

White House Press Briefing (via ABC News Live)

06/07/21

12:52:39 p.m.

5 minutes and 43 seconds

APRIL RYAN: Two questions. One with Putin and one here back at home. With Putin, the President is going into this meeting where there is great tension between both leaders and let's talk about the trust factor. How can you trust anything Vladimir Putin says in this sit down with the President comes back and you're going to learn what he's thinking and what he wants to move forward? How can you trust that as Vladimir Putin has already smeared the president's name? How can you do that? How can you trust?

JAKE SULLIVAN: Taking the measure of another president is not about trusting them and the relationship between the U.S. and Russia is not about relationship and trust. It's about a relationship of verification. It's about a relationship of clarifying what our expectations are and laying out that, if certain kinds of harmful activities continue to occur, there will be responses from the United States.

RYAN: What are those [INAUDIBLE]

SULLIVAN: Well, we will lay those out for President Putin in this meeting, and he will understand fully where the United States stands and what we intend to do, but one thing I will say, April, is we believe fundamentally that our capacity to ensure that harmful and disruptive activities against the United States do not continue unabated is to be able to communicate clearly directly, not by negotiating in public, but by explicating our position and our capabilities in private, and that's what President Putin intends to do.

RYAN: Then my second question — my second question, Jake on voting, um, the For the People's Act. Um, if it is not passed, what is the national security issue with it? Is their national security issue with it if it's not passed? Because we've heard so much over the past few years about issues of voting. If that is not passed, is it a national security issue?

SULLIVAN: I would say the basic notion of democratic reform and voting rights in the United States is a national security issue. We are in a competition of models, with autocracies, and we are trying to show the world that American democracy and democracy writ large can work, can effectively deliver the will of the people and to the extent that we are not updating, refurbishing, revamping our own democratic processes and procedures to meet the needs of the modern moment, then we are not going to be a successful in making that case to the rest of the world to China, to Russia or to anyone else. And so there is a national security dimension to this today, just as there was through the decades of the Cold War.

YAMICHE ALCINDOR: Thank you so much. My question is, can you talk a bit about how President Biden plans to convince — especially our European allies — that President — former President Trump was an anomaly in some ways, all of the things that he did in some ways, traumatized both leaders, calling into question the need for NATO. What's the plan there and is

concern that those scars are gonna be deeper than his ability to address them in this one trip?

SULLIVAN: I think our view going into this trip is that actions speak louder than words and that showing that the United States is capable of turning the corner on the pandemic, showing that the United States is capable of making the dramatic investments that will pull us up and out of this economic recovery and help our global growth, showing the world that we are ultimately capable of making the investments in R and D, infrastructure innovation, and workforce, ultimately setting that foundation for this country will be the most effective way to show the rest of the world that the United States has the power and purpose to be able to deliver as the world's leading democracy,

ALCINDOR: And —

SULLIVAN: So that's what he's going to try to demonstrate and he, as I said at the outset, feels he goes into this from a position of strength because of the record he's built up over the course of the first four months.

ALCINDOR: And on voting, can you talk a little bit — is Congress being briefed on the idea of voting as a national security issue. And the For the People Act isn't passed, what will that say globally, given the fact that you just laid it out of the national security issue?

SULLIVAN: So, I will say humbly as the national security advisor, I don't tend to get into the middle of the debates up on the hill on issues like voting rights. All I can say is the bottom line principle, not specific question about the vehicle or the — or the time frame, but rather the fundamental principle, which is that a strong, vibrant American democracy that protects voting rights is the best way for us to make the case to the world that our model and not some other model is the right model to actually vindicate the will of the people here in the United States and for other democracies to be able to do the same. [TO KAREM] Yeah.

BRIAN KAREM: Yeah two quick questions. One to follow-up on Yamiche. The biggest concern of some of our allies has been, over the last four years, and even before, just the rapid swing back and forth of our foreign policy. Now, you can't assure anyone what's going to happen after you leave, but what assurances and what will you tell our allies that, despite what we've seen in the past, that we have returned to normal.

