

Press Releases: Press Conference at NATO

Press Conference
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

NATO Headquarters
Brussels, Belgium
December 6, 2017

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, good afternoon, all. It truly is a pleasure to be back in Brussels. Someone reminded me this is my seventh trip to Europe already this year. But it is great to be back. I had a great visit with our tri-mission here in Brussels. These are the people who represent America's interests here at NATO, but it – with the EU and here in Brussels, as well. Really working hard. And had a chance to meet their newest member of their family, a two-week-old son that was born to one of our folks that's located here from the U.S.

And, of course, to be with Ambassador Hutchison, who is – who I've known for a very long time, and we have a very deep and strong friendship and a deep

respect for one another, in terms of her service in the United States Senate for so many years, and really proud that she leads our NATO mission here, as well.

The United States, obviously, I think has affirmed now on multiple occasions our support for NATO's mission. We know that the security NATO provides protects Western democratic principles, protects our right to live in freedom. To that end, the United States is eager for our NATO allies to exert their sovereignty and take on greater responsibility for our shared deterrence and our defense burden. I think, as each of us contributes, the better we will be able to deter and defend against the threats on Europe's frontiers, which also can become threats for America.

We do commend the many countries that have made additional commitments and greater contributions. This year Romania joined the United States, Greece, Estonia, the United Kingdom, and Poland as six allies that spend at least two percent of their GDP on defense. And two more allies, Latvia and Lithuania, will join that club in 2018. We expect 26 allies will increase their defense spending budgets this year and five more NATO allies have put plans in place to achieve the 2 percent objective by 2024.

Increased spending, however, is not enough. It is really about increasing capabilities. And we've spent a lot of time in the sessions here at NATO over the last day-and-a-half talking about that. It is interesting, since NATO was formed the single largest cause of loss of lives within NATO from threats has been terrorism. And I think President Trump, as all of you well know, has made it clear that stopping terrorism must be a growing focus of attention for NATO. And we had just completed a session on the subject.

Yesterday we discussed how to further leverage the action plan to strengthen the allies' resilience against terrorist attacks and, in particular, to build upon NATO's already long-standing commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, increase their cooperation as the President has announced his new South Asia strategy. We appreciate NATO members' commitments to the United States effort to defeat ISIS globally, as well as our other counterterrorism efforts.

The original mission of NATO, obviously, is still relevant. We have been clear with Russia that we cannot return to business as usual in the NATO-Russia relations, as long as Russia continues its illegal occupation of Ukraine. And Russia's continued use of hybrid warfare seeks to undermine Western institutions, and this stands as a significant obstacle to normalizing our relations, as well.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine remains the biggest threat to European security, and demands continued transatlantic unity in confronting that threat. Our NATO allies stand firm in our support of Ukraine's sovereignty and their territorial integrity. We do not accept Russia's efforts to change the internationally-recognized borders of Ukraine or recognize Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea.

Earlier this morning we also had a productive discussion with Georgian Foreign Minister Janelidze. Georgia is a large contributor to our joint

efforts in Afghanistan. In fact, they are the largest per capita of any contributing nation, and we strongly support Georgia's aspirations to become a NATO member.

Looking ahead to our final session, which will be over lunch today, the United States does support NATO's open-door policy, and our commitment that any Europe-Atlantic country that wishes to join the alliance and meets the requirements to do so should be allowed to do so. And no third party should have anything to say about that pursuit of NATO membership.

As we have done for decades, the United States will continue to maintain our straightforward, ironclad commitment to Article V. We will continue to work for the common defense and the preservation of peace called for in the NATO charter, and do so with confidence that our allies will continue to do the same.

Thank you. Happy to take questions.

MODERATOR: The Secretary has time for a few questions. Josh Lederman, AP?

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. On several occasions – thank you. On several occasions, the President has publicly undermined your diplomatic efforts. In recent days, White House officials have said that you are going to be pushed out. And these are not media inventions. These are coming from the White House.

