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Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, February 28, 2022

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

3:31 P.M. EST

MS. PSAKI: Hi, everyone. Okay. Happy Monday. State of the Union eve, shall we say?

Okay. I just wanted to get — start off and give you — highlight some of the ongoing assistance — obviously, we made a number of announcements over the weekend — to get everybody up to speed. We have some charts to give you all the specifics, in case that is helpful.

The United States is the largest provider of assistance to Ukraine, and President Biden has committed more security assistance to Ukraine over the past year than the United States has provided at any other time in history.

On Friday night, the President authorized an additional \$350 million of military assistance in support of Ukraine's frontline defenders as they face armored, airborne, and other threats. He did so hours after speaking with President Zelenskyy to ask him what support he needed.

We are working to expedite deliveries from the latest package the President approved — I would note that the prior package that we had already announced has been ongoing and — and has been delivered, even in the last few days — parts of that — of that package. We expect equipment to start arriving within the next couple of days from this package.

That brought the total security assistance we've approved for Ukraine to \$1 billion over the past year. It is the third time the President has expedited emergency security assistance for Ukraine's defense in recent months using the Presidential Drawdown Authority. We're also working with NATO Allies to facilitate the transfer of U.S.-made equipment from their inventories to Ukraine.

The United States is also the largest — the single-largest provider of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and recently deployed a Disaster Assistance Response Team to the region to lead the U.S. humanitarian response and support the Ukrainian people as they bear the brunt of Russian aggression.

You may have seen that our USAID — head of USAID, Samantha Power, is on the ground in Poland and has been there as well, providing guidance and assistance there.

We have provided over \$106 million in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine in the past year, including an additional \$54 million we announced this weekend to cover critical needs such as safe drinking water, sanitation, hygiene supplies, and critical emergency health supplies to meet the needs of hundreds of thousands of people, as well as emergency food assistance to meet the immediate needs of 125,000 people.

I will stop there. I know there's lots to talk about, so, Aamer, why don't you kick us off?

Q Thank you. In light of President Putin putting Russia's nuclear forces into "special combat readiness," has the United States changed its nuclear posture?

MS. PSAKI: Well, let me first start by saying that throughout the crisis, Russia and President Putin have falsely alleged that it is under threat, including from Ukraine, including from NATO. Neither the United States nor NATO has any desire or intention for conflict with Russia. And we think provocative rhetoric like this regarding nuclear weapons is dangerous, adds to the risk of miscalculation, should be avoided, and we'll not indulge in it.

We are assessing President Putin's directive and, at this time, we see no reason to change our own alert levels. But it's also important to remember that, even over the course of the last several months and years, when we have had significant disagreements with Russia over a range of issues, Russia and the United States have long agreed that nuclear use would have devastating consequences and have stated many times, including earlier this year, that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.

So we have not — had seen reason to change our alert levels, and we are — see obvious, significant danger in escalatory rhetoric.

Q Can I ask — there's been a great deal of movement of unity, and it comes after no shortage of angst about the Western Alliance, I think, in recent years, particularly going back to the last administration. Is the President going to use this moment, though, to push NATO members to get on track with that 2 percent of GDP on defense spending?

MS. PSAKI: Well, President Putin has been one of the greatest unifiers of NATO in modern history, so I guess that is one thing we can thank him for.

But I would just look at, Aamer, some of the announcements that have been made even over the last couple of days. One, the President has always been an advocate and a supporter of countries abiding by the 2 percent component. He was a supporter of that back when he was Vice President, where, for history's sake, there was a great deal of progress made before the last president even took office and talked about it.

But as we look even over the past — course of the past weekend, not only did you see a NATO Alliance that was incredibly unified and agreement among Europeans that there needed to be additional assistance provided in the form of security assistance to Ukraine, but you saw a number of countries take steps that they had not taken in recent history.

Germany has historically not sent weapons to conflict zones; this weekend, they changed course. Sweden also has not changed — sent arms to countries in active conflict; that changed this weekend. Finland also changed course.

Not all NATO members, of course, but the point is: What you're looking at here is a unified Europe, a unified West, a unified NATO who are standing up to the aggression and the invasion led by President Putin.

Q And if I could just quickly follow up on that, we've also seen some signs and responses beyond sanctions to isolate Russia. I think FIFA — and I'm sorry, I'm not a soccer fan — I think it's "FIFA," how you pronounce it — and the IOC have taken action to put pressure.

Can that type of pressure — is it sustainable in the long term, given the economic pressures? The longer this crisis goes on, can you maintain that sort of unity and those sort of collective actions? Can they continue beyond this early moment?

MS. PSAKI: Well — and you're referring to the IOC, as in the International Olympic Committee?

Q Yeah.

MS. PSAKI: And I don't know if it's "Fie-fa" or "FIFA."

Q FIFA.

MS. PSAKI: FIFA. Okay. I kind of —

Q I apologize to the international community. (Laughter.)

MS. PSAKI: — I tried to be soft there. Okay. FIFA.

Look, I think, Aamer, obviously the preference of everybody is for President Putin to take de-escalatory steps. That is everybody's preference.

But as it relates to unity among international organizations, among the West, among countries, among many leaders in the United States even, I think what we've seen over the last few days is a commitment to remain united and to send a strong message to President Putin that this act — these actions, this rhetoric is unacceptable and the world is building a wall against it.

Go ahead.