SULLIVAN: I think the best way to answer that question and — and this to build on what I said to Yamiche is what President Biden can do is show the rest of the world what America is capable of. If we can lead the world in ending the Covid-19 pandemic more rapidly, if the growth we are powering for the American people here at home helps power a global economic recovery, if we can help rally, as the President did with his climate leaders summit, action on climate — on the climate crisis so that we actually beat this thing, ultimately. That is going to be the best way for people to say, “man, the United States can do this. They can deliver and we will stand up and stand behind them.” And that is the approach that he has taken from the first day he's been in office. That's the message he's going to carry into these meetings and what I believe we will deliver just out of the G-7 alone, in addition to the other meetings he's going to have on this trip,

will show that the United States retains profound capacity to help rally the world's democracies to solve big problems.

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1:04:16 p.m.

1 minute and 13 seconds

PHILIP WEGMANN: When the United States rejoined the World Health Organization, you wrote in a statement that meant, “holding it to the highest standards.” Does that mean that the World Health Organization had failed to meet those standards at some point? And then, what specifically um, is this administration doing to make certain that they are held to those standards?

SULLIVAN: So we have made clear from the beginning of this administration and in rejoining that we believe the WHO does need to be reformed. Some of those reforms are more programmatic and bureaucratic. They relate to ensuring greater efficiency and effectiveness in responding to things like the outbreak of Covid-19. Some of them are about making sure that there is not undue influence or interference by any single member state or country in the WHO, and then some of them relate to very targeted issues like the Covid-19 origins investigation where I have personally and we collectively have been quite vocal about our view that there needs to be a second round to this investigation that truly gets to the heart of the matter, which is the original data and original information that is still being withheld by China and our hope is that in the coming months, we will see a credible international investigation progress, including in respect to those items.

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1:13:31 p.m.

2 minutes

JOSH BOAK: First, Senator Manchin laid out the argument that election reform should be bipartisan because anything partisan would “destroy the already weakening bodies of our democracy.” Does the President agree with that sentiment? Or is that sentiment untenable because the state level changes being pushed by Republicans?

[PSAKI]

(....)

1:22:31 p.m.

32 seconds

TYLER PAGER: And then just on — on the Vice President, obviously, you know, the President said that she was going to take a leadership role in voting rights. Democrats have warned that if, you know, Washington doesn't take action, that the midterms will be quite difficult, given the

changing voting laws. Is — is there going to be a more, you know — are we going to see signs of more urgency from the White House about taking action on voting rights? Obviously, the President has had a lot of lawmakers in the Oval Office to talk about infrastructure. Will we be seeing more signs of — of an increasing focus on trying to make progress on voting rights?

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1:26:03 p.m.

1 minute and 54 seconds

RYAN: Back on the issue of voting rights. You said the President issues some executive orders on voting rights, but they don't deal with the issue of — of *Shelby v. Holder* 2013 when it comes to preclearance, so how do you equate that?

PSAKI: Well I wasn't intending to equate it. So the question earlier was broadly about voting, right? It was not about whether or not it's essential to move forward with legislation that would make voting more accessible, ensure that everyone knew that every vote was counted. I think it's important to know and understand the President doesn't feel that, you know — that John Lewis Voting Act — Voting Rights Act is a replacement for the For the People Act and that it is necessary to move forward with more than that.

RYAN: And to follow up on that, um, tomorrow, Joe Manchin is meeting — it's reported — he's meeting with civil rights leaders. Civil rights leaders who pretty much aligned themselves with this administration. And what are your hopes? Because, I mean, they seem like they could be your last hope if there is any hope to move him on his opposition against the For the People Act.

PSAKI: Well, look, I don't know that I can speak to a meeting that has no member of the administration is participating in, April, but I can tell you that the president is going to continue and as are members of this administration have been leading this effort from Susan Rice is to Cedric to anyone who's at the highest level and obviously to the vice president when she returns from her trip to advocating for a path forward on how we can ensure that everyone knows their vote counts, that we make voting more accessible, that we make it easier and harder. Those are fundamentals. The President, the Vice President, other members of the administration will be open to, eager to have that discussion with anyone who wants to be constructive in that moving forward.

RYAN: Are you [INAUDIBLE] that his heart will change?

PSAKI: I'm not going to make a prediction about Senator Manchin's on an issue. I pointed to him to speak to that.

(....)

1:29:13 p.m.

2 minutes and 47 seconds

DOOCY: On COVID-19 origins, China has basically already said they think their part in an international investigation is done. So why is Jake Sullivan still here, saying he thinks it's possible that they're going to provide the preliminary data at some point?

