

Press Releases: Senior State Department Official Previewing Secretary Pompeo's Trip to Brussels, Belgium

Special Briefing

On Plane en route to Brussels, Belgium
December 3, 2018

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm glad to have you guys along. I'm happy to talk about pretty much anything you want to talk about, and [Moderator], jump in, but I thought I'd give you a few top lines on why the trip is important, some of the meetings that are going to occur, and then you guys can jump in with all of your questions.

So this is the Secretary's third trip to NATO since he became Secretary of State. I think most of you know he came over the day he was confirmed. He got on the plane. A ministerial, and then he came back for a NATO summit. This is his third trip in the last however many months, eight months or so since he became Secretary. We see this as an opportunity first and foremost to reinforce U.S. commitment to NATO allies, the alliance, Article 5, U.S. commitment to Article 5 ironclad; also engage with very close allies on areas that we agree on, some areas we disagree on, but hoping to in particular talk with some of our major allies about some of the most important international security issues that we're tracking today.

First and foremost, I would say you can expect to see a follow-up on commitments that were made at the 2018 NATO summit, so the July summit, and I would highlight a few. We continue to press allies on following through with their Wales commitments: 2 percent of GDP on defense, 20 percent of defense budgets on major equipment. I would highlight allied Portugal, which recently came forward with a credible plan, 2 percent spending. Also Slovakia just put through major spending increases for the defense budget. Across the alliance, we have seen an historic increase in defense spending since January of 2017.

I would also highlight by way of follow-up on the summit the updated counterterrorism action plan. This is a major set of contributions from the NATO alliance. Really, it's the first time in NATO's history that NATO has gotten deeply into the business of counterterrorism but also developed a strategy and an agenda for the South, the Mediterranean littoral. At this

ministerial, we're going to go through a report on NATO's southern dimension but also update the 2017 counterterrorism plan with a heavy emphasis on intelligence sharing.

And we'll also be, by way of follow-up, going through Secretary General Stoltenberg's heroic efforts at a functional review, so bringing the NATO civilian command structure up to speed with the changes and evolutions that we've had in a strategic setting but also changes in the military command structure.

The second big thing I would highlight is the discussion about the INF treaty. I'm sure all of you have been following this very closely. We intend to engage our allies in a close discussion over the next day and a half on INF. We've been in discussions with – for several days now with European allies on INF.

As all of you know who follow this, this is not a new problem. The U.S. calling out Russia on noncompliance is not a new phenomenon. We've been pressing the Russian Federation for five years now in public about the so-called screwdriver SSC-8 missile which is not INF-compliant. We will be at this ministerial building on the very strong language that came out in the summer NATO declaration and working with allies to chart a joint way forward in how we tackle the problem of Russian noncompliance with INF, and I'm happy to talk more about that in the Q&A.

And then finally, we'll have several sessions of the NATO Atlantic – of the North Atlantic Commission, sessions on Ukraine and Georgia. In that session, we plan to build on recent U.S. statements pressing Russian leadership to release the detained crew members and ships that were taken into custody in the recent Kerch incident. We are calling on European allies to show leadership in tackling a problem that's in Europe's own backyard. The President and Secretary have been crystal-clear in where we stand on the matter of the Kerch incident, Ukrainian – Russian aggression against Ukraine. This administration has provided a lot of things that the previous administration did not want to provide, but we plan in this ministerial to work with allies charting a way forward on how we make progress on these crew members and ships.

We also have a session of the NAC meeting on Resolute Support Mission. The goal is to work with our allies to endorse Ambassador Khalilzad's reconciliation efforts. We had recent elections in Afghanistan and also a donors meetings in Geneva. We want to build on the momentum from those events. Ambassador Hutchison and I will be attending the RSM session. At the last NATO summit, the allies agreed to extend the financial support through 2024 for Afghanistan's security forces. We intend to continue to build on that as well.