Q I think the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia had a call with Emmanuel Macron yesterday where he reiterated the commitment for OPEC Plus's production agreement. Has there been an explicit U.S. request to Saudi or to members of OPEC Plus to increase production, given what's happening right now?

MS. PSAKI: Well, without getting into specific details from here, just because it wouldn't be constructive to our overarching objectives, we have been in touch. I think you may remember that Brett McGurk and Amos Hochstein made a trip to the region just a few weeks ago to have conversations with the Saudis and others about a range of topics, including the conflict in Yemen, but also to have a conversation about the need to address any impact on the global markets — global oil markets that we expect could happen — expected at the time could happen and could continue to happen as a result of President Putin's invasion.

Q But was any request made for a specific production increase?

MS. PSAKI: Again, there is a — there has been an ongoing discussion about steps that we can all take as a global community to address any volatility in the market.

Q And then given, I think, the speed and scale of the ramp-up on the sanction side of things over the course of the last 72 hours, does the U.S., European Allies have a — like, a threshold for which they view if you cross this, it would be viewed as an act of war by President Putin? As in, how do you calibrate your actions in terms of response and what may be coming back?

MS. PSAKI: Well, he was — he's already in a war — committed an act of war, invaded a sovereign country.

Q I mean for NATO countries or EU countries.

MS. PSAKI: Oh, you mean for NATO countries to act further, in terms of further military steps or further sanctions?

Q As in, if you gave out — as you gave out what a response would be, given the scale of the sanctions package —

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q — that was unveiled, is there a line that if we do this sanction or if we go this far, then that would for sure draw a response directly towards the U.S. or towards the EU from Russia?

MS. PSAKI: Well, if you look at the significance of the steps we've taken to date, including the announcements over the weekend about cutting off major financial — major financial — banks in Russia from the SWIFT banking system, we have continued to escalate and build in close coordination and alignment with the Europeans.

Unity is a top principle for President Biden as we take steps forward. That doesn't happen on its own. It doesn't happen by accident. It happens as a result of a lot of conversations, diplomacy, and hours by the President and others on his national security team behind the scenes.

But the other piece, just to get to the core of your question, that we very much weigh is maximizing the impact on President Putin, the Russian elite, the economy while minimizing it on the global markets and the American people.

So, as we look at steps to take — I mean, even if you look at the impact on the energy sector, you know, we have — we have taken steps — we have not taken some steps on energy sanctions, in part because we weigh that.

That doesn't mean that they're off the table. That remain — they remain on the table. But Europeans, for example, are very concerned about further price spikes on gas, in particular. Their prices have gone up 335 percent over the last three — yes, over the last year and 26 percent over the last five days.

So sanctioning energy would affect Russia's income stream — certainly that would be a reason to do it — but it would also have extreme consequences on the world energy markets, particularly for our Allies in Europe.

So, I use that as an example because we have to weigh all of the factors as we weigh whether to take additional steps. We have additional steps we could take, but we consider all of those factors as we make determinations.

Q And then, last one, just real quick: Is the Biden administration considering following what the EU and Canada did in barring Russian flights from the U.S. at any point?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have anything to update you on, on that front at this point in time. There are obviously a range of — of options that remain on the table. So, it's not off the table, but I don't have anything to announce and no decision made.

Q Thank you.

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. You spoke about — a little bit about the sanctions that were announced over the weekend —

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q — on Russia's Central Bank. How long does the U.S. anticipate keeping them in place? I mean, is there sort of a timeframe there? Perhaps — you spoke about, you know, Russia considering de-escalatory tactics or, you know, maybe announcing a ceasefire. Or, you know, is there — is there, sort of, a broad timeframe that the U.S. is thinking about?

MS. PSAKI: Well, let's hope that's the discussion we're having. Obviously, right now, President Putin is continuing to take escalatory steps, so we're not at that point of having that discussion. We hope that's one that we will be a part of.

Q Okay. So, for the time being, there is, sort of, no discussion on perhaps, you know, putting an end to the sanctions that have been put in place?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I mean, President Putin and the Russian military is moving toward the capital of Ukraine, and there are hundreds of thousands of refugees leaving the country

because he has invaded a sovereign country. So, no, I would not say we're talking about reducing sanctions at this point in time.

Q And, sorry, one quick question on President Zelenskyy saying he wants to be a member of the European Union. We did see some comments come in from the EU over the weekend saying they are a part of us. However, this morning, there were some conflicting comments again from the EU saying, you know, there are, sort of, discussions among EU members about, you know, whether such a decision can be made. What is the U.S. position on Ukraine joining the EU? Do you support it?

MS. PSAKI: It's up to the European Union. We're not a member of the European Union.

Q If they did consider taking Ukraine in, would you support that?

MS. PSAKI: It's up to the European Union to make that decision. There's a process.

And, of course, we support the aspirations of any country to join any organization and the decision of that organization to make a decision.

Go ahead.

Q President Zelenskyy is urging President Biden and NATO to impose this no-fly zone. You've said that this would significantly escalate the situation. So, just to be clear: Is this a no go for right now, or is this completely off the table — something that you would not consider?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the President has been very clear that he is not intending to send U.S. troops to fight a war with Russia. And I think what's important to note here is that is essentially what this would be a step toward, because a no-fly zone would require implementation. It would require deploying U.S. military to enforce, which would be a direct conflict — potentially a direct conflict and potentially war with Russia, which is something we are not planning to be a part of.

