

Press Releases: Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia Patrick Murphy on U.S. Relations With Southeast Asia

Special Briefing

Patrick Murphy, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia

Via Teleconference

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MR STROH: Thank you very much and thanks to all of those who have joined us this afternoon. I'll introduce our speaker first and then lay out the ground rules very briefly. Today we're joined by Patrick Murphy, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. This call will be conducted on the record, and we'd ask that we observe an embargo until the conclusion of the call.

And with that, I will turn it over to Deputy Assistant Secretary Murphy.

MR MURPHY: Thank you and good afternoon, all. I'm very delighted today to spend a little time talking with you about U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia. I think there is no better place to start than with today, April 20th. Out in the region, we have our Vice President currently conducting his first trip to the Asia Pacific region and has spent a very productive day in Indonesia.

And in Jakarta his visit has bilateral and multilateral dimensions to it. He met with President Jokowi. He made a visit to the ASEAN Secretariat. He engaged with youth – Indonesian youth – who participate in our Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative. He visited the largest mosque in the country – the country which happens to be the largest Muslim-majority country in the world.

So all of these dimensions were at play, and of course, he made a very important announcement on behalf of the President while he was there that the President is committed to going to Vietnam for the APEC Leaders Meeting and to the Philippines for the East Asia and U.S.-ASEAN Summits, all of which take place in November – a very welcome announcement by our friends and partners and allies across the region.

So stepping back a little bit from today, looking more broadly across the year, it's an important year. ASEAN will celebrate its 50th year of existence, and the United States and ASEAN will celebrate concurrently 40-

year anniversary of relations. So we have lots going on.

Secretary of State Tillerson has already hosted the Washington-based ASEAN ambassadors, and he will be hosting the ASEAN foreign ministers here in Washington on May 4th. That's just two weeks from today. The Secretary himself is also committed to going to the Philippines in August for a range of multilateral meetings, including the ASEAN Regional Forum and then the various ministerials that encompass the U.S.-ASEAN relationship, as well as the East Asia Summit, the Lower Mekong Initiative.

The Secretary of State has, to this date, already hosted several of his counterparts – foreign ministers from Malaysia, Singapore, and also today, from Vietnam. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh visited the building here at the State Department earlier today.

With all of these engagements and interlocutors and partners and allies, the discussions are very wide-ranging. We're talking about trade. We're talking about security, how we work together to address a whole range of threats, like proliferation; terrorism; maritime disputes; trafficking of all nature – trafficking in persons, in illicit narcotics, and in wildlife; infectious disease; law enforcement; and the like.

It's not just the State Department and the Vice President and the President, but many others are engaging in Southeast Asia as well, including my counterparts from the U.S. Trade Representative's Office. Admiral Harris, our Pacific commander, was out to Thailand a bit of – a time ago. Secretary Mattis – Secretary of Defense Mattis has made a commitment to go to the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.

So, in brief, a lot's happening with this region that reflects our sustained engagement and the full range of our efforts to advance U.S. national security interests. I am delighted to take questions.

MR STROH: Thank you very much. And with that, we'll open it up to questions.

OPERATOR: And ladies and gentlemen on the phone lines, if there are any questions at this time, please press * followed by the 1 on your touchtone phone. You'll hear a tone indicating you've been placed in queue. Once again, if there are any questions from the phone lines, please press * followed by the 1, at this time.

And our first question comes from the line of Nike Ching with Voice of America. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for the briefing. The first question is now that the United States has withdrawn from TPP, what should we expect from the prospect of a bilateral trade deal with Vietnam and the free trade agreement with – between the United States and some of the countries from Southeast Asia? Thank you.

MR MURPHY: Thanks very much, Nike, for your question. Trade is very important to the United States, particularly with this region. The ASEAN collective represents in its unity a massive trading partner and is the source of a lot

of U.S. investment there. The volume of trade supports over half a million American jobs across all of our 50 states, and the ASEAN countries buy over \$100 billion of U.S. exports each year.

We want to expand the trade, and we want to do so in a way that's both free but also fair. You asked the specific question about the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and it's our view that our withdrawal from it does not change our commitment to the region writ large and a rules-based economic order. I think what we are talking about with the countries is how to proceed in a way that's beneficial to ensure fair trade so that the United States has equal access to the markets in the region as they have access to our market.

And there have been some challenges. I think it's been discussed quite broadly that there are a number of countries in this region that enjoy a substantial trade surplus with the United States, and that's a disadvantage for us. So we will be having these kind of discussions on how we can level the playing field so that American companies, products, and services can compete evenly.

And I think what we find in the region is a great desire to proceed with trade discussions, whether they are of a multilateral nature or a bilateral nature. Of course, on the United States side, we're still formulating broader economic policies and the broader economic team, getting individuals confirmed and into senior positions and places. But I can assure you that in our discussions heretofore with our partners, it's robust and constructive as all sides come together in pursuit of expanding good trade.

