

Press Releases: Press Availability With New Zealand Prime Minister Bill English

Press Availability
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

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MODERATOR: Good afternoon, members of the press. It is my honor to welcome The Right Honorable Bill English, Prime Minister of New Zealand, and The Honorable Rex Tillerson, Secretary of State of the United States of America, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, The Honorable Gerry Brownlee.

I invite the prime minister to give his opening remarks.

PRIME MINISTER ENGLISH: Well, ladies and gentlemen, it's been my pleasure to welcome the Secretary of State to New Zealand. It's impressive that so early in his tenure he has come to this part of the world, to Australia and then to New Zealand – not something that normally happens.

We've had a pretty wide-ranging discussion around the Asia Pacific. And it was the Secretary reassured us of the ongoing engagement of the U.S. in both the economic and defense and security aspects of the stability of the Asia Pacific.

We also discussed what are some signs of success in the war against ISIL, because we are all contributing in different ways to the war on terrorism, and was pleased to hear of how much appreciation there is for the vital task that New Zealand troops are involved in of training and mentoring security forces in the Middle East. As, because as there is some success against ISIS and areas come back into the control of national governments, the ongoing security of them is particularly important.

We also discussed the – our disagreement with the administration's decision over withdrawing from the Paris agreement and heard from the Secretary about the direction of climate change policy in the U.S.

And we also had the opportunity to compare notes about the – our ongoing

relationships with China. As you're all aware, Premier Li visited here just a few months ago, and the – clearly, the administration is involved in a constructive discussion with China and in a way that enables small countries like ourselves to maintain the kind of relationships that work for our economy and work for our ongoing defense interests.

Mr. Secretary.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, thank you, Mr. Prime Minister, and let me thank you and also Foreign Minister Brownlee for the warm welcome. And I am really delighted that we were able to make this stop in New Zealand to reaffirm the strong partnership that exists between the United States and New Zealand. We had very productive discussions on many topics, as the prime minister just described to you.

This relationship between our two nations – I know, as I think many of you know, we are walking up to a 75-year anniversary of the landing of troops in World War II. And this was a deployment, important deployment point for many of our troops who were fighting alongside one another to achieve the victory of World War II.

That relationship and that shared sacrifice has spanned many conflicts over the years, including the current conflicts in the Middle East; and I think it is a visible demonstration of our commitment to shared values around the freedom, around an international rules-based order; and that our words mean something because we're willing to sacrifice to defend those. And we appreciate and value that relationship, that partnership, with New Zealand.

And as the prime minister said but I want to say it myself, we are deeply appreciative of New Zealand's troops in the Middle East and this really important role they're playing to train security forces. As we liberate areas from – that have been under ISIS control, the first actions is to secure the area, so that the local citizens feel safe about returning to their homes and beginning the long process of rebuilding not just their towns but also their lives. And having security forces that have been well-trained and understand how to conduct themselves in this environment is vitally important to the ongoing success and restoration of liberated areas, and we are very thankful for the contribution made by New Zealand troops in the region.

So again, it's – it was a very useful, productive visit, and I am pleased that we were able to make the stop here.

PRIME MINISTER ENGLISH: Any questions?

MODERATOR: The first question is from Corin Dann from TVNZ for the Secretary of State.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, welcome. Given an increasingly unpredictable President Trump has pulled the United States out of TPP, the Paris accord on climate change, how can countries like New Zealand trust that the U.S. will continue to show leadership in the Asia Pacific region and not embark on a protectionist, isolationist stance that surrenders leadership to China?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I would take exception to your characterization of it being unpredictable. The President ran his campaign on the intention to withdraw from TPP and the Paris climate accord. I think he did take time and made very deliberative decisions to finally take action on both of those fronts.

But clearly, that also represents the will of the American people. There was very little support in the Congress, which are the people's elected officials, for either TPP or the Paris accord; and I think in both cases the President was quite clear that he took these actions because he knew they were not in the best interest of the American people and our own future prosperity.