Q And on Vladimir Putin, you've said, you know, you're not going to assess his mental state, but the President has said, you know, he knows Putin well. They've talked a few times over the last several weeks and months. Has the President himself noticed or commented on any change that he's picked up on in Putin's demeanor or tone?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have anything — any more assessment about the President's view of President Putin's mental acuity to state from here.

There's no question — outside of that, we'll leave that to others — that what we've seen from President Putin, whether it is escalatory rhetoric as it relates to nuclear capabilities and nuclear intentions — something that is in direct conflict with something President Putin, himself, and the Russians committed to — had an alternate — you know, committed to something else just a year ago, or whether it is the speech he gave last week where he questioned the sovereignty of the country of Ukraine at all, or the actions he's taking right now. Those are not actions of a — of a global leader that — that that should be treated with respect on the global stage.

Q But given the behavior that you have seen, some of the things that you just noted, and the very severe consequences that he is now facing — these severe sanctions — is there any concern that instead of retreating that Putin will feel so squeezed and so pressured that he will lash out even more, intensifying his attacks — that any of this could backfire, essentially?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think that it is our responsibility — the United States, President Biden as a leader in the world — to rally the world in making clear how unacceptable his behavior is and to put in place severe consequences.

Now what he is feeling on the ground — there are protests, there have been oligarchs in his own cozy circle who have been outspoken. And obviously, the pinch is being felt significantly in the Russian economy, even if you just look at the fact that the market was closed today. The ruble has been plummeting. So those are the ways that he is feeling this.

He has a decision he can make to de-escalate. And certainly, we would welcome that decision.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. Does the White House believe it is possible to say whether Ukraine or Russia are winning this war right now?

MS. PSAKI: I don't think we're going to make an assessment of that from here. But what I will reiterate is something we have said in the past, is that: President Putin and Russian military have made clear that they have every intention of taking over the capital city.

While it — while there has been a greater pushback in the country than they may have assessed to begin with, and I know my colleagues at the Department of Defense have spoken to this — the Ukrainian military, President Zelenskyy, and others, have fought courageously, have fought boldly in this moment — they are continuing to proceed, continuing to move towards the capital. So, I don't think their ambitions have changed.

Q What would Putin have to do to get these sanctions lifted? Would he have to agree to a ceasefire? Would he have to pull all of his troops out of Ukraine?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not going to make a prediction or assessment of that from here. If he starts to take the de-escalatory steps, I'm sure we can have that conversation.

Q How great is the concern — this is sort of building on Mary's question: How great is the concern that these sanctions are so punishing that, essentially, Putin will have nothing left to lose and no offramp?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the sanctions are punishing so that they will inflict significant consequences and change the outcome at the end of the day — and de-escalate at the end of the day. That is what they are intended to do.

Q And then, you were talking about a no-fly zone over Ukraine, but I know officials have been discussing the possibility of imposing a no-fly zone for Russia over the U.S. Where do those talks stand right now and what are the pros and cons to doing something like that?

MS. PSAKI: Well, while — while no option is off the table, there — I don't have anything to preview for you in terms of a decision or anything along those lines.

I would note that there are a lot of flights that go over — that — that U.S. — U.S. airlines fly over Russia to go to Asia and other parts of the world, and we factor in a range of factors.

Q And then, finally, what's the U.S. doing to reduce the possibility of nuclear war?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think, one, we are not escalating our own rhetoric. Two, we are certainly assessing what President Putin's comments mean. But, as I noted a little bit earlier, we have not changed our own posture. What we are trying to do is reduce the tension; take the — the tenor of the rhetoric down; and make clear that we have seen this pattern in the past, which is posing threats or suggesting, through misinformation of sorts, that there are threats posed to President Putin in Russia that don't exist.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. There are reports of illegal cluster bombs and vacuum bombs being used by the Russians. If that's true, what is the next step of this administration? And is there a red line for how much violence will be tolerated against civilians in this manner that's illegal and potentially a war crime?

MS. PSAKI: It is — it would be. I don't have any confirmation of that. We have seen the reports. If that were true, it would potentially be a war crime.

Obviously, there are a range of international fora that would assess that. So, certainly, we would look to that to be a part of that conversation.

Q And then, the new aid that you just laid out at the beginning here.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q The Post reported over the weekend that this aid will not include Stingers, that it would likely come in a future batch of aid. What is the reason for that?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not going to get into specifics of what is in the military package. It is — it is a combination of ground and airborne defense capabilities. And, obviously, we have provided those in the past, but I'm not going to have more details —

Q And then —

MS. PSAKI: — to outline for you from here.

Q — you mentioned that this next batch is going to be coming in the next few days. Why so long? I mean, “days” doesn't sound like a long time to us, but —

MS. PSAKI: The package that we had and already announced continues to be delivered. So, we have expedited the plans for delivery of this new package.

Q And then on the nuclear rhetoric we've been hearing from Putin: Does this influence at all the upcoming Nuclear Policy Review?

MS. PSAKI: In terms of how we — our relationship with — look, I would say — it's a good question, Jacqui. But I would say what's important for people to note — and this is why I noted it a little bit earlier — is that even at moments where we had huge tension with President Putin and Russia around the 2016 election, around the invasion of Georgia, around their prior invasion of Ukraine, it was agreed that escalatory rhetoric around nuclear ambitions was dangerous. And that was something we committed to with Russia not to pursue.