MR STROH: The next question, please.

OPERATOR: And we do have a question from the line of Matthew Pennington with the Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hello, Patrick. Thanks for doing the call. Can I ask, is the President planning to attend ASEAN Summits, East Asia Summits every year, I mean, or is this – is this a one-off event? And perhaps you could talk a little bit more about the purpose of the meeting between the ASEAN foreign ministers and Secretary Tillerson that you say is going to happen on May the 4th. Was this a U.S. idea or was it ASEAN's idea?

MR MURPHY: Thank you very much, Matt. Nice to hear from you. Look, going forward, I think it's hypothetical on United States participation in any summit that falls in subsequent calendar years. I think what's important about the commitment that the Vice President has announced today is that it's a commitment that comes quite early. November, six months down the line, is quite some time away. There are a lot of issues around the world to contend with and even in the region before November arrives.

But it is a firm commitment about our engagement to the region. It's a coincidence that both APEC and the rest of the summits take place in Southeast Asia this year. Of course, APEC rotates among its many 20-plus members. This year it happens to take place in Vietnam. So it's very good news for our engagement in Southeast Asia. Vietnam will be the Leaders

Meeting; the Philippines will be the host to the twin summits, both U.S.-ASEAN and the East Asia Summit.

So I think the firm – the announcement today is the news that we are committed to this region and we'll take those summits as they come.

Secretary Tillerson received a request from the ASEAN foreign ministers, who offered, on their part, to come to Washington to see him early in the year, prior to the planned multilateral meetings that take place in August in the Philippines. Secretary Tillerson readily agreed. So at the end of the day, he will be hosting them, but he agreed with their request to meet in a special session that will take place on May 4th. I think we'll be very delighted to have the foreign ministers here. Some of them, of course, will be coming back, having already been in Washington in recent weeks. And that will be a very important opportunity to discuss the challenges, the opportunities, and our cooperation in the region, again, before the more formal meetings that take place in August in the Philippines.

MR STROH: Thank you very much. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And we do have a question from the line of Nick Wadhams from Bloomberg News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks very much. I'm wondering if Secretary Tillerson has had sort of a revised opinion or sort of policy on where things stand with the Philippines in particular. In his confirmation hearing, he said when asked about President Duterte's drug war that further facts from the ground are needed before commenting. So what is the State Department's current stance on the killings that are happening in the Philippines as a result of that drug war? And does the U.S. still believe that there is a longstanding friendship that exists with the Philippines? Thanks.

MR MURPHY: Yes. Thank you, Nick. Let me take your two questions in reverse. The United States and the Philippines have a very longstanding alliance, a relationship built on shared sacrifices, common values, and friendship. When you look across the range of our ties, they are some of the most robust anywhere in the world, much less the Asia Pacific region. The people-to-people ties are particularly noteworthy. Somewhere between 4 and 5 million Filipino Americans here in our country; several hundred thousand Americans live there. And the ties between academic institutions, business, commerce, tourism in both directions are quite substantial. And it's an alliance that has produced a lot of results for both countries. As I said earlier, many shared sacrifices when you look back to World War II and other areas of challenge across the region. This is a friendship that's very enduring, and it's a relationship that we continue to pursue in our national interests.

When it comes to the drug war, I'll first say that the objectives are objectives that many of us can share. The Philippines has a serious challenge, a serious problem, with illicit narcotics. It's eroding communities; it's closely linked to crimes of a wide nature, including killings. We have a drug problem here in the United States, so not only do we sympathize but we want to work together in addressing the shared objectives

of eliminating the scourge of illicit drugs. And we can help the Philippines with drug rehabilitation, with the traffic and flow of narcotics across borders and the like.

We, however, do have a very sustained and deep concern when elements of the drug war are operating outside the rule of law. The growing number of extrajudicial killings is troubling. This has been the focus of many voices inside the Philippines itself, whether it's civil society, legislative figures, the church, and other organizations, and of course, internationally. We have raised those concerns publicly and privately, and we will continue to do so. We are urging the Philippines to follow up on its commitment to investigate extrajudicial killings, whether they're committed by law enforcement or of a vigilante nature. So I think those concerns are quite sustained. And Secretary Tillerson, now that he is Secretary – there is a distinction between being a nominee and being the Secretary – is our leader on this policy. So we will continue to work with the Philippines on shared values and objectives and urge that the country address this particular concern in its drug war.

OPERATOR: And we do have a question from the line of Manik Mehta with Bernama. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hello?

OPERATOR: Mr. Mehta, your line is open. Please, go ahead with your question.

QUESTION: Yes. This is Manik Mehta of – in New York. I have a two-part question. The first question relates to the visa exclusion of Malaysian citizens. As you know, the U.S. administration has been discussing with the Malaysian Government about letting Malaysian passport holders arrive in this country without a visa. This has been going on for two years, and I would like an update on that.

