

Press Releases: Press Availability in Geneva, Switzerland

Press Availability
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Geneva, Switzerland
October 26, 2017

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, obviously this has been a – although a number of days, not a long trip, but it's been a lengthy trip in terms of the number of stops. And so I have a number of, I think, observations I want to offer you. So I've put them down on paper here so I don't overlook some things. So I'm going to go through that and then welcome your questions at that point.

So as you know, we're now at the last stop of this weeklong trip to important capitals in the region, many of which are still in broad and significant conflict. At each stop, we have reaffirmed the United States will continue to provide global leadership, promote security, stability, and prosperity for all people. And in doing so, obviously we will deliver the same to the American people.

That was evident in Riyadh, where we began the trip. I was very honored to take part in the inaugural Joint Coordination Committee alongside His Majesty King Salman and Prime Minister Abadi. That event highlighted the strength of the United States bilateral relationship with both Saudi Arabia and Iraq and how we continue to promote greater cooperation between them. We believe a deepening Saudi-Iraqi relationship is not only vital for stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq but also for the stability of the entire region.

In the spirit of the Riyadh summit earlier this year, the United States continues to work closely with Qatar and our Gulf partners to crack down on terrorists and those who finance them. All of our Gulf partners are putting forward a renewed effort to counterterrorism. We must expand those efforts through greater cooperation, coordination, and information-sharing among all.

The United States remains troubled and concerned about the far-reaching consequences of the Gulf dispute. Our message is clear: The GCC is strongest when it is united. We will continue our efforts to open lines of communication to pursue that unity, and as President Trump has said, we remain ready to assist with any mediation efforts.

U.S. leadership has been and continues to be instrumental and necessary in Iraq, and I welcomed the opportunity to meet with Prime Minister Abadi separately on the heels of the Joint Coordination Committee meeting. Under the prime minister's leadership, ISIS is in retreat. In the words of President Trump, "the end of the ISIS caliphate is in sight." With the coalition's support, the Iraqi Security Forces have successfully liberated now more than 90 percent of the territory ISIS once held in Iraq, allowing more than 2 million Iraqis to return home. And today, Iraqis are rebuilding their communities. More than 360 Iraq-led, UN-implemented, coalition-funded stabilization projects are underway and will continue.

We know these victories on the battlefield are not sufficient to create a stable, prosperous Iraq, so we continue to seek greater international support to shore up the Iraqi economy and bolster ongoing humanitarian and stabilization efforts. We are glad to see expanding connections between Iraq and its neighbors, as the Coordination Council meeting in Riyadh clearly illustrates.

The tensions that have played out in northern Iraq over the past month are concerning. The United States is a friend to all Iraqis, including our friends in Baghdad and our friends in Iraq's Kurdish region. We are disappointed the parties have not yet been able to reach an entirely peaceful resolution of the recent tensions.

Subsequent to my meeting with Prime Minister Abadi, I had a very lengthy telephone call with Kurdistan President Barzani. The United States stands ready to assist Baghdad and Erbil to chart a positive course forward in support of a unified, federal, and democratic Iraq through peaceful, political means. I called upon both sides to avoid all conflict between Iraq and Peshmerga forces, and I encouraged Prime Minister Abadi to accept Erbil's overtures for talks on the basis of the Iraqi constitution.

The remainder of the trip focused on South Asia and the President's new strategy for the region and Afghanistan's future. As President Trump made clear, achieving peace, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan requires the involvement of regional partners – most importantly, Pakistan and India. Our goal is to work with our regional partners to root out terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan so that South Asia can enter a period of peace and prosperity. The road to a stable, sovereign, unified, and democratic Afghanistan requires the Afghan Government to advance their commitment to reform. President Ghani assured me that he and his government are working towards reforms, particularly anticorruption efforts to achieve real progress for the Afghan people.

Pakistan is a key partner for the stability of the region. We have a long history of positive partnership with Pakistan, but Pakistan must do more to eradicate militants and terrorists operating within its country. The people of Pakistan have much to gain from a stable, peaceful Afghanistan, and a region that denies safe haven to terrorists. This was my principal message to Prime Minister Abbasi, Chief of Army Staff Bajwa, and the Pakistani leadership.

