

Press Releases: Press Availability at NATO Headquarters

Press Availability
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

Brussels, Belgium
December 4, 2018

SECRETARY POMPEO: Good evening, everyone. I want to begin this evening by expressing my condolences to the Bush family on the passing of a great man, President George H. W. Bush. He embodied literally the best of America in his devotion to public service and his ardent patriotism. My wife Susan and I mourn with President Trump and all of our fellow Americans as we celebrate his incredible life. Tomorrow I will join the President and my fellow cabinet members in honoring him during America's national day of mourning.

President Bush, during his entire lifetime, was a relentless defender of transatlantic security. Today, we strive to emulate his example by asserting powerful American leadership on behalf of our people and our allies. When the INF Treaty was inked in 1987, it represented a good-faith effort between two

rivals to de-escalate the threat of nuclear war. President Reagan described it as the realization of “an impossible vision,” and Mikhail Gorbachev said it had “universal significance for mankind.”

But whatever successes this treaty helped produce, today we must confront Russian cheating on its arms control obligations. As I told my fellow ministers earlier today, our nations have a choice. We either bury our head in the sand or we take common-sense action in response to Russia’s flagrant disregard for the express terms of the INF Treaty.

It’s worth noting that Russia’s violations didn’t happen overnight. Russia’s been flight-testing the SSC-8 cruise missile since the mid-2000s. They’ve been testing it in excess of ranges that the treaty permits. All the tests of the SSC-8 have originated from a Kapustin Yar site from both a fixed and mobile launcher. Its range makes it a direct menace to Europe.

In 2017, General Selva of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told Congress that Russia had deployed its missile, and I quote, “in order to pose a threat to NATO and to facilities within the NATO area of responsibility,” end of quote. Russia continues to press forward, and as of late 2018 has filled multiple battalions of the SSC-8 missiles.

Throughout all of this, the United States has remained in scrupulous compliance with the treaty. In spite of Russia’s violations, we have exercised the utmost patience and effort in working to convince Russia to adhere to its terms. On at least 30 occasions since 2013, extending to the highest levels of leadership, we have raised Russia’s noncompliance and stressed that a failure to return to compliance would have consequences.

Russia’s reply has been consistent: deny any wrongdoing, demand more information, and issue baseless counter-accusations. For more than four years, Moscow has pretended that it didn’t know what missile or test the United States was even talking about, even when we provided extensive information about the missile’s characteristics and testing history. It was not until we chose to publicize the Russian name of the missile in November of 2017 that Russia finally acknowledged its existence. Then Russia changed its cover story from the missile that does not exist to the missile that exists but is treaty-compliant.

These violations of the INF Treaty cannot be viewed in isolation from the larger pattern of Russian lawlessness on the world stage. The list of Russia’s infamous acts is long: Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, election meddling, Skripal, and now the Kerch Strait, to name just a few.

In light of these facts, the United States today declares it has found Russia in material breach of the treaty and will suspend our obligations as a remedy effective in 60 days unless Russia returns to full and verifiable compliance.

We’re taking these steps for several reasons. First, Russia’s actions gravely undermine American national security and that of our allies and partners. It makes no sense for the United States to remain in a treaty that constrains our ability to respond to Russia’s violations. Russia has reversed the

trajectory of diminishing nuclear risk in Europe, where America has tens of thousands of troops and where millions more American civilians are living and working. These Americans live and work alongside many more millions of Europeans who are put in danger by Russian missile systems.

Second, while Russia is responsible for the demise of the treaty, many other states – including China, North Korea, and Iran – are not parties to the INF Treaty. This leaves them free to build all the intermediate range missiles that they would like. There is no reason the United States should continue to cede this crucial military advantage to revisionist powers like China, in particular when these weapons are being used to threaten and coerce the United States and its allies in Asia.

If you ask the question why the treaty wasn't enlarged to include more nations, including China, keep in mind that it has been tried three times without any success already, and it has failed each time.

Third, inertia will not drive policy in the Trump administration. As President Trump has made clear and as I spoke about this morning, the United States will not support international agreements that undermine our security, our interests, or our values.

Finally, and I want to be clear about this, America is upholding the rule of law. When we set forth our commitments, we agree to be bound by them. We expect the same of our treaty counterparts everywhere, and we will hold them accountable when their words prove untrustworthy. If we do not, we'll get cheated by other nations, expose Americans to greater risk, and squander our credibility.

Earlier today, I spoke on America's enduring leadership role in the international order and I reiterate that powerful American leadership means never abandoning our responsibility to protect our security and our nation's sovereignty. I've stated our position in no uncertain terms. The United States remains hopeful that our relationship with Russia can get better, can get on better footing.

With that being said, the burden falls on Russia to make the necessary changes. Only they can save this treaty. If Russia admits its violations and fully and verifiably comes back into compliance we will, of course, welcome that course of action. But Russia and Russia only can take this step.

We appreciate NATO's strong support for the United States decision as expressed in this statement released today. The United States and our NATO allies stand vigilant that Russia's lawless conduct will not be tolerated in the realm of arms control or anywhere else.

Thank you.

MS NAUERT: We have time for several questions. The first one goes to Teri Schultz from Deutsche Welle. Teri.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you. Secretary Pompeo, I'm here.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Got you.

QUESTION: What does this mean concretely? What will the next steps be? Are you just waiting the 60 days and hoping that Europe can help pull Russia back into compliance? What exactly – how exactly will this play out now? And then does the six months start in 60 days? Just a few more details on that. Thank you.

SECRETARY POMPEO: You bet. So as I said in my remarks, we would welcome a Russian change of heart, a change in direction, the destruction of their program and their follow-on continuance of the terms of the treaty. And so over the next 60 days they have every chance to do so. And we would welcome that.

I will tell you, our European partners appreciate that extra time. We work closely with them. They asked for an extended period, and we, in our efforts to make sure that we had complete unity – and I will tell you, as you speak to the other 28 ministers who are here today, there is complete unity around this – we believe this is the right outcome. The six-month period will begin to run 60 days from now. During the 60 days, we will still not test or produce or deploy any systems, and we'll see what happens during this 60-day period.

We've talked to the Russians a great deal. We're hopeful they'll change course, but there's been no indication to date that they have any intention of doing so.

MS NAUERT: Jessica Donati from *Wall Street Journal*.

QUESTION: Yeah. Thank you. Beyond withdrawing from the – or suspending your membership of the INF Treaty, what other steps can you do to help Ukraine in what it's suffering at the hands of Russia?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So there was lots of discussion about that today. I'll leave to a couple of others to talk about the conversations. But two things were very clear from the time that we spent with the Ukrainian foreign minister as a group, is that there is complete unanimity that the Russian action was lawless and unacceptable and deterrents must be restored, and that that is a collective commitment of Europe and the world to deny Russia the capacity to continue to violate basic international law norms. We hope that the Russians will return the sailors that they're holding today, just immediately. And we will collectively develop a set of responses that demonstrate to Russia that this behavior is simply unacceptable.

MS NAUERT: Emerald Robinson from One America News.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. You talked about, yes, the commitments with treaties in regards to the United States and its allies. But you also talked about international institutions and gave America's viewpoint on that. You called out specifically the IMF and the World Bank and the UN. How do you think so many large international institutions can be reformed today? Is it a question of new leadership?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Every institution needs to be evaluated consistently, right. That doesn't – multilateral, international organizations are no different. These organizations have now been around for an extended period of time, and each of them is worthy of full review. Do they still – are they still fit for purpose? Do they still serve their intended means? That's what I spoke about this morning.