Secondly, we are having this APEC conference coming up in Vietnam. Will there be any discussion on expansion of APEC to include very strong and potential candidates like India, which has been knocking on the door? Thank you.

MR MURPHY: Thank you for your questions, Manik. I think I'll be brief because both of these topical issues fall to other experts within the Department of State, but I can say something.

First, on Malaysia, I want to correct a perception. We don't have a visa exclusion of any nature in place for Malaysia. Malaysians enjoy ready access to the United States and come here in great numbers to study, for tourism, for business, for official engagements. I think what you're referring to is the Malaysian pursuit to join our Visa Waiver Program. And the Visa Waiver Program has a number of requirements, and Malaysia continues to address those requirements. But I will leave to my experts in Consular Affairs to address the kind of specifics.

I think in similar fashion, Manik, when it comes to APEC and expansion, like we have our APEC ambassador, my colleague, Ambassador Matt Matthews, and his

team can probably address that more specifically. But I will say this about APEC: This is the preeminent economic organization for the Asia Pacific. There are a good number of members in the Asia region, in the Southeast Asia region. We view this as an important forum to address common opportunities and challenges. And we are delighted that Vietnam is the host this year of APEC. They do a terrific job hosting multilateral events from a logistics perspective and also from a policy perspective. They've proven to be with us, the United States, a growing and important partner, and we'll be working with them closely to help ensure a successful APEC Leaders Meeting in November.

OPERATOR: And we do have a question from the line of David Brunnstrom with Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah. Hi. Thank you very much. Just wanted to ask, during – sorry – in the ASEAN talks were meeting with the Secretary of State, whether you expect the South China Sea to be a topic there. And, I mean, what is the position nowadays with FONOPs? We seem to be fairly overdue for a U.S. FONOP, and is there a danger of creating perception that maybe the relationship with China is more important than ASEAN concerns about the South China Sea?

MR MURPHY: Thank you, David. I think when it comes to a variety of security challenges in the Asia Pacific, we use every opportunity to raise them. As I mentioned earlier, that could range from proliferation to terrorism to maritime disputes. We never miss an opportunity with our friends and partners and all members of the Asia Pacific community to discuss them. So indeed, when the Secretary of State hosts his counterparts from the 10 ASEAN countries in early May, we can very much expect that the South China Sea issue will be addressed and talked about very frankly so that we can all continue to pursue what we hope will be the inevitable outcome, and that is peaceful resolution to these disputes, and in the meantime, adherence to the rule-of-law, rules-based principles that the United States and ASEAN have heretofore very much agreed on.

With regards to freedom of navigation operations, I think with the specifics, the timing, and the parameters, I'm going to leave that to my colleagues and counterparts at the Department of Defense. However, it remains a matter of U.S. policy that we will continue to use FONOPs, which is our right and our responsibility. We will continue to sail and fly where international law permits. I think that's our longstanding policy and that remains the case.

We believe that the South China Sea should be the scene of unimpeded commerce and travel. And many countries, the entire international community for that matter, relies a great deal on unimpeded travel and commerce through this region. And we believe as an Asia Pacific nation that we have a role to play in this regard. So I think you can see that FONOPs will continue.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: And we do have a question from the line of Barbara Usher from the BBC. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you, just a brief one: Can you tell us the reason stated by

the ASEAN ministers to have this summit with – or this meeting, sorry, with Mr. Tillerson? What was their overriding concern or objective in wanting to meet him as a group? And what else would be on the agenda besides the South China Sea? Is there anything in particular, especially from the America or the State side that needs to be addressed?

MR MURPHY: Yeah, thank you, Barbara. I think on the part of the ASEAN countries, it was a very genuine, heartfelt request to engage with the United States. I think they recognized we've had a political transition in Washington. We hear consistently from them that they value U.S. engagement and presence in the region. And they wanted to make it clear early on that as a strategic partner – ASEAN has been a strategic partner of the United States – they wanted to continue with the United States administration, the new administration, this partnership, this relationship, and to ensure sustained U.S. engagement in the region.

I think I'll be a good diplomat here and not reveal the entire agenda plan for May 4th, but I think I am on good ground in saying that we will discuss a very wide range of areas of cooperation and challenge, and among those challenges I've already addressed a few. These are difficult times worldwide and Southeast Asia is no exception. This region faces challenges from traffickers, from crime in general, from terrorism, from territorial disputes. And I think we can envision all of these topics will be the subject of discussion.

OPERATOR: And with that, for closing remarks, I'll turn the conference back over to Mark Stroh. Please, go ahead, sir.

MR STROH: Thank you very much. Thanks to our speaker. Again, you were speaking with Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia Patrick Murphy. We will now conclude this call, and with that conclusion, we will have lifted the embargo. Thank you very much, everyone. Have a nice day.

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