

Press Releases: Deputy Secretary John Sullivan's Meetings in Poland

Readout
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
December 19, 2018

The below is attributable to Deputy Spokesperson Robert Palladino:□

On Wednesday in Warsaw, Deputy Secretary John Sullivan reaffirmed to Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz the United States' ironclad commitment to the NATO Alliance and celebrated the centennial of Poland's reclaimed independence. He applauded the continued strengthening of our bilateral relationship and commended Poland for the country's commitment to spend 2.5% of GDP on defense by 2030. He also witnessed the signing of an agreement between the Polish Oil and Natural Gas Company (PGNiG) and Sempra Energy, which will assist in energy diversification for Poland.

While in Poland, he also met with President Duda's Chief of Staff, Minister Szczerski, as well as representatives from civil society and the business community.

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Press Releases: Bulgaria's Defense Modernization

Press Statement

Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

Washington, DC
December 19, 2018

The United States welcomes Bulgaria's defense modernization plans and looks forward to the country's imminent selection of a new multirole fighter aircraft.

As I emphasized during my phone call with Prime Minister Boyko Borissov on December 18, and as Deputy Secretary Sullivan underlined during his visit to Sofia last weekend, the United States is committed to working with the Bulgarian government to tailor the final scope of a potential F-16 sale to fit its budgetary and operational requirements, while still offering superior capabilities.

The United States has provided more than \$200 million in security assistance to Bulgaria over the last 25 years to increase military professionalization and NATO interoperability. The United States has also invested more than \$100 million in upgrades to the Novo Selo Training Center and Graf Ignatievo air base as part of the European Deterrence Initiative, and plans to continue such upgrades in the future. The United States will continue to prioritize investments with Bulgaria that build NATO interoperability.

The United States looks forward to completing final negotiations with the Bulgarian government.

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[Press Releases: Deputy Secretary](#)

Sullivan's Meeting With Macedonian President Ivanov

Readout
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
December 19, 2018

The below is attributable to Deputy Spokesperson Robert Palladino:□

On December 18 in Skopje, Deputy Secretary of State John J. Sullivan reaffirmed with President Gjorge Ivanov the United States' continued support of the landmark Prespa Agreement. The two also agreed on the need to implement key reforms required by NATO and the EU, including crucial judiciary reforms.

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Press Releases: Department Press Briefing – December 18, 2018

Robert Palladino
Deputy Spokesperson

Department Press Briefing
Washington, DC
December 18, 2018

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TRANSCRIPT:

3:04 p.m. EST

MR PALLADINO: Hello, everyone. Sorry we're running a little later today.

A couple for the top. I want to highlight today the department's newly published report, *To Walk the Earth in Safety*, which I believe has been passed out already – it is in front of you – and which we posted today to our website. This annual report highlights the United States' enduring commitment to making post-conflict communities safer and

setting the stage for their recovery and development.

Since 1993, the United States has invested more than \$3.2 billion for the securing and safe disposal of excess small arms, light weapons, and munitions, as well as the safe clearance of landmines and other explosive hazards in more than 100 countries, making the United States the world's single largest financial supporter of conventional weapons destruction. Working in close cooperating with the Department of Defense and the United States Agency for International Development's Leahy War Victims Fund, the Department of State has helped numerous countries to declare themselves mine-free.

And secondly, we welcome the recent statements issued by France and the European Union parliament and the resolution presented by Canada at the United Nations that was adopted by a clear majority yesterday, drawing the world's attention, once again, to the Iranian regime's sickening human rights record. Such statements underscore the international community's grave concern regarding the regime's daily violations of the human rights of the Iranian people.

We join others around the world in demanding an investigation into the senseless death of the arbitrarily detained activist Vahid Sayadi Nasiri as well as into the uninvestigated suspicious deaths of numerous others while they were in the custody of the Iranian regime. We call – we join others around the world in demanding the immediate and unconditional release of Nasrin Sotoudeh and all other arbitrarily detained individuals currently languishing in Iranian jails, including Farhad Meysami.

The United States will continue to support the Iranian people and to call for their fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, religion, and belief, to which they are entitled and justly deserve.

