

Press Releases: Background Briefing on Secretary Tillerson's Travel to Kyiv, Ukraine and Istanbul, Turkey

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Officials
Via Teleconference
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MODERATOR: Hi, everyone. Good afternoon and thanks so much for joining us for a background conference call with two senior State Department officials on Secretary Tillerson's upcoming travel to Kyiv, Ukraine, and also Istanbul, Turkey. I'm going to start by introducing our speakers and stating a couple ground rules, and then I'll turn it over to them and then to you for your questions.

We're joined this afternoon by [Senior State Department Official One] – he'll be Senior State Department Official One – and also by [Senior State Department Official Two], Senior State Department Official Two.

This will be a background call, which means it can be attributed to senior State Department Officials. The information on the call will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call. And with that, I'll turn it over to [Senior State Department Official One], our Senior State Department Official One.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Good afternoon, everybody. I have a cold, so I apologize if my voice is a little bit rough at times.

The Secretary in his stop in Kyiv will be looking to build on his engagement with the Ukrainian Government and to build a new relationship with the Ukrainian people. He will be focused in his meetings on the two main pillars of our engagement with Ukraine.

Pillar one is to support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity by helping Ukraine in resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine and in restoring control of its international borders. That includes helping Ukraine become more resilient across the full spectrum of security and government capabilities.

Pillar number two of our engagement is to support Ukraine's ongoing reform efforts as it seeks to build a modern and transparent and accountable government that takes the country in its European trajectory as defined by

the revolution on the Maidan in 2014.

So those are our two main goals. The Secretary will meet with President Poroshenko, and then he'll have a chance to meet with several of the – of engaging reformers in and outside of the Ukrainian Government to discuss ongoing reform efforts. And then, as he has done in other travels, he will have a chance to meet with the U.S. embassy community of employees and family. Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: So thanks, everybody. Secretary Tillerson will arrive in Istanbul, Turkey right after the trip to Ukraine, and he arrives there on the 9th of July. The anchoring event that he's attending there is the World Petroleum Congress, where he'll be receiving an award and making a few remarks on the importance of energy security as a national security priority and a regional priority for the United States and our partners.

We also anticipate there being a fairly robust bilateral portion of this trip where he will meet with senior Turkish Government officials. Those schedules are still a little bit in flux, but meet with senior Turkish Government officials to sort of underscore, first, the importance of our partnership with Turkey in the fight against ISIS and the key role Turkey plays as a member of the coalition to defeat ISIL and as well as Turkey's important role as a NATO ally, and then also to talk to a little bit about keeping our partnership with Turkey close and robust on a range of economic and prosperity issues.

We also anticipate the Secretary will have a visit with Mission Turkey American family members and staff to thank them for their service. And because this is a large conference, we anticipate some number of third-country folks being there, but we don't have a full sense of participation or scheduling yet. So there may be other elements of that visit for the Secretary in terms of meetings with other countries or industry, but we don't have any details on that yet as participation remains to be confirmed.

MODERATOR: Okay, thank you so much. And why don't we start out with some questions. First, let's start with Matt Lee. Matt, hi, how are you?

QUESTION: Hi there. I'm well. Hope everyone had a happy Fourth of July. My question is about the Istanbul, the Turkey portion, and the bilat for the Turkish officials. In terms of the arrest warrants that were issued for the bodyguards, is this something that the Secretary intends to bring up, or is it kind of – is that basically a done deal and it's something that you're just hoping you can – that both sides can put behind them? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, I mean this is really a law enforcement issue, and it's an issue that's been handled in the – on the U.S. side through judicial channels and Department of Justice channels. So should the Turks raise any concerns about that, we'll obviously take them on board, but this is really an issue that's not – not something that lies anywhere outside the judicial channel in terms of what next steps are.

Broadly speaking, right after the incident and in times since then, the Secretary and other U.S. officials have made their displeasure known with the behavior of the Turkish security forces here during that visit, and I think the Turks have heard that message loud and clear. That said, next steps and so forth are really a law enforcement matter that's kind of out of my lane to comment on.

