

Press Releases: Senior State Department Official Previewing Secretary Pompeo's Upcoming Trip to Russia

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Official
Via Teleconference
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MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone. Thank you for joining us this morning. I see many of you also joined us last week while we previewed the Secretary's travel to Europe. This upcoming visit to Russia will mark the 39th country that Secretary Pompeo has visited as Secretary of State. Since his first overseas trip at the end of April 2018, the Secretary has spent 92 days on official travel. He remains firmly committed to getting out to engage with his counterparts around the world to advance the Trump administration's foreign policy goals to ensure the secure, prosperity, and freedom of the American people.

The ground rules for today's call are that it's on background. For your situational awareness only and not for reporting, today we have [Senior State Department Official], and you may cite him as a, quote, "senior State Department official," end quote. [Senior State Department Official] will talk about Secretary Pompeo's upcoming travel to Moscow and Sochi, Russia, the meetings that they have planned, and a whole range of challenges that the Secretary will be discussing on his trip.

And with that, I will turn it over to [Senior State Department Official].

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Great. Thank you, everybody. Thank you for the opportunity to be here with you. And I will just run quickly through the trip and some of our issues, and then we can get into some questions.

So Secretary Pompeo will arrive in Moscow on Monday, May 13th, and begin his visit to Russia by meeting with his team at the U.S. embassy in Moscow. Under the leadership of Ambassador Huntsman, this team has done incredible work under difficult circumstances on behalf of the American people. The Secretary will have an opportunity to express his appreciation and support for all that they do.

While in Moscow, the Secretary will meet with American business leaders and

U.S. exchange program alumni to hear their perspectives. He will also participate in a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier to honor the sacrifices of those who died fighting with us against the Nazi regime.

The Secretary will then travel to Sochi on Tuesday afternoon to meet with Foreign Minister Lavrov and President Putin. An issue high on the agenda for their discussions will be arms control. President Trump has made clear that he wants arms control agreements that reflect modern reality. These agreements must include a broader range of countries and account for a broader range of weapon systems than our current bilateral treaties with Russia. There will be a full range of global challenges to discuss, including Ukraine, Venezuela, Iran, Syria, and North Korea.

The Secretary will also talk about the challenges in our bilateral relationship with Russia. It is no secret that we have many areas of disagreement with the Russian Government, and the Secretary will have a very candid conversation about concerns in our bilateral relationship, including Russia's breach of longstanding arms control agreements like the INF, and Kremlin-backed attempts to meddle in U.S. and other foreign elections. These are issues he's raised before, and he will continue to raise. No administration has been tougher than the Trump administration in imposing costs on Russia for its malign activities.

But as President Trump has said, and I quote, "A productive dialogue is not only good for the United States and good for Russia, [but] it is good for the world. [But] if we're going to solve many of the problems facing our world, then we are going to have to find ways to cooperate in pursuit of shared interests," end quote. This is the work of diplomacy: showing up, having frank discussions, and working to find areas where we can cooperate.

The United States is not the only nation having frank discussions with Russia. Our European allies and partners have stood with the United States in expressing our concern about Russian actions that threaten our shared commitment to Europe that is strong and free. We are not going to solve these issues overnight, but we are going to have – we have to be engaging to create opportunities for progress.

And we have made progress in a number of areas. The Secretary met earlier this week with Foreign Minister Lavrov in Finland at the Arctic Council ministerial, and they had productive discussions there. We have open channels of communication on a range of key issues – like Afghanistan, North Korea, and counterterrorism – where engagement with Russia can advance U.S. interests. Let me just run through those very quickly.

On North Korea, Special Representative Biegun is engaging with Russia about how to achieve our shared goal of final, fully verified denuclearization. These have been constructive discussions. Even though we don't agree with Russia about all the details of how to achieve this goal, we will continue dialogue to bridge gaps on the way forward.