In India, I continued to share our message about the President's South Asia strategy and India's role. We're grateful for India's generous contributions to the development of Afghanistan, and we hope to see greater involvement from them. As I outlined last week in Washington, we will work to make the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership the foundation for greater peace, stability, and growth of the Indo-Pacific region. We support India's responsible rise and want to find new ways to partner with them and other likeminded countries in Asia. I had a very comprehensive discussion on economic and security links with Prime Minister Modi, National Security Advisor Doval, and Foreign Minister Swaraj. It is essential that our two democracies work together to address the challenges facing both of our peoples.

And I just completed a few moments ago a fruitful discussion with UN Special Envoy de Mistura regarding ongoing developments in Syria. With ISIS on the brink of defeat, we continue our efforts to de-escalate the violence in Syria and support the Geneva process called for under UN Security Council Resolution 2254 to allow the Syrian people to chart a new political course. As we've said many times before, the United States wants a whole and unified Syria with no role for Bashar al-Assad in the government.

The United States remains committed to providing leadership in every region of the world. And as we lead, we will continue to ask more of others to take up their responsible roles as well so that they can ultimately provide for their own people and uphold their own sovereignty. As we do, we'll provide greater security and prosperity for the American people.

MODERATOR: Thank you. For questions, we'll start with Nick and go down the table.

QUESTION: The statement on Assad seems to differ but – from what you had said in Turkey this summer, I mean, a clear call for him to leave. Does that reflect a change in position that we've been – you had indicated it was really up to Syrians to decide themselves.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, it's our view that – and I've said this many times as well – that we do not believe there is a future for the Assad regime, the Assad family. I think I've said it on a number of occasions. The reign of the Assad family is coming to an end, and the only issue is how should that be brought about. And we believe it can be brought about and will be brought about as part of the UN Security Council – implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which, as you know, has a very specific prescribed procedure for elections and the development of a new constitution.

I think what – the only thing that changed is when this administration came into office, we took a view that it is not a prerequisite that Assad go before that process starts, rather the mechanism by which Assad departs will likely emerge from that process.

QUESTION: I've heard European diplomats describe Syria as a triumph of Iran, because Iran has been so essential for the Assad government. How do you make sure that's not the case? And did you get any assurances from de Mistura as he – is there a timeline for these negotiations to start?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I do not see Syria as a triumph for Iran. I see Iran as a hanger-on. Iran has not particularly been successful in liberating areas. The Russian Government, providing significant air support for Syrian regime forces, have been successful. They've had their successes. We've had our successes, enormous successes, with our coalition forces. So I don't think that Iran should be given credit for the defeat of ISIS in any way in Syria. Rather, I think they have somewhat taken advantage of the situation with their presence there.

In terms of Iran's future influence in Syria, again, I think that will ultimately emerge from the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, through the new constitution, the elections, and whatnot.

QUESTION: Sir, talk about your meeting with the Pakistanis. Their official news agency has talked about how the United States has presented them with a list of 75 terrorists that the Pakistanis claim they're – that none of them are Pakistanis, that the head of Lashkar-e Tayyiba is not on that list, and that they provided you with a list of 100 terrorists that they would like the United States to go after. Could you talk about what you specifically laid out for them when you talked to them the other day?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think what you just described is a very healthy exchange of information on terrorists, which is what we really hope to achieve with Pakistan. We have provided them specific asks, beyond just names of individuals. We've provided them specific asks. But we've also invited greater sharing from them as well. So we expect to receive information from them that will be useful.

And the specific location on any given day of where certain individuals or certain cells may be located – they do move around. As you know, the Pakistan-Afghan border is quite porous; in fact, it's ill-defined. And so we're less concerned about are they in Pakistani territory, in Afghanistan territory, or – as we are obtaining information so that we can eliminate them.

QUESTION: I'll stay on the Pakistan theme. The reaction that we are reading from Pakistan today is that your visit did not go over well, that there was a sense that you were lecturing Islamabad from Delhi and from Kabul. I want to ask you if you think – what practically you think you've accomplished that you would not have accomplished without being there.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I would not have characterized my direct discussions with them as lecturing at all. It was a very good and open exchange. In fact, we probably listened 80 percent of the time and we talked 20 percent. And it was important to me, because I have not engaged with Pakistani leadership previously. And so my objective was to listen a lot, to hear their perspective.

