

Remarks Following a Meeting With Prime Minister Theresa May of the United Kingdom and an Exchange With Reporters in Hangzhou, China
September 4, 2016

President Obama. Good morning, everybody. I want to begin by saying what a pleasure it was for me to meet with Prime Minister May and congratulate her on becoming Prime Minister. We've had occasion to be together before in other settings, but this was the first time that I had a chance to address her as Madam Prime Minister. I'm glad that Theresa and I could meet early in her tenure. The Prime Minister continues to be a steadying influence during a time of transition.

It was a wide-ranging conversation, but it began with the basic premise that even as the U.K. pursues an orderly exit from the EU, together, we reaffirm the very special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. It will not simply endure, but it will continue to grow stronger with time. The vibrant economic partnership between our countries will continue. As the U.K. gains further clarity on its new relationship with the EU, our two countries will be discussing ways in which we continue to sustain and strengthen our trade and investment ties. Here at the G-20, we will continue to pursue an agenda of inclusive and sustainable growth.

When it comes to security issues, under Prime Minister May, the U.K. has reaffirmed its strong commitment to the transatlantic security architecture. We are NATO allies. We see the world in the same way. We will continue to oppose Russian aggression in Ukraine. We will continue to counter cyber threats. We will continue to work diligently to root out terrorist networks, and we'll work to destroy ISIL.

At a time when the international order is under strain, I also emphasized the degree to which United Kingdom's leadership on the world stage is essential. We are grateful for the U.K.'s indispensable role in achieving landmark agreements on climate change, on issues of energy security and global development. We will continue to count on being able to stand together, stand strong with our British friends to make sure that international norms and rules are enforced and are maintained.

The bottom line is, is that we don't have a stronger partner anywhere in the world than the United Kingdom. And despite the turbulence of political events over the last several months, we have every intention to making sure that that continues.

And so I look forward to our partnership. This is my last G-20, Theresa's first. But the continuity of the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom, that stretches back many decades, and it will continue for many decades to come.

Theresa.

Prime Minister May. Thank you. Thank you very much. And I'm very pleased to be here at my first G-20 summit and pleased to have had the opportunity to meet you, Barack. And as you say, the United States is a special partner for the United Kingdom, a longstanding ally and a close friend. We share the same values of freedom, openness, and tolerance. We share intelligence and technology. Our troops train, fight, and recuperate together. And together, we do more together than any other two countries in the world. And I think that's as true now as it has ever been.

And our discussions today have been wide ranging. We focused on Brexit, on the threat from Daesh, the situation in Syria, and on the need to do more to solve the migration crisis. I'd just like to say a few words on each of those.

First, we have talked about Britain's decision to leave the European Union: the process now and what Brexit means for U.K.'s relationships with our European friends, but with other countries too. The U.K. has always been a strong partner for the U.S., and that will remain the case. We have a thriving economic relationship. British businesses export twice as much to the United States as they do to our next largest market, and the United States is the largest inward investor in Britain, with total American investments providing more than 1 million jobs.

We need to build on that strong foundation as the U.K. leaves the EU. We're both strong supporters of free trade, and today we've discussed how to take forward consultations to ensure that the U.K. and the U.S. have the strongest possible trading relationship. And this reinforces my belief that as we forge a new global role for the U.K., we can and will seize the opportunities that Brexit presents and make a success of it.

We've also discussed the threat from Islamist terrorism. The U.K. and the U.S. have been at the forefront of efforts to defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and it's vital that we take action to degrade Daesh abroad to help keep the streets of Britain safe. And the coalition is making progress. Daesh is losing territory in Iraq and Syria. Its finances have been hit. Its leaders are being killed, and fighters are deserting. And in recent weeks, thanks to U.S. efforts, Daesh in Libya have been forced backwards too.

But we must not be complacent. We know these terrorists are intent on destroying our way of life, and the threat in the U.K. remains severe. So as we drive Daesh out of one area, we must be alert to the risk that they will seek a safe haven't elsewhere, and we must work internationally to defeat their ideology of hatred and murder. And we need to support other countries in the region, helping to protect them from the threat of Daesh and thereby protecting people home in Britain too.

