

Press Releases: Briefing on Upcoming NATO Ministerial

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Official
Via Teleconference
April 2, 2019

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. Hi. Good morning, everybody. Thank you for joining us for today's background call to preview the upcoming NATO ministerial.

For your situational awareness only and not for reporting, we are joined today by [Senior State Department Official]. He will be referred to as Senior State Department Official for attribution purposes. [Senior State Department Official] will give some brief remarks, then we'll open it up for some questions. The – this call is embargoed until its conclusion. And with that, I will turn it over to [Senior State Department Official].

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you very much, and thank you very much, everyone, for coming to listen today as we have a chance to talk about the NATO foreign ministerial which begins in a day here in Washington. As you all know, we will be – the gathering will include the – all the ministers from the members of the alliance as well as the – for the first time, North Macedonia, which has signed its accession protocol. It'll be attending as an observer of the ministerial.

The ministerial itself is an opportunity to celebrate all that the alliance has accomplished over the past 70 years, but also to discuss and present a realistic picture of the security environment that we face today, and to reaffirm NATO's commitment to implementing the Brussels July 19 – July 2018 summit agenda. And in that context, it is an opportunity to continue the modernization and adaptation of NATO to meet the challenges of the present era, just as our predecessors did strategic inflection points in the past, such as the end of the Cold War or after the September 11th attacks in the United States. And lastly, this is an important milestone on the road to the NATO leaders meeting which is taking place in the United Kingdom later in the year in December. A date has not been set for that yet.

I'm going to quickly – or briefly, rather – go over the schedule to give you a sense of the – how it will unfold, and then I'm happy to take any questions you all might have. The program, if I can put it that way, will begin this afternoon when Secretary-General Stoltenberg arrives in Washington and meets with President Trump. Tomorrow he will address a joint session of Congress.

That is the first time this will be happening for a NATO secretary-general. It's a big event and a big honor for him, and of course, for the alliance.

On Wednesday, the secretary-general will then meet with the Secretary— with Secretary Pompeo— in a final coordination session ahead of the meetings. And the formal program begins on the evening of the 3rd with a reception that's going to be hosted by Secretary Pompeo at the Mellon Auditorium. This, if you don't know, was the location where the original 12 allies signed the North Atlantic Treaty on April 4th, 1949, and we are particularly grateful to the National Archives for making the original charter available for the event. It'll be available for viewing during this reception. They will each deliver brief remarks at this event, and there of course will be the traditional family photo that begins with — that we take at the beginning of every NATO event.

Then on the 4th, the next day, the foreign ministers are going to be meeting in the Department of State. There will be two plenary sessions and a working lunch. The first session — the first plenary session will focus on Russia, where I expect ministers will endorse a package of Black Sea measures designed to improve the alliance's deterrence and defense posture in the region. And they're also likely to discuss the INF Treaty, and specifically, Russia's failure to return to full and verifiable compliance with the INF Treaty. We certainly appreciate — we the United States appreciate the strong statements that NATO has issued in December of last year and February of this year on the INF, which makes clear that Russia's violation of the treaty is responsible for the current situation.

In the second session, we expect to update allies on the situation in Afghanistan. We will also likely be discussing the success of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in destroying the physical caliphate, as well as NATO's new training mission in Iraq and the broader efforts the alliance is making to work with our partners in the south to fight the scourge of terrorism together.

At the working lunch, which will be ministers only, allies will discuss the transatlantic link and the importance of fair burden-sharing to support it. It will also be an opportunity to have an honest discussion of the progress we've made to date on burden-sharing. And as the secretary-general has said and as the President has said in his State of the Union address, we anticipate there will be, by the end of 2020, more than \$100 billion in additional new spending from our allies on defense. But of course, there's also still more work to be done, and as the secretary-general said in Brussels, there needs to be a new sense of urgency associated with this. All allies agreed to that and to redouble their commitments to meet the so-called Wales Pledge. So I anticipate that conversation will revolve around those two issues. And finally, Secretary Pompeo will address the ministerial — address the press after the ministerial concludes. As I noted, North Macedonia will be participating in the first ministerial since the signing of the accession protocol in February.

