

Press Releases: Previewing the Secretary's Trip to Europe

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Official
Via Teleconference
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MODERATOR: Okay, thank you, sir. Good afternoon, and thanks, everyone, for joining us for today's background call previewing Secretary Tillerson's trip to Europe. We're joined by [Senior State Department Official], who will be referred to as Senior State Department Official. As a reminder, today's call is on background and it will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call. And with that, I'd be happy to turn it over to our senior State Department official for some opening remarks, and then we'll take some questions.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you very much, [Moderator]. And it's great to be here this afternoon. Thank you all for taking the time and for your interest in this. So let me give a very brief overview of the trip, and then we can answer any questions. I think as most of you know, this is the Secretary's eighth trip to Europe. He's going to London, Paris, and Davos, where he will join the President, and then he'll finish the trip at the end of the week in Warsaw.

The purpose of the trip is to underscore our commitment to the transatlantic alliance. First stop is United Kingdom, where the Secretary will reaffirm the U.S.-UK special relationship. That's Monday morning, January 22nd. He'll meet with Ambassador Johnson and personnel from our mission there at the new embassy. He will then meet with the British national security adviser, Mark Sedwill, and discuss our cooperation on Iran, Syria, Libya, DPRK, and Ukraine. He has a working lunch in London with Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and other senior British officials.

On Tuesday morning, in Paris, the next stop, the Secretary will meet with French Foreign Minister Le Drian to discuss Syria, Iran, Lebanon, Libya, DPRK, and Ukraine. The Secretary will participate in Paris in a signing ceremony for the launch of the International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons. This is a political commitment. It involves like-minded countries. Purpose is to increase pressure on those responsible for the use of chemical weapons. The overall point here is to hold those who use chemical weapons accountable, and this is a very high priority for the President and for the Secretary, particularly now that Russia has used every opportunity at its disposal to protect the Assad regime in its continued use of chemical weapons.

Also in Paris, the Secretary will meet with Ambassador McCourt and officials, U.S. officials and the people at our embassy there. He goes on to Davos on Thursday, the 25th. He'll join the President there, so I would refer you to the White House for details on the program in Davos.

On Friday morning, the 26th, the Secretary arrives in – I'm sorry, on Friday evening, the 26th, the Secretary arrives in Warsaw. Following the President's visit in July of last year, this is really an opportunity to underscore the deep alliance and friendship that we have with Poland, one of our closest NATO allies. As the President has said, Poland is one of the most committed members of the NATO alliance, and we want to use this trip as an opportunity to strengthen the strategic partnership that we have with that country. The Secretary will meet with Polish President Duda. He'll then meet with the Polish prime minister and foreign minister.

Friday, January 26th, is the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The Secretary will use the occasion to lay a wreath and make a few remarks at the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Monument, which, as many of you know, is a traditional location for commemoration in Warsaw of International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The Secretary will head back to our embassy after the ceremony and meet with our folks there, meet with the ambassador, and then he'll head back to D.C.

That's the broad outline of the trip and our stops. Would love to hear any questions that you have.

MODERATOR: Okay. Let's go ahead. Our first question: Matt Lee, from Associated Press. Hi, Matt.

QUESTION: Hi, there. Thank you. I – one – two very, very brief questions. One: If there is a government shutdown, is this trip going to still go ahead? Or do we know 100 percent that it is or isn't? And then secondly, I – unless I have missed something, you skipped entirely over Wednesday. What's going on Wednesday?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So on your first question, Matt, the Secretary will have to decide whether his travel is one of the activities that would continue under a lapse. I wasn't aware that I had missed Wednesday. I can take a look at the agenda. I think some of that was in flux, and I believe the Secretary had set aside some time – logistically, they were looking at how the pieces would align. But I don't think that that part of the agenda has been finalized.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question: Arshad, from Reuters.

