

Press Releases: On the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Official
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MODERATOR: (In progress) He's going to speak with you on back ground as a senior State Department official. [Senior State Department Official] just exited the meeting that was held on Ukraine and Georgia in which the Secretary spoke and a lot of others spoke, so [Senior State Department Official], go right ahead.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So as [Moderator] said, I just came out of a meeting of the North Atlantic Council on Black Sea security. This is the format focused on Georgia and Ukraine. You may remember, and I want to call everyone's attention to the fact, that Hungary has been blocking participation of Ukraine in certain formats at NATO, a habit that we strongly object to. This is a format, a Black Sea format that – it's now the second time this format has met, and it is a format that we put together to have these two countries continue to engage NATO, but it's a workaround to Hungary's blockage, which we continue to object to.

In that session, there were strong expressions of support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and Georgia. The United States in particular sent a very clear and strong message of support for both of these countries, joining them in their stand against Russian aggression, both externally with regard to territorial acts of aggression and internally with regard to the building of democracy and continued efforts at reform.

There was a special focus in the NAC session just now on the November 25th incident outside the Kerch Strait. I know all of you have followed that closely and are aware of everything that happened. It's a serious concern for the United States for a couple of reasons. One is Ukraine itself. It marks an unmistakable escalation of the conflict there, not least because it's the first time that the Russian Government has openly and unapologetically used its own forces without any attempt at claiming it was done by so-called separatists; but secondly the demonstration effect of what happened in Kerch. There are a lot of international passage – maritime passageways in the world – Middle East, Asia. We have principled reasons to be concerned about a demonstration like – the demonstration effect like this sinking in, but also very practical and interest-based reasons to be concerned about a lot of places in the world where U.S. troops and commerce pass through, and we don't

want this precedent to stick.

Today the U.S. reiterated that we condemn this Russian act of aggression, call it for what it is; that Crimea is Ukraine; and that the Russian action in Kerch is both a clear military escalation and a violation of international law and freedom of the sea. Long before this latest incident in Kerch, the United States has been raising our concerns about Russian behavior in Azov and with the construction of the Kerch Bridge. We've had State Department statements on Kerch and Azov on numerous occasions, most recently in May, August, and November prior to this incident. We have raised concerns about Azov and Russian behavior there in the OSCE Permanent Council on five occasions since last year.

I think all of you know – you have followed the President's decision some months ago to reverse the previous administration's blockage of lethal aid to Ukraine – we've provided two cutters to enhance maritime security of Ukraine, and a senior State Department official was present at the handoff ceremony. We recently held a meeting of the U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Partnership Commission, which I chair, co-chaired with Minister – Foreign Minister Klimkin, and that included a special focus on Azov.

I would also note that the Russian entities who are involved in the Kerch Bridge construction and who are operating in Crimea, a number of those – at least a dozen by my count – are already sanctioned entities. In the period since this incident, we demarched all 28 EU members as well as Russia. We have pressed publicly and privately alongside allies for release of the crew and a reopening of the strait. The Secretary has made very strong and clear statements about this and has tweeted about it on numerous occasions. The President has spoken about this. Ambassador Haley made a statement about this. I think all of you know that the President canceled a Putin meeting because of his concern about this incident. We put out a G7 foreign ministers statement, we had a NATO-NAC statement on November 27th, and we're now working very closely with allies to assess the way forward.

And the final thing I would say is I think the Russians have this message; but if they don't, it should be abundantly clear to them that for as long as they hold these crew members, we will continue to raise the costs. They need to release the crews, return the ships, and this is not something that we're going to turn our attention away from.

QUESTION: How has – how have you risen –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: First question, please.

QUESTION: How have you risen the costs since the incident? Other than statements, I don't know where, but (inaudible) – how has –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So the – you haven't heard the final word on this matter. We're in close coordination.

QUESTION: Tell me. What is it?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I don't have a final word for you on this

matter.

QUESTION: Oh, oh, oh. (Inaudible) you were saying.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We're closely coordinating with allies on a way forward and we have complete consistency in our concerns and messaging with allies, and right now we're assessing how to get the crew and ships out. There's a variety of options for that, but as I said, it's not an issue that's going to go away.

QUESTION: I understand, but you said that the – you're going to continue to raise the cost to the Russians if they don't do this. So I'm just – "continue to" – I don't see how the cost has risen since the incident has happened, so there's nothing that they can get in return for releasing the crew and the ships except for you guys stop writing mean letters, right?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah, thank you for that characterization of our policy.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I mean, look, there should be no doubt whatsoever, because if you look at our actions over the last two years, there should be no doubt about cost imposition and this administration's focus on cost imposition for Russian aggression.

QUESTION: I'm not –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: And this is the latest example of Russian aggression.

