

# Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – March 29, 2018

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## Index for Today's Briefing

- [RUSSIA](#)
- [RUSSIA/SYRIA](#)
- [RUSSIA](#)
- [RUSSIA/SYRIA](#)
- [RUSSIA](#)
- [ISRAEL/PALESTINIANS](#)
- [SOUTH KOREA/NORTH KOREA](#)
- [CUBA](#)
- [EGYPT](#)
- [TURKEY/IRAQ](#)

TRANSCRIPT:

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3:06 p.m. EDT

**MS NAUERT:** Hi. How are you? Hi, everyone. Good afternoon.

**QUESTION:** Hello.

**MS NAUERT:** Welcome back to the State Department. Nice to see you all. Hi, Andrea.

Well, by now you have heard the news that Russia has made the decision to expel 60 of our staff from that country and also close down our consulate in St. Petersburg. A short while ago, I spoke with our U.S. ambassador to Russia, Jon Huntsman, who is serving over there. We spoke by phone, and he shared with me a statement, which I'd like to read with you.

"This evening, Ambassador Jon Huntsman was convoked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. The Russian Federation dubbed 60 of our staff persona non grata, and they now must depart within seven days. They also ordered the closure of our consulate in St. Petersburg within 48 hours. It's clear from the list provided to us that the Russian Federation is not interested in a dialogue on issues that matter to our two countries."

I spoke with him a short while ago; have also spoken with some of his other colleagues who are serving in Moscow. I let Ambassador Huntsman know that the entire State Department and U.S. Government stands with our people at Mission Russia.

I want to remind you that there is no justification for the Russian response. Our actions were motivated purely by the attack on the United Kingdom, the attack on a British citizen and his daughter. Remember, this is a first time that a weapons-grade nerve agent, Novichok, has

been used outside of war on allied soil. We have not taken these steps lightly; we've taken these steps in concert with our allies across the world. Twenty-eight countries now join the United States backing our allies in the decision to have kicked out 153 Russian spies from the various countries. Georgia is the latest country that has joined us in this effort. I believe they announced today that they would kick out one spy, which is significant, given that Georgia is in the backyard of Russia.

Our ambassador was called into the Russian foreign ministry this afternoon – excuse me, this evening Moscow time. We're now reviewing the Russian Government's note informing us of their response. It appears that Russia has chosen to take the regrettable, unwarranted action to respond to our entirely justified action that I just covered. As I understand it, Russia plans to take the same unjustified actions against 28 other countries, countries that stood in solidarity with the UK. Russia is further isolating itself following the brazen chemical attack. We are still reviewing the details of the Russian action, but let me say, again, that we reserve the right further to any Russian retaliation against the United States.

So we are reading this. We are reviewing it, and we'll respond accordingly.

We typically go to Matt first. With Matt – be happy to start taking your questions.

**QUESTION:** Sorry. What was that last bit? You reserve the right to do more is what you said, or you reserve the right –

**MS NAUERT:** We reserve the right to respond.

**QUESTION:** To respond to their response?

**MS NAUERT:** Correct.

**QUESTION:** So in other words, this is not over; this could – is not necessarily over? We could be – could see an escalation beyond this?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not going to predict anything that could happen, but we certainly have the ability to do so.

**QUESTION:** All right. And when you say there is no justification for the Russian response –

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** – I'm not sure I understand. You guys threw out 60 of their people. When they made you reduce your diplomatic presence last year, you made them reduce your diplomatic –

**MS NAUERT:** Let me explain why I say there is no justification for that response. The United States, in concert with many other countries, made

the decision to kick out Russian spies. We don't see this as a diplomatic tit-for-tat. Russia is responsible for that horrific attack on the British citizen and his daughter. Once again, they have broken the Chemical Weapons Convention. It was a banned substance that they have used – Novichok. We take this matter very seriously.

Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to let you finish. I thought you were –

**MS NAUERT:** (Laughter.) Thank you. That normally doesn't happen.

**QUESTION:** (Laughter.) Yeah, well, there's a first time for everything.

**MS NAUERT:** You caught me off guard. They don't need to act like a victim. Russia should not be acting like a victim. The only victims in this situation are the two victims in the hospital in the UK right now, and the people who cannot go into the park, the medical workers, the first responders who are now having to be treated and watched carefully because they may have come into contact with that substance.

