

Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – September 20, 2018

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Index for Today's Briefing

- [DEPARTMENT/GEORGIA](#)
- [DEPARTMENT](#)
- [UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY](#)
- [NORTH KOREA/SOUTH KOREA](#)
- [AFGHANISTAN](#)
- [PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES](#)
- [MIDDLE EASTPEACE](#)
- [IRAQ/IRAN](#)
- [PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES](#)
- [DEPARTMENT](#)
- [INDIA/PAKISTAN](#)
- [NORTH KOREA](#)
- [EGYPT](#)

TRANSCRIPT:

3:22 p.m. EDT

MS NAUERT: Good afternoon, everyone. Hope you're well today. I'd like to start off with telling you a little bit about who we welcomed here at the State Department today. Today Secretary Pompeo met with the Georgian prime minister and reaffirmed the strength of the U.S.-Georgia bilateral relationship. Ten years ago, Russia invaded Georgia and continues to occupy the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In spite of Russians' occupation of 20 percent of its territory, and in spite of deaths, kidnappings, and other abuses that have occurred under Russia's ongoing occupation, Georgia continues to reform its democratic institutions and develop its economy.

The United States stands with Georgia; U.S. and Georgian soldiers serve side by side in Afghanistan, where Georgia is the largest per-capita contributor to NATO's Resolute Support Mission, and we look forward to one day welcoming Georgia into NATO. The United States continues to support Georgia's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, and the United States will continue to support Georgia's efforts to enhance the rule of law and accountable government.

Next, I'd like to thank the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for their votes earlier this week where they approved several of our outstanding ambassadorial nominees. This helps fill vacancies in American embassies all over the world and to advance American interests. We still have far too many vacancies here at the State Department, from ambassadors to regular folks here serving at the assistant secretary level, also the under secretary level.

So today we call on the Senate to help us get the finest diplomatic team on the field and get to work on behalf of the American people. A diverse group of more than 55 nominations still await the Senate's approval. As we head to the United Nations General Assembly, it is more crucial than

ever that the world's diplomatic corps see an American team ready to execute on our foreign policy. Today we implore the Senate to act so that these candidates may take their place along the finest – alongside the finest of diplomats.

Lastly, I'd like to mention a little bit about the schedule in the coming days, as many of you will be joining us at the United Nations General Assembly. The Secretary arrives in New York on Sunday the 23rd for the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly. The White House will be issuing the President's schedule. Ambassador Haley, you may have seen a short while ago, just concluded a press conference highlighting some of the events that we can expect at the High-Level Week.

I thought I'd take a few moments to give you a sense of the administration's priorities for this year's UNGA, and they fall within five overarching themes. First among the priorities is addressing the global threat posed by weapons of mass destruction. That includes the proliferation of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, as well as ballistic missiles. The President intends to chair a UN Security Council meeting on that issue, and you can expect considerable discussion of North Korea, Iran, and Syria in this category throughout High-Level Week and beyond.

The United States will use UNGA High-Level Week to highlight humanitarian crises around the world and to encourage all nations to do more to support humanitarian response and also food security. The United States believes UN member-states can do more to address threats to peace and security, in particular the world drug problem. That's something that the President, the First Lady, and the Secretary and others will certainly be highlighting in the early part of the week.

The United States will continue to emphasize also global initiatives to defeat ISIS, al-Qaida, and other terror groups that threaten America and its interests. We will reinforce last year's call for member-states to support meaningful and lasting reform to ensure that the UN is serving the interests of its membership effectively, efficiently, and accountably.

Regarding Secretary Pompeo's schedule: On Monday, Secretary Pompeo will join the President's Global Call to Action on the world drug problem. On Tuesday, Secretary Pompeo will speak out against Iran's proliferation in an event hosted by the United – United Against Nuclear Iran. On Tuesday, Secretary Pompeo looks forward to hosting the annual Transatlantic Dinner. He's excited about that. We know many of our European friends are looking forward to joining that as well. On Wednesday, Secretary Pompeo will participate in an African Union meeting regarding the peace process for South Sudan. On Thursday, he'll join the P5 foreign ministers to address some of the world's most pressing global issues. Then on Friday, the Secretary will meet with some of our Middle East partners to address shared security goals.

