

Press Releases: Background Briefing Following the First Day of Meetings at the G7 Foreign Ministers Meeting in Toronto

Special Briefing
Senior Administration Official
Toronto, Canada
April 22, 2018

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The G7 ministers had a productive and useful exchange on a range of foreign policy priorities. For the United States, we emphasized three areas, specifically North Korea, Syria, and Russia. There was – on Russia, there was a, I would say, G7 unity on opposing Russia’s malign behavior, and the nations reviewed the steps that they have taken to counter the negative trends emerging from the Kremlin that threaten peace and security.

On Syria, the ministers recalled that Russia is the guarantor of chemical weapons in Syria and have failed in that role. The United States does not believe that any reconstruction assistance should go to any areas under the control of the Assad regime.

MODERATOR: That’s reconstruction, not stabilization.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, I mean the –

MODERATOR: Just to clarify. Right.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes. Yeah. We’ve said that before; that’s not new. That there was broad support for the Geneva process and strengthening it as much as possible as the best way to wind down the civil war and promote a political solution.

One other thing on Syria: The April 13th allied strike was not a one-off but was part of a sustained allied campaign to re-establish the deterrent against chemical weapons, and that includes using military means again, if necessary.

There was also a good discussion on North Korea, and you’ve seen the President’s tweet today, I believe. You’ve seen that, the tweet today?

MODERATOR: On North Korea.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: North Korea.

QUESTION: Oh, on North Korea.

MODERATOR: This morning.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So take a look at that. The President has spoken on North Korea today. I would just highlight that.

We said that North Korea's suspension of nuclear tests is welcome news, and it's also consistent with North Korea's previous promise to the U.S. in March. Again, I'd highlight what the President said today. We said that we will not make the same mistakes of the past because the incremental, phased approaches of previous negotiations have all failed. We are looking for substantial dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear programs first, and until denuclearization is achieved the global maximum pressure campaign will continue.

Those are the highlights I have.

QUESTION: Can we start with North Korea maybe? Do you mean the maximum pressure campaign will continue up until the moment that there is not a single nuclear weapon or program or site left in North Korea? Can you be – what do you mean by that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: How do I put this? To achieve our policy objective of denying North Korea the ability to threaten the United States with its nuclear and missile program, we are using two avenues: one, a global campaign of maximum pressure; and two, talks. And I don't want to get ahead of the summit with North Korea, if it happens, but we – in the past, people have relaxed pressure to improve the atmospherics for talks. We are not going to repeat that mistake again.

QUESTION: But in your answer just there, you specifically said to defend – to prevent their ability to threaten the United States.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And our allies.

QUESTION: Oh, and – okay.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sorry. Yes.

QUESTION: So my colleagues at NHK there (inaudible) want to hear that phrase.

QUESTION: May I ask a question on that point?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Go ahead.

QUESTION: You said substantial dismantle of North Korea's nuclear weapons first. Is it – what are you expecting North Korea to do, and is this a precondition to the upcoming summit between the United States and North Korea?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't want to go into the preconditions other than to say that we are very mindful of not repeating the mistakes of the past, and we will not be relaxing the global pressure campaign and continuing the policy of strategic patience.

QUESTION: Kim Jong-un, in his statements, didn't address the problem of medium-range missiles. This is a concern for Japan. Is it also a concern for the U.S.?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes. Yes, it is.

QUESTION: What are you asking them to do?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, we have – we have asked for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. ICBM programs always accompany a military nuclear program; they're inseparable. And so we need to have – we are very concerned, obviously, about the nuclear and the ICBM program because they are necessarily linked.

QUESTION: Are you any closer to finding a location for the summit?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No comment on that.

QUESTION: Can we turn to Russia, please? You talked about the G7 unity. It was G7 unity on opposing Russia's malign behavior.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah.

QUESTION: Do you expect the meeting to come out with strong language on that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There will be a communique released at the end of the meeting that will have language on Russia.