**QUESTION:** So are you saying that the American diplomats who are being expelled are not spies under diplomatic cover?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm saying that they work for the U.S. State Department; they are our colleagues who have served there with great distinction. I can tell you that Russia did provide us a list of 60 names.

**QUESTION:** Right.

**MS NAUERT:** We are reviewing that list and we will respond accordingly.

**QUESTION:** Right. But you're saying that these – that your action was justified, theirs wasn't because these people aren't the equivalent of who you –

**MS NAUERT:** Let's – I think we're forgetting what got us to this place: their attack. The United States and many other countries chose to respond by kicking out spies.

**QUESTION:** I –

**MS NAUERT:** This all begins with Russia's actions –

**QUESTION:** I get it.

**MS NAUERT:** – their irresponsible actions, where they are showing that they're not serious about being a cooperative world player.

**QUESTION:** I get it, but surely you expected them to – this is not a surprise that they would –

**MS NAUERT:** Look, it doesn't surprise us.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MS NAUERT:** It doesn't surprise us.

**QUESTION:** All right. And the last one –

**MS NAUERT:** But it is not justified; I want to be clear about that.

**QUESTION:** Well –

**QUESTION:** Hold on. Last one for me.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Do you think – so you clearly don't think the number of being thrown out are – is reciprocal, is a reciprocal move. What about the consulate in St. Petersburg? Do you think that the closure of that is the equivalent to your closure of their consulate in Seattle?

**MS NAUERT:** Look, I'm not going to equate one with the other. I can say that Russia is choosing, through its actions, to further diplomatically and also economically isolate itself not just from the United States, from the world. They have indicated that they would kick out other countries' diplomats who are serving in Russia at this time. Russia clearly is not interested in having good relations with other countries, and that is evident by the actions that they have taken.

Andrea, go right ahead.

**QUESTION:** Heather, why haven't we heard from the President of the United States? The last thing we know about his communications with Russia were his congratulatory call to Vladimir Putin, when he did not mention this attack. With this being the largest expulsion that we ordered and now the retaliation –

**MS NAUERT:** Let me – I have an issue with the premise of your question.

**QUESTION:** – since the Cold War.

**MS NAUERT:** You have only seen the readout, the formal readout that was provided of the call. You do not know the entire content of the call that the President had with Vladimir Putin, so you cannot assume that none of this was, in fact, brought up. In terms of a so-called "congratulatory call," that is something that we do. That is something that past presidents have done. Even – you may not like a country; you may have difficulties with a country. But that doesn't mean that you don't pick up the phone and have a conversation. The reality is, whether we like it or not, we have to have a relationship with a government as large and as significant as Russia.

**QUESTION:** Well, all of the reporting and the readouts and the White House statements have not questioned the fact that he did not raise the subject of this in that call. Can – are you saying now that he did raise

the subject of this attack –

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not saying that at all. What I'm saying, Andrea, is that what you read in a readout does not always cover everything that was stated in a call. You were not on that call; I was not on that call. So I don't think that you can jump to those conclusions.

**QUESTION:** Do you think that – isn't Russia and the rest of the world getting mixed messages about the difference between the President's stated views of the Kremlin and what the administration has done?

**MS NAUERT:** I'd say this is a tired storyline. This administration has taken very tough actions against Russia – not against the Russian people but against the Russian Government. And you have seen that through numerous rounds of sanctions; you've seen that through our actions that we took earlier this week; you've seen that through our actions that we've taken at the United Nations, standing together against Russia and its activities in which it still continues to kill and be responsible for killing tens of thousands of innocent civilians who are living in Syria. Our actions have been extremely tough. But the reality is that we still have to maintain some type of contact with these countries.

Hi. Hi, Elise.

**QUESTION:** Hi. I want to go back to a little bit of the questioning of Matt. Like when you talk about that this action was not justified, because you took these actions because of the Russian – the nerve agent that you said Russia used – I mean, essentially you're asking Russia to just admit that they did it and take their punishment, right.

**MS NAUERT:** Wouldn't that be the adult thing to do?

**QUESTION:** Well –

**MS NAUERT:** Wouldn't that be the right thing to do by the world? You break the Chemical Weapons Convention, you – and that is in place for a reason. That is in place so that countries can be responsible parties and so that they can work together and we can all work together in some sort of peaceful understanding of the kinds of weapons that won't be used against civilians.

**QUESTION:** I'm not –

**MS NAUERT:** Russia broke with that.

**QUESTION:** I'm not –

**MS NAUERT:** Russia broke with that, and so a lot of countries made the decision that they needed to be held responsible and that their spies needed to be held responsible and kicked out.