But the bottom line, if I can put it that way — and I think you'll see this coming out of the statements that the ministers make and the formal statement

that the ministers issue – the secretary-general issues on behalf of the ministers at the end of the event – NATO remains strong and unified. We have a very strong foundation of shared democratic values. The alliance has brought 70 years of peace, stability, and prosperity to its citizens. That is a cause to celebrate. But it is also adapting to ensure that we can do the same into the future.

And the U.S. commitment, of course, to NATO remains firm. We have consistently reaffirmed our support for the alliance, including for collective defense under Article 5. The list of officials, from the President to the Vice President, the Secretaries of State and Defense who have underscored this, is long. And that will be a message that comes out of the ministerial as well. And NATO membership remains an integral part of what – of U.S. security strategy. As we've said many times before, the United States is better able to address challenges across the globe, whether militarily or politically, because of the NATO alliance. And during the last 70 years, of course, the one time that Article 5 was invoked was in the attack on the United States on September 11th, so the value of the alliance to us was most manifest, of course, on that date.

And finally, alliance defense investment is critical. Investment by all allies in their national defense is necessary to ensure that NATO collectively has the capabilities for an effective defense, incredible deterrent, to meet current and emerging threats. The threat landscape has changed. We talk about that in our National Security Strategy and the alliance has talked about it in the past, and more investment is necessary to meet those new challenges.

So that's the bottom line. I'm happy to stop here and take any questions.

OPERATOR: And ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to ask a question, press * then 1 on your touchtone phone. You'll hear a tone indicating you've been placed into queue, and you can remove yourself from the queue at any time by pressing the # key. If you are using a speakerphone, please pick up the handset before pressing the numbers. Once again, for questions, you will press * then 1 at this time. And also, it has been requested that you limit yourself to one question.

Our first question from Rich Edson with Fox News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Good morning. Thanks very much. Do you guys expect the foreign ministers to discuss the incident in the Kerch Strait, even a couple of months later? And are the U.S. and allies still considering a response? Also, will there be any discussion of Russia's presence in Venezuela, do you expect?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Russia will be a topic of discussion at the ministerial. It is, as I said earlier, a threat to the alliance and to the United States. I anticipate that all elements of the nature – all elements of the Russian threat will be discussed. That includes the actions in the Kerch Strait, it includes the so-called annexation of Crimea, the occupation of Georgia, the Skripal attacks, the violation of the INF agreement. All of

those items will be discussed, as they have in the past. And the Black Sea package is, in part, a response to the challenges we face in that region, the Black Sea region, not merely because of the Kerch Strait incident, but because we find that Russia is threatening the alliance all along the eastern flank, not just in the north. So we'll be – I don't want to get in front of the ministers or in front of their news, but there will be a Black Sea package that comes out of all this.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: We go to Matthew Lee, Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Sorry, I'm not going to be able to stick with the just one, but my two will be very brief. One, do you expect the – in the Afghanistan meeting that any decisions will be made there in terms of deployments, or is that entirely dependent on what happens with Ambassador Khalilzad's efforts? And then secondly, you talk about the alliance being strong and unified, but just yesterday the administration halted delivery of F-35 parts to Turkey, which, last I checked, is still a member in good standing of NATO. So how does the strong and unified fit in with this obvious rift? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Let me get – take your first question first. No decision has been made regarding U.S. or alliance troop levels in Afghanistan. The conversations that we're having in Afghanistan at the ministerial are ongoing. The SRAR has been out to NATO several times – I think four times – to brief allies on the peace negotiations and the prospects for making progress. We will continue to do that. That's part of what the ministerial's conversation about Afghanistan is about, so we don't anticipate any decisions being made at the ministerial, and I think your instinct that this will be something that is a function of the progress made in the peace talks is correct.

With regards to Turkey and F-35, obviously I think you should be asking the Pentagon about the F-35 program and how – and the program office about how they are responding to Turkey's decision to purchase the S-400. But it has been made clear to Turkey by the United States at the highest levels, on many, many occasions, that we have very serious concerns about its stated plans to proceed with the acquisition of the S-400 missile defense system and that there will be potential consequences within sanctions law and the F-35 program if they continue.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: We'll go to Nick Wadhams with Bloomberg News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you. Two quick ones. One, can you give a little more detail on what the Black Sea package would look like? Is that sanctions or some other punitive measures? And then just to follow up on Matt's question about Turkey, is there any concern or possibility that Turkey's membership in NATO is at risk over the S-400 issue or over what appears to be its broader rapprochement with Russia? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I can't provide you with details about the Black Sea package. I can tell you the focus is on the defense and deterrence posture of the alliance in the Black Sea region.