For that, I will open it up to questions.

QUESTION: On UN action, just very briefly, the UN – the General Assembly yesterday also passed a resolution condemning North Korea for human rights. Is there any reason that you didn't want to mention that at the top?

MR PALLADINO: Happy to talk about North Korea, if we have questions about North Korea. Absolutely.

QUESTION: Well, I'm just wondering why you wouldn't – why you would highlight Iran and not North Korea, which actually already has a nuclear weapon.

MR PALLADINO: We've been – we've spoken out often on North Korea here. And if there's questions on North Korea –

QUESTION: Right.

MR PALLADINO: We – I mean, we decide usually a couple minutes before,

Matt.

QUESTION: I can't remember actually – you've also spoken out about Iran actually most – like every single day.

MR PALLADINO: Yeah.

QUESTION: So I'm just wondering why you chose to highlight the Iran resolution and not the North Korea one. That's all.

MR PALLADINO: We're not going to review how we prepare for a press briefing, Matt. And we're trying to pull it together quickly.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR PALLADINO: What's your question, Matt?

QUESTION: I want to ask you just briefly – and I know you won't be able to say a lot – but about this woman, this Yemeni woman who was trying to get here to see her dying son out on the west coast. I understand visa records are confidential, but my question about this is: Why does it always seem to take a public outcry for you guys to do what a lot of people think is the right thing, the humanitarian thing to do?

MR PALLADINO: What I'd say, Matt, is – I mean, I've read these reports, and it is a very sad case, and our thoughts go out to this family in this time, this trying time. But I would also add we – that we are governed by the Immigration and Nationality Act, and visa records are confidential. For the latest, they could share information as they see fit, and that's not something that we're going to be able to do here from the State Department.

QUESTION: No, I'm not asking you – I'm not – we know what the – that the decision has been made and that she has gotten a waiver, at least according to the family's lawyers. My question is: Why does it always seem to be – and this is not just this administration. This goes back previous administrations as well, is that in cases like this, it always seems that you guys don't do what most people think would be the right and humane and humanitarian thing to do until there's a public outcry about it. What is it about the visa process that makes it so harsh when it comes to situations like this?

MR PALLADINO: These are decided on a case-by-case basis, and we are committed to following United States administration law and ensuring the integrity and security of our country's borders, and at the same time making every effort to facilitate legitimate travel to the United States. These are not easy questions. These are – we've got a lot of Foreign Service officers deployed all over the world that are making these decisions on a daily basis, and they're trying very hard to do the right thing at all times.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: No, let's move on – different question. Sorry. Lesley.

QUESTION: I want – well, I want to ask you about the meeting today with Iran and Turkey and Russia – if the U.S. – and on Syria. It appears that they failed to agree on the makeup of this constitutional body that would oversee a political process in Syria. Does the U.S. have a comment on this? And would you see any – I mean, can you see any further progress happening until – I mean, basically the UN envoy has to step – steps down at the end of the month.

MR PALLADINO: We believe that the only path to a political solution in Syria remains the United Nations-led political process in Geneva, and that includes constitutional reform, as you point out, and United Nations-supervised elections in line with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254.

United Nations Special Envoy de Mistura has long worked to launch a credible and balanced constitutional committee under the United Nations auspices. We look forward to de Mistura's assessment of this process and – at the United Nations Security Council council, which is going to take place on December 20th.

Now, the establishment and convening by the end of the year of a credible and balanced constitutional committee in Geneva is an important step to lasting de-escalation and a political solution to this conflict, and this goal has broad international support from the quadrilateral summit in Istanbul. Russia and Turkey joined the call to convene the committee by December. So we fully support the work of the special envoy to facilitate the political process, and that empowers the United Nations to convene the Syrian Government and opposition representatives for political talks. And we're going to remain engaged.

QUESTION: But Robert, once again there's another delay until next – early next year. Does this mean that – I mean, this delays – these delays have been going on for quite a while.

MR PALLADINO: We're going to remain engaged with the United Nations and with other parties, including Russia, and we are going to continue to encourage all possible efforts be taken to advance the political track, as called for in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254.