We must also continue to strive for a political situation in Syria. The goal remains a negotiated settlement which delivers stability for all Syrians and a Government with whom we can work to defeat the terrorists. We welcome U.S. efforts to broker an end to the violence and to help protect moderate opposition forces. It's vital that humanitarian supplies get to innocent Syrians who are in desperate need. And this afternoon I will urge President Putin to do all he can to get the aid convoys in and to end the indiscriminate bombing of civilians. And next week, the Foreign Secretary plans to host the moderate Syrian opposition in London as we continue to support their hopes for a democratic, peaceful, and inclusive Syria.

And finally, we discussed the global migration crisis. Across the world, there are now over 244 million migrants, 65 million displaced people, and over 20 million refugees. This growing crisis cannot be solved by the actions of one country alone. We need an international approach, which better identifies those refugees who most need support, deals more effectively with economic migrants, and does more to address the root causes of migration.

This issue will be top of the agenda at the U.N. General Assembly later this month, and I hope we can make concrete progress to stem the flow of migration and help people in their home countries and regions.

So we've had a productive meeting. It's been an opportunity to discuss how we respond to some of the great challenges we face. And I look forward to continuing our discussions at the summit, particularly on the global economy. We understand that many of our citizens are

frustrated by the pace of globalization and feel they're not experiencing the benefits of international trade. We both believe this is an issue that we as G-20 leaders cannot afford to ignore. Instead, we must all work together to spur economic growth, to boost free trade and build a fairer economy that truly works for all.

Thank you.

President Obama. So we're going to take a couple of questions, starting with Andrew Beatty of AFP [Agence France-Presse].

Syria/Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Terrorist Organization/The President's Overseas Travel/China-U.S. Relations/Press Freedom

Q. Thank you very much, Mr. President. I had a question on Syria, first of all. It seems like there is a deal with the Russians within reach. I was wondering, do you not think there's a risk that there's another short-lived agreement that doesn't end the war, but which allows the Russians to deflect criticism at the G-20 here and at the U.N. General Assembly? And secondly, what do you make of the kerfuffle yesterday at the airport?

And for the Prime Minister, you said that Brexit means Brexit, but I wonder if you could be a bit more specific. Could you categorically rule out the U.K. staying within the EU? Thank you.

President Obama. Okay. With respect to Syria, we have long been interested in finding a way to reduce the violence, improve humanitarian access on the ground as a precursor for a political transition inside of Syria.

Now, it is a very complicated piece of business. You have the Asad regime, which has been killing its own citizens with impunity, supported by the Russians and the Iranians. You have a moderate opposition that has continuously tried to consolidate a position that would lead to a inclusive and representative government, but is often outgunned. Then, you have ISIL, and you have Al Qaida in the form of Nusra on the ground as well and a range of other players from the Turks and the Gulf States to the Kurds. Trying to corral all of those different forces into a coherent structure for negotiations is difficult.

But our conversations with the Russians are key, because if it were not for the Russians, then Asad and the regime would not be able to sustain its offensive. And these are difficult negotiations. We have grave differences with the Russians in terms of both the parties we support, but also the process that's required to bring about peace in Syria. But if we do not get some buy-in from the Russians on reducing the violence and easing the humanitarian crisis, then it's difficult to see how we get to the next phase.

So John Kerry and his counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, have been working around the clock, as well as a number of other negotiators, to see what would a real cessation of hostilities look like that could provide that humanitarian access and provide people in places like Aleppo relief. We're not there yet. And understandably, given the previous failures of cessations of hostilities to hold, we approach it with some skepticism. But it is worth trying.

To the extent that there are children and women and innocent civilians who can get food and medical supplies and get some relief from the constant terror of bombings, that's worth the effort. And I think it's premature for us to say that there is a clear path forward, but there is the possibility at least for us to make some progress on that front.

In addition, I should point out that the U.N. special rep, Staffan de Mistura, has been also coming up with a longer term structure for a political transition. We are supporting his efforts as well. And those two things, hopefully, can operate in tandem.

And the last point I would make is that none of this is slowing down our very aggressive efforts against ISIL. As we've seen in recent weeks, not only have we been able to clear out ISIL from additional territory inside of Syria as well as Iraq, but we continue to systematically go after their leadership, including their head of external operations and probably the second most prominent person in the ISIL infrastructure. So none of this is slowing down a very aggressive effort to go after what I think we all consider to be a—the principal threat that's emanating out of Syria.