MODERATOR: Okay, next question. Nick Wadhams, please.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks very much. I just have two quick questions. One is on Ukraine, whether they've been open to the idea of the U.S. and Russia pursuing something that would achieve the goals in the Minsk dialogue but outside of – the Minsk agreement but outside of that agreement, as Secretary Tillerson has suggested in the last few weeks.

And then also the award that Secretary Tillerson is accepting, is that in – that's in his capacity as the former CEO of Exxon, right? I mean, can you just tell us how that squares with his desire – his stated intention to recuse himself from anything having to do with Exxon? Is there any sort of conflict there? It just seems a little bit jarring, especially given that the Petroleum Congress website identifies him not as Secretary of State but as the former CEO of Exxon. Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So on the Ukraine question, I would say that all of the members of the Normandy format – France, Germany, Ukraine, and Russia – have expressed their desire to have a U.S. counterpart that they can work with in the negotiations, not as a member of the Normandy format but as an important support to that format and collaborator with those countries as they negotiate implementation of the Minsk agreements. And so there is broad-based support across the four of them for U.S. involvement, and we are currently considering how best to support the Normandy format and the Minsk negotiations.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, on the second question, we don't have any control over what the WPC puts on their website. I will just say the Secretary's message there about energy security is a broad one related to U.S. priorities. I'll leave it at that.

MODERATOR: Okay, next question, please. CNN.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. My question was a little bit about Nick's question, but to take it a bit further. I mean, it definitely seems that President Putin has his own ideas of how he'd like to deal with Ukraine that don't necessarily adhere to the exact letter of the law of Minsk. So I'm wondering are there negotiations to be had, if you could expand a little bit on your previous answer.

And also, how much of what he discusses in Ukraine will be kind of driven by what President Trump and President Putin are able to discuss in Hamburg?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Well, I certainly can't speculate about what the President might discuss with Putin in Hamburg. I guess what I could

say is there certainly is no intent or desire to work exclusively with Russia. I mean, this is a multiparty issue, resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Russia and Ukraine are signatories to the Minsk agreements and have made certain commitments in those agreements, and we remain committed to that process and committed to the Normandy format as a way of negotiating implementation of those agreements. And so that is not an exclusive thing between the U.S. and Russia, nor should it be. And we'll continue to work with all of the parties involved.

MODERATOR: Okay. Nike Ching from VOA, please.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. Also a follow-up from Nick's question. So a few weeks ago Heather mentioned that Secretary Tillerson likes results and the United States is "open to other channels" besides the Minsk agreement. So I just want to clarify, should we expect a continuation of the multilateral format of another peace plan that is in the works? And also, should we expect tangible results from the Secretary's meeting with President Poroshenko? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So the – kind of the first part of your question, so if you look at the context, obviously the Secretary was speaking in his – in public testimony with the Senate and he was talking about the larger point about sanctions and that the tools should not eclipse the objectives. And he made a similar point with regard to Minsk. He said the Minsk agreements are the tool to achieve certain objectives, and so we shouldn't lose sight of those objectives for the sake of fixating on the tool.

That said, the Minsk agreements are the existing framework. There is no better option out there. There's no other option out there. And so I think all the Secretary was saying was unless and until a better option comes about that both Ukraine and Russia agree to, then Minsk is it and we are fully supported – supportive of Minsk, but that we should not exclude looking at other options if something turns up that could achieve the same objectives in a better way and that would be acceptable to both Ukraine and Russia.

And I'm sorry, and the second part of your question was about concrete deliverables with regard to President Poroshenko?

MODERATOR: Nike?

QUESTION: Yes, the concrete tangible deliverables.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I certainly don't want to get ahead of the Secretary's meeting, but I think having a chance to be in Kyiv and to hear the Ukrainian perspectives directly and to hear from several of Ukraine's dynamic young leaders and reformers is an opportunity for him to expand his – his database as he goes forward trying to help bring peace to Ukraine.

