

Press Releases: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson Press Availability

Remarks

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SECRETARY TILLERSON: Afternoon, all. I thought I'd take a few moments to offer a few comments on the strategy for South Asia that President Trump outlined last night in his address to the nation, and then take a few of your questions on that subject.

I think the President did a, I think, fairly thorough job in terms of describing the new military approach. And I think the important point in that is a conditions-based approach as opposed to a time-based approach that had specified troop ceiling levels and timetables, and I think the President's been quite clear that what is – will be different this time is he has empowered our military commanders on the ground to make more timely decisions, to conduct battlefield operations based upon the conditions on the ground, and with the battle plans that Secretary of Defense Mattis will be approving. That is going to change the dynamic on the ground considerably. These are some of the same tactics that have been employed in the very successful campaign to defeat ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and so I think we're taking a lot of lessons learned from our success there and we'll translate those to Afghanistan.

This is going to take some time for our military to go through a new set of training with some of the Afghan forces. The fighting will still be borne by the Afghan forces, by their military and their security forces, but we believe that we can turn the tide of what has been a losing battle over the last year and a half or so, and at least stabilize the situation and hopefully start seeing some battlefield victories on the part of the Afghan forces who have fought very bravely, but they've been fighting, I think, with less than full capabilities that we can give them.

I think similarly on the diplomatic front, we too are going to adopt a conditions-based diplomacy. We're going to condition our efforts along with the progress we see being made by the Afghan Government, who must continue

the reform efforts that we've been working on for some time – in particular, much more rigorous efforts around the anti-corruption.

Now, part of the corruption challenge in some respects has been the methods and ways in which we have been delivering some of our aid. We've not been as accountable, I think, to ourselves in terms of ensuring that our aid programs, development programs are delivering the results that they were intended to deliver. Some of that has been challenged by the security environment. It's very difficult for many of our aid workers to operate in Afghanistan. So as the security environment improves, we expect to adopt a different approach as to how we deliver on the development and assistance that supports the Afghan Government in their reforms as well.

I think the President was clear this entire effort is intended to put pressure on the Taliban to have the Taliban understand: You will not win a battlefield victory. We may not win one, but neither will you. And so at some point we have to come to the negotiating table and find a way to bring this to an end. Now, this is a regional approach and part of why this effort took as long as it did is we chose not to just focus on Afghanistan, but we undertook a fairly comprehensive review of our relationships in Pakistan and our relationship with India. And we see this approach as requiring an integration of all three of those strategies, and use Pakistan, India to also bring pressure to bear on the situation in Afghanistan.

Pakistan in particular can play an important role here, certainly in delivering the Taliban to the negotiating table. Pakistan has suffered acts of terrorism, their citizens have suffered acts of terrorism as – I think as dramatic as any we've seen anywhere. And we stand ready to help Pakistan address terrorist organizations inside of their country, but they must – they must adopt a different approach themselves.

Pakistan and the U.S. historically had very good relationships, but over the last few years, there has been a real erosion in the confidence between our two governments. There's been an erosion in trust because we have witnessed terrorist organizations being given safe haven inside of Pakistan to plan and carry out attacks against U.S. servicemen, U.S. officials, disrupting peace efforts inside of Afghanistan. Pakistan must adopt a different approach, and we are ready to work with them to help them protect themselves against these terrorist organizations, but certainly to begin to end their attacks that are disrupting our efforts at peace. We are going to be conditioning our support for Pakistan and our relationship with them on them delivering results in this area. We want to work with Pakistan in a positive way, but they must change their approach.

India is emerging as a very important regional strategic partner with the United States, and has played an important role supporting the Afghan Government, and in particular supporting their economy. India has provided developmental assistance. They've provided economic assistance. They are hosting an important economic conference in India this next week.

All of that is important to stabilizing Afghanistan as a nation – get their economy functioning, stabilize the country so that they can provide more

opportunities to their citizens. These are all elements of what will lead to stability and ultimately a peace agreement. But the effort is, again, a regional effort. Put pressure on the parties to understand that this fighting is going to take everyone nowhere, and it's time to begin a process – it may very well be a lengthy process – of reconciliation and a peace accord.

And Afghanistan, as the President said, can choose its form of government that best suits the needs of its people – as long as it rejects terrorism, never provides territory in Afghanistan to provide safe haven for terrorists, and accommodates all of the groups represented inside of Afghanistan, ethnic groups and others. How they want to organize themselves is up to them. But we have to recognize that their culture is a tribal culture, and their history accommodates the nature of those relationships. There's no reason their form of government cannot accommodate that as well.

