

Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

Press Briefing: 66th United Nations General Assembly

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H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: (In progress) – welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I'm Andrew Schwartz. I'm our senior vice president for external relations. And I have the pleasure of working with these wonderful colleagues here who have agreed to get up at the crack of dawn. And, everybody, thank you all for coming so early, too. We want – and we knew today was a busy day and there was a lot of other briefings going on at the White House and so forth, and so we wanted to get this done early.

We will have a transcript later today which either Ryan or I will mail it out, and the only reason it won't be me is because – I was just telling Howard (sp) and some others – I'm embroiled in third-grade – the politics of third-grade basketball, and I also have to coach my fifth-grade baseball team today. So these are important matters of national security that I'm sure all of you came here to hear about. But we will be sending out a transcript later today and we'll also have video of this up on the website within a few hours after the event.

Without further ado, I'd like to introduce our Middle East Program director, Jon Alterman. Many of you know Jon. He's one of our senior, senior people here at CSIS and has a few things to say about what's going to be happening at the U.N. next week. And with that, I will turn it over to Jon.

JON ALTERMAN: Thank you. Thank you. It's good to see you all.

Because I know there's a lot of interest in this, I took the effort and I found a copy of Susan Rice's diary from last night. And it starts – the entry starts with, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, the age of foolishness. It was the epic of belief, the epic of incredulity, the season of light, the season of darkness, the spring of hope, the winter of despair. (Laughter.)

That's what this week is going to be like. There's good news that's coming out of the U.N. The good news is, the Libya stuff is actually going pretty well, right? The Libya stuff – if you're the Obama administration, where do you want Libya to go? You want Libya to go precisely where it has been going. There has been no mass casualties in Libya, no huge retribution. The international community is stepping up. There'll be a new resolution today in the Security Council that will authorize Ian Martin to go in with a team to work. It's not the United States making Libya into a model of what it wants to be; it's the U.S. and the international community assisting Libya, not with U.S. responsibility but with broad international support.

And the U.S. has played a facilitating role. We have a huge number of bilateral issues – very important issues, not just having to do with governance but having to do with weapons and decommissioning of weapons, finding the weapons that have disappeared.

It's not that we don't have issues in Libya. But the international community is acting precisely the way the United States would like the international community to act. The administration is playing the role it would like to play. And events on the ground are unfolding very much the way the United States would like them to unfold.

That's not to say Libya is going to be a success. It's much too early. We have a lot of bumps in the road ahead of us. But where we are with the U.N. right now, I think the feeling is, this is moving in place; this is what the U.N. is supposed to do.

That's the good side. That's the best of times.

The worst of times is, I can't figure out any way anybody comes out ahead on this Palestine vote. I see it hurting everybody's interest.

The Israelis have thrown down the gauntlet and said, this is a vital threat to the state of Israel, raising the stakes on a vote it will surely lose.

The United States finds itself in an impossible position, says it will veto the resolution in the Security Council, will end up once again on the wrong end of a lopsided vote in the General Assembly, surely leading to all sorts of complaints the administration has no credibility in the international stage.

The Europeans – I mean, I'll defer to Heather on this – I think the Europeans have a miserable choice ahead of them because on the one hand, they have been vociferously articulating their desire for a Palestinian state. They don't want to be on the wrong side of the United States. They don't want to alienate the Israelis. There is no good way for this to turn out for Europe.

And for the Palestinians, does this really do anything for the Palestinians? I would argue it does nothing for the Palestinians. It raises expectations in the Palestinian community for what follows. It does nothing practical that advances Palestinian interests. It antagonizes the Israelis. It makes them feel more isolated. It has them hunkered down more. And it antagonizes Congress who may cut U.S. funding for the Palestinian Authority.

I don't see any way anybody does an iota better as a consequence of this, but everybody's in a position where it's very hard to step down.

And the administration's approach has been to try to subvert this with diplomatic negotiations: We'll do enough of a push toward diplomacy that it'll make everybody happy.

Well, first, I don't think diplomacy is going to be enough to dissuade people. Second, I don't think the missing link here is diplomacy. I think the missing link is politics. The missing link is that there is no support on the Israeli side for making far-reaching concessions to the Palestinians because they don't think it will get them peace. There is no support on the Palestinian side for making far-reaching concessions to the Israelis because they don't think it

will get them peace. And until you begin to alter those politics, it's very hard to make the diplomacy work.

Is it possible to get a broader resolution that says some things that may make a more constructive environment in the future? It's possible. But the real danger – and, I think, the likelihood – is that where we will go is toward greater feelings of isolation, greater feelings of vulnerability that this won't be constructive for anybody.

The sort of U.S.-Israeli angle of this – which, I think, agonizes the Obama administration deeply and agonizes the government of Israel – is something that we've talked about in this book that we're rolling out at 9:30 this morning about the future of the U.S.-Israeli relationship. So if you have some down time in your briefings today, I think it's worth – it's worth a look. It describes the fact that this is not the old U.S.-Israeli relationship and it won't be the U.S.-Israeli relationship going forward. I think it is well worth the time it'll take you to read it, and I commend it to you.

And with that, I turn over –

MR. SCHWARTZ: And we do have copies of our new report, “Crossroads”, about the U.S.-Israel relationship by Haim Malka which Ryan has in the back of the room, so we'll make sure you guys get copies if you need them.

MARK QUARTERMAN: Do you want to introduce me?