President Trump believes that if we exert American leadership and American national sovereignty and we evaluate these institutions against the objective of creating prosperity and peace around the world, that each of them is ripe for some piece of reform. And we'll look at the parts that are working as I – and I described several institutions' functions that are working. We'll keep those. We'll enhance those. We'll want to be part of those.

But if it's broken and it's not delivering for America and for the world then we ought not rest on our laurels and think, "boy, that's good," just because it's multilateral. That notion that the mere nature of something being multilateral is not in and of itself a good. The things that are good are the things that flow, the things that follow from the work that nation-states do as part of those multilateral organizations, and the United States is intent on being a leader to make sure each of those institutions that you mentioned is delivering.

MS NAUERT: Last question, Guy Taylor from *Washington Times*.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Back to the INF Treaty just for a second. You mentioned the prospect of the U.S. developing and deploying systems that would otherwise be in violation of the treaty. From a strategic perspective, is that kind of deployment something that the administration, the Trump administration, is really now preparing to do? And can you speak perhaps to European concerns about the prospect of the deployment of midrange nuclear weapons across Western Europe, for instance, that have been banned by this treaty for so long?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So I can say two things about that today. European nations can rest assured that as we prepare how we will all protect and create stability in Europe and around the world from the threat of intermediate nuclear range missiles, and those in particular from Russia, that we will be working closely with our European allies and other allies throughout the world who are also threatened by these missile systems. And so it won't come to a surprise anyone what the United States is thinking, how we're approaching it, and we will look for their assistance, their help, their inputs in how to develop a security architecture – an architecture that actually delivers.

I mean, we – just to be clear, we had a party – a treaty that had two parties, only one of which was compliant. That's not an agreement. That's just self-restraint, and it strategically no longer made sense to remain in that position and we'll develop our course forward. I don't want to say much about what the United States policy is going to be because there are lots of folks still to talk to. And I will also leave to the Department of Defense the nature and work that they're doing on systems that will ultimately

potentially be noncompliant.

MS NAUERT: Okay, thank you very much everyone. Thank you.

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Press Releases: Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook With Traveling Press

Special Briefing
Brian Hook

Senior Policy Advisor to the Secretary of State and Special Representative for Iran

Brussels, Belgium
December 4, 2018

MR HOOK: (In progress.) We discussed Iran's missile testing, Iran's missile proliferation, and I encouraged the European Union to make progress on missile proliferation, and there's many different ways you can do that. So we had a very good discussion about that. It's – even if one stipulates that Iran is in compliance with the deal, one –

QUESTION: Do you stipulate that, by the way?

MR HOOK: There's nothing to suggest they're not in compliance.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR HOOK: The IAEA has been – so even if you stipulate that Iran is in compliance with the deal, that should not be – the deal should not be an

obstacle to addressing missile testing and proliferation by the Iranian regime. It's important that we not – the Iran nuclear deal is a modest and temporary nonproliferation plan of action. That can't come at the expense of missile proliferation or other threats to peace and security. So it's important that we address these threats comprehensively and not get sort of sidetracked by the Iran nuclear deal.

Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz again. The Islamic Republic of Iran does not control the Strait of Hormuz. The strait is an international waterway. The United States will continue to work with our partners to ensure frequent navigation and the free flow of commerce in international waterways.

There we are. We're also very troubled – very troubled – by the discovery of Lebanese Hizballah tunnels inside of Israel's territory. This is another example of Iran's revolutionary foreign policy that is expansionist and destabilizing for the Middle East, when Iranian-backed Hizballah is digging tunnels into another country beneath their borders. So we condemn this activity and support Israel in its military operations to address these tunnels.

That's it.

QUESTION: You – just on that last thing. You were in the meeting last night with the prime minister?

MR HOOK: No, it was a one-on-one meeting.

QUESTION: Oh, okay. Well, do you know anything about the meeting?

MR HOOK: Did we put out a statement on –

MODERATOR: We put out a readout.

QUESTION: Yeah, but it wasn't very specific.

QUESTION: Nope.

QUESTION: Very interestingly. Highly coincidental that within hours of the meeting they launched this operation.

MODERATOR: You can ask the Secretary about that this evening.

MR HOOK: Yeah.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR HOOK: You should ask.

QUESTION: All right. Then can I ask you about the – on the Euros and missiles? So did they accept – are they on board with the premise that even though they're still in the deal and they're still giving sanctions relief, that they will go after missiles because they're not included in the deal?

MR HOOK: I would say –

QUESTION: Yeah, you pivoted from saying “we discussed” to suddenly saying “we have to address” blah blah blah.

MR HOOK: Well, as you – since many of you covered the supplemental negotiations that we worked on, we discussed Iran’s missile testing and proliferation extensively. And we had reached agreement in the supplemental negotiations to include intercontinental ballistic missiles. We were not able to agree on the sunset clauses, but we had full agreement on missiles.

For 12 years – as I said yesterday on the plane, for 12 years the Security Council has said that Iran should – in various formulations – that Iran needs to stop testing and proliferating ballistic missiles. This is a policy of the – this is a global consensus. I don’t hear anyone in the world arguing that Iran should continue testing and proliferating ballistic missiles.

QUESTION: Well, Iran.

MR HOOK: (Laughter.) Great point.

QUESTION: You do hear that, right? Or are you just –

MR HOOK: No, we’ve heard that. Their actions speak louder than words. So there is a clear global consensus that Iran needs to stop, and Iran continues to defy the UN Security Council and defy the international community on this. And I think that there is, and as Iran – Iran has not diminished its missiles tests during the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal, and I think the world is increasingly recognizing this.

QUESTION: Right. Okay. I just –

MR HOOK: So it’s easier to address the threat because Iran continues to defy –

QUESTION: Let me – I’ll stop at this – but let me just – you said that the deal should not be an obstacle to dealing with missiles.

MR HOOK: Correct.

QUESTION: But do the Europeans see it that way, too? I mean, or are they concerned that if they impose sanctions on something or someone for missiles who are covered under the relief from the deal, that that would be a violation on their part?

MR HOOK: I would put it this way, that the Iran nuclear deal focuses on one threat that Iran presents to international peace and security, the nuclear piece. The theory of the case is that you can’t take on too much, so you can only focus on one threat to get a deal done. The people that negotiated the deal never once said that this will prevent nations from addressing the nonnuclear threats.

QUESTION: No, I know. That was a selling point for it.

MR HOOK: That’s a selling point. Since Iran has expanded its threats to peace

and security in every category during the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal, it is incumbent upon all nations – especially those that still support the deal – to not ignore the escalating threats. And no threat is more escalatory in recent months than the missile proliferation – year – months and years.

QUESTION: Brian, they blame you, basically – the Europeans – because by getting out – by ignoring the deal, by getting out of the deal, by breaking the deal that the United States signed –

MR HOOK: There were no signatures.

QUESTION: Well, the United States agreed to –

MR HOOK: In the last administration.

QUESTION: In the last administration.

MR HOOK: It was a political commitment, which the Obama administration, in a letter to Congress – that is a political commitment. It's not a treaty; it's not legally binding.

QUESTION: By getting out of the deal that the United States agreed to –

MR HOOK: That's fair. Well, that President Obama agreed to –

QUESTION: That President Obama agreed to on behalf of the United States.

QUESTION: He was elected president.

MR HOOK: Yes, I know that, right. It's not a treaty, though, right. Keep going.

QUESTION: – that –

MR HOOK: This is a long wind up.

QUESTION: Well, I didn't mean it to be.

QUESTION: And you'll hit it out of the park, I'm sure.