Having said that, on both issues, the President of the United States has every intention of being directly engaged on trade relationships. And indeed, the process of discussions on a bilateral basis is already well underway with some countries in the region, and that will continue in the days and years ahead.

On Paris, I think the President, again, felt this was just simply not an agreement that served the American people's interest well. Having said that, as he made that decision, I think he made clear that he welcomes the opportunity to talk about a subsequent agreement.

And I think there's two important elements to keep in mind. The United States has an extraordinary record of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, possibly unparalleled by anyone else, and our greenhouse gas emissions are at levels that were last seen in the 1990s. That's been done with 50 million more energy consumers than we had in the '90s with an economy that's twice as large. So we're very proud of the record of reducing our own greenhouse gas emissions, and that's been done without a Paris climate accord. It's been done without a heavy-handed regulation. It's been built on technology, innovation, entrepreneurship.

We have every expectation that record of performance is going to continue. There's no reason it would stop just because we withdrew from the Paris climate accord. So we do believe that engagement globally continues to be important on the issue of climate change, and we will be seeking ways to remain engaged. And there are many ways in which we can do that through the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as well as through the various economic and trade forums that we will obviously be very active in as well.

So I don't think anyone should interpret that the U.S. has somehow stepped away from these issues or is seeking to isolate itself. Indeed, one of the reasons I'm in the region, one of the reasons Vice President Pence has already been to the region, Secretary Mattis has been to the region, is to reaffirm to everyone that the United States views this region of the world extremely important to both our national security interest and our own economic and prosperity interest. And I think you can expect, in fact, to see an elevated level of engagement to that that you saw in the past eight years.

MODERATOR: The next question is from Gardiner Harris from *The New York Times*

for the Secretary.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, can you give us an update on the situation in the Middle East with Qatar, Saudi Arabia? There's also been some talk that the President's very warm embrace of Saudi Arabia gave Saudi Arabia somehow the ease of doing this break, and what have been your efforts on the break?

And also, Qatar is obviously one of the closest partners for ExxonMobil. Can you say how your past might either help or hinder in your efforts in resolving this crisis?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, with regard to my past, I'm not going to comment on ExxonMobil's activities. But – but I have been in dealings with the Qatari leadership now for more than 15 years, so we know each other quite well. I know the father emir well. I know the current emir well.

I think the situation in the GCC in terms of the differences of views that have led to this, as I indicated yesterday, there are – there are a number of issues that I think are involved here, and I think there's a certain level of frustration that things rose to that ended up with the countries deciding to take this action.

I think in terms of the President's message in Riyadh, remember, was to motivate all of the Arab and Muslim nations worldwide and the Arab Muslim summit that all nations needed to take action against extremism and take action to also terminate the support, financial support, in any ways that they can.

And I think every country in the region has their own obligations they need to live up to, and they have their own challenges to live up to that commitment to terminate support for terrorism, extremism, however it manifests itself anywhere in the world. And I would say that's true of all the GCC countries; they have their own work to do in that regard.

As I said yesterday, we are hopeful that the parties can resolve this through dialogue, and we encourage that, that they do sit together and find a way to resolve whatever the differences are that have led to this decision.

MODERATOR: The third question is from Barry Soper from NZME for the Secretary of State.

QUESTION: Hello, Mr. Secretary. In the light of the crisis in Qatar and the terrorist attacks in London over the weekend, what expectation does the United States have for New Zealand to increase its contributions to countries – like you've mentioned Iraq and Afghanistan? And closer to home for us (inaudible) closer to home for us, how much of a threat do you view North Korea and the South China Seas to regional security?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I think in terms of the commitment that all of the – all nations, including New Zealand along with – in partnership with the United States towards counterterrorism efforts, is extraordinarily important today. And the tragic events in London are just, here again, we're seeing it as to how it manifests itself. I was in London only 11 days ago on the heels of the

Manchester attack, and before I can leave and get back home again, we have another incident.