MR. SCHWARTZ: Sure. And my colleague, Mark Quarterman, who is the director of our C3 program, Conflict, Cooperation – Conflict –

MR. QUARTERMAN: Crisis.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Crisis, Conflict, and Cooperation. Mark's, of course, former U.N. official, and we're very grateful to have him here this morning. Mark?

MR. QUARTERMAN: Thank you all for coming. After that lead-in from Jon, you can't do much better than “Tale of Two Cities,” but before I get to the really turgid stuff about General Assembly votes, Security Council resolutions – and I do plan to say a few words about that – I just want to kind of, in a more general way, talk about what next week means in a general sense.

The general debate of the General Assembly really is the annual convention of heads in states – heads of state and governments. You know, they come together, kind of, like, in any industry, as in any annual convention. Less interesting things often happen in the convention meeting rooms and more interesting things happen on the margins – the bilateral meetings the president's going to have, the small group meetings. If you look at it this way, then the speeches become a lot less important and the interactions on issues that they're just going to take advantage of being together become a lot more important.

And you can imagine what that shadow agenda is that bleeds a little bit into the official agenda. The vote on Palestinian recognition, updating each other on the Arab Spring and activities regarding that, Libya, Syria, the economic crisis in the – in the – in the European Union will be – will be key issues.

As regards the Palestinians, the recent news reports are saying that they are first going to opt for a full membership, which means that they have to go through the Security Council. And then, likely, there would be a likely fallback, as Jon said, to the General Assembly. And it's extremely likely, of course, that the United States will veto, although there is another option of sending it to a committee of the whole of the Security Council to review the Palestinians' request. That would kick it down the – kick the can down the road a bit. It wouldn't necessarily be that useful a delaying tactic, but it is a delaying tactic. Eventually, it –

Q: (Inaudible) – the next (meeting ?).

MR. QUARTERMAN: Pardon me?

Q: Take it to the next (meeting ?).

MR. QUARTERMAN: Well, no, not to – not to the new General Assembly, because the Security Council meets on a rolling basis, so a couple of months, maybe a month or so. This wouldn't be kicking it to the next year. But ultimately, it probably would come up for a vote in the Security Council because there would be the support to bring it up for a vote. And, inevitably, the U.S. would veto.

Just a footnote here, the Soviet Union set all sorts of records that will never be broken, kind of Joe DiMaggio sorts of records, for vetoes in the Security Council.

But since about the early 1980s, the U.S. has been the most active member of the – by far, actually, the most active member of the Security Council in exercising its veto on the Security Council. And almost every one of those vetoes was on an Israeli-Palestinian issue. And it often found itself vetoing to override votes, even by its allies, in favor of a resolution by the U.S. and – by the U.K. and France among others.

So that appears to be the Palestinians' first step, and they're going for the full membership.

The second step, then, would be to go to the General Assembly for an upgrade of their membership. Right now, they're permanent observers and they would be looking for non-member state status. Now, people talk about that as Vatican status, which is – and it – and it – it's the status that the Vatican holds now. But Switzerland held that status for a number of years when it wasn't sure it wanted to join the United Nations. And early in their – in their respective existences, South Korea and West Germany held that status, too.

So this would, the Palestinians believe, put them in a position to be able, then, to accede to a number of international treaties, the International Criminal Court, join any range of much less glamorous international bodies, and would raise their status in general around the world.

Now, we should also know that the PLO, for many years, has had diplomatic status around the world in a number of countries; I think over a hundred – 130 have recognized the PLO and have – as the representatives of the Palestinian people, and there are PLO diplomats in official missions in 130 countries. We need to think about that when we think about the vote. There's overwhelming support among the member states of the United Nations for Palestinian statehood.

And as Jonathan correctly pointed out, the real question in the General Assembly vote is not whether there would be support for this, but, rather, where would key U.S. allies end up on this vote, where would – where would European Union members, among others.

To put the vote in – a vote like this in some context, too: I've had a few questions from reporters over recent days saying, well, if the U.S. loses a vote like this in the General Assembly, would this be an example of a diminishment of President Obama's power? Well, there are about a dozen votes on the Palestinian issue that come up every year in the General Assembly. The vote count ranges from 116 to 5 to maybe 8 abstentions to 120 to 3 to 4 abstentions or whatever. And the U.S. is almost always on the "no" side. And these votes – the U.S. voting pattern has – and the pattern in the General Assembly has been locked into place for decades.

So an overwhelming loss on this vote would be very much – for the U.S. would be very much along the lines of the half-dozen or so votes. I mean, one that was just up this year was a resolution by the General Assembly urging the Israelis to compensate the Lebanese for oil slicks on Lebanese shores from Israeli military actions. And if you bear with me for a second, I'll let you know what that vote was. The U.S. voted against it. And it was 163 in favor, 8 no, 5 abstaining, and the U.S. voted – the U.S. voted no. This – the – if it were to go to the General Assembly, if there were to be a vote on –

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. QUARTERMAN: That vote?

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. QUARTERMAN: It was urging Israel to compensate Lebanon for oil slicks caused by Israeli military action.

There are other – there are other votes on condemning Israeli settlement policy, human rights abuses in the occupied Palestinian territory, among other things. And the vote count is very similar. And there are probably – there are close to a dozen or so votes every year on a variety of issues regarding Palestinians, whether it's –

Q: In the General Assembly.

MR. QUARTERMAN: In the – in the General Assembly –

Q: And in other bodies, there are more.

MR. QUARTERMAN: Yes, exactly – whether it's supporting the existence of a division for Palestinian rights in the Department of Political Affairs, in the U.N. Secretariat or other things. And the vote counts, as I say, range from, you know, 116 to 7 to a number of abstentions.