**QUESTION:** I'm not saying whether they did or they didn't. I know that there's evidence suggesting that they did. But they're saying that they

didn't. So essentially, you're – again, you're just asking for that. I mean, by saying that this is your punishment and you should take it and not retaliate, you are, in fact, asking them to admit to something that they say that they didn't do.

**MS NAUERT:** And you know what? There's nothing wrong with admitting wrongdoing. And we've seen Russia again and again misinform, use disinformation, claiming that little green men went into Ukraine, denying responsibility for the downing of MH17. We don't talk about that much anymore, and I'm referring to the plane that was shot down, killing many innocent civilians over Ukraine. Russia is known for its disinformation campaigns, and I think this is just another one.

**QUESTION:** I'd just like one more on the further measures. Do you anticipate – when you say you're not going to rule out anything, are you talking about seizing Russian assets? Or are you talking about specifically on the expulsions? Because if – past practice is that in terms of expulsions, you expel a certain amount, you expect them to expel with reciprocity, and then other measures are something separate.

**MS NAUERT:** I can just tell you that we reserve the right to respond further. We're reviewing our options.

**QUESTION:** Including more expulsions?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not going to get into specifics about that. This is something that the President, our deputy secretary, General Mattis, others, the entire interagency process can have a conversation about what to do next, and I'm not going to get ahead of any of those conversations that might happen.

Hey, Rich.

**QUESTION:** Heather, in the U.S. presence – the full U.S. presence in Russia, at least for the next couple of days, how or where does St. Petersburg as a consulate fit in? Is it – as far as the passport volume it controls, the staffing it has there? And how much will its removal from the constellation of the U.S. presence there affect U.S. operations?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, it's significant. It's significant. Our people don't like to see something like this happen. It is certainly not a good day for our colleagues who are serving at Embassy Moscow and elsewhere in that country. It's frankly not a good day for the locally employed staff. And when I say that Russia has decided to further isolate itself diplomatically and also economically, that's what I mean. There will be locally employed staff who very likely will need to be laid off as a result. Those are people who are Russian citizens who work at our complexes and our compounds and who do all kinds of work. Our work at our embassies and our consulates is not possible without the help of those locally employed staff. If Russia is concerned about its economy, it wouldn't be taking these actions, because those people will be hurt.

We saw that happen last year when we had – were forced to draw down some of our colleagues in Russia earlier, and we saw many locally employed staff go – many people who have, frankly, worked for us for sometimes 10, 20, 30 years even.

**QUESTION:** And as the Russians wanted to close down a consulate and they had several to choose from, the fact that they did choose St. Petersburg, does that – or does the U.S. view that as trying to maximize the effect on the U.S. mission there?

**MS NAUERT:** I can't answer that question. You'd have to ask Russia why they chose to select St. Petersburg.

Okay, hi.

**QUESTION:** Did Deputy Secretary Sullivan speak to someone in Russia, his counterpart Lavrov, or –

**MS NAUERT:** Well, Ambassador Huntsman did. That's typically the –

**QUESTION:** No, nobody in the building speak to or plan to speak –

**MS NAUERT:** Hold on. Typically what will happen is that a diplomatic note will be given to one of our colleagues. That was provided to Ambassador Huntsman. We are at the point we are still trying to translate that diplomatic note. That – the contents of that – will make its way back to Washington. We will take a look at it, we will review it. This happened not so long ago, so we're still in the process of gathering the information.

**QUESTION:** And President Trump last week said he was planning or intended to speak with – to meet with President Putin. It is something still in the plans or –

**MS NAUERT:** I don't have any meetings to announce. We would certainly like to have a better relationship with Russia, but their actions today don't indicate that they are very serious about having a better relationship with the United States at this time.

Hi, Carol.

**QUESTION:** Can I move on to –

**QUESTION:** No. (Laughter.)

**QUESTION:** Heather, how do you expect this to impact other issues such as the efforts to get Russia to exert pressure on the Assad government in Syria?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, efforts for Russia to exert pressure on the Assad government – they're not doing anything to help in Syria. Russia is the huge part of the problem for the tens of thousands of innocent civilians who have been killed and are still being killed each and every day as we



look at the video that's coming out of Eastern Ghouta. Russia is responsible for that. Russia not only sends its people, its military, its weapons down there. You see video; people on the ground point up to the plains and they say there's another Russian bombardment. We see the barrel bombs coming down. Russia is directly responsible for propping up Bashar al-Assad, who has been killing his own people for far, far too long – Iran also responsible.

