trudeau spoke in French, and no translation was provided.]

President Obama. We're all going to have to rethink how we do energy. I don't think that's unique to Canada. We're discussing it here at APEC. We discussed at the G-20. And we'll certainly be discussing it when we get to Paris.

My view has been that we have to transition. That transition does not happen overnight. Both of us are large oil and gas producers, and that's an important part of our economy. We make no apologies for that. But I also think we have to recognize that if we want to preserve this planet for our kids and our grandkids, then we're going to have to shift increasingly away from carbon-emitting energy sources.

And so it's not contradictory to say that there will be production in Canada and the United States, but that how we design incentives, how we design our research and development, how we think about fuel efficiency standards and the demand side of fossil fuels, how we incentivize businesses in what fuel choices they make, and the work we do with utilities—that all that should reflect the recognition that over time, our priorities are going to shift.

And my expectation is, is that Canada will be going through these same debates, just as we do. Now, some of this is also going to be dictated by market prices. Right now, in Alberta, a lot of the issues with respect to how they extract oil just have to do with the fact that oil prices are low, and they're going to be low, I suspect, for a while. And that actually presents both our countries an opportunity. With respect to producers, it's a good time to think about, how do you diversify your business model? With respect to consumers, it's a good time to think about, how are you using the savings you may make at the pump for installing a solar panel on your house and continuing to benefit from these low prices, not to use more, but to shift in how you spend your energy budget?

And this is going to be a messy, bumpy process worldwide, but I am confident that we can get it done. And the fact that we now have a very strong partner in Canada to help set up some global rules around how we approach this, I think, will be extraordinarily helpful. All right.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:41 p.m. in Room 218 of the Philippine International Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau, wife of Prime Minister Trudeau; and President Bashar al-Asad of Syria. He also referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization. Prime Minister Trudeau referred to his children Xavier, Ella-Grace, and Hadrian Trudeau.

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