So the question, really, will be, where will U.S. European allies end up on this issue? How overwhelming will the vote be? And then, ultimately, you know, getting away from the narrow U.N. politics, how useful will this be or how damaging will this be, as Jon said, for the range of players – the U.S., the Israelis, the Palestinians, the Europeans and others?

Jon pretty much covered Libya. It is a positive story and it's – and it's very much the U.N., as Jon said, doing what the U.N. does.

This is a post-conflict issue. The proposal, based on, initially, a letter from Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to the president of the – of the Security Council that's since been translated into a resolution for the Security Council, would provide for an assistance mission – assistance mission to be headed by, actually, my old boss, Ian Martin – he was my boss in East Timor, where he oversaw the referendum vote for East Timorese independence – but where Ian would lead a mission that would assist Libya in a – in a range of post-conflict issues. It could well – you know, could be with security sector reform, financial sector reform, among other things, as well as helping to coordinate international donors in general.

This is very much a comfort zone for the – for the U.N. The U.N. has been in the lead on this. I wrote something a while back way at the beginning when Resolution 1970 was adopted on sanctions that the U.N. acted with extraordinary speed for the Security Council, for any U.N. body, and fulfilled what at least I thought was a multilateral moment – potential crimes against humanity or at least a humanitarian disaster occurring in Libya – and acting first with a – with a resolution on sanctions, and then with a resolution authorizing military action to head that off; the Security Council did what it needed to do.

The interesting shift-in-power question – and I'll stop after this – this is a – this is a broader question, not just for this general debate – is not whether – as I said, what happens in the General Assembly on the Palestinians, but rather the number of states that abstained on Resolution 1973 that authorized military action, and which states they were. Emerging powers lined up against the military action. China, of course, abstained; Russia abstained. But India and Brazil as well – Germany, for its own reasons.

But this is a very interesting question that I think we'll see more of in the future, in part because we have a surprisingly – I suppose you could say – powerful Security Council now with four and maybe four and a half members of the council who have desires to be permanent – and reasonable claims to be permanent members of the council: Brazil, India, South Africa – I'm

blanking on one – Brazil, India, South Africa – you’ve also got Nigeria on the Council, which in the – in the past, might have been a legitimate contender – oh, and Germany, of course.

And it’s really – it’s – thank you – and it’s extraordinary to have that degree of regional power on the Security Council at the same time. And I think, therefore, it’s very interesting to look back at their votes on the Libya issue and the blocking of the – of action on Syria in that context.

And with that, I will turn over to Andrew to turn over to Heather.

HEATHER CONLEY: Thank you. (Chuckles.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: Calling Heather Conley, who’s our Europe Program director – many of you know. And – Heather?

MS. CONLEY: Thank you very much.

Jon, when you started your quote, I actually thought you were talking about Europe. It is the best of times certainly for President Sarkozy and Prime Minister Cameron yesterday in their triumphant visit to Benghazi and Tripoli. And I – Jon, I think the Europeans would agree certainly with your assessment that Libya, with a sigh of relief, has turned out well. I think they would slightly alter it in part because of strong European leadership, whether that was at the Security Council table or NATO or in providing the military and security efforts to lead – to what we see today as victory.

So indeed, I think – I’m starting to pay close attention, what I’m sort of terming as a European reawakening – we talk about the Arab awakening – a European reawakening in its foreign policy efforts towards North Africa and the Middle East. The stakes are very high for Europe, obviously, both economically as well as politically. And I think you’re seeing now a much stronger role for Europe.

Perhaps this is because the United States, whether the leadership-from-behind model or perhaps, in the Israeli-Palestinian context, it having a difficult time expressing and influencing, perhaps Europe now sees an opportunity and a moment to use its unique blend of soft power – and I’ll talk about that in a moment – in providing really impressive amount of funding to the Palestinian Authority as well as their leadership diplomatically to see where they can bring some resolution to this.

So indeed, let me talk about a bit on the Palestinian front. Like Libya, unfortunately, there’s nothing common about the European foreign and security policy towards the Middle East. It’s fractured. And I think we will definitely see that playing out next week.

Prime Minister Netanyahu has spent a great deal of time this summer in European capitals, I think in anticipation of trying to shore up European support in some part or negate European activism against Israeli positions.

What we're seeing, though, will be a split. The German government has already messaged pretty clearly that it will not support efforts by the Palestinians to seek membership or a status. I think, in part, this is in response to their Libya vote where they were messaging early and often to sort of manage the surprise factor of their abstention on U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973.

I think you're going to also see a split, quite frankly, with France, leaning certainly towards support the Palestinian position. And I think we have to watch very closely where the British come out on this. Obviously, Tony Blair is taking a leadership role as the special envoy for the Quartet. But, again, they do have a problem. They want to be seen as an honest broker here, and, I think, as Jon was saying, no one's going to win here, and they're very concerned about how this is going to reflect on them. So I think we will watch them.

The other actor to watch, quite frankly, is Catherine Ashton, the EU high representative. Again, this is in part her credibility test. She was in the region earlier on Monday. I think she's trying to develop some sort of a package that would incorporate – at least, again, this is what we're seeing from early reports. I think this is going to be a moving story throughout to try to manage a package where the Quartet has a statement sort of going back to – back to the negotiations, but perhaps putting some carrots in there that would be conducive.

So we'll see if the EU can play a role here. I have my doubts because the member states will, quite frankly, be quite divided.