Many Americans see these efforts as humiliating to you. You have had an illustrious career. Why do you put up with it? Why don't you quit?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: This is a narrative that keeps coming up about every six weeks. And I would say you all need to get some new sources, because your story keeps being wrong.

MODERATOR: Teri Schultz from Deutsche Welle, right there in the middle.

QUESTION: Hi, over here. Yesterday, the German foreign minister arrived at the meeting saying that there was an increasing divide between the U.S. and Europe, that Europe needs to take more of its responsibility, which is not just the funding question, and that transatlanticism was suffering. So I'm interested particularly in whether you've heard that in your meetings with allies – you had a meeting with them on Iran yesterday – and did they express as strongly as we hear them differences with the administration on Iran policy?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I heard Foreign Minister Gabriel's statement, and Sigmar and I have become quite close. I think I've probably met with him as many times and had as many telephone conversations as any of my counterparts. And look, Germany is going through a very difficult political process right now. Sigmar is part of that. And I don't want to say anything that's going to suggest any leanings one way or another.

In terms of the support that we've received in our talks around our approach to Iran and in our Quad meeting yesterday, it was a very productive meeting.

We share a common view of the threat that Iran poses in terms of its destabilizing activities in the Middle East region, most particularly in Yemen and in Syria, its support for terrorist organizations like Hizballah, its export of lethal weapons, including rockets and missiles. And that – we're all very concerned about how to address that issue, and that was the discussions that we held in our Quad meeting yesterday. It was very productive discussions.

MODERATOR: Dave Clark from AFP.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. Much of the world is holding its breath as President Trump declares Jerusalem the capital of Israel. Major European allies are saying its wrongheaded, and Middle Eastern partners and even some in your own department are warning of potential violence and unrest. Is this part of a thought-out strategy to improve peace prospects, or is President Trump just fulfilling a campaign promise? And how can you claim to be a neutral broker in the Middle East conflict?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I want to be respectful that the President has not been allowed to address this issue himself, which he will be doing later today, as you know, with a speech that he'll be giving. So I don't want to go too far in terms of getting ahead of his speech.

What I would encourage people to do is a couple of things. First, listen carefully to the entirety of the speech; listen to the full content of the speech. The President is very committed to the Middle East peace process. He has a team that he put in place almost immediately upon entering the White House. That team has been working very diligently on new approaches to the peace process. They've been engaged in a quiet way with many in the region around that process. They've shared it with me so that I could give them my steer on certain elements of the process, give them guidance on areas that I thought would be challenging to address, and they've gone – they've done the hard work to try to address those.

So I would just say that all of this, we continue to believe there is a very good opportunity for peace to be achieved, and the President has a team that is devoted to that entirely. And I would – with respect to the decision on Jerusalem, I really would leave that until you hear the President's full statement on that.

MODERATOR: Julian Barnes with *The Wall Street Journal*.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, Julian Barnes, *Wall Street Journal*. Ukraine. Is the peacekeeping proposal by Russia real? Is there a possibility to negotiate something that would – the United States could support that would put peacekeepers on the border, restore control to Ukraine? And related, do you support expanding Russia-NATO dialogue or is the current sort of high-level NATO-Russia Councils the right track to be on?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We've been engaged with the Russians now for some time through, as you know, I appointed Ambassador Volker to be our point of contact with the Russians on finding a way to break the logjam on Ukraine.

We've prioritized ending the violence as our first priority, and we think to do that, we need to put a peacekeeping force in place. Russia has long resisted a peacekeeping force, but they have agreed now, and as you point out, they put the first proposal forward for peacekeepers. I think it's significant that we're talking about the right thing.

We have a significant difference between the mandate that a peacekeeping force would be given and the scope of their mandate, and that's what we continue in conversations with the Russians as to the peacekeeping force. We hope we can close those gaps. We think it's vitally important to stop the violence in east Ukraine. People are still dying every day from that violence, and that's our objective, is to stop the killing, stop the violence, and then we still have a lot of work to do to address all elements of the Minsk accord, and including the government in Kyiv has significant work to do as well. But this is a process that's ongoing, and the peacekeeping and stopping the violence was our first and foremost objective.

