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Barack Obama

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I want to begin by once again thanking President Varela and the people of Panama City and all the Panamanian people for being such excellent hosts at this Summit of the Americas. Given its strategic location -- a place where cultures and commerce of our hemisphere have long intersected -- Panama has often been called the "crossroads of the world." And with Panama's leadership, our nations have come together to focus on the world, on the future, and on what we can build for the one billion people of the Americas.

This has been my third Summit of the Americas and my eighth visit to Latin America. And my trip reflects, as I mentioned earlier, a new era of U.S. engagement in the region. Over the past few days we've advanced our engagement across the board.

In keeping with the Inter-American Democratic Charter, we continue to stand up strongly for democracy and human rights. This was the first Summit of the Americas to include a formal role for civil society. As I said at yesterday's forum, the United States will continue to deepen our support for civil society groups across the Americas and around the world. I'm pleased that there was widespread agreement among the nations here that civil society groups have a permanent role in future summits. And the United States will support this work through the new innovation center we're creating to empower civil society groups across Latin America.



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How to promote greater opportunity for the Cuban people was also a major focus of my meeting with President Castro, the first between leaders of our two nations in more than half a century. I told President Castro in private what I've have said in public -- that our governments will continue to have differences and the United States will continue to stand firmly for universal values and human rights. At the same time, we agreed that we can continue to take steps forward that advance our mutual interests. We'll continue to work toward reestablishing diplomatic relations, reopening embassies in Havana and Washington, and encouraging greater contacts and commerce and exchanges between our citizens.

I'm optimistic that we'll continue to make progress and that this can indeed be a turning point -- not just between the United States and Cuba, but for greater cooperation among countries across the region.

Second, we continued our work to create more prosperity and opportunity for our people. At our meeting yesterday, Central American leaders reaffirmed their commitment to pursue the good governance and economic and security reforms that are needed, and I reiterated my commitment to working with Congress to secure the \$1 billion I've proposed for our engagement with Central America. Yesterday's deal between Boeing and Copa Airlines will support jobs in the United States, in Panama, and across the region, and I think is representative of the commercial opportunities that allow both north and southern hemispheres -- both North and South America, as well as Central America to prosper if we deepen those trade ties.

I was encouraged by the support of many leaders here for the WTO Trade Facilitation agreement, which would boost regional trade, and for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, with its high standards for trade and strong protections for workers and the environment.

Thanks to Panama's leadership, this summit included a special focus on how countries can expand access to education. I want to thank our private sector partners who pledged to continue their support of our 100,000 Strong in the Americas initiative to encourage more exchanges between our students. The nearly \$70 million in investments that I've announced in Jamaica will expand education and training and employment programs for young people across Latin America and the Caribbean, including in impoverished and marginalized communities. And the Young Leaders of the Americas initiative that I launched will help young entrepreneurs and civil society leaders across the entire region access the training and the resources and connections they need to start new ventures, including the small businesses that create so many jobs in the region.

Finally, we took new steps to invest in clean energy and combat climate change. The new fund I announced with our Caribbean and Central American partners will help mobilize private sector investment in clean energy projects and reduce carbon emissions across the region, and our new energy task force will identify additional steps we can take together. A number of our countries committed to doubling our collective share of non-hydro renewable energy by 2030.



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I reaffirmed that, through our \$3 billion pledge to the Green Climate Fund, the United States will continue to help developing nations deal with the impacts of climate change. And I reiterated our commitment to ensure that all countries in the hemisphere have open access to climate data as we meet this challenge together.

So, continued progress on Cuba; new commitments to help lift up young people in the region; new partnerships to protect this beautiful land and our planet. As I said this morning, the United States is more deeply engaged across the region than we have been in decades, and I believe the relationship between the United States and the Americas is as good as it has ever been. We're focused on the future and what we can build and achieve together. And our engagement with the countries and peoples of the Americas is going to continue throughout the remainder of my presidency.

So, with that, let me take some questions. I'll start with Jim Kuhnhenh.

Question: Thank you, Mr. President. Sir, you head back to the United States with the task of convincing the American people and Congress on two major foreign policy initiatives -- the framework for a nuclear deal with Iran, and likely soon, the decision to remove Cuba from a list of state sponsors of terror. Recent remarks by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini have raised doubts among some as to whether that deal can occur in Iran. And Senator Schumer, an ally of yours, has -- wants Congress to have the right to vote on removal of sanctions. Presidential politics are likely to play a part in this Cuba decision inevitably. So I'm wondering if it would take a lot of political capital just to get one done, let alone two. Have you bitten off more than you can chew?