I think most of you know that the Secretary is giving a major speech while he is in Brussels. I can provide you a little bit of a preview on that speech. I don't want to get too far ahead of him. It's a great speech. I've read it. This will happen at the German Marshall Fund. The symbolism was deliberate. It was important to us to evoke the memory of George C. Marshall, one of the

Secretary's predecessors who helped to create the foundation for the Atlantic alliance. The Bretton Woods system, the foundation for the international order as we know it, most of the major international institutions in the world today grew out of that immediate post World War II moment.

I think you can expect to see the Secretary walk you through a big-picture assessment of how he, how this administration, views the strategic reality in the world: rising revisionist authoritarian powers, number one; and number two, how we view international institutions and the growing gap between the international institutional order on one hand and the scale of the type of strategic challenges that we face on the other. So you can expect to see him share this administration's vision for America's place in the world.

So that's a quick preview. Happy to answer any questions. If there's anything I overlooked, let me know.

MODERATOR: Remember this is on background to a senior State Department official. Go ahead, let's get a question.

QUESTION: Can I ask, do you support Ukraine's call to (inaudible) which you said (inaudible) to the Sea of Azov?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I don't want to get ahead of process. We support Ukraine wholeheartedly in its defense of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and I think our actions have been very clear in that regard. We're looking at a lot of measures both on the U.S. side, coordination with allies, and you'll be seeing more in the days ahead of how we and our allies will jointly message and where appropriate take action. We really want to see European allies do more. The United States I think has been – I think the administration has been forceful and clear up to an including providing a lot of lethal aid to Ukrainians. We want to see European allies take greater responsibility for a security problem that's just 200 miles from Germany's border, and we'll be right there with them every step of the way.

QUESTION: And is this the forum for official (inaudible) six months on INF? There was a lot of speculation in Brussels last week that that's what the speech was going to be used for, but then Stoltenberg said today that no, it's still not time yet.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Look, I don't want to get ahead of process. I want to stay focused on our goal right now, which is to be in sync with allies. We want to keep the burden squarely where it belongs – the onus, and that is on Russia for noncompliance. We are determined to stay in sync with our allies in our response to this problem. So the discussions over the next day will be about that, and you can expect to see a decision in due course.

QUESTION: In what?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: In due course.

QUESTION: Okay. The speech is at 11:00 (inaudible) so –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The Secretary's speech?

QUESTION: Yeah.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. I'll let the Secretary's speech speak for itself. As I said, it's big-picture. It's looking at America's role in the world. On INF I don't want to – I don't want to get ahead of ourselves here. We really want to roll up our sleeves and work with our allies on a joint position, and that's what we're focused on right now.

QUESTION: Follow-up on Nike's question. Can you give any more specifics on what you'll be asking for from Europe as far as Ukraine?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: As far as Ukraine is concerned. So we have some ideas in the United States. I think we've messaged very clearly that it's unacceptable that Russia took this latest step, this act of aggression. We've coordinated very closely over the last several days with European allies both in the NATO format and in the EU format, and right now we're focused on sizing an allied alliance-wide response, having the right size response to what happened at the Kerch. There is a humanitarian dimension to this with the sailors involved. There is an international legal dimension to this with freedom of navigation. And we want our allies to show leadership. It's a problem a lot closer to home for them than it is to us. There's a lot of things that the United States has done and will continue to do for the Ukrainians, but we want to make sure that we come out of this week with a unified position where we're working with allies to have a holistic response.

QUESTION: As you look at the risk metrics there in the Sea of Azov, what's the likelihood or – that you see of Russia trying to repeat in Mariupol some of the operations they had at Donbas?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I don't want to speculate on the military situation. I think the facts on the ground are very clear as they stand right now. Russian forces and Russian-backed so-called separatists are waging daily aggression in violations of ceasefire. It's one of the things that we will be addressing at OSCE in a couple of days. We're very watchful. The situation on the ground there is very dangerous. Ambassador Volker is very engaged, as you know, with the Russians, trying to find a clear way – a peaceful way forward. But I think Azov marked – I should say, it was on the Black Sea side – let's say the Kerch Strait act of aggression marked an unmistakable escalation on the part of the Russians, because it was the first time that they were openly using their own forces and being very unapologetic about it.

