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Barack Obama

Post ASEAN Press Conference

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Good afternoon, everybody. Once again, I want to thank the government and the people of Laos for their wonderful hospitality and for their leadership as host of the ASEAN and East Asia Summits. And I especially want to express my gratitude for the warmth and the kindness that they've shown to me as the first U.S. President to visit this nation. It has been a memorable and, at times, a very moving visit.

We're here because, as a region with more than 600 million people, several fast-growing economies, some vibrant democracies, but also countries transitioning to democracies, and given their strategic location along vital trade routes, the 10 nations of ASEAN are critical to peace and prosperity not only in the Asia Pacific but to the world. Indeed, the United States and ASEAN are among each other's top trading partners. We're the largest investors in this region, and ASEAN is one of our largest markets for U.S. exports, supporting hundreds of thousands of American jobs. So our trade and investment fuels jobs and prosperity across our countries.



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And that's why, as part of my rebalance of American foreign policy to the Asia Pacific, I've deepened our engagement with the nations of Southeast Asia and with ASEAN as an institution. As the first U.S. President to meet with the leaders of all 10 ASEAN countries, I've sustained our cooperation throughout my presidency. Earlier this year, I was proud to host the first U.S.-ASEAN Summit in the United States, at Sunnylands, California. Our meeting here in Laos was our eighth meeting. And this visit marks my ninth to the ASEAN region -- more than any U.S. President.

Together, the United States and ASEAN have forged a strategic partnership guided by key principles, including that ASEAN will remain central to peace, prosperity and progress in the Asia Pacific. The United States is now firmly part of the East Asia Summit, and we have worked to make that organization the region's leading forum for dealing with political and security challenges, including maritime security. And we're guided by the shared vision of the region that we put forward at Sunnylands -- open, dynamic and competitive economies; mutual security and the peaceful resolution of disputes; and respect for human rights -- in short, a region where all nations play by the same rules. That's a vision that we advanced here.

We're stepping up our efforts to increase trade and investment. As part of the initiative I announced earlier this year -- U.S.-ASEAN Connect -- we're doing more to connect our businesses and investors so that it is easier to start new ventures together. More to connect our entrepreneurs so we're encouraging innovation in what are increasingly digital economies. More to connect clean energy projects as we pursue a low-carbon future. All of which will also reinforce this region's continued economic integration through the ASEAN Community. And given that four ASEAN nations are also part of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, I reiterated that I am determined to do everything I can to encourage the U.S. Congress to approve TPP before I leave office.

With regard to security, our nations reaffirmed our commitment to a regional order where international rules and norms are upheld and where disagreements are resolved peacefully. There was recognition of the importance of the international arbitration ruling in July, which is legal and binding, and which clarified maritime claims by the Philippines and China in the South China Sea. We discussed the importance of claimants adhering to steps to which they've already agreed, including respecting international law, not militarizing disputed areas and not occupying uninhabited islands, reefs and shoals.



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And I reiterated that the United States will stand with allies and partners in upholding fundamental interests, among them the freedom of navigation and overflight, lawful commerce that is not impeded, and peaceful resolution of disputes.

The United States and ASEAN also continue to deepen our cooperation on transnational challenges. We discussed the importance of continuing to share information to prevent terrorism and the flow of foreign fighters. Given the threat of climate change to all our nations -- especially countries in this region -- we agreed on the importance of bringing the Paris agreement into force as soon as possible. We agreed to cooperation in the fight against human trafficking, including sharing more information on smugglers, closer law enforcement cooperation and more support for victims.

And at the East Asia Summit, our 18 nations expressed our grave concern about North Korea's provocative missile launches, highlighted the threat posed by its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, and called on North Korea to uphold its international obligations.

And, finally, I'm especially pleased that we continue to deepen the connections between the people of ASEAN and America -- particularly our young people, like the inspiring young men and women that I met with at our town hall yesterday. Our Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative is now [more] than 100,000 strong. The women's leadership academy that I announced yesterday will support women leaders in business, government and civil society throughout ASEAN. And we're going to help increase language skills among students and teachers through our English for All program.