President Obama: No. You may be surprised by that response, Jim. Let me take them in turn.

First of all, with respect to Cuba, there is majority support of our policy in the United States, and there's overwhelming support for our policy in Cuba. I think people recognize that if you keep on doing something for 50 years and it doesn't work, you should try something new.

And so the American people don't need to be persuaded that this is, in fact, the right thing to do. I recognize that there are still concerns and questions that Congress may have; we've got concerns and questions about specific activities that are taking place in Cuba, and human rights and reform. And there were two members of the Cuban civil society that were in attendance at the meeting that I had yesterday who expressed much of what they have to go through on a day-to-day basis. They were supportive of our policy of engagement with Cuba.

And so I don't think that it's so much we have to persuade anybody. The issue of the State Sponsor of Terrorism list -- as you know, the State Department has provided a recommendation; it's gone through our interagency process. I'll be honest with you, I have been on the road, and I want to make sure that I have a chance to read it, study it, before we announce publicly what the policy outcome is going to be.



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But in terms of the overall direction of Cuba policy, I think there is a strong majority both in the United States and in Cuba that says our ability to engage, to open up commerce and travel and people-to-people exchanges is ultimately going to be good for the Cuban people.

Now, with respect to Iran, I have always been clear: We are not done yet. What we were able to obtain was a political framework between the P5+1 nations and Iran that provided unprecedented verification of what is taking place in Iran over the next two decades that significantly cuts back on its centrifuges, that cuts off pathways for it to obtain a nuclear weapon, and that calls for, in return, the rolling back of sanctions in a phased way that allows us to snap back if Iran violates the agreement. That's the political framework. That was not just something that the United States and Iran agreed to, but Iran agreed to a political framework with the other P5+1 nations.

Now, what's always been clear is, is that Iran has its own politics around this issue. They have their own hardliners. They have their own countervailing impulses in terms of whether or not to go forward with something, just as we have in our country. And so it's not surprising to me that the Supreme Leader or a whole bunch of other people are going to try to characterize the deal in a way that protects their political position. But I know what was discussed at -- in arriving at the political agreement.

What I've always said, though, is that there's the possibility of backsliding. There's the possibility that it doesn't get memorialized in a way that satisfies us that we're able to verify that, in fact, Iran is not getting a nuclear weapon, and that we are preserving the capacity to snap back sanctions in the event that they are breaking any deal.

And that's why the work is going to be so important between now and the end of June to memorialize this so that we can all examine it. And we don't have to speculate on what the meaning of a deal is going to be. Either there's going to be a document that Iran agrees with the world community about and a series of actions that have to be taken, or there's not. Part of the challenge in this whole process has been opponents of basically any deal with Iran have constantly tried to characterize what the deal is without seeing it.

Now, if we are able to obtain a final deal that comports with the political agreement -- and I say "if" because that's not yet final -- then I'm absolutely positive that that is the best way to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. And that's not my opinion; that's the opinion of people like Ernie Moniz, my Secretary of Energy, who is a physicist from MIT and actually knows something about this stuff. That's the opinion of a whole bunch of nuclear experts who examined the deal.

Very rarely do you see a consensus -- "consensus" is too strong a word -- a large majority of people who are experts in the field saying this is actually a realistic, plausible, meaningful approach to cut off the pathways for Iran getting a nuclear weapon, and that it is more likely to succeed not only than maintaining current sanctions or additional sanctions, but more likely to succeed than if we took a military approach to solving the problem.



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Again, that's not uniquely my opinion. That is -- talk to people who are not affiliated with the administration, some of whom were skeptical about our capacity to get a deal done and have now looked at it and said if we're able to actually get what was discussed in the political framework, it's absolutely the right thing to do.

Now, there's politics and political pressure inside of the United States. We all know that. The Prime Minister of Israel is deeply opposed to it. I think he's made that very clear. I have repeatedly asked, what is the alternative that you present that you think makes it less likely for Iran to get a nuclear weapon, and I have yet to obtain a good answer on that that.

And the narrow question that's going to be presented next week when Congress comes back is what's Congress's appropriate role in looking at a final deal. And I've talked to not only Bob Corker, but I've talked to Ben Cardin, the Ranking Member on the Democratic side. And I want to work with them so that Congress can look at this deal when it's done. What I'm concerned about is making sure that we don't prejudge it, or those who are opposed to any deal whatsoever try to use a procedural argument essentially to screw up the possibility of a deal.