It's interesting to note, again, how much the EU has put forward financially in strengthening Palestinian institutions. And I think, again, this is European soft power. Our sort of back-of-the-envelope calculation is since 1994, the EU has provided nearly 4 billion euros in assistance. Since 2008, that figure has been 1.6 billion euros. And just earlier this week, the EU gave a 16.3 million euro infusion to pay for Palestinian salaries. So they have an enormous amount of investment in seeing Palestinian institutions strengthened.

I think we'll see this move forward. As a side note, I think the interesting issue to watch is obviously Turkey's role in this. And this is sort of one of these – you put an asterisk beside this, and we'll continue to watch this space.

And we, actually, at CSIS have been following quite closely Turkey's reorientation, potentially, away from Europe, and what that impact has on potential EU accession conversations with Turkey. This is potentially a thorn in the side of the European leadership in this part of the world, if they're feeling a bit of competitive space with Prime Minister Erdogan. So we'll continue to watch that.

And finally, as Mark has mentioned, meanwhile, as we're watching New York very closely, we're continuing to follow very closely the European economic crisis. And that will be the conversation in the hallways. That's why Secretary Tim Geithner has decided he needed to visit Europe twice this week and is in Poland today.

We are watching these developments because again, to get back to Jon's quote, the very best of times, we have some external foreign policy activism by Europe; the worst of times – it's because I believe that we are watching what has been over an 18-month crisis starting to morph into a slow-motion collapse. And this will be – this is the story for Europe. This is the story for the global economy. And watching that in relationship to how events unfold in New York, I think, will be very, very interesting.

And I – certainly I don't want to derail from our focus where, which is on UNGA and the conversations in New York, but I would not suggest to you that this is not going to be the hallway chatter in the halls of New York. So with that, thank you very much. I'll turn it over to you, Andrew.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Colleagues, thanks very much. I'd like to open it up for questions. If you could speak into the microphone, that would be helpful for the transcript – and identify who you are and what news service you're with. Let's start with Howard (sp).

Q: Great, thank you. I guess whoever – maybe Jon or Mark. But do you see any usefulness to – I mean, we are hearing these rumors of some kind of a plan, either coming from Blair or Ashton, that would kind of include elements where the Palestinians would be able to take something to somebody, maybe the Security Council, but shunt it off quickly to Bonn – but anyway, with the idea of allowing some time for negotiations, direct negotiations to get going again.

Do you see any usefulness to that? And secondly, I mean, are there any prospects for talks getting going, even if it is three months?

And secondly, on Libya, I'm just wondering what this resolution today – but yet with what impact might that have on the fact that there are still these pockets of resistance? Is it designed at all to kind of influence the new government in its approach to, you know, maybe not attacking these pockets, or not violently going after Gadhafi?

MR. ALTERMAN: You know, in my analysis, the principal problem is a political problem and not a diplomatic one between the Israelis and the Palestinians. And the goal has to be to change the politics in each community, partly to create a sense of urgency to negotiate and partly to create a sense of necessity to negotiate. I don't see these resolutions doing either one of those.

Everything I've heard about the resolutions will raise Palestinian expectations from where they are, make Israel feel more embattled, make Israel feel that it's being delegitimized on the world stage, and rather than creating an urgency to negotiate, I see Israelis interpreting that as a sign they have to dig in.

I've heard rumors of the proposals. I haven't seen the proposals. I think you have to design the proposals to affect the political realities in those two communities, not find some structure to get negotiators in a room. Because even if the negotiators in a room can reach an

agreement, they can't get people outside the room to buy into that agreement under current circumstances, in my judgment.

I don't know – I haven't heard anything about the resolutions intended to deal with these three pockets of resistance in Libya. I think that is principally a military issue rather than a diplomatic one at this point. What we have seen an awful lot of is the international community trying to assist the Transitional National Council, figuring out the tasks it needs to do and structuring, framing them, and trying to help them accomplish them to the extent they can give technical assistance.

There has been a remarkable openness to that kind of assistance, I think, in part because it hasn't been tremendously heavy-handed. You haven't seen 4,000 aid workers going in, saying, OK, now we're going to run your country for you. Ian Martin's team, I think, is going to be on the order of 60, which is calculated, in part, to help the Libyans but not overwhelm them.

The question, though, remains – and it's a question the answer to which will only become clear over the next several months – whether the people we're working with are going to be the people who end up in power in Libya. And that is an unanswerable question at this point. The people we are working with now are making a lot of the right noises. They seem to have a lot of the right instincts.

Whether in a year's time we're going to look back and say we were all naïve, whether in a year's time we're going to say we empowered the right guys and this went in a useful direction, whether it's going to be something mixed – it's too early to tell.

But I can tell you that one of the things on the mind of the people in the Obama administration is very much trying to learn the lessons of the last 15 years of conflict, of trying to draw the experiences of learning lessons from Iraq, learning lessons from Timor, learning lessons from a whole range of places about what the role should be – rightsizing the role – not so you maximize what we'd like, but so you maximize getting what we need.

MR. SCHWARTZ (?): Mark, do you want to follow up?

MR. QUARTERMAN: Sure. I agree with everything Jon said. Just on the Palestinian side, it would be – and I have a little – not nearly the background that Jon has, but a little bit of background in this. And I just – I think it would be very hard for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to pull back this multi-month-long move toward the United Nations, very public move toward the United Nations, without a very, very concrete process laid out in front of him.

He has his own political issues to deal with as well, including a Gaza that's controlled by Hamas. And so whatever the Europeans are trying to put on the table – and I would imagine that Heather might talk a little bit more about that – it would need to be extremely concrete and pointing toward progress soon. And I think that's very unlikely, as Jon said.