QUESTION: [Senior State Department Official], there's a sense in Europe that you're backing out of the INF because of concerns about China, not so much about Europe, and that the Europeans feel that you are – that that policy shows that American attention is increasingly diverted from Europe to China. What's your response to that?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, look, I think if you read the Nuclear Posture Review, it was crystal-clear. Number one, we're committed to arms control, but number two, we have growing concerns about the actions of a lot

of American rivals. There's Russia, there's China, there's Iran. I'm not sure it's helpful to disaggregate those when we're talking about the future of INF, because the central problem is that Russia – which is a party to INF – is in flagrant noncompliance. We're talking about five years of repeated U.S. efforts. We've tried on 30 different occasions at very high levels to share with the Russians the information that we have about their systems, to call them into – back into compliance. We've also shared a lot of intelligence with European allies.

I think at this point we have been so engaged with European allies, the one thing I don't question is whether the allies understand where we're coming from. They've seen the material. If you saw the NATO declaration, I think it's crystal-clear. Our central focus is Russia. And there is a China problem; a big portion of the Chinese ballistic arsenal is not in compliance with INF. But I would not say from a U.S. perspective we look at INF to look at the way forward. I wouldn't look at that and say the United States has made a determination on the basis of what Russia has done to do X, Y, or Z. Right now our focus is on sharing what we have with allies, making sure as I said a minute ago that we're on the same page with a clear way forward. And once we've had those conversations with allies, we'll make a decision and communicate those decisions in concert with our allies.

MODERATOR: Just a couple questions left.

QUESTION: One more, do one more. This is going to be the 70th anniversary of NATO coming up in – it'll be the first major anniversary of NATO where there is not going to be a leaders summit. Europeans are saying that they're not going to have a leaders summit because they don't want Trump to be part of such a big summit because the last summit with Trump was such a disaster. What's your response to that?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So we take the – as the Secretary has said on more than one occasion, we take the NATO alliance seriously and the 70th anniversary very seriously. We've been looking very closely with allies at some plans for next year. I don't think we're at a stage where we're sharing those publicly, but we take it seriously. You'll learn more in due course, but it's – we are cognizant of the symbolic value of next year, and you'll hear more about that in the days to come.

QUESTION: Can you talk about the agenda for tonight's meeting with Netanyahu?

MODERATOR: [Senior State Department Official] handles EUR, so not NEA issues. There'll be something more on that later. But we can confirm that the Secretary's meeting with the prime minister.

QUESTION: So you can't speak to the priorities of the pull-aside with the Libyan prime minister either?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm not deeply involved in that, unfortunately. I follow it closely, but it's not – I wouldn't want to step on my NEA colleagues.

MODERATOR: And [Senior State Department Official] will still – even though we'll be headed back to Washington for President Bush's funeral, [Senior State Department Official] will still be heading to Milan, where he'll be doing some of the OSCE meetings that the Secretary had planned.

QUESTION: Can you tell us about the agenda for Italy, what you're looking to get out of that part of the trip?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: For OSCE?

QUESTION: What you're looking to get out of the Italy portion of the trip.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Right. So OSCE – we want to reaffirm U.S. commitment to the OSCE as a significant platform for security in Europe but also for human rights dialogue in Europe and Eurasia. I think a couple of the agenda items that you will see – number-one agenda item will be Ukraine and Kerch Strait. We are determined to hold Russia accountable for those actions, and OSCE is a great venue for European nations showing leadership. So you'll see the U.S. focused on SMM, you'll see us focused on ceasefire violations.

And then secondly, as you know, the United States continues to call on Russia to come back into compliance with a family of treaties and obligations under OSCE – Open Skies, conventional forces in Europe. We're in the process of trying to work through a modernization of the Vienna document. The Vienna document is the instrument of OSCE. It provides transparency for military exercises. And those will be the two big focal points.

MODERATOR: Okay. [Senior State Department Official] has to get back to the other part of his job.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thanks, everybody.

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