Last comment I'm going to make on this. When I hear some, like Senator McCain recently, suggest that our Secretary of State, John Kerry, who served in the United States Senate, a Vietnam veteran, who's provided exemplary service to this nation, is somehow less trustworthy in the interpretation of what's in a political agreement than the Supreme Leader of Iran -- that's an indication of the degree to which partisanship has crossed all boundaries. And we're seeing this again and again. We saw it with the letter by the 47 senators who communicated directly to the Supreme Leader of Iran -- the person that they say can't be trusted at all -- warning him not to trust the United States government.

We have Mitch McConnell trying to tell the world, oh, don't have confidence in the U.S. government's abilities to fulfill any climate change pledge that we might make. And now we have a senator suggesting that our Secretary of State is purposely misinterpreting the deal and giving the Supreme Leader of Iran the benefit of the doubt in the interpretations.

That's not how we're supposed to run foreign policy, regardless of who's President or Secretary of State. We can have arguments, and there are legitimate arguments to be had. I understand why people might be mistrustful of Iran. I understand why people might oppose the deal -- although the reason is not because this is a bad deal per se, but they just don't trust any deal with Iran, and may prefer to take a military approach to it.

But when you start getting to the point where you are actively communicating that the United States government and our Secretary of State is somehow spinning presentations in a negotiation with a foreign power, particularly one that you say is your enemy, that's a problem. It needs to stop.



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Jim Acosta. Oh, I'm sorry -- where's Jim?

Question: Right here.

President Obama: There you are.

Question: Thank you very much, Mr. President. I was wondering if you were struck by Raul Castro's warm words for you today. He said he admired you; said he had read some of your autobiographies; described you as an honest man. I'm just curious what you thought about that. And do you feel that Raul Castro is an honest man and can be trusted?

And I would be remiss if I didn't ask you about another Secretary of State -- Hillary Clinton -- who is expected to announce her campaign for the presidency tomorrow. Do you foresee being involved in her campaign? And do you hope that she runs on your record? Thank you very much.

President Obama: It was a candid and fruitful conversation between me and Raul Castro. I can tell you that, in the conversations I've had so far with him -- two on the phone and, most recently, face-to-face -- that we are able to speak honestly about our differences and our concerns in ways that I think offer the possibility of moving the relationship between our two countries in a different and better direction.

We have very different views of how society should be organized. And I was very direct with him that we are not going to stop talking about issues like democracy and human rights and freedom of assembly and freedom of the press -- not because we think we are perfect and that every country has to mimic us exactly, but because there are a set of universal principles for which we stand.

And one of the goals of my administration is to have some consistency in speaking out on behalf of those who oftentimes don't have a voice. And I think during his speech in the plenary session, he was pretty clear about areas of U.S. policy he doesn't like, and I suspect he's going to continue to speak out on those.

What's been clear from this entire summit, though, is the unanimity with which, regardless of their ideological predispositions, the leaders of Latin America think this is the right thing to do. Because what they see is the possibility of a more constructive dialogue that ultimately benefits the Cuban people, and removes what too often has been a distraction or an excuse from the hemisphere acting on important challenges that we face.

So I am cautiously optimistic that over the coming months and coming years that the process that we've initiated, first announced in December, reaffirmed here at the Summit of the Americas, will lead to a different future for the Cuban people and a different relationship between the United States and Cuba.



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With respect to Hillary Clinton, I'll make my comments very brief. She was a formidable candidate in 2008. She was a great supporter of mine in the general election. She was an outstanding Secretary of State. She is my friend. I think she would be an excellent President. And I'm not on the ballot. So I'm not going to step on her lines. When she makes a decision to announce, I'm confident that she will be very clear about her vision for the country moving forward, if she announces.

And in terms of her relationship with my administration, she was focused and working on really important foreign policy initiatives. And the one thing I can say is that she's going to be able to handle herself very well in any conversations or debates around foreign policy. And her track record with respect to domestic policy is I think one that cares about working families. If she decides to run and she makes an announcement, she's going to have some strong messages to deliver.

Jim Avila.

Question: Thank you, Mr. President. First of all, on Cuba, if I could, two questions. The Cuban government has frequently said that it cannot allow more political or personal freedoms, or press freedoms, because the United States has used both covert and otherwise actions to try to overthrow the Castros. Does your new era, in fact, end regime-change efforts by the United States? And should the Cubans then respond by allowing free elections and tolerance of dissent now because of the changed policy?

And secondly, on the issue of Hillary Clinton, Vice President Biden, of course, said that the Democratic race is wide open. The polls seem to say otherwise. What is your opinion on that? Is the race still wide open?