Some of the other senior officials who will be in New York next week

include our Deputy Secretary John Sullivan, Under Secretary David Hale, Under Secretary Andrea Thompson, our Director of Policy Planning Kiron Skinner, our Special Representative Steve Biegun, and Special Representative Brian Hook, among many others from the State Department.

The United States seeks a strong, sovereign, and independent partnership with countries that control their own destinies, and the United Nations General Assembly provides an excellent platform to advance our American interests. And I look forward to seeing you all in New York and talking with you nonstop, I am sure.

I'd be happy to take your questions.

QUESTION: Probably more than you want.

MS NAUERT: (Laughter.) And I imagine we'll be having a few drinks together as well. So looking forward to that.

QUESTION: Shh. What was Thursday again? I'm sorry, you were going very fast and I can't –

MS NAUERT: Let me go back to that. Bear with me one second. And we will provide updates to the schedules. As you know, with bilateral meetings, there is a lot of shifting in the schedules, and so we will provide you with the schedule in the evening and then any revised schedules in the morning.

Let's see, Monday – bear with me.

QUESTION: No, no, Thursday is what I missed. Sorry, everyone.

MS NAUERT: Can anyone else help out Matt? Can the class help?

QUESTION: Well, we can –

MS NAUERT: Ah, excuse me. On Thursday he'll join the P5 foreign ministers to talk about global challenges.

QUESTION: Global challenges.

MS NAUERT: More specific details, we'll provide that for you.

QUESTION: All right.

QUESTION: Are there any specifically on Syria?

MS NAUERT: I – look, you're all going to have a lot of questions, I understand, about a lot of these things. Syria will, of course, come up under proliferation, but any side meetings related to that, I just don't have that for you today.

QUESTION: So –

MS NAUERT: Some of these things are still being developed, and we'll

provide you updates to the schedule on a daily basis.

QUESTION: All right, okay. Well, so I was trying to come up before this with something very profound to ask, but I failed miserably.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: So do you know –

MS NAUERT: I've bored you to tears.

QUESTION: I realize that you don't have his exact schedule for bilats yet, but yesterday in his statement he said he had asked the North Korean foreign minister to meet with him at some point next week. Do you know, has that – is that going to happen, or is it still not going – I'm not asking for a time or a venue or a place.

MS NAUERT: I understand. So an invitation went out. I don't have any updates for you on that. We certainly stand by ready to meet if they are able to.

QUESTION: Okay. And then the same goes for Special Representative Biegun. Do you know, has a date for the Vienna – proposed Vienna meeting –

MS NAUERT: So that –

QUESTION: Clearly, it won't be next week if he's going to be in New York.

QUESTION: Steve Biegun will be in New York with us and I am sure looks forward to meeting a lot of you in the coming days and weeks ahead. We don't have anything specific on his schedule with regard to any travel to Vienna, but he stands by ready to travel.

QUESTION: Okay. And –

QUESTION: The meeting with the Middle Eastern partners, is that on Wednesday? Is that what you said? Wednesday or Friday?

MS NAUERT: I put it away. Now I have to go back and look.

QUESTION: It was on Friday.

QUESTION: Friday. Yes, okay.

QUESTION: Have any bilats been set yet?

MS NAUERT: Oh, yes, we do. But as you know, these things are shifting a lot.

QUESTION: Well, that's fine.

MS NAUERT: So we're not ready to announce all the specifics just yet, but

we will on a daily basis get you all the information that you need so that you can plan your schedules. Okay? And Said, I'll get back with you on that answer to that question.

QUESTION: And then I had one other logistical question.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: And that is the Tuesday thing, the Iran, United Against Nuclear Iran event, that is part – that's a nongovernmental group that was very opposed to the Iran deal. I'm presuming that that is not – do you know what the venue is for that?