Let's go to Janne, please.

QUESTION: Stay on Syria?

QUESTION: Thank you, Robert.

MR PALLADINO: Syria? All right, one more on Syria.

QUESTION: Do you have any comment on the visit that the Sudanese president has made to Syria and he met with President Assad two days

ago?

MR PALLADINO: I don't have anything on that from the (inaudible) today. I'm sorry.

QUESTION: But in principle –

QUESTION: Syria? Syria?

QUESTION: – do you support such visits?

MR PALLADINO: Laurie. Let's go to Laurie.

QUESTION: Syria. President Erdogan claimed yesterday that President Trump had given him a nod for a Turkish attack on Syria east of the Euphrates. That is a misstatement, isn't it, that President Trump had told President Erdogan that they could attack east of the Euphrates?

MR PALLADINO: Yes. The United States and Turkey are coordinating actively on all issues affecting both Turkish security and the situation in northeast Syria, where, of course, as you know, U.S. forces are present in the campaign to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. We've made significant progress recently in the campaign, and – but the job is not yet done.

And President Trump and President Erdogan had discussed these issues in their telephone call last week, as did Secretary Pompeo and Foreign Minister Cavusoglu in a separate call. Both of our countries remain focused on coordination to counter the threats that terror poses to Turkey, the region, and beyond, and we believe we're making progress with Turkey.

Please.

QUESTION: And to follow up on that, Ambassador Jeffrey yesterday described the U.S. relationship with the SDF as, quote, "tactical and transactional," end quote, to defeat ISIS, and that makes it sound like the U.S. is going to use the Kurds and then abandon them. But then Ambassador Jeffrey compared the U.S. relationship to the SDF with its relationship with the KDP/PUK and SCIRI, which that relationship has lasted for over 20 years, and he said, quote, "The eventual goal is for the SDF to become part of the fabric of a changed Syrian society and that isn't tactical or transactional at all." So how would you characterize the U.S. relationship with the SDF?

MR PALLADINO: They're a critical partner in the fight, and our goal for the SDF is the same for many other groups in Syria, and that is, as you just quoted Ambassador Jeffrey, that's to be a part of the fabric of a changed Syria. And beyond that, I would refer you specifically to Ambassador Jeffrey's comments, who spoke about it extensively yesterday.

QUESTION: And you don't anticipate abandoning them?

MR PALLADINO: What we are focused on is a reformed Syria government, an international-supported ceasefire, and the international process that gives everyone – everyone a chance to live in Syria. I'll leave it at that.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Can we go to North Korea?

MR PALLADINO: Yes, please, here.

QUESTION: Ambassador Haley spoke about the Israel-Palestine peace plan today at the UN, and she said she had read it so that's confirmation that it exists. Two questions: One, has the rollout been delayed because of Netanyahu's political troubles at home? And two, are the – is the administration reaching out to Palestinian businessmen to get support for the economic side of it given that the Palestinian Authority isn't talking to them? This is what's been reported.

MR PALLADINO: Yeah. I would refer to the White House on both of those, to Jason Greenblatt and Jared Kushner. They're the ones that are focused most on this. We're of course in close coordination, but I wouldn't want to get ahead of anything now that the White House is planning.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: I'm going to Syria right there. Ben.

QUESTION: May I follow up on this, on her point? A very quick follow-up, okay? Because the Europeans – she was appealing to the Europeans and to the world to support the plan which nobody knows anything about. But the Europeans have responded by saying that they will support any peace plan that will include international resolutions and so on at the UN, including a two-state solution recognizing East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state. Do you have any comment on that?

MR PALLADINO: When we're ready to present the plan, it will be presented and we hope that everyone will be giving it a very close look.

QUESTION: A quick follow-up on that?

MR PALLADINO: Ben. Let's go to NHK.

QUESTION: North Korea, a quick follow-up on that?

MR PALLADINO: NHK. Right there, please.

