

Press Releases: Background Briefing: Senior State Department Official Previewing the Secretary's Travel to Europe

Special Briefing
Office of the Spokesperson

Via Teleconference
December 1, 2017

MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us for today's call. We're pleased to have a senior State Department official here today to discuss on background the Secretary's upcoming travel to Europe. For your reference and not – for your reference and not for reporting, we'd like to welcome [Senior State Department Official]. From here forward [Senior State Department Official] will be known as a senior State Department official. He's going to offer brief remarks at the top, and then we'll turn it over to you for questions.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, thank you for that introduction. And thank you, everyone, for joining us this afternoon. We are really excited for the Secretary making what is his seventh trip to Europe since becoming Secretary of State. The Secretary will travel to Belgium, Austria, and France this next week, leaving on Monday and returning on Friday. The purpose of this trip is really to reiterate America's commitment to the transatlantic alliance and underscore a message to our allies and partners in Europe that the United States is committed to the defense not only of Western institutions but also the West as a community of shared interests and values more broadly.

A lot of the themes we're going to hit on this trip I think you see also in the Secretary's speech a few days ago at the Wilson Center. He outlined an approach to Europe and some specific areas of focus and interest that these meetings will provide us an opportunity to follow up on in greater detail.

Starting with Brussels, the Secretary will participate in a NATO foreign ministerial. He'll meet with EU High Representative Mogherini, have lunch with the EU 28 foreign ministers in a special meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council, and meet with Belgian officials to discuss a wide-ranging bilateral agenda that includes defense cooperation, Afghan strategy, and

defeat of ISIS. Also in Brussels, the Secretary will meet with Secretary General Stoltenberg, who's done so much for the NATO alliance, presiding over a really expansive agenda these past few years, also meet with other counterparts from NATO and the Georgian foreign minister to underscore the U.S. commitment to Georgian partnership with NATO.

In these and other meetings, I think the essence of the messaging will be to reinforce President Trump's central message of shared responsibility in Europe and the global agenda that we're jointly managing with the EU, NATO, and European partners that includes DPRK, Syria, and issues related to Russia.

The Secretary will then travel to Vienna on the 6th and through the 8th. This is for the annual meeting of the OSCE, and the emphasis there will be on the importance of members meeting the OSCE commitments in arms control and human rights. The Secretary will also reiterate in Vienna, and I think all of our other stops, the message of support for Ukraine, Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. In Vienna there will also be a meeting with Austrian Foreign Minister Kurz to thank Austria for its contributions to peacekeeping missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo, and continue to work with Austria on Western Balkans and issues in terrorism.

Finally, the Secretary will travel to Paris on December 8th and meet with French counterparts. As you all know, we have a very special and deep cooperation with the French on a global agenda that encompasses issues in – on Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, DPRK, and Sahel.

So it's a very full agenda. We've got a lot of meetings both in the NATO format and the OSCE format, but really both of those sets of organizational meetings provide a target-rich environment for meeting with NATO and EU and other partner states more broadly, so making the most of those opportunities to reinforce the messaging that was in the Secretary's speech earlier this week. If you haven't had a chance to read that speech, I would encourage you to do so. I think it will preview for you some of the themes that you'll see coming out of these meetings.

So again, I'm happy to be here and happy to take any questions.

MODERATOR: Okay, we're ready to start taking questions.

OPERATOR: Thank you. And ladies and gentlemen, if you'd like to ask a question, please press * then 1 on your telephone keypad. You'll hear a tone indicating you've been placed in queue. And you may remove yourself from the queue at any time by pressing the # key.

Our first question will come from Josh Lederman with the Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey, thank you for doing the call. Considering that every major news organization in the U.S. is reporting that the President wants the Secretary gone, what reason would any of these leaders that he's going to meet with have to believe that he has the – speaks on behalf of the President

or is – has the authority to conduct foreign policy that’s likely to still be the foreign policy of the U.S. just a few weeks from now? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks for that question, Josh. As the Secretary has been clear, really this is baseless speculation and a distraction. I think the Secretary is focused on doing his job. We have a lot of work underway with allies in Europe. This is not the first time there’s been speculation of this kind in the media, and that has not impeded the Secretary from working very effectively with close allies and partners. And really, the Secretary over the last several months has built up close and continuing relationships with a number of world leaders but particularly in Europe, and he continues to be committed to that, really putting a lot of effort into developing these relationships that are – we’ve got a wide agenda on important security issues in particular. So I think right now the Secretary is just focused on doing the job at hand, and we’ll let speculation take care of itself.

MODERATOR: Okay, we’re ready for our next question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. That will be David Clark with AFP. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. As you mentioned in your opening remarks and also the Secretary mentioned in his speech this week, part of the relationships with Europe is about shared values. But this week the Dutch and the British have both protested the President’s decision to endorse racist far-right movements in the UK and his tweets in support of Britain First, a fringe racist element which the British Government says does not reflect their values. Does this kind of prelude to the trip undermine the Secretary’s attempts to form a bond?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks for that question, David. The Secretary’s speech earlier this week, I think he was crystal clear in articulating what America stands for as a force in the world and in our work with European allies and partners. The transatlantic alliance is a very old alliance and set of relationships that we’ve cultivated for many, many years. It’s based on a lot of things in the category of strategic interests but also in the category of values. I think President Trump also articulated that very clearly in his Warsaw speech, and frankly I would also say just the scope of the agenda that we’re managing with European allies and partners I think speaks for itself.