QUESTION: That you have imposed on Iran penalties, obviously, that were not agreed to under the deal, and thus the Europeans do not see it as possible or in their interests or in the interests of surviving the deal to impose more penalties outside of the deal for such things as ballistic missiles. Yes, they were willing to do it, as long as you stayed in the deal. That was the point of the supplemental agreement. By getting out of the deal, you have prevented the world from really addressing Iran's ballistic missile program. What – that's their point of view. How do you respond to that? This is basically your fault.

MR HOOK: Yeah, during the – from the time the JCPOA – during its negotiation and implementation, up until the time the President left the deal in May, Iran did not diminish its missile testing. And during that same period, no

nation – the EU and other parties to the deal did not take action against Iran’s missile program. So the neglect of this threat predates the President leaving the Iran deal.

Now that we are out of the deal, we have a – much more freedom to use the diplomatic tools at our disposal to address the entire range of Iran’s threats. We think that is the correct posture. We have more freedom to address their threats, and it puts us in a position of leverage to try to get an even better deal.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Brian, yesterday you said we would like to see the European Union move sanctions that target Iran’s missile program. Did you, in your meetings today, see any indication that the EU was any closer than it was yesterday to moving on sanctions that target Iran’s missile program?

MR HOOK: I think there is a growing appreciation among European nations, given Iran’s expanding missile program and the bomb plot in Paris, Denmark, the assassination plot, the smuggling of heroin through Italy – that’s just in recent sort of memory. That doesn’t also account for Iran giving Assad billions, which then of course is one of the factors that creates a refugee crisis that deeply affects Europe. So I think the Europeans increasingly understand that it is possible to address these threats that exist outside of the nuclear deal. The nuclear deal, from its inception in the last administration, was never meant to be an obstacle to address any other threat that Iran presents to peace and security.

QUESTION: Yes, but did you see any indication in your meetings today –

MR HOOK: We are making progress, yeah. We’re making progress.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Okay. So at UNGA in New York, the President told me – when I asked him how progress was being made in regards to the Europeans on the Iran nuclear deal – he suggested that we as America and our safety and structure didn’t even rely on Europeans, per se, to cripple Iran’s economy. And we are seeing it have a big effect.

MR HOOK: Yeah.

QUESTION: So in saying that, how important is it really to get our European allies to join us in this effort?

MR HOOK: Given the role of the United States in the global financial system, it gives us enormous diplomatic leverage to address threats to peace and security. We are doing that in the context of the Iranian regime, and we have been very pleased with the success we have had since May to impose economic costs on Iran for being an outlaw regime. We are very well positioned to deepen Iran’s economic isolation until Iran decides to change its behavior and starts behaving like a normal country and not like a revolutionary regime. As Kissinger said, Iran needs to decide whether it’s a cause or a

country.

Yeah.

QUESTION: I wanted to go back to what you mentioned at the top about sanctions. Can you get into a little bit more about the nature of the conversations and pushback from Europeans who don't really want to go along with a lot of these sanctions? And you did the oil waivers, that kind of thing. I'm just kind of curious to get a sense of where their heads are at in terms of following the U.S.

MR HOOK: Following the U.S. on?

QUESTION: On sanctions. On the reimposition that –

MR HOOK: Oh. Well, what we found is for us, for our sanctions, they affect corporations. And we have seen only full compliance by European corporations who are connected to the international financial system. And we just don't see any daylight between the United States and European companies.

QUESTION: However, there is with the governments.

MR HOOK: The governments who are still in the deal, yes, we have a disagreement over the efficacy of the Iran nuclear deal, and we didn't think – we think it's a deficient deal that needs to be replaced by a new and better deal. While we are out of the deal, it allows us to do everything we can to starve the militias that Iran funds and to start choking its revenues for money to Assad, money to Hizballah, Hamas, the Houthis, cyberattacks, threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, all that.

QUESTION: At the top, you said that during – you said that during a supplemental agreement, you had full agreement on – supplemental talks, you had full agreement on ballistic missiles.

MR HOOK: To include ICBMs.

QUESTION: To –

MR HOOK: Yeah. I mean, ICBMs needed to be included in the – because ICBMs and a nuclear program always walk arm in arm. They're never separate.

QUESTION: So was there an agreement on how to counteract the Iranian missile program in the spring? Did you have that piece in place and are the Europeans now declining to pursue that in this context?

MR HOOK: No. I would separate these things. I – just in the context of negotiating, seeking a supplemental agreement to address the three deficiencies that the President identified around its – we need a stronger inspections regime, we need ICBMs, and we need to have the elimination of the sunset clauses. Those are the three areas of focus. The President also asked for – it would be helpful if we could address these other areas around regional aggression and the other threats, which we talked about. We would spend half the day talking about the nuclear piece and the other half of the

day talking about the non-nuclear threats. And this is what I've said for a long time: We share the same threat assessment. There is a difference of opinion about the Iran nuclear deal. In the context of just trying to address the deficiency of the ICBMs, we were able to get agreement that ICBMs need to be a part of it, but then we couldn't get agreement on sunsets and so we're out of the deal.

QUESTION: But does that mean – forgive me if I'm being dense here – does that mean that there's a – you have – you've had agreement on two of these three areas in May. Was there –

MR HOOK: Yeah, I think as I've said –

QUESTION: Was there – is it on the shelf? It's not being implemented now, even though you'd subsequently agreed on it earlier? (Inaudible.)

MR HOOK: No, it's separate. No, it's not – it's not, it's – I would separate what we're talking about now with the supplemental agreement, and there's a lot that's – look, that ended in May. We have since had a number of developments since May on Iran's missile program. On Thursday, when I was at Bolling and unveiling the new missiles that we found, the missile test on Saturday, and then the other incidents that have happened in Europe have created a new climate, I think, for us to make more progress on the non-nuclear issues.

QUESTION: Does that –

MR HOOK: Jessica? What?

QUESTION: I have a question on – so you mentioned that you – there are three main areas. Is this – when you announced you were leaving the deal in May, there were 12 concessions, which included regional interference. Have you dropped that?

MR HOOK: The what? The –

QUESTION: There were 12 – Pompeo –

QUESTION: There were 12.

MR HOOK: Yeah, the 12, yeah.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: That included not –

QUESTION: But now you're talking about three.

QUESTION: – interfering anymore in this.

QUESTION: Twelve and three.

QUESTION: And now you say that there are just three.

MR HOOK: No, no, no. You've got to separate the supplemental agreement from what everything that came after. I'm not – it's – after the President left the deal, it put us in a position to announce a new Iran strategy. That includes no enrichment, a whole range of things. So those 12 is the comprehensive strategy that you need to apply in the case of Iran.

QUESTION: Would the U.S. be willing to enter into a new deal if it didn't include regional interference?

MR HOOK: I'm not going to get into those hypotheticals.

QUESTION: Can I just ask you –

MR HOOK: We are seeking a comprehensive deal that addresses nukes, missiles, terrorism, everything in the Secretary's 12 areas. When the prior – you have to remember, the President outlined the three areas well prior to – six months prior – more than six months prior to when Secretary Pompeo gave his speech.

QUESTION: You –

MS NAUERT: We're going to have to wrap this up. Brian's got another engagement, so –

QUESTION: You've correctly identified that ICBMs have been agreed to.

MR HOOK: Well, roughly. I mean, when I say agreed to, we have made – yeah.

QUESTION: Yeah, but look, so the Europeans were notoriously resistant on short and medium-range, but you do not seem to be – you seem to be pushing that as well. So in – are you saying that – when you say you think you're making progress, are the Europeans willing to consider less than ICBM range missiles?

MR HOOK: I'm not going to get into the specifics of it, but we did have a medium – we had a couple of days ago the launch of a medium-range ballistic missile.