On Libya, exactly right. I haven't seen the draft resolution, but I don't think that it addresses the pockets of resistance. Really, it's a longer-term mandate for a mission that will provide assistance to Libya as it moves forward, with a focus on democracy, on human rights, on transitional justice, as well as on effective governance.

And so to the extent that some of those human rights and transitional justice questions would come up in the treatment of Gadhafi supporters, the U.N. would be very strongly urging this regime not to act in the way that the previous regime did and to keep human rights obligations in the forefront, as well as to think about transitional justice questions. You know, will people be tried? What types of people will be tried, and in what circumstances?

But I think the one thing we need to recognize, and I think Jon alluded to this, is transitions take a very long time and often follow a very bumpy path. Recent work done by the World Bank has shown that transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy can take up to a decade or more, and in some cases, a generation, to be solidified.

So exactly: the people we're talking to now, will they be the people who will be in power six months from now, and will they be the people that are in power three years from now and 10 years from now? Will we look back and say, you know, it was dicey for a while, but Libya has moved toward democracy? And I think we can look at Indonesia and other places and see their paths.

MR. SCHWARTZ: (Off mic.)

Q: Thanks. Margaret Talev with Bloomberg. So I've got like a million questions, but I'll try to stick to the main ones.

What are the stakes – for those of us who cover President Obama – for President Obama at the U.N. General Assembly this year? His speech last year was all about saying, hey, I think we can come back here next year and celebrate, you know, a peace deal. And obviously, that's not what this is all about. But what is he trying to show the world? Do Americans care? What are the domestic political stakes for him? Is there a stake among Jewish voters in America?

And then on the ICC question, aren't there any real criminal – or whatever – liability implications for the Israelis, or is that just sort of theoretical, if there is a broad General Assembly vote? Thanks.

MR. ALTERMAN: I'm going to do a partial duck on the first question, and a complete duck, and defer to counsel, on the second question. (Laughter.) The way I read the newspaper, everybody's talking about everything but the president's speech to the General Assembly meeting. The president is clearly focused on jobs and the economy. The politics of the budget are huge. We have an extraordinarily active Republican primary.

I don't see the American public hanging on the words of the president at the General Assembly. That's not to say the president doesn't have a set of important tasks at the General Assembly. I think he has been trying to position America where he wants the country to be in

international affairs. He has been trying to lead but not dominate. He has tried to accommodate others' leadership. He has tried to articulate principles that guide the way we see the world.

This was initially welcomed with rapture, and has been dismissed, and I think he needs to rearticulate it in a way that's persuasive to an international audience. But I just don't see a huge domestic audience for him at the General Assembly, and my guess is that the message of the month has to do with the economy, not international affairs.

MR. QUARTERMAN: No, I think that's right. I think the stakes are extremely low now. And one way they're low is that there won't be a vote on the Palestinian issue next week. So it's not as if President Obama will be there and have to, you know, sit in the Security Council and exercise the U.S.'s veto.

So there will be a number of speeches; there will be a number of meetings. There are much more important, almost tectonic issues going on in the world economy. So I really don't think the stakes are all that high, and the Palestinian issue will play out more slowly. This is a chance for President Obama to highlight, you know, the positive occurrences as regards Libya, and maybe push a little bit on Syria and a few other issues. And I would say that's about it.

On the ICC, it's purely theoretical for Israel. You know, a first step would be the Palestinians being able to accede to the Rome Statute and become a member state of the ICC. They would then have to refer the matter – a matter – to the Office of the Prosecutor, and it's theoretical as to what they would do. The Office of the Prosecutor would have to decide to take it up and then determine that there's a prima facie case, and then it would bump up against Israel's non-membership in the International Criminal Court.

So no, this is not something that would be an immediate threat to Israel or even a medium – or even a longer-term threat.

Q: Ron Kampeas from Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Given the amounts that Europe has dedicated to the Palestinian Authority, how it's going to – I mean, the two congresswomen who are actually important on Palestinian funding have said they're going to cut it off, so it looks like they're going to cut off Palestinian funding. So how important would that be?

And then, for Mark Quarterman, the way that the Republicans and conservatives have tried to cast the Obama administration and the United Nations is that in terms of what they actually do, they do the right thing – they veto, they oppose – but in terms of what they say, they represent a new tone in terms of criticism of Israel. And they point to Susan Rice's speech at the Security Council when they vetoed the settlement resolution in the spring. Is that correct? Has there been a change in tone?

MS. CONLEY: As the events unfold and as Congress makes some funding decisions, European assistance to the Palestinian Authority will only grow in importance. I would argue that it's been absolutely vital in contributing to the institutional capacity that we have seen today. And certainly, with U.S. support – I don't mean to suggest that American financial support and

technical assistance hasn't been vital. But the EU has put forth an extraordinary amount, and I think they're going to be very loathe to see that investment not continue.

What we don't know in the long term – and this is something we're studying, longer-term trends – how austerity begins to impact Europe's ability to continue to support this type of effort. What we've seen so far, through both the U.K.'s recent budget-cutting exercise – they are willing to reduce European defense spending, but they keep their official development assistance fairly strong, which again is, I think, an underlying testament to their view that soft power is a vital instrument for them.

So it will continue to be very vital, and the decisions that the EU makes, as well as the individual member states, about how they're going to fund this over the coming months, I think, will be important in providing some tangible support. And I will turn the rest over to you, Mark.