So, you know, we — I think, for right now, we're going to remind the global community of those commitments.

Q And on that same note, does this administration trust Russia to be an honest broker in the talks with Iran right now?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think it's not about trust in any of these negotiations or discussions; it's about verifying and then trusting later, including with the Iranians. But the Russians have been, in the past, a part of the P5+1 negotiations. They're a part of it now.

I would — I would — I would just convey that, you know, it is in everyone's interest to have an understanding and visibility into Iran's capacity to acquire a nuclear weapon. There's no question about that.

So, at this point, we're just — we're just continuing to work — hope to make progress on that agreement.

Q And then after all of this, what is the stance of the U.S. and buying Russian gas at this point? At this point, are we ready to pledge not to buy any more Russian gas?

MS. PSAKI: Well, as you know, it's really — let me give you actually kind of an update on this because it's a — it's — I think there's been a little confusion. One moment.

So, as it relates to Russian gas, the U.S. government doesn't dictate where the U.S. market sells our own oil and gas products nor where it acquires crude or refined products from for domestic consumption. This is all up to the private sector, other than exceptions like countries under sanctions.

So, the U.S. refiners currently importing Russian products are largely legacy refinery operations tooled in Hawaii and Alaska for certain supplies because of geography; and imports to the Gulf, both of certain refined products and of crude, as refiners in the Gulf mix crude supplies to meet the needs of their particular refinery designs.

There have been companies — obviously, private sector companies — who have made decisions and announcements, and we certainly applaud that.

Q So, can you just explain, though, what you laid out at the beginning because I'm a little bit unclear. You just — just in layman's terms: We are not going to be making any policy from the U.S. government that would prohibit the sale or the purchase of Russian gas then because it's not something that we already do?

MS. PSAKI: We haven't ruled out that, but I think what I wanted to convey is what is accurate about what happens now and how it currently works.

Go ahead.

Q Jen, thank you. Staying on that topic for a moment — of oil and gas. You have said “nothing is off the table” when it comes to releasing more reserves, more barrels from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. Where are those negotiations right now? Is the administration closer to moving forward with that, given the sanctions and what we’re seeing?

MS. PSAKI: I don’t have anything to preview for you on that front. It remains an option on the table and, obviously, it would help meet any supply issues in the marketplace. There are conversations that we’ve been having with global partners. And obviously, we have our own Strategic Petroleum Reserve stockpile to tap into.

Q Can you characterize if you’re closer to making a decision on that front though, given what we are seeing and obviously the global impact that these very harsh sanctions (inaudible)?

MS. PSAKI: It has remained on the table. I just don’t have anything to predict for you at this point in time.

Q Okay. Just a short time ago, the President was asked by our colleagues here if Americans should be concerned about a nuclear threat. He said very firmly, “No.” Can you explain what gives him that confidence?

MS. PSAKI: Because, as I said a little bit earlier, while we think provocative rhetoric regarding nuclear weapons is dangerous and adds to the risk of miscalculation and should be avoided — which we’re not going to indulge in — we are continuing to assess President Putin’s directive and, at this time, we see no reason to change our own alert levels.

We’ve also seen, throughout this crisis, President Putin falsely allege that they are under threat and use that as a predicate for taking more aggressive action. So, we assess — we have our own capacities and capabilities here, but nuclear war cannot be won.

And what everybody should be doing around the world is taking steps to reduce the rhetoric, reduce the tension, and that’s certainly what our objective is.

Q One breaking news development that I wanted to ask you about. The U.S. has expelled 12 diplomats — 12 Russian diplomats. The Russian ambassador just said a short time ago that move was a “hostile step” toward Russia. Can you give us the thinking behind the decision?

And, again, following up on some of the lines of questioning that you’ve already gotten, could there be a backlash to this step? Is this escalatory?

MS. PSAKI: Well, let me first state that today's action has been in the works for several months. We informed — the United States informed the United Nations and the Russian Mission to the United Nations that we were beginning the process of expelling 12 intelligence operatives from the Russian Mission who had abused their privileges of residency in the United States by engaging in espionage activities that are adverse to our national security. So, it takes some time to make those evaluations and that — again, those actions were — were in the works for months.

Q And your response to the Russian ambassador who called this a “hostile act”?

MS. PSAKI: I think the hostile act is committing espionage activities on our own soil.

Q And, Jen, just finally, on the issue of refugees —

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q — you have also said — you were asked by my colleague earlier today whether the administration would move to give refugees from Ukraine protective status. Can you give us a timeline for that? These are people who are suffering, and they want to know what the answer is.

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think, to be clear: Temporary Protected Status applies to people currently living in the United States. Right? So that, I think, is one of the questions — a good question — that has been asked. I don't have any update on that.

That's a process that's run by the Department of Homeland Security. They evaluate, through an interagency process, both what everybody's recommendations are and, obviously, the conditions on the ground in Ukraine.

The second piece is whether we would accept refugees. Yes, we would.

But I think it's important to note that the vast majority of refugees are going to want — in our assessment and through the discussion with refugee agencies, with other countries in the region — will want to be in Europe and neighboring countries, many of whom have already conveyed very clearly that they will welcome refugees in. Many of them have family members there. Many have work there. So, we are also coordinating and supporting those efforts as well.

Q Thanks, Jen.