With respect to dialogue with Russia, we had a lot of discussion during this NATO meeting, and in particular around dinner last night, over what is the proper engagement with Russia. And I think there is broad consensus among all the NATO members that there is no normalization of dialogue with Russia today. What dialogue occurs, whether it be through periodic meetings of the NATO-Russia Council – and I say periodic because we are not going to return to regularized calendar meetings. If there is a reason to meet, if there is a dialogue with a result expected, then we should meet and we support dialogue to produce results. But having dialogue just to be talking and trying to regularize or renormalize this relationship cannot be undertaken until some of these actions that I've addressed – in particular Ukraine, hybrid warfare – until Russia begins to address those actions which we find not just unacceptable but intolerable.

So I think we do support dialogue when there is a purpose, when there's a substance, when there's a result that we're attempting to achieve.

MODERATOR: Carol Morello, *Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, you've often said that you start every meeting in the – every day asking about the safety of diplomats abroad. It's been more than a year now since your diplomats started coming under attack in Cuba, and you have still not put forward publicly a single piece of evidence, yet you've taken some pretty drastic steps in response that have seriously damaged the Cuban economy and reputation, and Havana has complained that you won't share even basic information that they need to investigate. So are you still convinced that these were attacks, and will you tell us what you know about what happened to them?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We are convinced these were targeted attacks. We have shared some information with the Cubans, and there are two restrictions I've placed on sharing information. One is respect for the privacy of individuals and their medical conditions, and the second is not to provide whoever was orchestrating these attacks with information that's useful to how effective they were. What we've said to the Cubans is a small island, you got a

sophisticated security apparatus, you probably know who's doing it, you can stop it. It's as simple as that. So that's what we've asked the Cubans. We understand the Cubans don't like the actions we've taken. We don't like our diplomats being targeted.

MODERATOR: Essia Bouguerra, Al-Sabah.

QUESTION: Thank you, Secretary. I'm Essia from Tunisia. My question is related to the – does the U.S. Secretary still believe that the two-state solution is still available or still present in the – in your priorities?

But the second one, concerning the meeting of President Putin and President Bashar al-Assad: What role has the Syrian regime right now in the – any coming negotiation in the future about Syria? Thank you.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: With respect to anything related to Jerusalem, I really would like to let the President make his statement before I comment. So we'll be happy to comment later today or tomorrow, after he's had an opportunity to lay out the full contours of the decision he's made.

With respect to the Syrian regime and Bashar al-Assad's role in the peace discussions in Geneva – and this is a process that will follow the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 – we have said to the Russians it is important that the Syrian regime be at the table and be part of these negotiations and part of the discussion. We think it's important that as long as Bashar al-Assad is still the leader of that regime, that he be directly engaged in these discussions and negotiations. We have left it to the Russians to deliver them to the table, and we did have a delegation from the Syrian regime attended the first week of the talks that have resumed in Geneva. We hope they will – that they will return to those discussions. These talks have a process, as you know, that lays out the development of a new constitution, that moves towards an election process where all Syrians will have an opportunity to voice their views on the future of Syria, including all Syrian diaspora that may have been – may have had to leave the country due to the violence. This is as – all as is called for under the UN Security Council resolution.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. Thank you.

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Press Releases: Visa Restrictions on Individuals Responsible for Undermining Cambodian Democracy

Press Statement
Heather Nauert

Department Spokesperson

Washington, DC
December 6, 2017

As the White House stated in a November 16, press statement, the United States is taking concrete steps to respond to the Cambodian government's actions that have undermined the country's progress in advancing democracy and respect for human rights. These actions—which run counter to the Paris Peace Agreements of 1991 that ended a tragic conflict and accorded the Cambodian people democratic rights—include the dissolution of the main opposition political party and banning of its leaders from electoral politics, imprisonment of opposition leader Kem Sokha, restriction of civil society, and suppression of independent media.

