

# Congress Focuses on Ukraine, Iran, Syria and Boko Haram; President Obama hosts German Chancellor Merkel

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## Russia/Ukraine Crisis

Secretary of State **John Kerry** visited Kyiv and met with **Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko**. While seeking a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Ukraine, Secretary Kerry said the United States would not “close [its] eyes” to Russian tanks and fighters crossing Ukraine’s borders. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande were also in Kyiv late Thursday meeting with President Poroshenko to discuss a possible diplomatic solution. Both departed for Moscow, where they met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss the proposal before heading to the Munich Security Conference. On Sunday, the media reported officials from France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia are expected to meet this Wednesday in Minsk, Belarus, in a fresh attempt to reach a peace deal in the Ukrainian conflict.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) last Wednesday for his confirmation process, Defense Secretary-nominee Ashton Carter said he is “inclined” to provide lethal arms and other defensive equipment to Ukraine to assist the country in its fight against Russian-supplied and trained separatists. On Thursday, SASC Chairman John McCain (R-Arizona) said there was “overwhelming bipartisan consensus” in Congress to provide Ukraine with lethal assistance. Chairman McCain also said his Committee would be “looking at marking up legislation” calling for the defensive arming of Ukraine. Meanwhile, NATO Defense Ministers met last Thursday to review progress and direct further work on the implementation of the NATO Readiness Action Plan.

On Thursday, 12 February, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will hold a business meeting on a resolution that would express the sense of the Senate regarding the 24 January 2015 attacks carried out by Russian-backed rebels on the civilian population in Mariupol, Ukraine, and the provision of lethal and non-lethal military assistance to Ukraine.

## President Obama Hosts German Chancellor

President Barack Obama hosted **German Chancellor Merkel** at the White House for a bilateral meeting and working lunch, with Vice President Joe Biden joining the meetings. The leaders discussed a range of issues including Ukraine, Russia, counterterrorism, ISIL, Afghanistan, and Iran,

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economic growth, international trade, climate change and Germany's plans for hosting the G-7 Summit in June.

## Vice President's Trip & The Munich Security Conference

In Brussels last Friday, Vice President Biden met with European Union officials, discussing the conflict between Russia and Ukraine; energy security; the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and policies to promote economic growth; counterterrorism cooperation and countering violent extremism; as well as other global issues. The Vice President also met with Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel and discussed bilateral relations, countering violent extremism, TTIP, and global issues, including the coalition effort to degrade and destroy ISIL.

Over the weekend, Vice President Biden attended the Munich Security Conference. He held a trilateral meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Poroshenko. Also on the margins of the Conference, in the afternoon, the Vice President held a bilateral meeting with President Rosen Plevneliev of Bulgaria; met with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg; and held a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi of Iraq. On Sunday, Vice President Biden met on the margins of the Summit with Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili of Georgia; held a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Milo Dukanovic of Montenegro; and held a bilateral meeting with Iraqi Kurdistan Regional President Masoud Barzani. SASC Chairman McCain led a bipartisan congressional delegation to the annual Munich Security Conference, which included House Armed Services Committee (HASC) Chairman Mac Thornberry (R-Texas) and Senate.

## Iraq/Syrian Crises

Last week, ISIL immolated a captured Jordanian jet pilot – First Lieutenant Moaz al-Kasasbeh – while King Abdullah II of Jordan was in Washington, meeting with President Obama and Vice President Biden. President Obama condemned the horrific act, saying, “the coalition fights for everyone who has suffered from ISIL’s inhumanity.” On Wednesday, all the members of the SASC sent a letter to Secretary Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, calling for the urgent provision of military materiel to Jordan for its ongoing efforts against ISIL.

This Thursday, 12 February, the House Foreign Affairs Middle East and Global Human Rights Subcommittees will hold a joint hearing titled, “The Syrian Humanitarian Crisis: Four Years Later and No End in Sight.”

## Defense Secretary Confirmation Hearing

Despite facing a barrage of questions ranging from counterterrorism to Russian aggression to Guantánamo and more at his SASC confirmation hearing last Wednesday, **Ashton “Ash” Carter’s** nomination to be the next Secretary of Defense is expected to swiftly advance out of Committee to the full Senate for consideration.