MS NAUERT: I don't know where that is being held offhand.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Lesley, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Can I have – yeah, can I have a follow-up? So what does – can you give us some kind of insight into what the Secretary is thinking about this next meeting with the North Koreans? Does he feel – I mean, does he want to get a list of all the North Korean nuclear facilities from the foreign minister? Where does he – where does he want to take it? Can you give us some kind of –

MS NAUERT: So I think the first thing that we want to do is get a very fulsome readout that resulted from the meeting between North Korea and South Korea. We have received a preliminary readout – as you know, we coordinate very closely with the South Koreans – but have obviously have yet to meet with them face-to-face to fully flesh out the negotiations and the conversations and how those went in North Korea. So that's the first step.

The Secretary looks forward to speaking with them in the days to come. The President, along with – our President, along with President Moon, will have an opportunity to chat, I believe in person, in the early part of the week. So that will be the first step, having those conversations to learn in a more granular level how those conversations went.

We are open to meeting, certainly, as you well know. The Secretary put out a statement yesterday congratulating President Moon on a successful series of meetings in North Korea. We welcome the reaffirmation of the elements that were agreed to in the Singapore summit, the joint agreement, and we also welcome Chairman Kim's decision to complete the previously announced dismantlement of various sites.

So all of that is good news. We see that as progress, and we're prepared to engage immediately in negotiations if and when they're ready.

QUESTION: So there's a lot of focus on the date, the 2021. What exactly is the goal for denuclearization by that time?

MS NAUERT: Well, this is something that the Secretary has spoken to before. I think when we were in Seoul, I think you and I were sitting right there with the Secretary, Francesco, as he talked about this and highlighted the fact that we get this done pretty quickly when or as North Korea cooperates. The intention is to get this done by the time the – at the end of the President’s first term. So this is not something new. It’s somehow been interpreted as something new, but this is something that the Secretary has said before.

Okay, Francesco.

QUESTION: You didn’t mention the Secretary chairing a UNSC meeting on North Korea on Thursday. Is this still happening?

MS NAUERT: As far as I know. Let me have my colleagues double-check. Yes, it is. Yeah.

QUESTION: Yes. And then on – yesterday in his statement, the Secretary didn’t mention the fact that Chairman Kim, Kim Jong-un, is asking for corresponding measures to dismantle its nuclear complex. Are you ready to corresponding measures, which would mean a phased, step-by-step, reciprocal process?

MS NAUERT: I think I’d go back to something that Chairman Moon^[1] has often said, and that we have to have –

QUESTION: Chairman Moon?

MS NAUERT: Excuse me.

QUESTION: Chairman Moon or President Moon or Chairman Kim?

MS NAUERT: You know I always do this, right? I get tired at the end of the day and people start marrying up like that, so –

QUESTION: Yeah.

QUESTION: This is just the beginning. (Laughter.)

MS NAUERT: I think I’d just go back to what I’ve said about that very issue before, and that nothing can happen in the absence of denuclearization. Denuclearization has to come first, okay.

Hi, Janne.

QUESTION: So no corresponding measure to – for the dismantlement of the site?

MS NAUERT: Look, I don’t have any guidance on that beyond what I’ve just told you, that denuclearization is something that has to come.

Hi, Janne.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you. North Koreans said that if United States take

steps first, they will destroy or shut down Yongbyon reactors. Do you think this is successfully – Moon say that is – I don't think so – Moon does make any successful denuclearizations meeting with Kim Jong-un.

MS NAUERT: Look, I think any time that we have our government sitting down and talking with their government, that we have President Moon talking with Chairman Kim, it is a step in the right direction – a step in the right direction to start to have regular dialogue. This is something we had talked about a couple months ago, and I said these things will become regular, where it's not such a surprise when the U.S. is having conversations, trading emails, phone calls, whatever you want to call it, having meetings with North Korea. And I think it's just another step in that direction, okay.

QUESTION: But should North Korea not develop future nuclear weapons or should not all nuclear weapons be destroy? So what do you want? What United States want? They want a future nuclear weapons or –

MS NAUERT: Well, we'd like to see a brighter future for the North Korean people and for the North Korean Government. We hope that they would like to see the same thing. That is something that Chairman Kim had indicated to the President, that he shared that vision to have a brighter future for North Korea. That means a denuclearized North Korea. That's something that the United States doesn't just believe in, but many other countries have joined us in this overall mission to achieve denuclearization of North Korea, okay.