So we want to facilitate a reconciliation peace process, and we will facilitate them coming to some conclusion around how they want to govern themselves. That's really the essence of the strategy.

And before taking your questions, I do want to make one comment on North Korea. I think it is worth noting that we have had no missile launches or provocative acts on the part of North Korea since the unanimous adoption of the UN Security Council resolution. And I want to take note of that; I want to acknowledge it. I am pleased to see that the regime in Pyongyang has certainly demonstrated some level of restraint that we've not seen in the past. We hope that this is the beginning of this signal that we've been looking for that they are ready to restrain their level of tensions, they're ready to restrain their provocative acts, and that perhaps we are seeing our pathway to sometime in the near future having some dialogue. We need to see more on their part, but I want to acknowledge the steps they've taken thus far. I think it's important to take note of that.

So with that, I'm happy to take your questions.

MS NAUERT: I'll call out on some of the reporters here. Please keep your questions tight; we don't have that much time today. Matt Lee from the AP, we'll start with you.

QUESTION: Thanks. I'll be really brief. It seems like – to me, at least – that with the no nation-building concept of the President laid out last night and what you just said, that the main difference – other than the time table part of the military stuff – the main difference between this new approach and the old one is that you're eliminating two-thirds of what used to be known as the clear, hold, and build strategy. In other words, we clear – or you clear, you hold, and we won't build; you will. So if that's correct, what happens to the anti-corruption efforts that you mentioned, the good governance, the counter-narcotics, the education programs? What happens to those? And more specifically, what would – what's that going to mean for particularly Afghan women and girls who have been assured for the last 16 years by two separate administrations that they wouldn't be abandoned?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I don't want to suggest that there's that dramatic

a difference in terms of our expectations for Afghan Government performance. And as you point out, there's been enormous strides achieved in Afghanistan, both in terms of the numbers of millions of children that are now in schools being educated, the role of women in the Afghan economy now has been dramatically changed. I don't expect any of that to be rolled back. I think that has become part of the Afghan Government structure; it's become part of what the Afghan people themselves, I think, expect.

If you go back many years ago, prior to all of this disruption, that was Afghanistan. That was the nature of Afghanistan 30, 40, 50 years ago. So I think it is part of their culture already. We want to support that.

In terms of the clear and hold, that is still the approach, is that areas will be cleared and Afghan Security Forces can hold those areas, thereby enabling some growth in the Afghan economy. Part of what Afghanistan struggles under is they do not have control over but a portion of their economy. So as the forces are able to either hold areas and stabilize them so to not give up further ground, and they're still losing ground today, as you well know. So this is going to take a little while. But it's to stabilize and then hopefully begin to regain control – and as ground is gained, it will be held by Afghan Security Forces – while allowing the Afghan Government to continue what it has been very successfully doing under our assistance now for many years, and not roll back any of those gains that have been made. That's – I don't think that's the aspiration of the Afghan Government or the Afghan people, either.

So we're going to continue to help them institutionally. We may be taking different approaches and not putting so much of the U.S. taxpayer dollar on the ground, building schools and building infrastructures. We think there are plenty of others that we're going to call upon for assistance as well. Rather, we're there to facilitate and ensure that there is a pathway for reconciliation and peace talks as this pressure begins to take hold, and we do – we believe, we already know, there are certain moderate elements of the Taliban who we think are going to be ready and want to help develop a way forward. How long that will take will be, again, based on conditions on the ground.

MS NAUERT: Right. Andrea Mitchell, NBC.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. Mr. Secretary, a question that embraces both the military side and the diplomatic side. On the military side, won't the new rules of engagement mean that in the short term at least, our forces will be more at risk because they will be potentially doing night raids against the Taliban again, not just training but actually supporting in a more active role because the Afghan troops are not all up to par here to push back against the Taliban advance? And on the diplomatic side, why didn't the President mention Russia's rearming of the Taliban, which General Nicholson has been talking about very openly? He seemed to be letting Russia off the hook in his speech. And do you have enough people, given the fact that there are not Trump-confirmed diplomatic appointees in many of these positions in the region?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, on the military operations side of it, I would really defer to the Department of Defense to answer that one, other than I know the approach is going to be, as I said, similar to what we have had success elsewhere. As Secretary Mattis describes it, it's a "by, with, and through" approach, and I think that's part of why the need for a step-up in troop levels is so we can now, at the battalion level, organize and help the Afghan army fight in a different way with close ground advisement at the battalion level and the ability to call in support on a more timely basis as needed, to ensure victory as opposed to either stalemate or defeat.

