

Alerts

This Week in Washington - February 24, 2012 February 24, 2012

DOMESTIC POLICY MATTERS

Congress was in **recess this week**, returning to session next week.

After the House and Senate agreed on legislation to extend the **payroll tax cuts**, President Obama quickly signed the measure into law last Friday. House Republican leaders announced this week that they will now shift away from efforts to pass a long-term **transportation bill** and, in a win for urban Democrats, to decouple transit funding from the Highway Trust Fund. Much of the U.S. business community supported Speaker John Boehner's (R-Ohio) bill, but some House conservatives opposed it on spending grounds. The Senate currently is pursuing a two-year reauthorization bill and will resume consideration of that package next week.

On Wednesday, President Obama offered a **broad framework for corporate tax reform**. The proposal includes a lower corporate tax rate of 28 percent and a requirement that companies pay a minimum tax on foreign earnings, paid for by the elimination of several tax breaks, including some used by oil and gas companies. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner told reporters on Wednesday that he would meet with Congressional tax writers as early as next week to discuss the proposal.

President Obama traveled to the 2012 presidential battleground state of Florida Thursday to deliver a speech at the University of Miami focused on **energy policy**. In the midst of rising gas prices, President Obama took the opportunity to address critics and discuss his Administration's long-term plan for **energy independence**.

Also Thursday, the Obama Administration unveiled a "**Consumer Privacy Bill of Rights**" as part of a comprehensive blueprint to protect individual privacy rights. The initiative "seeks to protect all Americans from having their information misused," and is supported by a commitment from online ad firms to accept voluntary privacy safeguards. Although currently a voluntary framework, Commerce Secretary John Bryson suggested the Administration will work with Congress to turn the Consumer Privacy Bill of Rights into law. Meanwhile, Administration officials spent time this week urging lawmakers not to dilute key provisions **cybersecurity legislation** introduced last week in the Senate.

On Wednesday, U.S. officials announced a **plea bargain with high-value Guantánamo Bay detainee** Majid Khan, who agreed to plead guilty and testify at the trials of other detainees in exchange for a reduced sentence and eventual release. U.S. Pfc. Bradley Manning, accused of leaking classified military reports and diplomatic cables to **WikiLeaks**, was formally charged Thursday with 22 criminal counts, including aiding the enemy and violating the Espionage Act.

Same-Sex Marriage State Laws. This week, the Maryland Legislature cleared a bill to legalize same-sex marriage. Governor Martin O'Malley (D) is expected to sign the measure.

Washington Governor Chris Gregoire (D) signed similar legislation into law last week, making Washington the eighth state in the nation to legalize same-sex marriage. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie (R) vetoed a same-sex marriage bill passed by the New Jersey Assembly, as the Governor favors a public referendum on the issue. Although the New Jersey Assembly has until the end of the legislative session in January 2014 to override the Governor's veto, it is not expected to garner the needed two-thirds majority in both chambers.

2012 U.S. Election News. The remaining four candidates for the Republican presidential nomination participated in a debate in Arizona on Wednesday night – the final debate before Super Tuesday (March 6th). Meanwhile, the candidates will compete in primaries in Arizona and Michigan next Tuesday (28th). A court-ordered panel released Minnesota's final redistricting plan Tuesday, placing Republican Congresswoman and Michele Bachmann in the same Democratic-leaning seat as Democratic Congresswoman Betty McCollum, but leaving an adjacent Republican-leaning seat vacant. Congresswoman Bachman immediately announced that she would run in the vacant district in November. The redrawn districts of Republican Congressman Chip Cravaack and Democratic Congressman Tim Walz remain competitive under the plan.

FOREIGN POLICY MATTERS

Syrian Conflict. Late last Friday, the Senate adopted a resolution (S. Res. 379) condemning the Syrian regime for “brutal and unjustifiable use of force” against Syrian citizens. On Wednesday, American journalist Marie Colvin and French journalist Remi Ochlik were killed in Homs by what the State Department characterized as “ongoing intense shelling by the Syrian regime.” Thursday, the United Nations and the Arab League named former U.N. General Secretary Kofi Annan as a Special Envoy for Syria. Also Thursday, the U.N. International Commission of Inquiry on Syria compiled a list of top Syrian officials who could face investigation for crimes against humanity. On Friday, in Tunisia, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton joined the *Friends of Syria* meeting, which reportedly is focusing on a possible short-term ceasefire to ensure humanitarian assistance access, a longer-term U.N./Arab League peacekeeping plan, and possible support for arming the Syrian opposition. The Secretary also met separately with Tunisian Prime Minister Hamadi Al-Jabali and President Moncef Marzouki.

