

# Press Releases: Senior State Department Official Remarks to the Press En Route to Kuala Lumpur

Special Briefing

Onboard Airplane en route to Kuala Lumpur  
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**MODERATOR:** On background, senior State Department official. [Senior State Department Official] has covered this region for many, many years. (Inaudible) spent some time together in Burma and Bangladesh, has a real interest in Cambodia as well. I know some of you have asked some questions about that. So we'd like him to get into some of the policy and understand why we're here and why we're doing (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** Great, thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So we're on our way to Southeast Asia. We have ahead of us three busy days, three countries. A considerable amount of diplomatic engagement will take place. The Secretary is really looking forward to the opportunity to engage with counterparts from across the entire Indo-Pacific region.

We're starting in Malaysia, and that's quite purposeful for a couple of reasons. Secretary Pompeo will be the first senior U.S. Government official to visit Malaysia since that country's historic election not too long ago, and also Malaysia is ASEAN's current country coordinator for the United States. Each of the 10 ASEAN countries play this coordination role with the 10 partners of ASEAN, and Malaysia has been our country coordinator for the last three years, concludes this weekend. So it's a chance to talk with Malaysia as our country coordinator about ASEAN matters and cooperation.

The relationship with Malaysia is quite important. We have a trading relationship. We have a security relationship, a lot of dimension in terms of our cooperation on counterterrorism, maritime security, other regional matters. So Secretary Pompeo will be seeing Prime Minister Mahathir to congratulate him on his election and the new government's start following that recent election.

The Secretary's actual counterpart, the foreign minister, Foreign Minister Saifuddin, is already in Singapore. The ASEAN foreign ministers have been gathering there for the last couple of days, so Secretary Pompeo will see the

foreign minister when we get to Singapore.

**QUESTION:** [Senior State Department Official], can I just ask on Malaysia now? Given the Secretary's speech the other day when he talked about problematic Chinese lending in Asia, does he see Malaysia as something of a case in point? Mahathir is asking for Chinese loans to be reviewed. Is this something that will be discussed?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** I don't think the Secretary is going to Malaysia specifically to talk about other countries in that manner, but he will have an opportunity to talk about our Indo-Pacific strategy and our vision for an open, transparent, rules-based region and will be echoing some of the themes that he addressed in his speech in Washington at the Indo-Pacific Business Forum.

With Malaysia we have a comprehensive partnership, and so that encompasses many topics, many areas of cooperation that we'll be talking about. The Secretary is also going to be seeing our embassy, our embassy staff in Kuala Lumpur, led by the outstanding Ambassador Kamala Lakhdhir. We have a terrific deputy chief of mission there as well, Dean Thompson. All of that takes place tomorrow. It's going to be a very busy day because we continue on to Singapore.

Do you have questions about Malaysia?

**QUESTION:** A question on Malaysia, yes. Are you going to be talking about Iran at all and about sanctions? They still have some – do some trade or buy some of the – some of Iran's oil. Will that be part of this effort, a purpose of going there?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** The primary purpose in stopping in Kuala Lumpur is the bilateral relationship and, Malaysia being a key member of ASEAN, opportunities to talk about the Indo-Pacific region and the Asia Pacific and the kind of issues that will be addressed in Singapore. I think that's the best way to describe what the objective there is in Kuala Lumpur.

**QUESTION:** What about IMDB? Is that going to come up? I mean, do you see there's a linkage apparently between the Belt and Road and IMDB now emerging? Is that something you'll be discussing or concerned about?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Well, we know the new government is focusing quite closely on that issue as well as reforms and corruption in general. From the United States perspective, that's a matter for the Justice Department, and investigations are underway so I don't have much to offer.

**QUESTION:** This is really kind of like Back to the Future with Mahathir and your experience. What exactly is different about this administration's approach to Malaysia under Mahathir and every previous administration (inaudible)?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Well, the election was quite historic.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but how is – how is U.S. policy any different?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** This is a first touch for Secretary Pompeo, for a senior U.S. Government official, and we have a good friendship, good cooperation, between the United States and Malaysia. And I think we take note of the fact that for the first time in Malaysia's history an election has gone to an opposition coalition. That says a lot for governance and democracy, which is very much on display in Malaysia, is a strong democratic member of ASEAN. And that's the background, the framework, for making this stop.

**QUESTION:** Mahathir is not a new entity. He's well known.

**MODERATOR:** Matt, can you speak up?

**QUESTION:** Mahathir is not a new entity. He is well known to U.S. Government officials, presuming there are still any who survived this long into this administration, who have dealt with him in the past. He was not exactly the knight in shining armor for the U.S. You guys had great problems with him, particularly over the – Anwar (inaudible). And I know you've been around long enough to remember when Mahathir was prime minister (inaudible), so how is this different? I mean, to say that he's an opposition guy now, I mean, that's just kind of not right. He's not. He's the establishment.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Prime Minister Mahathir is an elder statesman in Malaysia and in the region and has a lot of experience in government. He has come back to a governing role in a – through a different route, and that is an interesting observation that we can make about Malaysia.

