

Congress Scrutinizes Iran, as the Deadline for a Final Deal Approaches; Ceasefire Violations in Ukraine Continue; Congress to Hold Hearings on ISIL; The House is Expected to Turn to Trade Measures At Some Point in June

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Vice President Mourns Death of Son

Late on Saturday, 30 May, the White House informed the public that Vice President Joseph Biden's son, Joseph R. "Beau" Biden III, passed away after a two-year battle with brain cancer. He was 46 years old.

Iran

Despite media reports last week that yet another delay may be necessary, the State Department denied another extension may be needed beyond 30 June to conclude a final deal with Iran regarding its nuclear facilities. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman, who leads the U.S. negotiators in the discussions with Iran, announced her resignation last Wednesday. She will continue to lead the U.S. negotiators in the discussions with Iran until a final deal is reached.

Secretary of State John Kerry is returning to Washington early, after concluding a round of talks with Iran and after breaking his leg during a bicycle ride over the weekend in Europe.

On Wednesday 3 June, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is expected to hold a hearing titled, "Implications Of The Iran Nuclear Agreement For U.S. Policy In The Middle East." The day before, the Committee will receive a closed briefing on Iran's nuclear program.

On Tuesday, 2 June, the House Foreign Affairs Committee will hold a hearing titled, "Americans Detained In Iran."

Russia/Ukraine Crisis

Last Thursday, the State Department criticized reports that the Russian government plans to classify military deaths during special operations in peacetime. Spokesperson Jeff Rathke alleged that the law is a misplaced effort to cover up Russian active duty military personnel fighting and dying in

eastern Ukraine, and further serves as a blow to freedom of the press. The United States continues to urge Russia to fully implement the Minsk agreements, warning that otherwise “the costs will continue to rise.” While the media is reporting on a Russian military build-up along eastern Ukraine’s border, the State Department declined to confirm whether the Obama Administration believes that Russia is preparing for a new offensive against Ukraine.

On Wednesday, 27 May, Vice President Biden asserted that U.S. sanctions on Russia must and will remain in place until the Minsk agreements are fully implemented. He expressed hope that European leaders will renew the existing sanctions when they meet at the end of June until the Minsk agreements are fully implemented. He emphasized that in the interim, the United States will continue to expose the truth about Russia’s actions and will coordinate closely with its partners to ensure that further Russian aggression is met with further costs if Russia again moves beyond the line of contact.

Also last Wednesday, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that he was deeply troubled by Russia’s escalating rhetoric about its nuclear weapons, as well as increased flights by its nuclear-capable bombers. The Secretary General said that if Russia places nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad, near Poland, or in Crimea, the balance of security in Europe would fundamentally change. President Barack Obama met with Secretary General Stoltenberg last Tuesday and discussed Russia’s increasingly aggressive posture in eastern Ukraine, among other topics.

FIFA

One day after Senators Robert Menendez (D-New Jersey) and John McCain (R-Arizona) sent a letter to the International Federation of Association Football (“FIFA”) Congress encouraging the international soccer governing body reconsider granting a fifth term to President Sepp Blatter, Swiss law enforcement agents arrested top FIFA authorities last week in connection with a U.S. Department of Justice investigation. Nine FIFA officials and several corporate executives have been indicted in New York on charges involving a racketeering conspiracy, as well as wire fraud and money laundering. Much of the attention is focused on Qatar being named host of the 2022 World Cup, but Senators Menendez and McCain were critical of Mr. Blatter for his support of Russia’s successful bid for the event in 2018.

Last Thursday, State Department Spokesperson Rathke denied that a recent U.S. Department of Justice investigation against FIFA leadership is an attempt by the US to influence the organization’s internal processes, including its selection of Russia as host of the 2018 World Cup. He emphasized that the investigation and its associated indictments are focused on addressing corruption allegations within the organization. While more arrests are expected, Mr. Blatter was re-elected – reportedly without U.S. support – on Friday.

Syria/Iraq Crisis

The U.S. military has started training Syrian opposition fighters in Turkey to combat ISIL, an expected expansion of the program first launched in Jordan several weeks ago. Secretary Kerry is expected to join by teleconference a meeting in Paris this Tuesday of Foreign Ministers who are part of the coalition against ISIL.

On Wednesday, 3 June, the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East will hold a hearing titled, “U.S. Policy Towards ISIL After Terror Group Seizes Ramadi and Palmyra.”