In closing, I'm mindful that this is the last day of my last trip to this region as President. And when I think back to the time that I spent here as a boy, I can't help but be struck by the extraordinary progress that's been made across so much of the region in the decades since -- even as there's still a lot of work to be done. And so it means a great deal to me, not only as President, but also personally, that over the past eight years we've increased cooperation between ASEAN countries and the United States. It is unprecedented the breadth and depth of our relationships. And I think it's one of the most successful parts of our rebalance policy.



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We've made it clear that the United States will continue to stand with the people of this region in advancing their security, prosperity and dignity, including universal human rights. And I am very optimistic that the ties of friendship between our people -- as reflected by that roomful of young people that we saw yesterday -- will bring us even closer in the years to come.

So, with that, I'm going to take a couple questions. And I will start with Kathleen Hennessey of AP.



Question: Thanks very much, Mr. President. There's been a lot of talk back at home and here about how you were received on this trip, your last to Asia. Donald Trump said you were humiliated. I suspect you think that was overblown, but --

President Obama: Yes.

Question: Maybe you could talk about whether or not you think your reception here was at all limited to some of the -- or at all related to the limits and challenges of your Asia pivot policy. And while we're talking about legacy items, if I could just ask another quick one on Guantanamo Bay. You have four months left, 60 prisoners left. At this point, are you willing to acknowledge that the prison will be open by the time you leave office?

President Obama: Well, in terms of my reception here as far as I can tell has been terrific. I don't know if you've gone and talked to some people in Laos. They seem pretty happy about my visit. Everywhere we've gone, we've had a great reception -- just as earlier when we went to Vietnam we got a great reception. You will recall there were millions of people lining the streets.

So if this theory about my reception and my rebalance policy is based on me going down the short stairs in China, yes, I think that is overblown. And I think that any reasonable person, certainly any person in the region, would be puzzled as to how this became somehow indicative of the work that we've done here.



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If you look at the remarks of leaders, if you look at the remarks of ordinary people, if you look at the concrete work that we've gotten done on everything from economic programs to development programs, to legacy of war issues, to promoting civil society and young people, the concern that I've heard is not that what we've done hasn't been important and successful; the concern that I've heard is will it continue. And almost uniformly, the question I get from other leaders is, we hope that America's interest and presence and engagement is sustained.

And my hope and expectation is, is that my successor will, in fact, sustain this kind of engagement, because there is a lot happening here. You've got countries here that are taking off. You've got one of the most dynamic and youngest populations in the world. This is where the action is going to be when it comes to commerce and trade, and ultimately creating U.S. jobs by being able to sell to this market.

And that's the only feedback that I've received. And that's not just based on what leaders tell me. If you read local newspapers or you talk to people, that's been the same commentary that we receive generally.

With respect to Guantanamo, I am not ready to concede that it may still remain open because we're still working diligently to continue to shrink the population. I continue to believe that Guantanamo is a recruitment tool for terrorist organizations, that it clouds and sours some of the counterterrorism cooperation that we need to engage in. And it's not necessary and it's hugely expensive for U.S. taxpayers.

Is there strong resistance in Congress? Absolutely. But as we continue to shrink the population to the point where we're looking at 40 or 50 people and are maintaining a multimillion-dollar operation to house these handfuls of individuals, I think the American people should be asking the question, why are we spending this kind of money that could be spent on other things when it's not necessary for our safety and security.

So there's no doubt that because of the politics in Congress right now, it is a tough road to hoe. But I expect to work really hard over the next four months -- five months -- four and a half months.

Margaret Brennan.



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Question: Thank you, Mr. President. Can you tell us if last night Philippine President Duterte offered his apology to you, and if you said to him the U.S. will continue to help the Philippines push back against China? And last night, sir, Donald Trump said Vladimir Putin has been more of a leader than you, and then he said you have reduced American generals to rubble. Do you care to defend your legacy?

President Obama: Do I care to defend -- okay.

Question: Respond.

President Obama: Okay, okay -- respond. Got it. I did shake hands with President Duterte last night. It was not a long interaction. And what I indicated to him is, is that my team should be meeting with his and determine how we can move forward on a whole range of issues.