President Obama: Not only have I run my last election, but I am not in the business of prognosticating future elections. That is your job. (Laughter.) And there's no shortage of people who are happy to opine on that. I will not be one of them.

On Cuba, we are not in the business of regime change. We are in the business of making sure the Cuban people have freedom and the ability to participate and shape their own destiny and their own lives, and supporting civil society.

And there's going to be an evolution, regardless of what we do, inside of Cuba. Partly it's going to be generational. If you listened to President Castro's comments earlier this morning, a lot of the points he made referenced actions that took place before I was born, and part of my message here is the Cold War is over. There's still a whole lot of challenges that we face and a lot of issues around the world, and we're still going to have serious issues with Cuba on not just the Cuban government's approach to its own people, but also regional issues and concerns. There are going to be areas where we cooperate as well. Cuban doctors deployed during the Ebola crisis made a difference; Cuban activity in Haiti in the wake of the earthquake made a difference. And so there may be areas of collaboration as well.



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What I said to President Castro is the same thing that I've said to leaders throughout the region. We have a point of view and we won't be shy about expressing it. But I'm confident that the way to lift up the values that we care about is through persuasion. And that's going to be the primary approach that we take on a whole host of these issues -- primarily because they don't implicate our national security in a direct way.

And I think that we have to be very clear if Cuba is not a threat to the United States. That doesn't mean we don't have differences with it. But on the list of threats that I'm concerned about, I think it's fair to say that between ISIL and Iran getting a nuclear weapon, and activities in Yemen and Libya, and Boko Haram, Russian aggression in Ukraine and the impact on our allies there -- I could go down a pretty long list -- climate change -- so I think our approach has to be one of trying to work with the region and other countries, and be very clear about what we believe and what we stand for, and what we think works and what doesn't.

And so often, when we insert ourselves in ways that go beyond persuasion, it's counterproductive. It backfires. That's been part of our history -- which is why countries keep on trying to use us as an excuse for their own governance failures. Let's take away the excuse. And let's be clear that we're prepared to partner and engage with everybody to try to lift up opportunity and prosperity and security for people in the region.

Major Garrett.

Question: Good afternoon, Mr. President. Allow me, if you will, to correct -- to quote the Supreme Leader directly.

President Obama: Yes.

Question: The United States activity since the announcement of the framework has been deceptive, it is lying, it is devilish. And on two particular points, he said -- direct quotes -- "Iran's military sites cannot be inspected under the excuse of nuclear supervision," and "all sanctions should be removed when the deal is signed."

Is it your opinion, Mr. President, that this is pure posturing and it should be disregarded by your government and by you and your Secretary of State? And if so, could you help me understand to whom the Supreme Leader would be posturing? Because under my limited understanding of Iranian politics, that's not a job description usually applied to the Supreme Leader.

President Obama: That was a well-crafted question, Major. And let me just suggest that even a guy with the title "Supreme Leader" has to be concerned about his own constituencies. And the issue is not whether I have to take his word for whether that's his understanding -- because we've got work until the end of June to see if we've got a document that works.



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And if that is his understanding and his position, in ways that can't be squared with our concern about being able to embark on vigorous inspections to assure that Iran isn't cheating under any program, and that we don't have the capacity to snap back sanctions when we see a potential violation, then we're probably not going to get a deal.

So part of the concern that I have in this debate here, Major, is I don't understand why it is that everybody is working so hard to anticipate failure. The opponents of the deal don't seem to be focused on how do we get to a good deal as much as they're focused on how can we show that it's not possible to get a good deal. And my simple point is let's wait and see what the deal is, and we'll be able to look. And if, in fact, we're not satisfied that it cuts off the pathways for Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon, then we won't sign it.

If, on the other hand, it does, then I will strongly argue, and I believe the American people will support and the international community will support, that it's far preferable to the other alternatives.

Now, Major, it's not going to be perfect, in the sense that if you asked Prime Minister Netanyahu or some members of the Republican caucus, or even some Democrats. If you ask me, would I prefer that Iran never had, never did have, will never have even a single nut, bolt, anything related to nuclear power, don't have any nuclear scientists, don't have any capacity to develop it, that would be great. But that's not possible. That's not achievable. That's not achievable through sanctions; it's not achievable through military means.

They're going to have some form of peaceful nuclear power, and that will then pose a challenge for the international community, which is why the political agreement calls for unprecedented framework of inspections that allows us to assure that it's not being used or diverted in ways that could be weaponized.

