

Press Releases: Remarks With United Kingdom Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson at a Press Availability

Remarks

Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

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FOREIGN SECRETARY JOHNSON: Hi. Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you very much for coming, and it's a great pleasure, once again, to welcome Rex as part of a pretty intense rhythm of contacts and discussions that we have nowadays between the U.S. and the U.K. Last week I was in Vancouver, where Rex was building up a pretty big international consensus about how to deal with the North Korean nuclear ambitions.

Today, we've been having – we've really been having discussions about Syria and Iran. We'll have lots more to talk about in just a few moments. Tomorrow, in principle at least, we are meeting again in Paris to talk about chemical weapons and Syria and other matters.

So great to see you, Rex. And never forget it, it goes without saying it's always worth saying that the relationship between the U.S. and the U.K. is absolutely fundamental to diplomacy, but also to our economy. And as you know, there are a million people who go to work in the United States every day who are employed by British companies, as there are 1.2 million who go to work every day in this country who are employed by American companies. There is no other economic relationship like it and we're very glad to welcome you here today, Rex. Secretary.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Thank you, Boris. And first, let me thank Boris for making the trip all the way to Vancouver. It was a really important and I think it achieved many of our objectives, and in many ways exceeded what I had hoped for out of the discussions with our counterparts around the world, the common view around the threat that North Korea poses to the entire world, and a common resolve, just how we want to respond to that threat.

We also view this as the special relationship that it has been and will be, it is an enduring relationship. And I was commenting earlier that we spend a

lot of time talking about the world's problems, whether it's North Korea, Syria, or Yemen, and sometimes we forget about the importance of our own relationship. And I think the foreign secretary just touched on many elements of it, both from a security standpoint, but also from an economic standpoint. And we need to pay attention to that relationship and the importance of this relationship on a bilateral basis as well while we work together in common cause to address some of these serious conflicts around the world that confront both of our nations.

But we treasure this relationship, and I treasure Boris's relationship with me personally, and the work that we do together on these many issues. And I'm delighted to be here again. Thank you, Boris.

FOREIGN SECRETARY JOHNSON: Thanks, Rex. Good, I think we're going to take a couple questions, folks. (Inaudible.)

QUESTION: Secretary Tillerson, could I ask you about the fast-moving situation on the ground in Afrin, in northern Syria? Whilst you've been in discussions with the foreign secretary, some of the Syrian Kurdish groups have appealed for help. There are reports now that Turkish troops and allies have moved beyond Afrin, east of that town in military operations. What are you going to do to help these groups if the U.S. has armed and helped train in the fight against the so-called Islamic State? Are you going to help them?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, as you know, the U.S. is in Syria to defeat ISIS, and we've done that with a coalition of partners, and the Syrian Democratic Forces in particular, which are comprised of Kurdish and Arab, but also elements of Christian forces. It is truly a multiethnic group of fighters who are defending their home territory. And so we are concerned about the Turkish incident in northern Syria.

Having said that, in a statement as of yesterday, we recognize and fully appreciate Turkey's legitimate right to protect its own citizens from terrorist elements that may be launching attacks against Turkish citizens and Turkish soil from Syria. We're engaged with Turkey, and we are engaged also with the leadership of our coalition, and are asking that both sides show restraint, please minimize the impact on civilian casualties, which – who've already suffered too many civilian casualties, and see what we can do to work together to address Turkey's legitimate security concerns in a way that's satisfactory to Turkey, and get back to the process of defeating ISIS, securing a peaceful, stable Syria, and working towards a unified Syria through the Geneva peace process that all of us are committed to.

QUESTION: Thank you. May I ask one final question?

FOREIGN SECRETARY JOHNSON: And just to add to that, obviously, that this is something where – it's a very broken current situation. And we understand that the Kurds have clearly been instrumental in taking the fight to Daesh, and everybody appreciates that and understands it. On the other hand, Turkey does have a legitimate interest in protecting its own borders and its own security, as Secretary Tillerson has just said, as Rex just said.

So I think, really, I would underscore what Rex has just said in calling for restraint on both sides, and an absolute minimum of casualties, low incidence of casualties.

MODERATOR: All right. We'll go to Vaughn Hillyard from NBC.

QUESTION: Secretary, what progress has been made on the supplemental agreement to the Iran deal at this point? And were you given any assurances by your counterparts here in the U.K. that they would sign on to such an agreement?

And Foreign Secretary, for you, why not announce support for an additional agreement at this point? Have you engaged with your other European counterparts on such a deal? Is one possible by May?

And if I can add, we –

FOREIGN SECRETARY JOHNSON: On the JCPOA?

QUESTION: Yes, correct. And we've learned the Trump administration intends to announce an accelerated move of its embassy to Jerusalem. Did you express any concern to Secretary Tillerson about naming Jerusalem the capital of Israel?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, with respect to working jointly with, in particular, the E3 members of the JCPOA, we have a working group that's been established. And I think there is a very – I think there's a common view among the E3, certainly, that there are some areas of the JCPOA, or some areas of Iran's behavior, that should be addressed. And most particularly, their ballistic missile programs and our concerns over the expiry of the JCPOA and the provisions around the expiry. So we're engaging in a working group, we've designated individuals that are going to be meeting to talk about what are the principles around how we might approach Iran to address our concerns with the JCPOA, and how might we fix those, the flaws as the – as President Trump has described them, through some type of another side agreement perhaps or a mechanism that would address the concerns that we have. So we're – we will be discussing that through working groups beginning as early as next week and we'll see what progress we can make.

FOREIGN SECRETARY JOHNSON: Yeah, and just to add to that, a couple of weeks ago, again, Rex was over this side of the Atlantic with the – at a meeting with Sigmar Gabriel in Geneva, my German and French counterparts. And I'd say there was a pretty wide measure of agreement on the European side about the need to look at what Iran is doing on the ballistic missile front and to work out what we can do collectively to constrain that activity and to make a big difference there.

And we think we can do that; we think we can do that together. But as Rex says, it's important we do that in parallel and don't vitiate the fundamentals of the Iran nuclear deal, and we're sure we can do that.

QUESTION: What about Jerusalem?

FOREIGN SECRETARY JOHNSON: Oh, sorry. And on – I think the – the world is

really waiting to see with great interest what the United States is going to produce by way of a proposal on the Middle East peace process, and clearly, that decision feeds into that. Let's see where we get to. I think it's that there is – funnily enough, there is a moment of opportunity here. A process that has been stalled for years, if not decades, could see some progress. And everybody is very interested to see what the United States comes up with. And clearly, Jerusalem now having been recognized by the United States as the capital of Israel, one would expect some sort of symmetrical movement in the other direction to get things moving. So that's what we're interested in.

QUESTION: Does – does the U.S. decision –

QUESTION: Prime Minister –

QUESTION: Does the U.S. decision hurt that process?

FOREIGN SECRETARY JOHNSON: Well, I think, as I said, it – it's possible that it could help to push things along if there is symmetrical movement in the other direction, as I said.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. That's all we have time for.

FOREIGN SECRETARY JOHNSON: (Inaudible), last one.

QUESTION: Just one more. Do you support more funds for NHS? Do you want to see more funds for the NHS? And if so, are you happy to see them got from the savings in the defense budget?

FOREIGN SECRETARY JOHNSON: The best way to fund our National Health Service, as I'm sure Rex will agree, is to have a strong economy (inaudible). Thank you.

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