## National Security Strategy

Last Friday at a Brookings Institution event, National Security Advisor Susan Rice released the Administration’s much delayed National Security Strategy. The President’s new National Security Strategy “provides a vision and strategy for advancing the nation’s interests, universal values, and a rules-based international order through strong and sustainable American leadership.” HASC Chairman Mac Thornberry commented on the Strategy from the Munich Security Conference, saying,

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“More than ever the world needs the United States to speak clearly and stand strong. Instead the President has adopted a posture of ‘strategic patience.’”

## Iran/Yemen

This Tuesday, 10 February, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will receive a closed briefing from U.S. officials on the state of the P5+1 Talks with Iran over its nuclear program. The House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade will hold a hearing on Wednesday, 11 February, titled, “State Sponsor of Terror: The Global Threat of Iran.”

Last week, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Ed Royce (R-California) issued a statement about the situation in Yemen:

“This takeover of Yemen by the Iranian-supported Houthi militia is a very dangerous blow to our national security. Iran is consolidating its grip on the region, our embassy is on lockdown, and al-Qaeda has more room to operate. The Administration must come to grips with the increasingly destructive role Iran is playing in the region.”

## Israel

The White House announced last week that Vice President Biden will be travelling abroad when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scheduled to address Congress in early March. The Prime Minister was invited and accepted an invitation from Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-Ohio) without advance notification to the White House, which is causing tension among pro-Israeli Democratic Members of Congress who have yet to determine if they will attend the joint session of Congress.

## Africa

Last Wednesday, **Boko Haram** brutally attacked the Cameroonian town of Fotokol, with reports indicating more than 80 civilians may have been killed, along with 13 Chadian and seven Cameroonian soldiers – combined forces that are fighting Boko Haram inside Cameroon and Nigeria. The U.N. Security Council condemned Boko Haram’s brutal attack on Thursday. Boko Haram also launched an attack inside Niger – broadening their attacks on Nigeria’s neighbors who are contributing forces to a multinational African Union force to fight the terrorist group. On Friday, the State Department condemned Boko Haram’s attacks in Cameroon and Niger, expressing support for the multinational joint task force, while acknowledging it is responding to requests from Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. Over the weekend, the State Department expressed disappointment over the Nigerian Government’s decision to delay the upcoming elections (originally scheduled for 14 February), saying political interference with the Independent National Electoral Commission is unacceptable.

On Thursday, 12 February, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will hold a business meeting on S. Res. 65 – a non-binding measure that supports efforts to bring an end to violence perpetrated by Boko Haram and urges the Government of Nigeria to conduct transparent, peaceful, and credible elections.

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## Trade

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) said last week that he is talking with the Obama Administration about how to address currency manipulation in legislation that would move in tandem with a Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) bill. Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Michigan), however, called for a currency manipulation provision to be included in TPA, as well as have it addressed within the far-advanced Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations.

## Keystone XL Pipeline

Last week, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) warned the **Keystone XL pipeline** could accelerate production from Canada's oil sands and worsen climate change. While green groups welcomed the EPA comments, pipeline supporters dismissed them as a bid to provide political cover to the President to deny the project permit.

## Cyber Attack

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Devin Nunes (R-California) condemned last Thursday the latest cyber attack on **Anthem**, a major Indianapolis-based health insurer, whose membership records were breached, potentially revealing personal information about 80 million current and former subscribers. He encouraged Congress to pass cyber security information-sharing legislation, which has failed to advance in the Senate in previous Congresses.

## FY 2016 Budget Request

Last Monday, President Obama released his \$4 trillion Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 Budget. The President's proposal provides \$50.3 billion in discretionary funding for the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development, including \$7.0 billion in Overseas Contingency Operations. Republicans have largely panned the President's budget proposal as a tax-and-spend wish list, saying it will never pass Congress.

## Looking Ahead

**Washington will likely focus on the following upcoming matters:**

- 9 February: President Obama to host German Chancellor Angela Merkel at the White House
- 18 February: White House to host Summit on Countering Violent Extremism
- 3 March: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address Congress
- 24 March: Framework deal with Iran due
- 24 September: Pope Francis to address Congress

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