QUESTION: I know, but –

MR HOOK: And so I –

QUESTION: – the Europeans, even before when you're talking about when you had an agreement, weren't agreeing on medium.

QUESTION: That's true.

MR HOOK: I'm not going to get into the specifics of where we are now.

QUESTION: Can I quickly just ask you something –

MS NAUERT: You're going to have to – wait, guys.

QUESTION: Wait, Michael – Michael hasn't asked –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: You're going to have to be the last one, because Brian's –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Michael Birnbaum from *The Washington Post* in Brussels.

MS NAUERT: Brian's already an hour – five minutes late (inaudible).

QUESTION: That's all right, let me ask one more.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MS NAUERT: Yeah, go ahead.

QUESTION: He hasn't had a question. He hasn't had one.

QUESTION: But it's sort of outsider's question, because I live here in Brussels. I spend all my time talking to European officials, not American ones. And there's so much energy here that's given in to thinking about SPV and thinking about ways to preserve the JCPOA, but basically to undermine the American attempt to blow up the deal. How are you making progress? Like, in what areas are you making progress when so much bandwidth here in Brussels and in Europe is devoted to undoing what the Trump administration has done? I'm trying to sort of square the circle a little bit. How do you have them try to undermine your decisions on the one hand and work with them on the other?

MR HOOK: I'm not sure what you're – can you give me that question again? I'm not sure – you're saying that –

QUESTION: Well, it seems like most –

MR HOOK: They don't have enough bandwidth to do both at the same time?

QUESTION: It seems like most of their Iran focus is devoted to preserving the JCPOA, undermining your sort of measures on Iran. I'm just wondering how you can make progress on the one hand in pushing on all of these sort of supplemental issues while their –

MR HOOK: Because we –

QUESTION: – main energetic focus seems to be on preserving the JCPOA.

MR HOOK: Because you can do both things at the same time. We share the same threat assessment. They're still in the deal and so they have equities in the deal that they are managing. We don't have those equities anymore. We do at the same time share the same threat assessment about Iran's missile proliferation.

MS NAUERT: Okay.

MR HOOK: Got to get going?

MS NAUERT: Right, bye. Thanks, Brian.

MR HOOK: Okay, thank you, bye.

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[Press Releases: On the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council](#)

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Official
Washington, DC
December 4, 2018

MODERATOR: (In progress) He's going to speak with you on back ground as a senior State Department official. [Senior State Department Official] just exited the meeting that was held on Ukraine and Georgia in which the Secretary spoke and a lot of others spoke, so [Senior State Department Official], go right ahead.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So as [Moderator] said, I just came out of a meeting of the North Atlantic Council on Black Sea security. This is the format focused on Georgia and Ukraine. You may remember, and I want to call everyone's attention to the fact, that Hungary has been blocking participation of Ukraine in certain formats at NATO, a habit that we strongly object to. This is a format, a Black Sea format that – it's now the second time this format has met, and it is a format that we put together to have these two countries continue to engage NATO, but it's a workaround to Hungary's blockage, which we continue to object to.

In that session, there were strong expressions of support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and Georgia. The United States in particular sent a very clear and strong message of support for both of these countries, joining them in their stand against Russian aggression, both

externally with regard to territorial acts of aggression and internally with regard to the building of democracy and continued efforts at reform.

There was a special focus in the NAC session just now on the November 25th incident outside the Kerch Strait. I know all of you have followed that closely and are aware of everything that happened. It's a serious concern for the United States for a couple of reasons. One is Ukraine itself. It marks an unmistakable escalation of the conflict there, not least because it's the first time that the Russian Government has openly and unapologetically used its own forces without any attempt at claiming it was done by so-called separatists; but secondly the demonstration effect of what happened in Kerch. There are a lot of international passage – maritime passageways in the world – Middle East, Asia. We have principled reasons to be concerned about a demonstration like – the demonstration effect like this sinking in, but also very practical and interest-based reasons to be concerned about a lot of places in the world where U.S. troops and commerce pass through, and we don't want this precedent to stick.

Today the U.S. reiterated that we condemn this Russian act of aggression, call it for what it is; that Crimea is Ukraine; and that the Russian action in Kerch is both a clear military escalation and a violation of international law and freedom of the sea. Long before this latest incident in Kerch, the United States has been raising our concerns about Russian behavior in Azov and with the construction of the Kerch Bridge. We've had State Department statements on Kerch and Azov on numerous occasions, most recently in May, August, and November prior to this incident. We have raised concerns about Azov and Russian behavior there in the OSCE Permanent Council on five occasions since last year.

I think all of you know – you have followed the President's decision some months ago to reverse the previous administration's blockage of lethal aid to Ukraine – we've provided two cutters to enhance maritime security of Ukraine, and a senior State Department official was present at the handoff ceremony. We recently held a meeting of the U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Partnership Commission, which I chair, co-chaired with Minister – Foreign Minister Klimkin, and that included a special focus on Azov.

I would also note that the Russian entities who are involved in the Kerch Bridge construction and who are operating in Crimea, a number of those – at least a dozen by my count – are already sanctioned entities. In the period since this incident, we demarched all 28 EU members as well as Russia. We have pressed publicly and privately alongside allies for release of the crew and a reopening of the strait. The Secretary has made very strong and clear statements about this and has tweeted about it on numerous occasions. The President has spoken about this. Ambassador Haley made a statement about this. I think all of you know that the President canceled a Putin meeting because of his concern about this incident. We put out a G7 foreign ministers statement, we had a NATO-NAC statement on November 27th, and we're now working very closely with allies to assess the way forward.

And the final thing I would say is I think the Russians have this message; but if they don't, it should be abundantly clear to them that for as long as

they hold these crew members, we will continue to raise the costs. They need to release the crews, return the ships, and this is not something that we're going to turn our attention away from.

QUESTION: How has – how have you risen –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: First question, please.

QUESTION: How have you risen the costs since the incident? Other than statements, I don't know where, but (inaudible) – how has –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So the – you haven't heard the final word on this matter. We're in close coordination.

QUESTION: Tell me. What is it?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I don't have a final word for you on this matter.

QUESTION: Oh, oh, oh. (Inaudible) you were saying.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We're closely coordinating with allies on a way forward and we have complete consistency in our concerns and messaging with allies, and right now we're assessing how to get the crew and ships out. There's a variety of options for that, but as I said, it's not an issue that's going to go away.

QUESTION: I understand, but you said that the – you're going to continue to raise the cost to the Russians if they don't do this. So I'm just – “continue to” – I don't see how the cost has risen since the incident has happened, so there's nothing that they can get in return for releasing the crew and the ships except for you guys stop writing mean letters, right?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah, thank you for that characterization of our policy.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I mean, look, there should be no doubt whatsoever, because if you look at our actions over the last two years, there should be no doubt about cost imposition and this administration's focus on cost imposition for Russian aggression.

QUESTION: I'm not –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: And this is the latest example of Russian aggression.

QUESTION: I'm not questioning that. I'm not questioning that.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So as I said, right now our focus is on working with our allies, because European allies have a principal responsibility for something that happens in their own backyard.

QUESTION: Yes, but my only question – I’m not doubting that you’re tough on the Russians. I’m saying what have you done in response to this specific incident that raises the costs so that they will think again –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I just gave you a really long list of a variety of things that we’ve done over the last two years, and I think for where we stand right now, I’m just going to call your attention to that list. I think it speaks for itself in communicating our resolve to get the crew out, unblock the strait, and not let the precedent stick.

QUESTION: But the crew hadn’t been taken –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Next question.