As I said when I was asked about this in China, I don't take these comments personally, because it seems as if this is a phrase he's used repeatedly, including directed at the Pope and others, and so I think it seems to be just a habit, a way of speaking for him.

But as I said in China, we want to partner with the Philippines on the particular issue of narco-traffickers, which is a serious problem in the Philippines. It's a serious problem in the United States and around the world. On that narrow issue, we do want to make sure that the partnership we have is consistent with international norms and rule of law. So we're not going to back off our position that if we're working with a country -- whether it's on antiterrorism, whether it's on going after drug traffickers -- as despicable as these networks may be, as much damage as they do, it is important from our perspective to make sure that we do it the right way, because the consequences of when you do it the wrong way is innocent people get hurt and you have a whole bunch of unintended consequences that don't solve the problem.

It has no impact on our broader relationship with the Philippine people, on the wide range of programs and security cooperation that we have with this treaty ally. And it certainly has no impact in terms of how we interpret our obligations to continue to build on the longstanding alliance that we have with the Philippines however that may play itself out.



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And my hope and expectation is, is that as President Duterte and his team get acclimated to his new position, that they're able to define and clarify what exactly they want to get done, how that fits in with the work that we're already doing with the Philippine government, and hopefully it will be on a strong footing by the time the next administration comes in.

As far as Mr. Trump, I think I've already offered my opinion. I don't think the guy is qualified to be President of the United States. And every time he speaks, that opinion is confirmed. And I think the most important thing for the public and the press is to just listen to what he says and follow up and ask questions about what appear to be either contradictory or uninformed or outright wacky ideas.

There is this process that seems to take place over the course of the election season where somehow behavior that in normal times we would consider completely unacceptable and outrageous becomes normalized, and people start thinking that we should be grading on a curve. But I can tell you from the interactions that I've had over the last eight or nine days with foreign leaders, that this is serious business, and you actually have to know what you're talking about, and you actually have to have done your homework. And when you speak, it should actually reflect thought-out policy that you can implement. And I have confidence that if, in fact, people just listen to what he has to say and look at his track record -- or lack thereof -- that they'll make a good decision.

Elise Hu.

Question: Thank you very much, Mr. President. On North Korea, there's increasing evidence that China isn't enforcing economic sanctions, namely when it comes to coal. So what's the next move there in your remaining four and a half months in office? And second, is it time for a fundamental rethink of North Korea policy, given that all these years of condemnations and increasing sanctions haven't led to a desired outcome? Thank you.

President Obama: Well, those are good questions. In my meeting with President Xi, we emphasized the importance of full implementation of the U.N. sanctions that have been put forward. I can tell you that based on not only their presentations but actually intelligence and evidence that we've seen, China has done more on sanctions implementation than they have on some of the previous U.N. Security Council sanctions.



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But you are absolutely right that there are still places where they need to tighten up. And we continue to indicate to them the importance of tightening those up.

You may have noted that China continues to object to the THAAD deployment in the Republic of Korea, one of our treaty allies. And what I've said to President Xi directly is that we cannot have a situation where we're unable to defend either ourselves or our treaty allies against increasingly provocative behavior and escalating capabilities by the North Koreans. And I indicated to him that if the THAAD bothered him, particularly since it has no purpose other than defensive and does not change the strategic balance between the United States and China, that they need to work with us more effectively to change Pyongyang's behavior.

Now, when it comes to changing Pyongyang's behavior, it's tough. It is true that our approach -- my approach since I've been President -- is to not reward bad behavior. And that was based on the fact that, before I came into office, you had a pattern in which North Korea would engage in some provocative action and, as a consequence of the equivalent of throwing a tantrum, countries would then try to placate them by giving them humanitarian aid or providing other concessions, or engaging in dialogue, which would relieve some of the pressure, and then they would just go right back to the same provocative behavior later.

