

Press Releases: Press Conference at NATO

Press Conference
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Secretary of State

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SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, good afternoon, all. It truly is a pleasure to be back in Brussels. Someone reminded me this is my seventh trip to Europe already this year. But it is great to be back. I had a great visit with our tri-mission here in Brussels. These are the people who represent America's interests here at NATO, but it – with the EU and here in Brussels, as well. Really working hard. And had a chance to meet their newest member of their family, a two-week-old son that was born to one of our folks that's located here from the U.S.

And, of course, to be with Ambassador Hutchison, who is – who I've known for a very long time, and we have a very deep and strong friendship and a deep

respect for one another, in terms of her service in the United States Senate for so many years, and really proud that she leads our NATO mission here, as well.

The United States, obviously, I think has affirmed now on multiple occasions our support for NATO's mission. We know that the security NATO provides protects Western democratic principles, protects our right to live in freedom. To that end, the United States is eager for our NATO allies to exert their sovereignty and take on greater responsibility for our shared deterrence and our defense burden. I think, as each of us contributes, the better we will be able to deter and defend against the threats on Europe's frontiers, which also can become threats for America.

We do commend the many countries that have made additional commitments and greater contributions. This year Romania joined the United States, Greece, Estonia, the United Kingdom, and Poland as six allies that spend at least two percent of their GDP on defense. And two more allies, Latvia and Lithuania, will join that club in 2018. We expect 26 allies will increase their defense spending budgets this year and five more NATO allies have put plans in place to achieve the 2 percent objective by 2024.

Increased spending, however, is not enough. It is really about increasing capabilities. And we've spent a lot of time in the sessions here at NATO over the last day-and-a-half talking about that. It is interesting, since NATO was formed the single largest cause of loss of lives within NATO from threats has been terrorism. And I think President Trump, as all of you well know, has made it clear that stopping terrorism must be a growing focus of attention for NATO. And we had just completed a session on the subject.

Yesterday we discussed how to further leverage the action plan to strengthen the allies' resilience against terrorist attacks and, in particular, to build upon NATO's already long-standing commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, increase their cooperation as the President has announced his new South Asia strategy. We appreciate NATO members' commitments to the United States effort to defeat ISIS globally, as well as our other counterterrorism efforts.

The original mission of NATO, obviously, is still relevant. We have been clear with Russia that we cannot return to business as usual in the NATO-Russia relations, as long as Russia continues its illegal occupation of Ukraine. And Russia's continued use of hybrid warfare seeks to undermine Western institutions, and this stands as a significant obstacle to normalizing our relations, as well.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine remains the biggest threat to European security, and demands continued transatlantic unity in confronting that threat. Our NATO allies stand firm in our support of Ukraine's sovereignty and their territorial integrity. We do not accept Russia's efforts to change the internationally-recognized borders of Ukraine or recognize Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea.

Earlier this morning we also had a productive discussion with Georgian Foreign Minister Janelidze. Georgia is a large contributor to our joint

efforts in Afghanistan. In fact, they are the largest per capita of any contributing nation, and we strongly support Georgia's aspirations to become a NATO member.

Looking ahead to our final session, which will be over lunch today, the United States does support NATO's open-door policy, and our commitment that any Europe-Atlantic country that wishes to join the alliance and meets the requirements to do so should be allowed to do so. And no third party should have anything to say about that pursuit of NATO membership.

As we have done for decades, the United States will continue to maintain our straightforward, ironclad commitment to Article V. We will continue to work for the common defense and the preservation of peace called for in the NATO charter, and do so with confidence that our allies will continue to do the same.

Thank you. Happy to take questions.

MODERATOR: The Secretary has time for a few questions. Josh Lederman, AP?

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. On several occasions – thank you. On several occasions, the President has publicly undermined your diplomatic efforts. In recent days, White House officials have said that you are going to be pushed out. And these are not media inventions. These are coming from the White House.

Many Americans see these efforts as humiliating to you. You have had an illustrious career. Why do you put up with it? Why don't you quit?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: This is a narrative that keeps coming up about every six weeks. And I would say you all need to get some new sources, because your story keeps being wrong.

MODERATOR: Teri Schultz from Deutsche Welle, right there in the middle.

QUESTION: Hi, over here. Yesterday, the German foreign minister arrived at the meeting saying that there was an increasing divide between the U.S. and Europe, that Europe needs to take more of its responsibility, which is not just the funding question, and that transatlanticism was suffering. So I'm interested particularly in whether you've heard that in your meetings with allies – you had a meeting with them on Iran yesterday – and did they express as strongly as we hear them differences with the administration on Iran policy?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I heard Foreign Minister Gabriel's statement, and Sigmar and I have become quite close. I think I've probably met with him as many times and had as many telephone conversations as any of my counterparts. And look, Germany is going through a very difficult political process right now. Sigmar is part of that. And I don't want to say anything that's going to suggest any leanings one way or another.

In terms of the support that we've received in our talks around our approach to Iran and in our Quad meeting yesterday, it was a very productive meeting.

We share a common view of the threat that Iran poses in terms of its destabilizing activities in the Middle East region, most particularly in Yemen and in Syria, its support for terrorist organizations like Hizballah, its export of lethal weapons, including rockets and missiles. And that – we're all very concerned about how to address that issue, and that was the discussions that we held in our Quad meeting yesterday. It was very productive discussions.