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. The U.S. has authorized the departure of non-emergency employees and diplomats' relatives from the embassy in Moscow. How confident is the administration that the U.S. Embassy in Moscow can remain open in the long term?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I can't make an assessment of that. That's something the State Department looks at and assesses. Obviously, our — our embassies and consulates around the world play an incredibly important role in communicating with American citizens who are in a country, but also with the Russian people. And so that is something — that's why we have a diplomatic pres- — you know, consulates in and around the world, including in Russia.

There are also decisions that are made for a range of reasons — the State Department could outline it more specifically for you — including temporary departure. It's something that has happened around the world for many, many decades for a variety of reasons.

I would, you know, give you an example of: Just a couple of years ago in Turkey, there was ordered departure, right? Then diplomats return. That's obviously the objective, but it really depends on the conditions on the ground.

Q And what level of concern is there for the safety of American citizens who are living in Russia? Is there concern that they could face retaliation in light of this conflict?

MS. PSAKI: Again, I would point you to the State Department. They do assessments, and they give clear guidance to people who are on the ground and what their recommendations are for their security. I would note that one difficulty, right now in Russia because of these sanctions, is of gaining access to U.S. currency and using banking cards. And that is a hindrance for many people who are living there right now.

Q And just, lastly, you know, you've been very clear that the President does not have any intention to deploy U.S. troops to engage militarily in this conflict. But would you say that there is any particular red line that this administration has that would necessitate military action?

MS. PSAKI: As in sending our U.S. military into Ukraine? The President has no plans to send U.S. military to fight a war in Ukraine against Russia.

Go ahead.

Q Can you share any details about what came out of the President's secure call with other Allied nations this afternoon?

MS. PSAKI: Sure. I know we were working on a readout, which we will get to you shortly after the briefing. It's been a bit of a busy day, so let me venture to get that to you.

The purpose of this call was for the President to have an opportunity to continue to engage with other leaders about what we're seeing on the ground, the range of assistance we're providing, the financial sanctions and economic consequences steps we're taking, and ensure we remain closely coordinated. But I will see if there's more details we can get you.

Q Great. And then administration officials earlier this — earlier today had a background briefing with reporters about the State of the Union coming up. Can you tell us a little bit more? We understand — or we understood from the call that the President will be addressing elements of the Build Back Better plan when it comes to things like childcare and paid family leave. And officials talked about how those things, if implemented, will lower costs for families, but they were hesitant to use the word “inflation” or say whether that would be addressed directly in the President's speech. So can you say whether the President will be addressing any new policies — not necessarily new domestic programs but policies that would address inflation directly?

MS. PSAKI: Well, first, let me say, the President will absolutely use the word “inflation” tomorrow, and he will talk about inflation in his speech. Of course, that is a huge issue on the minds of Americans.

Now, one thing to note is one of the best, most important steps that the Senate could take is to confirm his slate of eminently qualified nominees to fill out the Federal Reserve Board, given they — given they have a very important role as it relates to inflation.

But I think what you will hear the President talk about — and I think this is what they were talking about on this call — is how we're going to address costs for the American people and lower costs. And we talked a lot about inflation in here, our economists talk about inflation, the Federal Reserve talks about inflation — hugely important.

How people experience it is what it means for their pocketbooks, for their budgets, for their bank accounts, and how they're paying for things. And that's why a lot of what you're going to hear about tomorrow, as he talks about it, is how he's going to reduce costs.

Now, the Build Back — you know, parts of his agenda that have — that he has talked about significantly — a lot over the course of the last several months — lowering costs for childcare,

lowering costs for eldercare, lowering costs for prescription drugs — those are not done yet. So he will reiterate his call for Congress to move forward on those.

But I would also note that, in the speech, he's going to make clear that one of the best ways to lower costs over the long run is to — is to increase the productive capacity of our economy, to make more things in America with more American workers contributing and earning a good living.

He's going to describe the emerging manufacturing comeback with American companies betting on America again because of the administration's commitment to domestic industrial revitalization and technological development.

He will also call on — he will also explain that we can also lower costs by promoting fair competition in the U.S. economy. And there are new steps to lower — and he will talk about steps to lower consumer prices and level the playing field for American businesses in ocean shipping and new steps to protect seniors and other nursing home residents by cracking down on unsafe nursing homes.

And he's also going to talk about — reflect on one of the strongest labor market recoveries in American history and make clear that it's important to continue to take steps to eliminate barriers to good-paying jobs for workers across America.

So I would expect that you will hear a lot, the American people will hear a lot about how he's going to lower their costs, how he's going to build — continue to build a strong economy over the long term.

Q If I could just follow up on what you were saying about addressing lowering costs for families — the President has been encouraging Congress to pass at least elements or his entire Build Back Better agenda for months; Congress has been negotiating for months. What gives the President any confidence that this time around things would be more likely to pass, given we are just months out from midterm elections?

MS. PSAKI: Because there is strong support across the country for lowering costs for prescription drugs. It's incredibly popular. Who wants to pay more for prescription drugs? I don't know why that gets to be a Democratic idea, but we'll — we're happy to own that one. Or for lowering the cost of childcare, for lowering the cost of eldercare and healthcare.

There's also strong support for those — those items and those priorities and those good ideas in — in the Senate among Senate Democrats. So he's going to keep pressing to get it done, and he thinks the American people want us to get it done.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen.