On Tuesday, 2 June, the House Foreign Affairs Terrorism Subcommittee will hold a hearing to review

the State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau.

Africa

On Thursday, 4 June, the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa will hold a hearing entitled, "Security Assistance in Africa."

On Wednesday, 3 June, the House Foreign Affairs Africa Subcommittee will hold a hearing titled, "The Future of U.S.-Zimbabwe Relations."

South China Sea

At the International Institute for Strategic Studies Summit in Singapore over the weekend, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said about China's activities in the South China Sea:

"Turning an underwater rock into an airfield simply does not afford the rights of sovereignty or permit restrictions on international air or maritime transit."

House June Agenda – Trade Measures Ahead

House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-California) released a Memorandum last Friday outlining his chamber's June agenda. While the agenda does not definitively state when, the House is expected to consider: (1) Trade Promotion Authority (TPA); (2) Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA); (3) a trade preferences measure (AGOA/GSP/Haiti program); and (4) a customs measure.

House Majority Leader McCarthy notes in the "Additional Items" section of the Memorandum:

"To preserve American interests abroad, grow our economy, and increase commerce, the House will likely consider H.R. 1314, The Trade Priorities and Accountability Act of 2015 (as amended by the Senate), which reauthorizes Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) and strengthens Congress' role in trade policy. When TPA is considered, the House will also consider the Trade Preferences Extension Act of 2015 and the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015." (Emphasis added).

Customs Measure

In a letter dated 22 May to Senate Finance Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) and Ranking Member Ron Wyden (D-Oregon), House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin) said he intends to include four amendments in the House version of a customs and enforcement bill (H.R. 1907) that failed to advance in the Senate's version of the TPA bill. These changes include:

1. Trade remedy law changes championed by Senators Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) and Rob Portman (R-Ohio), currently pending in the House as H.R. 2523.

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2. Compromise language on human trafficking originally offered by Senator Robert Menendez (D-New Jersey).
 3. An immigration-related amendment originally offered by Senators Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and Hatch.
 4. An amendment championed by Senator Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) that would create a principal negotiating objective regarding opportunities for U.S. exports in fish, seafood and shellfish.

Despite an International Monetary Fund assessment that China's currency is no longer undervalued, some argue a provision to address foreign currency manipulation is still needed.

Trans-Pacific Partnership

Chief negotiators of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) continued negotiations in Guam last week, though a lack of TPA remains a significant obstacle to concluding some of the agreement's more complex chapters. Meanwhile, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russell said on 27 May that the United States welcomes the Republic of Korea's interest in joining the TPP in the future. On 26 May, the White House announced that President Barack Obama would welcome Korean President Park Geun-hye to the White House on 16 June.

Transatlantic Trade & Investment Partnership

Last Thursday, the European Parliament's International Trade Committee passed a non-binding resolution that endorsed inclusion of an investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanism in the Transatlantic Trade & Investment Partnership (TTIP) agreement and also called on the United States to adopt higher labor standards.

Cuba

Last Friday, the Obama Administration formally removed Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism. State Department Spokesperson Rathke said,

“The rescission of Cuba's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism reflects our assessment that Cuba meets the statutory criteria for rescission.”

Cuba has been on the list for nearly 30 years.

2015 Climate Investment Reports Released

Last Friday, the State Department began a staggered release of its 2015 Investment Climate Statements. These reports cover more than 175 foreign markets and provide country-specific information and assessments on investment-related laws and other pertinent factors for doing business abroad. U.S. embassies and consulates prepared the statements to assist U.S. companies with making informed decisions regarding investment in foreign markets.

Looking Ahead

Washington will likely focus on the following upcoming matters:

- 7-8 June: G-7 Summit in Schloss Elmau, Germany
- 16 June: President Obama will host President Park Geun-hye of the Republic of Korea
- 24-24 June: NATO Defense Ministerial in Brussels
- 30 June: US Export-Import Bank charter expires
- 30 June: P5+1 Talks with Iran deadline to reach a deal
- 13 July: President Obama to host Conference on Aging
- [TBD] July: President Obama to travel to Kenya attend the Global Entrepreneurship Summit
- 15 September: 70th Session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) opens in New York City
- 24 September: Pope Francis to address Congress and meet with President Obama
- 28 September: General debate of the UNGA begins

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National Law Review, Volume V, Number 152

Source URL: <https://natlawreview.com/article/congress-scrutinizes-iran-deadline-final-deal-approaches-ceasefire-violations-ukrain>