And with respect to our visit here, so far, it's been extraordinarily productive. It is true that, not for the first time, when we come here there ends up being issues around security and press access. And part of the reason is, is because we insist on a certain approach to our press pool, for example, that other countries may not insist on. We think it's important that the press have access to the work that we're doing, that they have the ability to answer questions. And we don't leave our values and ideals behind when we take these trips. It can cause some friction. It's not the first time it's happened. It doesn't just happen in China, it happens in other countries where we travel. I think this time maybe the—as Josh put it—the seams are showing a little more than usual in terms of some of the negotiations and jostling that takes place behind the scenes. And in fairness, when delegations travel to the United States, sometimes, there are issues about our security procedures and protocols that they're aggravated with, but don't always get reported on.

But none of this detracts from the broader scope of the relationship. As we saw yesterday, President Xi and I continued what has been a historic joint project to elevate climate change issues. The bilateral discussions that we had yesterday were extremely productive and continue to point to big areas of cooperation. When I bring up issues like human rights, there are some tensions there that perhaps don't take place when President Xi meets with other leaders, but that's part of our job, that's part of what we do.

And so I wouldn't overcrank the significance of it, because, as I said, this is not the first time that these things happened. And it doesn't just happen here. It happens in a lot of places, including, by the way, sometimes, our allies. Part of it is, we also have a much bigger footprint—[*laughter*]*—*than a lot of other countries. And we've got a lot of planes and a lot of helicopters and a lot of cars and a lot of guys, and if you're a host country, sometimes, it may feel a little bit much. [*Laughter*] I—you notice some chortling among the Brits; they probably find it a little overwhelming as well. [*Laughter*]

So I—but the one thing I will say is, we don't make apologies for pushing a little bit harder when it comes to press access, and that's been the case from my very first state visit here. And we don't always get everything that we'd like to see, but we think it's important for us to at least stand up for those values. Okay?

Prime Minister May. And on the question you asked me about Brexit: Yes, Brexit does indeed mean Brexit. On the 23d of June, the people in the U.K. voted for the U.K. to leave the European Union. The Government respects that decision. We respect the wishes of the people, and we will put that into practice. So there will be no second referendum, no attempt to turn the clock back, no attempt to try and get out of this. The U.K. will be leaving the European Union.

I think we have a question from Jason Groves from the Daily Mail.

United Kingdom's Referendum Vote To Leave the European Union/United Kingdom-U.S. Trade Relations

Q. Yes, Jason Groves from the Daily Mail. Mr. President, you came to London earlier this year and urged the British people not to vote for Brexit and warned them that they'd be at the back of the queue for a trade deal if they did. Do you guys think we got it wrong on Brexit? And do you regret making that threat, or are you really going to punish us for taking a democratic decision?

And could I ask, just quickly—

President Obama. Quite the editorial question.

Q. I work for the Daily Mail. [Laughter]

President Obama. Yes, I get it. [Laughter] That was quite clear.

Q. And could I ask just quickly whether you've got any advice for the Prime Minister this autumn, when she's got the pleasure of hosting Donald Trump in London?

Prime Minister, can I ask whether you've had any trade reassurances from the President about your place in his queue? And could I also ask you quickly about Hinkley Point, which you'll be discussing with President Xi tomorrow? You've said you'll look at all the evidence. Does that include getting the National Security Council to look at the potential security implications?

Prime Minister May. On the first point that you've raised, Jason, I mean, we've had discussions about the importance of the trading relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States. As you know, I've been very clear that, following Brexit, we will be looking to establish new trading relationships around the globe. I think there are real opportunities for the United Kingdom; we will be going out and seizing those opportunities. But we have a very strong—as I indicated in my own statement with some of the figures that I gave—we have a very strong trading relationship with the United States, and we will be looking to ensure that we can maintain that strongest possible relationship into the future.

And on the question that you ask about Hinkley Point, I will be doing exactly as you've said, indeed, in your question, Jason, which is, as you know, I'll be looking at all the evidence around the—this issue. I—the way I work is that I don't just take an instant decision; I actually look at the evidence, take the advice, consider it properly, and then come to a decision. And I've been very clear that I will be doing that and will be taking a decision sometime this month.