QUESTION: – hadn’t been taken and the strait wasn’t blocked four months ago.

MODERATOR: Let’s move on. (Inaudible.)

QUESTION: So were you happy when MBS did a high-five with Vladimir Putin? Given all of your concerns about Putin’s behavior over the last several years, given all the things that you’ve done to raise that, to talk to – to increasingly isolate the Russians on the international stage, one of your closest allies had a enthusiastic, almost bear hug-like high-five with Putin at the G20, where both were sort of obviously gleeful. Is that the sort of messaging that you think is appropriate by one of your closest –

MODERATOR: I think the question about Saudi Arabia should be not addressed to [Senior State Department Official] and that was your (inaudible).

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: It was about – look –

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MODERATOR: Hold on. You can certainly answer – ask the – that question to the Secretary.

QUESTION: Okay.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Look, let me answer that in part from an EUR perspective. Vladimir Putin is determined to increase Russian influence in the Middle East and the Russians, make no mistake, have a strategy to exercise greater influence over things like the price of oil. This is a big part of the reason why, when we look at policy both in Eastern Europe and in the Middle East, we have to be cognizant of the fact that Putin is an opportunistic player looking to cement stronger strategic relations with countries like Saudi Arabia that’s a close U.S. friend and partner. So it’s part of the reason that I think Secretary Pompeo has been clear there’s a lot of equities that we have in the Saudi relationship, and we have to balance those wisely.

So I would say your question points to something that I hope our friends in the media are cognizant of, that we have to prevent Putin from having opportunities like this to cement relations with Saudis, among others.

MODERATOR: Next question.

QUESTION: There were reports this morning that the Russians were easing their blockade of Ukrainian seaports. Was that mentioned? Do you see that as a sign of progress? And then you've been repeatedly saying the Europeans should be doing more here since this is in their backyard. Have any solid commitments been made? And what specifically more (inaudible)?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. So on the first part of your question, even a partial blockage from our standpoint is unacceptable, both under international law and the obligations that the Russians have to the Ukrainians from their own agreements on how they – bilateral agreements on how they manage that passageway. So we don't see that as success.

On your second question, I would answer that a lot like I did earlier, that we are talking and working very closely with European allies right now to chart a unified way forward where the West is not only speaking with one voice, which I think we are right now, but what we're working on and a big part of why we're here today is charting the way forward in terms of actions.

QUESTION: Is it consensus that that's unacceptable, that it's not a victory – the partial unblockage, or is that just the U.S.?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I can only speak from the perspective of U.S. policy. I would refer you to numerous other foreign ministries.

QUESTION: Well, that didn't come up in the – did – it didn't come up in the NAC meeting?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Did what come up?

QUESTION: The partial unblockage, and did you all come to consensus that this is not good enough, that they have to –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: A lot of those developments are very, very recent, right, so over the last few hours. Several of the ministers who spoke up noted that, but they didn't note it by way of saying we're out of the woods. But people are aware of the fact – I think across the alliance are aware that this is a fluid situation.

I mean, I'll go out on a limb and say I think generally from a NATO-wide perspective no one would see that as a satisfactory move or the end of a matter.

MODERATOR: [Senior State Department Official] only has a few more minutes. Nike, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes. Thank you very much. First I would like to know if – do you see any indication of Russia – (phone rings). Sorry. Do you see any indication on Russia stepping up interference in Ukraine in the run-up to the – excuse me – in the presidential and parliamentary election next year? And separately, was Georgia's bid to become a NATO member addressed?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We see a noticeable uptick in already very high levels of Russian interference inside Ukraine. I think the Russians, and I should specifically say the Russian Government – and I think these decisions are coming from Putin – sees Ukraine as a very vulnerable target and is attempting through a variety of means to undermine confidence in democratic institutions. A lot of Russian cyber activity. As you may know, the State Department has provided a lot of practical support to the Ukrainians. Our post is very active there, but we've also targeted a lot of our recent aid at bucking up Ukrainian cyber defenses. So we've rolled up our sleeves and we work with them on a daily basis in making Ukraine and its institutions more resilient against those attacks.

QUESTION: On Georgia?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Georgia. So from the U.S. perspective, and I think we've been clear on this, that we stand by the Bucharest 2008 declaration affirming that Georgia has a future in NATO. Georgia has made tremendous strides in reform, particularly in the defense sector, is an outsized contributor to international security missions, so our policy position has not changed.

And we are happy to see that the presidential elections went off as smoothly as they did. We are concerned about numerous irregularities that we saw in those elections but are very watchful now in how the Georgians implement their new constitution, and I think the early part of next year will be a test for democratic institutions in Georgia.

MODERATOR: Guy.

QUESTION: Yeah, well I just want to remind you – thanks so much, this is really insightful. But I want to remind you that it's on background, so nobody reading this knows who said it.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks for the reminder.

QUESTION: Yeah. I mean –

MODERATOR: This is what we typically do at State Department, previews with some of our experts.

QUESTION: Oh, I understand. Of course, but –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Do you have a question?

QUESTION: My question is I want to give you an opportunity to tell us what exactly was achieved here today vis-a-vis Ukraine in a simple statement. Was there – is there anything that – I mean, yesterday you told us that the goal – or we were calling on European allies to show leadership, we want to see European allies take greater responsibility for a security problem that is just a few hundred miles from Germany's border. Was there any movement towards that? And I'm not trying to insinuate that there wasn't. Just here's the shot to give us –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Since we're on background, I'll offer an observation that when the United States and particularly this administration is – when we get criticized from the media, it's often for not coordinating enough with allies. When we coordinate with allies, we get criticized for coordinating with allies. So as I'm sure you can appreciate, although diplomacy probably works on a little bit different time schedule than some other things, not everything is resolved in a 55-minute meeting.

I think the NAC statement a few days ago was crystal-clear. What we do not see NATO doing right now is what NATO did at the onset of the Georgia war – sticking its head in the sand, not speaking up. Speaking up counts for something. As the Secretary said earlier today, words matter. And I think post-Kerch incident, the words of the United States are crystal-clear. As you've seen on our Ukraine and on our Russia policy, our words and actions match, and I've given you a long list of the ways in which they match. As I said a minute ago, you haven't heard the last word on this matter, and we want the Russians to absorb the message that they need to release the crews or there will be consequences and the pain will grow over time. As – and I think that's been our consistent message to the Russians across the board for various forms of aggressive behavior, and this will be no exception.

MODERATOR: Joel, go ahead.

QUESTION: A very quick question.

MODERATOR: Joel was ahead of you. Go ahead, Joel.

QUESTION: You said you want unified action, not just words. So have you found that the – are the Turks limiting the range of motion, so to speak, in response to the Kerch Strait incident in light of – to the growing relationship between Erdogan and –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The Turks are very helpful on this matter for a couple of reasons. First, there is a large Tatar minority community in Crimea. The Turks have been consistent in their commitments in a NATO context on not recognizing the annexation of Crimea. They've actually been one of the more forceful in raising concerns about human rights violations inside Crimea. But also, as I said a minute ago at the beginning of my remarks, they look at the broader implications of developments in a narrow passageway because they have one that they sit next to and are very cognizant of the precedents that could be set there. So we've been very pleased with the Turkish reaction to this and are stitched up really, really closely with them.

MODERATOR: We'll go to the last question, Jessica Donati.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) question, just – I know you can't specify the details, but can you give us a sense of the timeline that you're looking at, what kind of urgency? Is this days, weeks, or months from action?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: All I can tell you – and I know from your perspective it's probably not very satisfying, but I can tell you it is the

highest priority that my bureau is working on. And as I said a minute ago, we are closely coordinating with allies. We're stitched up inside USG. And beyond that, I don't want to give you a crystal ball.