MR. QUARTERMAN: And I'd also like to hear from Jon on this, since they do have this book on U.S.-Israel relations, but I'll – and the question you're asking about the tone, of course, is a much bigger question than just U.S. performance in the United Nations. But as regards the United Nations, there might be something of a change in tone from the Bush administration – the second Bush administration, of course, the George W. – which was, in effect, the high-water mark of U.S. support for Israel, at least in rhetorical terms.

I would say that in broad policy terms, within the United Nations there has been very little change between the Bush administration, the Obama administration, and generally across administrations, in voting against resolutions on the issue and trying to keep the issue off the agenda of the Security Council, among other issues.

But we should also remember that the Obama administration launched a bit of an effort on the settlements issue, I think, in part, to jumpstart the peace talks. And so Susan Rice's comments could be seen in that context as well. But in a broader sense, I turn to Jon on this.

MR. ALTERMAN: Look, I think the Obama administration – when the chips are down, the Obama administration has stood firmly behind Israel. We saw it in their response to the Mavi Marmara incident, where the president intervened actively to keep this from turning into a Security Council witch hunt.

We saw just last week, when Egyptian troops had held back when the protestors stormed the Israeli embassy, and Prime Minister Netanyahu couldn't get the Egyptians on the phone, who made the phone calls? The Americans made the phone calls. And six Israelis were saved, perhaps within moments of when the security would have been breached.

I think the president is, quite frankly, perplexed that – because I've spoken to people who work closely with him on Israel, and his sense is that he's not anti-Israeli – whenever he says anything he's perceived to be anti-Israeli, although his actions protect Israel's interests but urge Israel to move forward toward a negotiated settlement that can resolve this conflict in the longer term.

But it seems to me that what we have is a combination of language that seeks to move Israeli actions, and actions that consistently protect Israeli interests. And what I think is perplexing to the administration is this sense that rather than the actions speaking loudly and reassuring Israelis that these are done in order to protect Israeli interests, they take the words and they say, see, he doesn't have our interests at heart at all.

MR. QUARTERMAN: Yeah, if I could just follow up on that, specifically on this question that we spent most of our time talking about – either upgrading – or upgrading Palestinian status, what would be – of the two options – the U.S., once again, is putting itself in a position of isolation in the United Nations based on a principle. And the principle is that the peace process should go through negotiations between the two parties, and not through New York. The U.S. has consistently done this in its support of Israel, and has consistently isolated itself. And I really don't see a difference in this administration's actions versus the actions of previous administrations.

Q: Thanks. George Condon with National Journal. Two questions. First, to Heather, could you elaborate on – you said the hallway chatter on the debt crisis – what are the Europeans looking for from the president, and what is he looking for? And secondly, to follow on Margaret's question – I guess a little (pushback ?) – presidents go there every year. Most of the speeches are eminently forgettable, and as Jon suggested, most of the action has been in the bilats.

MR. ALTERMAN: (Off mic.)

Q: Well – you (channeled him ?). (Laughter.) But isn't the moment such that with all the issues that you talked about, that people are – the stakes are raised for the president? Isn't the international community looking for some kind of leadership, something in this speech?

MS. CONLEY: Thank you. Very briefly, I mean, I think there is precious little that the administration can do regarding the European sovereign debt crisis. My critique – I think the administration was a bit slow to realize over the last 18 months the gravity of the situation. But I think, really beginning with Chancellor Merkel's state visit here in June where the president dedicated a lot of that conversation to the economic crisis, I think it was slowly beginning to wake up the administration that this is a great and grave danger to the American economy.

What – Secretary Geithner's visit to Poland today does a couple of things. It raises the stakes enormously for what the U.S. can do but, again, the gap is we can't, other than to urge Europe to take action. Now, the problem is politically they are unable to take the steps necessary. And this month is going to be a really interesting month to watch as the 17 eurozone members have to vote on the July 21st summit decisions, where there seems to be absolute lack of agreement whether they can do that or not.

To suggest that the world's – the weight of the world – economic weight of the world is on Angela Merkel's shoulders is not an understatement. But politically, you know, the stars could not be more misaligned.

MR. ALTERMAN: Are you suggesting the president should give her a backrub?
(Laughter.)

Q: There's precedent. (Laughter.)

MS. CONLEY: (Chuckles.) Make no comment. (Chuckles.) Jon, you're naughty. But this is truly where – and this is, again, with all respect to the amazing events that are going on in the Middle East, this one element will absorb us. And there's very little the United States can do about it other than to hope that the Europeans, as I think – what Geithner will come out and say get your act together. You had Christine Lagarde yesterday – again, the dire consequences.

The rhetoric is, you know, emergency, emergency; the political action cannot get there. So as I just say – I don't want to divert our conversation – please, please watch this space because it is going to transform Europe and the trans-Atlantic relationship substantially. If I could give it a baseball analogy, if the European sovereign debt crisis is a nine-inning game, we're only in about the second or third inning. This is going to be an extraordinary story. So stay tuned.

MR. SCHWARTZ: (Off mic) – for the next president we turn to backrubs. (Laughter.) Transparency here at CSIS. But –

MR. QUARTERMAN: And on the issue of speeches, there is – there is a global crisis of – a multifarious global crisis now. But this is not necessarily a time where the world is looking for a presidential speech at the General Assembly to reshape things. I mean, I worked for the U.N. for 12 years and for most of those years got a chance to sit on the floor of the General Assembly during speeches. And there are two that stick out for me out of that entire time.

One was Bill Clinton's last speech where he received a standing ovation. I don't remember a word he said, but he received a standing ovation in the General Assembly, which is unheard of for a head of state or government. I mean, and this is after impeachment and a range of issues – his last speech, it was extraordinary – and the warmth in the room. And President Bush's speech in which he versely (ph) declared war against Iraq and threatened the U.N. with irrelevance. I was on the floor to hear that too.