QUESTION: I'm not questioning that. I'm not questioning that.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So as I said, right now our focus is on working with our allies, because European allies have a principal responsibility for something that happens in their own backyard.

QUESTION: Yes, but my only question – I'm not doubting that you're tough on the Russians. I'm saying what have you done in response to this specific incident that raises the costs so that they will think again –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I just gave you a really long list of a variety of things that we've done over the last two years, and I think for where we stand right now, I'm just going to call your attention to that list. I think it speaks for itself in communicating our resolve to get the crew out, unblock the strait, and not let the precedent stick.

QUESTION: But the crew hadn't been taken –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Next question.

QUESTION: – hadn't been taken and the strait wasn't blocked four months ago.

MODERATOR: Let's move on. (Inaudible.)

QUESTION: So were you happy when MBS did a high-five with Vladimir Putin? Given all of your concerns about Putin's behavior over the last several years, given all the things that you've done to raise that, to talk to – to increasingly isolate the Russians on the international stage, one of your closest allies had an enthusiastic, almost bear hug-like high-five with Putin at the G20, where both were sort of obviously gleeful. Is that the sort of messaging that you think is appropriate by one of your closest –

MODERATOR: I think the question about Saudi Arabia should be not addressed to [Senior State Department Official] and that was your (inaudible).

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: It was about – look –

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MODERATOR: Hold on. You can certainly answer – ask the – that question to the Secretary.

QUESTION: Okay.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Look, let me answer that in part from an EUR perspective. Vladimir Putin is determined to increase Russian influence in the Middle East and the Russians, make no mistake, have a strategy to exercise greater influence over things like the price of oil. This is a big part of the reason why, when we look at policy both in Eastern Europe and in the Middle East, we have to be cognizant of the fact that Putin is an opportunistic player looking to cement stronger strategic relations with countries like Saudi Arabia that's a close U.S. friend and partner. So it's part of the reason that I think Secretary Pompeo has been clear there's a lot of equities that we have in the Saudi relationship, and we have to balance those wisely.

So I would say your question points to something that I hope our friends in the media are cognizant of, that we have to prevent Putin from having opportunities like this to cement relations with Saudis, among others.

MODERATOR: Next question.

QUESTION: There were reports this morning that the Russians were easing their blockade of Ukrainian seaports. Was that mentioned? Do you see that as a sign of progress? And then you've been repeatedly saying the Europeans should be doing more here since this is in their backyard. Have any solid commitments been made? And what specifically more (inaudible)?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. So on the first part of your question, even a partial blockage from our standpoint is unacceptable, both under international law and the obligations that the Russians have to the Ukrainians from their own agreements on how they – bilateral agreements on how they manage that passageway. So we don't see that as success.

On your second question, I would answer that a lot like I did earlier, that

we are talking and working very closely with European allies right now to chart a unified way forward where the West is not only speaking with one voice, which I think we are right now, but what we're working on and a big part of why we're here today is charting the way forward in terms of actions.

QUESTION: Is it consensus that that's unacceptable, that it's not a victory – the partial unblockage, or is that just the U.S.?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I can only speak from the perspective of U.S. policy. I would refer you to numerous other foreign ministries.

QUESTION: Well, that didn't come up in the – did – it didn't come up in the NAC meeting?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Did what come up?

QUESTION: The partial unblockage, and did you all come to consensus that this is not good enough, that they have to –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: A lot of those developments are very, very recent, right, so over the last few hours. Several of the ministers who spoke up noted that, but they didn't note it by way of saying we're out of the woods. But people are aware of the fact – I think across the alliance are aware that this is a fluid situation.

I mean, I'll go out on a limb and say I think generally from a NATO-wide perspective no one would see that as a satisfactory move or the end of a matter.

MODERATOR: [Senior State Department Official] only has a few more minutes. Nike, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes. Thank you very much. First I would like to know if – do you see any indication of Russia – (phone rings). Sorry. Do you see any indication on Russia stepping up interference in Ukraine in the run-up to the – excuse me – in the presidential and parliamentary election next year? And separately, was Georgia's bid to become a NATO member addressed?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We see a noticeable uptick in already very high levels of Russian interference inside Ukraine. I think the Russians, and I should specifically say the Russian Government – and I think these decisions are coming from Putin – sees Ukraine as a very vulnerable target and is attempting through a variety of means to undermine confidence in democratic institutions. A lot of Russian cyber activity. As you may know, the State Department has provided a lot of practical support to the Ukrainians. Our post is very active there, but we've also targeted a lot of our recent aid at bucking up Ukrainian cyber defenses. So we've rolled up our sleeves and we work with them on a daily basis in making Ukraine and its institutions more resilient against those attacks.