With respect to the comment about Russia, to the extent Russia is supplying arms to the Taliban, that is a violation, obviously, of international norms and it's a violation of UN Security Council norms. We certainly would object to that and call Russia's attention to that. If anyone is going to supply arms, it needs to be through the Afghan Government.

In terms of our footprint on the ground, we have very competent, capable, experienced people there now. Our Afghan ambassador[1] is remaining on the job at this time. We have a Pakistan ambassador[2] that's been nominated; we hope to have that person cleared through the process soon. And even in the transition in Afghanistan, as Ambassador Hale[3] transitions out, we've nominated Ambassador Bass, a very experienced diplomat; been chief – been running the embassy in Ankara, Turkey – very complex place. He's very well equipped to step into this situation as well. And we are looking at a couple of different people for the special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan position. It's open currently; it's being filled with a very experienced individual today. So we're ready to get going with very competent people we have, and I'm not at all concerned about the competency level or the experience of the people that we have working on this. I'm quite confident with them.

QUESTION: And India?

MS NAUERT: All right. Go to this next question. Martha Raddatz from NBC – ABC, excuse me.

QUESTION: It's all right. Secretary Tillerson, I know you don't want to talk about the military, but you were just using some military terms, and battalion level and that. I know and understand why the administration does not want to talk about tactical moves, but strategy – don't the American people deserve to know approximately how many more of their sons and daughters will be going back to Afghanistan in a war that's lasted nearly 16 years?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think – and I don't want to speak for Secretary Mattis – but I think the intent is there will be visibility to troop levels once the decision has been made. I think what the President has conveyed, and I agree wholeheartedly with him, is that we are not going to signal ahead what our plans are. We're not going to signal ahead an increase, a decrease, the timing of any of that. It will be driven by conditions on the ground. The only way we can defeat an enemy that is as nimble and as cagey, tactically, as this enemy, is we have to be as cagey and tactical as they are. And we've

not been fighting that way.

QUESTION: Could that include strikes in Pakistan?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I'm not going to comment on what it could include, but the President has been clear that we are going to protect American troops and servicemen. We are going to attack terrorists wherever they live, and we have put people on notice that if you are harboring and providing safe haven to terrorists, be warned. Be forewarned. And we're going to engage with those who are providing safe haven and ask them to change what they're doing and help us help them. Because in my view, the best – the greatest benefactor, other than the Afghan people themselves, to achieving stability and peace in Afghanistan, are the people of Pakistan. They will benefit more than any other nation.

MS NAUERT: Margaret Brennan, CBS.

QUESTION: Thank you. Mr. Secretary – I'm back here. You said no preconditions to talks. Specifically, are you saying that the U.S. no longer expects the Taliban to accept the Afghan constitution and specifically the rights of women? And on Pakistan, did you articulate, in specific terms – or do you plan to – to Pakistan the consequences of their actions, whether it be sanctions, dropping their non-NATO ally status? I mean, what exactly have you communicated or do you plan to communicate?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I had a good call with the prime minister of Pakistan yesterday afternoon to give them a bit of a forewarning of what they were going to hear in the President's speech. And also, we did touch on the points I've made to you today. We are going to be engaging with them in a very serious and thorough way as to our expectations and the conditions that go with that. And all of those things you just listed are on the table for discussion if, in fact, they are unwilling to change their posture or change their approach to how they're dealing with the numerous terrorist organizations that find safe haven inside of Pakistan. Again, it is in Pakistan's interest to take those actions.

When we say no preconditions on the talks, I think what we are saying is, look, the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban representatives need to sit down and sort this out. It's not for the U.S. to tell them it must be this particular model, it must be under these conditions, and I think that's what the President means when he says we're no longer nation building. We're – look, we've tried taking certain principles and forms around the world and sometimes it works; in a lot of places, it doesn't work. We don't know what's going to emerge here. We're going to be there, obviously, to encourage others. But it's going to be up to the Afghan Government and the representatives of the Taliban to work through a reconciliation process of what will serve their needs and achieve the American people's objectives, which is security – no safe haven for terrorists to operate anywhere in Afghanistan now or in the future.