Otherwise, this is not the time to roll out a new initiative, even if a new initiative is needed. And this is probably not the time for a new initiative because these crises – whether it's the Arab Spring or the European debt crisis or what I consider to be a general kind of slow, tectonic shift in power within multilateral institutions is playing out – these are playing out more slowly. So I – the speech is not – is not the crucial issue here.

Q: (Off mic) – question maybe for Mark is – sorry – for Mark is: Do the Palestinians need to go – can they go – if they chose to, could they go directly to the General Assembly, or do they need to go through the Security Council first? So – and is there a sense that maybe the U.S. is pushing them towards the General Assembly first?

And then the two broader questions are, first, if you could maybe, Jon, give an assessment of where you think the U.S. standing is in the Middle East these days – you know, sort of two years after the Cairo speech, you know, after the whole Arab Spring – and to what impact do you think a veto would have on that, if any significant impact, on sort of his broader effort to reshape the view of the United States?

And then finally – it seems from where I sit as a White House reporter that President Obama has sort of stuck his neck out for the Palestinians in being tough, at least rhetorically, on Israel in a way that was politically risky for him at home. And is there any sense that – and right now they are trying desperately to get the Palestinians not to do this. You know, is there any sense that the Palestinians are being a little sort of – you know, slap in the face of the U.S. after whatever it is that Obama has tried, or maybe from their point of view he has not done all that much anyway?

MR. QUARTERMAN: Maybe a quick answer to the technical question. The Palestinians could choose either to go the General Assembly route or the Security Council route. The Security Council route is full membership in the United Nations. The General Assembly route is increasing their status to non-member state. I was a bit surprised to hear that they decided to go the Security Council route and therefore force a U.S. veto. And I would say that the U.S. is not trying to push the Palestinians to the GA but in effect trying to push the issue out of the U.N. They would rather that neither of these questions come up.

MR. ALTERMAN: U.S. standing in the Middle East has declined in the last two years for a number of reasons. One is, there's a sense that the U.S. hasn't been effectively doing what it set out to do. There's a perception it hasn't been effective with Iran, that it hasn't been effective with Iraq and it hasn't been effective moving toward Arab-Israeli peace. And so the – and there's disappointment both in governments that the U.S. has not stood by its allies in the Arab Spring and among publics that the U.S. has not played as active a role as it should have promoting political reform.

Added to this, certainly on a leadership level, is a perception that our budget situation means that looking forward we're going to be a less consequential power than we've been. So I think if you look at everything, there is a perception that we are a waning influence on events, that we are not the positive influence that people had hoped we would be – that's not to say we've become inconsequential, it's not to say people have written us off. But I think you're seeing a number of countries thinking about supplementing their relationship with the United States. You've seen Turkey playing a more prominent role.

And I just had a piece in our newsletter last week about Turkey's efforts to build ties with Saudi Arabia, which I think is partly about a changing role for the United States and the sense of countries in the Middle East they have to build their alliances differently. As I say, it doesn't mean we're inconsequential, and I think this is a slide that began some time ago, but it's a slide that the president had hoped to arrest and has not been able to arrest.

In terms of sort of Palestinian gratitude, I think what – the president's actions have gotten him anger on all sides and gratitude on none, right? I mean, Israelis feel the president dislikes

them. The Palestinians feel the president has gotten rolled by Prime Minister Netanyahu and has not been able to protect their interests. And there's a complaint that the United States still ends up being the Israelis' lawyer instead of a mediator – that the president says he's going to do things and those things don't happen. And the sort of failure to make progress on settlements which the president identified as a key goal ended up not having a huge effect on Israeli settlement activity.

I don't know an easy way to get out of this problem. But you have a really serious set of political challenges in the Palestinian community, which this president inherited, which aren't getting any easier to deal with. And, again, I think that there is – because we cover diplomacy, there's a huge interest in covering the diplomacy. And because negotiations have often involved us, when we think of tools available to the United States, people rush to negotiations – that's something we can do. We can – we know how to set up negotiations, and we know – you know, we know how to reserve the rooms at the hotels, and how to get conference facilities and all that stuff. We know how to do negotiations.

When you say you have to affect Palestinian politics, you have to affect Israeli – you have to reassure the Israeli people – that's harder. And I think the instinct is we're going to have negotiations because we know how to do it. I think what we have to be much more creative on is how can we create the politics because – and I've said this, I think, before in one of your briefings – I can't remember any time in history when two sides have made peace when at least one of those parties didn't believe there was both an urgency and a necessity to make that peace.

And I look at these two antagonists and I don't see either side feeling there is either an urgency or a necessity to make a deal. And under those circumstances you can have all the negotiations in the world, but you can't get a peace deal.

I'm afraid – I'm sorry. I – because I have to make a phone call before I roll out this wonderful study by Haim Malka next door in 20 minutes, I'm going to have to run. But I would love to talk to all of you again soon. And thank you, Andrew, for this.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Sure. Thanks, Jon.

MR. QUARTERMAN: Can I just really quickly – just a word on what Jon just said, too, especially the last part of it. You know, I – after 12 years at the U.N. I'm a relative newcomer to Washington. And I'm struck at the extent to which the thinking here is, well, what can we do and why can't we make these people change their views or why – you know, why isn't the president making peace in the Middle East or why isn't he affecting this?