QUESTION: Yeah. Can I just ask what the current status is with U.S.-DPRK negotiations? I know you put out an announcement that Steve Biegun is going to South Korea, but it seems he's only meeting with South Korean counterparts. And over the weekend, North Korea put out some pretty strong statements after U.S. sanctions. So I'm just wondering, are you still having daily communications? Is there any sort of positive

progress?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah, give me a second here. As you point out, our special representative has gone – is about to depart, I think, and – if I'm going to be clear – and he will be on his way to South Korea. You saw the media note early today.

To your first question, your first question was does communication still continue. I would say communication is ongoing, yes. And so as far as the status of what is going on right now, I would say our goal remains the same, and that is to achieve the final, fully verified denuclearization of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as committed to by Chairman Kim in Singapore.

And at that summit in Singapore, President Trump and Chairman Kim, they made the first leader-level United States-Democratic People's Republic of Korea commitment on denuclearization in history. And the United States remains confident that the commitments made by President Trump and Chairman Kim at their summit in Singapore will be fulfilled.

QUESTION: Still (inaudible)?

QUESTION: Robert, follow-up –

MR PALLADINO: It's Chairman Kim's commitment to denuclearization upon which the world remains focused. Follow-up?

QUESTION: Follow-up.

MR PALLADINO: Please, Janne.

QUESTION: Thank you. You said that Singapore – that the Chairman Kim commitment on denuclearizations in Korean Peninsula – he never mentioned about denuclearizations in North Korea. What is different concept? Because Chairman Kim recently – he mentioned that – he never mentioned the denuclearization, their country, Seoul –

MR PALLADINO: Yeah. I haven't seen those comments, but our focus remains denuclearization of North Korea, and that's where we're pushing. So –

QUESTION: So we're a little confused at the –

MR PALLADINO: Don't be confused. Our policy hasn't changed.

QUESTION: Wait.

MR PALLADINO: We are focused on the denuclearization of North Korea. We remain confident and we look forward to the commitments that Chairman Kim and that President Trump have made, and –

QUESTION: One more follow-on –

QUESTION: That means – the denuclearization in Korean Peninsula meaning

is the denuclearization in North Korea; is that right?

MR PALLADINO: I don't want to split words, and I think our policy has been clear. Let's go right there, please.

QUESTION: All right. So on the special representative's travel to South Korea, he's going to Seoul, but will he make any stop to Panmunjom while he's there?

MR PALLADINO: I have nothing to announce on his trip during this – nothing to announce on future plans. I know – I think in the media note we outlined some of the meetings that he would be engaged in. There will be follow-up discussions to their November 20th meeting that they had here in Washington. He'll be meeting with the Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Representative Lee Do-hoon and other Republic of Korea officials.

This is very much focused on strengthening United States-Republic of Korea coordination. And this is all about our shared objective for the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea. And while he's in Seoul, Special Representative Biegun and Special Representative Lee, they're both going to also co-chair as – the United States-Republic of Korea working group meeting, and that's going to be focused on our joint efforts to achieve this goal and to flesh that out further. And that will include inter-Korean cooperation projects as well.

QUESTION: A follow-up?

MR PALLADINO: Yeah. North –

QUESTION: Speaking of this – U.S.-ROK coordination, the United States and South Korea have failed so far to reach an agreement on President Trump's demand that the South Koreans pay more to support U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, despite many meetings on this. Is there concern within the department that the failure to reach such an agreement is undermining the denuclearization talks, because it shows a lack of unity between North and – the U.S. and South Korea right now?

MR PALLADINO: Talks are ongoing, and the United States-Republic of Korea relationship, that really is a linchpin of – for peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and in the region. And we'll continue working together. Let's go – please, right there. Right there.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: North Korea has complained against the U.S. recent sanctions, saying it breaks the progress on the talks. So do you see you're still making talks with North Korea? And is Secretary Pompeo going to resume his talk with his counterpart? The previous meeting was canceled last month. Are you still going to resume the talk?

MR PALLADINO: Regarding your question on sanctions, I would just say the world remains united in enforcing and implementing United Nations

sanctions until the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea. And President Trump himself has been very clear on this. President Trump has made it clear that sanctions relief will follow denuclearization. And the sooner North Korea denuclearizes, the sooner sanctions can be lifted.