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

Q First, just on Ukraine.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q Over the past 72 hours or so, there have been a series of announcements that have come on aiding Ukraine or punishing Russia. But it has appeared that Europe has taken the lead on many of these announcements, and I can go through a few of them if you want. But the brunt of my question is I know — whether you can explain whether there's a deliberate strategy right now in this moment to have Europeans and European nations and European leaders being the ones out front on punishing Russia or supporting Ukraine?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say first that the SWIFT banking system is a European system. So, in terms of the steps that would be taken, it would be only natural for those steps to be taken or announced by them. It is something we have clearly been long open to, but I just wanted to state that from the beginning.

I would also say that, you know, the — the President and the United States has been leading this effort around the world in building this coalition, which includes many countries in Europe but also many from other parts of the world, in standing up to President Putin and standing up to the aggression and the invasion of Ukraine.

And so, all of this coordinated action did not happen by accident. It wouldn't have happened without the President's efforts, the President's time he spent on diplomacy, the time of our national security team.

The order of announcements and how that has gone, I would not overread into that because we would not be here had the President not been leading this effort around the world for months.

Q But I think you just saw, you know, over the weekend in particular, this sort of onslaught of news and, sort of, changing posture in Europe, and the President was not — not present at all in the, sort of, like, you know, living rooms of the American people. You know, we were seeing newscasts of these vacuum bombs and whatnot, but no sort of visual image of the President taking — you know, doing the kind of behind-the-scenes leadership that you just described.

And I do wonder if that is on purpose or if that just happens to be the way the schedule worked.

MS. PSAKI: Well, the President was at a memorial service for a family member yesterday, and he was with the family on Saturday. And so that was his priority this weekend — or one of his priorities this weekend.

He also, though, engaged in a meeting with his national security team, and I think you saw him quite visible last week and again today — well, I guess you know about his call he had today — and he will continue to, in the days ahead, lead the world in not only building the coalition but pushing for agreement and a coordinated effort to hold Russia accountable.

So I would say this weekend, he had some personal family reasons — an important one: a memorial service for a family member — as to why he was not giving a speech yesterday. But he is somebody who has been leading this effort behind the scenes for months.

Q And on that front, if you could just preview, for a minute — the call earlier today was very focused on the President's economic agenda, and if you could talk a little bit about what the President may say and how he will, you know, frame this — this moment and, sort of, this international crises, and the extent to which he sees this a, you know, global audience, you know, more so than it normally would be in a State of the Union.

MS. PSAKI: Sure. Sure. Well, first I would say that there's no question that this speech is a little different than it would have been just a few months ago. And there's always national security in every State of the Union speech, but every State of the Union speech also reflects a moment of time. And so, the President will lay out the efforts we are taking, he has taken, he has led on to rally the world to stand up for democracy and against Russian aggression.

He will talk about the steps we've taken to not only support the Ukrainian people with military and economic assistance but also the steps he's taken to build a glo- — global alition [coalition] imposing crippling financial sanctions on President Putin, his inner circle, and the Russian economy. And he will talk about the steps he's taking to mitigate the impact of President Putin's invasion of Ukraine on the global economy and the American people.

And certainly, you know, I think people can expect to hear him, you know, position that as the importance of the United States as a leader in the world — standing up for values, standing up for — for global norms, but also, you know, the efforts that he has undertaken to mitigate how it will impact people here.

Q And I just have one other quick one. But, again, based on the background briefing earlier today about the State of the Union — it focused on the economy and various programs that the President wants Congress to push. Could you characterize what percentage of the programs that the President will talk about are just a repackaged parts of Build Back Better — like chunks that he wants to see the Congress pass versus like brand new ideas that he's introducing for the first time tomorrow night?

MS. PSAKI: Well, here's what I will tell you, having been through a few State of the Unions in the past, and I know you have as well: They don't get longer, they get shorter. Nobody wants a two- or three-hour State of the Union. I don't think anyone in here does. So I just don't want to preview more at this point in time.

You can certainly expect to hear him talk about some — call on Congress to send bills to his desk that deliver progress on ideas that have historically been supported by Democrats and Republicans. Some of those are economic and some of those are in other areas that could just impact and help communities across the country.

And you will certainly hear him call, as you — as you touched on, for a continued effort — a redoubling of the effort to move forward on steps that will reduce costs for the American people in these key areas of childcare, healthcare, prescription drugs.

So, you know, stay tuned for tomorrow night. But we have a lot of hours between the speech, and I'm sure we'll have more previews between now and then.

Q Thanks, Jen. Just staying on the State of the Union topic.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q Can you talk a little bit about what — what it would look like, in terms of masking or what you expect it could look like in terms of masking? Specifically, this — is the President — will he walk in, shake hands? Will he be wearing a mask when he walks in?

MS. PSAKI: Well, he will certainly not be wearing a mask when he's speaking. I have not talked to him yet about whether he's going to wear a mask when he's walking down the aisle. But it has been announced, I think, that it's not required, and certainly he will abide by that. But I will see if there's more we can report out to you on that later today.

MS. PSAKI: Was it important to the President that masks come off dur- — before the State of the Union? Is there a message that he hopes to send with — you know, with that news?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say the President is very powerful, but he couldn't make us be in the green zone that we're in right now in D.C. That's why we are not required — we're not going to be required to wear a mask starting tomorrow.

So I would say that for him, it had nothing to do with the timing around the State of the Union. He wanted to give the CDC the time to assess and make recommendations that would be clear to the American public about what their recommendations would be for mask wearing moving forward.