In direct response to the Cambodian government's series of anti-democratic actions, we announce the Secretary of State will restrict entry into the United States of those individuals involved in undermining democracy in Cambodia. In certain circumstances, family members of those individuals will also be subject to visa restrictions.

We call on the Cambodian government to reverse course by reinstating the political opposition, releasing Kem Sokha, and allowing civil society and media to resume their constitutionally protected activities. Such actions could lead to a lifting of these travel restrictions and increase the potential for Cambodia's 2018 electoral process to regain legitimacy.

We will continue to monitor the situation and take additional steps as necessary, while maintaining our close and enduring ties with the people of Cambodia.

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Press Releases: President Trump's Decision to Recognize Jerusalem as Israel's Capital

Press Statement
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

Washington, DC
December 6, 2017

President Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital aligns U.S. presence with the reality that Jerusalem is home to Israel's legislature, Supreme Court, President's office, and Prime Minister's office.

We have consulted with many friends, partners, and allies in advance of the President making his decision. We firmly believe there is an opportunity for a lasting peace.

As the President said in his remarks today, "Peace is never beyond the grasp of those willing to reach it."

The President decided today, as Congress first urged in the Jerusalem Embassy Act in 1995, and has reaffirmed regularly since, to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

The State Department will immediately begin the process to implement this decision by starting the preparations to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The safety of Americans is the State Department's highest priority, and in concert with other federal agencies, we've implemented robust security plans to protect the safety of Americans in affected regions.

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Press Releases: Human Rights Council Special Session on Burma

Press Statement
Heather Nauert

Department Spokesperson

Washington, DC
December 5, 2017

Earlier today in Geneva, the United Nations Human Rights Council held a special session on Burma. The United States was an early supporter of this special session and a co-sponsor of the resulting resolution on the Situation of Human Rights for Rohingya Muslims and other Minorities in Myanmar. At the special session, Ambassador Kelley Eckels Currie, the U.S. Representative to the UN Economic and Social Council, and Deputy Assistant Secretary Scott Busby of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor reiterated Secretary Tillerson's call for all actors to play a constructive role in resolving the human rights situation in Burma and holding perpetrators of human rights violations accountable.

The United States urges an immediate end to violence, restoration of the rule of law, countrywide access for the UN Fact-Finding Mission, immediate humanitarian and media access to affected areas, and guaranteed and verifiably safe, voluntary, and dignified return for those who want to return to their homes.

Respect for human rights of all peoples is a fundamental element of democracy and the United States stands ready to support the elected civilian government in its efforts to achieve peace, stability, and prosperity for all of Burma.

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[Press Releases: Remarks to the Staff and Families of U.S. Tri-Mission](#)

Remarks

Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

Brussels, Belgium

December 5, 2017

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Thank you, Ambassador Hutchison, for that very warm introduction. And the Ambassador and I have known each other for many, many years. We hail from the great state of Texas, we share friendship through our alumni association – (laughter) – at the University of Texas. We are devout Orangebloods, as they say. But thank you very much.

I also want to recognize the leadership of our new charge d'affaires, Lussenhop and Shub. And I've commented on this many times with respect to our situation at the State Department, where we're still awaiting a lot of nominees to clear processes and to be confirmed. And you've seen I get a little criticism for that from time to time – (laughter) – from people, and the thing that – and I really do mean this sincerely – I'm so blessed and impressed with the people that we have that are willing to step up in these acting roles. These are superb individuals, highly qualified for what they're doing.

The State Department is not missing a beat just because we've got some nominees that are still working through the process, and I'm very grateful for their service. I know it is a difficult situation when you're in an acting role, but I have yet to encounter anyone who has not stepped up and fully assumed the responsibilities. And I just want to say again how much I appreciate both of your willingness to serve in that regard.