Please.

QUESTION: More on North Korea?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: Shaun, please.

QUESTION: Sure. Afghanistan, Abu Dhabi. Representative Khalilzad is, of course, there. The Kabul government has now announced that they're sending a delegation there as well. Is there a sense of optimism in what's going on in Abu Dhabi? Where do you sense where you are now in terms of finding a negotiated way out in Afghanistan?

MR PALLADINO: I've seen some of the reports and characterizing things. I mean, the meetings in Abu Dhabi are part of United States efforts to promote an intra-Afghan dialogue towards ending the conflict in Afghanistan. And this is part of our South Asia strategy, and we have long said that war in Afghanistan will only end when Afghans sit together with mutual respect and acceptance, discuss a political roadmap for their future. So our efforts and those of our partners are focused on this objective right now.

Now, Special Representative Khalilzad, he is in the region, and he has in the past been meeting and will continue to meet with all interested parties to support a negotiated settlement to this conflict. And so others are coming together, and we continue to push this forward.

QUESTION: Robert, can I – a follow-up to that.

QUESTION: Are there any – is there any validity to reports that there's a proposal to postpone the April election so that the Taliban can participate in future elections?

MR PALLADINO: No. Afghanistan?

QUESTION: Yeah. According to – Taliban sources have told Reuters that the U.S. is discussing a proposal for a six-month ceasefire in Afghanistan and a future withdrawal of foreign troops. Can you confirm that?

MR PALLADINO: Well, I'm not going to be able to discuss details of private diplomatic conversations. But the United States military presence in Afghanistan remains conditions-based, and that's the cornerstone of the administration's strategy. The special representative continues to work with all interested parties in close coordination with the Afghan people and the Afghan Government to facilitate intra-Afghan

dialogue and negotiations.

Let's move on. Let's go to TASS, Dmitry.

QUESTION: Thank you, Robert. I wanted to go back for a second to Geneva and Syria. Is the list that the Russians, the Iranians, and the Turks came up with so far acceptable to you? And do you support their intention to convene a Syrian constitutional committee early next year, as they announced today?

MR PALLADINO: We support the United Nations here. We support the work of United Nations Special Envoy de Mistura and what he is doing to facilitate the political process that the Security Resolution 2254 calls for. And we're going to remain engaged with the United Nations and other parties, including Russia, to encourage all possible efforts to advance the political track in furtherance.

QUESTION: May I change the subject?

MR PALLADINO: Let's go right there. Right there, please. To Mexico, okay.

QUESTION: Yes. The money and the projects that you all announced today, if I understand correctly, most of that is already in the pipeline or had been requested for next year. So my question is: If this announcement was intended at least in part as an incentive to get more cooperation from Mexico for your other demands, such as keeping asylum seekers and that sort of thing, and is there any progress on that goal?

MR PALLADINO: I would characterize this as strong efforts by the Secretary of State to work with the incoming Mexican administration. This has been something they've been very focused on. This is a – meant to be holistic, coordinated approach working with Mexico to stem illegal migration. And so the commitments that we announced today, that's part of us talking about how we're going to promote a safer, more prosperous Central America and southern Mexico, and we're going to do that by enhancing security, governance, and economic prosperity.

There were some specific deliverables that were announced as well, focal points for the new year in 2019, to bring new leadership together, to bring a task force together that's going to be very much focused on attracting new investment to help there. So we are – we're optimistic. We're – the coordination is strong, and I'll leave it at that.

QUESTION: Have you given up on the goal of keeping asylum seekers in Mexico?

MR PALLADINO: What I would say is today we're announcing our intent to coordinate strategies to spur development in Central America and southern Mexico. So I have no further announcements to make about our procedures, things along the lines of like how ports of entry are handled, and that's a separate matter.

Any more? Yeah, Conor – go to Conor, please.

QUESTION: The President tweeted just two months ago that the U.S. would cut off aid to these three countries because they hadn't stopped migrants from traveling to the U.S. Why are you now increasing aid?