And I think – I think that there – we need to have a greater sense of the limits of external actors in conflict resolution as well. External actors can be extremely useful when, as Jon said, one of the – at least one of the parties, and it's often the need for the most powerful one to think this – or it could be either – feels an urgent need. But Washington can't move things if the – if the situation isn't ripe and the time isn't ripe.

Q: Martin Klingsman, the German weekly, Die Zeit. And two questions, one concerning the Palestinian-Israeli issue in the United Nations. When were – when are we going to see the showdown? Is it going to be Friday and the next weekend or – like, in the case of the timetable. And then to you, Heather, about the European crisis – you know, Geithner being in Europe and telling, get your act together, is probably as complicated as Europeans telling Congress get (their ?) act together. (Chuckles.)

But what you – what you might see in the upcoming days or weeks could also be, you know, an increase of the crisis because of a comment of the German government. The German government is deeply divided over the bailout issue. And you follow that intensely – intensively. So I don't know how they get out of this quagmire, you know, because it's – as you know, they have this coalition and the two parties have totally different standpoints, and even inside the Christian Democratic Party is a huge division.

MR. QUARTERMAN: On the first issue, which is a much easier question – (chuckles) – I think the plan is for President Abbas after his speech, and I think he's speaking on the 23rd, to present his request to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon – who knows then when it will happen? You know, there won't be showdown next week. There will be a request next week. And then it has to get on the Security Council agenda and the resolution needs to be drafted, and so it will take some time.

Q: Is it going to be in this session, or –

MR. QUARTERMAN: Well, I mean, the Security Council meets on a rolling basis, so there isn't – there isn't a session question in the way there is with the General Assembly. The General Assembly, because there's such overwhelming support for it, could move fairly quickly. So if it takes a month or so for it to make its way through the Security Council to a U.S. veto – and this has happened before on other issues – you can imagine within weeks the General Assembly could have a resolution ready to go. And so that could happen soon after that. But no, there won't be a dramatic showdown during the general debate while the heads of state and government are there.

MS. CONLEY: And very briefly – I want to be very respectful of everyone's time and, Martin, you and I can follow up on this later. You know, in some ways the strains of this conversation of what Jon talked about – we know how to negotiate, we know how to talk and hold conferences and keep talking, but how do we affect the political process, whether that's in the Middle East, whether that's in Europe, whether that's here in our own country – we – this is exactly where we find our complexities. If there was a logical way forward we would have found it. It's the political processes that have just stymied this.

And very true in German domestic politics, where there is a deep division about what to do and the responsibility of the German taxpayer for what they see as profligate spending by the periphery. But this is also across Europe and it's not just North, South – the northern states versus the periphery. It is young and old. We are going to see – it's European versus sort of a – you know, immigrant – anti-immigrant. We are going to see these tensions play out across Europe which is just accelerated by the economic crisis.

I'll talk to you later about my views on the – on the German government. But, again, the – what the chancellor's – what decisions she takes, whether – how this will unroll, it will have an enormous impact on the coalition government and in German politics, quite frankly, for the next decade. So this will – the stakes are extremely high.

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. QUARTERMAN: That would be a very dramatic move, especially from the podium of the General Assembly. I don't have any sense of that. And as I recall, there was some pushback from the Iranian judiciary that might slow that process down too. So it's not entirely clear that something like that would happen.

MR. SCHWARTZ: (Off mic.)

Q: Aamer Madhani, USA Today. The Saudi aspect of this – where, you know, they've basically really laid it out in real clear terms of what the consequences would be of a U.S. veto. Your sense of how serious that is and how grave of – how grave the consequences would be to – for a fraying of that relationship with the U.S.?

MR. QUARTERMAN: I'm not an expert on Middle East politics – Middle East diplomacy. But I can say just from observation that the – that relationship is frayed in other ways. I mean, this would be a continued fraying in some ways of the – of the relationship. And I think that Jon struck a very interesting note when he talked about the Turkish effort to increase relations with Saudi Arabia. I think Saudi Arabia has serious concerns about a perception of abandoning the Mubarak and Arab allies. It was concerned about even U.S. statements about Bahrain, and we saw that the Saudis sent troops there. It's geopolitically concerned about the rise of Iran in the region, especially with the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.

And so if – but the Saudis – the Saudis are surprisingly interested in Middle East peace and feel that – at an Arab League summit some years ago they put out a reasonable process that has been rebuffed, and bring it up on a regular basis. So, no, this would be serious for the Saudis, but the Saudis also have geostrategic reasons to remain in a close relationship with the United States, and I'm sure they will balance that.

MR. SCHWARTZ: (Off mic.)

MR. QUARTERMAN: Sure – just a really quick point. I was thinking about this as Heather was talking, and I always think about this in terms of the United Nations. And this is my sense of multilateral politics that I actually don't use the word diplomacy much, because within multilateral institutions, it's so legislative; it's more – I think better characterized as politics.

And this might be esoteric but, you know, we've been doing bilateral relations between countries in the manner we're doing it since the beginning of the Westphalian state – you know, 1648 or so. We've been doing this form of multilateralism since the end of the Second World

War. And we're seeing the growth pains of it. We're seeing it in the EU, which is an extraordinary success in so many different ways but has serious structural problems. We see it in the United Nations as well.

And so I just urge a longer-term view toward multilateral activity. I think that we're still in the early stages of learning how to do this – successes in the U.N. and certainly failures. But it's something that we as states – and when I say “we” now it's not just the United States – are only beginning to grapple with dealing with effectively. Thank you.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Thank you all very much for coming today, and we'll be in touch. Thanks.

(END)