Q And can I ask one question about the Ukraine-Bel- — on Belarus —

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q Can you talk about the Belarus situation and aiding Russia? What — is there — are there additional actions that the United States is considering?

Just speaking of SWIFT, there's been some reports that Europe is considering or looking at kicking Belarus out of SWIFT. Is that something — is the United States part of those discussions? Does it support that type of action against Belarus?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have anything to predict on that front at this point in time, but what I will say is we've already taken steps to put in place sanctions on some leaders in Belarus, some of the military components; certainly, we could build on that. But I don't have anything to predict at this point in time. But we certainly are a part of those discussions.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks. One of the topics — I know you don't want to get into, you know, stuff that might be cut. But you guys have said many times that the Chinese have, at least tacitly, supported Putin's moves into Ukraine. Is the President going to call out the Chinese for that behavior or President Xi Jinping or what you guys have been trying to get the Chinese to do on helping with Ukraine or helping with Russia on this crisis? Is he going to mention that at all?

MS. PSAKI: I would say this speech is more about the unity of the vast majority of the global community in standing up against President Putin, it's more about American leadership in this moment, and it's more about even unity here in standing up against the aggression of President Putin into Ukraine.

I would say, on the Chinese, what we've said generally is that it's important at this moment for any country to be vocal in speaking out against the actions of President Putin and — and

Russian leaders in this moment.

What we have seen from the Chinese last weekend — or, I guess, a weekend before that at the Munich Security Conference — they reiterated their support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. We saw them abstain from the U.N. Security Council vote.

But, you know, this is not a moment to be on the sidelines. This is a moment to be vocal, and this is a moment to think about where you are in history.

But I think the speech, for everyone's expectation for tomorrow, is more about laying out efforts to the American people that the United States has undertaken to rally the world for democracy and against Russian aggression.

Q But you are, in general, pushing the Chinese to be less on the sidelines and not trying to have it both ways, basically, by being vocal?

MS. PSAKI: Again, they have implemented the sanctions. If they don't do that, then we obviously have steps we can take. We are encouraging every country to continue to be vocal and more vocal as it relates to Russia's aggression and invasion of Ukraine.

Go ahead. Oh, go ahead. Go.

Q One more — just breaking news.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q The Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, just announced that he — the Canadians would unilaterally ban Russian crude oil imports. I know you've just talked a lot about how you're taking into account how this will impact the Europeans. But is there something you had — is this something you would just do unilaterally, not as a coordinated effort?

MS. PSAKI: From the beginning — again, all options remain on the table — you have seen us take a number of actions over the last several days that play that out. But I don't have anything to predict at this point, other than to reiterate that we have really worked to take steps in lockstep with the Europeans and a number of our NATO partners.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. On Friday, you said this isn't — this is not a “moment where diplomacy feels appropriate.” The French President talked with Putin hours ago. So, have the discussions between the Russian and Ukrainian delegations changed — or how are they influencing

President Biden's stance on having leader-to-leader discussions. We're a few days out from that.

MS. PSAKI: Nothing has changed in terms of the President — this President's assessment of having a conversation or engagement with President Putin.

As we said before, we're not ruling it out ever; it just is not the appropriate moment or the moment for the United States President to have a conversation with the President of a country invading a sovereign country. That's our view; other countries make their own decisions.

In terms of the engagements or discussion between the Ukrainians and the Russians, I'd really point you to the Ukrainians to get more of a readout from that. There have been reports that those will continue. I would point you to them to confirm whether that is the case. And I expect we will be in touch with the Ukrainians, as we are nearly every day.

Q At the beginning, you kind of outlined all of the support being given not just by the United States but other countries who typically have not done so. But I wonder if you — if the administration has any concerns about how President Putin would use that as an excuse to escalate and possibly attack NATO Allies, considering his warnings about the West getting involved in this crisis?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think it's important to step back and remember who the aggressor is here. The aggressor is President Putin. The aggressor is the Russian military at the direction of President Putin into a sovereign country.

The world is standing up against this aggression, and he is feeling the impact already of the financial sanctions and consequences.

If you just look purely at the impact on the Russian economy, even today: The ruble fell 20 to 25 percent and is trading at its weakest level ever. The Russian stock market was kept closed today, likely due to a fear of capital flight once it opens. The Russian Central Bank more than doubled their key interest rate to 20 percent, the highest in almost 20 years.

This is the world saying, "This is not acceptable." It is now up to President Putin, if he wants those circumstances to change, to change his own behavior.

Q And then, last one: The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released kind of a major, unprecedented report with lots of warnings today and said some places in the world have basically maxed out their capacity to adapt to climate change, while others soon will. I'm curious — I mean, Joe Manchin offered kind of a slimmed down BBB version with \$555 billion

for climate – will the administration be pressing Democrats to at least move on that portion of climate change in light of the recent developments of this recent report?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say, first, the President agrees absolutely that we need to do more. That is why they – that he has been such an advocate for historic levels of investment in addressing our climate crisis. And if we had had 50 votes to move that forward, we would have done that. Right?

So there are ongoing discussions, of course; they are happening a lot on the Hill between members on the Hill. The President remains committed to moving that forward.

I would also note that part of what was in that report was the need to bolster adaptation efforts that increase our resilience to the impacts of climate change.