MODERATOR: Thanks, everybody.

QUESTION: Thanks, [Senior State Department Official].

(Break.)

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I should have said more about Nord Stream 2. I never miss a messaging opportunity on Nord Stream 2. I think you could – look, Kerch incident should be a reminder to all of our European allies on why Nord Stream 2 is such a bad idea. And to put an even sharper point on it, I mean, by way of background, I would put it this way: I would say the Kerch incident is a reminder that the less infrastructure you have, the less gas infrastructure you have bypassing Ukraine because of Nord Stream 2, the weaker the deterrent – deterrence is to Russian acts of military aggression.

So there are practical energy-related reasons we don't want Nord Stream 2 to go forward. There are also security and Ukraine-related reasons that we don't want Nord Stream 2 to go forward, and this is a startling reminder.

QUESTION: Did the Germans get that reminder?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We raise Nord Stream 2 with the Germans on every occasion, and I will say I think that Kerch – I mean, when you have a naked act of aggression like that, I think it resonates in German public opinion. And we've seen some indications in our recent conversations with German officials that they've absorbed that message more plainly after Kerch. It's harder for them to just say this is a commercial project.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thanks, guys.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks, guys.

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Press Releases: Russia's Violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty

Fact Sheet
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
December 4, 2018

Since 2013, the United States has raised its concerns with Russia regarding Russian development of a ground-launched cruise missile (NATO designator: SSC-8, Russian designator: 9M729) with a range capability between 500 and 5,500 kilometers on repeated occasions. These include more than 30 engagements at all levels of the Russian government.

Russia has repeatedly changed its cover story regarding its violating missile. For more than four years, Russia denied the existence of the missile and provided no information about it, despite the U.S. provision to Russia of the location of the tests and the names of the companies involved in the development and production of the missile. Russia only admitted that the missile existed after we publicly announced the missile system's Russian designator but claimed that the missile was incapable of ranges beyond 500 kilometers and, therefore, INF Treaty-compliant. Russia refuses to provide the United States any more information about the missile, its capability, or its testing history to support Russia's contention that the missile is Treaty-compliant. Despite such obfuscation, Russia claims that it wants to preserve the Treaty.

The United States has convened five meetings of the parties' technical experts to discuss Russia's INF Treaty violation since 2014. These meetings included two sessions of the Special Verification Commission, the Treaty body responsible for addressing compliance concerns, in November 2016 and December 2017, and three bilateral U.S.-Russia meetings of technical experts in September 2014, April 2015, and June 2018. At each of these meetings, the United States pressed Russia on its violating missile, urged it to come back into compliance, and highlighted the critical nature of our concerns. These actions were met with denials, obfuscation, and falsehoods. In contrast, Russia has initiated zero expert meetings with the United States on this topic during this time period and has not engaged in a substantive manner.

The United States has provided detailed information to Russia regarding its

violation over the course of these bilateral and multilateral engagements, giving more than enough information for Russia to engage substantively on the issue. This includes the following:

- Information pertaining to the missile and the launcher, including Russia's internal designator for the mobile launcher chassis and the names of the companies involved in developing and producing the missile and launcher;
- Information on the violating ground launched cruise missile's (GLCM's) test history, including coordinates of the tests and Russia's attempts to conceal the nature of the program;
- Information showing that the violating GLCM has a range capability between 500 and 5,500 kilometers;
- Information showing that the violating GLCM is distinct from the R-500/SSC-7 GLCM or the RS-26 ICBM; and
- The U.S. assessment that the Russian designator for the system in question is 9M729.

If Russia had decided it wanted to return to compliance, it had a clear path forward. There are measures in the Treaty that were used for eliminating systems, which Russia could have adopted to verifiably destroy the SSC-8 and its associated equipment. Russia decided not to do so.

It is important to note that, in addition to violating the INF Treaty, Russia is also not complying with its obligations under several other arms control treaties, including the Open Skies Treaty, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty.

U.S. Compliance with the INF Treaty

The United States is in compliance with its obligations under the INF Treaty, and Allies affirmed this most recently in the NATO Summit declaration in July 2018. In contrast to Russia's refusal to answer substantively key U.S. questions about the SSC-8/9M729, the United States has provided Russia with detailed information explaining why the United States is in compliance with the INF Treaty. The United States has even presented some of this information publicly, including in a separate factsheet on the State Department webpage.

U.S. Response to Russia's Violation

The United States is declaring that Russia's ongoing violation of the INF Treaty constitutes a material breach of the Treaty. As a consequence of Russia's material breach, the United States will suspend its obligations under the Treaty effective in 60 days from December 4 unless Russia returns to full and verifiable compliance.

Russia must return to full and verifiable compliance; Russia's failure to do so will result in the demise of the INF Treaty. We should be clear that Russia has not shown any indications that it seeks to return to compliance.

As described in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, the United States is committed to arms control efforts that advance U.S., allied, and partner

security; are verifiable and enforceable; and include partners that comply in a verifiable manner with their obligations. An arms control treaty that restrains only one side, while the other side violates it, is not effective in making us safer. Rather, it undermines the very idea of arms control as a tool to enhance our collective security.

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Press Releases: Briefing With Special Representative for Syria Engagement Ambassador James F. Jeffrey

Special Briefing
James F. Jeffrey

Special Representative for Syria Engagement

Washington, DC
December 3, 2018

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Hello, folks. Here to talk a bit about Syria today and take your questions. Can you all hear me?

QUESTION: Yes.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Okay. Let me review the bidding since the Astana meeting last week on Thursday of Turkey, Iran and Russia trying to focus on the political track. And I will focus my remarks on the political track because we're at a critical juncture on that important track in this month. I'll explain a little bit why and where we are on it.

We also just completed today a meeting of what we call the small group, which is an informal group of European states – Germany, France, and Britain – and Middle Eastern states – Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt – who work with us and consult with us on this issue. They met with Under Secretary David Hale, and they also met with the head of the Syria negotiating committee – commission, rather, Nasr Hariri, who is basically the senior, and his senior staff from the Syrian political opposition, who are very much involved in this whole process.

So what I'd like to do is to take you through what happened last week and where we are now with the small group. As you may remember, the summit in Istanbul over a month ago now saw Angela Merkel, Vladimir Putin, President Macron, and President Erdogan meet together to discuss Syria. They discussed primarily two very contentious issues: the Idlib deconfliction zone of ceasefire, and particularly the political process, specifically the constitutional committee which is to be stood up, and it's something that three countries, known as the Astana group – Turkey, Iran, and Russia – took upon themselves a year ago to try to stand up, because the regime was not being cooperative.

That's all under the aegis of UN Resolution 2254 from December of 2015, which is the basic core document that is trying to resolve this terrible and very dangerous conflict, and we see indications of the danger of it all of the time. I can't confirm or deny the reports that were in *The Washington Post* today of strikes against terrorists. I can't confirm or deny reports of Israeli contacts a few days ago. But we get these things all of the time because this conflict is a very dangerous conflict, and as I've said before, you have the five military forces, outside military forces in close proximity.

Okay, so we were hoping – following up from the Istanbul conference – that the Russians, the Iranians, and the Turks would be able to finalize the third list of members to this constitutional committee, and that was a primary goal of the Astana meeting last Thursday. They didn't succeed. They issued a statement that basically did examine the Idlib de-escalation area, they call it, and stressed the importance of a lasting ceasefire while underlying the necessity to continue the effective fight against terrorism. That is good news because the Idlib ceasefire, as President Trump notably and other senior officials have said, is very, very important to the overall hope for stability in Syria.