It is a great honor to serve in this role. And many of you know when then

President-elect Trump asked me to take this on, he and I had never met. The day I met him was the day he asked me to do this, so it was a bit of a shock for me. But it's been a real honor to serve. It's been a whirlwind because the day we stepped in we had a lot of challenges on our plate. But I want to tell you, your State Department, your colleagues all over the world have done a remarkable job putting policy in place, beginning to execute against the policy. And while we don't have any wins on the board yet, I can tell you we are much better positioned to advance America's interest around the world than we were 10 months ago, and it's all attributable to the great men and women of this department.

I also want to thank all of the trilateral mission folks here for how you represent us in the various interests here. The willingness of families to come to a foreign country and serve, and I know it's a – there is a certain level of sacrifice that goes when you have to take an overseas assignment. I did that a little bit in my prior life, and I know what it means to miss birthdays and miss weddings and miss anniversaries and miss ballets and plays, and – because I went over unaccompanied. But I'm pleased to see families here. It's a great experience for the families as well, and hopefully when it's all said and done it's a plus-plus for all of you and the experiences that you get doing this.

I also really want to acknowledge and express our thanks for our locally employed staff. You're the continuity. As you know, many of your colleagues from the U.S. and from other parts of the world and the State Department come and go, they rotate in and out. You're the glue that kind of keeps things going as they come and go, and you're extremely important to us in our ability to be successful here, so thank you as well for your contributions.

I want to say just a couple of words about the State Department. The redesign, which everyone seems to be an expert on – (laughter) – we're actually going to be doing some town halls here before the end of the year, because the teams, your teams – and this is an employee-led effort – all the teams are led by your colleagues at the State Department. We've had multiple teams working on the redesign. We've been through phase one, now we've just completed phase two, and we're going to transition to phase three, which is now execution.

And so now we're in a position to really talk about some concrete things. And there's two kind of broad elements of this, if I could have you think about it this way: There's a huge leadership element where we see we need to do some things with a lot of the systems and developing people, servicing their needs, and a lot of leadership areas that we're going to address. And then there's what I call the modernization of the State Department. And modernization is anything from having an IT system that's in the cloud and lets you work efficiently, to modernizing a lot of our practices and policies and principles to recognize today's working families. The workforce has changed, and over the last 20 years State Department policies haven't necessarily changed with it. So we have a lot of modernization to do from a policy standpoint.

We have some modernization to do with how we get things done efficiently and

effectively – again, using today’s approaches. So again, your colleagues have really led this effort. They’ve met with a lot of great ideas out, and now we’re ready to begin to execute against those. So we’ve got some programmatic areas and we’ve got some projects to undertake. We’re going to talk some more about that in the coming days and share with you the specifics.

We’ve got what we call some quick wins. I think you’re going to be happy with some of the quick wins that we’re going to announce here in the next couple of weeks because I think they get right to some of the issues that we’ve heard from you in the listening exercise. And for those of you that participated back when we did the survey, 35,000 of you responded. That’s where all these ideas came from. Over 300 face-to-face interviews. And we’ve kept the portals open so you can continue to put things into the process, and I can tell you that people look at every idea that comes in and it gets incorporated into the work that others are doing.

So we’ll have more to say about that to you in the next couple of weeks, before the end of the year. We’ll share some things with everyone so you know where this is going. It really has one objective in mind, and that’s to allow you to be more effective at what your talents already allow you to do, and also to prepare you to do more and allow you to have a much more rewarding career and do it in a way that isn’t so frustrating sometimes because some of the processes you have to interface with are frustrating. So we’re going to be addressing a lot of that, and hopefully when it’s all said and done you’re going to have a much more satisfying work environment, a great career ahead of you, and we’re going to be much more effective and much more efficient in how we do it. That’s really the objective of the whole exercise. There’s nothing more to it than that.

So again, thank all of you for what you do. It’s an honor for me to lead this organization. You make me proud every day. I’m inspired by every one of you when I come to work every day, so thank you for what you do and thanks to our three leaders here as well. Thanks. (Applause.)

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