I think Secretary Pompeo is arriving in Kuala Lumpur with 2018 in mind. There's a long history in both countries. The most important aspect I think I can emphasize is that we have a comprehensive partnership between our two countries with many areas of cooperation, and that will be an opportunity for Secretary Pompeo with the government to address how we're doing in those areas of cooperation, how we can prepare for success in Singapore over the next two days.

**QUESTION:** Do you see opportunities for U.S. business in Malaysia given the fact that so many of these Chinese projects, big projects, are under review?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Well, speaking specifically about American business, we have a big business presence in Malaysia and a very good trading relationship. Of course, in line with our President's objectives, it's a trading relationship we're hoping can continue to be free and fair and we can bring about some balance to the trade deficit that we have with Malaysia.

But trade and investment is very substantial. Malaysia as an economy is one of the big success stories in the Asia Pacific and has come a long way in the last few decades. So the Secretary's message from Washington, where we addressed the economic commercial dimensions to our Indo-Pacific vision and strategy, provides some background for discussions while in Kuala Lumpur.

Let me just address what we'll be doing for the rest of the day on Friday.

**QUESTION:** Just one more question on Malaysia. Is that one of the countries that you are considering for an exception to the zero purchases of Iranian oil?

**MODERATOR:** I think [Senior State Department Official] would not be getting into some of the sanctions issues. That is something that is handled by a different group of our colleagues in the State Department, and we're not forecasting sanctions (inaudible).

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So in Singapore on Friday, two of the multilateral meetings – there will be four in total while we're in Singapore – two of them take place on Friday.

The first is the Lower Mekong Initiative, and Secretary Pompeo actually chairs that meeting because that's a U.S. initiative with our five partner countries – Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. The LMI, as it's known, is in its ninth year. It's been very successful in building capacity and cooperation around the Mekong River but also other issues, including health and education, connectivity, infrastructure, and the like.

This particular version of the ministerial will address a water data initiative that we launched last year, and this year the Secretary will be talking about broadening this water data initiative cooperation between the Lower Mekong Initiative, the Friends of the Lower Mekong, which include all of these partner countries plus other donors, and the Mekong River Commission, the MRC.

It turns out to be quite timely to talk about water data because we've seen water in the news in mainland Southeast Asia over recent weeks. The very tragic dam breach and collapse in Laos has had impact in Laos, also on some of its neighbors. There's been flooding in Burma, elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia as well. The Secretary will be offering condolences to our partners for the suffering that's taken place and highlighting some of the assistance we're providing.

**QUESTION:** On that point, some of those countries blames these problems on climate change. Is the Secretary prepared to talk about climate change?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Well, in fact, the Lower Mekong Initiative was founded nine years ago based on the fact that all of these countries have waterfront on the Mekong River but experience the impact of what takes place upstream where the Mekong originates. And the initiative brings these countries together with different – they have different histories, they have different legal systems, different capacities, different levels of development – and really builds a platform for them to cooperate together. So there's a lot of enthusiasm among these countries for the Lower Mekong Initiative, and the Secretary will have some announcements about how we're helping out with that water data initiative – getting good data, sharing data about water resources.

**QUESTION:** Climate change (inaudible)?

**QUESTION:** When you talk about upstream, you mean Chinese dams, right?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** The Mekong originates in China, and China has influence on that resource that has impacts downstream, so the countries have to manage some of those impacts. Correct.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) the question was about climate change.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Among the many topics that the Lower Mekong partners talk about is the environment, environmental impacts and how they contend with them. So I think that's the kind of framework. The other topics include water, energy, food, human development and connectivity, which comprises education, health, particular issues that women face in the region.

The reason I keep coming back to water is because millions of people earn their livelihoods based on Mekong, its tributaries, and other water resources. So water tends to be a particular topic of interest among the countries.

**QUESTION:** The words "climate change" are taboo? They can't be spoken?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Well, they do come up from time to time, but I don't have more to offer.

The second multilateral grouping is the U.S.-ASEAN Ministerial, and that's the United States plus the 10 member-countries of ASEAN. This is a ministerial that actually prepares for the U.S.-ASEAN Summit that takes place in November, also in Singapore. The United States and Malaysia co-chair this meeting, so Malaysia, as I mentioned earlier, is the country coordinator. Last year, ASEAN itself celebrated 50 years of existence. The United States and ASEAN celebrated 40 years of official ties. So now we're beginning the next 50 years, the next 40-year periods.

We have a strategic partnership that's been in place since 2015 with ASEAN as a collective, and we'll be there in that venue talking about many regional issues, including North Korea, the South China Sea, counterterrorism, the crisis in Rakhine State, cyber security, support for the Lower Mekong Initiative because ASEAN is quite supportive of the LMI. And the Secretary will be talking about some new USAID programs. One is called IGNITE, and that's helping the region with international standards for their aspirational economic integration. The other is called PROSPECT, which is helping with inclusive rules-based approaches to the region.