But they did not take any significant action on the constitutional committee. Rather, they stated once again that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict, but all they did was reaffirm their determination to set up joint efforts to launch the constitutional committee in Geneva. But they didn't even say "by the end of the year"; what they said was "the soonest possible time," which tends to be waffling.

As a result of that, you may have seen that the UN envoy, Staffan de Mistura, who was present at the conference, issued his own statement. It begins, "Staffan de Mistura appreciates the work done at the Astana meeting by the three guarantors to ensure the Idlib de-escalation arrangements are sustained."

He then issued for the UN at this point in the process quite a strong statement: "However, Special Envoy de Mistura deeply regrets that at a special meeting in Astana with the three Sochi co-conveners, there was no tangible progress in overcoming the 10-month stalemate on the composition of the constitutional committee. This was the last occasion of an Astana meeting in 2018 and has, sadly for the Syrian people, been a missed opportunity to accelerate the establishment of a credible, balanced, and inclusive Syria-owned, Syria-led, UN-facilitated constitutional committee."

We then issued a statement by Heather, "No breakthrough" on the Astana meeting, pointing out what had happened, making reference to Staffan, and basically saying that this is not a process we think has come to its end.

Today with the Syria small group, we first of all reviewed implementation of a UN-facilitated, Syrian-led, and Syrian-owned political process that would create a permanent, peaceful, and political end, in line, again, with 2254. There was support, as you can imagine, for UN Envoy de Mistura's statement regarding the November 28th, 29th Astana meeting which I just read to you,

particularly the importance of sustaining the Idlib de-escalation arrangements, the efforts to meet the December 31st deadline to convene the Syrian constitutional committee, and we are looking forward to de Mistura's December 14th report to the Security Council.

That will be the key point where we see whether we are going to have the political process moving forward under the UN, facilitated perhaps by the Astana guarantors putting pressure on Damascus, or whether we're going to be in another stalemate and then with a new Syrian UN envoy, Geir Pedersen, coming on board right thereafter. We'll all have to re-examine where we're going on this extremely important, extremely dangerous issue.

So I'll stop there, having brought you up to date on the situation.

STAFF: (Inaudible) AFP.

QUESTION: Thank you for doing this. Do you – we are now December 3rd. Do you really think that it's possible to convene the committal – constitutional committee before the end of the year? You have already pushed that deadline back other times, so do you think that this time you can do it, or you are going to say by the end of January and then by the end of February?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: We are staying with, as the Istanbul summit states, the end of the December. I'm sure that if Staffan de Mistura got a green light from the regime or the Astana people that there was a list that he could accept and verify as credible, that on the 14th he could announce a December convening, and I believe it would convene.

STAFF: Nadia, Al Arabiya.

QUESTION: Good to see you, Ambassador. As you just explained and elaborated, there seem to be a political stagnation. What does it take to have a breakthrough, especially that some people say the U.S. is playing a secondary role and Russia and Turkey are leading?

And if – allow me as well, I have a question on Russia. Yesterday, they accused the U.S. of playing a dangerous game, as they said, or playing the Kurdish card, especially now that the SDF are trying in the final push to clear an area from ISIS. Are you playing a dangerous game?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: That's about – first of all, we're not playing a dangerous game. Russia is playing a dangerous game accusing us of playing a dangerous game. We are totally committed to defeating Daesh along the Euphrates. Our local ally in that, as you know, since 2014, has been the SDF, as everybody else knows. They are involved in a very, very tough battle. This is not an organization that has been totally destroyed. We think that we'll be able to finish the job in the months ahead, but there's very heavy fighting there and we're putting a lot of our own effort and the effort of our friends and allies and partners into it.

In terms of – can you give me the first half of your –

QUESTION: What does it take to have a breakthrough in this since we have

political stagnation versus –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Yeah. Oh, yeah, I know, that – are we playing a secondary role. There's about six questions there, so I'll try to pull each of them out.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: We think we're playing a primary role. I think you should ask the others and get their opinions because we're always going to think we're playing a primary role. Ask any of the other participants in this process the role of the United States overall in Syria. I think they'll say it's a very, very active role with many aspects.

Now, in terms of a breakthrough, we've been in a stalemate since this whole Sochi – Astana/Sochi process began in December of 2017, following on six years of stalemate. What we've seen in the last few months is a ministerial at the small-group level at the UN putting pressure on the UN and on the Astana group to come forth. Then we saw the Istanbul summit where, for the first time, Russia said that they would try to get this thing done by the end of the year. Up until that point, they would be saying there's no artificial deadline, when in their minds any date is an artificial deadline, so we got them to move on that. And there's at least a possibility that they will move by the 14th with de Mistura.

So I would say while I still think that the chances are not great, I would say they're better now than they were three months ago or six months ago.

QUESTION: Thank you.

STAFF: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Ambassador, thank you very much for doing this. One zoomed-in question and then one zoom-out.

Zoom-in: Idlib itself, the fighting, what are you tracking? Are you seeing the collapse of the stalemate itself in terms of the fighting on both sides?

And then zoom-out: Last time you and I had a conversation about the strategy in Syria, one of the three pieces of the strategy was the removal of all Iranian-commanded forces from the entirety of Syria. Is that still part of the strategy and is there any progress on that?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: That is part of the overall strategy. I would say we have made progress hammering that particular goal to everybody. We think that the people who need to listen are listening. I don't – again, have nothing to announce. I have no specific thing to point to. But this is in play, and again, as I mentioned at the time, it's in the context of a political solution to the overall conflict and the withdrawal of all the other forces that have arrived since 2011.

Now in terms of Idlib, we still believe (a) that it is a very good thing that there is this de-escalation zone. We believe it is holding. All of our

conversations, not just with the Turks but with the Russians, indicate it is. We had one incident a week ago with alleged use of chemical weapons by terrorists from Idlib, and the Russians then conducted a strike. We cannot, I want to underline, corroborate any chemical weapons attack based on that incident, and we'll try to have more for you as soon as possible.

STAFF: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, good to see you again. My question is about Idlib. Contradict to Manbij roadmap, there are some reports indicating that there are a good amount of YPG/PYD militants still in Idlib right now. And also, what's your –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: YPG/PYD in Idlib?

QUESTION: Yeah, according to some of the reports from the field. And my question is –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Not Manbij? You said Idlib.

QUESTION: I'm sorry, Manbij. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Manbij. You're right. I'm sorry.

So my question is: What's your solution to preventing a possible attack from the group against Turkish troops? And I mean, they constantly are showing solidarity with PKK terror group and also threatening Turkish groups on the field, so –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Sure. First of all, some – it's over 50 – we've confirmed over 50 members of those organizations have left Idlib, and we passed that number on to the Turks. We're also in the process now under what we call the Manbij roadmap that Secretary Pompeo and his counterpart Foreign Minister Cavusoglu agreed in June to vet senior leadership in the Manbij Military Committee, which is the military side, and in the Manbij Council – this is some, oh, 70, 80, 100 people – to vet them jointly by our two countries to ensure that there is nobody there who might be threatening the Turks.

In terms of an attack out of there, again, we have a quite significant force there. We have, under the Manbij Roadmap, joint patrols with the Turks, and – I've been out there myself – very good observation of everything that is going on. That region is, as regions go in Turkey – rather, correction – in Syria quite secure, at least north of where the regime is.

QUESTION: Have you personally talked to YPG/PYD leadership about this?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I talk to whoever I need to talk to to accomplish my job.

STAFF: Barbara.