MODERATOR: Okay, thank you. Felicia Schwartz from *The Wall Street Journal*.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. Just going back to the World Petroleum

Congress, was this an invitation that the Secretary received while he was Secretary of State, or did they invite him when he was still at Exxon? And is there any more back story to why he's speaking there?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, I don't have that information. All I can say is that this is a good opportunity for the Secretary to meet with his Turkish counterparts and a range of others who will be in town.

MODERATOR: Okay, Sevfan Allaverdi, please.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you for doing this. As you know, Turkey particularly stays on top of two individual issues: first, the leader of Gulen movement, Fethullah Gulen, here in U.S.; and secondly, PYD and its target in the region and Turkey's security reasons. Will both of these topics be discussed during this visit in Turkey? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: I expect that the Secretary will discuss Syria broadly and some of the specifics with his counterparts. This is an ongoing question of coordination that we have with the Turks, and that's a normal part of our dialogue at all levels.

With regard to Fethullah Gulen, this is an issue that's important to Turkey and an issue that they raise again and again. I think we've been pretty clear from the Secretary on down what the legal parameters are of the Gulen question, and I would just leave it at that.

MODERATOR: Okay, Carol Morello from *Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. On Ukraine, when President Poroshenko was in D.C., he talked about negotiating with the White House over defensive weapons. Can you tell us what the status of those talks are? And on Turkey, do – does the Secretary plan to raise at all the question of the arrests of over a hundred journalists there?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So on the Ukraine question, what I would say – we have neither ruled out providing such weapons to Ukraine nor have we taken any decision to do so. The – President Poroshenko's conversations when he was here in D.C. covered the full range of U.S.-Ukraine security cooperation. So that – Ukraine's desires are well known, and our position continues that we have not yet taken a decision to do that.

MODERATOR: John Hudson from BuzzFeed.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: (Off-mike.)

MODERATOR: Oh, I'm sorry.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, just on –

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing –

MODERATOR: John, hold on one second. I jumped the gun here.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Just on the second question regarding Turkey, while I don't want to get ahead of what the Secretary will raise in his meetings with the Turks, I will say that we have both in public and in private been pretty clear with the Turks and the Turkish Government that we view transparency, rule of law as critical elements to the health of Turkish democracy and as important factors that have to be maintained. So this is an issue that's important to the United States and an issue that we continue to press broadly across the scope of our relationship.

MODERATOR: Okay, John Hudson. Sorry about that – go right ahead.

QUESTION: Thanks a lot. You just mentioned that there's no desire to work exclusively with Russia when it comes to Ukraine and the Minsk agreement. That makes a lot of sense. I'm just curious, is there still the intention to appoint a special envoy to the Minsk agreement?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So we certainly, as I mentioned – I think I've already covered that all of the parties to the Normandy format have asked for a U.S. interlocutor that they can work with, some sort of Minsk coordinator or envoy, if you will, and we're actively considering that, but we're looking for all the ways in which we might be able to be helpful and supportive to the Normandy format and to Minsk implementation more broadly.

MODERATOR: Kylie Atwood from CBS.

QUESTION: Yeah, hi. Thanks for doing this. I have a question in regards to the NGOs that Turkey has been shutting down recently. I wonder if those will also be raised as part of this conversation. And the Turkish troops in Qatar – I wonder if Tillerson will have some follow-up conversations on that.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: So with regard to NGOs, yeah, I mean, this is part of a broader conversation that we continue to have with Turkey about the value of democracy, transparency, and civil society. Without getting too much into specific NGOs, I will say that kind of the more robust civil society you have in a country, the more robust a democratic system you have, and that's a message we continue to push with the Turks and one I expect the Secretary will be consistent with and will continue to push.

With regard to Qatar, Turkey and the United States have both been looking at the situation in the Gulf and it's our hope that Turkey will play a supportive role in trying to get everybody to calm down the rhetoric and find a settlement that works for everybody there.

MODERATOR: Dmitri from TASS.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for the call. Can you hear me?