PSAKI: Well, I don't think we just give up that easily. We are — can continue to press — in coordination with the international community — China to be transparent, to be forthcoming with data and information. We're not going to just stand by and accept that they've said they're not going to participate. Now, at the same time, as you know, we're also launching our own review. And our own process, and I'm certain this will be a topic of discussion as the President goes overseas this week?

DOOCY: And when you say that the White House is going to continue to press, what is that? What is that? What press mean?

PSAKI: Well —

DOOCY: What are you doing?

PSAKI: — ok.

DOOCY: No. I mean, like what — what mechanism?

PSAKI: What steps are we taking to press.

DOOCY: Yes.

PSAKI: We are engaging certainly at the highest levels and will continue to do that. Whether it's the secretary of state or other leaders who engage on it on through national security, diplomatic conversations and we will continue to work through the WHO and also with our international partners to exert that pressure and ensure that we're all going to keep pressing for them to release data — underlying data and participate in the second stage of this investigation.

DOOCY: And then just quickly, a housekeeping thing. Presidents Bush, Obama and Trump all commemorated D-Day anniversaries on D-Day — on D-Day anniversary. Why didn't President Biden?

PSAKI: Well, I can tell you that certainly the valid — his value for the role that men and the — men who served on D-Day and the memory of them, the families who have kept their memories alive over the course of years on this day is something the President spoke to many, many times in the past. Um, it's close to his heart, and I wouldn't be surprised if there's more we would have to say on it. Go ahead.

MIKE MEMOLI: Jen, I know you say you don't want to read out any private conversations —

PSAKI: Yeah.

MEMOLI: But it certainly seems like the President and Senator Manchin are sending messages to one another in the public. You had the President last week, expressing some frustration about — he didn't name him, but senators in his party who vote with the other side, you have the op-ed from Senator Manchin this weekend. Are these two men on the same page? Does the White House feel like it understands and knows what Senator Manchin wants out of this, particularly his infrastructure talks. And can you say when --- how often these two have been speaking with one another, if not in person, by phone?

PSAKI: Well, I can certainly tell you that the president and senior members of the administration are in close touch with Senator Manchin and his team about infrastructure and about a range of issues where there is an opportunity to work together, moving forward. I'll also note that I'm pretty sure Senator Manchin is pretty proud of his independent streak and he made clear he took no offense to the President's comments last week.

1:32:00 p.m.
29 seconds

MEMOLI: Does the President see Senator Manchin as potentially an obstacle to his agenda if he follows through on not backing changes to the filibuster, not wanting to pursue infrastructure through reconciliation, that pretty much grounds the President's domestic agenda at this point.

PSAKI: Well, we're certainly not ready to accept that --- that analysis. I will say the President considers Senator Manchin, a friend. He knows that they may disagree on some issues as they do on this particular piece of legislation. He's going to continue to work with him, reach out to him[.]

(...)

1:33:39 p.m.
2 minutes and 28 seconds

ANDREW FEINBERG: So you've answered a number of questions about voting rights and people casting their votes. I wanted to ask you about counting the votes?

PSAKI: Yeah

FEINBERG: A number of the bills that have passed Republican legislatures and pending before Republican legislatures take voting and the counting of votes and the running of elections out of the hands of nonpartisan officials and put them in the hands of Republican state legislatures. This is what Donald Trump wanted done during the run up to when Congress certified President Biden's victory. This is what a lot of scholars are saying Republicans, as a whole, are preparing to do in the event Democrats win close elections in 2022 and 2024. The For the People Act does not address the issue of counting the votes and rigging or ignoring the counting of votes if a Democrat wins. How much of a concern is this to the President? And what — what's he going to do to highlight this and find a solution?

PSAKI: Well Andrew, it's a really important issue to raise and as you've noted, there are pieces of legislation putting the federal effort aside that are moving their way through state legislatures, which would make it part — a partisan, in some scenarios, in some cases, put the hands in the power of a partisan decision-making body or individual and clearly, that's concerning. We noted in the announcement about the Vice President's role is that her effort would be focused partially on federal legislation and moving that forward, seeing what path the path looks like moving, but also working with voting rights groups, working with state activists, working with others to see how we can address these challenges. It is a priority. It is a focus. Um, and again, the President's fundamental view is that it should be easier to vote, not harder and that we should ensure that everybody knows their vote is counted.

FEINBERG: Would the President support Congress amending the Electoral Count Act.

PSAKI: I — I am happy to see if there's any specific statement of administration policy we have on that particular piece.