QUESTION: Thank you. Ambassador, if, as you seem to think it's possible or likely on the 14th the Staffan de Mistura doesn't come through with the breakthrough, then what happens next? Is there a Plan B if the whole Astana/Sochi process doesn't segue into the UN process and the regime doesn't

agree to this third committee? What happens then?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, again, the first address to such a question is the UN, because the UN has been charged by the Security Council to carry out this political process under 2254 and specifically to the new successor to de Mistura, Mr. Pedersen. But our suggestion, and I think I would reflect the views of many of the other major UN countries that are concerned and interested in Syria, is that we do not continue with this rather strange Sochi/Astana initiative, for them to take over the job of putting together a constitutional committee and presenting it on a platter to de Mistura. They tried and they failed, or at least up to this point they failed. And if they are still failing by the 14th, the U.S. view, as we indicated in Heather's comment or Heather's press release on Thursday, is let's pull the plug on Astana.

QUESTION: And then what?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: And then we go back to the UN.

QUESTION: And the UN comes up – and the UN gets the regime to the table how?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, that's a good a question because we've been trying now for six years. First of all, the regime has shown some flexibility. Again, is this is a stalemate? Yes. Are we quite as stalemated as we were a few months ago? I don't think so. I think that particularly in Astana the Turkish Government has held its position and not succumbed to pressure by the other two to sign up to a third list that would be pro regime. That's very important.

You've seen on the ground, be it al-Tanf, be it in Idlib, be it in some of the alleged Israeli actions, be it in some of our actions in the northeast, you've seen an unwillingness to yield to pressure from the regime or from the regime's allies. And you're in a different conflict now, a conflict – not a conflict, but you've got a situation where you've got a number of outside countries that are present on the ground or in the air over Syria, and that gives you fewer actors to deal with.

At one point John Kerry, when he was trying to do this in 2016, was trying to get a ceasefire among 400 opposition groups. Now the opposition groups are basically in a much different situation, and it's much easier to get them to stop shooting, as we've seen in Idlib and other areas. So that's the first thing why I'm somewhat more optimistic.

The second thing is it's very clear that the Damascus regime, and particularly the Russians and the Iranians, want to see what I call the three Rs: refugees essentially pushed back to Syria; reconstruction aid, perhaps up to 400 billion according to the UN, to flow into the country from the West – us, Europe, international organizations; and the regime to be recognized by the world as legitimate. None of those things are happening, and they're not going to happen until the political process makes progress, as far as I can see. And I don't see a change in that, and I think that's dawning on at least the Russians.

STAFF: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Thank you for your time, Mr. Ambassador. My question is what will be the U.S. policy on the Kurds in Syria.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Our policy is to work with the people of the northeast first of all to defeat ISIS. We have to do some basic humanitarian work and local stabilization work in order to have a platform for this defeat of ISIS. We have no political agenda either with the Kurdish groups, with the Arab groups, or with any other groups inside Syria. Our position is (a) the territorial integrity of Syria under its present borders; (b) we will work with all political forces that are willing to recognize and accept the UN political process and the basic criteria of all of these UN initiatives since 2012 on Syria, which is no threat to the neighbors, no threat to the population, no use of chemical weapons, no support for terrorism, no mass slaughter of one's own civilians, and accountability for war crimes. That's our position with everybody and anybody.

STAFF: Right here.

QUESTION: Ambassador Jeffrey, last – during your last briefing you stated that the forces under the command of Iran were not as active as previously. Is that still the case? And what do you know about what they're actually doing on the ground in Syria?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, right now there is a relative lack of combat in Syria other than the most active is against the ISIS forces around Hajin, around the Euphrates close the Iraqi border, which is an operation that we are leading with the SDF. There have been some very limited regime operations against ISIS or Daesh in the southwest of the country but not very much. So apart from that there hasn't been much military activity. That has an impact on the activity levels of the Iranians or anybody else, but I would just say that we're monitoring the Iranian situation closely. We're not the only ones monitoring the Iranian situation closely.

QUESTION: Does it look like they've maybe shrunk in terms –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I would say we're monitoring the Iranian situation closely.

STAFF: Said.

QUESTION: Thank you. Thank you, Ambassador. I wanted to ask you – I mean, we're a bit confused on the position of the United States as far as Syria is concerned. On the one hand they say we will be there forever, on the other hand that your operation is limited and so on. Could you just give us like a vignette of how and when will the United States forces leave Syria?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Well, the United States forces are in Syria for one mission, which is the enduring defeat of ISIS/Daesh. That is a military mission that flows from congressional authorization in 2001 against terror post-9/11. That's the military mission of our military there.

When we say we're going to be present not forever in Syria but present until our conditions – enduring defeat of ISIL, as was said earlier, the withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces from the entirety of Syria, and an irreversible political process. We're saying the United States as a whole, that the President as the Commander-in-Chief and as the leader of our foreign policy has various options that involve military involving our forces. Remember we were present not in northern Iraq but over northern Iraq in Operation Northern Watch for 13 years. That can be a UN force. Under 2254 there is language on a UN-managed and operated ceasefire. That can be partner forces. That can be other countries' forces.

Then there's the diplomatic initiatives that we do with the Small Group in the UN, then there is the actions of our friends and allies. For example, the Istanbul summit we weren't there, but we were working with the French, the Germans, and the Turks, and we got a good result from it. That's an example of the kind of tools we use.

Also economic, both sanctions on this regime every way possible – we're announcing them all of the time, including particularly our focus is on oil transfers from Iran to Syria and money back. We're pursuing that very aggressively.

And finally, our position, which has an awful lot of support, not to push refugees back, not to recognize the regime, and in particular not to allow reconstruction funds to flow to Syria until we see real progress on these other tracks.

So that's the summary of all of the tools we have that under the rubric of we will stay on in Syria until we get these goals.

QUESTION: Thank you.

STAFF: Tracy, did you have a question?

QUESTION: Oh yes, you just mentioned the sanctions. I wanted to ask about that. I think it was two weeks ago you all sanctioned – I think it was Russian and Iranian companies that were supplying oil to the Government of Syria. Does that kind – I mean, does that kind of sanction have an impact? Do you have any sense of seeing that that has reduced the shipments of oil to Damascus?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Yes.

QUESTION: Okay. Do you want to elaborate?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: No. (Laughter.)

STAFF: Okay I think we have – last question. Michelle.

QUESTION: With the ultimate goal of removing Iranian influence from Syria –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: I didn't say that. I would – I wish I could say that, but that's not U.S. policy. It's Iranian-commanded forces.

QUESTION: Okay.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Nice try.

QUESTION: But given that's part of it and finance – and squeezing them financially would be a part of that –

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Yes.

QUESTION: – what progressive effect have you seen on the continued sanctions regime on Iran in light – the effect of the Iranian involvement in Syria right now? Would you say that there has already been some effect?

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: All I can say is – that's the problem if you leave government and you become an outside analyst, commentator, and think tanker. There is things you've written. I was ambivalent and probably leaning against pulling the plug on the JCPOA as late as a year ago. I have to say, from everything I have seen in coming back in, it was an absolutely valid decision in terms of putting pressure on Iran where it really hurts, which is in the financial area. It's still early. As you know, it's less than a month since we imposed the NDAA oil sanctions on Iran, but we have seen a dramatic drop in both international firm engagement in Iran, in the banking sector's activities and their ability to use the international financial system, and we've seen a huge drop of over a million barrels of oil. I mean, Brian Hook comes down here and does the briefings far better than I. I'm just doing the top level.

And I'm seeing some impacts of this on Syria, which I can't get into. It's another way of answering the same question, the other one asked a few minutes ago.

STAFF: All right, I think we have to wrap up now.

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY: Okay, that's fine. Thank you.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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