MODERATOR: We can.

QUESTION: Just to be clear, is the Secretary bringing any new creative ideas on how to intensify attempts to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine within the Minsk and Normandy format, or jump to other formats?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I think the Secretary is forming his own views and also collecting information on how best the U.S. can be involved to support Minsk implementation. So it would be getting ahead to speculate on what specific ideas or proposals he might be bringing with him.

MODERATOR: And Apostolos – pardon me – Zoupaniotis.

QUESTION: Hey. Yes, thank you very much. Apostolos Zoupaniotis from Cyprus News Agency. As you know, there are ongoing talks on Cyprus in Switzerland. The secretary-general of the United Nations is going tomorrow. I wonder if the Cyprus problem is on Secretary Tillerson's agenda in Turkey, and what is the message of the United States Government?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Well, yeah, if you're following this, you know that there's minute-by-minute updates coming out of Switzerland with regards to the talks on Cyprus. And so I'm not going to necessarily comment on where we are tactically now and where we might be over the weekend in terms of what's happening there, but what I will say is our broad message to all of the parties is that this is a really unique opportunity for the parties in Cyprus to sit and find a settlement that fulfills the long-term goal that everybody has agreed to of a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation. And our hope and our message to all of the parties is flexibility, creativity, and keeping at a Cypriot-led process is the best way to do this, the best way to get a settlement on Cyprus that sort of uncorks a lot of potential for the people of the island and the people of the region.

So the Secretary's message would very much be consistent with that, and we'll sort of see where we are by the weekend in terms of how things are going on the talks.

MODERATOR: Okay. Joel Gehrke from *The Washington Examiner*.

QUESTION: Hi. I was just wondering, did you see Turkish President Erdogan's comments that he – when he was asked by a German weekly if he trusts President Trump more than Vladimir Putin, he declined to answer, said he shouldn't be asked to make that choice. Is that demurral concerning? Is there anything that the Secretary is going to be doing this week to build up trust, shall we say, between the Trump administration and Turkish officials?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, well, I'd let the Turkish Government answer for their president's comments. All I'll say is that for the United States, Turkey is a critical partner, and the closer cooperation and contact we have with them on issues of concern, particularly the fight against ISIS, the better. And even if we don't agree all the time, that relationship is worth investing in for progress and results.

MODERATOR: Eric Geller with Politico.

QUESTION: Thanks. My question's on Ukraine. So last week there was this big cyber attack that seemed to start there, and the Ukrainian Government has blamed Russia for this. There were some attacks on the power grid over the last two years as well. Is this on Secretary Tillerson's agenda, to bring up

this apparent cyber attack on Ukraine?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I'm sure such a significant topic would be part of that conversation. I won't speculate as to what the nature of the conversation will be, but unfortunately, cyber attacks against Ukraine are not a new phenomenon and Ukraine is developing quite an experience in responding and hopefully preventing such attacks. And we're aware that the Ukrainian Government is holding Russia responsible for last week's attacks, but we're not ready to make that judgment just yet.

MODERATOR: Last question, Omur Sahin of Birgum.

QUESTION: Hi, my question is on Turkey. Will Afrin be part of the discussions of Secretary Tillerson and Turkish officials? And then I'll ask, what's the position of the United States regarding Afrin and Turkey?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: I think you said Afrin, the area in Syria. Our position with regard to that has been fairly consistent with Turkey, which is that the fight in Syria is a complicated one and we need to be in very, very close coordination with our allies, including with Turkey, in terms of what happens there. And so we want to stay in close touch with Turks on developments on the ground and reinforce our message to them that any action that they take or we take needs to be done in full transparency with the rest of the coalition to make sure that there are no surprises and that we're working towards the same goal.

MODERATOR: Okay. Everyone, thank you so much. Thanks for joining us, and gentlemen, thank you, [Senior State Department Official One] and also [Senior State Department Official Two]. The embargo has now been lifted and we will see very soon. Look forward to seeing you all tomorrow. Thanks so much.

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