MS NAUERT: Tom Rogan with *The Washington Examiner*.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, you mentioned the force protection concerns and Ambassador Bass shortly going to Afghanistan and the SRAP discussions. But how are you going to get someone who is able to go out beyond the wire and negotiate functionally, regularly in that weekly basis with individuals from the Haqqani Network and that force protection concern?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, we are going to have to improve the security environment. It is not – the environment today is not conducive the carrying out those types of activities. You're exactly right. And so part of what we're going to have to do is, first, ensure we're ready to engage when conditions permit us to engage. It, again, is why Pakistan is very important in this discussion as well. Pakistan can facilitate much of that discussion.

And there are other regional players to which this particular conflict and this unstable situation in Afghanistan are important. We've had discussions with the Chinese about a role they might be able to play. We've had discussions with the Russians about the role they could play if they choose to. And certainly regional players in the Gulf, GCC member countries, are very interested in seeing this area in Afghanistan stabilized as well. So there are a lot of partners out here on the periphery that I think will have, from time to time, important roles they can play. Ultimately it comes down to the two parties – the Afghan Government and the Taliban representatives.

MS NAUERT: Felicia Schwartz with *The Wall Street Journal*.

QUESTION: Thanks, Mr. Secretary. Going back to Pakistan, officials for quite some time – Democratic and Republican administrations – have tried to get the government to stop its – stop giving safe haven to the Haqqani Network, terrorist groups. What leverage do you think you have?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think it's – obviously, we have some leverage that's been discussed in terms of the amount of aid and military assistance we give them, their status as a non-NATO alliance partner. All of that can be put on the table. But at the end of the day, Pakistan has to decide what is in Pakistan's best long-term interest from a security standpoint for themselves and for their people. Quite frankly, as I evaluate Pakistan's current situation, if I were the Pakistan Government, I would be – I would have growing concerns about the strength of the Taliban and other organizations inside of Pakistan who seem to be growing their numbers and their presence to the point that at some point they become a real threat to the stability of the Pakistani Government itself.

I think they need to be thinking about what is in their best long-term interest and how can we work with them to achieve a safer, more stable Pakistan in the next decades to come as well. I think it really is up to them. They've got to ask themselves that question. Why is – why does this work for them and why is this going to be – going to continue to support their stability and the survival of their government in the years ahead, if they continue to allow these elements to just grow and maintain their presence inside of Pakistan.

MS NAUERT: Last question. Welcome, AFP. Front desk here.

QUESTION: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Don't you fear on the other side that too much pressure, too tough pressure on Pakistan may destabilize the Islamabad and may have destabilizing all the region with having Taliban stronger in the country?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: That is a concern, and that's why I made the comments I just made, that I think it's important that Pakistan begin to think about its ability to contain these groups as well.

It's why, though, we take a regional approach. The U.S. alone is not going to change this dynamic with Pakistan. India and Pakistan, they have their own issues that they have to continue to work through, but I think there are areas where perhaps even India can take some steps of rapprochement on issues with Pakistan to improve the stability within Pakistan and remove some of the reasons why they deal with these unstable elements inside their own country.

As I said, other regional players have strong interest in Pakistan. China has strong interest in Pakistan. Having a stable, secure future Pakistan is in a lot of our interests. They are a nuclear power. We have concerns about their weapons, the security of their weapons. There are many areas in which we believe we should be having very productive dialogue that serves both of our interests and regional interest as well.

So this is – again, this is not a situation where the U.S. is saying, “Look, it's just us and you.” What our approach is to bring – as I said, these regional approaches is to bring all the other interest into this effort. Much as we've done with North Korea and assembling this global effort in North Korea, I think too often we try to distill these challenges down to where it's just the U.S. and some other country and only between the two of us can we solve it. We have to enlarge the circle of interest and bring others to – into the effort as well, and that's what we'll be doing with Pakistan as well.

MS NAUERT: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Thank you everyone.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: We'll see you tomorrow. We'll have a press briefing at 2:00 p.m. Thanks.

QUESTION: Thank you.

[\[1\]](#) Correction: The U.S. ambassador to Pakistan remains in position.

[\[2\]](#) Correction: A nominee for U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan has been named.

[\[3\]](#) Correction: Chargé d'Affaires Ambassador Hugo Llorens remains in position.

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