And so our view was, that wasn't working, let's try something else. Now, it is entirely fair to say that they have continued to engage in the development of their nuclear program and these ballistic missile tests. And so we are constantly examining other strategies that we can take, close consultations with Republic of Korea and Japan, as well as China and Russia and others who are interested parties, and we do believe that if there are any signs, at any point, that North Korea is serious about dialogue around denuclearization in the Korean Peninsula, that we'll be ready to have those conversations.

It's not as if we are looking for a problem, or avoiding a willingness to engage diplomatically. But diplomacy requires that Pyongyang meet its international obligations, and not only is it failing to meet those international obligations, it's not even suggesting that they have any intention to do so anytime in the future regardless of the inducements that might be put on the table.



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So, look, we are deeply disturbed by what's happened. We are going to make sure that we put our defensive measures in place so that America is protected, our allies are protected. We will continue to put some of the toughest pressure that North Korea has ever been under as a consequence of this behavior. Can I guarantee that it works? No. But it is the best options that we have available to us right now. And we will continue to explore with all parties involved, including China, other potential means by which we can bring about a change in behavior.

Bob Woodruff.

Question: Thank you, Mr. President. First of all, I just want to let you know that this is going to be more of a personal question for you. We are almost the same exact age, born August 1961, but I'm two weeks younger than you.

President Obama: You know, I noticed that when we were in the gym together, you were working out a little harder than me. So those two weeks clearly are making a difference.

Question: But I want to ask you about some of your thoughts all those years ago, since we were living in those days of the Vietnam era. What were your thoughts about Vietnam, the war at that time, and certainly as time went on, but more importantly, about the Secret War, when you found out about that, and also as time went by? Given what you learned about that and what you see now, and what you've witnessed when you're here, do you think you should apologize fully to the country of Laos? And one other very important thing, too, is, for those American veterans who did serve in the Secret War, those that are Special Ops, CIA, certainly pilots that dropped the bombs -- those are the ones that targeted known enemies in a war they did not create. Would you be comfortable, in Laos, calling them heroes as we do with those that served in Iraq and Afghanistan?

President Obama: Well, because we're the same age, you'll recall that at the peak of the war, we were still too young, I think, to fully understand the scope of what was taking place. It was the tail end of the war where we're entering high school and starting to understand the meaning of it. But at that point, it was -- I think the debate had raged. Even those who had been strong supporters of the war recognized there needed to be some mechanism to bring it to an end. So I can't say that I was so precocious that I had deep thoughts about it at the time, other than the images that we all saw on television.



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Standing here now, in retrospect, I think what I can say is that the United States was on the right side of history when it came to the Cold War. There may have been moments, particularly here in Southeast Asia, in which, in our singular focus on defeating an expansionist and very aggressive communism, that we didn't think through all the implications of what we did as policymakers. And certainly when you see the dropping of cluster bombs, trying to figure out how that was going to be effective -- particularly since part of the job was to win over hearts and minds -- how that was going to work, I think with the benefit of hindsight, we have to say that a lot of those consequences were not ones that necessarily served our interests.

Having said that -- and I've said this before -- regardless of what happens in the White House and decisions made by policymakers, when our men and women in uniform go into action and put their lives on the line, and they're carrying out their duty, my attitude is they're always heroes, because they are saying that I am willing to do whatever it takes, what my Commander-in-Chief has ordered, in order to keep the American people safe. And, by definition, their job is to put their lives on the line and make sacrifices, both seen and unseen, that have longstanding ramifications. And that act of sacrifice is heroic.

And one of the things that when I think about in terms of legacy and I reflect back on my presidency as it comes to an end, is the degree to which I came in respecting and honoring our men and women in uniform, I leave here even more in awe of what they do.

And it also is one of the reasons why I take so seriously the decisions I make about war and peace. Because I know whatever decision I make, there are men and women out there who will carry out my decision, even if they think it's wrong, even if they didn't vote for me, even if they have completely different ideas about what's required for our national security. That's heroism. That's service. That's the definition of it. And that puts a special burden on the occupant of my office to get it right -- or at least as right as you can. And hopefully, when people look back 20 years from now, or 30 years from now, at the decisions I made, they'll be able to say that he did pretty good.

All right? Thank you very much, everybody. Let's go home.