Iran. After Iran denied access to its military complex at Parchin, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Yukiya Amano announced Wednesday the two-day IAEA inspection of Iranian nuclear facilities was incomplete and “disappointing.” Today, the IAEA released its confidential report of its latest visit to Iran to the IAEA Board and U.N. Security Council. The IAEA Board is expected to meet in early March. On Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney again condemned “reports that Iranian authorities’ reaffirmed a death sentence for Iranian Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani for the sole reason of his refusal to recant his Christian faith;” although on Sunday, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey noted the U.S. government is “...of the opinion the Iranian regime is a rational actor” with regard to its security interests. Last week, a U.S. Federal District Court judge imposed an 18-month prison sentence and \$1.25 million forfeiture against a businessman who pled guilty to conspiring to export computer equipment to Iran in violation of the *International Emergency Economic Powers Act*.

President Obama spoke Monday with Afghan President Hamid Karzai about regional support for Afghan-led reconciliation and the Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran trilateral meetings last week in Islamabad. On Thursday, President Obama apologized for the accidental burning of Qu'rans in **Afghanistan** by NATO forces, which contributed to several Afghan demonstrations this week outside of NATO military installations, Afghan government buildings and the U.S. Embassy in Kabul.

Secretary Clinton was in London Thursday to attend the **Conference on Somalia**, which was hosted by British Prime Minister David Cameron and focused on the terrorist organization operating within Somalia (al-Shabaab) and counter piracy efforts of the coast of Somalia. On the margins of the Somalia Conference, Secretary Clinton met with **Pakistani Foreign Minister** Hina Rabbani Khar. The Secretary characterized the bilateral relationship as “too important” and called for a resumption of full ties after Pakistan’s parliamentary review is completed. Secretary Clinton also held **bilateral meetings with foreign officials** from Britain, the UAE, Egypt, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Uganda.

Egypt. From Mexico, Secretary Clinton said a senior team is in Cairo working on a resolution to the NGO crisis. The NGO employees are scheduled to begin standing trial this Sunday.

Last weekend, Secretary Clinton participated in the **first G-20 Ministers of Foreign Affairs Informal Meeting** held in Mexico, where she raised themes such as sustainable growth, climate change, and anti-competitive government practices or distortions. Secretary Clinton and Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar also signed an agreement with Mexico regarding oil and gas reserves in the Gulf of Mexico. In Washington Tuesday, Secretary Clinton held a bilateral meeting with **Guatemalan Foreign Minister** Harold Caballeros. The Secretary also addressed a Global Business Conference Tuesday, speaking on **Jobs Diplomacy**, a State Department initiative that focuses on creating domestic jobs by (1) promoting U.S. businesses, (2) attracting investment back to the U.S., and (3) leveling the playing field for fair competition. Secretary Clinton also announced at the Conference Heidi Rediker will serve as the **first-ever Chief Economist** at the State Department.

President Obama spoke Tuesday with **German Chancellor** Angela Merkel, discussing the latest financial developments related to the Eurozone and preparations for the upcoming G-8 Summit. Also Tuesday, the State Department chaired an **experts meeting on West Africa**, discussing engagement with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to counter transnational criminal organizations. Thursday, Beijing hosted the third round of exploratory talks between the U.S. and **North Korea** related to the possibility of returning to the Six Party Talks. Also Thursday, White House Press Secretary Carney, in advance of the Sunday presidential election in **Senegal**, urged “Senegalese authorities to uphold internationally-recognized electoral standards to ensure that these elections reflect the will of the Senegalese people.” In advance of upcoming congressional debate of whether to grant **Russia** Permanent Normalized Trade Relations (PNTR) status, Senate Finance Committee Chair Max Baucus (D-Montana) met with outgoing Russian President Dmitry Medvedev during a trip to Moscow. Late last Friday, President Obama announced his **intention to nominate** the following individuals: Makila James, to be U.S. Ambassador to Swaziland; Richard Norland, to be U.S. Ambassador to Georgia; Mark Pekala, to be U.S. Ambassador to Latvia; and Carlos Pascual, to be Assistant Secretary for Energy Resources (State).