

Press Releases: Background Briefing Previewing Secretary Tillerson's Trip to Ottawa

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Officials
Via Teleconference
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MODERATOR: Good afternoon, and thanks for joining us for today's background call on Secretary Tillerson's travel to Ottawa, Canada. That trip is going to take place tomorrow, December 19th. We are very pleased to have with us today [Senior State Department Official]. From here forward he will be known as a senior State Department official. As a reminder, this background briefing is embargoed until the end of the call. With that, I'll go ahead and turn it over to our senior State Department official for opening remarks, and then we'll take your questions.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Hi, everybody. Thanks a lot for joining today. Before taking your questions, I'd like to just start by providing a little preview of the Secretary's trip tomorrow. This will be Secretary Tillerson's first trip to Canada as Secretary of State. Secretary Tillerson will be joined on this trip by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Francisco Palmieri, and they will be welcomed by relatively newly arrived Ambassador to Canada Kelly Craft.

While in Ottawa, Secretary Tillerson will be meeting with Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland and several other senior Canadian officials. This is part of the ongoing and very active relationship between our two great countries. You'll recall that Prime Minister Trudeau and President Trump met at the White House in February this year. At the press conference that day, President Trump said we share the same values with Canada, we share the love and a truly great love for freedom, and we share a collective defense.

So that's what the Secretary will be doing with our Canadian colleagues. He'll continue the dialogue on our mutual prosperity, defense, and security. The Secretary will discuss our shared concerns on global issues, including North Korea and the ongoing situation in Ukraine. In addition, he'll talk to our Canadian partners about hemispheric issues such as the Lima group on Venezuela, which recently met in Canada. He'll also talk about a range of issues that good neighbors always need to discuss such as border security and our economic relationship. As you know, both countries are always interested in making our border more secure and more efficient for the 400,000 people

and 1.7 billion, with a B, worth of goods and services that cross it every day.

And with that, thank you very much. I'm happy to take a few questions.

OPERATOR: Once again, if you do have a question, please hit *1. Our first question comes from the line of Tracy Wilkinson with the *LA Times*. Your line is open.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. You mentioned the economic relationship. I'm wondering if the Secretary will talk to the Canadians about NAFTA. It seems like the Canadians and the Mexicans are sort of joining forces against what they see as the United States' more tough demands, and so I'm wondering what the Secretary – I know it's not exactly his field but certainly he'll talk about it, and I wondered what you could say. Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah, I find it hard to imagine that it's not going to come up. Look, we continue to work hard toward modernizing NAFTA. President Trump remains committed to moving towards a deal for fair and reciprocal trade. We're working with the Mexicans and the Canadians to seek solutions across the board. We're looking to modernize NAFTA. As you know, it was 25-plus years ago that the treaty was initially negotiated. A lot of things have changed since then. I think according to our logic, there are lots of ways that we could all benefit from a modernization of the agreement.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Warren Strobel with Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you. That's Reuters. Thanks for doing this. There's been some reporting that the Canadians next month will host a meeting on North Korea in Vancouver and that the people invited would basically be the countries that contributed to the UN Force in the Korean War back in the '50s. I'm just wondering if that's going to be a matter for discussion or maybe even a date announced for that meeting.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: North Korea will certainly come up. We've got a good partnership with Canada on the issue. Secretary Tillerson and Minister Freeland talk about it quite regularly. We are going to convene this conference jointly with Canada. It's called the United Nations Command Sending States Meeting, and it will include Korea – South Korea, sorry, Japan, and other key affected countries to discuss how the global community writ large can deal with North Korea's threat to international peace.

Beyond that, I don't really have much more to say about it. Like I said, I'm sure it will be a major topic of conversation between Secretary Tillerson and Minister Freeland.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Josh Lederman with Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thanks. Warren asked my question – North Korea. So we're good.

OPERATOR: Okay. Our next question comes from the line of Alexander Panetta with the Canadian Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah, thanks for doing this. I just wanted to ask you for some background context on how this meeting on North Korea, from what I take it, in January in Vancouver, how it came to pass. Just kind of like the process that led to how this thing got put together. Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. I'll be brutally frank with you. I am not the person that deals with the North Korea issue on a daily basis here. I am not the person with all the answers, and I would also note that it's been an issue that's been dealt with at very senior levels, particularly Secretary Tillerson and Deputy Secretary Sullivan. So I don't want to be in a position of giving you any information that isn't correct, so I'm going to really leave it right there, if I might. Thanks.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Carol Morello with *The Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Well, given what you've just said, you may not have any insight into this. But I was curious, also on North Korea, if Secretary Tillerson is satisfied with the steps that Canada has taken. There has been some reporting that there may – that Canada may even be able to form a back channel to North Korea via Cuba. So I was wondering if there was anything you could tell us about that, and if (inaudible) like Canada to do in regard to his pressure campaign against North Korea. Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Great. No, thanks for the question. Obviously, it's an understandable one. Again, this is something that's being dealt with by folks who are typically expert in the East Asia Pacific region and particularly by Secretary Tillerson and Deputy Secretary Sullivan. I'm not party to those conversations, and I don't want to be in a position of misleading you and giving you some false information.

MODERATOR: I think we have time for one more call after this.

OPERATOR: Okay. Our next question comes from the line of Katie Simpson with Canadian Broadcast. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you very much for taking our calls today, our questions today. My question has to do, again, with North Korea. And given what you've stated, I'm not sure if this is something that you can sort of provide some light on. But given the upcoming meeting next year on North Korea, we know that Secretary Tillerson as well as Foreign Minister Freeland have talked extensively about a diplomatic solution on this issue. Does Secretary Tillerson plan on discussing or addressing any other options that would not include a diplomatic solution – possible military interventions?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm not going to speculate on what is going to come up in conversations between two ministers. I think it's safe to say that the Secretary and the foreign minister have a very regular and deep dialogue on this subject and, frankly, on a number of others as well. And not

being someone who's privy to those discussions, I really don't think it's appropriate for me to really characterize or to, frankly, speculate about what's going to come up in their meetings in Ottawa.

MODERATOR: Okay. I think that wraps today's call. Really appreciate everyone dialing in, and thanks for your time and attention. Have a great day.

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