QUESTION: On Georgia?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Georgia. So from the U.S. perspective, and

I think we've been clear on this, that we stand by the Bucharest 2008 declaration affirming that Georgia has a future in NATO. Georgia has made tremendous strides in reform, particularly in the defense sector, is an outsized contributor to international security missions, so our policy position has not changed.

And we are happy to see that the presidential elections went off as smoothly as they did. We are concerned about numerous irregularities that we saw in those elections but are very watchful now in how the Georgians implement their new constitution, and I think the early part of next year will be a test for democratic institutions in Georgia.

MODERATOR: Guy.

QUESTION: Yeah, well I just want to remind you – thanks so much, this is really insightful. But I want to remind you that it's on background, so nobody reading this knows who said it.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks for the reminder.

QUESTION: Yeah. I mean –

MODERATOR: This is what we typically do at State Department, previews with some of our experts.

QUESTION: Oh, I understand. Of course, but –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Do you have a question?

QUESTION: My question is I want to give you an opportunity to tell us what exactly was achieved here today vis-a-vis Ukraine in a simple statement. Was there – is there anything that – I mean, yesterday you told us that the goal – or we were calling on European allies to show leadership, we want to see European allies take greater responsibility for a security problem that is just a few hundred miles from Germany's border. Was there any movement towards that? And I'm not trying to insinuate that there wasn't. Just here's the shot to give us –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Since we're on background, I'll offer an observation that when the United States and particularly this administration is – when we get criticized from the media, it's often for not coordinating enough with allies. When we coordinate with allies, we get criticized for coordinating with allies. So as I'm sure you can appreciate, although diplomacy probably works on a little bit different time schedule than some other things, not everything is resolved in a 55-minute meeting.

I think the NAC statement a few days ago was crystal-clear. What we do not see NATO doing right now is what NATO did at the onset of the Georgia war – sticking its head in the sand, not speaking up. Speaking up counts for something. As the Secretary said earlier today, words matter. And I think post-Kerch incident, the words of the United States are crystal-clear. As you've seen on our Ukraine and on our Russia policy, our words and actions match, and I've given you a long list of the ways in which they match. As I

said a minute ago, you haven't heard the last word on this matter, and we want the Russians to absorb the message that they need to release the crews or there will be consequences and the pain will grow over time. As – and I think that's been our consistent message to the Russians across the board for various forms of aggressive behavior, and this will be no exception.

MODERATOR: Joel, go ahead.

QUESTION: A very quick question.

MODERATOR: Joel was ahead of you. Go ahead, Joel.

QUESTION: You said you want unified action, not just words. So have you found that the – are the Turks limiting the range of motion, so to speak, in response to the Kerch Strait incident in light of – to the growing relationship between Erdogan and –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The Turks are very helpful on this matter for a couple of reasons. First, there is a large Tatar minority community in Crimea. The Turks have been consistent in their commitments in a NATO context on not recognizing the annexation of Crimea. They've actually been one of the more forceful in raising concerns about human rights violations inside Crimea. But also, as I said a minute ago at the beginning of my remarks, they look at the broader implications of developments in a narrow passageway because they have one that they sit next to and are very cognizant of the precedents that could be set there. So we've been very pleased with the Turkish reaction to this and are stitched up really, really closely with them.

MODERATOR: We'll go to the last question, Jessica Donati.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) question, just – I know you can't specify the details, but can you give us a sense of the timeline that you're looking at, what kind of urgency? Is this days, weeks, or months from action?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: All I can tell you – and I know from your perspective it's probably not very satisfying, but I can tell you it is the highest priority that my bureau is working on. And as I said a minute ago, we are closely coordinating with allies. We're stitched up inside USG. And beyond that, I don't want to give you a crystal ball.

MODERATOR: Thanks, everybody.

QUESTION: Thanks, [Senior State Department Official].

(Break.)

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I should have said more about Nord Stream 2. I never miss a messaging opportunity on Nord Stream 2. I think you could – look, Kerch incident should be a reminder to all of our European allies on why Nord Stream 2 is such a bad idea. And to put an even sharper point on it, I mean, by way of background, I would put it this way: I would say the Kerch incident is a reminder that the less infrastructure you have, the less gas

infrastructure you have bypassing Ukraine because of Nord Stream 2, the weaker the deterrent – deterrence is to Russian acts of military aggression.

So there are practical energy-related reasons we don't want Nord Stream 2 to go forward. There are also security and Ukraine-related reasons that we don't want Nord Stream 2 to go forward, and this is a startling reminder.

QUESTION: Did the Germans get that reminder?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We raise Nord Stream 2 with the Germans on every occasion, and I will say I think that Kerch – I mean, when you have a naked act of aggression like that, I think it resonates in German public opinion. And we've seen some indications in our recent conversations with German officials that they've absorbed that message more plainly after Kerch. It's harder for them to just say this is a commercial project.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thanks, guys.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks, guys.

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