There will also be an announcement about a U.S.-ASEAN internship program. This is where U.S. companies based in the region will be taking on interns who come from the 10 member-states of ASEAN – terrific opportunities to build people-to-people ties and tap youth innovation and creativity.

I should note that while the Secretary is in Singapore he will be echoing the themes that he addressed in Washington on the Indo-Pacific region and our vision for it. In Washington he had quite a bit of attention given to the economic commercial dimensions of the vision. He will echo those in Singapore and also talk a little bit more about what we're doing in the security realm.

Finally, on Friday, the Secretary will be meeting with Prime Minister Lee of Singapore for a couple of reasons, I think mostly obvious. Singapore is the host. Singapore is the chair of ASEAN this year. And so there's a courtesy aspect, but also we have a very important relationship, bilateral relationship, between the United States and Singapore. So that's an opportunity to talk about our security cooperation, the other regional issues I noted will be addressed in the multilateral meetings, also our trade and investment. Singapore is one of those countries with whom we actually have a trade surplus in the region, so we feel very good about that, but it'll be an opportunity to talk about expanding even more trade and investment. Singapore is host to a massive U.S. business presence, really the biggest in the Asia Pacific. Thousands of American companies are based there in Singapore.

Prime Minister Lee, of course, visited Washington last year and the year prior. He came two years in a row to visit the White House over successive administrations. That's one indication of how close the relationship is. So the Secretary looks forward to seeing the prime minister. He will see his counterpart, Foreign Minister Balakrishnan, in the multilateral meetings and will likely have an opportunity to chat with him on Saturday.

I think we'll have another opportunity to talk so I won't go into great detail, but on Saturday the other two multilateral meetings take place. The first is the East Asia Summit Ministerial, which prepares for the summit in November. That includes ASEAN plus eight countries. And then the ASEAN Regional Forum, which includes ASEAN plus 17 countries, a total of 27 countries. The ASEAN Regional Forum is what I would describe as terminal. It ends at the minister level and culminates a year of activities.

I'd be happy to answer your questions then about any of these stops and visits and engagements.

**QUESTION:** If he does meet with the North Korea foreign minister, would that be on Friday or Saturday, do you think?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thank you for that question, Carol. I'm not in a position to confirm any additional meetings of a bilateral nature beyond those meetings with Singapore, but I will simply note what happens at these annual gatherings is there are at least 27 – I think this year with guests of the chair there are approximately 30 – foreign ministers. That provides a platform for a lot of interaction – some sit-down meetings, some side-bar meetings, some pull-asides, some chance encounters – to address challenges in the region or other business. So I think it's safe to say the Secretary will be seeing many of his counterparts.

**MODERATOR:** We need to wrap it up. A few more questions.

**QUESTION:** You said last Tuesday that the Secretary will ask countries to continue implementing sanctions against North Korea, but what – can he do more than just ask implementing when there is a sense that they are not implementing them as – as they were doing before the summit and before this year?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Yeah, I think when it comes to North Korea and sanctions, it's more than an ask; it's a reminder of obligations. All of the countries participating in these multilateral meetings are also members of the United Nations and are obligated to implement all UN Security Council resolutions. And we do have concerns about North Korea bypassing some of those sanctions, not adhering to its own obligations, so the Secretary will use these opportunities to remind all of that obligation to stick to the sanctions as a means to get to the ultimate objective, the fully verified, finally fully verified, denuclearization of North Korea.

**QUESTION:** But he already addressed this problem at the UN Security Council a few weeks ago. What can he do more than just reminding them? I mean, is this having some success in implementation? Do you see some changes or not yet?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Well, in very general terms, we believe that the sanctions and the adherence to sanctions by countries around the world is a primary reason that North Korea has entered into dialogue, and those sanctions need to stay in place until the goals and objectives of the sanctions are achieved. That's a very important message, and it's not one that the Secretary delivers lightly, I think he delivers on a regular basis, and we see a need to continue doing so.

**MODERATOR:** Okay, one last question. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) question.

**MODERATOR:** Last question. We've got to go.

**QUESTION:** The Singaporean (inaudible) in D.C. expressed concern that the U.S. is not interested in multilateral agreements, which the region see as really important because of the interconnectedness of all the different markets. So what is the U.S. able to offer as a reassurance after pulling out of the TPP that it really is as committed as the previous administration was?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** I think the ASEAN-related ministerials that will take place on Friday and Saturday are a perfect example that the United States is very much about multilateralism. We've been a member of the East Asia Summit for a number of years, the ASEAN Regional Forum for even longer. As I mentioned, our ties with U.S.-ASEAN are now at 41 years, Lower Mekong Initiative at nine years, and these collective bodies of countries agree on many issues, addressing security challenges, addressing areas of cooperation, including on disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. And we are a Pacific nation, and that's how we identify ourselves. That's how we come to the table and work with all of these countries together. Each of the countries operate on a consensus basis, so it really is defining of the term and the concept of cooperation.

**MODERATOR:** Very good. We've got to go. Thank you all.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

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