QUESTION: And then a follow-up specifically on the Geneva process. There are some, including some in the administration, that believe that you should rethink the Geneva process or update it in a way that you could actually – that there could actually be a solution. Was that discussed in any way? Or do you find that there are some paths among the allies crossing in which – that would support something like that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would say that Staffan de Mistura still enjoys the strong support of the G7, and we believe that the best opportunity to accelerate the political track is through Geneva.

QUESTION: What? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: But it seems like it's going nowhere while Astana is at least having meetings and so something is happening on the ground. Does it still have life in it when Astana seems to at least have some movement?

MODERATOR: But, Carol, consider who's a part of Astana and who's a part of Geneva.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Very different – exactly. It has to do with the composition. And Geneva has the right people.

MODERATOR: [Senior Administration Official] –

QUESTION: You said no reconstruction for areas that are –

MODERATOR: Hold – wait, wait.

QUESTION: Sorry.

MODERATOR: But [Senior Administration Official] and I were just talking downstairs about – and correct me if I'm wrong here, and I was talking to Tom Shannon a short while earlier – that the countries recognize that Geneva is the way forward, even though it hasn't gotten to the point where –

QUESTION: Yes.

MODERTOR: – where they've had considerable success, but recognizing that Astana really hasn't worked and that Sochi hasn't worked, and all of that. So Geneva is it. That's the only game in town.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The international community has designated the United Nations as the lead on the Syrian political process, and that has not changed.

QUESTION: But the United Nations can remain that point. The question is whether you think that the deal that was struck before is still relevant given the changes over the last seven years in Syria.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would say the political process that comes out of any civil war has ups and downs. This is – the Geneva process is the present focus of making political progress.

QUESTION: This, you need to engage with Russia, to re-engage with Russia. Is this something that can happen in the near future?

MODERATOR: I'm sorry. What was your question?

QUESTION: For this, the U.S. and other Western countries need to re-engage with Russia – if that can happen in the near future?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, but we had – we have engaged with Russia. And if you look at the statement that was released in Hanoi between the U.S. and – the Russians affirmed that Geneva is the political track. And they've done something in Sochi, and you've had stuff in Astana, but those have been – those do not enjoy the same support that the Geneva process does. They're very different. And we don't believe in changing that at present.

QUESTION: When you say no reconstruction money for areas that are under Assad's control, there is some reconstruction money that's currently frozen or under question for areas that are not under Assad's control?

MODERATOR: That's stabilization, which is different from reconstruction, just to clarify.

QUESTION: Okay.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And what is it? Two hundred and –

MODERATOR: And it's still being – it's still being paid out.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's 200 billion.

QUESTION: Two hundred million, yeah.

QUESTION: Million.

QUESTION: That was just announced in February.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm sorry. Two hundred million. When we are looking and when we are surveying the way forward, we do not want funding to go to areas under the control of the Assad government. And I don't – I mean, we've said this before. I don't know what more to say.

QUESTION: Yeah, yeah.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not sure what you're asking.

QUESTION: Well, you're not giving any funding now, so a threat to withhold it from other areas –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I said that we – we continue to believe that this is important, and one of the ways – I mean, we think that is part of accelerating the political process. It's not –

QUESTION: And if an area was to receive reconstruction funding, would that be an implicit promise to defend it from ever falling under Assad's control after the reconstruction money has been spent?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's – it's a hypothetical. I'm just saying, for now, we do not want the – what is it? – yeah, the – to reconstruct areas that are under control of the Assad regime.

QUESTION: But if you're to reconstruct an area that's under the control of, say, the SDF, and then later they were to come to an agreement with the central regime in Damascus –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's too many hypotheticals. I'm just saying that for now that's where we are.

QUESTION: [Senior Administration Official], how much discussion was about leaving the door open for some cooperation with Russia? So not absolutely isolating Russia but continuing some kind of dialogue with them so that you –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah.