On Afghanistan, Special Representative Khalilzad has met twice with his

Russian and Chinese counterparts. Together they issued a trilateral statement outlining support for the Afghan peace process, demanding the Taliban take tough and public steps against international terrorists, and encouraging the Taliban to sit down with an inclusive, intra-Afghan delegation to discuss a political settlement that ends this conflict. We welcome the positive role of Russia, China, and any other country in the Afghan peace process.

And finally, on counterterrorism, our reciprocal exchange of information with Russia on foreign terrorist fighters, on preventing terrorist travel, and on the protection of major international sporting events helps protect the United States, its people, and its interests.

The Secretary then will depart on Tuesday evening to return home, so I think you see it will be a short trip but an important visit.

MODERATOR: Great. Thank you, [Senior State Department Official].

Lois, we're ready for some questions. Thank you.

OPERATOR: Thank you. And again, if you do have a question, please, press * then 1 at this time.

Our first question is from Matthew Lee from the Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi there. Thank you. I'm wondering – you mentioned that no one's under any illusions that you're going to solve anything overnight, but I'm just wondering: Do you – is there any particular item that you think could be described as a deliverable that might come out of this meeting, or is it more just a kind of, I don't know, continuation of the President's phone call with Putin from last week and the Secretary's discussion with Foreign Minister Lavrov on Monday in Finland?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I don't want to be – I don't want to predict any outcomes. I think we're approaching this from a very realistic approach that this is an opportunity to take the conversation to a higher level and to have that frank and direct conversation on this full range of issues on the relationship.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Thank you. And our next question is from the line of Shaun Tandon from AFP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. Perhaps getting a little bit more specific on some of the global hot spots that you mentioned, particularly Venezuela and Syria. It's no secret, as you mentioned, that the two countries are on different sides on both of those issues. Do you see any room for cooperation with Russia on either of these? Do you expect to reiterate the U.S. stance on Venezuela in terms of Russian involvement there and on Syria? Do you find a way that the two countries could actually have some positive outcome together in either place?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So I think on both of those, we will be reiterating our concerns about Russia's role. I think, as you well know, on Syria we have a very productive de-confliction channel and we will continue that type of conversation. On Venezuela, our policy is very clear. We continue to support democracy in Venezuela, and the National Assembly is the only democratically elected institution in the country. We have – we disagree with Russia's continued support for Maduro and that's going to be the subject of discussion.

MODERATOR: Thanks, Shaun. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Thank you. And that is from Nick Wadhams from Bloomberg News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Could you talk about two things – one, the idea that the President essentially wants to reboot the U.S. relationship with Russia now that the Mueller report has been released and that this trip is part of that effort; and also, how much of this trip would be to lay the groundwork for a potential meeting between President Trump and President Putin during the G20 in Osaka? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Nick, we've been clear all along that part of our Russia policy is it is in our interest to have a better relationship with Russia. The President has been clear, the Secretary has been clear on that. And so where we have concerns, we're going to raise them directly, narrow those differences, and find areas where we can cooperate to protect and advance our interests.

With regard to any future travel, I'd really have to refer you to the White House. Thanks.

QUESTION: Are you looking for a meeting?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Again, I'd have to refer you to the White House about any future meetings.

MODERATOR: Thanks, Nick. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And that question is from Nike Ching from Voice of America. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Sure. Thank you very much for this phone call. Do you have any updates on the Americans being detained or under house arrest in Russia, including the case of Paul Whelan and Michael Calvey? Will this be discussed during Secretary Pompeo's meeting in Russia, and how do you characterize the handling of these cases by Russia? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Sure, thank you for that question. So the administration places the highest priority on the safety and the welfare of U.S. citizens overseas. We stand ready to provide all appropriate consular services in cases where U.S. citizens are detained. I think you're aware of the very active role Ambassador Huntsman has played on this issue. And so I don't have something specific but I would expect this issue will be

discussed.