This is the nature of the challenge before us, and it is why in our initiatives in the Middle East in Riyadh we said we have to win this fight on the battlefield. But defeating them on the battlefield will not end this. We have to win this fight in the ideological sense as well, and that means getting into the social media space, getting into the mosque, getting into the majlis, getting into the conversation.

And I was actually encouraged when I heard on the news this morning that a number of imams in London have condemned these attackers and said they will not perform prayer services over their funerals, which means they're condemning their souls. And that is what has to be done. Now, only the Muslim faith can handle this. And in the discussions with the Muslim countries in Riyadh this was one of the commitments we asked, and there was a center created to counter extremism. This is the role of that center is to begin to get into this ideological debate that only the Muslim community can have with itself. We want to be supportive, but it's really they have to take this on, and I think we're beginning to see early signs that they are ready to take this on.

With respect to North Korea and China's activities in the South China Sea, we had a very good discussion about that today. We have called on all nations that have any type of relations, economic activity with North Korea, to join us in putting pressure on the regime in Pyongyang to cause them to rethink the strategy and the pathway they're on with the development of their nuclear weapons program.

All the regional partners, including China, have reaffirmed without question their commitment to a de-nuclearized Korean Peninsula. And so now I think the question is: How do we work together collectively to bring Pyongyang to the table, to have a discussion about that future, a different future than the one they have charted thus far?

And I think this pressure is needed to cause them to pause and really question whether what they think is their future is truly achievable. And we're very serious about ensuring that they never have weapons or the means to deploy them against the United States, and they certainly should not be deploying those against other nations as well.

So we had a good conversation about the ways New Zealand can support us in that regard both in terms of reaffirming that message but then backing it up in whatever small ways are possible to put action behind the message that North Korea needs to change its path.

With respect to China's activities in the South China Sea, we share the same view that freedom of navigation both of the waters but also the airways is vital to global economic prosperity. It's vital to the growth of economic prosperity in the region, and anything that threatens that threatens not just this region but the entire world's economic prosperity.

So we are, I think, of one mind with many others in the region as well in conveying to China that these actions they're taking to build islands and, more alarmingly, to militarize these islands threatens the stability, the stability that really has served China as well or better than anyone in terms of China's ability to grow its economy. It's been this very stable environment that has existed. These actions of theirs threaten that stability, and we ask that they cease those activities.

MODERATOR: The final question is from Ana da Costa from Reuters, and again it's for the Secretary of State.

QUESTION: Hi there. I'm just wondering how worried you are that the U.S. political crisis involving the government's alleged links with Russia may take down the Trump administration. Thank you.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I can't really comment on any of that because I have no direct knowledge, and so it's – it would be inappropriate for me to make any comment.

What I would tell you is the President has been very clear with me that Russia is an important global player, and today our relationships with Russia are at a very low point and they've been deteriorating.

So the President asked me to begin a re-engagement process with Russia to see if we can first stabilize that relationship so it does not deteriorate further, and then can we identify areas of mutual interest where perhaps we can begin to rebuild some level of trust and some level of confidence that there are areas where we can work together.

And that's the process that's underway today. And the President has been clear to me do not let what's happening over here in the political realm prevent you from the work you need to do on this relationship, and he's been quite clear with me to proceed at whatever pace and in the areas that I think we might make progress. I really am not involved in any of these other issues.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) a quick follow-up to my colleague, Corin, (inaudible) some clarification of the (inaudible) the unpredictability of the President, and you commented (inaudible). And the clarification is what about the unpredictability of the tweets by the President? And I speak in particular to the tweet about (inaudible) that had been actually contradicted by one of (inaudible). What are your thoughts on (inaudible)?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: The President has his own unique ways of communicating with the American people and the world; and it's served him pretty well, and I don't intend to advise him on how he ought to communicate. That's up to him.

Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Prime Minister and Secretary of State. That concludes this press conference.

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