We don't anticipate that Russia is going to – based on their actions – is going to help right now. We've seen that they have supported UN Security Council resolutions and they have failed to – even though they supported it at the United Nations, they failed to follow through. And I think you can see that in the ceasefire resolution that was passed unanimously, oh, about a month or so ago. They have never adhered to that ceasefire resolution. We'd like them to stick to the bargain and be an honest broker and be a responsible party to the world.

Okay. Hey, Laurie.

**QUESTION:** So are you going to take this up at the United Nations, the current –

**MS NAUERT:** I have not spoken with Ambassador Haley about that. But if I get any information for you, I certainly will bring it to you.

Hi.

**QUESTION:** Laurie. I wonder if this discussion would be a little less abstract if you could tell us something about the dangers that novichok – novichok poses, like how much is a lethal dose of novichok and is it more dangerous than an older generation of chemical weapons?

**MS NAUERT:** That is a very interesting question. I am not an expert on how much of a chemical weapon one is needed to become deadly. I'm not an expert on that. That would probably be an intelligence matter. But novichok is contained in the Chemical Weapons Convention. That is one of the banned substances.

**QUESTION:** But the point is that a very small amount can kill you, and if it were used for terrorism –

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not an expert at that, but we can certainly see the condition that the British citizen and his daughter ended up in, in serious condition in the hospital. And I think since countries have decided to ban that substance, I think that speaks for itself.

**QUESTION:** Okay, if I could ask you about Turkey.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) Russia?

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.)

**MS NAUERT:** (Laughter.) Hold on, hold on.

**QUESTION:** I just wanted to kind of –

**MS NAUERT:** Hi. Hey, Nick.

**QUESTION:** – follow up on Rich's question on the impact of shuttering the St. Pete consulate.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** What, if any, unique services does that consulate provide to Americans?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, some of the things that our consular facilities provide are visas. So if someone wants to come to the United States, such as a Russian citizen wants to visit a family member in the United States, then they would need to apply for a visa there. They would need to set up an appointment, come into our embassy. When we are forced to close down our facilities, when we are forced to draw down our staff, we have fewer people who can respond to those queries. Our priority has to be, whether it's there or any other country, dealing with American citizens first. So we will be able to work to assist American citizens. It certainly hampers our ability to do so, but that is always our priority. But certainly visa, and consular operations will be affected by this.

**QUESTION:** Can I go back to Russia in terms of – you were speaking about Syria and what they're doing in Syria. The President just said a few minutes ago that the U.S. is coming out of Syria very soon and let other people take care of it, we're coming out. So, I mean, when he says let other people take care of it, specifically he means the Russians, because they're really the ones on the ground. And I'm wondering, will this – back to Carol's question – if this will affect your efforts to come out of Syria if you're going to leave it to the Russians and you have no relationship with the Russians.

**MS NAUERT:** I can only say that as a general matter – and I have not seen the President's comments myself. I don't – I don't know the context in which his comments were said. But I can say that, as a general matter, this administration looks to other countries to help out. Far too often, the United States has been the leading country in efforts, whether they be humanitarian efforts or leading fighting efforts to try to help out a country, save a country, or fight a war. So the United States, under this administration, looks for other parties to do more. But that's just as a general matter, and I can't comment beyond that.

**QUESTION:** But, like, Russia is the – as you know, the main party on the ground there. And when you say leave it to other people, that's specifically –

**MS NAUERT:** Elise, I can't comment on what the President supposedly said. I haven't seen it. I'd have to refer you back to the White House.

**QUESTION:** Well, he didn't – he didn't supposedly say it.

**MS NAUERT:** Well, I have not seen it myself, okay?

**QUESTION:** He said it.

**MS NAUERT:** I have not seen that myself.

**QUESTION:** Okay, but so you –

**MS NAUERT:** And you don't necessarily comment or report on things that have been heard secondhand, and I'm not going to do that either.

**QUESTION:** That's – okay, that's fine. So you're not aware of any policy determination to pull all – to pull the U.S. out of Syria?

**MS NAUERT:** I am not, no. No.

**QUESTION:** Okay. So the President is just speaking off the cuff and making up policy as he goes along without telling –

**MS NAUERT:** I don't know. I don't know. I'd have to refer you back to the White House. I'm not aware of those comments.