Hi. Nazira.

QUESTION: Yes, thank you. Heather, do you know that President Ghani will have meeting with President Trump or Afghan delegation, what kind of meeting they will have in New York next week?

MS NAUERT: I understand that the Afghan Government will have representation at the UN General Assembly. I don't have any specific meetings to read out for you, especially on behalf of the President, so we'll just have to wait for the White House to put out that – their meeting readout schedule.

QUESTION: Sure.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

QUESTION: Can we go back to North Korea?

MS NAUERT: We'll come back to that. Hey, Abbie.

QUESTION: Hey. My apologies if I missed some of this at the top, but were you asked whether or not Secretary Pompeo will be meeting with any member of the Palestinian delegation, if there's an attempt to be meeting with a Palestinian while he's there? And separately, given the general feeling that often the U.S. is ganged up on on this issue, do you anticipate any sort of blowback from recent U.S. decisions to not

fund UNRWA and take funding away from the East Jerusalem Hospitals?

MS NAUERT: Yeah. So I'm not aware of any meetings taking place. Again, I don't have the full schedule, but I'm not tracking any meetings between the Secretary and the Palestinians at next week's UN General Assembly.

To the hospital issue – and I know some of you have asked questions about that in the past, so I'll just address that right off the bat, and you all know the news that was made there. The United States Government does not believe that it is responsible for paying for the hospital bills. Now, that may shock some people to hear that. The Palestinian Authority is the one that actually incurs these bills on behalf of Palestinian citizens and others who seek treatment at that hospital. The Palestinian Authority is solely responsible for paying for the treatment of Palestinians in those hospitals.

Historically, they have neglected to pay the bills at their hospital of those individuals and other bills related to the hospital. Our funding in the past has generously shored them up. The PA, though – we have seen the Palestinian Authority is prioritizing paying its debts – has failed to prioritize paying its debts and has instead put money into funding things like payment to families of terrorists and payment to – as you all are well aware of the Taylor Force Act – and payment to families of those who have been imprisoned. We think that that is a wrong decision, that the Palestinians should be funding the care of their own people in the hospitals and that it should not be the responsibility of the United States Government to pay those bills when the Palestinians have that money that they could choose to use on their own people, as opposed to funding the families of terrorists and those who are serving in prison.

QUESTION: Sorry, wait a second, Heather. Are you saying that the Palestinian Authority takes money that it would otherwise be using to pay for medical treatment for Palestinians in the East Jerusalem Hospital Network and instead pays – gives that money to the relatives of prisoners and people who have committed anti-Israel acts or killed –

MS NAUERT: Three words to answer that question: Money is fungible, and that is the money that we provide to different entities and groups throughout the Palestinian Authority can be used for other things. So we see that. We hope that the Palestinians will choose – the Palestinian Authority will choose to spend money on its own people at the hospital, and the United States should no longer be forced to shoulder that bill.

QUESTION: Well – but forced?

QUESTION: Forced?

QUESTION: The United States was never forced to pay Palestinian hospital –

MS NAUERT: Encouraged. The United States should no longer pick up that tab. Okay?

QUESTION: You – but you did it –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: – keep these hospitals funded because you are, as you consistently say, the most generous country on Earth.

MS NAUERT: And we –

QUESTION: So your argument is that this is not – it is not ungenerous to take away money that could be used –

MS NAUERT: No, Matt, that the Palestinian Authority could pay these bills on their own.

QUESTION: Could it? I mean, do you have the numbers to know?

MS NAUERT: Could pay these bills on their own, but you know what, they're choosing to spend money that goes to the families of terrorists. Under the Taylor Force Act, that is something that is now established into law, and so –

QUESTION: Has someone crunched those numbers? Because the Palestinian Authority doesn't – I mean, it takes in some money, but a lot of money is supposed to be transferred to it by Israel, and that money has been in the past withheld from it. So has someone done the numbers to show that they could actually pick up the – pick up the money that you cut from the hospital network?