MR PALLADINO: President has made it very clear that United States assistance is allocated in order to meet United States priorities, and we expect all foreign aid recipients to hold up their end of the bargain. We're going to redouble our efforts to work with the Northern Triangle governments toward showing results, and results mean improving opportunity and security so that their citizens can thrive at home. And we will be continually reviewing that and reviewing our aid to ensure that the American public's tax dollars are wisely spent and that they're meeting United States objectives.

QUESTION: But after he sent those tweets, we were told that the department was reviewing aid then. Did you find that they actually were quite cooperative and that they deserved this new money?

MR PALLADINO: This is part of a comprehensive, holistic, new approach that we are working with the new Government of Mexico to address the totality of the issue. We remain – we applaud, frankly, what Mexico has done when they announced an unprecedented development program for the region, and we on our part are committed to increasing the project line for OPIC if any commercial, viable projects emerge. So we'll be taking a look at various financing mechanisms and tools and that's going to include, of course, very much a focus on cooperation with the private sector, multilateral banks, and other regional partners.

QUESTION: But nothing has changed in their behavior?

MR PALLADINO: Okay, Abbie, please.

QUESTION: Just to clarify, of the 5.8 billion, how much of that is actually new or not previously announced commitments from the public sector rather than the private sector?

MR PALLADINO: The figure includes 1.8 billion that the United States has spent on or allocated Fiscal Year 2015 to 2018, as well as our FY '19 budget request, as well as OPIC's current projects and potential pipeline, and our current Millennium Challenge commitments. Some of the OPIC commitments are new, but they remain contingent on the identification of commercially viable projects.

Now, there was two releases that went out, one that was joint with Mexico and one that we issued from the United States, and I just – I refer you to the paragraph that deals specifically with the financial numbers, and that there's a pretty good breakdown – something that I'm not going to be able to do right from here right now. Okay, Abbie?

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR PALLADINO: Let's go to Bloomberg, please.

QUESTION: On the possibility of a shutdown, though that may be looking increasingly unlikely, can you just talk about what services may be suspended if a shutdown does occur? The White House announced that Secretary Pompeo would lead the presidential delegation to Brazil. Will that trip go ahead if there's a shutdown? And what services worldwide will be available to U.S. citizens and to others seeking U.S. services? Thanks.

MR PALLADINO: A lapse – well, a lapse – I was going to make a joke about this briefing not continuing, but I'll refrain. How's that? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: There probably would be another briefing if there were shutdown, right?

MR PALLADINO: Okay. All right.

QUESTION: Anyhow.

MR PALLADINO: All right. No. A lapse could mean that a number of activities across the federal government would shut down due to a lack of appropriated funding, as you point out. So what happens? This is obviously a congressional matter for decision, but we're just talking the what-ifs here, as (inaudible) like to do.

So the Office of Management and Budget has directed us to prepare, and part of that preparation is that we are required to post our plan online, and it's available to read. It's 42 pages; I won't read it to you. But in that plan, the gist of what the Department is doing: it's basically a prioritization. And we prioritize along the highest national security responsibilities – protection of American citizens that are overseas and protection of American personnel in our facilities overseas. Those become the highest priorities in a situation like this.

And as that's being examined, you can expect that certain things are going to be prioritized and will continue. And two of the most important functions that the State Department is able to provide are our visa and passport services. So domestically and overseas, that's something that's going to remain open so long as there are sufficient funds, but it will remain a priority. And our embassies and consulates overseas, they're going to continue to provide emergency services as well as routine services to American citizens.

QUESTION: Can you –

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

QUESTION: Can you tell – can you just tell us for citizens who may be expecting certain services, as well as what will continue, what will be suspended?

MR PALLADINO: Beyond – beyond a focus on passport and consular services,

visa services, assisting American citizens overseas, this is something that we will – we look at once – once – check out the plan. Take a look closely at the 42-page plan that goes into more detail. But we go through a system by which we evaluate the most essential personnel – first of all, the most essential functions that must continue, and very much they're related to national security and security. And then based upon that, we identify personnel that are required to continue those – continue that, to make sure that that happens. And others are exempted, or those are the ones that are exempted and others – they're exempted from the furlough and others, of course, would not be. So, I'll move it on. Let's go –

QUESTION: Robert? No, no, so passport hotline –

MR PALLADINO: The –

QUESTION: So the passport hotline would not be suspended? It would be still running and people can still go get their passport done?