We put our points forward. We put our expectations forward in no uncertain terms. There has been significant engagement prior to my visit, and there'll be further engagement in the future, as we work through how we want to, as I said, exchange information and achieve the objective of eliminating these

terrorist organizations, wherever they may be located. We had – it was very frank, very candid. We had the joint meeting with Prime Minister Abbasi and the full leadership team. And then I had a second meeting with Army General Bajwa and a couple of his close advisers, so we could have a more thorough discussion about some of the specifics.

But I think it was a very open, candid, and frank exchange, and it's – there's nothing to be achieved by lecturing, but we should be very clear about expectations and what we're asking. And either people will step up and meet those expectations or they won't. We're going to chart our course consistent with what Pakistan not just says they do but what they actually do.

QUESTION: Can I – I'm curious about the first two, first three – several stops, but in terms of the Saudi and Iraq rapprochement. I think it's pretty clear that since almost the – very early on, February or March, that there has been significant progress or – in bringing the two closer together. But I just wonder how hopeful or how realistic it is for them to – Riyadh and Baghdad to come together in such a way that it does, in fact, achieve the purpose of not just helping to rebuild Iraq but also blunting the Iranian influence, when just a couple days after your meeting in Riyadh and your going to Baghdad Abadi is in Tehran.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think – and I think Prime Minister Abadi, in fact, commented – or at least I read some comments he made on that – on the visit to Iran. I think we have to be realistic and understand and recognize Iraq has a very long border with Iran. There are long – not just decades, centuries-long relations between Iran and Iraq, and we're not going to eliminate all contact between those two countries. There are legitimate contacts that should continue – economic, trade, things like that. What we're saying to Iraq is, "You must develop the capacity to stand on your own and resist that influence." And the way that we can help Iraq do that is to ensure the Iraqi people understand, because there has been – and I think Foreign Minister Jubeir mentioned this in the press avail we had in Riyadh – there's been more than three decades of isolation almost between Iraq and the GCC countries, long – and he explained why.

But historically, centuries-long, those are their tribal brothers in Iraq. These are all the same people. Iraqis are Arab. Iraqis are not Persian. So whether it's Iraqi-Sunni or it's Iraqi-Shia, it's Iraqi-Shia Arabs. They're not – they're not Persians. And one of the – I think the things that the Saudis are keen to achieve is a reconnection with their longstanding tribal brothers. And when we had early discussions back in February and I had one of my first meetings with Foreign Minister Jubeir in Hamburg, we talked about the importance of – that this is an opportunity for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Take the lead and reconnect with their Arab brothers in Iraq.

And he very bravely – if you remember, he very bravely then, I think in early March, made that first approach by going to Baghdad and made the first visit. That then resulted in our encouraging Prime Minister Abadi to reciprocate by coming to Saudi Arabia. That began to open the doors. And so we've worked hard to facilitate and encourage that. They will do it on their own. We're

there to encourage it and to the extent we can help facilitate that opening. And it's moved a long way in a short period of time. The kingdom is very committed to it. In my meetings with the crown prince, he's very committed to that rapprochement. The Kuwaitis have committed there's going to be a reconstruction conference jointly held with the Iraqis next year, early next year in Kuwait.

So I think these are – it's important to facilitate Iraq, again, standing on its own, that it doesn't have to look only to the east. It has important partners – security partners, but more importantly, economic partners – to the south. And I think this is how we strengthen Iraq as an independent country, and they can make their own decisions then.

QUESTION: Can I go back to Pakistan for a second? Is it accurate to say that the message you received from the Pakistanis was, "We will not be coerced," that they delivered to you a message of defiance in the face of the U.S. trying to pressure them? And did – that's kind of one question. And the second question is: Did they respond at all to you about the U.S.'s strategy of deepening relations with India?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, in answer to your first question, that would be a complete mischaracterization of the meeting.