So we’re going into this trip focused on those critical areas including in the realm of values. That’s why we’re up front and center at OSCE. We see this as really an important set of messages to reinforce in the OSCE format again not only about the security commitment of OSCE states but about the human rights commitment. So we’re still focused on an agenda that encompasses strategic interest and values. Secretary Tillerson feels very strongly about those values, and I think you’ll see that continue to be the focus of U.S. foreign policy.

OPERATOR: Thank you. And next we’ll go to Nick Wadhams with the Bloomberg News. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. Can you tell us to what degree Syria will be a topic of discussion during this trip, whether the Secretary will be looking ahead to sort of post-conflict reconstruction in Syria, and then whether there would be a potential meeting with the Russian foreign minister at any time during this trip? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Nick, thank you for that question. That's a critical issue that the Secretary feels very strongly about. The Secretary has been very active on Syria and in recent days, as you've seen, the main focus really has been in pointing our Russian counterparts back towards the Geneva process and expanding the very successful de-escalation zone that has really helped to save a lot of lives, particularly a lot of civilian lives. That continues to be the approach, and Syria is really forefront in our dialogue with so many of our allies. Certainly, our NATO allies, even though the effort in Syria is not a NATO mission, we work and coordinate very closely with NATO allies who are a part of the coalition as well as Arab states who are a part of the coalition. I think particularly in our meetings with the French and British, this will be a high focal point.

There is a meeting that's been scheduled with Foreign Minister Lavrov. We have a fairly robust set of discussions underway with the Russians on a lot of global issues – DPRK, Ukraine, and certainly Syria. So the answer to your question would be yes, Syria will very much be discussed and the U.S. approach continues to be to focus on moving the endgame in Syria towards an outcome that is in the interests of the Syrian people, a unified Syria that has Assad in the rearview mirror. So we're working closely with a lot of partners on this and having very candid dialogues with the Russians as well.

OPERATOR: Thank you. And just a reminder, press *1 if you have a question. And our next question will come from Carol Morello with *The Washington Post*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you for doing this. Say when he is in Vienna at the OSCE, do you expect him to make any progress on discussing a potential peacekeeping mission in Ukraine, and can you give us any details about it? And also you mentioned that at NATO he will be talking to the Europeans about stepping up their contributions for their own defense. Considering that he and the President have said – have sent this message so many times before, what more could he possibly add? Is there anything new, or is it just reiterating what has already been said probably dozens of times?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Carol, thank you so much for that question. Starting with OSCE, Ukraine will very much be on the agenda. As you know, OSCE plays a role in Ukraine, particularly with the special monitoring mission. The Secretary really has a heart for the brave men and women who participate in the special monitoring mission and has raised this repeatedly, their safety and security; also, the safety and security of the Ukrainian people in the east in the occupied territories who continue to be the target of military operations with the encouragement and participation of forces from the Russian Federation.

So the Secretary feels very strongly about this portion of the agenda. It –

there will be a focus on various dimensions of the Ukraine issue. We continue to pursue negotiations with Russian counterparts, led by – our side, obviously, being led by Kurt Volker meeting a lot with Surkov in recent days, as you know. The Russians have put forward a proposal on peacekeeping which we've explored. We're now in the latest – the latest phase of that I think has indicated that the Russians have taken a step back to a certain extent, but we're still exploring the possible scope for this. But I think the U.S. approach continues to emphasize that whatever comes out of this process needs to point towards a confirmation of the Minsk agreement. It needs to be an outcome that would have a UN force encompassing the contested area and not just ratifying the gains that the Russians have made on the ground.

So that will be a focus. We continue to work at that diplomacy and look for a way to exit the violence. I think that's in the interest of the Ukrainians and of the Russians as well.

In terms of the burden-sharing agenda in NATO, as you know, this has been a longstanding message now for not just this administration but for previous American presidents and secretaries of defense and state. The Secretary will continue to make the point that NATO is safer and stronger when all allies are sharing – are shouldering their fair share of the defense burden. But I think you'll also see that the United States approach is to highlight the great strides that have been made by allies. We've seen a real uptick in the last several months in increased spending and promises of increased spending.

So I think the burden-sharing agenda is partly about whether allies are spending more on defense, but it's also about what allies are doing. And we've been very encouraged to see European allies doing more in the Baltic under the umbrella of EFP. The CT missions and activities in Syria have been a real encouragement, and we really want to build on that. I don't think that's a conversation that's ever fully complete, but I think part of American leadership is continuing to put this on the agenda, but also in the leadup to the NATO summit steering allies towards the kind of actions they can take to give substance to their increased verbal commitments at Warsaw. And as I've said, that's not only financial but political will.

OPERATOR: Thank you. And one more reminder: Please press *1 now if you have a question. And we'll go to Dmitry Zlodorev with RIA. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Thank you. I think you answered my question already. Thank you.

OPERATOR: All right. Thank you. Then we'll go next to David Clark with AFP. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: No, again, Carol asked my question for me, so I'm fine, thanks.

OPERATOR: All right. Thank you. Then we will move on to Nick Wadhams with the Bloomberg News. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Sorry, could you just say where the Lavrov meeting will take place and what day that is?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Let's see here. We have – the Lavrov

meeting is taking place in Vienna on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial. And let me check on the date. My understanding is it's tentatively scheduled for the 7th, but it's – as you know, these meetings, the scheduling of these meetings unfolds as the trip planning is underway. What I have right now is on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial on the 7th.

MODERATOR: Okay. Well, I think that [Senior State Department Official] has – we've run out of time for today's call, but we definitely appreciate you calling in and hope you have a great day. Thanks very much.

The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.