But we're going to have to see whether or not we can get a deal or not. My only question is why we keep on trying to short-circuit the actual negotiations. Nobody is -- we're not disarming. We're not getting rid of our nuclear weapons. We're not getting rid of our Navy. We're not giving anything up. We are simply waiting to see what it is that the negotiators come up with. And if, in fact, we are able to come up with something that works, then we'll know.

And with respect to the Supreme Leader, yes, it's a pretty important title. It seems a little more clear-cut than President. On the other hand, there may be ways of structuring a final deal that satisfy their pride, their optics, their politics, but meet our core practical objectives. And that's what we've got to give the negotiators room to determine.

Last question. Karen DeYoung. Where's Karen? There she is.



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Question: Thank you. Just to belabor the point on that question, Mr. President, your people have said that the framework agreement, that what's in it stands, that they are not renegotiable points, although the implementation of them can be renegotiated in some way. And I wonder how, within that framework that's already been agreed, how we can come up with something that satisfies the kinds of concerns that he raised -- no inspection of military sites, immediate lifting of all sanctions the day that the thing is signed.

And also on Cuba, I wanted to ask, as you discussed the State Sponsor of Terrorism list with President Castro, the Cubans have raised some issues about the 45-day waiting period. I wondered if that came up. I know that your government is eager, assuming that the recommendation is approved -- is to remove it and is approved by you -- that we move ahead quickly with embassies. The Cubans have raised concerns about that 45 days and how something could go wrong in those 45 days. And it really doesn't give them access to the kinds of things they think they can have once they're -- if and when they're removed from the list. Did that come up? And is it your belief that once they're removed from the list, then there is no impediment to go ahead with opening embassies, once you approve their removal from the list?

President Obama: Okay. So I'll make one last run at Iran here. There's a political framework, the outlines of which were established between Iran and the P5+1. In some cases, there was great specificity around, for example, the reductions that need to take place in the number of centrifuges in Natanz, or the conversion of Fordow into a facility that does not permit the potential production of weapons-grade uranium. And in other cases, there were -- there was language of intent, but the details matter. And how those details are interpreted are going to be subject to negotiation.

So it's not accurate to suggest that -- and I don't think my team has ever suggested that somehow everything is all done and it's just a matter of writing it up. This is a situation in which we have a framework that is, if implemented, powerful, and will achieve our goal of making sure that Iran doesn't have a nuclear weapon. But the details make a big difference, how they're structured. And I guarantee you there will be some tough negotiations around that.

And that's what I said the first day when we announced that we had an agreement, and that's what we've continued to say. So there's really no contradiction here. And keep in mind that when we started this process off, even with the interim agreement, when we signed the JPOA way back at the beginning of this whole thing, there was a similar back-and-forth in terms of interpretation of how this was going to be implemented. And the Iranians were saying that's not true, and we were saying this. But once we actually got through negotiations, it turned out that we had something that was substantial, that was subject to review by everybody involved, and that has proven to be highly effective, even by the assessments of critics of the policy like the Israelis.



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They've said, yes, this actually has worked, Iran has abided by the agreement. In fact, now they're suggesting, why don't we just stay here, it's worked so well -- despite the fact that they had made almost the precise same argument they're making now about the final deal. But consistency is the hobgoblin of narrow minds.

Cuba. I will tell you, we did not get into the level of detail, Karen, that you just described. And I'm impressed with how many details you seem to be aware of. As I said before, the State Sponsor of Terrorism recommendation will be coming to me. I will read it; I'll review it. There's a process whereby if, in fact, I accept those recommendations, Congress has an opportunity to review it, as well, and it will be there for people to see.

I think that the concerns around the embassy are going to be mostly on the Cuban side. They haven't dealt with an American embassy in Cuba in quite some time. And changing in this way is, I'm sure, an unsettling process. We're accustomed to this. I mean, we've gone through now a number of times where, with China and with Vietnam and other countries, we reopened diplomatic relations, and we understand I think, are familiar with how that gets done in a way that's consistent with improving diplomatic relations over the long term. This is probably a more profound shift for them than it is for us.

But we stand ready to move forward. We're confident that it can lead to an improved dialogue. And our bottom line at the end is, is that it can lead to an improved set of prospects for the Cuban people.

And I'll say just in closing, to all the people here from Latin American countries, thank you for this extraordinary opportunity. I want to thank the people of Panama. I am very optimistic about this region, and the main reason I'm optimistic about this region is because of its people. They are extraordinary. And it is a great gift to the United States to be able to have such strong friends and partners in tackling many of the challenges that we have in common.

Thank you very much.