MR PALLADINO: That's my understanding. Yes, exactly. So let's –

QUESTION: If I may, can I ask on Russia?

MR PALLADINO: A Russia question.

QUESTION: Yes, so Russia has announced to set up a military base in one of the island in – of Venezuela, in the Caribbean area. I wonder if you have any position on that. Do you see that as a threat? Because it's in the back yard.

MR PALLADINO: I would refer you to the Russians on their statement. They say a lot of things, and I'm not going to react to it from here. I would also refer you to the Government of Japan on that matter. Please. Fine, please.

QUESTION: Just there is a U.S.-based organization, Sikhs for Justice, which is calling for a campaign, Referendum 2020, to separate the northern state of Punjab from India. And in our story, the – one of the attorneys, Ravi Batra from New York, has said that the State Department and – should look into the citizenship and all that, that how this – such a thing is happening from the U.S. soil, that calling for separation of a state, of a state of India?

MR PALLADINO: And I'm sorry, who's – I didn't understand (inaudible).

QUESTION: The U.S.-based organization Sikhs for Justice –

MR PALLADINO: Ah, I see.

QUESTION: – is calling for a campaign – it's called Referendum 2020 – to separate northern Indian state of Punjab from federal India. So is the State Department aware of it? Are you looking into it?

MR PALLADINO: I'm not aware of it. That's – I mean, I'm just not aware of it today. I haven't seen these reports. We have freedom of speech in the United States, we have freedom of association, and these are bedrock principles of American society. And – but I –

QUESTION: Yeah, but is – is that freedom of speech gives one a right to call for disintegration of another country?

MR PALLADINO: We have freedom of speech in this country that's protected by our First Amendment, and that is a bedrock of American society and the American Constitution, and I unfortunately don't have anything on this specific case. And I'm going to wrap –

QUESTION: Robert? Robert?

MR PALLADINO: All right, last one, last one. Barbara.

QUESTION: The Russian military base that Nike was talking about is off of Venezuela, not of Japan, so – and given that the Secretary of State has spoken about his concerns of Chinese influence in Latin America, would there not also be concern about Russian influence?

MR PALLADINO: I'm sorry, so you asked about Japan, though; correct, Nike?

QUESTION: No, I asked off Venezuela.

QUESTION: No, it was Venezuela.

MR PALLADINO: I'm sorry. I did not listen to your – Nike, I need to listen more closely, and I apologize for that. Okay. All right, you can get me later for that. You're asking about Venezuela, and what I would say about Venezuela is it's the same thing.

QUESTION: The Russian military base that might be set up near Venezuela –

MR PALLADINO: Yes, yes.

QUESTION: – is the question.

MR PALLADINO: Yes, I think I'd say the exact same thing I said to the other question.

QUESTION: Except not consult Japan.

MR PALLADINO: And that is why I would refer –

QUESTION: Get comment from Venezuela?

MR PALLADINO: – you to the Russians on their statements. Frankly, they say a lot of things, and I am not going to react to everything that they say. I – today we are not going to comment any further on Russian propaganda, okay? Thank you.

QUESTION: On Iran?

MR PALLADINO: We're done. Thanks, guys.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:41 p.m.)

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[Press Releases: Secretary Pompeo's Meeting With Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali of Nepal](#)

Readout
Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC
December 18, 2018

The below is attributable to Deputy Spokesperson Robert Palladino:

Secretary Michael R. Pompeo met with Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali of Nepal today in Washington. Secretary Pompeo highlighted the enduring strength of the U.S.-Nepal partnership and the close people-to-people ties that form the foundation of the relationship. The two leaders discussed Nepal's \$500 million Millennium Challenge Corporation compact; Nepal's central role in a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific; and global issues, including North Korea. The Secretary noted that today's historic meeting demonstrates the U.S. commitment to its strong partnership with Nepal. He emphasized the great potential for the further development of U.S.-Nepal ties.

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