**QUESTION:** It's not just the Russians who are big in Syria; it's also the Iranians.

**MS NAUERT:** That is correct.

**QUESTION:** And if you guys are going to pull out and just leave it to other people, Russia and Iran are going to go in there. I'm just wondering, have you spoken to the Israelis about this? Because I don't think they'd like it. The –

**MS NAUERT:** Matt, I'm not prepared to comment on what was supposedly said because I have not heard it myself. I'd refer you back to the White House for more information.

**QUESTION:** Can I go back to just the embassy – the diplomats issue for a second?

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** I'm still a little bit mystified as to how you can – how you were – why you were able to say yesterday and – or maintain yesterday that the United States is safer because these 60 Russians are now out. Am I correct in presuming that because you're saying that these American diplomats who are being expelled from Russia are not the same, don't fall into the same category as the 60 Russians, that it would be inaccurate – wrong – for the Russians to claim that Russians are safer or will be safer without –

**MS NAUERT:** They claim all kinds of unusual things that we don't agree with. They are the masters of propaganda. I think you very well know

that. To the question of kicking out –

**QUESTION:** I think the North Koreans are the masters.

**MS NAUERT:** – kicking out – well, they are too. Kicking out spies – I would argue that our country is safer, and I think many of you who cover our elections process, and many American and Western reporters would argue too, that the United States is better off with fewer Russian spies.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And then last thing is the – are – you mentioned 28 countries have taken action and –

**MS NAUERT:** That's right. Plus the United States, so 29 in total.

**QUESTION:** Are there countries that you asked or would have liked to have seen take action that didn't, that you're disappointed in?

**MS NAUERT:** I would say this appears to be a rolling effort. Georgia is the latest country that got on just today. Other countries may join this effort in recognizing the awful actions that Russia took against these two individuals.

**QUESTION:** Right. But this appears to go beyond NATO and the EU, the number of countries –

**MS NAUERT:** Australia, also Canada.

**QUESTION:** Right, exactly. So have you sought, like, the Japanese, the South Koreans, the Israelis?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not aware – I am not aware –

**QUESTION:** None of them have done anything.

**MS NAUERT:** I am not aware of all the phone calls or the contacts that we have had on this campaign, if you will. I know the British Government has been very engaged. They've been talking with people as well. This is a global effort. Other countries may be having conversations with countries that we're simply not aware of.

**QUESTION:** Heather, can we move on, please –

**QUESTION:** No.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** No, not yet, please.

**MS NAUERT:** And then we'll take your question after that. We'll give Andrea one last one.

**QUESTION:** I have one more.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** You spoke about Syria. There are other – clearly other U.S.-Russian issues in play here: arms control, as well as North Korea and our efforts there. How might this escalation affect our relationship, our ability to work with Russia on other key issues, bilateral issues?

**MS NAUERT:** I would look at it from another point of view: Russia's decisions – Russia is making the very clear decision that it appears not to be interested in working with many countries around the world. I think we have to look at their actions and the actions that they are taking. And pushing countries – pushing countries aside, that is why I say that Russia has clearly making – made the decision to diplomatically isolate itself. They've done that from the UK, they've done that from Germany, they've done that from France, Lithuania, Estonia – I can go on and on about the number of countries that it has chosen to distance itself from.

**QUESTION:** And –

**MS NAUERT:** And I'm going to move on. I think we've covered enough on that.

**QUESTION:** And –

**MS NAUERT:** Said, go right ahead.

**QUESTION:** I have a very quick question on the Palestinian issue. Yesterday, Ambassador Friedman told Channel 10 – the Israeli Channel 10 that if Abbas does not come to negotiate with us, someone else will, the successor will. Is there – are there any plans to let's say have regime change in the Palestinian Authority?

**MS NAUERT:** Absolutely not, absolutely not. And I think the ambassador was clear in his remarks. He put out a tweet this morning, if I could try to find it here. He says he was misquoted in various reports, stemming from an interview that was published today. The United States is not seeking to replace Mahmoud Abbas. It is for the Palestinian people to choose its leadership, so I think he was clear in his response to that.