MODERATOR: Dave Clark from AFP.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. Much of the world is holding its breath as President Trump declares Jerusalem the capital of Israel. Major European allies are saying its wrongheaded, and Middle Eastern partners and even some in your own department are warning of potential violence and unrest. Is this part of a thought-out strategy to improve peace prospects, or is President Trump just fulfilling a campaign promise? And how can you claim to be a neutral broker in the Middle East conflict?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I want to be respectful that the President has not been allowed to address this issue himself, which he will be doing later today, as you know, with a speech that he'll be giving. So I don't want to go too far in terms of getting ahead of his speech.

What I would encourage people to do is a couple of things. First, listen carefully to the entirety of the speech; listen to the full content of the speech. The President is very committed to the Middle East peace process. He has a team that he put in place almost immediately upon entering the White House. That team has been working very diligently on new approaches to the peace process. They've been engaged in a quiet way with many in the region around that process. They've shared it with me so that I could give them my steer on certain elements of the process, give them guidance on areas that I thought would be challenging to address, and they've gone – they've done the hard work to try to address those.

So I would just say that all of this, we continue to believe there is a very good opportunity for peace to be achieved, and the President has a team that is devoted to that entirely. And I would – with respect to the decision on Jerusalem, I really would leave that until you hear the President's full statement on that.

MODERATOR: Julian Barnes with *The Wall Street Journal*.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, Julian Barnes, *Wall Street Journal*. Ukraine. Is the peacekeeping proposal by Russia real? Is there a possibility to negotiate something that would – the United States could support that would put peacekeepers on the border, restore control to Ukraine? And related, do you support expanding Russia-NATO dialogue or is the current sort of high-level NATO-Russia Councils the right track to be on?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We've been engaged with the Russians now for some time through, as you know, I appointed Ambassador Volker to be our point of contact with the Russians on finding a way to break the logjam on Ukraine.

We've prioritized ending the violence as our first priority, and we think to do that, we need to put a peacekeeping force in place. Russia has long resisted a peacekeeping force, but they have agreed now, and as you point out, they put the first proposal forward for peacekeepers. I think it's significant that we're talking about the right thing.

We have a significant difference between the mandate that a peacekeeping force would be given and the scope of their mandate, and that's what we continue in conversations with the Russians as to the peacekeeping force. We hope we can close those gaps. We think it's vitally important to stop the violence in east Ukraine. People are still dying every day from that violence, and that's our objective, is to stop the killing, stop the violence, and then we still have a lot of work to do to address all elements of the Minsk accord, and including the government in Kyiv has significant work to do as well. But this is a process that's ongoing, and the peacekeeping and stopping the violence was our first and foremost objective.

With respect to dialogue with Russia, we had a lot of discussion during this NATO meeting, and in particular around dinner last night, over what is the proper engagement with Russia. And I think there is broad consensus among all the NATO members that there is no normalization of dialogue with Russia today. What dialogue occurs, whether it be through periodic meetings of the NATO-Russia Council – and I say periodic because we are not going to return to regularized calendar meetings. If there is a reason to meet, if there is a dialogue with a result expected, then we should meet and we support dialogue to produce results. But having dialogue just to be talking and trying to regularize or renormalize this relationship cannot be undertaken until some of these actions that I've addressed – in particular Ukraine, hybrid warfare – until Russia begins to address those actions which we find not just unacceptable but intolerable.

So I think we do support dialogue when there is a purpose, when there's a substance, when there's a result that we're attempting to achieve.

MODERATOR: Carol Morello, *Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, you've often said that you start every meeting in the – every day asking about the safety of diplomats abroad. It's been more than a year now since your diplomats started coming under attack in Cuba, and you have still not put forward publicly a single piece of evidence, yet you've taken some pretty drastic steps in response that have seriously damaged the Cuban economy and reputation, and Havana has complained that you won't share even basic information that they need to investigate. So are you still convinced that these were attacks, and will you tell us what you know about what happened to them?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We are convinced these were targeted attacks. We have shared some information with the Cubans, and there are two restrictions I've placed on sharing information. One is respect for the privacy of individuals and their medical conditions, and the second is not to provide whoever was orchestrating these attacks with information that's useful to how effective they were. What we've said to the Cubans is a small island, you got a

sophisticated security apparatus, you probably know who's doing it, you can stop it. It's as simple as that. So that's what we've asked the Cubans. We understand the Cubans don't like the actions we've taken. We don't like our diplomats being targeted.

MODERATOR: Essia Bouguerra, Al-Sabah.

QUESTION: Thank you, Secretary. I'm Essia from Tunisia. My question is related to the – does the U.S. Secretary still believe that the two-state solution is still available or still present in the – in your priorities?

But the second one, concerning the meeting of President Putin and President Bashar al-Assad: What role has the Syrian regime right now in the – any coming negotiation in the future about Syria? Thank you.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: With respect to anything related to Jerusalem, I really would like to let the President make his statement before I comment. So we'll be happy to comment later today or tomorrow, after he's had an opportunity to lay out the full contours of the decision he's made.

With respect to the Syrian regime and Bashar al-Assad's role in the peace discussions in Geneva – and this is a process that will follow the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 – we have said to the Russians it is important that the Syrian regime be at the table and be part of these negotiations and part of the discussion. We think it's important that as long as Bashar al-Assad is still the leader of that regime, that he be directly engaged in these discussions and negotiations. We have left it to the Russians to deliver them to the table, and we did have a delegation from the Syrian regime attended the first week of the talks that have resumed in Geneva. We hope they will – that they will return to those discussions. These talks have a process, as you know, that lays out the development of a new constitution, that moves towards an election process where all Syrians will have an opportunity to voice their views on the future of Syria, including all Syrian diaspora that may have been – may have had to leave the country due to the violence. This is as – all as is called for under the UN Security Council resolution.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. Thank you.

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