QUESTION: Okay, okay.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: It was a very open, frank conversation that began with a retracing of the history between the U.S. and Pakistan, which, by and large, has been a very, very positive history. We've had a deterioration in that relationship over the last 10 years, but prior to that we had very strong relations with Pakistan. Throughout the Cold War to the post-Cold War, the post-9/11, they were a tremendous partner in the post-9/11 years in terms of helping us apprehend a number of the individuals that were involved in the 9/11 attacks.

So what's happened has happened more recently, and I think what was important to me is that let's reconnect and remember that it hasn't always been this way. So there was no lecturing and there was no lecturing of them back to me either. I view it as a respectful relationship. We have some very legitimate asks, some very legitimate concerns that we need their help addressing. I said to them, "You can do it or you can decide not to do it. And if you decide you don't want to do it, just let us know. We'll adjust our plans accordingly and we'll deal with it ourselves."

And it's not – that's not a threat. It's just a matter of fact. We have to deal with the conditions on the ground. And as you know, the entire South Asia strategy is a conditions-based strategy, and so the same message to Pakistan was: "Here's what we need for Pakistan to do. We're asking you to do this; we're not demanding anything. You're a sovereign country. You'll decide what you want to do, but understand this is what we think is necessary. And if you don't want to do that, don't feel you can do it, we'll adjust our tactics and our strategies to achieve the same objective a different way."

QUESTION: And what was their response?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I think they share the same concern we have about the presence of terrorism. They are – they have been victims of terrorism. The Pakistanis have suffered significant losses fighting terrorism themselves. My conversation with them was about what we feel is important for Pakistan's future stability. And yes, what they can do will have an important impact on creating conditions for reconciliation and peace talks in Afghanistan, but it's not just about Afghanistan. It's about our concern for Pakistan's long-term stability as well.

MODERATOR: Gardiner.

QUESTION: And the India question – and the India question, whether that came up, the deeper relationship with India.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: There was not a lot of discussion about that, other than they clearly have their differences with India, they have their concerns along their border with India. I made the observation to them, "You have two very troubled borders. You have one in Afghanistan, you have one with India," and that we're willing to help on both of those borders, and we're not just here to talk about the situation on the Afghan border. We're also here to talk about how can we lower the tensions on the border with India, and there are legitimate concerns on both sides of that border as well.

QUESTION: Sir, as you know, your power rests in how closely you are seen to represent the President. There are significant doubts in the countries we visited when we talked to diplomats that you are the – the President's clear representative. They're worried about what they see as some chaos in Washington. How do you respond to that, and how do you reassure your interlocutors that you are indeed speaking for the President of the United States?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I reviewed this trip with the President prior to my departure. Every stop, I told him here's where I plan to go, assuming I can get into certain locations, here's the objective, here's what I'm attempting to achieve, any guidance he wanted to give me before I left. So – and this is the normal way I do things when I go out on the road, is we sit and talk before I leave, and I spoke to him on Friday right before I headed to Andrews. So if something comes up along the way, obviously, then we can talk.

So far this week, I know that he's been getting readouts of all of my meetings as well. Nothing's come up because they've pretty well gone according to what we expected at this point, no real big surprises. So I'm out implementing the foreign policy that's been adopted by the President at the – through the interagency process of the National Security Council. We develop the policy, the President approves it, and then it's up to me. My responsibility is to go out and execute that policy. And so this trip was about executing against the South Asia policy, executing against the recent free and open Indo-Pacific policy.

MODERATOR: Okay. Felicia.

QUESTION: On that note, what was the reception at all? This new policy, did people understand the policy? That – people are saying now that ISIS is on the decline, there is no comprehensive U.S. policy, so we're kind of back to the beginning.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: For which – for which?

QUESTION: In Afghanistan and that – in Afghanistan primarily, it's –

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, no, I think the South Asia policy, which deals with Afghanistan, Pakistan, India – and as you recall, when that was released and described, we were very clear to people that this is not just about Afghanistan. That in fact, as we looked at past policy decisions that have been taken about Afghanistan, as I studied those and we began to formulate the essentials of this policy, the framework which then we flesh out through the interagency, my observation was we had always looked at Afghanistan in isolation and we kept trying to solve Afghanistan in Afghanistan. And that, to me, made no sense.