**QUESTION:** But why not? I mean, you guys aid the Palestinian Authority; it seems that the Palestinian leadership has not been able to sort of deliver on –

**MS NAUERT:** That is up for –

**QUESTION:** many things for the Palestinians.

**MS NAUERT:** That is up for the Palestinian people to decide.

**QUESTION:** Right, and one other question: tomorrow there are going to be marches that are called the return marches to celebrate land day. And

the Israelis deployed some like hundred snipers around Gaza; there is likely to be a bloodbath. Are you calling on the Israelis to refrain from the use of excessive force –

**MS NAUERT:** I would –

**QUESTION:** – in the case that the –

**MS NAUERT:** I would call on you to not use that kind of language, Said.

**QUESTION:** What language?

**MS NAUERT:** That language, it sounds like you're calling for that yourself. Look –

**QUESTION:** I'm not calling for that myself.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** I'm saying that people are maybe – maybe – maybe marching in the tens of thousands. The Israelis are saying that they have deployed – I'm not saying that, they're saying – that they have deployed snipers and so on. This is likely to result in bloodshed. Do you call on them to refrain from using excessive force? Are you not –

**MS NAUERT:** I certainly hope you're wrong.

**QUESTION:** I hope I'm wrong. Of course, I –

**MS NAUERT:** We don't like to hear excessive language in conjunction with an area that is so sensitive.

**QUESTION:** Right.

**MS NAUERT:** Israel has certainly put on heightened security alerts as a result. We hope the measures that they choose to take, and to be implemented, will minimize the impact on the ability of people to cross in and out of Gaza, for example. Overall, we believe that Israel has the right to defend itself, but we recognize that people have a right to be out and be out in the fashion that you had mentioned.

**QUESTION:** Just –

**QUESTION:** And –

**MS NAUERT:** But we – but we hope things remain calm.

**QUESTION:** Just a quick –

**MS NAUERT:** Hold on.

**QUESTION:** And lastly, please. And lastly, there are about 1,500 Christians in Gaza.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Some of them would like to go to the Church of Holy Sepulchre. The Israelis have denied them that. Would you call on Israel to allow Gaza Christians to go and celebrate the – Easter?

**MS NAUERT:** I would just say that we hope that they will do this and they will implement this in a way that would minimize impact, and will allow people to go where they need to go to to celebrate religious holidays.

**QUESTION:** I have a question on this march. Do you see it, as the Israelis do, that this is a call by Hamas to incite to violence?

**MS NAUERT:** I –

**QUESTION:** Because that's what the Israelis are – the message that they're putting out is that they feel that Hamas is inciting to violence and spending a lot of money on this campaign.

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah, I would just refer you back to the Government of Israel. I don't have any information on that.

**QUESTION:** Well I mean, but how do you view this march?

**MS NAUERT:** I don't have any additional information on that beyond I – I'm aware that it's happening. Yeah, okay.

**QUESTION:** Heather.

**MS NAUERT:** Go ahead. Hey. Alicia.

**QUESTION:** Hi. A date for the summit between North and South Korea has been announced for April 27th. What are your expectations? Are you hopeful that this can set the stage for a successful meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un?

**MS NAUERT:** It seems like that was announced weeks ago, doesn't it? And it was only this morning – how quickly the news moves, certainly. I think that meeting, overall, that was announced between – between the Republic of Korea and North Korea – just moves us closer to the point where the United States can sit down with North Korea and have a meeting. We're realistic about that overall. The State Department is planning for that meeting. We're going ahead in full faith and good faith. We've had lots of conversations with the Republic of Korea about the contents of that meeting and the contents of their discussion, and we believe overall that the pressure campaign is working. It's one that I've talked about so many times up here, and we're proud of that pressure campaign. And so many countries joining the United States in recognizing the destabilizing elements within North Korean – the North Korean regime, in terms of its ballistic missile and nuclear testing. Okay.

**QUESTION:** And uh –

**MS NAUERT:** Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Just sorry, Heather. One more follow up on that. This –

**MS NAUERT:** Let me just move on to her, and I'll come back to you if I have time.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MS NAUERT:** Sir, sorry. (Inaudible.)

**QUESTION:** Still on North Korea. The North Koreans have said that they're committed to denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula if South Korea and the United States respond to their efforts with good will and create an atmosphere of peace and stability. How do you assess that statement? The Japanese Government has expressed skepticism about their true intentions there, so what is the U.S. perspective?

**MS NAUERT:** And certainly, I understand the feeling on the part of the Japanese Government. They were here about a week and a half, two weeks ago, and sat down with Deputy Secretary Sullivan and shared their concerns. I can tell you we are strong allies, we are on the same page working with Japan, just as we are with South Korea, on these issues of mutual concern – chiefly, their country's security and the security of the region.