QUESTION: Just a couple of quick, simple things. Is the Secretary going to take part in any kind of a commemoration of the new embassy in London when he visits, or not? Second: How much of a feature do you expect Iran to be in his conversations, notably with Foreign Ministers Johnson and Le Drian? Yeah, that's it.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks for the question. The Secretary

always makes a point on all of his trips to take time and visit our embassies, visit the people on the ground. As you know, he places a very high priority particularly on the safety of our foreign personnel. In London, that – the trip is still coming together. My understanding is that he will make a visit to the mission. I don't think that there is a ribbon-cutting or any sort of ceremony planned, in part because the facilities are still in the final phase of construction. I think there's still quite a lot of pieces and debris in the lobby and elsewhere and it's really not the moment for a ribbon-cutting, but he is visiting the new embassy.

On Iran, inevitably Iran will dominate a lot of the conversations that the Secretary has with our NATO allies and partners in Europe. As you know, we really emphasize close coordination with the British in particular and the French in our efforts to close the gaps in JCPOA and in next steps on how we curtail Iranian malign influence in the region, so I think that'll be a very high priority in his conversations.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question, Francesco from AFP.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. What is the format of this ministerial meeting on Syria that you plan to have in Paris? Who will be attending, and is Russia going to be represented on it?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So at this point, the meetings on Syria I think are still coming together. I know that the Secretary is interested in – in engaging with our French allies, obviously the British. Beyond that, I think some of the other components are still coming into place, and we should know more soon.

MODERATOR: Okay. Martin from TBN Poland.

QUESTION: Thank you. What is the agenda for the meetings in Poland and what issues does Mr. Secretary want to discuss or address when he's talking with the Polish officials?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks for the question. As you know, there is a new cabinet in place in Poland, and I think that this is a great opportunity to build close relationships. The United States and Poland have a wide agenda of shared strategic interests in security, energy, and trade. We cooperate very closely in NATO format and also bilaterally. The Secretary's focus is on strengthening cooperation in all of those areas in ways that improve the safety and prosperity of the American people. It – I think we'll be talking about the Three Seas Initiative, we'll be talking about the presence of U.S. troops in Poland and how we do more to strengthen deterrents on the eastern flank of the alliance, and we'll be talking about energy security.

MODERATOR: Okay. Thank you. Next question is from – pardon me. Do we have a next question?

OPERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, if you'd like to ask a question, please press * then 1.

MODERATOR: Do we have anybody queued up? Okay. I guess we are out of questions. Pardon me. Pardon me. Do you have any other remarks you'd like to add?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'll just add that I know the Secretary is personally very excited about this trip. We have a full agenda in the transatlantic relationship this year, particularly as we look at the lead-up to the NATO summit. He has formed close and effective relationships with senior officials in all of our allied countries and we're looking forward to this being a successful trip.

MODERATOR: We do have a final one. It's from Conor Finnegan from ABC News, and this'll be our last question.

QUESTION: Hey, thanks very much for holding the call. Just wanted to ask about Poland. One of the things you didn't mention was the situation in terms of democracy in Poland. Is that an issue that the Secretary will address as well? Yeah, that's it.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks for that question, Conor. It's good to hear your voice. I would say on that issue that the view of the United States is: On any of these internal matters related to Poland, Poland is a sovereign democratic ally of the United States. As I said a minute ago, we share strategic interests in security, energy, and trade. The Secretary's focus is on strengthening cooperation in those areas. Poland is one of Europe's oldest democracies. Democracy is alive and well there. We leave questions of internal policy to the Poles and trust that any reforms that they're looking at are consistent with their constitution and the will of their people.

MODERATOR: Okay. I believe we have one final question from BBC if Barbara – if you are on the line. Are you queued up?

OPERATOR: Please press * then 1 if you'd like to ask your question.

MODERATOR: Okay. I'm afraid Barbara isn't on the call, or at least we can't hear her, but everyone, thank you so much for joining us. The embargo has now been lifted, and as a reminder, [Senior State Department Official] will be referred to as Senior State Department Official. And I know the Secretary and [Senior State Department Official] are looking forward to seeing some of you in Europe. Thanks so much.

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