President Obama. It is absolutely true that I believed pre-Brexit vote and continue to believe post-Brexit vote that the world benefited enormously from the United Kingdom's participation in the EU. But I also said at the time that, ultimately, this was a decision for the British people, and the British people made that decision.

And I never suggested that we would quote, unquote, "punish" Great Britain. As you will recall, if you were at that press conference, I was asked about the viability of immediately negotiating a separate trade agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom, because I think the notion was that the consequences of Brexit would be minimal and we would just go ahead and start lining up a whole bunch of free trade agreements separate and apart from the EU relationship.

And my simple point was, is that we've put great priority on, first, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which, now that we have an agreement, we want to put into force, that we are also negotiating effectively with the entire EU around the transatlantic trade agreement, or T-TIP, and those negotiations are proceeding.

And so it would not make sense for us to put those efforts aside, particularly at a time when my working assumption was, is that if in fact the people of the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union, their first priority would be to renegotiate terms of trade with the economic unit that they sell half of their goods to.

So that, in fact, is I think the approach that the Prime Minister is wisely taking—that in a prudent, well-informed fashion with consultations with businesses and stakeholders, as well as her counterparts across the Channel, they—the Prime Minister makes a determination about when to invoke article 50, how those negotiations should proceed. And we are fully supportive of a process that is as little disruptive as possible so that not just the people of the United Kingdom, but people around the world can benefit from continued recovery and economic growth.

And what I've committed to Theresa is, is that we will consult closely with her as she and her Government move forward with the Brexit negotiations to ensure that we don't see adverse effects in the trading and commercial relationships between the United States and the United Kingdom. Obviously, we have an enormous amount of trade that already takes place. We have a lot of investment between British companies in the United States and U.S. companies in the United Kingdom, and that's not going to stop. And we're going to do everything we can to make sure that the consequences of the decision don't end up unraveling what is already a very strong and robust economic relationship that can become even stronger in the future.

But first things first. And the first task is going to be figuring out what Brexit means with respect to Europe. And our first task is making sure that we get, first, TPP done, but also that we move forward on the T-TIP negotiations in which we've already invested a lot of time and effort.

Okay? Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:36 a.m. in Ballroom C at the JW Marriott Hotel Hangzhou. In his remarks, he referred to President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Viktorovich Lavrov of Russia; U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura; Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, spokesperson and chief of external operations for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization, also known as "Daesh," who was killed in a U.S. airstrike near Al Bab, Syria, on August 30; White House Press Secretary Joshua R. Earnest; and President Xi Jinping of China. Prime Minister May referred to President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia; and Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Boris Johnson of the United Kingdom. A reporter referred to Republican Presidential nominee Donald J. Trump.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: Hangzhou, China; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : United Kingdom, Prime Minister May.

Locations: Hangzhou, China.

Names: Adnani, Abu Muhammad al-; Asad, Bashar al-; Earnest, Joshua R.; Kerry, John F.; Lavrov, Sergey Viktorovich; May, Theresa; Mistura, Staffan de; Xi Jinping.

Subjects: China : President; China : President Obama's visit; Civil rights : Freedom of press; Commerce, international : Free and fair trade; Commerce, international : Group of Twenty (G-20) nations; Defense and national security : Cybersecurity :: Strengthening efforts; Environment : Climate change; Europe : European Union :: United Kingdom, membership status; Europe : Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership; Foreign policy, U.S. : Civil and human rights, promotion efforts; Iran : Syria, role; Iraq : Security cooperation with U.S.; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Russia : Minister of Foreign Affairs; Russia : Syria, role; Russia : Ukraine, role; State, Department of : Secretary; Syria : Civil war and sectarian conflict; Syria : Jabhat al-Nusra terrorist organization; Syria : President; Syria : U.N. Special Envoy for Syria; Syria : U.S. and coalition airstrikes; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist organization; Terrorism : Counterterrorism efforts; Terrorism : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP); Ukraine : Political unrest and violence; United Kingdom : European Union, membership status; United Kingdom : Prime Minister; United Kingdom : Relations with U.S.; United Kingdom : Trade with U.S.; United Nations : Syria, U.N. Special Envoy for; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Press Secretary.

DCPD Number: DCPD201600559.