I understand their skepticism. We are being realistic too about this meeting. But that doesn't mean that we won't go ahead and plan a meeting to have these conversations about the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

**QUESTION:** Heather – Heather, I have –

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Janne, hi.

**QUESTION:** A related question?

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much, Heather. Recently, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has mentioned that he wants a conditional denuclearization in Korean Peninsula. I think there is a difference between the CVID that U.S. want. What is the U.S. prospect of the denuclearization talks? Because they liked the conditional denuclearization talks.

**MS NAUERT:** North Korea has stated to South Korea, certainly, and to China that it is committed to denuclearization. We are going to or we are planning – we are planning to go ahead with meetings to have conversations with them about that. At this point, we will go forward with those and hope that they are serious about that.

**QUESTION:** Heather –

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)



**MS NAUERT:** Okay. And then we're going to have to wrap it up.

**QUESTION:** Do you go to those discussions ready to some concessions, as any negotiation will –

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not going to get ahead of any meetings that take place. Some of these would be established, some of those guidelines would be established at a much higher level.

**QUESTION:** I have a –

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Yeah. Go right ahead. Hi.

**QUESTION:** Hi. President Trump just said in Ohio that he may hold up the Korea Free Trade Agreement until a deal is reached with North Korea. Is that a possibility? Has the State Department been informed?

**MS NAUERT:** Well, the KORUS agreement, the Korea Free Trade Agreement, is something – it's funny because there were a lot of countries that worried that we were pulling out of everything. I mean, this is an agreement that the President and others working for the administration have been working on. We believe that this will be a – better for American workers and for the U.S. economy, but this is not a done deal. There is still – it's not a final agreement. I have not heard what the President said about that, so I don't want to comment beyond the fact that we are renegotiating. We can renegotiate with other countries and end up stronger as a result of those negotiations, but it's still not a done deal just yet.

**QUESTION:** But just on that point –

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MS NAUERT:** Okay, okay.

**QUESTION:** Just on that point, I know you don't want to speak to what the President might have just said, but do you see this agreement as conditional as to whether there's an agreement with North Korea?

**MS NAUERT:** I would refer you to the White House. If there's something that the President just said about that, I'd have to refer you to the White House on that.

**QUESTION:** No, I'm not talking about what the President said –

**MS NAUERT:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** – but, like, is it your understanding that this agreement is conditional upon whether there's an –

**MS NAUERT:** My understanding is that this agreement has not been

finalized just yet. Okay?

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but what he said was that he would hold it up, delay it, use it as leverage with the North Korean agreement. This is the second thing that we've asked you about that the President spoke to today that you don't seem to know anything about, which suggests that the President is just kind of, I don't know, just throwing stuff out that –

**MS NAUERT:** Do I need to remind you again that I work at, what is it, 2205 C Street?

**QUESTION:** 2201.

**QUESTION:** No, but the administration –

**MS NAUERT:** I don't work at six – 2201. See, I'm still learning the address.

**QUESTION:** This is (inaudible) policy.

**QUESTION:** But this is a – these are policy questions.

**MS NAUERT:** But – yeah.

**QUESTION:** It's about policy.

**QUESTION:** Either you're pulling out of Syria or you're not. Either you're going to hold up the KORUS agreement for a deal with North Korea or you're not, and the State Department –

**MS NAUERT:** KORUS deal has not been finalized just yet. We are in the process of renegotiating that. As a whole –

**QUESTION:** I get that, but it – but I don't remember anyone ever –

**MS NAUERT:** Hold on. As a whole, this administration looks for more countries to join us in our efforts so the United States isn't consistently carrying the heavy load. We will always continue to be a leader on these matters diplomatically, militarily, but we look for others to join us. Okay?

**QUESTION:** I get it, but –

**MS NAUERT:** Beyond that, I'm not going to comment –

**QUESTION:** But – I get it, but –

**MS NAUERT:** – on anything that the President supposedly just said.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** – there has been no discussion at all anywhere else that I'm aware of – maybe I'm wrong – but that I'm aware of that the free trade agreement with South Korea is somehow linked to a denuclearization

agreement with North Korea.

**MS NAUERT:** Look, part of that is being handled out of the U.S. Trade Representative's office. If you want any more details on the trade agreement, I can refer you to his office.