And one of the – and a couple of pieces that the President has already done: He launched an Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience, a whole-of-government response, to help more than half a billion people in developing countries adapt to and manage the impacts of climate change.

And he also – the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, we often forget – not you, maybe, but some of us – that it will strengthen our nation's resilience – that's a big part of it – to extreme weather and climate change while reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

So, we absolutely need to do more. We want to do more. But we have – he has already taken some steps to help address because we recognize that resilience is something that there needs to be more work and effort on.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. The administration has been studying for months the impact of the sanctions that were rolled out over the weekend and their potential impact on financial markets in the West. You just detailed what happened in the Russian markets, but I'm wondering if there's been any fallout that's been seen that would warrant government intervention by central banks in Western countries.

MS. PSAKI: In Europe or in the United States?

Q In either.

MS. PSAKI: Well, I can only speak to the United States. I mean, I think that our effort — and, as you noted, we have been preparing and studying and analyzing for months now. As you know, Russia is, I think, our 26th-largest trading partner; it's not an enormous trading partner of ours.

And we've obviously been taking steps to mitigate any impacts on our markets. We're not trying to tank our markets, to state, kind of, the obvious here. We're trying to maximize the impact on the Russian economy and squeeze around President Putin.

In terms of analysis, otherwise, I would point to the Treasury Department and European officials.

Q The Pentagon has also said that President Putin and Russian forces continue to advance on Kyiv, that that is still the ultimate goal of President Putin. So, I'm wondering, with all of the sanctions that have already been rolled out, what else can the U.S do besides wait?

MS. PSAKI: Well, one, we have provided an additional enormous package of security assistance — the President announced over the weekend. We have provided an enormous package of humanitarian assistance. And we're continuing to plus up support for our neighbors in the region. That is — we continue to be the largest provider of all of those, and we continue to have the backs of the Ukrainian leadership and the Ukrainian people.

Q President Zelenskyy says the next 24 hours are critical, though. So is there a risk that all of that equipment ends up in Russian hands? How do you prevent that?

MS. PSAKI: There's always steps the Department of Defense takes to mitigate that, and we take them in — in coordination with our partners. I would have you speak with them about more specifics.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. Oh —

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead.

Q Thank you. I wanted to ask for more specifics on refugees. I know that you told Kristen just now that the U.S. will accept refugees from Ukraine. Do you have a specific number of refugees? And what — how would you determine that?

MS. PSAKI: Well, there's — I would first note that we — we continue to believe that the vast, vast majority will go to Europe. And so, this is different from other conflicts where that has not been the — the likely outcome.

We — in terms of specific numbers, we do not have that. There are refugee programs that they would have to, of course, apply for.

There's a question about Temporary Protected Status, whether that applies to refugee — people who are in — not refugees, but people who are in the United States right now.

But, again, what our focus is on — because we think it will impact the vast majority of refugees — is working in close coordination with our European partners and plussing up our humanitarian assistance and assistance in these countries where they're — where they are receiving refugees.

Q I also wanted to ask about voting. Texas has an election coming up, and they're beginning to have people who vote by mail — their ballots being rejected. I know this administration has been very vocal about new voting laws that it disagrees with. Can you talk about what you, as an administration, are doing to leverage the resources of the White House and of the executive branch to help people get access to voting in the coming weeks, not just in Texas but around the country, as elections get going?

MS. PSAKI: So, we absolutely can get you a readout of that. I would say, though, that the vast majority of this is going to come from the Democratic National Committee and the political arm. Right? So, I would really point you to them for more specifics.

Go ahead. Go ahead.

Q Thank you so much. I just have two quickies on Ukraine. First of all, with the upcoming ASEAN Summit, does President Biden hope to use this summit to shore up support — I guess you could say, in opposition to Ukraine — in opposition to Russia, or however you want to put it?

And how does the administration feel about Myanmar's support of Russia?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think, for any country, what our message is, is that it's important to deter — to think about what place — where you want to stand on the side of history, and that is how you will be judged moving forward. And obviously, we are encouraging every country who has — who has not been condemning the actions of Russia to change course.

As it relates to the ASEAN Summit, which is in a couple of weeks, I don't have anything about the agenda at this point in time. And we're certainly not waiting to communicate — the President is not waiting to communicate with — or our national security team is not waiting to communicate with ASEAN countries about steps they can take to help be a part of the solution here, whether it is providing — we've seen a lot of progress on this front — LNG gas access to European countries that they don't need, or condemning the actions, or putting in place sanctions and steps themselves.

Q And then, quickly, just on sanctions: Every round of sanctions the administration describes is “the harshest yet,” “the strictest yet.” But President Putin is not responding to these so far. And so, what — what happens next? Do you have anything else in your tool belt? Because, I mean, these all seem very severe, and it boggles the mind as to what more you can do. So, what else do —

MS. PSAKI: We always have more we can do. But I would say that what we're seeing, in terms of the impact on the financial markets in Russia, is significant. And I outlined some of the impacts, of course, on the ruble, on inflation, on central bank lending there in Russia.

All of these steps squeeze not just President Putin, but squeeze the people around him and have a huge, devastating impact on the economy.

And they are more significant. We've built them more significant over time. And that's what they're intended to do — is to have those consequences that build over the course of time.

Thanks, everyone.

(Cross-talk by reporters.)

MS. PSAKI: I will see you all tomorrow. Thank you, everyone, very much.

4:24 P.M. EST