OPERATOR: The next question is from the line of John Hudson from *The Washington Post*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey, thanks. You mentioned that arms control discussions are going to be a top priority. I was just wondering if you have gotten any closer to finding sort of a point person on these discussions in the T family. You mentioned that you'd like a broader range of weapon systems included. Can you say what weapon systems those are? Yeah, just any sort of insight into that and the extension of New START would be helpful. Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Again, the President and the Secretary have been clear, is that we need a new era of arms control to address new and emerging threats. So I don't want to preview or get ahead of where the conversations with – between the Secretary and the Russian Government will go, but this is an opportunity to discuss exactly those issues, and we'll see where they go from there.

MODERATOR: Next question.

OPERATOR: And that's from Dmitry Kirsanov from TASS. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks a lot for doing this. I wanted to ask what the United States expects to achieve as a result of this visit, and I also wanted to follow up on Matt's and Nick's questions and ask again if you – if we can expect any deliverables – I'm sorry – in the form of at least a joint statement or something and if a discussion about a potential summit is going to be on the agenda in Sochi.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Okay, so look, I think the starting point we have to have when we discuss any – our policy towards Russia – and this is part of what diplomacy does – and the Secretary's trip is to acknowledge frankly that Russia has taken a series of aggressive and destabilizing actions on the global stage. And this is – this trip is an opportunity to make those points clear to the Russian Government and what our expectations are and see how to forge a path forward. Again, an improved relationship between the United States and Russia would be in our interests, but we have expectations for the Russian side.

And so, again, in terms of summit or future meetings, I would have to refer you to the White House, and we will see what comes out of the visit.

MODERATOR: Thanks.

OPERATOR: And the next question is from Conor Finnegan from ABC News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey, thanks very much for the call. Two questions if I could. The first one: Will the Secretary meet with any opposition leaders or democratic activists while he's on the ground in Moscow?

And then secondly, this has kind of been addressed, but can you just say why

this meeting is happening now? I believe it's the first time the Secretary is traveling to Russia. If you could correct me if I'm wrong on that. So why does he think now presents an opportunity?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Right. So this is the Secretary's first trip as Secretary of State, but he's had multiple engagements now with Foreign Minister Lavrov, and this is a good opportunity, as I think we've laid out with all the issues on the agenda, to take that conversation to a higher level and for a frank exchange of views on where the challenges and opportunities are.

MODERATOR: Thanks. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: The next question is from Mike Eckel from Radio Free Europe. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks very much. Two questions. Fiona Hill was in Moscow a few weeks back, and we're told that she made a proposal that roughly involved Russia letting up on Venezuela in exchange for some U.S. concessions on Ukraine. Can you discuss more details of this proposal and the specific Venezuela discussions that the Secretary will have with Putin?

And secondly, on Ukraine, I wonder if you can address the question of why Ambassador Masha Yovanovitch was removed from her post in Kyiv prematurely. Was it a political decision by the White House? Was the State Department involved? Thanks very much.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Sure. So look, if you have questions about Fiona's trip, I'd really, again, have to refer you to the White House to address the substance of her visit and her conversations. I think we have a very clear policy, and the Secretary has been abundantly clear with both Russia on – with Russia on both the issues of Venezuela and Ukraine, where our concerns are about their actions, and where we expect the path forward.

MODERATOR: Last question, please.

OPERATOR: And that will come from Deirdre Shesgreen from *USA Today*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thanks so much. Can you say specifically how many Russian troops are in Venezuela, Russian military personnel, and then provide further details about what Secretary Pompeo said was their role in persuading Maduro not to leave the country?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The Secretary's concerns about Russia, they speak for themselves. We are concerned about Russia's actions in Venezuela, and we think support for Maduro is a losing bet. And so our support for the Venezuelan people continues, and that will be a subject for the discussion.

MODERATOR: Great. Thank you very much to everyone who joined today's call. This concludes the call. Again, a reminder, today's call was on background and our speaker may be referred to as a senior State Department official. Thanks so much. Bye-bye.

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