QUESTION: – you can work with them on Syria. And you –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There is openness to dialogue with Russia while we hold them accountable for their malign activities and their efforts to destabilize nations.

QUESTION: What do they have to do to – what is dialogue –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Russia knows what it needs to do.

MODERATOR: Just as a reminder, we still have that southwestern ceasefire area that is still – has still been holding since about June or – June or July of last year.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's right. The longest ceasefire, yes.

QUESTION: Was there much discussion about Douma and whether the Russians and Syrians had cleared the area properly and that you – that you just might not even get any – might not get anything from that site?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think that much of the discussion was highlighting the importance of the allied strike in Syria to re-establish the deterrent against chemical weapons, which should have been done in the past but has now been done twice in the last year.

QUESTION: And so when you said at the beginning this is not a one-off, you're talking about reserving the prerogative to go back in if chemical weapons are used?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

QUESTION: Or is there some other nuance there?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, no, no. That's all there is to it.

MODERATOR: We're going to have to wrap it up in just a minute.

QUESTION: Venezuela?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Venezuela – yes, Venezuela will be in the communique. We did discuss – yes – it will be in the communique.

QUESTION: So how often do you – do you continue squeezing Maduro through sanctions?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

QUESTION: Trying to find some kind of political solution? Waiting for the election?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: As you know, the Vice President recently went to Lima for the Summit of the Americas, and Venezuela was a priority there. And in the communique there is a section on Venezuela.

QUESTION: Yeah.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't remember where it is. Let me see if I can find it and refresh in my memory.

QUESTION: It's okay, you can just email us that and we'll –

QUESTION: Yeah.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: We'll look up (inaudible). (Laughter.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sorry, I can't remember where it is. It's in –

QUESTION: Okay. But it's going to be there?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, it was on the agenda.

QUESTION: The fact that it's on the agenda means –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, it was on the agenda.

QUESTION: Real quickly, you mentioned earlier today that you were going to be talking about Iran and the update of the status on the supplemental.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah.

QUESTION: Did you make any progress on that? Did you hear anything that suggests progress is being made or you're closer to it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The G7 ministers discussed the range of Iran's malign activities, they discussed Iran's ballistic missile program and how that is unacceptable, and they also discussed the JCPOA and the efforts to seek a supplemental agreement by the E3 and the United States.

QUESTION: Is there going to be any effort to reschedule the Quad meeting?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't know. I don't know.

MODERATOR: What was the question?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Is there going to be an effort to reschedule the Quad meeting. I don't know.

MODERATOR: Oh. We're waiting to hear from them.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We're waiting to hear back.

QUESTION: How important do you think that the state visit of Macron tomorrow in Washington will be to find a solution for the JCPOA, or not?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Because France is part of the negotiations to

reach a supplemental agreement, President Trump and President Macron will naturally be discussing Iran's nuclear program, but they will also be discussing the broad and vast range of Iran's destabilizing initiatives across the Middle East.

QUESTION: It sounds like you spent the day basically restating positions you have held for a long time. Was there anything – any movement, any change?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, that's the purpose of the joint communique, to let you know what they – what those are. I don't want to get ahead of the communique. I'm just giving you a sense of what was discussed today, and the communique is really the best vehicle to announce any – any announcements.

MODERATOR: We're going to have to wrap it up, guys.

QUESTION: When we talk to European diplomats about the JCPOA, they seem to say that nobody – not even you, maybe – really knows what would satisfy President Trump between those negotiations? Would you share this – this view?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The President has – on January 12th the President made clear that he would like a supplemental agreement with the – with our European allies, and we have been working on that for the last few months. We – the President will be presented with a range of options so that he can make a decision.

QUESTION: So at this moment, we will not hear yet. With three weeks to go, you think it's going to be enough to –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Too early to tell.

QUESTION: Thank you. Appreciate the time.

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