So we – as we began to think about it at the State Department, we zoomed it out and we said, well, what else is affecting this? And of course, immediately, Pakistan comes into the viewfinder, but then suddenly you realize India has an influence. And in fact, there's a Central Asian influence with the C5 countries and we've already had meetings with them in New York on the margins of the UN General Assembly to begin to talk about the situation in Afghanistan with them. You zoom out further and China has a role to play.

And so what we've done is really expand the elements that could lead to success in Afghanistan and build the policies and the strategies around incorporating what others could do. And maybe it's only a piece of it, but that piece could be critical to achieving the ultimate success. So what we've been doing is explaining everyone's role to them, and the receive – what we've received in the region is enormously positive over the South Asian strategy. People have said this is the first time we've seen a strategy. I think many have said, yes, we've been fighting a war in Afghanistan for 16 years; when we've been fighting, it was 16 one-year strategies. There was never anything in mind as to how does this come to an end. And we have put in place a very comprehensive approach that lays out a roadmap of how we think we can achieve it. We now have to go execute.

QUESTION: When you say "When does this come to an end," when did the conditions-based requirements – like, what is the timeline on that? Conditions-based could mean another 16 years, couldn't it?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: No, it will not be another 16 years. As the President was clear, it's not an unlimited time, it's not a blank check, and it's not – we're not going to say, "Date certain here." That's the mistake everyone's made in the past. That's what – that's how you end up with 16 one-year strategies. It's conditions-based.

As I said, we have articulated specific role and responsibilities for regional players, and we need to see them delivering on their part of that solution. It is all built around creating conditions where the Taliban and the leadership of the Taliban that is – that has the will to do so is ready to say, “Enough is enough.” And what we’ve made clear to the Taliban: You will never achieve a military victory. And this is the conversation we do have through backchannels to them and through the Doha office: Do you want your children and grandchildren fighting this same fight? Because that’s the way it’s going to be if you don’t find a different way to go forward.

The Afghan Government has a specific responsibility to create the conditions that are inviting the Taliban to come to the table. And as I said in my remarks, I think, in Afghanistan, there is a role for the Taliban in this government. Please come. Please come and take up your role, but you must come on the condition that you renounce terrorism, you renounce violent extremism, and you will never take up those efforts again. So that’s – there is a very specific strategy and we’ve never had one before.

QUESTION: Might you say –

QUESTION: Sir, would you say anything about North Korea? They’ve been threatening to blow up that bomb over the Pacific again.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Yes, I’ve heard the threats. (Laughter.) I’ve heard the threats.

QUESTION: Just really, really briefly, in your speech – the CSIS speech – you talked about the anchors, the Indo-Pak region and the four anchors – U.S., Australia, Japan, and India.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Japan – yeah.

QUESTION: And I’m just wondering – so the Indians are the first to hear this, I guess, directly from you post-speech – is this something that they’re excited about? I presume they are, but I just want to – or were they –

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Yes, but it’s an –

QUESTION: Are they a little bit nervous about –

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Yes, but I would be the first to acknowledge it is a new approach as well, and I think that we’ve had a – the U.S. has had positive relations with India for 70 years but it’s never quite moved to that next level, and I think that’s in part due to – on both sides. From time to time, the other side has taken a step back from the relationship for their own reasons. What we’re trying to put in place is make the case that this needs to move to a different level and be sustained, as I said, for the next 100 years.

We have the standing trilateral with Japan, India, and the U.S., and actually, a lot of this – we began the early conversations around the corners of what this was going to be in that last trilateral just to get some reaction. I think Japan, they understand it probably better than anyone

already, and we have talked to the Australians about participating as well. Everyone has to decide that's the right thing to do. So we're – this is week one –

QUESTION: Right.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: – of executing this one.

QUESTION: On the North Korea point, did –

MODERATOR: We got to go, guys, thanks.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Did India deny the U.S.'s request to close the North Korean embassy in India? I was just looking at the foreign minister's comments.

MODERATOR: Probably best to ask them.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Yeah, I think they just indicated they think that office has value as a conduit for communications.

QUESTION: And do you agree?

QUESTION: Is this then –

SECRETARY TILLERSON: It could. It might. (Laughter.)

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