With regards to Turkey and the S-400, I can just repeat what I've already said. We've made it very clear to Turkey that we have very serious concerns with its plans to go ahead and purchase the S-400 missile, and we are going to continue to raise those concerns.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: We'll go Lesley Wroughton with Reuters. Your line is open.

QUESTION: Yes, hi. Also just coming back to Turkey, because I guess I'm a little confused, if they do go ahead with the S-400, is there a time that then they could get – I mean, I don't think they can get kicked out of NATO. But is there a chance that you would have to say: well, we can't deal with Turkey as a NATO ally?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We have made very clear to Turkey that its acquisition of the S-400 will result in a reassessment of Turkey's participation in the F-35 program and risk other potential future arms transfers, as well as potentially trigger sanctions by the United States. That is what we've made clear to Turkey and that's been our consistent message to Turkey across the board, from the Pentagon, the White House, and the State Department.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: We go to Shaun Tandon with AFP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for doing this call. I know you've just discussed Turkey, but I just wanted to pursue it further. I mean, just – I know you're talking specifically about the F-35s, but can you just talk about the broader relationship? What would you like from Turkey? What value do you see of Turkey within the NATO alliance, and what would you like to see them do, setting aside this issue of – on the S-400?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Turkey has been and remains an important NATO ally, an important partner to the United States. Our relationship is not being defined by the single issue of the S-400. But the S-400 is a deeply problematic issue for the United States, and we have made that clear to Turkey. So this is – I don't know what more I can say beyond that. We continue to partner with Turkey in other areas bilaterally and within the alliance.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: We'll go to Joel Gehrke with *Washington Examiner*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for doing this. I wanted to ask a China question since Secretary Pompeo was in Europe recently warning about the (inaudible) threat posed by Huawei to – and how that would affect military cooperation from the

United States and allies (inaudible). A bipartisan group of lawmakers last week introduced a resolution that warned that Huawei and others were a threat to NATO communication systems. Is there any discussion – do you envision NATO having a function that they – that they need to develop in terms of in a concerted manner countering China (inaudible)? I know you're talking about Russia this week, but is there a NATO China posture?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: You broke up a little bit, but I think I understood the thrust of the question. Let me start by restating what we've said in our National Security Strategy, which is we would like a results-oriented, constructive, bilateral relationship with China. That having been said, there are areas of tension along with areas of cooperation.

And in the context of Europe and the alliance, it's critical from the United States view – and this is what the Secretary was driving at in his public remarks – that we maintain secure, reliable information and transportation and other infrastructure networks in Europe and in the United States so that we have the ability to respond in a crisis without any concerns about threats posed by Chinese influence over this infrastructure. And we discuss those concerns regularly with our allies, both in Brussels and in our bilateral meetings with allied foreign ministers. And I would expect, as a matter of course, ministers to have conversations about that as well over the next two days.

MODERATOR: We have time for one more question. Please, Laurie.

OPERATOR: That is from the line of Franco Ordonez with McClatchy. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thanks so much for doing this. I wanted to ask a follow-up on Venezuela. Can you talk about why – and why it's important to talk about Venezuela here and how that will – how that conversation will be discussed, how it will come up?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think the conversation will be about Russia writ large and the threat Russia poses in an era of renewed great power competition. And I think what you see from Russia – whether it's the buildup of its forces in the east of Europe, the invasion of Ukraine, the illegal seizure or so-called annexation of Crimea, the occupation of Georgia, Skripal, the cyber attacks, the attempts to influence the domestic politics of countries in Europe and the United States, the intervention in Syria and now the intervention in Venezuela – suggest strongly that we have a real, meaningful challenge on our hand. And it is one of those new challenges that we need to address and adjust to, which brings me back to adaptation and modernization of the alliance and the importance of making defense investments. That's the context in which all of this will be discussed.

MODERATOR: Thank you all very much for participating this morning. This concludes this morning's briefing. The embargo is now lifted. As a reminder, this briefing was on background and today's speaker for attribution purposes must be referred to as a senior State Department official. Thank you all very

much. Bye-bye.

The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.