**QUESTION:** Turkey?

**MS NAUERT:** And we're going to – and I'm going to have to leave it at that. Okay?

**QUESTION:** Turkey? Turkey?

**QUESTION:** Cuba, can I (inaudible)?

**MS NAUERT:** Go ahead. Miss, hi.

**QUESTION:** What's the status of the investigation into the alleged attacks on U.S. diplomats in Cuba?

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Hi, welcome. This is your first time here, right?

**QUESTION:** It is.

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Heather.

**MS NAUERT:** You're welcome back anytime you like. So Cuba, last time that we had talked about it – and it's been a while since it's come up here in the briefing – just for an update on the investigation, we – the investigation is still ongoing. The State Department is involved in that, as are other government agencies and departments as well. It is still an ongoing investigation. The United States Government is still not sure who or what is responsible for those health attacks on 24 of our embassy personnel who were based down at our embassy in Cuba. The investigation continues. It's not something that we're giving up on.

The decision was made late last year to bring home some of our people. We are operating at a reduced staffing rate. We still are. It is considered an unaccompanied post. That means that we don't allow spouses down there, children down there. The reason being for these personnel changes which went into effect last year is that we can't necessarily ensure people's safety when we don't know what is responsible for attacking our people.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** There's evidence now that there is – there was brain damage. There's medical evidence of brain damage done on the U.S. diplomats. Have any measures been taken to protect U.S. embassy employees around the world, not only in Cuba but around the world?

**MS NAUERT:** I can tell you if anyone feels – and we've been very public about this. If any of our colleagues around the world feel that there has been something suspicious that has taken place, if they are noticing some unusual symptoms, they have been encouraged – and we've made this clear – to contact the State Department and talk with our MED department and talk with their supervisors and make us aware of this.

We have provided medical services through different medical facilities in the United States on the mainland for our people who felt like they were affected. They are receiving treatment; they're meeting with doctors, undergoing various levels of testing. And at any point, if someone feels like they are experiencing some symptoms that are similar to the symptoms that others affected have experienced, they can then go in for testing. But beyond that, I'm not going to discuss the specifics of what our people went through.

**QUESTION:** May I follow – just –

**MS NAUERT:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Can you just tell me if that includes protection from a possible electromagnetic –

**MS NAUERT:** Pardon me?

**QUESTION:** – or radio waves?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm sorry. Your question is?

**QUESTION:** Does that include protection from a possible electromagnetic or radio wave weapon of sorts?

**MS NAUERT:** When we don't know what or who is responsible for it, it is difficult to do anything to take action to prevent from – prevent an attack from something you don't know where it is coming from. So that's virtually impossible to do, and I hope people would understand that.

**QUESTION:** May I follow on that? May I follow on that?

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** When you don't know yet who or what may have happened, would that rule out reinstating Cuba on the terror list?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not –

**QUESTION:** And is that under consideration?

**MS NAUERT:** I have not asked our people that lately. This is not a topic we have –

**QUESTION:** Is that under consideration?

**MS NAUERT:** I'm not aware of that. I can look into that and see if I can get something for you on that. However, it is something that I may not be able to answer because some of these might be diplomatic conversations.

**QUESTION:** The Egyptian –

**QUESTION:** Turkey. Turkey –

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Oh, Said. Whoa, guys. Settle.

**QUESTION:** The Egyptian election? Quick comment on the Egyptian election?

**MS NAUERT:** Okay. Let's see. Today was the last day of the Egyptian election.

**QUESTION:** Yesterday was, I think.

**MS NAUERT:** No, today was. Three days, right? I think it was three days.

**QUESTION:** Yesterday was the last day –

**MS NAUERT:** The election won't be certified until next week, so we will be sure to have a more fulsome statement for you on that next week.

**QUESTION:** Could you clarify the situation in Sinjar? The PKK says it's left. Turkey is still making threats. What's the situation there, as far as you know?

**MS NAUERT:** Right. We've certainly seen reports that there are those groups in Sinjar. And many of us will remember Sinjar from the Yezidis, the Yezidis who were there who then had to be rescued, some of them, and some of them were brutally murdered by ISIS. We've seen the reports of those groups in Sinjar. We understand that Turkey has expressed some of its concern over the presence of them in northern Iraq. Sinjar and the United States expect that any operations in Iraq would be done with the approval of the Iraqi Government. So if Turkey is coming into Sinjar, they need to coordinate that with the Government of Iraq.

**QUESTION:** Do you know if the PKK has left?

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MS NAUERT:** I've got to leave it there. I've got to leave it there. Thanks, guys.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:41 p.m.)

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