

# Press Releases: Press Availability at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

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Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan  
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**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** Well, I want to start by thanking President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah and the Afghanistan leadership for meeting with me this morning. I thought it was very important to stop here in Afghanistan coming to the South Asia region as part of the recently announced South Asia policy and strategy that President Trump has put forth.

I also want to thank – I have Ambassador Llorens and General Nicholson with me – for their leadership, both our diplomatic as well as the incredible military effort of the men and women in uniform here as well, and all of the effort that they've put forth to work towards a peace, which is really our objective.

I think the U.S. has made it clear in terms of our support for Afghanistan, support for a sovereign, unified, and democratic Afghanistan, charting a path to peace, prosperity, and self-reliance. It is imperative at the end that we are denying safe haven to any terrorist organizations or any extremists to any part of this – the world.

(Brief interruption.)

**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** I'm so sorry.

**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** That's all right. We also want to work with regional partners to ensure that there are no threats in the region as well. And this is very much a regional effort, as you saw was rolled out in the strategy itself. So we're demanding others also deny safe haven to terrorists anywhere in the region. We are working closely with Pakistan in that regard as well.

President Ghani has assured me of his firm commitment to reform, continuing reforms here in Afghanistan, as well as his new anti-corruption strategy and policies that is going to underpin much of the effort here. We also discussed

preparations for parliamentary elections next year in 2018. It's very important that those elections go forward as well. And finally, we discussed regional developments and agreed on the vital importance of all regional stakeholders to work with us, work with the United States, but also work with our other partners, the NATO partners and others who take a great interest in this region, to fight against terrorists, fight against insurgents, to support peace and stability for Afghanistan.

We have a lot of hard work, some challenges ahead of us. But the United States and our partners here in Afghanistan are committed to seeing this through.

With that, happy to take a question or two.

**MODERATOR:** John.

**QUESTION:** Sir, what kind of message – let me back that up. You've said in the past that if the Pakistanis do not take firm action in denying safe haven for the Taliban and other extremists, they could suffer a cut in U.S. – further cuts in U.S. assistance – the United States, I believe, has given Pakistan a menu of other actions that it could take – unless it takes those actions within a certain timeframe. Are you able to give us details of what that menu is and what the timeframe is?

**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** I'll be traveling to Islamabad tomorrow, in fact, to meet with Pakistani leadership as well, and we have made some very specific requests of Pakistan in order for them to take action to undermine the support that the Taliban receives and the other terrorist organizations receive in Pakistan. And we've said in this whole strategy this is a conditions-based approach, and so our relationship with Pakistan will also be conditions-based. It will be based upon whether they take action that we feel is necessary to move the process forward of both creating the opportunity for reconciliation and peace in Afghanistan, but also ensuring a stable future Pakistan. In our conversations with Pakistani leadership, we're as concerned about the future stability of Pakistan as we are in many respects here in Afghanistan. Pakistan needs to, I think, take a clear-eyed view of the situation that they're confronted with in terms of the number of terrorist organizations that find safe haven inside of Pakistan. And so we want to work closely with Pakistan to create a more stable and secure Pakistan as well.

**MODERATOR:** Gardiner.

**QUESTION:** Sir, this sort of has the feel of a forever war. Is there a part of this strategy – as you said, it's conditions-based, but it seems as though that condition means a U.S. military presence far off into the horizon. Isn't it?

**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** Well, the President has made it clear that we're here to stay until we can secure a process of reconciliation and peace. It's not an unlimited commitment; he's also made it clear it's not a blank check commitment. That's why it is a conditions-based commitment.

But I think if you consider the current situation in Afghanistan – and we were talking about this a few minutes ago – and you look a few years in the past and what the circumstances were, Afghanistan has come quite a distance already in terms of creating a much more vibrant population, a much more vibrant government, educational systems, a larger economy. And so there are opportunities to strengthen the foundations for a prosperous – a prosperous Afghanistan society.

Clearly, we have to continue the fight against the Taliban and against others in order for them to understand they will never win a military victory. And there are, we believe, moderate voices among the Taliban, voices that do not want to continue to fight forever. They don't want their children to fight forever. So we are looking to engage with those voices and have them engage in a reconciliation process leading to a peace process and their full involvement and participation in the government. There's a place for them in the government if they're ready to come renouncing terrorism, renouncing violence, and being committed to a stable, prosperous Afghanistan.

**MODERATOR:** Michele.

**QUESTION:** Have you spoken with the Pakistanis since your big speech on India? Are you trying to reassure them about what India's involvement is here? And I understand Ghani is going as well.

**SECRETARY TILLERSON:** I've not spoken to anyone in the Pakistani leadership since the speech I gave on India. That's certainly something we'll be talking about during the visit tomorrow. But I think our view of the relationship with India is one that's of strategic importance not just for this specific region, but in the context of that speech it was about a free and open Indo-Pacific region stretching all the way to – from Japan to India.

So it's a broader relationship. We do, though, believe that India has a very important positive role that India can play in the process to achieve a peaceful, stable Afghanistan as well. They already are providing important economic activity – creating jobs – which is important for the future Afghanistan. And we think they – we want to encourage that as well. We think they can be a very positive influence on creating the right environment for the future in Afghanistan.

**MODERATOR:** All right, guys. Thanks so much.

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