MS NAUERT: I'm not sure it's our responsibility to crunch the numbers to figure out whether or not they have enough money –

QUESTION: Well, it kind of is if you're saying that –

MS NAUERT: – to share in – to pay for those hospital bills. The United States has shored them up in the past. The United States Government has made the decision at this point to no longer do that.

Said, I'm sure you have some questions about this.

QUESTION: Yeah, I just have a couple of follow-up. Even in your report on terrorism yesterday, you mentioned that this agreement with Israel, paying the prisoners, goes way back to 1965. So the Israelis have agreed to this a long, long time ago. You mentioned that in your report.

MS NAUERT: I'm sorry, the Israelis have agreed to what?

QUESTION: I'm saying the payment to prisoners and so on was something that was agreed through international bodies with the Israelis even before the '67 war. Another thing is that, on these hospitals, the funding predates the PA. It goes way back before the PA on these particular hospitals.

And my question to you is actually on settlement. It's not a topic that you address frequently, but in fact, I know your position –

MS NAUERT: Let me – before we go on to settlements –

QUESTION: Okay. Fine.

MS NAUERT: – and I'd be happy to address that – I just want to highlight something, in that we have heard reports the Palestinian Authority has said that it will pay money to the family of the man who murdered an American citizen, Ari Fuld. We've heard that report. We are looking into that. While I'm at it, because we've not talked about it at this briefing, let me add that we are deeply saddened by the loss of this American citizen and our condolences go out to his family and also his friends. I want to make clear that we condemn the Palestinian Authority payments to the families of prisoners, of convicted terrorists, and deceased Palestinians, and we strongly oppose any program that incentivizes those acts of violence and terror. And let me remind folks that that law, the Taylor Force Act, became law and was a bipartisan law, and that is something we continue to stand behind. Okay?

QUESTION: No, we understand this –

QUESTION: Just –

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: You just said that you've seen reports and you're looking into it, that they will pay this – the perpetrator, the killer of this guy, but both Ambassador Friedman and Jason Greenblatt have said that they have condemned this payment, as if it was confirmed and had already happened. So are you trying to walk that confirmation back at all?

MS NAUERT: Not in the least. I just haven't seen their tweets. I'm sorry. I just haven't seen that today. Okay, in terms of settlements, your question.

QUESTION: Yeah, let me ask you on the settlements, because this is an issue that can be discussed at length, the payments and so on, because they're paying the families. They're not paying the person, the perpetrators. A lot of them have children and so on that they have nothing to do with that decision. But I – but that's something for you –

MS NAUERT: You don't see that happening in the United States. That's not a normal thing to do.

QUESTION: I understand. Okay, but –

MS NAUERT: It's not a normal – it's not a right thing to do to pay the families of those who have murdered innocent people. I mean, that's something that the United States Government on a bipartisan level passed a law against. It has bipartisan support.

QUESTION: They did – I mean, I understand your condemnation.

MS NAUERT: Yeah.

QUESTION: I understand your feelings. But the day before, two Palestinian children, one 12 and one 14, were gunned down in Gaza. Were you aware of that?

MS NAUERT: I was not aware of that. I don't have any information on that for you.

QUESTION: Okay. All right.

I wanted to ask you about the settlements. I know it is not a topic that we discuss often because you guys say, "Our position on the settlements is well known." But I want to bring your attention to the fact that this administration has not in any way expressed outrage on the settlement activities that is just going crazy every day. There's not a day that goes by without expropriating land, without throwing Palestinians out of their land, without taking land and so on, establishing outposts and so on. You don't even express any outrage or you don't call on the Israelis to stop. Are you planning to, as a show of goodwill, considering this is the time of high tensions between Palestinians and Americans, to show that America does stand by its principles and does consider these settlements to be illegal?

MS NAUERT: Said, I'll say it one more time, and that is that the Israelis have assured the President that they will take his considerations – his concerns into consideration regarding settlements. They've assured the President of that. Unrestrained settlement activity does not advance the prospects for peace. We've been clear about that. Peace will not be easy. We all know that very well. And it will take some time, but we're ready to sit down and help facilitate those talks when the parties are ready.

Okay. Hey, Laurie.